

RESEARCH TITLE

Borders, Migration, and Belonging in *Valeria Luiselli's Lost Children Archive*: A Literary Analysis of Refugee Narratives, Identity, and the Politics of Memory

Ali Alhaq Almosawi¹

¹ English Department, Open Educational College – Dhi Qar Branch, Iraq.

HNSJ, 2026, 7(7); <https://doi.org/10.53796/hnsj77/28>

Received at 10/06/2026

Accepted at 20/06/2026

Published at 01/07/2026

Abstract

This research examines the themes of borders, migration, and belonging through an analysis of Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* (Luiselli, 2019), one of the most significant contemporary literary works addressing the refugee crisis, particularly child migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. The study focuses on how the novel represents refugee suffering in a humanly intricate way beyond politics and law to issues of identity, memory, and belonging. This research adopted a textual analytical methodology. The analysis focused on narrative structure, symbols, and the concept of the 'archive' as a counter-documentation of forgetfulness. In the end, the research finds that the novel sets borders as spaces of symbolic and institutional violence and forced migration as a process of psychic and social disintegration, while at the same time revealing how elusive and fragile belonging can be for refugees. In addition, it exposes how Luiselli uses literature as an ethical document in providing a human voice for refugee children in the face of marginalization and silence.

Key Words: Borders; Forced Migration; Refugee Children; Belonging; Cultural Memory.

الحدود والهجرة والانتماء في رواية فاليريا لويزيلي أرشيف الأطفال الضائعين: تحليل أدبي لسرديات اللاجئين والهوية وسياسات الذاكرة

المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة موضوعات الحدود والهجرة والانتماء من خلال تحليل رواية فاليريا لويزيلي أرشيف الأطفال الضائعين (Luiselli, 2019)، بوصفها واحدة من أبرز الأعمال الأدبية المعاصرة التي عالجت أزمة اللاجئين، ولا سيما الأطفال المهاجرين العابرين للحدود الأمريكية المكسيكية. وتركز الدراسة على الكيفية التي تمثل بها الرواية معاناة اللاجئين بطريقة إنسانية معقدة تتجاوز الأبعاد السياسية والقانونية إلى قضايا الهوية والذاكرة والانتماء. وقد اعتمدت الدراسة منهج التحليل النصي، حيث ركز التحليل على البنية السردية، والرموز، ومفهوم «الأرشيف» بوصفه توثيقاً مضاداً للنسيان. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن الرواية تقدم الحدود بوصفها فضاءات للعنف الرمزي والمؤسسي، كما تصور الهجرة القسرية بوصفها عملية تفكك نفسي واجتماعي، وفي الوقت نفسه تكشف عن هشاشة الانتماء ومراوغته بالنسبة للاجئين. إضافة إلى ذلك، تبين الدراسة كيف تستخدم لويزيلي الأدب بوصفه وثيقة أخلاقية تمنح الأطفال اللاجئين صوتاً إنسانياً في مواجهة التهميش والصمت.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الحدود؛ الهجرة القسرية؛ الأطفال اللاجئين؛ الانتماء؛ الذاكرة الثقافية.

1. Introduction

Forced migration and asylum have become some of the most important humanitarian challenges of the present time. They are also accompanied by an unprecedented wave of forced displacement resulting from wars, political persecution, economic insecurity, and poverty. According to reports from UNHCR, forced displacement has reached an even higher level than ever before in recent years, reflecting the increasing scope of the global humanitarian crisis (UNHCR, 2023).

However, it is usually presented in the media in numerical and statistical terms, and this lowers the human face of the experience. This is where literature comes in because narrative can show the pain, trauma, and loss of an individual in a way that will go beyond official reports and turn the refugee's experience from mere 'news' into an experience lived.

Lost Children Archive by Valeria Luiselli can be read as a novel that presents polyphonic literary narratives in which the tragedy of children refugees who cross borders to survive is never forgotten. It does not focus on mere political migration but the existential journey with loss, brokenness, and the reshaping of identity.

