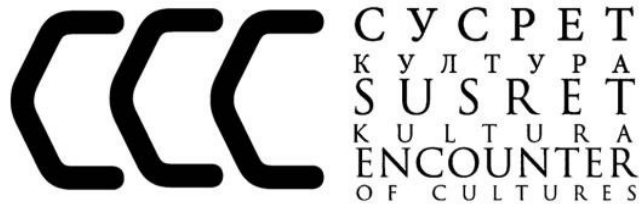




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REFUGEE IMAGES IN CONTEMPORARY HUNGARIAN LITERATURE

Abstract: The paper offers an interpretation of the literary representations of refugees in contemporary Hungarian literature. The examination focuses on how stereotypes define the formulation of the attitude toward refugees and how the texts reflect on the political rhetoric as well as the process of producing enemy images. The refugee crisis of recent years does not play a pivotal role in Hungarian literature. Still, the topic is present in the texts of Sándor Jászberényi, Zsuzsa Selyem, Ottó Tolnai, Iván Sándor, Krisztina Tóth, and Dénes Krusovszky, among others. In these works, refugees are portrayed in different manners. In some instances, migrants are treated as background elements; in others, they are given a more significant role, though in most cases, they feature as strangers, as the manifestation of Other. The reader sees the refugees through the narrator's or the protagonist's eyes. The migrants themselves seldom have a voice. Their characterization is generally based on stereotypes. The paper distinguishes between different refugee images, the refugees' image of themselves, the Global North's image of the refugee, which is shaped by xenophobia, fear, and anxiety on the one hand, and humanitarian concern on the other. In some cases, the Global North describes itself as the victim of the refugee crisis, producing enemies of the refugees. All of these stereotypes and enemy images can be traced in contemporary Hungarian literary works.

Key words: Refugee literature, stereotypes, stranger, enemy, Hungarian literature

INTRODUCTION

The paper discusses the various representations of refugees¹ in contemporary Hungarian literature. The study focuses on how stereotypes define attitudes toward refugees, how the texts reflect on the political rhetoric and how the

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¹ The terms 'refugee' and 'migrant' are used as synonyms in this work, interchangeably denoting people forced into exile, fleeing their homelands due to political instability.

process of producing enemy images is influenced by the typical tropes and metaphors of exile.

The refugee crisis of recent years is not a central subject in Hungarian literature, yet it can be found in the writings of Sándor Jászberényi, Zsuzsa Selyem, Ottó Tolnai, Krisztina Tóth, Dénes Krusovszky, and Iván Sándor, to list but a few. These texts have different aspects and presentation modes. In some, migrants are no more than background elements; in others, they are granted a more considerable role, though still portrayed as strangers, as the manifestation of the Other throughout. The reader sees the refugees through the narrator's or the protagonist's eyes. The migrants seldom have a voice. Stereotypes play an essential role in how those literary characters are described.

According to Edward Said, modern Western culture is primarily the creation of exiles, emigrants, and refugees. He supported this statement by George Steiner, who called the entire 20th-century Western literature extraterritorial (Said 2000: 173–174). Researchers in various scientific fields have dealt with this topic, and literature is no exception, the term refugee literature already established concept. Sercan Hamza Bağlama stated that refugee literature was a realistic snapshot of the migration crisis's nature that thematized the experiences of victimization and dehumanization (Bağlama 2020: 632).

Corina Stan distinguished between diasporic, exilic, and refugee literature, the term refugee literature referring texts written by and about refugees (Gallien 2018: 723). In Claire Gallien's view, "Refugee literature is not (only) a literature of despair that dwells on the moral hypocrisy of the west. Nor is it only a form of testimonial literature depicting traumatic events and an urgent intervention to respond to a fictional "crisis". In other words, its temporality reaches beyond the past, nostalgia, and trauma but also beyond the present and its many urgencies. It is literature where seminal experimentations with forms, genres, languages, and national literary constructions occur, thereby indicating, especially in its ecological vein, directions for postcolonial futures" (Gallien 2018: 725).

