

# The Theft of Enjoyment

## Representations of Syrian Women and Children in the Conventional Turkish Media During the Early Syrian Civil War

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**Öz:** Bu makale Zizek'in zevk hırsızlığı kavramını incelemesine dayanarak mültecilerin ev, mahalle ve aidiyet tecrübeleri üzerine olan söylemlerin konvansiyonel Türk medyasında nasıl unsurlar içerdiğini analiz etmektedir. Türk medyasında farklı gazeteleri eleştirel bir şekilde inceleyerek Suriyeli mülteciler, özellikle de Suriyeli kadın ve çocuklar, meselesini ele almaktadır. Bu makale gazetelerde yer alan söylemlerin Suriyeli mülteciler meselesinde nasıl farkındalık ve hassasiyet ürettiğini ve nasıl yeniden ürettiğini incelemektedir. Makale, Suriyeli mülteciler üzerindeki bu söylemlerin belli başlı özelliklere sahip olduğunu ve özellikle mültecilerin zevki çalan figürler olarak temsil edildiğini iddia etmektedir. Cinsiyetçi toplumsal perspektifte, mülteciler söylemsel olarak ev ve mahalledeki zevki çalan figürler olarak kurulmuşlardır. Haber metinleri derinlemesine incelendiğinde Suriyeli çocukların mahalledeki huzuru bozan, yerel yaşamı ve gündelik hayatın normal seyrini tehdit eden, Suriyeli kadın mülteci öznelerin ise "Türk kadınlarının kocalarını çalan" ve "evleri ve yuvaları yıkan" figürler olarak görüldüğü iddia edilmektedir. Böylece mikro sosyal yapılar olarak ev ve mahalle Suriyeli mülteci "öteki" üzerine söylemlere katkıda bulunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** zevk hırsızlığı, Türk medyası, Türkiye'deki Suriyeli mülteciler, Suriyeli kadın ve çocuklar, ev, aidiyet

**Abstract:** Relying on the Zizekian notion of the theft of enjoyment, this paper analyzes how discourses on refugees' experiences of home, neighborhood, and belonging are represented in conventional Turkish media during the early period of the Syrian Civil War. It examines various newspapers in Turkish media and employs a critical analysis of the issues concerning Syrian refugees, particularly Syrian refugee women and children. This paper explores how these discourses produce and reproduce awareness about the Syrian refugees in Turkey. The article argues that earlier discourses on Syrian refugees in Turkey revolve around specific characteristics framing Syrian refugees as figures of "the theft of enjoyment". Refugees are discursively constructed as figures threatening homes and neighborhoods. After critically examining the media pieces, the article asserts that Syrian children are portrayed as ruining neighborhood peace and threatening the local "way of life", while Syrian refugee women are depicted as figures who "steal Turkish husbands" and "destroy homes". Therefore, both home and neighborhood as micro-social structures contribute to the discourses on the Syrian refugee "other".

**Keywords:** theft of enjoyment, conventional Turkish media, Syrian refugees in Turkey, Syrian women and children, home, belonging

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## Introduction

Political protests in Syria began in 2011, influenced by similar uprisings in other Arab states in the Middle East and North Africa where people united to overthrow the dictatorships<sup>1</sup>. The media coined the term “Arab Spring” in order to refer to these movements which aimed to remove long-standing dictators and implement democratic reforms. Several countries experienced “successful” transitions where rulers stepped down, new governments were elected through free elections, and constitutional amendments were introduced to emphasize democracy, rights, and liberties.

The Syrian people also protested against the Bashar Al-Assad government due to high levels of corruption, a lack of democratic and transparent institutions, and the regime’s brutality toward oppositional views (Gelvin, 2015, p. 127). However, according to Gelvin (2015), Syria and Bahrain were two countries that proved themselves “coup-proofed”, meaning these regimes were highly securitized against any internal threats (p. 119). The Assad government’s persistence in maintaining power through violent repression of opposition groups, combined with the formation of various opposition groups that employed terror, led to massive flows migration flows. Many Syrians fled the atrocities and insecurity, seeking refuge in neighboring countries, Europe and North America. However, December 2024 marks a critical turning point for the Syrian Civil War. The opposition forces overthrew the Assad regime after 13 years, and Assad stepped down and left Syria (Brookings, 2024). The establishment of the Syrian Transitional Government afterward signals a new beginning for the Syrian people and the region. The new government called on Syrian refugees worldwide to “return home” to build the new Syria (The Guardian, 2024).

