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## Between Two Worlds

# The Representation of Refugees in the Short Stories of Anna Vörös

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**Abstract.** Anna Vörös's collection of short stories, *Vadoma* (2022), offers a completely novel perspective on refugees in contemporary Hungarian literature. The collection focuses on Vadoma, a young refugee girl of Syrian origin, who is the first-person narrator of most of the short stories. The reader can follow the young girl's path from Aleppo to Budapest as she faces dilemmas and problems. The main issue of our hero is the fact that she is stuck between two worlds, as her old life and city of origin do not exist anymore, but Budapest has yet to become her home. Her mother tongue and words are no longer enough to express her experiences, but she has not learnt a new language yet. Mariangelo Pallodino's concept of "islandment", which refers to landing without arrival, expresses Vadoma's situation perfectly. The present study examines whether Anna Vörös's short stories can be read in the context of refugee literature, and it looks at how the figure of the refugee appears in them. Special attention is paid to the themes of cultures, religions, languages, and the in-betweenness of identities.

**Keywords:** refugee literature, Anna Vörös, islandment, language, identity, in-betweenness

## Introduction

The migrant crisis of recent years is not a dominant theme in contemporary Hungarian literature, but it has been turning up more often. Most of the texts

are written from the perspective of Western culture and are heavily imbued with stereotypes. The depicted refugees seldom have a voice. This is not highly striking because Hungary is a transit country; there are other destinations for refugees. Anna Vörös's first collection of short stories, *Vadoma* (2022), is a refreshing exception. It paints a much nuanced picture of the refugee crisis. The precise distinction between different racial groups of refugees is quite a new element in contemporary Hungarian literature, but this is not the only peculiarity of the book.

*Vadoma* is the I-narrator of most of the short stories; she is a young girl from Aleppo, who crossed the sea to dock on the shores of Europe. After several refugee camps, she arrived in Budapest, in a dormitory, where she tried to fit into Hungarian society. She learns Hungarian, makes friends, and gets acquainted with the differences between the Muslim and Christian cultures. Three timelines meet in the short stories – the past in Aleppo (right before and during the Syrian civil war), the present in Budapest, and the missing future of the refugee characters. Anna Vörös describes everything based on her experiences as a volunteer in refugee camps, altogether avoiding stereotypes. It is worth emphasizing that the author volunteered in refugee camps in Turkey, Greece, and Egypt, so she has a wide range of knowledge of refugees, their motivations, and their circumstances. These experiences and the knowledge accumulated in the volume of Anna Vörös guarantee that the reader feels *Vadoma*'s thoughts, doubts, and emotions are genuine. Her insider view makes her capable of grasping the essence of the refugee crisis, avoiding didactics.

The reader follows the title character's path from Syria to Hungary. The main "scenes" of displacement appear during her journey, and they include home, sea crossings, borders, and refugee camps. Out of these sites, the analysis focuses foremost on the sea crossing, which already is a liminal space in itself, but it also has a very complex meaning. It serves as an excellent symbol for the position of the main character, who is between two worlds, as she left her home but cannot arrive to her new home. The refugee camp plays a similar role. Mariangelo Palladino's 'islandment', a term this study deals with in detail, is useful in the analysis of both of these places. The study also considers whether the collection can be read as refugee literature, the philological questions and reception of the short stories, as well as the protagonist's difficulties in integrating, touching upon the issues of identity, language, and religion.

## **Anna Vörös's *Vadoma* as refugee literature**

Although fleeing has been part of humanity since the beginning of times, the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have seen greater migration than any previous eras. In his essay, "Reflections on Exile", Edward Said highlights that "Modern Western

culture is in large part the work of exiles, émigrés, refugees” (Said 2000: 173). Sercan Hamza Bağlama calls the 21<sup>st</sup> century the era of the refugee crisis and observes that examples of contemporary refugee literature “mostly provide a realistic snapshot of the nature of a refugee ‘crisis’ and thematize the process of victimization and dehumanization experienced by internally displaced persons, refugees and asylum seekers fleeing the civil war in Syria or elsewhere in the Middle East or the Global South” (Bağlama 2020: 632). Fatemeh Pourjafari and Abdolali Vahidpour use the term of migrant literature. According to them, it “implies that subject matter will be about migration and the culture and tradition of the host nation”. They state that although migration experiences and adaptation are the main themes in this kind of literature, it can be “very diverse, either thematically or structurally” (Fatemeh & Abdolali 2014: 680).