Researchers often list walls, paper(s), and water as tropes of refugee literature as well as "metaphors related to large quantities and elemental forces such as water and flooding" (Stan 2017: 797). When analyzing the media coverage of the refugee crisis in 2015 and 2016, Greussing and Boomgaarden found that "the framing of refugee and asylum issues in mass media coverage can be grouped into three common types: refugees and asylum seekers are represented as passive

victims, as threat to the culture, security and welfare of the host country, or as dehumanised, anonymous (out-)group” (Greussing & Boomgaarden 2017: 1751).

POLITICAL PROPAGANDA, STEREOTYPES, AND ENEMY IMAGES

There are different refugee images that must to be distinguished, namely, the refugees' image of themselves, the Global North's image of the refugee, which is shaped by xenophobia, fear, and anxiety on the one hand, and humanitarian concern on the other. In some cases, the Global North describes itself as the victim of the refugee crisis, producing enemies of the refugees (Cox et al. 2020: 6). The anti-immigration propaganda of the Hungarian government is a revealing example of this phenomenon. The political campaign came in several waves between 2015 and 2018, dominating the political landscape of Hungary. The government's anti-immigration attitude was linked to their decidedly negative stance towards human rights NGOs, George Soros, and the European Union (Barna 2019: 56). The first poster campaign was conducted in June 2015, when blue billboards were mounted all over the country with the following messages: “If you come to Hungary, you can’t take away the jobs of Hungarians”; “If you come to Hungary, you must respect our culture”; and “If you come to Hungary, you must obey our rules”. Ildikó Barna highlighted the inherent paradox: while these messages were clearly addressed to refugees based on the wording, they were all displayed in Hungarian, a language inaccessible to them, so the message could not reach them in any way (Barna 2019: 62).

In addition, the Hungarian media constantly presented the migrant situation as a threat to national security (Barna 2019: 65). The prime minister, Viktor Orbán touched on the topic in each of his speeches at various events, stressing the need to protect the country from external enemies. Thus, he presented Hungary yet again as the savior of Europe and Christianity, using a historical parallel. Analyzing the speeches of Viktor Orbán, Kopper et al. determined that after 2015 “the Hungarian government's rhetoric is nothing but a permanent naming of new enemies who are attacking the country” (Kopper et al. 2017: 110).

The Hungarian government's propaganda included the following items, based on Brown's list: the pinpointing of the enemy, the appeal to authority, and the use of stereotypes (Barna 2019: 69). Due to all these elements, the political rhetoric “built a pseudo-environment full of lies, half-truths, and distorted facts, continually omitting any information that would contradict the message it wanted

to convey” (Barna 2019: 68). Contemporary Hungarian literary works reflect on government propaganda, the use of stereotypes, and enemy images.

The propaganda against refugees is an essential layer in Sándor Jászberényi’s novel, *A varjúkirály* [*The Crow King*]. It must be noted that the author is a war correspondent and photojournalist who worked in conflict zones, channeling a wide range of knowledge on refugees, their motivations, and circumstances into his works. His insider view enabled him to grasp the essence of the refugee crisis. The style is based on the objective journalistic approach. The novel’s omnipotent narrator does not judge; he simply documents the events and the environment. However, beyond all the objectivity, the voicing of the propaganda, the reader can identify an ironic undertone, hence, when reading the novel, the reader is left with the feeling that the narrator may not identify with the propaganda messages after all.

One of the above-mentioned blue billboards proclaiming government messages can be found in the novel’s opening landscape (Jászberényi 2020: 213). This conspicuous environment at the start of the novel set the tone for the entire text, the reader can hear the low – and occasionally increasingly loud – background noise throughout *A varjúkirály*. The background noise is almost like a radio constantly playing somewhere close by, and if the reader listens carefully, he can hear the news and hateful social advertisements floating in the air. Later in the text, the prime minister is speaking on the radio, assuring everyone that Hungary will protect its borders. The bulleting on declaring the state of emergency due to the mounting danger caused of mass immigration, the news that a migrant raped a young girl on a train, as well as talk of passports and mobile phones found in the border zone are all crucial in creating this novel’s peculiar atmosphere. In his works, Sándor Jászberényi often combines fiction and journalism.

