



INVISIBLE TRAVELLERS: CHILD REFUGEE IDENTITIES IN ALAN GRATZ'S REFUGEE NOVEL

Görünmez Yolcular: Alan Gratz'in *Refugee* Romanında Çocuk Mülteci
Kimlikleri

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ABSTRACT

The global policies and conflicts that developed with the beginning of the 20th century have triggered global refugee crises for more than a century and made the crisis of belonging and adaptation problems controversial. The First and Second World Wars and the subsequent Cold War period, the freedom struggles of the colonial states, the Gulf War and finally, the Syrian civil war have always kept the refugee crisis on the agenda. Refugee problems and migrant identities, which also find a vast place in literature, have been widely discussed from a postcolonial perspective. However, refugee children and their psychological struggles have generally remained invisible, both politically and socially, and these children, who have to face adult problems in their children's world, have always been left out of the agenda. In this context, Alan Gratz's novel *Refugee* makes the invisible visible and provides a good basis for discussing refugee children and identity crises. The novel, which consists of three different stories set at different times, has linked past refugee crises with today's problems and has attracted a lot of attention globally by conveying the 1938 Germany, 1994 Cuba and 2015 Syrian refugee crises from the perspective of young adolescents. In conclusion, this study aims to focus on the different child refugee characters in Alan Gratz's novel *Refugee*, discuss the identity crises of the invisible child refugees from postcolonial and neo-colonial perspectives, and put the subject on a scientific basis.

Keywords: refugee literature, refugee crisis, identity problems, postcolonialism, child refugees.

ÖZ

20. yüzyılın başlarıyla birlikte gelişen küresel politikalar ve çatışmalar, bir asırdan fazla bir süredir küresel mülteci krizlerini tetiklemiş, aidiyet krizi ve uyum sorunlarını tartışmalı hale getirmiştir. Birinci ve İkinci Dünya Savaşları ve ardından gelen Soğuk Savaş dönemi, sömürgeci devletlerin özgürlük mücadeleleri, Körfez Savaşı ve son

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olarak Suriye iç savaşı, mülteci krizini hep gündemde tutmuştur. Edebiyatta da geniş bir yer bulan mülteci sorunları ve göçmen kimlikleri, postkolonyal bir perspektiften geniş çapta tartışılmıştır. Ancak mülteci çocuklar ve psikolojik mücadeleleri hem siyasi hem de sosyal anlamda genel olarak görünmez kalmış ve çocuk dünyasında yetişkin sorunlarıyla yüzleşmek zorunda kalan bu çocuklar her zaman gündemin dışında bırakılmıştır. Bu bağlamda, Alan Gratz'ın romanı *Refugee*, görünmezi görünür kılmakta ve mülteci çocukları ve kimlik krizlerini tartışmak için iyi bir temel oluşturmaktadır. Farklı zamanlarda geçen üç farklı hikâyeden oluşan roman, geçmiş mülteci krizlerini günümüz sorunlarıyla ilişkilendirmiş, 1938 Almanya, 1994 Küba ve 2015 Suriyeli mülteci krizlerini genç ergenlerin bakış açısıyla aktararak dünya çapında büyük ilgi görmüştür. Sonuç olarak, bu çalışma, Alan Gratz'ın *Refugee* romanındaki farklı çocuk mülteci karakterlere odaklanmayı, görünmez çocuk mültecilerin kimlik krizlerini postkolonyal ve neo-kolonyal perspektiflerden tartışmayı ve konuyu bilimsel bir temele oturtmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Sözcükler: mülteci edebiyatı, mülteci krizi, kimlik sorunları, postkolonyalizm, çocuk mülteciler.

Introduction

The global policies and conflicts that arose at the start of the 20th century have provoked global refugee crises for more than a century and made the belonging crisis and adaptation issues controversial. The First and Second World Wars, the Cold War that followed, the liberation struggles of the colonial states, the Gulf War, and the Syrian civil war have always kept the refugee crisis at the forefront of the agenda. Refugee issues and migrant identities, which are also prevalent in literature, have been extensively discussed from a postcolonial standpoint. As Sercan H. Bağlama points out in his essay; “A Postcolonial Approach to Contemporary Refugee Literature: Benjamin Zephaniah’s Refugee Boy”;

Literary works, which can be classified as part of refugee literature, mostly provide a realistic snapshot of the nature of the refugee “crisis” and thematise the process of victimisation and dehumanisation experienced by internally displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers fleeing the civil war in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East or the Global South (Bağlama, 2020: 632).