Literature written by and about refugees can be considered refugee literature (Gallien 2018: 723). Anna Bernard emphasizes three genres of refugee literature: poetry, verbatim theatre, and graphic narrative (Bernard 2020: 66–67). Literary works “provide an alternative site for refugees’ claims for recognition and justice, a site where such claims might be received with openness rather than suspicion, and where the reader might be willing to act as an ally rather than a judge” (Bernard 2020: 67). Arthur Rose discusses refugee writings in the context of the exile memoir (Rose 2020: 55–57).

Anna Vörös’s collection of short stories, *Vadoma*, examines the story of a refugee girl, so it can be read as refugee literature that is about refugees. The texts are about the once peaceful everyday life and holidays in Syria, the destruction of war, the escape of the hero, as well as attempts of integration in Hungary. The characteristic topoi of refugee literature, such as the border, walls, papers, or water (Stan 2017: 797), all appear in the short stories. Although they were not written in one of the genres mentioned by Bernard, like poems, the short stories are brief and can be written in a short amount of time, and, similarly to verbatim theatre, they are based on the experiences of refugees, even though they were not written by a refugee. Remembering and forgetting, or the memoir, is also relevant in the stories. Although *Vadoma* would like to forget, she is continually remembering the stories of her past, and her memories weave through the narrative of the present.

## **The genealogy and reception of *Vadoma***

The short stories of Anna Vörös can be read in journals since 2016, but once arranged as a collection, we can observe a number of differences between the collection and the journal publication. The previous third-person narrator has been changed in almost all cases to a first-person one, and thus the narration becomes a lot more personal. Furthermore, the previously more didactic

passages are left out of the collection. In some instances, the titles were changed – for example, instead of “Vadoma szédül” [Vadoma is dizzy], “Szédül” [Dizzy] becomes the new title used in the collection. In the case of “Sátorverés” [Putting up a tent], we encounter “Vadoma találkozik Faresh-sel” [Vadoma meets Faresh]. The short story “Vadoma meglátogat” [Vadoma visits me] ends up in the collection with significant changes, as its central plot, the news, discussing events in Aleppo, becomes part of the short story “Hírek” [News]. The texts of the *Zempléni Múzsza* are told from the perspective of a Westerner, but the collection reflects Vadoma’s perspective. In the former text, the I-narrator, whom Vadoma visits, does not know how to behave with Vadoma and looks at her helplessly while she stares, mesmerized, at the news about her hometown, before breaking down in tears. This scene reminds the reader of Luc Boltanski’s (1999) concept of distant suffering. In the short story collection “Hírek” [News], Vadoma visits her dorm roommate’s family in Szentendre, and the news do not affect her nearly as much as they do in the other text. According to her, six months before, she could not have handled watching the images, but they no longer cause her pain, in fact, they seem distant to her. Instead, the short story focuses on the differences between the two cultures. The first-person narrator discusses greeting forms, the differences between the scents of eastern and European homes, and the fact that in Syria under no circumstances can women smoke in public. For this reason, when Vadoma accepts a cigarette from her roommate’s father, she gets out of the habits of her previous life. It would have been unimaginable to light up in front of other people at home, so this scene could not have played out in front of her father or other men in Syria. It is not only the act of smoking but also the cigarette itself that serves as a reminder of the difference between the two worlds. Because tobacco manufacturers vary their products according to the given region’s or country’s market and taste, it is not surprising that the Hungarian cigarette irritates Vadoma’s throat in a different way, and her palate experiences the bitterness differently as well.