A varjúkirály offers a highly detailed and nuanced description of the attitude of the manipulated Hungarian society towards migrants. Negative attitudes towards strangers are not a new phenomenon in Hungary; they started to increase between 1992 and 1995, around the time of the regime change, rising from 15% to 40%. Following spells of stagnation and fluctuation, negativity was on the rise again in 2012 (Gazsó 2020: 371). The representative Eurobarometer research also indicated an increase in xenophobia after the onset of the migrant crisis: “in 2015, right after the anti-migrant campaign started, 48 percent of the Hungarian population would allow a few non-Hungarian migrants into the country; and 32 percent would allow none of them into the country. Whereas in 2017, only 37

percent would allow a few into the country; and 48 percent would allow none” (Barna 20119: 68). A 2018 analysis of the most common fears of the Hungarian society showed that immigration was considered the fifth most crucial problem of the entire Hungarian population (Boros & Laki 2018, 56). Another study, however, revealed that more than half of the participants (60,5%) had no personal experience with migrants, be it directly or through a close relative (Janik, Pénczváltó & Varga 2022: 2).

The protagonist of *A varjúkirály*, Csontos, and especially his Roma friend Csabi are marginal figures, almost as marginal as the refugees. They become involved in the work of an illegal border guard team, a team of nationalists. Csabi’s ethnic background is a considerable problem, but the members of the troop realize that they need every single person in the battle against the external enemy. Their approach is in accordance with government propaganda. Their task is to protect the Hungarian border during the night, but what they do is not simply protection; it is, in fact, hunting. They are armed and treat the migrants like animals. They commit robbery, humiliate refugees, and finally murder them: only Csontos and Csabi suffer from feeling guilty. Csontos compares the refugees to animals; this comparison is based on the vulnerability and bewilderment of the hunted animal: “Az őzek jutottak róluk az eszébe. Ugyanaz a rémült tekintet, az inakba dermedt feszültség, ami azt keresi, merre ugorhatna” [He was reminded of deer. The same terrified gaze, the tension frozen in their tendons looking for where to flee]² (Jászberényi 2020: 246). The shopkeeper also treats the refugees as animals, but in contrast to Csontos's impression, his comment reflects state propaganda: “Mert ezek is állatok. Pesten is megmondták, erről beszél a tévé” [Because they are also animals. They said so in Budapest, that is what the TV is saying] (Jászberényi 2020: 226).

The shopkeeper serves the migrants because he is scared of them. He is afraid they will set the shop on fire if he refuses to serve them. Later in the novel, this does happen, but the reader is left in the dark about who started the fire, but the people know: “Egy ötven körüli nő a faluból, aki elég közel állt, hogy hallja a párbeszédet, közbeüvöltött: ‘A **migráncok** csinálták ezt, mindenki **tuggya**. Több tanyára is betörték az éjjel, maguk meg nem csinálnak semmit’” [A woman aged about 50, from the village standing close enough to hear the conversation, interjected: ‘The migrants did this, everybody knows that. They broke into several

² The fictional quotes were translated by the authors.

farms last night and you are doing nothing about it'] (Jászberényi 2020: 272). The spelling mistakes in the highlighted Hungarian words carry a deeper meaning in these sentences. They indicate the woman's lower social status and low-level literacy. The woman's hostile attitude and low education level are consistent with the results of the research (Boros & Laki, 2018: 52).