In postcolonial and neocolonial contexts, the refugee crisis illustrates the intersection of complex identities and power dynamics. These terms refer to historical relics where colonial powers governed territories outside their borders, resulting in socioeconomic structures that persist to this day.

In addition, these contexts involve enduring power relations in which dominant states continue to influence inferior states through political interventions and economic policies. Unfortunately, marginalized groups are frequently subjected to severe oppression by those with political or economic authority in such environments. This oppression exacerbates the displacement of vulnerable populations as they become more susceptible to conflict and violence. When analyzing the situation of exiles during crises in postcolonial/neocolonial contexts, we must therefore emphasize the correlation between identity and power dynamics.

Discussion and Evaluation

Regarding the relationship between power dynamics and identity, postcolonial literature is intricate and complicated. Individuals confronting displacement because of refugee crises are frequently confronted with obstacles that result in marginalization and oppression due to their social status, thereby limiting their agency. The insight of Dizayi (2015) enables us to comprehend how colonialism has pervasive effects on cultural identities. Post-colonial authors frequently explore themes revolving around the struggles of indigenous populations to establish distinct identities amidst the confusion caused by colonization. After nations are liberated from colonial rule and attempt reconstruction, these struggles become even more difficult (Dizayi, 2015). The author's narratives reveal a desire to dismantle established power structures bolstered up by nineteenth-century Western realistic novels by depicting them as insignificant claims. Baglama's (2020) analysis of Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* offers insight into abstract institutional forms that function through internalized assumptions that manufacture consent while indirectly dominating individuals. This process illustrates how individuals' identities can be controlled without their knowledge, perpetuating cycles of marginalization despite fleeing their native countries in search of asylum elsewhere. Moradi examines Wole Soyinka's novel *The Interpreters*, providing neocolonial research about Nigeria following its independence from England, where hybridity crises result from the imposition of European values while attempting to identify with African culture. Moradi observes that these calamitous results have paralyzed Nigeria; as a result, Soyinka issues warnings against future conflicts resulting from these circumstances. In conclusion, postcolonial literature enhances our understanding of the intricate relationship between identities and power dynamics in both neocolonial and postcolonial contexts, where marginalized groups suffer disproportionately. The refugee crisis serves as a

stark reminder of how colonialism affects cultural identities, resulting in unbalanced power dynamics that necessitate creating an inclusive society that respects cultural diversity.

As Homi Bhabha asserts, the colonized -or the immigrants and refugees in contemporary neo-colonial context- are produced as a social reality by colonial discourse, which makes them both “other” and completely definable and visible at the same time (Bhabha, 1996: 71-72). However, politically and socially, refugee children and their psychological struggles have been largely invisible. These children, who confront adult problems in a world designed for children, have not been prioritized sufficiently. M. Fazel and A. Stein assert in their essay published in 2002 that “in the past 10 years it is estimated that more than two million children have been killed in conflict, with a further six million wounded and one million orphaned” (Fazel & Stein, 2002: 366). With recent global political issues such as the civil war in Syria and the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, it is undeniable that the aforementioned statistics are significantly higher and the situation for refugee children has become even more perilous. The one of the primary causes of the problems is the rise of xenophobia throughout the Global North. These bigoted movements are typically populist nationalist parties with anti-immigrant, Islamophobic, xenophobic, and anti-EU policies (Lifland, 2013: 9). This blatant prejudice promotes ethnic homogeneity and opposes all cultural interactions within their countries. Lifland suggests that this perception is especially prevalent in Scandinavian nations because “right-wing politicians there have argued that much of these countries’ success is due to their cultural and ethnic homogeneity.” (Lifland, 2013: 10). In such a climate, it is quite difficult for immigrants and refugees to assimilate to the local culture and way of life, as forming a stable identity is virtually impossible in these right-wing strongholds. It appears that over the past ten years, there has been a rise in the number of aggressive or reactionary reactions to immigrants in Europe. Examples like the protests in France (October and November 2005) or the anti-Muslim caricatures in Denmark (2005) are frequently mentioned as proof of this phenomenon. Also, anti-immigrant sentiments appear to be on the rise among natives, which is demonstrated by the rise in support for anti-immigrant political parties like the FPÖ in Austria or the FN in France (Rustenbach, 2010).

