

The Civil War Female Refugee and Assimilation: An Acculturative Study of Layla AlAmmar's *Silence Is a Sense*

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Abstract—Female refugees go through numerous stages and transformations during the asylum-seeking process, all of which leave their imprint on their individuality over time. This forced journey, the fleeing of a war-torn country, the search for shelter and safety in the host country, as well as a plethora of other factors, all have a bearing on the refugee's assimilation or lack thereof. This article aims to demonstrate the journey of assimilation that the protagonist in Layla AlAmmar's novel *Silence is a Sense* (2021) underwent. It takes John Berry's models of acculturation as its approach in order to investigate whether or not the refugee character Rana assimilated into the host society. Therefore, it critically scrutinizes the text to determine how Rana represents millions of female refugees, what it means to be a refugee in a host country, the extent to which a female refugee can integrate into the other country's culture, and whether the process of fully acculturating is underway.

Index Terms—female refugees, war, assimilation, acculturation, Berry

I. INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries experienced a surge in refugeeism. In fact, the scope of the worldwide refugee crisis has increased significantly during the previous ten years. In light of this, the ongoing issue of asylum seeking and refugeeism in the Eastern part of the world indicates a paramount need to be addressed in literature. In order to add insight and depth to this new sort of literature, the refugee literature, current Anglophone writers felt an indulgence to this new subject. These authors have a variety of perspectives on this phenomenon because some had firsthand experience with it while others have just visualized it. The refugee problem was brought up by authors through writings that showed how refugees in general, and specifically female refugees, who form the core of this essay, are forced to escape their torn-homeland in search of a safe haven to settle in. Reality, though, is harsher; the place which is called home is a shark, and the refuge is a maze.

Recently, there has been an increase in diasporic narratives written by contemporary Anglophone authors, most of which are about refugees in general and female refugees in particular. There are numerous works in the area, including the novels *What Strange Paradise* by El Akkad (2021), *Sea Prayer* (2018) by Hosseini, and *Escape From Aleppo* (2018) by Senzai. In terms of the current study, Layla AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense* (2021) is a pertinent piece to portray female refugees. Rana, the main character in this story, is an effective descriptive character that serves as a symbol for other female refugees and narrates many events in a refugee's life in exile through her voicelessness and status as a voyeur.

The current essay encompasses the idea of assimilation /separation of the female refugee in AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense*, a contemporary Anglophone novel. Therefore, it is necessary to elucidate the notion of assimilation. Basically, Assimilation is one aspect of acculturation. It involves the complete adoption of the ways of life of the new cultural group, resulting in the assimilated group losing nearly all of its original or native culture. Relatedly, Acculturation is the process whereby an individual from one cultural group learns and adopts elements of another cultural group, integrating them into his or her original culture. Although it can refer to any process of cultural integration, it is typically used to describe the ways in which an immigrant or non-majority individual or group adopts cultural elements from the majority or mainstream culture, as the incentive is typically greater for acculturation to occur in this direction (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2014, p. 24).

In *The Cambridge Handbook of Acculturation Psychology*, Sam and Berry (2006) said that the blending of cultures and the subsequent changes have come to be recognized as acculturation. They offer a number of explanations for this rise in interest in the study of acculturation, but they all come down to two main points: first, the rise in global migration caused by calamities like war, conflict, poverty, and famine as well as to improved means of traveling over larger distances. Second, the growing significance of understanding the relationship between culture and human behavior developed by those in the field of cross-cultural psychology (p. 1).

Acculturation, in its widest sense, refers to all the changes that occur as a result of "contact" between people and groups from various cultural origins. It refers to the transformations that come about as a result of ongoing, direct interaction between two or more diverse cultural groups and/or specific members of those groups. Berry states that the concept has been broadened at the individual level to include psychological acculturation, which includes changes in daily behavior patterns as well as psychological changes brought on by cross-cultural encounters (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 14). Acculturation is a protracted, fluid process that can have long-lasting effects on both the dominant society's components and the people of the minority culture involved in the contact. Therefore, "acculturation" essentially identifies "interaction between two cultural groups" as a necessary condition for transformation. However, with psychological acculturation, where changes may also affect a person's values, attitudes, and identity, it can be challenging to determine whether a change is the result of acculturation or not. Every human goes through ontogenetic development, which may involve changes to who they are or how they behave (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 16).

Berry, on the one hand, noted that assimilation is sometimes employed mistakenly or synonymously with acculturation (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 11). On the other hand, acculturation and assimilation have also been employed as subsets of one another rather than as synonyms of one another. In particular, assimilation has alternately been viewed as one form/phase of acculturation and at other times the situation has been reversed (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 12).

