

## What to Pack? The Semiotics of Be-Longing(s) of Syrian Displaced Women

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[See table of contents](#)

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### Article abstract

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# What to Pack? The Semiotics of Be-Longing(s) of Syrian Displaced Women

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## ABSTRACT

This qualitative study focuses on a group of 42 Syrian displaced women who live in Irbid, Jordan. The women went through the traumatic experience of forced eviction from their homes as a consequence of the civil war in Syria. The participants responded to a questionnaire about the most important things that they packed and whether the objects affected their coping with displacement. Our discussion of the socio-semiotic implications of the carried items validates our main thesis that the displaced women were empowered by the agency of commitment to the re-creation of home life away from home by solidly grounding it in the “dailiness” of domesticity. Through concept-driven coding, the study defines the pervasive patterns of the participants’ responses to the questions about their carried objects in relation to concepts of identity, home, and memory. The conclusion confirms that the women’s commitment to their roles as mothers and homemakers, along with their religious faith-based awareness of displacement, contributes to their sense of agency and resilience.

## KEYWORDS

refugees; displaced women; Syria; Jordan; home; semiotics; lyrical sociology

## RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude qualitative se penche sur un groupe de 42 femmes syriennes déplacées vivant à Irbid, en Jordanie. Ces femmes ont vécu l’expérience traumatique d’être évincées de chez elles à cause de la guerre civile en Syrie. Les participantes ont répondu à un questionnaire sur les objets les plus importants qu’elles ont emportés et sur l’influence de ces objets sur leur manière de faire face au déplacement. Notre discussion sur les implications socio-sémiotiques des objets emportés valide notre thèse principale selon laquelle les femmes déplacées ont pu acquérir de l’autonomie en s’engageant à recréer leur vie de foyer loin de chez elles, en l’ancrant solidement dans le « quotidien » de la domesticité. À travers un codage guidé par les concepts, l’étude identifie les motifs omniprésents dans les réponses des participantes aux questions sur les objets qu’elles ont emportés, en relation avec les concepts d’identité, de foyer et de mémoire. La conclusion confirme que l’engagement des femmes dans leurs rôles de mères et de ménagères, ainsi que leur conscience religieuse du déplacement, contribuent à leur sens de l’agentivité et de la résilience.

What do we pack? The coffee urn father  
Brought from Turkey? The Pair of earrings  
Specially chosen for the wedding day?  
How can we ever pack anything if not everything?  
—Elmaz Abinader, “This House, My Bones”

These lines, written by the American Lebanese poet Elmaz Abinader in the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq and shortly before

the Syrian civil war, serve as an appropriate entry into our study. Such a lyrical entry re-creates for us the moments of mixed emotions and of making difficult decisions about what to pack and what to leave behind when people are forced to abandon their homes. The quote encapsulates the sense of longing for a stable home life and the

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fears about loss of cherished memories and displacement experienced by millions of people who have been forced from their homes due to armed conflicts and wars. In this study, we seek to understand the experiences of Syrian displaced women who have been forced to flee their homes due to the civil war in Syria. We focus on the objects they chose to carry with them in order to assess the socio-cultural semiotics of these objects and how they contribute to the women's sense of identity, belonging, and resilience. By examining the objects that Syrian displaced women chose to pack, we aim to shed light on the ways in which these women have managed to re-create a sense of home and normalcy amid displacement.

As a result of an emergency response by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) to save lives and protect people in war crises, "6.1 million people ... have been internally displaced, and 5.5 million people [are] living as refugees in Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey" (OCHA, 2018, para. 2). Due to its geographical proximity with Syria, Jordan has become home to most Syrian refugees, with almost 90% of them living in the northern part of the country after being forced to flee their homes due to the ongoing civil war in Syria (Beaujouan & Rasheed, 2020, p. 19). A look at the UNHCR's webpage shows that by the beginning of 2012, 238,800 Syrian refugees had arrived in Jordan. By August 31, 2022, the number jumped to 677,038 registered Syrian refugees, of which 50.1% were female (UNHCR, 2022).

Driven by empathy as well as curiosity to ask and seek possible answers to questions such as, "What happens when people are forced from their homes and when families are displaced?" and "What are the impacts of this on their daily lives in post-displacement?" this qualitative study is based on interviews

conducted with 42 Syrian displaced women, aged between 20 and 67, who are now living in Irbid, a city in northern Jordan. The Appendix at the end of this paper shows the demographic characteristics of the participants, including age, region of origin in Syria, marital status, number of family members, education, and current occupation. These women responded to a questionnaire of 22 open-ended questions. Based on their answers to these questions, we explore the most important things they chose to pack, the tokens of nostalgic home memories they carried with them, and their concepts of family, home, and coping with post-displacement challenges. Their responses to the questions help us theorize about their socio-cultural semiotics. Such theorizing reveals information on the Syrian women's sense of identity (both individual and collective), their experiences of longing for their country/home, and their feelings of belonging to their new territory. The socio-semiotic implications of the carried objects as tokens of everyday practices validate our main thesis that the displaced women are empowered by the agency of commitment to the re-creation of home life away from home by grounding it in the "dailiness" of domesticity and familial and communal support. In other words, these carried objects trigger strings of memory associations that evoke their homes and country as a collective home, whereby they become a site of socio-cultural semiotics that is part of who these women are, not only as displaced individuals but also as Syrians. Such memory associations and the women's re-creation of home life as semiotized by the packed objects function as a normalizing process that helps them cope with the trauma of leaving their homes. Not only do simple carried objects reinforce a sense of identity, community, and resilience, but they also help some of these women secure a

modest income for the family—hence the empowerment and agency of the refugee women through the objects they carried with them.