As they investigate their new environment, refugee children frequently face formidable obstacles, such as trauma, grief, and discrimination. Bronstein and Montgomery state that “refugee children may experience what is

termed the cumulative stress of forced migration or the compounding stressors of childhood with the extraordinary and traumatic experiences of displacement. Consequently, these children are at greater risk for psychological distress than non-refugee children” (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011: 44). They could face challenges gaining access to necessities such as food, shelter, and education, as well as integrating fully into their new communities. They may also have the opportunity to simultaneously learn new languages, cultures, and ways of being, which can help them develop and strengthen their identities. Understanding the experiences of children as refugees requires acknowledging the diversity, complexity, and nature of the social, cultural, and political context in which they live.

In terms of both material and nonmaterial aspects of existence, the human sense of home is valuable and essential. It includes a sense of belonging, trust, and tranquillity, reminds the family, and molds the family’s culture. Due to the formation of a spiritual void, every individual who is deprived of love, peace, and protection due to obligatory conditions will suffer psychological damage, particularly in the world of children who require them the most. Even in routine interactions, refugees are dependent on others for their basic needs. Due to isolation, language barriers, marginalization, loss of social standing, unemployment, socioeconomic distress, cultural-linguistic-religious disparities, and family loss, refugee children frequently experience severe psychological effects. “Refugee children suffer both from the effects of coming from a war zone and of adjusting to an unfamiliar culture” (2002: 367). The stress and challenges encountered by refugee children who are unprotected, in a new and unfamiliar social setting, and who have lost their previous social, psychological, and physical support are undeniably irreversible for adult refugees.

A separate tragedy is the plight of children who have lost or been forced to abandon their parents. It is highly probable that refugee children acclimate to the language, culture, society, and social system more quickly than adults. However, they may be exposed to distress due to parental loss, separation, difficult journey conditions, and inability to meet their basic needs. (James, 1997). During the migration period, individuals may experience depression, psychosomatic disorders, physical ailments, and severe health issues such as post-traumatic stress disorder. (McCarthy, 1998). Literature reveals that these children frequently suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder, melancholy, and psychological issues such as irritability,

restlessness, sleep problems, somatic symptoms, and behavioural disorders.

In this context, Alan Gratz's novel *Refugee* renders the invisible visible and offers a solid foundation for discussing refugee children and identity crises. The novel, which is comprised of three different stories set in various eras, has linked past refugee crises with current issues and attracted a great deal of global attention by depicting the 1938 German, 1994 Cuban, and 2015 Syrian refugee crises. The novel is historical fiction that recounts the interconnected tales of three young refugees seeking safety and independence. Josef, a Jewish child living in Nazi Germany in 1938, Isabel, a Cuban girl in 1994, and Mahmoud, a Syrian boy in 2015, are the subjects of the narrative. The novel explores themes of family, identity, and the human cost of war and displacement, with each character facing distinct obstacles as they flee persecution and conflict in their respective countries. *Refugee* is a moving and compelling story that vividly depicts the lives of young people caught up in some of the most significant events of the 20th and 21st centuries. The novel provides a remarkable ground for understanding the identity and psychological crises of refugee children since "despite their young age all three protagonists are forced to mature fast and to take up the responsibilities of adults" (Rubik, 2019: 14). Therefore, this article concentrates on the various child refugee characters in Alan Gratz's novel *Refugee*, discusses the identity crises of the invisible child refugees from postcolonial and neocolonial perspectives, and provides a scientific foundation for the subject.

Alan Gratz is a native Tennessean who attended the University of Tennessee for both his undergraduate and graduate degrees. He was born in 1972. After that, he finished his postgraduate studies in English instruction. *Grenade*, his debut novel, made it to third place on the list of best-selling books published by The New York Times, while *Allies*, his most recent book, came in at number two. His novel, *Refugee*, which was released in 2017 and was evaluated in this research, has held its spot on this list for more than a year. In addition to being a writer, he is also a professor at a university in the Czech Republic and produces a great deal of radio advertisements and articles for magazines.

Gratz is of the opinion that works of literature have the potential to assist us in comprehending and responding to problems that occur in the real world. Through his writings, he expresses the desire that younger generations will be able to see the problems that he perceives to be only on the

surface in various media channels from a variety of perspectives and through distinct windows that connect the fictitious world to the real world. In particular, he hopes to raise the social consciousness of young people by sharing the story of *Refugee* through the eyes of children. Young people are in a crucial position to play a part in shaping the future, so this is an important goal for him.