Turkey, due to its geographical proximity to Syria, has become a primary destination for large numbers of Syrian refugees. Since the onset of the Civil War, Turkey has pursued an “open-door policy” towards Syrian migrants, who have sought refuge from the conflict in their homeland. However, Turkey’s lack of experience in accommodating refugees, coupled with the significant influx of Syrian nationals has given rise to new dynamics in social interactions and political discourse concerning “the other” within Turkish society. According to the data provided by the Ministry of Interior’s Presidency of Migration Management, the number of Syrians under temporary protection was 14 thousand in 2012, 224 thousand in 2013, 1,5 million in 2014, 2,5 million in 2015, and 2,8 million in 2016 in the early years of the Civil War. The number later peaked at 3,7 million in 2021 (Göç İdaresi Başkanlığı, 2025).

1 Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya are considered to go through “the Arab Spring”. However, Gelvin (2015) argues that these cases were not as promising as the media suggested at the time; and certain democratic steps were later taken down. One of the highly known examples of these retreatments includes the 2013 Egyptian coup d’etat, in which the elected president Mohamed Mursi’s government was overthrown and Mursi was arrested.

The increasing visibility of Syrian refugees and the awareness of their presence among the Turkish population have led to the emergence of a distinct societal narrative. Unlike encounters with Western others, this new “other” from Syria brings with it unique social, economic, and political challenges. Consequently, Turkish society has exhibited a range of responses, including empathy, mutual sympathy, and opportunism towards the plight of Syrian refugees. As Derrida (2000) explores being a host should be considered in terms of using the power of hospitality.

However, the dynamics of this encounter are not uniform. Alongside feelings of empathy and hospitality, there exists a spectrum of emotions, including fear, anxiety over security, and concerns regarding economic implications. These varied reactions manifest across different segments of society, influencing political discourse, everyday interactions, and the functioning of both public and private institutions. Notably, the media plays a crucial role in forming and disseminating discourses surrounding the “other,” contributing to the multiplicity of perspectives present within Turkish society.

This paper explores how concepts of nation and nationalism, gender, home, and belonging are used in social and political discourses about Syrian refugees in Turkish media. The article argues that the earlier discourses on Syrian refugees are influenced by the psychoanalytic notion of “the theft of enjoyment”. The visibility of refugees produces anxiety over the host’s ideas of what the national identity is. The encounter with Syrian refugees challenges Turkey’s fragile conceptualizations of national identity over who a Turkish citizen is (Kentel, Ahıska and Genç, 2007; Bozdoğan and Kasaba, 2014). The article attempts to answer: “What was the discursive impact of Syrian migration on Turkey during the early years of the Syrian Civil War? How did the media in Turkey represent the Syrian people who seek refuge? What were the discursive frameworks that the media used to characterize Syrian refugee subjects?”

This article explores these questions by analyzing discourses on the refugee “other” in newspapers’ web editions in 2014, 2015, and 2016. These years cover the early years of the Syrian Civil War and also correspond to increasing numbers of Syrian refugees in Turkey, making the Syrian refugees an important topic in the Turkish social and political agenda. Certel and Atasü-Topçuoğlu (2022) also highlight that there is more news coverage on the Syrian refugees in the early years of the Civil War (p. 544). Apart from characterizing the earlier stages, this period is also marked by the general elections of June 7th and November 1st in 2015, in which the Syrian refugees were an important topic for discussion. The refugee issue sustained its importance in the aftermath of these elections.

The research rests on a search engine search for the word “Syrian” (“Suriyeli” in Turkish) in three mainstream Turkish newspapers during the period between January 2014 and December 2016. The newspaper coverage includes news articles, opinion pieces, government

legislation, and political discussions. Three newspapers—*Hürriyet*, *Milliyet*, and *Habertürk*—are selected to provide a wide range of data on Syrian refugees to assess the discourses on Syrian refugees. All these newspapers can be positioned ideologically in the center of the leftist-rightist scale. The aim is to present the landscape of discursive viewpoints in the mainstream media. Despite being different media outlets, none of these newspapers take explicitly anti-immigration or pro-immigration positions, reflecting Turkey's ambiguous approach to the Syrian refugee issue, contradicting the examples in Western countries (Gedalof, 2007, p. 78).

The article examines 871 news pieces on the newspapers' websites over a three-year period from January 1, 2014, to December 31, 2016, marking the earlier stages of the Syrian Civil War and its outcomes in Turkey. All news on Syrian refugees is reviewed, and most were excluded to focus solely on the conditions and representations of Syrian refugees in Turkey. To that end, news pieces specifically on Syrian women, men, and children are considered to examine how Syrian refugees, as Syrian women, men, and children, are represented in the media. Each news piece is coded to highlight its main subject, and several themes are developed to assess the main issues in the representation of refugees. Employing qualitative content analysis, the paper quotes exemplifying articles to examine the main issue of how Syrian refugees are discussed.