## CONTEXT AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This article emerges from a collaboration between two researchers who conducted their research between 2018 and 2020. We are both literary and cultural critics whose research integrates interdisciplinary approaches to study cultural texts and phenomena. The first author is a professor of English literature at Yarmouk University, Jordan, where she teaches women writers. Her research interests focus on women in contemporary fiction and the conceptualization of domestic space. The second author is an associate professor of literary and cultural studies in the Department of English at Yarmouk University. His research interests include world and post-colonial literature as well as transnational cultural studies. As such, our biases may be identified in our foregrounding of affectivity in our encounter with the displaced Syrian women. In fact, the proximity of our university campus to the Syrian borders enabled us to be aware of some of the hardships of border crossing and relocation caused by the influx of displaced Syrian families. Attending and participating in seminars at the Refugee Centre at Yarmouk University further equipped us with a better understanding of refugee issues.

One cannot undermine the importance of the body of literature written on the issue of forced displacement and the plight of refugees worldwide. Drawing upon existing literature on migration studies that have emphasized the importance of the human experiences and emotions behind the numbers and the human figures behind the statistics, we aim to understand

the day-to-day experiences of the women within a perspective close to [Michelle Lokot's \(2019, p. 468\)](#) recommendation that social researchers follow “an open approach to asking refugees about their experiences ... [and resist] the drive to gather data.” For Lokot, “the relationship with participants is what matters most” (p. 469). Lokot's view—which resonates with an earlier argument by sociologist [Andrew Abbott \(2007\)](#), whose call for lyrical sociological research that is imbued with “humane sympathy” (p. 96)—has influenced our standpoint as researchers. By adopting lyrical sociology as a stance to approach this study, we capitalize on the affectivity of the face-to-face encounter with the interviewees to project a different outlook on refugee studies. This “lyrical” encounter helps us foreground the women's voices and their important role in sustaining a sense of family life and a sense of identity in displacement.

As refugee women are often victims of humanitarian crises, our study, supported by evidence collected through interviews with a group of Syrian women refugees in Jordan, focuses on ordinary women whose daily efforts to nurture and sustain family life under challenging circumstances demonstrate their resilience and strength. Through interviews with this group of Syrian women refugees in Jordan and a focus on the items they packed, our article aims to deconstruct the victimization of Syrian women refugees and amplify their voices and narratives over those imposed upon them. In her “Double Marginalization,” [Katty Alhayek \(2014b, p. 696\)](#) criticizes “a form of feminist online campaign [Refugees Not Captives] that claims to represent voices of [Syrian refugee] women who generally do not have the economic and educational privileges to access the online spaces to speak for themselves.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>See [Alhayek's study \(2014a\)](#) on Syrian refugee women, where she dismantles the role of “social networking websites ...

Alhayek argues that most articles dealing with Syrian women refugees perpetuate and reinforce "Western hegemonic discourses" and depict these women "as a homogeneous group of powerless, victimized women" (p. 697). Thus, such mainstream misrepresentations do not do justice to Syrian refugee women as they struggle to re-create a sense of home for their families. In this context, Alhayek (2014b) points to the "disconnection between online representations and offline realities" where women's experiences remain "invisible" (p. 698). She further observes that "the dominant representations marginalize voices of underprivileged refugee women ... who emphasize the complexity and diversity of refugee women's experiences" (p. 699). In adopting this stance, we hope that our focus on the ordinary lives of Syrian women in displacement will yield significant patterns of their extraordinary sense of empowerment and agency.

## CONCEPTUALIZING EMPOWERMENT AND AGENCY

Even though the concepts of empowerment and agency cannot always be clearly defined, it is important to clarify their implications in our paper. Naila Kabeer (1999) defines **empowerment** as "the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability ... and the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices" (p. 437). In simpler terms, empowerment entails individuals' capacity to control their lives, make their own decisions and take actions to achieve their goals. Kabeer identifies three interconnected

dimensions of empowerment: agency, resources, and achievements (pp. 437–438). First, **agency** is "the ability to define one's goals and act upon them ... it encompasses the meaning, motivation, and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or 'the power within'" (p. 438). Second, **resources** pertain to the availability of material, social, and human resources that individuals can use to attain their goals, thus enhancing agency. Finally, **achievements** signify the outcomes of empowerment, evident in changes within individuals' lives (pp. 435–438). On the other hand, agency "involves not only the deliberative ability to make choices and action plans, but also the ability to construct appropriate courses of action and to motivate and regulate their execution" (Bandura, 2006, p. 165). This quote underscores that agency entails more than just decision-making and planning; it also involves creating suitable action strategies, self-motivation, and behavioural self-regulation. In other words, agency encompasses not merely the ability to think about what to do, but also the ability to do it while regulating one's own behaviour in the process.

By exploring the daily experiences of Syrian women refugees in Jordan, patterns of empowerment and agency can be identified. These patterns challenge negative stereotypes and stigma about refugee women as passive and vulnerable. For example, Safaa (48),<sup>2</sup> an interviewee, previously worked as a pharmacist back in Syria. Displaced in Jordan, she was working part time planting medical herbs at a nursery in Mafraq, not minding the manual labour that roughened the skin on her hands. A few other women helped cater to small neighbouring Jordanian communities by cooking traditional Syrian dishes. A couple of women generated income as hairdressers. Sewing and embroi-

[that] function as channels for promoting stereotypical and/or hegemonic representations of Syrian refugee women's issues" (p. 3). She asserts that "through the process of becoming refugees, Syrian women have heterogeneous experiences, which refute the dominant global and social media representations that 'minimized' Syrian women's stories to ... passive victims of war" (p. 4).