Based on actual events, Alan Gratz's novel *Refugee* describes the complex struggles of three child refugees in different places and times to cling to a new life, as well as the hardships they encountered on the road, the losses they suffered, and the circumstances that compelled them to undertake this journey. All of the events described here cast light on actual human tragedies that occurred during various historical eras. In 1938, at the age of 12, Josef was compelled to observe the racist and brutal treatment of Jews by the Nazi government. Since Josef's father continued to practice law despite being forbidden to do so as a Jew, and his parents were tortured, Nazi officers infiltrated Josef's neighbourhood and home. Thus, his father was removed against his will to a concentration camp. (Gratz, 2017: 9-10). Josef and his six-year-old sister Ruthie do not want to abandon their home, but they must do so in order to survive and remain safe.

Young Josef, who witnessed excessive violence and bullying as a result of rising antisemitism in Germany, is astonished by the kindness of others. This shock indicates that Josef is psychologically withdrawn, losing self-esteem and experiencing feelings of worthlessness, as he flees from his own experiences to those of refugee children. "Josef stood in wonder as another sailor – a German man without a Star of David armband, a man who wasn't a Jew – put a suitcase under each arm and done in each hand and led them up the gangway. He treated them like real passengers. Like real *people*" (2017: 15). When the "St. Louis" arrives in Cuba carrying 937 Jews whose lives were destroyed by the Nazis, Cuba does not welcome them. Josef, who has yet to comprehend what he has been through, believes that no one will comprehend their situation.

Josef also witnessed his father attempting suicide in front of his eyes, taken to a concentration camp, where he was tortured and watched the massacres: He was scaring Josef too. Josef stared at his father. This skeleton, this crazed ghost, this wasn't his father. The Nazis had taken his father away and replaced him with a madman. [...] Josef's father had jumped into the sea (2017: 83-85).

As with real-life refugee children, the fictional character Josef's experiences accelerated his maturation; he had to care for his family following the death of his father, and he was unable to enjoy boyhood as a child.

The story of Isabel's escape, the second refugee child character in the work, begins in 1994, when the Cuban population revolted in response to the country's economic collapse. The author, who based this story on historical events, explains at the conclusion of his work that in 1994, when then-Cuban president Fidel Castro lifted his prohibition on leaving the country, approximately 35,000 people fled to the United States in as little as five weeks. Isabel, who is only 11 years old and caught in the midst of the violence and unrest in her country, witnessed the police beating her father. "In all the turmoil, a policeman caught up with her father and grabbed him by the arm. 'No!' Isabel cried. She leaped down off the hood of the car and pushed her way through the pandemonium. When she got to her *papi*, he was balled up on the ground and the policeman was beating him with his nightstick." (2017: 20).

Isabel embarks on an arduous sea voyage with her pregnant mother, father, grandfather, and her friend Ivan and his family in order to flee the violence she witnessed in her country and live a more psychologically and economically comfortable life. Isabel and her family are forced, like refugee children in the real world, to abandon everything they own and know and relocate into obscurity. At this point, Gratz emphasizes that it is not preferable to be a refugee, revealing the commitment of humanity to live in its birthplace and the shocking impact of abandoning places where the human spirit feels at home in every way. In this way, fiction draws attention to the existence of adverse external conditions in the real world through the tragedies of child figures and parents, which, due to various ideological-political-economic conflicts of interest, displace and force people to become exiles in the real world.

None of the three refugee children depicted in the novel have an easy journey. During the journey, Isabel's best companion is killed by a shark, and his body must be returned to the ocean. Ivan's voyage, which began with great expectations, ends in his demise. His beloved companion Ivan's horrifying death in front of Isabel causes her great shock, and she struggles to accept death: "Iván was dead. Isabel couldn't grasp it. One minute he had been alive, talking to them, laughing with them, and the next he was dead. Lifeless. Like every other Cuban who had ever died trying to get to *el*

norte by sea. But Iván wasn't some nameless, faceless person. He was Iván. *Her Iván*. He was her friend." (2017: 110).

Mahmoud, age 12, is the third and concluding refugee child of the novel. The author also addresses the real-world Syrian Civil War and the human catastrophes caused by the conflict. Gratz, who combines the fictional and real worlds in many parts of the novel, asserts that the war began in 2011, which is accurate, but the year described in the text is 2015. Since he was eight years old, Mahmoud has witnessed the bloodiest and longest-lasting conflict in his country's history. Now, he and his family are attempting to survive in the face of imminent death. After a missile strike, Mahmoud, his two younger siblings, and his mother are buried beneath the rubble of their home.