The research shows that out of all the news pieces, 75 focus on Syrian children, 70 on Syrian women, and 28 on Syrian men, while the other news pieces address a variety of issues, including the increasing numbers of Syrian refugees in Turkey, violence against them, anti-refugee sentiments and discourse in society and politics, economic impacts, aid provision, and human trafficking.

The themes of news coverage about children include the following: children in dire conditions (from solitude to economic hardships) (19 pieces), violence against children (16 pieces), child workers and begging children (11 pieces), projects for the wellbeing of children (10 pieces), news to attract public opinion on Alan Kurdi, the two-year-old Syrian refugee boy drowned in the Mediterranean Sea with his family trying to reach Europe in 2015, (9 pieces), children in education (5 pieces), and children having health problems (5 pieces). This indicates that children are primarily portrayed as victims, and the hardships of living as a refugee child is acknowledged. However, the number of news pieces on violence against children takes second place, highlighting that refugee children are particularly vulnerable to violence.

The news pieces on women cover several themes: victimization of and violence against women (20 pieces), marriages with Syrian women (including polygamous marriages) (16 pieces), prostitution (13 pieces), sham marriages in which brides defraud grooms (9 pieces), women committing crimes (4 pieces), successful women in education or business (4 pieces), women giving births (4 pieces). There is a primary focus on the victimization of women enduring difficult conditions of war, displacement, and violence. Marriages consti-

tute the second major theme concerning Syrian women. This is not surprising because the number of Syrian brides among all foreign brides rose to second place in 2014 and first place in 2015 according to Turkish Statistical Institute's Marriage by Citizenship 2009-2023 report. In fact, this is covered in the news as before 2014, Turkish grooms would overwhelmingly marry German brides (Hürriyet, 2016, August 27; Habertürk, 2015, September 14).

The number of news specifically on Syrian men is relatively limited. This may be due to men not being gendered like women or portrayed as victims like children; rather, the figure of "the refugee man" is discursively portrayed as the general figure of "the refugee", making any specific references to refugee men marginal. This remains a limitation of the study and for this reason, the article does not include a section on refugee men. However, it is important to note that the news pieces can be classified into three; those that focus on Syrian men committing violence and crimes (16 pieces), violence against Syrian men (6 pieces), and successful Syrian men in business (6 pieces). The lack of victimization of Syrian men is noteworthy. While women and children are victimized and the difficult conditions of refugee life are acknowledged, the news does not treat the Syrian men in the same manner. Rather, Syrian men are represented as violent and criminal.

### **Turkey As a Host Country**

Turkey was not considered a major host country for refugees before the Syrian migrations (İçduygu, 2014). This is also because "the refugee problem" is typically discussed within the context of the Western world, where non-Western people often seek refuge (Dursun, 2017). Turkey, on the other hand, had fairly strict laws regarding the acceptance of refugees. This is due to the 1951 Geneva Convention, which the Turkish government adopted in 1961 (Güler, 2019). This convention requires states to take specific steps to host refugees with rights and liberties (Miş, 2013). However, this convention has geographical limitations that allow Turkey to accept asylum applications only from European countries (Korkut, 2016, p. 1). Therefore, the legal status of a "refugee" could only be given to European nationals. As a result, the concept of the "refugee" is not politically and legally used by the Turkish government. Consequently, there has been uncertainty regarding the appropriate term for the Syrian people. Initially, the more informal term "guest" was used, suggesting the temporary nature of their migration. The term "immigrant" is also used, reinforcing the temporary aspect of the Syrians. However, the Turkish state now refers to Syrians as being "under temporary protection" regarding their legal status<sup>2</sup>.

2 The article employs the term "refugee" to describe the Syrians migrating to Turkey, but it emphasizes that this does not imply a legal status. The diverse terminology used to describe Syrians adds complexity to the social and political discussions about them. This complication is linked to the legal fra-

The Syrian migration to Turkey began in March 2011. Political turmoil, instability, and economic decline all led to subsequent waves of migration in years. Turkey implemented an “open-door policy” regarding the Syrian crisis and subsequently emerged as the leading host nation for Syrian refugees globally (İlgi and Davis, 2013). The United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) reports from 2014, 2015, and 2016 demonstrate that Turkey received around 2 to 3 million refugees during the early Syrian Civil War (UNHCR 2014; UNHCR 2015; UNHCR 2016), and only 10 to 15% of the refugees stayed in camps (Dursun, 2017, p. 35).

The Syrian refugees in Turkey have attracted scholarly interest. Earlier studies on refugees are typically reports that aim to identify the refugee issue. These studies provide a brief overview of the number of refugees, explaining how the state supports them, and detailing the conditions of the facilities that host the refugees. These studies primarily aim to provide information about the initial phases of Syrian migration to Turkey with a historical and legal framework. Examples include Özden’s (2013) and İçduygu’s (2015) research reports. These reports address the factors driving Syrian migration worldwide, Turkey’s key principles concerning refugee acceptance, and the legal status of refugees in Turkey.