<sup>2</sup>Numbers in parentheses next to participants' names represent their age in years.



dery enabled some women to earn money. Even seemingly insignificant objects like thimbles, needles, threads, and knitting tools become symbols of these women's efforts and energy in sustaining their daily lives. The objects transcend their materiality and take on a complex level of semiotic signification, articulating different meanings for these women. They serve to maintain identity and cherished memories and help secure income while awaiting hope or resolution to the Syrian crisis.

## METHODOLOGY

### Recruiting Participants

To save time, we avoided door-to-door visits. Acknowledging that the research was culturally sensitive, and wanting to be respectful of the participants' experiences as women, the first author personally approached a Syrian refugee woman living near Yarmouk University campus. This 39-year-old woman, Ameerah, was asked about the topic of the research—the objects that the women refugees packed—and she was able to spread the word throughout mobile phone calls to her relatives and friends, who then contacted their acquaintances. The women's interest in the research topic and the fact that it was not affiliated with any international organization or official governmental group likely contributed to their willingness to participate without hesitation.

### Questionnaire and Interviews

Findings emerged from the analysis of data collected in Irbid, Jordan, through a questionnaire and follow-up discussion with 42 Syrian refugee women, all of whom lived in houses and apartments they rented in Irbid. Living off the grounds of Zaatari allowed these women a relative sense of mobility and

personal autonomy.<sup>3</sup> The meetings with the women took place in two informal friendly settings. On March 1, 2019, the first group gathered at a dining hall in the city, which we booked for the occasion. On March 8, the second group met at the house of a Syrian lady who offered to host us. The women were asked to respond to the questionnaire's 22 questions. They were given the option to either remain anonymous or give their names (they unanimously gave their names). They took nearly two hours to submit their responses. This was followed by a lunch break, which established a sense of familiarity. Next on the schedule for each group was an open three-hour discussion of their written answers, with particular focus on selected key questions.

The questionnaire addressed the women as "sisters in search of safety for their families." In fact, the women expressed appreciation for this form of address and revealed much concern at the demeaning social connotations of the word **refugee** [in Arabic, لاجئ; *Lāji'*]<sup>4</sup>—the epithet that frequently became a substitute for their individual names and who they really are. For many of them, the status of being a refugee implied a sense of feeling redundant, needy, and unwelcome. For the young women, this meant feeling vulnerable to incidental sexual harassment. Unfortunately, some Jordanian communities that suffered economic consequences due to the influx of refugees blamed them for the inflation in residence and living expenses.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup>According to the fact sheet published by UNHCR (2021), Zaatari is a refugee camp in Jordan; it is "under the joint administration of the Syrian Refugee Affairs Directorate and UNHCR" (para. 3). It is "home to ... 80,000 Syrian refugees" (para. 1) and has become a symbol of "Syrians' displacement across the Middle East following its establishment in 2012" (para. 4).

<sup>4</sup>For the impact of negative representations of refugees in the media, please see Pandir (2020), where she refers to the "victimization, depoliticization, dehumanization, marginalization, homogenization and de-individualization of refugees" in media portrayals (p. 104).

The entry into the questionnaire asked for general demographic information on age, education, occupation, marital status, number of family members, and employment (see [Appendix](#)). The study's main questions targeted information on the following: the condition of the house on the day of their departure, their views on the loss of possessions (if applicable), the most important three things that they packed, the function and significance of the carried items, the things they packed for emotional value and if they still considered them valuable, how the women's roles changed after displacement, and whether or not they developed a sense of belonging in the new territory. Some contingency questions were included, as well as other questions that revealed a plethora of socio-semiotics regarding the concepts of identity, home, and longing. A difficult question that triggered painful regrets was asked about the lessons learned in the process or as a consequence of displacement. All the interviewees had been to school (elementary, middle, and high school levels), and a few participants held college degrees. This fact allowed their responses and discussions to be expressed in clearly spoken as well as written Arabic language. The open discussion with the interviewees confirmed their written responses and provided more details on some issues that concerned them as women (i.e., the irregular schooling of their young kids, their new responsibilities as women, the ambivalence of return to their home country, their uncertain future). For purposes of this study, we translated their written and oral responses into English ourselves.

## Coding

The study applied a concept-driven coding approach to analyzing the text-based responses of the group. This coding framework enabled us to identify the main concepts

related to the study, such as identity, home, family relations, and displacement, among others, and to perceive them in different contexts. The identification of these concepts allowed us to notice the recurrent patterns of how the women related to their objects and these concepts.

## The Lyrical Sociological Stance

To further analyze our subject, we adopted the "lyrical sociology" approach as expounded by [Andrew Abbott](#) in his essay "Against Narrative" (2007). This approach helped us position ourselves as "lyrical" researchers seeking to represent "an intense reaction to some portion of the social process seen in a moment" (Abbott, 2007, p. 76). Abbott observes that a lyrical writer

looks at a social situation, feels its overpowering excitement and its deeply affecting human complexity [in hope of awakening] feelings in the mind—and ... the hearts—of his readers. This recreation of an experience of social discovery is what I shall here call **lyrical sociology**. (p. 70)

For us, the encounter with the Syrian women was such a "social discovery" that is "re-created" in our research.