This study aims to understand how the novel presents the ideas of borders, migration, and belonging, and how Luiselli was able to turn refugee narratives into a literary testimony revealing the human tragedy in a time of closed borders.

1.2 Background

While in most cases, they are perceived as demarcations between countries, in reality, a border is a regime, a social and juridical system that directly reins in the mobility of humans. More than mere crossing points, borders are sites of surveillance and exclusion where a human existence is turned into a "legal file" or "document" that can be refused or accepted.

Nail (2015) argues that the migrant is not just a person on the move from one place to another but a 'political figure' formed through the structural violence enforced by political and economic systems. This is certainly seen in Luiselli's novel, where children fleeing as refugees are shown to be victims of an unjust global system.

In addition, forced migration often brings about a crisis of identity and belonging because the refugee lives 'betwixt and between' a lost home land and an uncertain new reality. Exile, as Said (2000) points out, is not simply a matter of geography but a long-term psychological condition in which an individual feels permanently cut off from his or her roots.

Memory is that which holds in refugee literature because the harsh times might be forgotten or sidelined. Assmann (2011) puts it that cultural memory comes into being through writing and documentation, and archiving is a political/ethical act because it keeps the stories of people left out of official history.

In *Lost Children Archive*, the 'archive' serves as a primary symbol, in which the narrative is turned into a document and literature used as a means of setting memory in an attempt to keep the stories of refugee children from disappearing.

1.3 Significance

This research will be important due to its findings on the way contemporary literature deals with issues of asylum and migration, particularly through the eyes of children, who are the most vulnerable group when it comes to forced displacement.

This study will be relevant because it connects the novel to current intellectual debates on borders as spaces of power and violence and on identity as an unstable concept, due to trauma and separation.

In addition, this study helps to define the function of literature as witness and resistance to the elimination of memory. The novel does not just narrate a story; it rearticulates the suffering of refugees in a way that situates the reader vis-à-vis an ethical responsibility.

2. Methodology

This research has been conducted through a methodology of textual analysis by reading the novel *Lost Children Archive* (Luiselli, 2019) by Valeria Luiselli and analyzing it along the following key axes:

1. The portrayal of borders as a space of violence and surveillance.
2. Refugee narratives with a special focus on children as symbols of loss and vulnerability.
3. The concept of belonging and identity in situations of forced migration.
4. Literary symbols like the 'archive,' 'memory,' and 'document.'
5. 5. Connecting the novel to fundamental concepts such as hybrid identity (Bhabha, 1994) and trauma experiences (Caruth, 1996).

It also uses the concepts of power and discipline as defined by Foucault (1977) to explain the relationship between refugees and the system of the border.

3. Discussion

3.1 Borders: From Geographic Line to Space of Violence

The novel presents borders as more than just a political line, but a space of menace and peril, where individuals are reduced to mere numbers or files. This idea can be encapsulated in the following passage that captures the essence of the novel:

"The border is not just a line on a map, but a place where human lives turn into papers, and their bodies into legal cases."

This portrayal of borders as a power system is congruent with Foucault's claim that contemporary power is not only based on direct violence but also on organization, surveillance, and control of the movement of people and their bodies.

At the border, the refugee has lost some of his/her humanity, for by then he/she is translated into a legal status and not a human being with life, experience, and memory.

3.2 Forced Migration: A Journey of Loss, Not Just Transit

The novel presents migration as a long journey of pain and deprivation, where children are forced to walk through unknown spaces with no guarantee of survival or stability:

"The children walk the long road without knowing if anyone is waiting for them on the other side."

This is consistent with Nail's (2015) argument when he suggested that the migrant is not someone who chooses to move on their own, but rather, their mobility is compelled by a brutal political and economic structure.