Similarly, other reports analyze the social integration of Syrians in Turkey and explore how the Turkish state and society perceive the Syrian “other.” Erdoğan’s report in 2014 reveals various findings and contends that while there is a considerable level of acceptance of Syrian refugees overall, Turkish society harbors several concerns regarding their integration. Other reports include works by civil society and think tanks (ORSAM 2015; MAZLUMDER 2013a; MAZLUMDER 2013b; MAZLUMDER 2014). These reports provide everyday discrimination experienced by Syrians. However, they provide everyday information to offer policy recommendations. Their focus lies in examining how Turkish society addresses the influx of Syrian refugees and advocates for the development of sustainable policies by various stakeholders, including national and international actors.

There is also more literature on local responses to Syrian refugees in Turkey, including the portrayal of Syrian refugees in the media, especially in the later years of the Civil War. Some articles analyze the discriminatory discourses surrounding Syrians. Yayılcı and Karakuş (2015) examine Syrian representations in newspapers and contend that a newspaper’s stance on the Syrian refugees correlates with its political position. Efe (2015) reaches

mework followed by the Turkish state. Syrian refugees are not considered political asylum-seekers but people fleeing tremendous violence committed by the Syrian state and other terrorist organizations. However, the paper employs the term “refugee” because, in the common language, Syrians are called refugees regardless of their legal status. The term “under temporary protection” is a legal term adopted by the state and is not commonly used in everyday language.

a similar result in his article. Kolumuk (2009) also discovers similar outcomes in his paper, arguing that media coverage of refugees often demonstrates simplistic and superficial portrayals (p. 14). Doğanay and Keneş (2016) analyze the discriminatory discourses on Syrians and argue that representations of refugees are “exaggerated” (p. 178). Onay-Conker (2019) also holds that Syrian representation is intrinsically different from the Turks in order to otherize the refugees, while Sunata and Yıldız (2018) write that Syrian refugees are victimized and evaluated in human terms in the media. Atasü-Topçuoğlu (2018) highlights the selective representation of Syrians in the media, where they are both welcome and not welcome. Pandır (2020) agrees with the dualistic representations of the refugees, both humanized and dehumanized, and argues for the role of media to help the acceptance of the refugees and achieve social cohesion.

These works are important attempts to analyze the Syrian representations in the media. They demonstrate that there are humanitarian perspectives but political positions and economic concerns determine how Syrian refugees are viewed. However, they do not explain in detail why this discrimination occurs by applying theoretical models. This paper aims to explain the Syrian representations using psychoanalytic theories. In the following section, the paper explains how the notion of “the theft of enjoyment” can be beneficial for analyzing the Syrian representations.

### **On the Theft of Enjoyment**

In this study, the notion of “the theft of enjoyment” in psychoanalytic theory is used to examine processes of encountering and othering in Turkey as a host country. Psychoanalytic theory has significantly contributed to social theory by focusing on social identity, and the influence of social processes on the subject, emphasizing the subject and the object/the other relationship (Žižek, 1999, p. 194). Psychoanalytic thought is primarily used in studies on nationalism in which national identification is scrutinized. Stavrakakis (2007) argues that in the age of globalization, the persistence of nationalism and national identities remains a significant question. He explores the depth and durability of national identities by focusing on psychoanalytic theories (pp. 189-190).

The notion of identity, the differentiation of people between “us” and/versus “them”, forms the basic framework of the subject and the object/the other relationship. This relation exemplifies the relationality of interiority and contradiction. The politics of emotion is studied alongside the politics of identity. In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed (2014) investigates how the other produces feelings in us (p.1) and writes that “emotions are crucial to the very constitution of the psychic and the social as objects.” (p. 10). The relationality between the subject and the object, and the role of emotions constituting the subject form the core of psychoanalysis’s perspective on identity.

Zizek discusses the subject and the object relationship through “the theft of enjoyment”. He explains the notion of the theft of enjoyment by examining the discourse on “our way of life”. He argues that one of the defining characteristics of nationalism is the perception of the nation as “nation qua thing” (Zizek, 1993, p. 201). He analyzes “nation-thing” to be inherently contradictory. If the nation-thing is “ours”, it is something that the others, “they” cannot possess. This exclusivity is reinforced through the idea of “our way of life.” The nation-thing exists because it is “present in that elusive entity called ‘our way of life’” (Zizek, 1993, p. 201). It manifests itself in daily life through various ceremonies where “a community organizes its enjoyment” (Zizek, 1993, p. 201). Therefore, “our way of life” connotes the organization of the nation-thing’s enjoyment in specific settings in which the nation-thing becomes ours, not theirs.