**Lyrical sociology**, a term coined by [Abbott](#) (2007), prioritizes the communication of passion, emotions and "human sympathy" (p. 95) over abstract representation of reality. It suggests that its "ultimate, framing structure should not be the telling of a story ... but rather the use of a single image to communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality" (Abbott, 2007, p. 73). In this context, our face-to-face encounter with the women and discussions on packed items required us to be emotionally engaged and to contribute to the re-creation of a social experience by introducing "lyrical impulse[s]" that "communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality" (p. 73). The lyrical approach underscores respect and affectivity as main features of the interaction between researchers and interviewees, as they interact

in hope of producing a “lyrical” sociological text where figurative language, symbols, and images can be used.

Abbott (2007) calls for the creation of an “image of a world in a moment, a snapshot of another world in being, even as that world changed” (p. 75). Our encounter was an eye-opening experience that allowed us momentary access to the women’s homes. It offered us glimpses of their daily lives, memories, fears, and hopes. During that meeting, we perceived their packed objects as fragments of an entire life—not just remnants of the past but tools to sustain living in the present and look forwards to a better life.

Several sociological researchers aligned with Abbott’s position. In “Sociological Writing as Resonant Writing,” Rita Felski (2022) explores the public appeal of some sociological writing: namely, Didier Eribon’s memoir, *Returning to Reims*, and Hartmut Rosa’s social theory work, *Resonance*. Felski contends that these authors approach the world with a combination of a poet’s attentiveness and “a theorist’s critical gaze,” providing “vivid examples and resonant details” that “resonate with readers emotionally and intellectually” and help them see the social world differently (pp. 656–657). This is probably due, as Abbott’s essay calls for, to the use of “imagery, personification, figurative language, and a focus on a specific moment” (Felski, 2022, p. 658). In line with Abbott, Felski asserts that such qualities contribute to the public appeal of sociological writing, urging sociologists to engage with their subjects in a more empathic and appreciative manner.

Similarly, for Il-Tschung Lim (2019), lyrical sociology is considered not only a methodology but also a writing style and a mode of “sociological representation” (p. 142). Following Abbott’s lead, Lim suggests that

lyrical sociology provide “a distinct heuristic for the elicitation of a more colorful and vivid sociological imagination, namely an emotional imagination” (p. 139). Lim’s observation underscores Abbott’s concept of lyrical sociology as a potent “heuristic toolbox” for sociological inquiry (p. 144). Moreover, Lim notes that lyrical sociology transcends mere description, utilizing “figuration and personification” to evoke “a concrete and emotional connection between the researcher and the social world s/he observes” (p. 145). Thus, as an empathetic approach to sociological research, lyrical sociology offers a valid and valuable contribution to the field.

## DISCUSSION: THE SOCIO-SEMIOTICS OF THE CARRIED OBJECTS

Our argument resonates with Sandra Dudley’s (2010) observation that “repeated and active engagement in the present with the objects and actions of the past, are in a refugee setting particularly powerful and dynamic in forming and re-forming connections with the pre-exile past” (p. 742). The carried objects transcend their materiality, assuming profound symbolic significance in the women’s daily lives. Webb Keane (2003) has spoken of the validity of the “Peircean model of the sign ... that is processual: signs give rise to new signs, in an unending process of signification” (p. 413). He explains: “Thus, ... the ground that characterizes and motivates the relationship between sign and object can be iconic (resemblance), indexical (causal or proximal linkages), or symbolic (most evident in ‘arbitrary’ social conventions)” (p. 413). As we argue, the carried objects, as images or signs, initiate a discourse of semiotization and re-semiotization that emotionally signifies a profound connection for these women and evokes a personal resonance for us as researchers. This enables us to construct a discourse of things as they relate



to these women from a socio-cultural perspective. Similarly, Frank Trentmann (2009) argued that “things today are shaking our fundamental understandings of subjectivity, agency, emotions, and the relations between humans and nonhumans” (p. 284). Trentmann emphasized the interdependence between things and practice: “The life of objects ... is not prior to or independent of social practices but codependent” (p. 297). Likewise, Alexa G. Winton (2013) has spoken of “[the] emphasis on the critique of everyday articles of living as an essential tool in decoding wider social and cultural practices” (p. 45). She further notes, “Scholarship from outside histories of architecture and material culture has increasingly focused on the importance of ‘things’ as key social and cultural signifiers” (p. 45).

Bill Brown (2001) stressed that the questions we ask about things should focus on “the work they perform—questions, in fact, not about things themselves but about the subject–object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts ... to show how they organize our private and public affection” (p. 7); objects should be recognized “as participants in the reshaping of the world” (p. 10). Brown notes that Bruno Latour emphasized that “‘things do not exist without being full of people’ and that considering humans necessarily involves the consideration of things” (p. 12). Arjun Appadurai (1986) echoed this, contending that “even though from a **theoretical** point of view human actors encode things with significance, from a **methodological** point of view it is the things-in-motion that illuminate their human and social context” (p. 5). This aligns with our own argument that the carried objects, as “things-in-motion,” continue signifying for these women. In this context, Latifah’s (67) thimble becomes emblematic of her occupation as a seamstress, not only a source

of income (sewing) but also a conduit for artwork (embroidery for sale or for leisure), linking economic and aesthetic functions. The thimble also evoked some humorous commentary by the women on a folk proverb that applied to the chaotic political situation in Syria, described as “the thimble game” [لعبة الكشبان].