In their article "Rethinking the concept of acculturation: implications for theory and research", Schwartz et al. (2010) emphasize the idea that within Berry's model, these two independent dimensions of acquiring the host culture and maintaining the native culture intersect to create four distinct acculturation categories: assimilation (adopts the receiving culture and discards the native culture), separation (rejects the receiving culture and retains the native culture), integration (adopts the host culture and retains the heritage culture), and marginalization (rejects both the heritage and receiving cultures) (p. 3).

Most studies on acculturation focus on people who have moved to a place other than their birthplace, including immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and sojourners. Although these three categories may be very distinct from one another, a majority of acculturation research focuses on immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers who are considered to be continuously residing in their new country (Schwartz et al., 2010, pp. 1-2). So, in its fundamental horizon, this article will be dedicated to speaking on the process of acculturation for refugees, specifically the state of a female refugee in Layla AlAmmar's novel *Silence is a Sense*. It will look into how the acculturation process is associated with the character Rana and look into which category she fits into or went through. So, this study aims to respond to the following queries by examining the character Rana in Layla AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense*: How does Rana speak for the numerous female refugees? What does being a refugee in a host nation entail? How well can a female refugee adapt into the culture of the host nation? How far along is the process of complete assimilation? This study, which is in line with Berry's models of acculturation, demonstrates that assimilation/separation, aspects of the former's models, are crucial motifs that, in the case of Rana, critically disclose the situation of a female refugee. In fact, by examining how AlAmmar created and positioned the character Rana in her story, it is possible to compare her to other female refugees, which shows the condition of the latter in the place of sanctuary.

II. THE FEMALE MUTE VOYEUR AND ASSIMILATION: ALAMMAR'S *SILENCE IS A SENSE*

Layla AlAmmar is a writer and academic from Kuwait. She has an MSc in Creative Writing from the University of Edinburgh. Her short stories have appeared in the Evening Standard, Quail Bell Magazine, the St Andrews University Prose Journal, and Aesthetica Magazine, where her story "The Lagoon" was a finalist for the 2014 Creative Writing Award. She was the 2018 British Council International Writer in Residence at the Small Wonder Short Story Festival. Her debut, *The Pact We Made*, was longlisted for the Authors' Club Best First Novel Award. Her second novel, *Silence is a Sense*, was released in 2021. She has written for The Guardian, Lit Hub, the Times Literary Supplement, and Arab Lit Quarterly. She is currently pursuing a PhD on the intersection of Arab women's fiction and literary trauma theory (Layla AlAmmar, 2022, para. 1).

Viewpoints and reviews on AlAmmar's *Silence is a Sense* have varied since its release in 2021. It expertly weaves a story of memory and sadness with an illuminating social critique of the place of asylum seekers in modern British culture, leading some to call it a furious novel. Others claim that it is effective for erasing the hideous abstractions of Syria's Civil War. In addition to the story serving as a microcosm of a more profound, tragic journey that many must undertake to survive, some see it as a harrowing, poetic picture of trauma and a powerful account of trauma and eventual recovery. Regarding studies on this account, only the thesis of Raafat (2021) titled "A Syrian Refugee's Trauma: A Journey of Involuntary Dislocation in Layla Al Ammar's *Silence is a Sense*" could be located. Raafat addresses the Syrian refugee crisis in relation to the Arab Spring. She attempts an understanding of the traumatic events and their effects on the Syrian refugees by using the pluralistic model of trauma in Layla AlAmmar's book *Silence is a Sense*. She applies Renos K. Papadopoulos's framework of involuntary dislocation to examine and describe the journey and experience of a traumatized Syrian refugee (p. 1201). Apart from this, *Silence is a Sense* has not been the subject of much research or writing. The novel's narrative and characters are only briefly discussed in reviews and introductions.

The aforementioned research demonstrates that current scholarship has not shed any light on the assimilation /separation of female refugees in this piece. The next section will show how the protagonist, Rana, undergoes the assimilation/separation process in the society of sanctuary. *Silence is a Sense* does, in fact, follow Rana on her required

journey, a 26-year-old Syrian mute female refugee. She lately reached the United Kingdom, during a mass refugee crisis fueled by the continuing Syrian civil war. After her homeland plunged into civil war, Rana and her relatives were obliged to flee and escape the country. Yet, she made her destination alone to Europe. She ultimately finds herself in a nameless and bleak, town in England, where she lives in seclusion.