In this framework of “our way of life”, the conceptualization of the other plays a crucial role in Zizek’s understanding of nationalism and national identity. This conceptualization is articulated through the figure of the theft of enjoyment. Zizek is not the first theorist to address the theft of enjoyment. He explores this concept by referencing Jacques-Alain Miller’s unpublished lecture entitled *Extimité*. Zizek includes passages from this lecture in his discussion on the theft of enjoyment. In these passages, Miller holds that the theft of enjoyment by the other can be articulated in a psychoanalytical dynamic where the other is not only external but also internal to one’s being. Miller outlines a broader framework in which the “other” emerges as the entity challenging the subject’s enjoyment while also presenting a threat to this enjoyment. This “other” is characterized as both interior and contradictory in this analysis. Miller suggests that the “other” embodies the notion of the theft of enjoyment. Zizek follows this interpretation but focuses more narrowly on his analysis of nationalism and nation-thing. In order to articulate the basis of this figure, Zizek discusses how people often perceive the “other” as having excessive enjoyment that threatens their own way of life. This rests on the belief that the “other” either steals the enjoyment by disrupting our lifestyle or possesses a secret form of enjoyment. This leads to views that the “other” is either a hard worker stealing jobs or a lazy person living off other’s labor. Zizek highlights the contradiction in these views.

In Zizek’s analysis, the “other” of the nation-thing is the entity that threatens the enjoyment of the nation-thing. The “other” remains interior and contradictory; yet, Zizek’s interpretation provides a political reading in which national identification’s dependence on the “other” is represented by the figure of the theft of enjoyment. The immigrant and the refugee are important examples of the theft of enjoyment as “localizable groups” (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 152). Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras (2006) cite the Jews, immigrants, and neighboring nations as external actors to whom this theft of enjoyment is attributed (p. 152).



Zizek explains nationalism through its production of myths on how other nations steal the enjoyment of our nation-thing (Zizek, 1993, pp. 203-204). In this context, the theft of enjoyment constructs the “other” as strictly hindering the nation’s fulfillment of its enjoyment. This process relies on an essential, original state where the nation is “prosperous and happy”; followed by the entrance of the other who devastates this original state by participating in processes of enjoyment (Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras, 2006, p. 153). However, the other’s participation is perceived only as depriving the nation of fulfilling its enjoyment.

Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras (2006) argue that nationalism not only narrates the processes of the theft of enjoyment but also aims to activate the desire for full enjoyment by marginalizing or even eliminating the other (p. 153). The other is not essentialized but is historical. The category of the other always persists. Thus, it might be the Jews in one decade and immigrants in the national labor market in subsequent years. These processes are in line with extimacy, a Lacanian concept meaning “an existence which stands apart from” (Fink, 1995, p. 122). Miller argues that the other’s position relative to the subject is an example of extimacy (Zizek, 1993). The reason the other enjoys is attributed to the theft of my/our enjoyment (Zizek, 1999, p. 210).

The theft of enjoyment is crucial for analyzing the perception and encounter of Syrian refugees in Turkey due to its dual nature. This duality arises from the stabilizing and destabilizing tendencies of the concept of fantasy (Zizek, 1999, p. 192). On the one hand, this concept helps explain the possibility of “a harmonious resolution of social antagonism” (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 197). This is relevant in the Turkish context where being a gracious host to the refugees is a common discourse. This approach offers a stabilizing framework where social antagonisms can be addressed without disruption. There is a belief that social antagonisms can be resolved and a prosperous future is envisioned; in which partial enjoyment of desires suffices. However, the existence of the other is inherently problematic, as it threatens full enjoyment –because the subject is always after full enjoyment. Hence, the idea of achieving full enjoyment by marginalizing or ultimately eliminating the other persists. On the other hand, this perceived harmony is unnatural, and social antagonisms inevitably resurface. This dimension focuses on the destabilizing character of “a disturbing paranoid fantasy, which tells us why things went wrong” (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 197).

Zizek and Stavrakakis assert that the figure of the theft of enjoyment makes use of both stabilizing and destabilizing tendencies. For that reason, the article uses this concept to highlight the non-unilinear nature of Turkish representations of Syrian refugees in conventional media. The figure of the refugee is a primary example of the theft of enjoyment. This occurs in various ways; primarily, theft implies a threat to wealth. In the case of refugees, they are perceived as a threat to local and national wealth (Diken & Laustsen, 2005, p. 85). However, this paper argues that there is also a perceived threat to the private sphere, including homes and neighborhoods.