For us, the carried “things” transform into “iconic objects of everyday life” (Brown, 2001, p. 14)—the pair of golden earrings (one now lost), the wedding video without the video player (it was too heavy to carry), the house key (the house now ruined and doorless), the family photo album (now rendered obsolete with Skype and Messenger video calls), and the expired election card (amid the ongoing fight for democracy back home). For the women, these items embody the tension between trace (retained memory tied to the original object’s domestic context) and erasure (the need to move on).

Our semiotic reading of the carried objects detected several embedded concepts of identity, home, family relations, and religion. Other important patterns could be traced regarding the change of gender relations and gender roles after displacement. The argument about the change of women’s gender roles has been well established in existing scholarship on Syrian refugees. For instance, Karen Culcasi (2019) has observed that

[w]hile Syrian women are “becoming men” in the sense of their role as provider, this shift also recreates traditional gendered categories and binaries of acceptable feminine and masculine performances. Furthermore, women’s traditional gendered responsibility as the caretaker of their families is not being forgotten or lessened, but instead most women now navigate the gendered responsibilities of being the masculine provider and the feminine caretaker. (p. 474)<sup>5</sup>

When asked about role shifts due to displacement, Safaa (48), Razan (34), and Sanaa (29), all widows, stated that they had taken

<sup>5</sup>For more on this subject, please see Haddad (2014).

on full responsibility as head of their families. Thaerah (47), with her husband in Germany, assumed full responsibility for the security of her family. Rajaa (43) spoke of her husband's depression, which confined him indoors; she had to collect the distributed packages of food supplies herself. Ne'mah (34) had to perform some of her husband's tasks due to his war-related leg injury. However, most women expressed gratitude for having family together, enabling them to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers.

Except for a few women from Homs and Rif-Dimashq, most were from Dar'a, the closest to Jordan's borders. Prior to their displacement, they were given a two-hour notice to leave their homes due to imminent government military action against insurgents. Expecting temporary displacement, the women left the bulk of their house possessions and belongings behind, only taking necessities like baby formula bottles, eye drops for a visually impaired son, and diabetic medication. Over a decade-long war, many women lost homes; some learned of their home's destruction from relatives. Tragically, the women mourned loved ones lost to war, and some had incarcerated male relatives.<sup>6</sup>

The concept-driven coding of the women's responses reveals three patterns or discourses in relation to the socio-semiotics of the carried objects: identity, re-creating home, and faith—all of which help cope with the trauma of displacement.

### Identity Discourse

At the individual level, all women carried identification cards, birth certificates, property deeds, and diplomas, and they were entrusted with the task of keeping these family documents safe. Notably, they car-

ried tokens that emphasized their status as married women, such as marriage certificates, wedding albums and videos, and marital gifts like rings and earrings—even a non-functional wristwatch. The semiotics of marriage-related items imparted traditional, deep-seated views of marriage as a social safeguard and protection for females. The widowed women in the group faced greater insecurity and uncertainty. The only single woman, Raghad (27), spoke in an almost an apologetic tone about being in her late twenties with no prospects for marriage yet. For her, the most important "thing" she brought with her was her "body"—"pure and unmolested," as she put it.

Some packed objects confirmed national belonging (passports, ID cards, Syrian flags, an old election card). Most women prioritized Syrian over pan-Arab identity. As [Culcasi \(2017\)](#) has noted, "though displaced people create hybrid territorial constructs, they often simultaneously reify traditional territorial divisions by strengthening their connections to a state-territorial homeland through memories, cultural preservation, and performances of identity" (p. 324). Most women spoke of the rich quality of the Syrian soil, farm produce, and taste of water, all of which were different from those in the Jordanian territory. Sanaa (29) carried flower seeds from her garden as a token of remembrance. One may speak here of a subliminal process of "dissemination" of Syrian identity that represents persistence and hope.<sup>7</sup>

However, for many women, this did not preclude the sense of openness to their new territory. Jordan's proximity in environment, climate, religion, and language to Syria

<sup>6</sup>The war, which broke out on March 15, 2011, devastated the lives of hundreds of thousands of victims. For some details, please see [Specia \(2018\)](#).

<sup>7</sup>It is worth mentioning that Syrian refugees re-created their famous Damascene souq of Al-Hameedieh at al-Zaatari camp, which at the time of writing hosted 80,000 Syrian refugees. Other re-creations of "home" were noticed in small shops, cafés, and restaurants in some Jordanian cities.

helped some women experience a relative sense of belonging. Unfortunately, a few expressed their experience of "otherness" in unfriendly episodes with their neighbours or landlords, who controlled their access to clean water and electricity at times. Some other women expressed concerns about the bullying of their children as "unwanted" refugees at school.

In fact, the experience of protracted displacement inevitably triggered questions about identity for the Syrians. As [Kobena Mercer \(1990\)](#) claimed, "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty" (p. 43). Speaking of the models of identity, [Madan Sarup \(1996\)](#) provided two models of identity: "a 'traditional' view that all dynamics (such as class, gender, 'race') operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity," and "[t]he more recent view ... that identity is fabricated, constructed, in process and that we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors" (p. 14). During the discussion, our interviewees appeared to conform to the second category, where the sense of identity was suddenly destabilized and subject to uncertainty and negotiation due to their new circumstances. The women's sense of national and personal identity did not seem to impact their pragmatic understanding that their lives had changed and would continue to change.