Essentially, Berry identified four potential outcomes for the concurrent engagement and maintenance of the two cultures: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. These four outcomes are collectively referred to as "acculturation strategies" (Sam & Berry, 2006, pp. 18-19). In Rana's case, she cycled through these strategies unconsciously and randomly as she was perplexed and traumatized. Besides, The John Berry framework has drawn the most attention in psychological acculturation theory. He proposed that the degree to which a person concurrently engages in the cultural life of the new culture and upholds his or her original cultural identity determines how quickly acculturation takes place. For Rana, though, the situation is different because she was in an in-between zone, and she has restricted and enclosed herself to her small apartment as her entire world.

From her apartment, Rana watches with bewilderment, bordering on infatuation, the lives of her neighbors, to whom she calls strange names. She discovers that focusing on the lives of others rather than her own enables her to compartmentalize and downgrade reality (Hankir, 2021, para. 11-14). But painful memories visit her in unexpected situations as she declares "I am cornered by memories, caged in by recollections. I feel persecuted by the things I remember and by what my mind chooses to hide from me" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 22). The protagonist's memories of Syria constitute the strongest and most haunting passages in the book, especially her recollection of the early stages of the uprising against the Assad regime and the boundless hope of the protesters (Hankir, 2021, para. 15). Generally, as an asylum seeker, the mute protagonist stands in the first stage of joining the swelling diaspora; her memories are fresh and her feet are on shaky ground. She is voiceless (at least to the outside world) and has to build a new life while being possessed and controlled by the old. She is obliged to learn not only how to speak again, but how to speak a new language. Her journey is the one made by millions before her, but it is no less dangerous (Hankir, 2021, para. 18).

All different sorts of refugee stories, including those that stress the difficulties people faced when fleeing their homes and those that show the challenges they have endured elsewhere, have a place in literature. By gathering and sharing refugee experiences, literary pieces actually assist educate and inform the public about the situation surrounding the refugee issue. In general, literary works are seen as a mirror of the authors' earthly perspectives. As a result, intellectuals and writers today commonly problematize this aesthetic in their works. Indeed, literature is used to reflect on the plight of female refugees and to show the unfair conditions in which they were forced to live before, during, and after their arduous voyage.

Correspondingly, Layla AlAmmar in *silence is a sense* effectively places Rana, her main character, in this core spot. She successfully develops a heroine who is tormented by her past—in her home, her travels, and her new country—and who may, in some way, be representative of the plight of the many millions of female refugees worldwide. She has persevered through the rough road "Scurrying by rivers and forests and marshes, begging for food and hoarding any cash I can save or steal or manage somehow to earn. Across Turkey and those terrible Grecian waters. Vomiting until my insides feel like they're twisting up and out of my throat like vines. Clinging in furious waters to a raft that is more of a balloon. The stinking heat of Macedonia, bleeding blisters and insect bites, and Kosovo with nothing but a small hip sack and every document I have about who I am" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 69). In essence, Rana refuses to make the long journey to another nation that is comparable to her own; instead, she hopes to find sanctuary in a western nation, in this case, England. She has refused to travel to Egypt, another Arab nation, telling her father that Egypt is not more stable "What is happening here will happen there! Where's the law? Look at the news!" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 70). Correspondingly, the war took away Rana's simple pleasure of being around others and having a normal social life. She is actually severely traumatized by the memories of the Syrian war's blood and death as well as by the marginalization of displacement and sexual harassment, which also epitomizes the inner and outward states of many other female refugees.

Refugees, particularly female refugees, believe that their long journey has ended successfully and that a prosperous and stable life is ahead when they reach the end of their safe voyage. So, what does being a female refugee in a host nation entail? Actually, there aren't quite as many benefits as there are drawbacks to accepting refugees. Countries do worry that refugees may replace native workers and drive up the unemployment rate. They are perceived as a burden on the host nation as they put pressure on both public and private services, contribute to physical and economic overpopulation, exacerbate societal unrest, and raise the risk of civil war (Shellito, 2016, p. 3).