Mahmoud, 12, and his 10-year-old brother Waleed are experiencing a severe psychological and spiritual collapse. In response to war violence and profound suffering, they develop distinct spiritual defence mechanisms. Mahmoud has attempted to avoid the dangers to which he has been exposed by remaining 'invisible' until he is buried beneath the rubble. "Mahmoud Bishara was invisible, and that's exactly how he wanted it. Being invisible was how he survived. [...] Mahmoud didn't have any friends. It was easier to stay invisible that way." (2017: 13).

When they are buried beneath the rubble, Mahmoud overcomes his terror and panic to reach his family members. In this way, he dispels the illusion that he is actually "invisible" and the internal effort to deny it by ignoring the reality of the conflict he is at heart involved in:

Rubble was strewn everywhere. Missiles and bombs thudded nearby, close enough to shake loose parts of walls. A building shuddered and collapsed, smoke and debris avalanching out into the street. Mahmoud jumped when it fell, but Waleed stood still, like this kind of thing happened every day. With a jolt of surprise, Mahmoud realized this kind of thing *did* happen every day. Just not to them. Until now (2017: 31).

All of the characters in the author's work are based on real-world refugees. Waleed occupies a unique position in this context because he represents Umran Daknesh, a five-year-old boy from Aleppo who has become a symbol of the Syrian civil conflict. Umran, who survived the wreckage caused by a regime airstrike in Aleppo, Syria, on August 18, 2016, and sat alone in an ambulance, can be seen wiping the blood and dust from his

head and eyes without crying, in complete astonishment. Born into a conflict zone, violence, blood, death, injuries, attacks, debris, and casualties have dominated his life, and he is now accustomed to them. He becomes a symbol of the Syrian conflict and the most heart-breaking image of the war's destruction on children. In fact, Gratz explains at the conclusion of the work which actual characters inspired his fictional characters.

The author addresses the conditions of refugee settlements in his novel. Refugees are compelled to reside in deplorable facilities. They are even apprehended and detained as criminals in Hungary, and Mahmoud's father is beaten in front of him. Isabel and Mahmoud, two refugee children in the novel, witness the violence and insults of family members, while another character, Josef, witnesses the remnants and pains of violence that led his father to commit suicide in front of him. However, he was not present during his father's violent behavior:

A soldier whacked him in the back with his nightstick, and Mahmoud's father collapsed to the ground. "We don't want your filth here, either!" the guard yelled in Arabic. "You're all parasites!" He kicked Mahmoud's father in the back, and another soldier hit Mahmoud's father again and again with his stick. "No!" Mahmoud cried. "No! Don't! Stop!" Mahmoud begged. He couldn't bear to see his father beaten. But what could he do? (2017: 131).

The refugee crisis is a pressing issue in the contemporary global political landscape, highlighting the complex relationship between identities and power dynamics in postcolonial and neocolonial settings. These conditions frequently result in the oppression of marginalized groups, which forces vulnerable populations to relocate. Examining identities in the aftermath of colonialism exposes how identity formation evolves as a result. Societies continue to struggle with colonial-era issues such as racism, classism, misogyny, and other forms of discrimination. In addition, current refugee crises draw attention to colonial bordering practices that created divisions within communities and disrupted social cohesion. These actions resulted in the expulsion of people from their homelands, thereby significantly contributing to the current catastrophic situation.

Conclusion

Gratz identifies in his body of writing that the life of a refugee can be broken down into three distinct phases. The first challenge is to flee the situations that put their lives in danger, such as war, civil unrest, and tor-

ture, which prompted them to leave their homes and their homelands and take to the road; the second challenge is that those who are able to flee these dangerous circumstances are forced to live on the roads they take in search of a safe place to seek refuge, and during their journey, which brings them back to death and is just as difficult as the first challenge; and the third challenge is to fight to survive the second Gratz's *Refugee* is a successful exploration of the psychological effects that war and the stormy conditions that erupted in various countries at different times have on three children who are completely different from one another, as well as the events that they were subjected to on the difficult roads and the hope of a new life. The story is inspired by actual events that took place, and it was written by Gratz.

Through his compelling storytelling, Gratz brings his cast of personalities to life. We have high hopes that this visibility will both contribute to a greater awareness of the issue as well as civil action being taken. It is reasonable to have any optimism that things could improve so long as books like *Refugee* and others that are focused on immigrants continue to bring attention to the troubling stories they tell.

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