The carried items retained traces of the women's identity. [Russell Belk \(1988\)](#) argued, "Our possessions are a major contributor to and reflection of our identities" (p. 139). Some of the carried items, as most participants confessed, stirred in them nostalgia for their collective home/Syria, lost family homes, and neighbourhoods. As Belk stated, "home and neighborhood ... have been suggested to be strong sources of personal identity" (p. 143). Nostalgia, here, is related

to these women's sense of identity. [Susan Stewart \(1993\)](#) described nostalgia as "sadness without an object" (p. 14). Similarly, [Fred Davis \(1979\)](#) stated:

Nostalgia (like long-term memory, like reminiscence, like daydreaming) is deeply implicated in our sense of who we are, what we are about, and ... whither we go. In short, nostalgia is ... one of the more readily accessible psychological lenses ... [for] the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities. (p. 31)

Nostalgia, then, helps reconstruct identity. Indeed, many women recalled Syria as a site of childhood memories. In displacement, a consolidation of national identity was triggered by frequent nostalgic recollections and a communal emphasis on this identity among the women. Their longing serves as an affirmation of their sense of national belonging, despite their recognition that they may be relocated to other countries. Their concepts of identity can be considered multi-layered or "nested into one another" ([Jano, 2013](#), p. 27).

### Domestic Discourse: Re-Creating Home

This section explores the significance of the carried items. Our analysis reveals that the re-creation of home by these women serves as both a normalizing process that helps bypass the trauma of displacement and an expression of agency. [Maria Kanal and Susan Rottmann \(2021\)](#) have contextualized the agency of Muslim women within the socio-cultural milieu of the Middle East, which differs from the concept of agency as formulated in Western feminist perspectives. The Syrian women's agency is thus evident in their actions "**within** cultural constraints—without trying to directly oppose them" ([Kanal & Rottmann, 2021](#), p. 2). Moreover, [Saba Mahmood \(2001\)](#) underscored the

agency inherent in “the capacity to endure ... and persist” (p. 217).

In the process of re-creating a sense of home under the challenging circumstances of displacement, our participants emphasized the importance of specific items that evoked memories of home and family back in Syria—and that established continuity. Judging from the questionnaire responses and the ensuing discussions, we found that the concept of home was markedly expressed along spatio-temporal semiotics of the kitchen, the veranda, and the garden. The significance of mealtimes, often near sunrise or sunset, was particularly pronounced. This process echoes the concept of Re-Memory, defined by Divya Tolia-Kelly (2004) as “an alternative social narrative to memory. ... [It] is a conceptualization of encounters with memories, simulated through scents, sounds and textures in the everyday” (p. 314).

The concept of home takes on multi-faceted dimensions, influenced by various disciplines and contexts. Cathrine Brun and Anita Fábos (2015) propose three distinct “nodes” of “HOME,” “Home,” and “home” as configurations of “the ambivalence embedded in the experiences and practices of homemaking in long-term displacement, demonstrating how static notions of home and displacement might be unsettled” (p. 5). For Brun and Fábos, “home” stands for “the day-to-day practices of homemaking”; “Home” represents “values, traditions, memories, and feelings of home”; while “HOME” is viewed within “the broader political and historical contexts in which [it] is understood in the current global order and embedded in institutions” (p. 5). Our participants’ responses encompassed all three meanings: the homeland, the life left behind, and everyday practices in their new environment. It is important to acknowledge that each woman’s understanding of home is

uniquely perceived according to her personal experiences.

In fact, most women spoke of their strong attachment to their roles as wives and mothers, entrusted with the task of “making home.” The “symbiotic” relation between a woman and her home resonates with the responses of most of the women who said that they still remember each nook and corner of their homes. Buthaynah (40), however, regretted that she started forgetting some details of the “features and lineaments” of her house. As she put it in Arabic, “أنسى معالم و ملامح بيتي، بدأت.” The figurative use of personification confirms the fact that the house, just like absent family members, is deeply missed. Ni’meh (34) described her pre-displacement self “as the queen of her house that was her little kingdom” [بيتي مملكتي; كنت ملكة في بيتي]. The women whose houses were ruined or vandalized, as well as those whose houses remained standing, identified strongly with their domestic territory and prided themselves on continuing the task of re-creating a sense of home for their families. As Um Hamzah (28) described it, the home is the emblem of the nation [البيت هو الوطن].

The conflation of the family and the concept of home was evident. However, some women’s responses to the questionnaire revealed a clear distinction between house and home. The implications of “home” as family members living together in safety, even in displacement, were differentiated from the house as the cement and the stone left behind. This sense facilitated the rhizomatic extension of the home in the new geographic territory since most refugees came as families. What matters here is that the new place offered these women a sense of protection in the company of their families. However, Rajaa (43) voiced that her true feeling of safety resided solely in her old home where she rarely used to lock the door. Now, she had



to barricade the door with multiple locks to protect herself and her children. Sadly, for Mariam (25), despite being with her family, the sense of protection was lost the moment she “abandoned” her home in Syria, never to be recaptured.

Some carried items, like keepsakes, photographs, and gifts from friends and departed parents, acted as triggers for memories, weaving connections between these objects and the sense of home, often linked to the community within the neighbourhood [Ḥārah]. The “family” home was associated with a sense of “sanctity” [Ḥumah] and marked by a threshold [atabeh] that ensured privacy and security. The protection felt in the demarcation of a threshold is a significant denominator of the home. At the residence of our hostess, Um Huthayfa, the group of women created a sense of being “at home” by spontaneously re-enacting rituals that upheld the “sanctity” of the home. This was evident as they securely locked the worn-out wooden door and removed their shoes. During our conversation, reminiscences about the women’s past dwellings stirred poignant contrasts with their current lives as “refugees” residing in rented and overpriced houses.