Relatedly, the character Matt and his mates in the novel *Silence is a Sense* stand-in for prejudice against The Other; "The notion of 'us' versus 'them' is hardwired into every religion" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 28). They denigrate the mosque's Imam, Abdulrahman, and portray their entire community as "ragheads" (p. 45) and "Everything about them is shit. Bloody Muslim fucks" (p. 176). They exhort the non-native population to abandon their nation. Since they saw Rana "at the mosque and the raghead's shop" (p. 156), they even attacked her and labeled her an "ISIS bitch" (p. 176). They disrupt a gathering being held at the mosque. Rana claims that "The notion of hatred comes from a place of ignorance ... It's not a lack of education, and Mr. Big Man over there doesn't care that it's a peaceful party or that the imam has no plans to convert him or anyone else. It's fear; fear of the unknown, the Other, fear that things are changing in ways he can't predict or control. Fear doesn't waver in the face of facts" (AlAmmar, 2021, pp. 47- 48). In addition to

all of these occurrences, racism against refugees continues, even leading to the murder of Hasan Siddiqui, the owner of the store Maqbool, by Mr. Big Man and his pals, who are presumably Matt and his comrades. That being so, in his article "The Refugee as Invasive Other", Ignatieff (2017) states that "refugees in flight from chaos, bombardment, and fear are described as an invading force. And, People fleeing ISIS terrorists in Iraq and Syria are viewed as terrorist threats" (p. 224).

Truly, Female refugees are relieved when they reached the United States or another Western country because they are no longer threatened by the specter of war and death. But the challenges they encounter don't end when they get there. They may experience stressors from the four main categories, of traumatic stress, acculturation stress, resettlement stress, and isolation, after being resettled in the host nation. And the stressor of acculturation lies at the heart of this paper. In relation to the protagonist of *Silence is a Sense*, it will be examined to what degree a female refugee may assimilate into the culture of the host country and whether the process of fully assimilating is underway.

Considering the aforementioned, Rana's motivations for fleeing her war-torn nation and seeking a new secure life are abundantly obvious at the story's outset. She rejected her father's suggestion that they leave Syria for Egypt because she believes that both nations are dangerous and that Egypt is not more stable and secure than Syria. She was given some cash, clothes, and jewelry by her mother, who agreed with her decision to leave for a western nation (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 122). As soon as she arrives in England, Rana begins to monologue to herself, asking, "Could I survive in England with my body at war with itself?"..."I would never go back, but I began to wonder if there was anywhere in the world that I belonged" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 17).

During her adamant reluctance to interact, which "wasn't going to get her anywhere" (AlAmmar, 2021, p. 174), Rana made an effort to adopt a new identity at the hospital in England. She claims that she never sought asylum as a refugee. She had never been to Syria "let alone grown up there"(AlAmmar, 2021, p. 174). Given this, it is clear how eager Rana is to establish a new identity and personality, to forget her past and lineage, and to be a clean slate devoid of trauma and memories of carnage. She desired an assimilated identity as Berry puts it; assimilation is one of four techniques that a person can employ during acculturation. He refers to assimilation as the situation in which either a person chooses to identify and interact with members of the host society rather than his or her own cultural background and identity, or a national society expects foreigners to fully adopt the culture of the larger national society (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 12). And this is what Rana first did; she tried to put her truth and her identity aside in order to engage with the host community. She desired to settle down in this country, contribute to its peace and stability, and adopt a new appearance, but she was unable to accomplish these wishes.

At one point, Rana admits that

When I first arrived, I couldn't assimilate...I couldn't reconcile myself to the notion that I was free to go anywhere. So I set invisible borders that I abided by for a good, long while. The park to the south I wouldn't go beyond – where the rolling green meadows stopped, so did I. To the north, it was York Crescent on one end and the record shop on Albert Street on the other. East and west boundaries had their own end points as well: a graveyard at one and a train station at the other. I caged myself into this three-square-kilometer area, learning it inside out, every alley and street, all the mews and yards, every shop and pub and church and cemetery, until nothing about it surprised me until I felt safe. (AlAmmar, 2021, pp. 32-33)

Accordingly, Rana secludes herself in her apartment, while creating buffer havens in the big neighborhood, which serve as her personal boundaries. She did, indeed, isolate herself from the outside world while remaining engaged by visioning and creeping into the neighboring realm.

Actually, Rana prefers to remain mute after arriving in England because she is unable of articulating her awful experiences. Through the windows, she likes monitoring and examining her neighbors' everyday life as a form of self-indulgence. Rana, the mute voyeur or the strange refugee looker, fixes her eyes on them and uncovers some of their stories and mysteries. This drags her into their personal lives and integrates her into the neighborhood culture. She knows, for instance, that one of her neighbors is responsible for the mosque's damage.

Rana also tries to blend into the new environment she has found herself in while concealing her identity by removing her headscarf, which is a definite relationship to her Arab and Muslim individuality. She intended to be transparent, seamless, and explicit, so she dressed the same as them. Despite this, Rana still makes an emblematic attachment to her home country by attending a ceremony at the mosque and shopping at a Muslim store that offers items from back home. This is what Berry suggested; "the acculturation process proceeds according to the degree to which the individual simultaneously participates in the cultural life of the new society and maintains his or her original cultural identity" (Sam & Berry, 2006, p.19).