Anna Gács reads *Vadoma* in a transcultural narrative context, drawing attention to the issue of cultural appropriation regarding the short stories. Although the author, Anna Vörös, a member of the dominant culture, represents the perspective of a minority culture, that of the Muslim refugee, she manages to do so without cultural appropriation. Gács stresses that the collection aims to serve multiple purposes in actual Hungarian society, as it can simultaneously be considered fiction, an awareness-spreading work, a memoir, a work dissecting transcultural awareness, and anti-discourse (Gács 2023: 105). Csaba Károlyi also considers this to be the most valuable characteristic of the collection. According to Károlyi, certain information communicated by the characters in the stories are not meant to serve literary prose but rather informative purposes, yet the author manages to successfully interweave these parts into the text.



Károlyi considers the works of the collection to be serious literary work while dismissing the more lyrical parts (Károlyi 2023). Anna Gács, on the other hand, considers Vadoma's visions and associations the strongest part of the lyrical prose language. In her opinion, sections with the explanations are less inventive, but she accepts their necessity. Gács considers characterization as the collection's weakness, as, according to her, neither Vadoma nor her dorm roommate are individualized characters. To Gács, both seem to be the stereotypical representatives of their own groups. She draws attention, however, to the "Glosszárium" [Glossary], found in the collection after the short stories. This is no ordinary explanation of words but rather the author's own record of development in which she presents her own personal experiences to the reader (Gács 2023: 106–108).

## Arriving without arrival

The aquatic migration routes into Europe lead through the Mediterranean – overloaded flimsy boats are visual symbols of the migration crisis in the media, and frequent shipwrecks fan the flames. The Italian fishermen's catch often contains dead bodies, and some Italian beaches are covered with human remains again and again. In the light of all this, it is not surprising that the Mediterranean Sea is an accentuated topic in refugee studies.

Hakim Abderrezak interprets the Mediterranean in three ways. Firstly, as a sieve, "as a netted entity that allows a select few through while preventing most others from making it to the other side" (Abderrezak 2020: 376). Secondly, he examines the sea crossings related to the Arab Spring. Thirdly, he uses the neologism the 'Mediterranean seametry' "to capture the oxymoronic nature of the sea in which liquidity has become synonymous with immobility precipitated by preposterous and rigid policies that have transformed a sea into a cemetery" (Abderrezak 2020: 373). As cemeteries are set up on the outskirts of the city, seametry also appears on the borders of Europe. But it is not an open and public space like other cemeteries, "the Global South 'visitor' can only be admitted if dead". Seametry is not a general cemetery because most of the victims in it are Muslims, so it makes changes in traditional Muslim burial practices (Abderrezak 2020: 383–384).

The relationship of death and sea is also an inspiration for artists. For example, David Farrier draws attention to Nikolaj Larsen's group of sculptures called *End of Dreams* which commemorates "the thousands of people who die crossing the Mediterranean". The artworks made from concrete canvas symbolize dead bodies, and they are covered with barnacles and other marine organisms. The composition's aim is to highlight how the stories of refugees "are subsumed by other, more powerful narratives – forms of discursive violence, which reduce refugees to mere 'bodies of water', in concert with forms of structural violence" (Farrier 2020: 353).

Portrayals like this focus attention on the zoopolitical and biopolitical aspects of the migration crisis. Joseph Pugliese examines the process wherein human asylum seekers become non-humans in the Western attitude towards them and the language used to describe them. His very expressive example for this phenomenon is the case of two dead Roma girls in Torregaveta. The bodies of the girls washed up on the beach, and holidaymakers continued their vacation beside their covered dead bodies, which were treated as beach litter. “The corpses of these two young Roma girls delineate border zones of the dead. – states Pugliese – In their death, they stake out littoral death zones that mark the line of division between the human and the non-human, between the dead worthy of commemoration and mourning and the dead who are, rather, a nuisance or a form of pollution that needs to be dealt with” (Pugliese 2020: 358–359).