Carried culinary tools also acted as catalysts, evoking memories of Syrian cuisine and food preparation processes, which held a significant place in the social interaction among these women. As [Dudley \(2010\)](#) has observed,

it is not simply that weaving in a certain way, eating a particular food or wearing a familiar form of dress reminds refugees reassuringly of the past and thus enables a cognitive and affective continuity with it. Through such productive and consumptive acts, refugees also repeatedly **perform** the past, continually (re-)creating and sensorially (re-)experiencing it in the present. (pp. 751–752)

These tools held semiotic value beyond their functional use. For instance, the brass pestle and mortar carried by Asma’ (36)

transcended its physical state as a mere object; for her, it became a reminder of many past experiences—it was crafted by Syrian hands; it is a traditional icon in the preparation of food, particularly for festive occasions (births, Eids, and weddings). For Asma’, this domestic tool became a repository of intricate emotions and past experiences that were difficult to forget. It thus became a site of socio-cultural semiotics that is part of who she is as a Syrian woman. The same can be said of the chipped plates and wooden spoon carried by Huda, a 46-year-old mother, who considered her spoon the most precious item, which she described as being “loaded with her love and devotion” due to the daily act of feeding her family; as she phrased it in beautiful Arabic: “حملتها محبتي.” This deep emotional connection transcended the functional role of the plates and spoon, transforming them into an embodiment of devotion and care, a testament to her identity as a mother and a nurturer.

An incentive for the women to participate in the study was the opportunity to share a meal from the Syrian cuisine after they had completed the questionnaire. For these women, the Syrian food signified a sense of connection that transcended the confines of food coupons. The act of sharing this meal held profound significance, fostering a sense of belonging that was both comforting and empowering. This sentiment echoes [Nefissa Naguib’s \(2017\)](#) observations regarding how individuals and communities, separated from “their loved ones and homes, find meaning in recipes and meals” (p. 652). During the meeting, Um Huthayfa was momentarily claiming the rented dilapidated house as her own. The food connectivity dissipated the cold of the bare walls on which, as our hostess explained, the landlord asked her not to hang a single picture. Yet, the act of shar-



ing food helped dissolve these constraints, offering a powerful sense of connection.

## Religious Discourse

Copies of the Quran, prayer books, prayer rugs, and rosary beads were popular carried items, symbolizing strong religious and behavioural denominators. In this discourse, the attitude towards displacement is primarily perceived as a preordained ordeal by fate [Maktüb]. This sense of stoicism and fatalistic outlook appears to have forestalled anxiety disorders and depression. For these women, the Quran provided an anchoring reference point. Ayat (42) described the Quran as “my ultimate succour and refuge” [الجأ به الى ربي] [قرآني]. Several women stressed the comfort provided by their faith tokens, particularly in maintaining composure and accepting their “fates.”

The loss of material possessions back home due to the war did not appear to hurt the women much. Ni'meh explained that displacement taught her to avoid excess in the desire of possessing things [باقتناء الأشياء] [عدم الافراط]. Contra to Belk (1988), who argued that “loss of possessions may bring about a diminished sense of self” (p. 142), we found that the loss of possessions has not impacted the morale or the sense of self-worth of the women.<sup>8</sup> Asked in hindsight to consider what they would have carried instead, most women said that they would still first pack the Quran. As Malak (43) described it, “my Quran is my paradise” [قرآني جنتي]. The loss of material objects is thus perceived from a fatalistic perspective that brings psychological effects of resignation, if not comfort.

Asked about their attitudes towards their status of being “displaced,” one woman’s

response was that “we are all refugees” on this earth. Her response may be contextualized in the large Islamic view of the Earth as “the land of God” [Bilād Allāh; الله بلاد], where we, mortals, sojourn for a while and then transit to eternity. As another woman put it, this life is ephemeral [Al-Dunyā Fānyah; الدنيا فانية]; in this sense, all places are the same. Such views may explain the readiness of most women to positively adapt to their new “territory.” This corresponds to Culcasi’s (2017) observation that “rejecting traditional understandings of territory as a clearly defined and delimited area of earth that is exclusively administered, [it may be] argued that territory is multiscaled, hybrid, and always evolving” (p. 323). While most women appeared to have adapted easily to life in Jordan, others were open to the possibility of being relocated to other countries. A middle-aged woman gladly explained that Syrian bread-earning young men had been dispersed all over the Gulf and some European countries long before the civil war. Some women (Samar and Fairuz, aged 56 and 50 respectively) expressed relief at the mobility allowed them in Jordan, unlike in Syria, to go on holy pilgrimages (Haj and Emrah). Others were waiting to be relocated to Canada or Germany to join relatives, confirming once more that home is where family is.

## CONCLUSION

One cannot undermine the significance of a robust literature on refugees, human migration, and forced displacement and its role in exposing the plight of refugees. We relied on works by social theorists to explore and understand the day-to-day experiences of the women within a perspective close to Lokot’s (2019) recommendation that social researchers follow “an open approach to asking refugees about their experiences ...

<sup>8</sup>For a comparison, see Sayre (1994), where she observed that “the aspect of loss central to an understanding of the relationship between possessions and identity is one of loss of self, a natural correlate to the construct of possession centrality to self” (p. 109).