The stereotypes are the central topic in Krisztina Tóth's short story, *Sötét égbolt* [*Dark Sky*]. The I-Narrator witnesses a vicious conversation about refugees in a shop and listens to the taxi driver's cruel monologue in which he proposes various destruction methods and genocide, most notably the Holocaust, as the solution to the current refugee crisis: "Azt mondja, nem hiszi el, hogy a tudomány mai állása mellett nem lehet ezt megoldani, hát miért nem hajtják be az összes bevándorót egy sátor alá, aztán nyomatnak rájuk egy kis gázt. Mindjárt oda lehetne terelni a hajléktalanokat is, van itt épp elég normális ember, azoknak se jut hely" [He says he can't believe that they can't solve this issue given the current state of science. Why don't they just drive all the immigrants into a tent and then spray them with some gas? And they should drive the homeless in, too, while they're at it; there are enough normal people here, and there is not even room enough for them] (Tóth 2018: 11). The protagonist remains silent but asks the taxi to stop and let her out of the car. She switches to a bus, and while examining the other passengers, she asks herself how many of them would agree with the taxi driver. She judges others, yet she herself remains passive.

Conversely, the protagonists of Sándor Jászberényi's short story, *Hosszú hétvége* [*Long Weekend*], actually do something. A married couple travel to Vienna; the wife selects a single person from among the crowd to prove to them that the government propaganda is simply untrue. Similarly to *A varjúkirály*, this short story also starts with mentioning the social advertisements on the radio: "Kikapcsolnád a szaros propagandát? Hányingerem van tőle" [Would you turn off this shitty propaganda? I'm sick of hearing this] – the wife asked the husband (Jászberényi 2020a: 161). The couple's selection process is highly ambivalent, but eventually the woman is thrilled because the refugee she chose turned out to be brilliant and did not fit the image of the enemy. At the end of the story, there is a twist. The couple is arrested because their perfect refugee had used their phone, inadvertently linking them to a suicide bombing in France. Hence, in his work, Sándor Jászberényi did not idealize refugees; he highlighted that one must not generalize, these are always individuals among the crowd, each with a specific story.

In the novel of Ottó Tolnai, *Szeméremékszerek* [*Genital Jewelry*], the refugee crisis is not portrayed as a dangerous event, but as a possibility. The I-Narrator wants to form a field hockey team with refugees. He portrays an understanding, positive attitude towards them which is, nonetheless, also based on stereotypes; he generalizes and is unable to differentiate between individuals of different ethnicities.

FENCES, WALLS, BOUNDARIES, AND THE METAPHORS OF EXCLUSION

In the narrative of his novel *Amit a szél susog* [*What the Wind Rustles*], published in 2020, Iván Sándor concentrates on the imagery of fences, walls and boundaries as well as the motif of escape. He thematizes the migrant crisis (travel, memory, recurring historical traumas, the cyclical nature of cataclysms, and genocides). In the novel, the writer Z., is a modern pilgrim. Following the death of his wife, Z. travels to various destinations all over Europe tracing the paths of their former lives and journeys. In Athens, he meets a Greek archaeologist, Nikos, who witnessed the ISIS attack that destroyed the ruin city at the Palmyra excavations. Nikos' photographs of destruction and human executions emphasize the importance of remembering; however, Z. recognizes that visiting places once beautiful and full of life will not enable him to reconstruct previous situations (Sándor 2020: 35–36).

The concept of the border is inseparable from the images associated with the topos of the visual representation of refugees. The liminal situation, the mental and the physical boundaries are constant “spatial forms” of Iván Sándor's prose. The scenes set on Lesbos are interwoven with the “wire fences”: the novel's texture leads the protagonist back to the Holocaust: „Nem tudott szabadulni a szigeten sínylődők tekintetétől. A haláltáborok foglyainak fotókon látott tekintetére emlékeztették” [The gazes of those suffering on the island, he couldn't get them out of his head. Those gazes reminded him of the prisoners' gazes in the death camps seen in photos] (Sándor 2020: 40).