The concept has generated scholarly interest in areas other than psychoanalytical theory, including studies on racism (Hook, 2018), nationalism (Houston, 2006), post-colonial understandings of citizenship law (De Silva Wijeyeratne, 1998), the rise of populism in European countries (Mondon and Glynos, 2016), media and political analysis (Chang and Glynos, 2011). Hook (2018) explores racism through the theft of enjoyment and argues that this psychoanalytical concept can be used to analytically examine sociological phenomena. Similarly, Houston (2006) applies this concept to nationalism studies where ethnic and cultural antagonisms that are considered to break a nation apart could instead unite the nation together. In that sense, nationhood is a shared relationship to enjoyment. De Silva Wijeyeratne (1998) examines the Sri Lanka citizenship law that excludes the Tamil identity, which the author argues is rendered impossible; in other words, the Tamil identity is neither included nor excluded in the citizenship law. Mondon and Glynos (2016) study the rise of right-wing populism in the West, including Brexit and Trump's election. They hold that there is a political logic to the media coverage of populism, which stems from populism's appeal to collective desires and fantasies. Likewise, Chang and Glynos (2011) examine the ideological and political significance of language in the popular press through psychoanalytical concepts including the theft of enjoyment. Taking these studies into account, the concept of theft of enjoyment could be applied to studies on representations of refugees in the media.

From this perspective, refugees are discursively constructed as figures threatening the enjoyment of homes and neighborhoods. This paper focuses on exploring themes in the Syrian refugee representations in conventional media, particularly through the category of second marriages and naughty refugee children. After critically examining these representations, I argue that Syrian children are portrayed as disrupting neighborhood peace and threatening the local way of life; while Syrian refugee women are depicted as figures who "steal Turkish husbands" and "destroy homes". Therefore, both home and neighborhood as micro-social structures contribute to the discourses on the Syrian refugee "other."

### **"Ruining the Peace in the Neighborhood": The Syrian Refugee Children**

The figure of the refugee child employs specific characteristics that construct a figure of its own. The refugee child is related to the themes of home, family, and body; and its discursive constitution tells us about the processes of belonging or non-belonging in the host country. The refugee children are relatively more visible in the news pieces (Korkut, 2016, p. 6), which stems from feminization and "infantilization" of pain; women and children are portrayed as the primary victims of suffering; whereas the male refugee subject is more prone to criticisms of refuge and migration due to criminalization. Similar to Syrian refugee women, Syrian children are victimized and are considered to bear the real effects of civil war and violence

in Syria (Oğuz, 2016, March 21). However, discourses on children oscillate between two poles in the media demonstrating ambivalent discourses.

The portrayal of Syrian refugee children usually takes place in the visual media, showing Syrian refugee children engaging in petty thefts, such as stealing goods from markets or shops. These thefts often result in violent confrontations with shop owners. For instance, two Syrian children stealing pastries from a local shop were beaten violently with bats by shop owners in Hatay, a city near the Syrian border in Turkey. The children were injured so badly that there was a need for an ambulance (Milliyet, 2016, April 6). The piece on the terrible incident is rather short and a video from the security cameras of the bakery accompanies the text. In addition to theft, Syrian refugee children are subjected to violence when engaging in activities like selling handkerchiefs or “teasing” shop owners in public squares. These occurrences underscore the vulnerability of Syrian refugee children and the challenges they encounter in their new environment. For instance, there is a story of a Syrian child working in the neighborhood selling handkerchiefs. The child is beaten by the restaurant owner for disturbing the dining clients (Habertürk, 2015, July 22). The news is heavily covered in the media:

“On the second day of Eid, the child selling handkerchiefs was fighting with a little girl. We told them not to disturb the clients in front of our shops. We told them to stay away by saying ‘go away’. They went 10 meters forward but kept fighting again and we went near them to break up the fight. In fact, a chair bumped into me while they were throwing away chairs to each other. Three foreign people thought we were doing something and they came to fight with us. Then, a dispute took place and the child fell to the ground and his nose bled a little bit. That is it, there is nothing else to say.” (Şen, 2015, July 22)

In another incident, the president gifted a bicycle to a Syrian child beaten in Izmir by a shop owner. The shop owner claimed he beat the boy “not because he was Syrian but because he was making fun of him”:

“Musa S. told the press that the little child and his friends were coming near his cart and pushing it. Musa S. claimed that the kid came alone yesterday pushed his cart and let his hat drop to the floor. His final push to the cart made the cart bump into a woman, and then Musa started chasing the kid.” (Şen, 2016, March 11)

In another case, Syrian children are accused of begging for money from commuters on the subway; therefore, disturbing the peace. The children are brutally beaten by the security personnel (Hürriyet, 2015, September 1). There is an instance of murder of two child workers by their employers, a scrap-iron dealer. The children were brutally beaten to death (Milliyet, 2015, November 20).