[and resist] the drive to gather data" (p. 468). Likewise, [Abbott's \(2007\)](#) call for a lyrical sociology that allows for the communication of experiences and emotions resonates with our article. Furthermore, our research confirms [Dudley's \(2010\)](#) assertion that consistent and active engagement with "the objects and actions of the past" strongly influences the dynamics of refugee "connections with [their] pre-exile past" (p. 742).

It is in this light that the objects carried by the refugee women transcend their mere materiality to a more complex level of semiotic signification where they articulate different meanings for these women and for us. It is hoped that our focus on the socio-semiotics of the carried objects and on the ordinary lives of Syrian women in displacement may yield patterns of their extraordinary empowerment and agency that dissipate negative stereotypes and the stigma of passivity and helplessness often preconceived about refugee women.


For the Syrian displaced women, the ordinary packed objects provided an extraordinary sense of "dailiness," which imparted a sense of resilience and daily coping with the consequences of displacement. The objects, mostly insignificant in their material worth, provided means of maintaining a sense of identity and recollections of the past that only confirmed the need to be dynamic and resourceful in the present. A thimble, a needle and a thread or simple knitting tools proved to be useful and helped secure some income while these women were waiting for faraj [فرج]: some hope or resolution to the Syrian crisis. Particularly, simple tokens of "faith" forestalled stress and anxiety.

Unfortunately, for a woman like Safaa (48), the experience of depression could not be evaded at times. Nonetheless, for other women, some of the packed objects were reminders of the need to approximate

normalcy of everyday life in a new place. Therefore, one may conclude that some packed items function as restorative emblems of coping with the initial trauma of leaving home. Interestingly, several women expressed their openness to the options of making home in other countries, which reveals a concept of home that is practical and dynamic. Such a concept is in resonance with [Brun & Fábos's \(2015\)](#) assertion that displaced people "continue to **think** of home as existing in a range of different places across space and time and **act** within circumscribed geographic, historical, and political contexts to create domestic spaces" (pp. 14–15).

For us, the encounter with those courageous women was most rewarding for the compelling lessons of endurance and hope in the face of uncertainty. Judging by the opinions of these women, it might be said that the lightness of the carried items, notably the tokens of faith, is made to bear the heaviness of the burden of displacement. What finally matters is that their ordinary task of simple living has prevailed.

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## APPENDIX

### DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Participant	Age (years)	Region of origin in Syria	Marital status	Number of family members	Education	Current occupation
PN1	48	Damascus	Widowed	4	Bachelor's degree	Housewife / cultivating medicinal plants
PN2	34	Daraa	Widowed	6	High school	Housewife
PN3	25	Rif-Dimashq	Married	10	Community college degree	Housewife
PN4	30	Daraa	Married	4	High school	Housewife / seamstress
PN5	46	Daraa	Married	7	High school	Housewife
PN6	34	Daraa	Married	5	High school	Housewife
PN7	43	Daraa	Married	8	High school	Housewife
PN8	47	Homs	Married	3	Middle school	Housewife
PN9	35	Daraa	Widowed	4	Community college	Housewife
PN10	50	Daraa	Married	7	Middle school	Housewife
PN11	36	Homs	Married	6	Middle school	Housewife
PN12	45	Daraa	Married	7	Not mentioned	Housewife
PN13	56	Daraa	Married	5	High school	Housewife
PN14	46	Homs	Married	4	High school	Housewife
PN15	30	Daraa	Married	6	Middle school	Housewife

*Continued on next page*

*Continued.*

Participant	Age (years)	Region of origin in Syria	Marital status	Number of family members	Education	Current occupation
PN16	33	Daraa	Married	7	Middle school	Housewife
PN17	33	Daraa	Married	5	Middle school	Housewife
PN18	28	Damascus	Married	3	High school	Housewife
PN19	45	Daraa	Divorced	3	Middle school	Housewife
PN20	67	Daraa	Widowed	2	High school	Housewife
PN21	67	Daraa	Widowed	0	Middle school	Housewife
PN22	41	Daraa	Widowed	5	Bachelor's degree	Housewife / teacher
PN23	29	Daraa	Widowed	5	Bachelor's degree	Housewife
PN24	36	Daraa	Married	5	Community college degree	Housewife
PN25	40	Daraa	Married	6	College degree	Housewife
PN26	43	Daraa	Not mentioned	6	Middle school	Housewife
PN27	34	Daraa	Married	6	Community college degree	Housewife / make-up expert & hairdresser
PN28	42	Daraa	Widowed	4	High school	Seamstress
PN29	39	Daraa	Married	10	Bachelor's degree	Housewife
PN30	38	Daraa	Widowed	1	Community College degree	Unemployed
PN31	43	Daraa	Divorced	2	Community college	Housewife
PN32	20	Homs	Married	3	High school	Housewife

*Continued on next page*



*Continued.*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Age (years)</b>	<b>Region of origin in Syria</b>	<b>Marital status</b>	<b>Number of family members</b>	<b>Education</b>	<b>Current occupation</b>
PN33	30	Daraa	Married	6	High school	Housewife
PN34	33	Not mentioned	Not mentioned	5	Middle school	Housewife
PN35	20	Homs	Married	3	High school	Housewife
PN36	50	Damascus	Married	6	Elementary school	Housewife
PN37	21	Daraa	Single	8 (living with married sister's family)	High school	Unemployed
PN38	51	Daraa	Married	3	High school	Housewife / private tutor
PN39	31	Daraa	Married	5	High school	Housewife
PN40	51	Homs	Married	6	High school	Housewife
PN41	67	Daraa	Married	4	Middle school	Housewife
PN42	45	Daraa	Married	2	Middle school	Housewife