Pugliese refers to the systematic humiliation of refugees, too. For example, the refugee camp in Calais is called Jungle, but the fences constructed on national borders against migrants also testify to animal treatment, “they emblematised the EU’s sovereign exercise of zoopolitical violence” (Pugliese 2020: 365–366, 368).

All these motifs appear in the short stories of Anna Vörös. Vadoma recalls her sea crossing travelling on a crowded tram in the short story entitled “Emléketörés” [Memory Hack]. Of particular importance in the description are bodies stretched against each other, fear, vulnerability, stormy waves, the taste of salt, unbearable sunlight...

We can also find Hakim Abderrezak’s concepts in the text such as the sea as sieve and seametry. Vadoma wonders how and why someone survives this perilous journey, but she shows the dehumanizing treatment of refugees as well:

It’s hard to decide who receives Allah’s mercy, whose life is worth what, whose is worth enough to be swallowed by the surf, only for the bloated body to be found later, with disgust, no one daring to touch it. And who reaches the shore to be screamed at, to be dragged, to have what clothing remains yanked off, and they don’t care that we collapse unconscious on one another, they push the whole miserable group to move on, to give up our place to other wretched beings who’ve been thrown to shore by the sea. Dead or alive, it doesn’t matter by then. (Vörös 2022: 11–12)<sup>1</sup>

1 The translations from Hungarian literature are my own throughout the article. “Nehéz eldönteni, kinek kegyelmez Allah, kinek mennyire értékes az élete, kié annyi, hogy csak elnyeljük a tajtékok, és később undorodva találják meg a felpuffadt testét, amihez már senki sem mer hozzáérni. És ki ér partot, hogy ott üvöltösek vele, letépjék a maradék ruháját, ahogy rángatják, és nem érdekli őket, hogy ájultan rogyunk egymásra, taszigálják az egész nyomorult csoportot, hogy haladjunk, adjuk át a helyünket más szerencsétleneknek, akiket kidob a tenger, holtan vagy élve, akkor már nem számít.” (Vörös 2022: 11–12)

She recalls the deaths as well. A woman fell out of the boat; they could not save her. They watched for a long time as her body was tossed by the waves. The sight of orange life jackets looming from the sea below also testifies to more dead bodies. The passengers were pressed even further together to stay alive.

The sea was not just a sieve but a killing device. Those who drank sea water died, and the corpses began to stink, so they had to be thrown out of the boat. The description of the dead floating on the waves contrasts with the dehumanizing attitude demonstrated by Pugliese. The reason of the poetic, idyllic phrasing and the endowing of the dead bodies with living qualities is the inner point of view of the I-narrator. She shares their fate; she could be one of them:

They lay with spread arms and legs on top of the froth, as if they had swum too far while playing a game, and were bobbing with the waves while they collected their strength to swim back to shore, listening to the noise of the gulls and the beachgoers. They allowed their bodies to cool, their faces to stay hot. They tried to listen to the heartbeat of the immense mass of water beneath them. They seemed light. (Vörös 2022: 11)<sup>2</sup>

In contrast, the I-narrator characterizes the living with the dead:

I closed my eyes and thought that when they'd find us, they'd send us back to where we came from, but we won't have a human face by then, it'll be peeling from the salt and from exhaustion, salt streams will be pouring off our bodies, we'll flay the sea off of our bodies in pieces, we'll barely have the strength to roll out of this boat to the bare ground, the terrifyingly cold, dead ground. (Vörös 2022: 11)<sup>3</sup>

Vadoma finds it difficult to escape from the trauma of the sea crossing. She does not want to remember the sea, the taste of the salt, the pain, and the emptiness. She does not want to be a refugee, she wants to be saved, she wants to finally arrive somewhere.