A keen principle, in this story, is that Rana desired to forge her own identity and way of life free from all ties to any particular race, belief, or nation. She desired to be boundless, infinite, and unrecognizable to any group. She longed to be free to choose her new life, and writing pieces for The New Press Magazine under the alias the Voiceless gave her a platform to express herself. Through that, she gained the liberty to voice her opinions about whatever subject she pleased, encompassing the Syrian system and Conflict, War, smuggling of the refugees, abuse, and so on. Because if someone attempted to do the latter in her nation, he would face harsh judgment and punishment.

In a nutshell, "psychological acculturation" describes the changes a person goes through as a result of interacting with various cultures or taking part in the acculturation of their own cultural or ethnic group. Rana's condition is one in

which her transition from the Eastern to the Western hemispheres of the world, as well as her travels through several nations and interactions with numerous people, all have an effect on her muteness, traumatization, isolation, identity crisis, and dread of the locals in the host country. Berry claims that in addition to the need to distinguish between group-level and individual-level changes, the types of changes that take place at the two levels are frequently different. Changes at the group level could affect the group's political organization, economic foundation, or social structure. Individual-level changes may be occurring in terms of identity, values, attitudes, and behavior. Additionally, the rate at which changes occur within the person (i.e., their attitudes, conduct, etc.) may vary (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 14).

Overall, As per Berry, the four outcomes (assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization), which are commonly referred to as acculturation strategies, are not an end in themselves but rather strategies. Since acculturation is a continual process, an individual may adopt various strategies at distinct times, and to deal with different life issues. Once more, these different strategies should not be thought of as "additive", leading to where one can think of an individual as being fully "integrated." Alternatively, the strategies could be thought of as phases which an individual may pass through over and over, using several strategies at any given time (Sam & Berry, 2006, p. 19). Thereby, Rana has vacillated between fully assimilating, moderately assimilating, and not assimilating at all. Throughout the episodes on her protracted voyage and upon her arrival in the host nation, she passed by these strategies. Indeed, she wished to conceal her life's and her family's history by changing her name. Wearing the typical clothing worn by westerners allowed her to change her outward look. The headscarf, a representation of her religious beliefs, was removed. On the other side, she defines her own boundaries and confines herself to her apartment. She actually viewed it as her entire world, a place where she was protected from all danger. She regrets that she has been so exposed to people as a result of her interactions with numerous of her neighbors because she enjoys her position as a quiet voyeur. However, her decision to join the demonstrators' caravan, which was being led by Adam, his coworkers, outsiders, and college students in opposition to the world's atrocities, persecution, and condemnation, is significant. She hopes to raise awareness of the status of her nation and to give voice to the plight and suffering of the Syrian people. As a result, she has not entirely assimilated on the inside; but, in terms of her looks, she must conform to the western society.

III. CONCLUSION

To sum up, Rana assumed a different personality when she landed at the host land, concealing her true identity and name. She wanted to blend into this serene condition, but she was unable to do so. Afterward, she kept to her apartment, which served as her safe haven, cutting herself off from the outer world. Only she interacted with the community by skulking and spying on people. The gaze here is distinct from the usual conventional gaze; the eastern Syrian refugee is looking at western civilization and neighborhood, not vice versa. Additionally, she shed her hijab and her authentic appearance, which identified her faith and specified her ancestry and culture. She starts dressing the same as them (the westerners). She took all of these actions to hide her true self and ancestral history. Following that, she became involved with several of her neighbors, such as Adam and Chloe; she visited their homes, and they reciprocated, and she became involved in their lives from a close distance. But she later regretted it because it led to her becoming close to other people, which was never her intention. As a result of some of the aforementioned factors, Rana is certainly partially assimilated; nevertheless, by ultimately joining the demonstrators' caravan to speak about her nation's situation and cause, she has become integrated, or, as Berry puts it, has adopted the receiving culture while retaining the heritage culture. Overall, Rana experienced Berry's models of acculturation as she became agitated and non-chronologically changed over time, transforming her mind and personality. She was unsure of what to do in a free and secure environment. She was also perplexed about her own identity. Her exposing her true name and joining the strikes, on the other hand, implies that she regains her confidence, and she becomes Rana the integrated. Hence, Rana experiences both internal and exterior changes as a result of acculturation. The psychological acculturation she underwent and managed as a result of her required journey to find sanctuary is what caused her muteness, isolation, separation, quiet, longing for a blank identity, and mystery.

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