These stories have sparked public condemnation, especially as many of them were accompanied by videos and photographs from security cameras, circulated widely on social media. The victimization of children evokes both sympathy and violence, leading the host country to believe it can control and manage refugee children through various means, from education to violence. On one hand, discourses on refugee children demonstrate humanitarian issues, portraying them as innocent victims of violence in their home countries, though numerous. On the other hand, this victimization can lead to the criminalization of children through incidents of petty theft and burglary. However, violence against children stems from the belief that their bodies are more easily controlled and managed due to their devalued status.

These events contribute to the representation of Syrian children as troublemakers in neighborhoods and causing problems. Refugee children are depicted as disrupting the peace and stealing the enjoyment of the neighborhood. Their presence is framed as inherently violent, challenging the locals' enjoyment of their space. Discontent with refugee children is often linked to their large numbers, which are seen as uncontrollable. The politics of numbers regarding Syrian refugee children is important in the discourses surrounding them. Traditional Syrian families often have more children than the ideal nuclear family, leading to perceptions of them being uncontrollable. This perception aligns with the notion of "overly fertile women" (Gedalof, 2009, p. 95). Families having more than two children are blamed and declared guilty for their children's suffering without acknowledgment of the atrocities perpetrated by the regime. This problematizes the Syrian family and home, challenging notions of belonging and disrupting locals' enjoyment of the nation-thing.

### **"Stealing Husbands": The Syrian Refugee Women**

Marriages are a central topic in Western literature on refugees. Arranged marriages are problematized because it is thought that they are used to deceive the state (Gedalof, 2007, p. 86). There is significant attention on marriages between Turkish and Syrian communities, particularly Turkish men marrying Syrian women, often in polygamous arrangements (Certel and Atasü-Topçuoğlu, 2024). These marriages have become subjects of discourse in newspapers.

Marriages are seen as a prime example of producing homes and belonging. This process is gendered, with Syrian women often portrayed as "victims" and Turkish men as "saviors" rescuing them from their unfortunate circumstances. The marriages take place as polygamous marriages, the phenomenon of Turkish men marrying Syrian women as additional wives, despite such marriages being illegal. Traditionally, only wealthier men could afford second marriages, but the financial desperation of Syrian women has made this prac-

tice more accessible to middle-class men. The dowry required to marry a Syrian woman has become more “affordable” due to their desperate circumstances. For Syrian women fleeing their country, marriage frequently serves as a means of social safety net (Çamurluoğlu, 2022). They marry if they can, but because these marriages are not legally recognized, they lack the rights typically granted by legal marital bonds. Some Syrian men have advocated for these marriages to be officially documented to ensure that Syrian women can claim legal rights from their marriages (Oral Evren, 2016, April 4).

The larger framework of marriages involving Turkish and Syrian people is often discussed in economic terms, where the value of the Syrian bride is “calculated” and marriage is directly tied to material wellbeing. Men demonstrate their “rescue” by paying dowries, turning the marriage institution into a kind of “trade”:

“The reason Turkish men are so enthusiastic about marrying Syrian women is that the weddings are ‘less costly’. Various sources agree on the economic dimension of the issue. Two years ago, deals were being closed for 10 thousand liras, but now it is said that bargaining is done between 1 to 2 thousand liras. In the southeastern provinces, agreements are made under the name ‘bride price’ for 3 to 5 thousand liras. As one shopkeeper puts it: ‘There are potatoes that cost 2 per kilo, and some that cost 5...’ So, how is the value of the ‘potato’ determined? ‘It varies according to age or beauty,’ they say.” (Evin, 2015, January 27)

The desperation of Syrian refugees changes the financial dynamics, enabling men who are not considered wealthy by local standards to afford second marriages in times of crisis. A Turkish man got married via “matchmakers” but his Syrian wife has left him 10 days after the wedding by taking the gold jewelry he has gifted to her. He says:

“I bought 7 thousand liras worth of gold jewelry, including a ring, earrings, and a bracelet, for the Syrian woman named Ceylan... I spent 15 thousand liras in total. It was my five years’ worth of income. I don’t know what to do in the village now. I have three children and an elderly mother to take care of. We were so happy when we got a bride for our home, but we are in a miserable state now.” (Hürriyet, 2016, August 30).

Local women disapprove of these marriages with Syrian women, generating discourses about how Syrian women “steal their husbands” and “destroy homes.” For instance, Kilis is one of the cities that hosts high numbers of Syrian refugees and women of Kilis are scared of Syrian “second wives” (Hürriyet, 2016, February 16). It is argued that divorces in the city have doubled after marriages between Turkish men and Syrian women (Avcı and Hoppa-ni, 2014, October 28). Turkish men’s responsibility in these marriages is often overlooked, with Syrian women being blamed for disrupting marriages and homes.