The question of arrival is more difficult than we think. The landfall unfortunately does not evidently mean arrival. Mariangela Palladino deals with

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2 "Széttárt karokkal meg lábakkal feküdtek a habok tetején, mintha csak túl messzire úsztak volna be játék közben, és amíg elég erőt gyűjtöttek a kiúszáshoz, ringatták magukat, és hallgatták a sirályok meg a fürdőzők zsviváját. Engedték, hogy testük lehűljön, az arcuk viszont forró maradjon. Próbálták meghallani az alattuk lévő irdatlan víztömeg szívverését. Könnyűnek látszottak." (Vörös 2022: 11)

3 "Behunytam a szemem, és arra gondoltam, hogy amikor megtalálnak minket, visszaküldenek, menjünk, ahonnan elvergődtünk, de addigra már nem lesz emberi arcunk, mállani fog a sótól és a fáradtságtól, sópatakok fognak ömleni rólunk, darabokban hámozzuk magunkról a tengert, és annyi erőnk lesz csak, hogy kivágódjunk ebből a csónakból a csupasz földre, az ijesztően hideg, halott földre." (Vörös 2022: 11)

this topic in depth. Her notion, ‘islandment’, which integrates the words island and encampment, summarizes the contradictory interpretations of reaching the shores of Europe, interrogates and problematizes the rhetoric of hospitality in the migration discourse:

Islandment is a lived situation; it is arrival without an end to the journey; it signifies detention, and the double incarceration on the island by both the fences of the camp and the sea; islandment is inhabiting a liminal space in Europe but not quite so, neither geographically nor legally; it is a discursive category to defamiliarise the sea and reconfigure it as a destination. I place the notion of islandment amid a body of scholarship – especially in cultural theory and social studies – on islands as carceral spaces, on encampment, and the rhetoric of reception and hospitality surrounding immigration today. (Palladino 2020: 395)

Palladino’s concept points out the phenomenon of institutional hospitability, the inhospitable reception of refugees as unwanted guests, and the trespasses of authorities. The fences of refugee camps are indicative of imprisonment. The island and the refugee camp are also liminal spaces, as the sea, the migrants cannot break out or escape. They are just waiting there in the hope of arrival.

The problematicity of reaching the shores, the feeling of arriving without arrival can be found in “Vadoma”, too. The short story “Menni, menni, menni” [Go, go, go] describes the young girl’s landfall. She had not imagined that moment before, and she did not know what to do. It was impossible to act like normal people, get up, get out of the boat, and walk past to the nearest shop to buy some beverages and bread. The passengers walked towards the volunteer’s tent with blank looks, hesitantly.

Life jacket mountains are closely associated with the visual representation of landing. We can see them in the media representations of the migrant crisis, but they also appear in Sally El Hosaini’s film *The Swimmers* (2022), which is based on the true story of the Mardini sisters. Vadoma also notices the piles of life jackets on the shores:

The horizon is lost in the fog, one can’t decide where the surface of the water ends and the sky begins. [...] Life jackets, split cans, banana peels litter the shore. [...] To the left, several steps away, two shabby boats pierce the sand. A third is tipped on its side, half sunk, it moved rhythmically in and out of the water, as if it were still trying to land. (Vörös 2022: 14)<sup>4</sup>

4 “A horizont ködbe veszett, nem lehet eldönteni, hol ér véget a vízfelszín és hol kezdődik az ég. [...] A parton szétdobálva mentőmellények, felhasított konzervdobozok, banánhéjak. [...] Balra, jó pár lépésnyire két ütött-kopott csónak fúródott a homokba. Egy harmadik az oldalára

In addition to external circumstances, it is also important to pay attention to internal events and feelings. Vadoma concentrated on getting up without help, and after she succeeded in getting out of the boat, she sat in the sand. She did not want to be one of the others. Her thoughts are consistent with the dilemmas of Parvati Nair's informant, Samir, who asks himself every day "Is this why I crossed the sea? Is this why I kissed death?" (Nair 2020: 420):