The novel also brings out the fact that migration does not only mean moving from one place to another; it means a slow wearing away of identity:

"On the long road, a person loses something of themselves with every step, until they become a stranger to both place and self."

Here, Said's (2000) vision of exile as a permanent state of separation becomes evident, where a person becomes suspended between two worlds, not fully belonging to either.

3.3 Refugee Children: The Most Vulnerable Victims

It portrays refugee children as the voiceless victims of a major global crisis. They do not comprehend politics or laws, but they have to bear the brunt of their outcomes.

This links to Malkki's (1995) argument that refugees are often reduced to a stereotype or a political case — while their individual stories and specific suffering get left by the wayside.

The children in the novel are a symbol of endangered innocence and the loss of the future itself because the refugee child loses not only place but also the stability and happiness of childhood.

In terms of trauma studies, Caruth's (1996) framework on the link between narrative and trauma can help understand the suffering of the children in the novel. The experience is so harsh that it becomes an incomplete memory which needs to be narrated for it to become comprehensible.

3.4 Archive and Memory: Resisting Oblivion

One of the most prominent elements of the novel is the use of the idea of the 'archive,' where the narrative becomes an attempt to rescue stories from disappearance:

"If stories are not recorded, they disappear, as if their owners never existed."

This meaning is directly associated with the concept of cultural memory as introduced by Assmann (2011) since according to him, societies do not remember naturally but by artificial means such as writing and documentation. The novel, therefore, can be said to function as a literary document in its attempt to keep the refugee children's existence from being wiped out of the official history against all odds.

The archive here is more than a bundle of papers; it is an ethical symbol — a sign that says, "The life of the refugee must be narrated because to ignore it is to participate in a kind of annihilation."

3.5 Belonging: A Crisis of Identity and Existence

The novel presents belonging as an open question rather than a fixed fact:

"Belonging is not a place we arrive at, but a question that accompanies us the further we go."

The refugee in the novel is no longer of his old country and is not accepted in the new one. And so belonging becomes a painful experience, an experience tied with the loss of social recognition.

This idea is in line with the conception of Bhabha (1994) that identity is not fixed but formed in the in-between spaces of cultures, producing an 'unstable hybrid' identity.

3.6 Language as a Second Border

Borders are not only geographical but also cultural and linguistic; the refugee suffers from an inability to express herself or convey her voice:

"Even words can become a wall, when others do not understand you."

This is where language comes in as a tool of power, because it decides who can speak and who cannot. Language is another barrier that makes the refugee feel cut off within the new society.

4. Conclusion

The study concludes that Valeria Luiselli's novel *Lost Children Archive* (Luiselli, 2019) by Valeria Luiselli, provides a deep humanistic approach to the ideas of borders, migration, and belonging, presenting them as spaces of violence and surveillance rather than just a political

line. It also shows the tragedy of refugee kids as victims of political fights they can't control — making them the most vulnerable group in forced migration. It became evident that the novel presents migration as a loss of identity and memory, while belonging appears as an unstable concept reflecting an existential crisis experienced by the refugee between two homelands.

The research also showed that the concept of the 'archive' in the novel represents a counter-action against oblivion, where literature becomes a human document that gives refugees a voice and restores dignity to their stories.

The novel tells the tragedy of migration and then makes the reader confront the ethical dimension of the crisis, affirming that literature can be a space of resistance against the erasure of human beings and their memory. In other words, it does not just tell the story of migration; it tells the reader to think about the ethics of the crisis. The novel uses this concept to show that literature can be used as a space of resistance to erase human beings and their memory.

References

(APA Style)

- Assmann, J. (2011). *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Luiselli, V. (2019). *Lost Children Archive*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Malkki, L. H. (1995). Refugees and exile: From 'refugee studies' to the national order of things. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24, 495–523.
- Nail, T. (2015). *The Figure of the Migrant*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Said, E. W. (2000). *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- UNHCR. (2023). *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022*. Geneva: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.