In another of Sándor's works, *Az éjszaka mélyén 1914* [*In the Deep of the Night 1914*], published in 2012, the reader finds the main character, Ádám Kiss just graduated from secondary school in Szeged. At the outbreak of the war, he must face the consequence of his French scholarship: remain in Paris and enlist in the French army. Ádám transfers from one army to another and finds himself in a

prison camp, subjected to all the extreme situations of wartime existence. The scenes describing the prisoners of the war camps include references to the most iconic symbol of separation, the “wire fence”. This object appears as a threatening icon, a sort of premonition of the disaster looming ahead, i.e., the genocide that would occur some years later, surpassing in its destruction even the barbaric events of WWI: “Nem titok, hogy vezérezredes úr szándéka mindössze az egykori sedani győzelem után hajdan meghúzott határok örökkévalóságának biztosítása. [...] A táborokat körülvevő drótkerítésbe villanyáramot kell bevezetni. A magas állásokban fényszórók, géppuskák legyenek” [It is no secret that the intention of Mr. General is merely to ensure that the boundaries once set up following the earlier victory in Sedan remain forever. [...] We must run electric power into the camps' wire fence. The towers must be equipped with headlights and machine guns] (Sándor 2012: 65–66).

In Sándor's works, the protagonists live in constant border situations, and now their dynamic movements have been added to the events of the refugee crisis of recent years in a visual and decodable form. Iván Sándor's previous novel, *A hetedik nap* [*The Heroes of the Seventh Day*], is set during the “Eighty Years' War”. While on the verge of death, the characters are all refugees scrambling to retain some emblems of beauty in this culture (Kovács 2019: 122). In the world of Iván Sándor, exile is an age-old cultural topos, especially, considering that the persecuted people of all ages, be it Jews, Catholics and Protestants as opponents, victims of religious wars, young Frenchmen and Germans, adversaries facing each other in opposite trenches, always aiming to save the memories of culture.

The leading theory refugee literature is Luc Boltanski's model, the concept of “distant suffering”. The first category in Boltanski's model is the “politics of pity”, in which suffering must end immediately. Another way of considering this is the “politics of justice”, in the dimension in which the sufferers do not simply suffer. Their suffering always holds a significance in the relational system of some moral and equity problems (Chouliaraki 2008: 20). In her monograph (*The Spectatorship of Suffering*), Lilie Chouliaraki further considered Boltanski's idea and defined three types of observers of suffering. The involved spectator is moved by empathy and wants to share the tragic fate. The omnipresent spectator feels indignation, demands justice, and faces the events with an attitude corresponding to the “politics of justice and denunciation” of “distant suffering”. The distanced spectator is neither benevolent nor inclined to mete out justice, in fact, he sees suffering as neither heartbreaking nor unjust. The spectator also takes a moral,

moralizing position but primarily views the given event in its process and historical context (Chouliaraki 2008a, 179–180). The focus of the three spectators, their alternation, but especially the camera eye of the distanced spectator-narrator, was characteristic of Sándor's text world even before the appearance of the refugee theme, for example, in *Az éjszaka mélyén*.

Migrants stopped by barriers and wire fences arrive in Europe by way of the sea, the liquid space of freedom. The Mediterranean, according to Fernand Braudel, is the “uninhabited space” that “left its mark on the rise of civilisations” and is a medium of constant movement (Braudel 1975: 184). The “Garden of Eden” of the Mediterranean unity created by the Roman Empire is now the scene of destruction, a “jealously guarded or longingly desired property” for the eyes of Europeans, as formulated by Michel Mollat du Jourdin (Mollat du Jourdin 1996: 148). The former Mare Nostrum has become the scene of death, while the faceless crowd was given a name and a story through an event that has since become iconic in contemporary visual and popular culture. On September 2, 2015 the body of 3-year-old Aylan Kurdi was discovered on the beach of a Turkish resort. The boy, his 5-year-old brother, and their mother drowned in the Mediterranean Sea as the family tried to make its way in an inflatable boat from Turkey to Greece to settle in Canada eventually (Mielczarek 2018: 1–2). The photo series of Kurdi's corpse became a hashtag and a meme, but primarily a metonymy with rhetorical power, representing collective suffering. The visual representations of his body position and clothing captured at the moment of his drifting ashore (e. g., Omer Tosun's picture of the boy sleeping in bed in his room, published on Twitter) reinforce the new meaning of the composition with the material environment that serves primarily as the background of the body. These images and memes often imitate a small child's peaceful, sleeping state, so they absurdly suggest that a little one struggling in the “sea of hope” had to die to reach the longed-for promised land (Mielczarek 2018: 12, 17).