The home is perceived as the ultimate private, sacred, and stable unit. Any external influence is seen as an immediate threat to its stability and peace, with the assumption that the home is inherently peaceful and any disruption is an external fault. Syrian women, as part of the refugee crisis, are expected to create homes out of sight or not interfere with local homes. While Syrian refugee women are often portrayed as victims in some contexts, in this scenario, they are depicted as having significant influence over Turkish men and their homes.

Second marriages are highlighted as problems that need to be controlled by containing Syrian refugee women, not Turkish men, thereby redefining the differences between Syrian and Turkish communities through the lens of Syrian women's "home-wrecking" tendencies. A local perspective is as follows:

"A mother of four claimed that 20 days ago, she visited her mother, and upon returning, she found that her husband had moved in with a Syrian woman, whom he had taken as a second wife, in another house in the village. She said, 'He furnished a house for himself with new items bought using the disability allowance of my daughter Kader and placed the Syrian woman there. While we live in a makeshift shack, he stays with that Syrian woman.'" (Milliyet, 2015, January 15)

In this context, the potential for Syrian women to establish homes through marriages with Turkish men is scrutinized by social actors rather than the government. The government's role is limited to legally banning second marriages, without actively addressing the social dynamics at play. During this period, the Ministry of Family and Social Policies initiated a study on these marriages to gather information, but the study has not been finalized. This indicates that the issue is on the state's political agenda, although it may lead to the policing of Syrian refugees rather than Turkish men.

Syrian women are depicted as "unhomely" and "home-wrecking" (Gedalof, 2007). They are seen as either destroying peaceful local homes by becoming second wives to Turkish men or engaging in prostitution. They are portrayed as prone to crime and violence, with their involvement in illegal second marriages and prostitution problematized. These acts are considered regressive from the perspective of long-standing white feminist discourses (Gedalof, 2007, p. 90). This framing views Syrian refugee women as interested only in money and material goods, selling themselves through marriage and prostitution for financial gain. These assumptions ignore the violent conditions in Syria that drove them to seek refuge. The narratives focus on the perceived negative impact of Syrian refugees in Turkey rather than their reasons for fleeing their homeland. Syrian women who marry Turkish men as second wives are seen as claiming homes, yet their presence is presented as destructive and undeserving, indicating that they do not belong.

In these discourses, the Syrian women do not produce homes in Turkey; rather they destroy peaceful homes. In the context of the theft of enjoyment, the Syrian women are depicted as figures who steal Turkish husbands, wreck Turkish homes, and ruin the local way of life. It leads to destabilization and paranoia. Local women fear Syrian women, who are seen as threats to their domestic happiness and security. This takes on a gendered dimension, as Syrian women are viewed as the figures who steal the enjoyment and stability of the home.

## **Conclusion**

The discursive processes around the Syrian refugee “other” include the private realm, the micro-social settings in which the refugee subject becomes the figure of the theft of enjoyment. This article highlights the gendered dimensions within discussions of the theft of enjoyment, depicting Syrian women as “home-wrecking” figures who steal Turkish husbands, and highlighting the emergence of a “market” surrounding second marriages involving Turkish men and Syrian women. These discourses reveal asymmetric power relations between the actors involved, also seen in discussions on Syrian refugee children. While a humanistic perspective may portray children as victims, discourses often depict them as mischievous and disruptive, contributing to the narrative of the refugee child as a destabilizing force in the neighborhood that ruins the peace.

Yet, these discourses have inherent ambivalence, simultaneously victimizing and demonizing women and children. Home is not somewhere fixed, and it needs constant re-making (Ahmed, Castañeda, Fortier & Sheller, 2003); and the quest for belonging in the host state is central to discussions on refugees. This paper has specifically examined how the enjoyment of home and belonging to a nation-thing is problematized for refugees, highlighting the complexities and contradictions embedded within these discourses. This discursive analysis highlights how refugees, particularly women and children, can be represented as both victims and threats. These discourses reflect social anxieties about identity, economic realm, and cultural cohesion. These ambivalent representations need to be examined more deeply to understand how the host country relates with the refugee “others” in critical times of social change.

The Syrian refugees in Turkey have attracted scholarly interest since the early years of the Civil War. However, the recent situation in Syria after the Assad regime has been dismantled needs more research on what it means for millions of refugees worldwide. Future research could explore if and how narratives on refugees change after the establishment of a new Syrian government. These narratives in different contexts need attention in order to understand how these discourses are shaped comparatively. Future conditions in Syria and places where Syrian refugees reside could bring new discussions on home, and national belonging where traditional conceptions of citizenship and inclusion are further challenged.

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