How could this be called arrival, this dark grey sandy, cold shore, which I think might have been Greece, I was too embarrassed to ask. It's not over yet, and this sentence, which had calmed me and given me strength before because, yes, we can go on, there's a where to, look forward, there's always a new country, new cities, there'd be new people, who'd give me new names, which I'd learn to respond to, with time, I'll forget them, I'll find new favourite roads to follow, which will take me to my new home, I can learn however many trades, then I'll pack and move on anyway, and all these possibilities, all these maybes and evens crushed my shoulder with a force I hadn't known before. (Vörös 2022: 16)<sup>5</sup>

## Imprisoned by the refugee camps

We find detailed descriptions of refugee camps in Anna Vörös's short stories. These camps, a number of which are visited by the protagonist, can remind the reader of prisons, due to their barbed wire barriers, or of summer camps thanks to volunteers leading various music-related activities. The camps cannot be located exactly, but the texts tell us that Vadoma resided in a number of them. Their inclusion in the stories allows the author to make use of and share her own authentic experiences as a volunteer with the readers; moreover, we can familiarize ourselves with the fates of a number of other refugees from the faceless crowd.

Alongside Vadoma, the reader has an opportunity to meet Faresh, a nine-year-old Afghani boy who tells people he is twenty-eight years old. He is the only minor in the camp without a chaperone. Although he cannot read or write, he has

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dőlt, félig elsüllyedve, ritmikusan hol előrébb, hol hátrább sodródott a vízben, mintha még megpróbálna kikötni." (Vörös 2022: 14)

- 5 "Hogy lehetett volna ezt megérkezésnek nevezni, ezt a sötétszürke homokos, rideg partot, amiről úgy gondoltam, Görögország lehet, de szégyelltem megkérdezni. Még nincs vége, és ez a mondat, ami korábban megnyugtatót, erőt adott, hogy igen, még lehet tovább, még van hova, előre néztek, mindig akad új ország, új városok, lesznek új emberek, akik új neveket aggatnak rám, amikre idővel megtanulok hallgatni, majd elfelejtem őket, találni fogok kedvenc útvonalakat, amik majd az új otthonomba visznek, tanulhatok akárhány szakmát, aztán összecsomagolok és továbbálllok úgyis, és ez a sok lehetőség, ez a sok talán, és akár eddig ismeretlen erővel préselte össze a vállam." (Vörös 2022: 16)

a trade servicing hookahs, being an expert in them, despite not possessing any papers about these skills or any papers at all.

In another camp, Vadoma witnesses another minor refugee, Amidi, being taken away by social workers from a children's home. The boy spent a few days under the rubble of their house after it had been bombed. He was the only one to survive the bombing, but only because bricks were needed to build a bunker, so a few days after the bombing his body was uncovered. These traumatic experiences left him with deep scars, and whenever he hears a plane passing overhead, he crouches to hide under a table.

The short story "Asfiya" is set in a house in Athens, where a Pakistani refugee girl is playing with a Greek volunteer's daughter. They braid their black and blond locks together. The Pakistani girl does not consider herself pretty at all, so she does not understand why the Greek girl would want black hair like she has. Vadoma watches these events, but in the original short story that appeared in the journal, it is a volunteer, not unlike the author had been once, filling in the role of the I-narrator. Vadoma looks at the frail Pakistani girl and wonders how she was able to walk so much in her colourful dress and wooden slippers.

We also meet the Syrian family willing to accept Faresh in their tent but only if they are allowed certain privileges such as moving into the transit zone. Vadoma talks with an old man who disapproves of the volunteer girls and believes they would be a bad influence on the refugee girls.

Much is written about the judgement of the volunteers. At first, Vadoma cannot understand how they might help if they do not bring food. For her, it is strange that the adults and children should dance and sing together in a circle and that those outside the circle take photos of them. She does not value the endless singing and repetitive dancing, but eventually she joins the dance when she realizes that dancing or sitting around by oneself with one's thoughts both amount to the same result, since "this is how those that despair can be happy" (Vörös 2022: 45). She realizes when talking to the others that everyone laughs at the volunteers behind their backs, the children imitate them at night, but the refugees are all still glad to see them even if singing the same song over and over again can become rather tedious.