Iván Sándor's sea has already shown many versions of the oceanographic visions of European culture. In the texture of the novel, *Az éjszaka mélyén*, the sea is initially the space of happy memories (Sándor 2012: 31). For Ádám Kiss, the water later turns into the metaphor of battles and attacks, it becomes increasingly hopeless and uninterpretable, reflected in the expressions “sea of mud”, “sea of light” (Sándor 2012: 41, 179, 43). In the apocalyptic vision of *A hetedik nap*, we can also often read that the “whole world is a sea of mud”, but the North Sea, which stubbornly surrounds the events of the novel, primarily means a “world

without people” for the refugees, who are populating the story (Sándor 2018, 9, 215). Along this path, we reach the image of the sea as a mirror of water, as in *Amit a szél susog*, towering as an insurmountable physical barrier in front of the persecuted masses who meet the same fate as Kurdi: “áthaladnak egy sikátoron / nem lesz könnyű / az út a szigetre? kérdezte Z. / az sem... elég viharos a tenger...” [they are passing through an alley / It won’t be easy / The way to the island? asked Z. / That too... the sea is quite stormy...] (Sándor 2020: 35).

In the introduction to the thematic issue of the *Journal of Narrative Theory* on refugee literature, Hadji Bakara cited Nasia Anam's article, also found here, and termed Anam's thesis an essential tendency in the literary representation of the refugee issue. Anam subverted the conservative and undoubtedly racist idea of the “migrant as the new colonizer” when he stated that refugees settling in Europe are implementers of a new kind of “global citizenship” and that refugee camps are metaphors for a new kind of “global civilization”. Metaphors of a civilization in which statelessness is no longer considered an exception (Bakara 2020: 294; Anam 2020: 406).

SUMMARY

Based on this detailed review of current literary works, it can be declared that the migrant crisis as a topic does not appear often in contemporary Hungarian literature. There is hardly any discussion of refugees. One of the reasons for this is that Hungary is a transit zone. The passing stranger is only given a cursory glance, judged in a fleeting second, which is also reflected in literary works (Kovács & Novák, 2022: 122). However, the day of February 24, 2022 the first day of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, would rewrite the refugee narrative of contemporary European and Hungarian literature. Almost a year into the conflict, it has become clear that the perception of refugees from Ukraine is radically different from the reception of migrants during the refugee crisis of 2015. Instead of massive rejection, Hungary readily accepted Ukrainian citizens showing a great degree of tolerance and empathy, given that they were escaping from a neighboring, familiar country, fleeing the war (Tóth & Bernát, 2022: 348). Stereotypes will be essential in representing this crisis, although they are likely to be positive.

The stereotypical depictions of refugees are dominant in the analyzed texts, but different procedures can be observed. Although Sándor Jászberényi has an insider view, in his works, the emphasis is placed on the attitude of the Hungarian

society and the government propaganda. So, his works are actual period documents. Ottó Tolnai's approach is different. The I-narrator has a positive attitude toward refugees, which is, however, also based on stereotypes instead of deep knowledge and understanding. The narrator projects his characteristic creative process onto the migrants, expropriates and makes them part of his world. Iván Sándor embeds the current crisis in the historical tradition of exile and uses the elements of the Holocaust narrative to describe the refugee camp.

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