## **The difficulties of integration**

Just as landing or arriving in the camps cannot be called arrival, Vadoma's residence in Budapest is also temporary. Even though she attempts to acquaint herself with Hungarian culture and language, and Christianity, Hungary is not the final destination for her; as Anna Gács emphasizes, it is merely a "random stop on the road to nowhere" (Gács 2023: 109). According to Vadoma, Hungary

and Budapest are of minor significance in comparison with Syria and Aleppo. Although she does not like Budapest and would not return there, sometimes she still considers it a decent place, where she has all she needs and where she can plan ahead.

The I-narrator of “Emléketörés” [Memory Hack] is constantly positioning herself during a tram ride. She finds her way more easily in the Hungarian capital than most tourists, even if, just like the other foreigners, she struggles to pronounce the stops’ names. She is still new in the city, is learning where everything is, and is acquainting herself with the capital. We find out that she is a Muslim woman, a refugee. Getting off the tramway, she sits on a bench occupied by a homeless person, similarly to whom she is also a marginal figure without a home.

“In the first place, we don’t like to be called ‘refugees’”, Hanna Arendt writes in her essay *We Refugees* (Arendt 2007: 264). The identification with or as a refugee is problematic in Anna Vörös’s collection as well. Instead of the respect enjoyed by Syrians in the past, the I-narrator finds it insufferable that people consider her to be a pitiful refugee. This is explored in the short story “Bizonyítványosztás” [Handing out report cards]. In “Menni, menni, menni” [Go, go, go], we read that, upon reaching the shore, Vadoma refuses to be part of the refugee community; she does not want to belong there and appear to be a victim. Being in Hungary and the blue stamp that legalizes her presence there do not make her happy either; she feels instead as if something were pricking the sole of her foot, as explored in the short story “Vadomára új ruhát szabnak” [They tailor a new dress for Vadoma].

The term functions as a curse word in the story titled “Amal”. Vadoma meets Amal, who is her age, in one of the refugee camps. Amal is from an affluent family, but the differences between social classes are erased when fleeing, and the rich and the poor are all simply refugees. The girl confides in Vadoma and tells her she has fallen in love with a Hungarian volunteer, but the boy does not reciprocate her feelings. She believes Dávid could fall in love with her if she did not wear a hijab or if she were not just a refugee:

... if only I weren’t a.

Amal couldn’t say the word. It’s the biggest curse word. You don’t say that about yourself, I said quietly.

If I weren’t just a refugee. (Vörös 2022: 42)

Only the word “migrant” is a stronger insult. In “Bizonyítványosztás” [Handing out report cards], not only the theme of pity for refugees is present but so is fear. “Don’t go over there, Bence, that’s a migrant. Come, let’s sit here instead. Look at her staring at us. Your bag’s zipped shut, right?” (Vörös 2022: 106).<sup>6</sup> It is not

6 “Ne menjél oda Bence, az egy migráns. Gyere, üljünk inkább ide. Nézd, hogy bámul minket. Ugye be van cipzározva a táskád?” (Vörös 2022: 106).

revealed who warns the pupil, but it does not matter. Regardless of the warning, the boy approaches the girl multiple times and shows her his report card.

Vadoma builds a good rapport with her dorm roommate. The extremely open and interested Hungarian girl introduces Vadoma to Hungarian culture, and it is she who guides Vadoma to talk and to remember. Her naivety and lack of knowledge about Syria and the eastern world is reflected in the learning process of the I-narrator explored in “Glosszárium” [Glossary]. Although Vadoma is the I-narrator of most of the stories, this position is filled by the roommate in some of the texts, and the perspectives change within certain stories. The titles of the texts are obviously given by the roommate, as Csaba Károlyi also points out (Károlyi 2023).

Vadoma is especially interested in questions of religion. She has an almost child-like curiosity and wants to learn about nativity scenes from her roommate after she sees them everywhere around Christmas time. She reads a lot about Christianity, following the prophet Mohamed’s will. She realizes that she is alone in her interest, others do not concern themselves with this topic; she notices that it is embarrassing when she asks people about their favourite saint or which saint they were named after and why. This momentum also highlights the cultural differences between the two worlds and worldviews.

It is inevitable that the problem of language should be mentioned when discussing integration. In the stories of the collection, we encounter, on the one hand, the relationship to one’s mother tongue, fear of losing one’s mother tongue, and, on the other hand, expressing the lived traumas and the lack of language to process them. A returning characteristic of Vadoma’s is that she does not speak much, if she speaks at all. This is consistent with the central claim of literary trauma theory, which “asserts that trauma creates a speechless fright that divides or destroys identity” (Balaev 2008: 149). Although she is no longer certain that it makes sense to speak the language of a dying country, she still conjugates Arabic verbs almost obsessively so that she does not forget her native language.

She also insists on wearing a hijab. Although she would like to take it off at times and thus to shed the patterns of behaviour she has brought with her from home, she resists: “if only I could take off the hijab, I could get lost in the crowd. But without the veil, I’d feel like I was naked on the street. I don’t want to be naked” (Vörös 2022: 118). In certain situations, she leaves the habits of home behind, like when she accepts the cigarette from her roommate’s father, but she cannot identify with the lifestyle or the values of the West. She does not understand, for example, how parents can let the volunteer girls go to the camps alone.

Vadoma is unable to secede from her home and past, but she is also unable to arrive at her new life finally, neither on the shores of Greece nor in Budapest. The feeling of islandment follows her during her journey. She is locked between two worlds, two languages. Her old words are inadequate to express her feelings,



but she could not acquire a new language yet. She knows that she cannot return to her home country and city, Aleppo – after the war, it will not be the same as before the crisis. She has to construct her new identity because her nation's reputation was destroyed with Syria.

Love my country just because it's mine? I'd rather live, most of all, survive. There's a city, far away, my home city, which won't wait for me, I'm afraid, because by the time I return, Syria might not exist at all. They won't even find it, only a burnt, stinky pile of ashes will be left of it. Eventually, the war will end, and I still won't go home because I won't be able to. (Vörös 2022: 47)<sup>7</sup>

## Summary

Anna Vörös's collection of short stories, *Vadoma*, fits into the international trends of refugee literature and, thus far, it is unique in its attempt to portray not only the Western gaze but also the sentiments and motivations of refugees, giving voice to this marginalized group. In contrast with the generalizations and xenophobic representations present in the media as a reflection of current Hungarian politics, Anna Vörös places emphasis on individual stories, attempts to give nuance to the protagonist, evading the use of stereotypes and didacticism. Due to insights into the details of Hungarian and Syrian culture and worldviews, as well as the Christian and Muslim religions, the collection is important for its informative as well as literary value.

The stories paint a nuanced picture of the important scenes of fleeing, crossing the sea, and the time spent waiting in refugee camps. Mariangelo Palladino's term "islandment" serves as an excellent basis for the interpretation of *Vadoma*, as the term is not only relevant to crossing the sea, landfall, or spending time in refugee camps, but it is also useful in the examination of *Vadoma*'s time in Budapest. Arriving somewhere is not considered to be "arrival", spending time there is temporary, which is the reason *Vadoma* finds herself floating between two worlds, languages, religions, and identities.

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7 "Szeressem a hazámat csak azért, mert az enyém? Inkább élni akarok, és főleg túlélni. Van az a város, messze, a szülővárosom, ami nem vár meg, attól tartok, mert lehet, hogy mire visszamegyek, addigra Szíria egyáltalán nem lesz. Meg sem találják majd, valami kiégett, kormos és büdös földhalom marad belőle. Egyszer vége lesz a háborúnak, és még mindig nem fogok hazamenni, mert nem leszek rá képes." (Vörös 2022: 47)

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