

Decolonial Thinking and Refugees' Stories.  
The *Queens of Syria* Documentary (2014)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** As an important stimulus for the international mushrooming of artistic creativity in public spaces, counter narratives by displaced people are contributing to the reframing of the political and sociolinguistic contemporary framework, where migrant identities are fighting to gain a voice. A counter wave of audiovisual productions based on aesthetic discourse has emerged within territories that seem to be losing their humanity with respect to migration issues, and seem to publicly reinforce forms of spectacularisation. Against a backdrop of international political conflict, where migrants and dispossessed refugees are nameless and cannot speak, visual and performative arts have taken on a decisive role to give voice to unheard stories of migration. Drawing on recent research on narrative theory relating to translation and interpreting studies, this investigation scrutinises the documentary *Queens of Syria* (2014), where the English subtitles are explored as activist recipients of migrant narratives. These stories are contextualised within Nelson Maldonado-Torres's theses on coloniality and decoloniality (2016), and examined from a linguistic angle which applies the methods of Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and of the lexical semantic analysis as framed within Pamela Faber and Ricardo Mairal Usón's Lexical Grammar Model (1999). Results will testify to the linguistic and cultural function of the visual arts in their diffusion of ontological stories as both celebrating and challenging migrant identities, and also to the enacting role of language in meaning-transfer processes. The case under scrutiny will prove that the *Queens of Syria* subtitles, where the stories are captured and translated, may be looked at as decolonial devices, in which language use is strategically relevant and functional to the understanding of migrant narratives within a decolonial perspective.

Keywords: *decolonial, Queens of Syria, refugee, visual art, counter-narrative, translation*

I have a scream I want the world to hear, but I wonder if it will resonate.  
Refugee woman, *Queens of Syria*

## 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of international political conflict in the context of contemporary migration across the Mediterranean, which continuously puts displaced people in the condition of being nameless and voiceless, visual and performative cultures are taking on a crucial role. As an important stimulus for the transnational proliferation of artistic creativity, counter narratives by migrant people are contributing to the reframing of the political and sociocultural frameworks, both in Europe and the Middle East. In particular, a counter wave of audiovisual artistic productions has emerged within territories, whose humanity is lost with respect to the 'migratory situation',<sup>2</sup> and where forms of media spectacularisation are fostered.

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<sup>1</sup> Lorena Carbonara and Alessandra Rizzo have contributed equally to the overall drafting of the paper and have conceived this research together. However, Lorena Carbonara is the author of paragraphs 1, 2 and 3, whereas Alessandra Rizzo is responsible for paragraphs 4, 5 and 6. Both of them have written the 'Introduction' and 'Concluding Remarks' sections of the article.

<sup>2</sup> We drew this term from Ruth Wodak who, in her 2016 talk "The Language of Walls" in Belgrade, declared that she does not like the word 'crisis' when talking about migration, as "politics is in crisis, not refugees", [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWa3T\\_6FNOQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWa3T_6FNOQ), accessed 10 January 2020.

The *Queens of Syria* project, which was articulated in three important phases (a workshop in Jordan, a documentary and a UK touring play), from 2013 to 2016, is an ideal case study for the investigation of the modalities through which the 'migratory situation' can be portrayed in the creative cultural industry, where the spread of political participatory and activist movements is accelerating, along with the most extremist propaganda. Indeed, international public discourse about migration in the media constantly switches from the rhetoric of 'the threat' to that of 'human rights', while depicting migrants as a generic undifferentiated group of people.

Drawing on recent research on narrative theory,<sup>3</sup> this study focuses on the documentary *Queens of Syria* (2014), which is scrutinised from a linguistic angle based on a lexical semantic analysis that is rooted in Faber and Mairal Usón's Lexical Grammar Model,<sup>4</sup> and on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics.<sup>5</sup> Such investigation is placed within Maldonado-Torres's theses on coloniality and decoloniality,<sup>6</sup> which represent the theoretical framework where the decolonial perspective adopted in this study is rooted. Results testify to the strategic linguistic and cultural function of aesthetic discourse, which celebrates and challenges migrant identities through the dissemination of individual and public stories.

More specifically, the English subtitles for *Queens of Syria* are the focus of the analysis, since they are conceived as 'activist' subtitles, depositories of ontological truths, whose voluntarist production cooperates in giving voice to Syrian discourses and, in particular, to the discourse on Syria and its exiled inhabitants, while questioning hegemonic discourses. It is not by chance that the access to the refugees' narratives as performed in the documentary is guaranteed by the existence of subtitles which, as linguistic and cultural tools, permit stories of displacement to achieve transnational dissemination and digital popularity. In short, the *Queens of Syria* subtitles, viewed as containers of narratives and spaces of resistance and interventionism, are the core of the qualitative analysis.

The first part of the essay is widely theoretical, since it illustrates the topic from the perspective of narrative theory and decolonial studies, and introduces the *Queens of Syria* aesthetic project as part of the creative cultural industry world<sup>7</sup> at the level of niche production. The second part consists of a practical section aiming to demonstrate to what extent decolonial thinking can be deconstructed and (re)constructed through an in-depth scrutiny of language categories (i.e. lexical and grammatical sets of language), which, in the case in point, emerge within the space of subtitles.

## 2. Refugees' Stories as Counter Narratives: The *Queens of Syria* Project

The notion of narrative at the basis of this study draws on Mona Baker's sociological approach, which understands it as the unique way in which we make sense of the world and of our place within it, participating in the configuration of our reality.<sup>8</sup> Hence, individuals are seen in their relationship with the environment and with the stories that surround them, which mediate between them and their perception of reality. Narratives can render the world both in verbal and visual forms, which makes it possible to address the research focus on the visual dimension of narrative accounts.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Mona Baker, "Translation as Re-narration" in Juliane House, ed., *Translation: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Faber and Ricardo Mairal Usón, *Constructing a Lexicon of English Verbs* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Michael A.K., Halliday, *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality", [https://fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres\\_outline\\_of\\_ten\\_theses-10.23.16.pdf](https://fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres_outline_of_ten_theses-10.23.16.pdf), accessed 4 January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Alessandra Rizzo, "The Role of the Creative Industries: Translating Identities on Stages and Visuals", *Translation Today*, 11.2 (2017), 1-34.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, "Translation as Re-narration".

<sup>9</sup> Gretchen Barbatsis, "Narrative Theory", in Kenneth L. Smith et al., eds., *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 330.

This approach sheds light upon the ways in which both institutions and individuals create and circulate stories about some aspects of the world, “complete with characters, settings, outcomes or projected outcomes, and plot”.<sup>10</sup> As Baker pointed out already in 2006,<sup>11</sup> there are four different narratives:

- 1) Ontological narratives, existing within a culture and transmitting also collective narratives to individuals, namely, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our place in the world;
- 2) Public narratives, namely, narratives circulating around groups that can vary with time as public perceptions change;
- 3) Conceptual narratives, namely, disciplinary narratives which exist within a field of study;
- 4) Meta/Master narratives, namely, the narratives which can surpass geographical and temporal narratives.

In the case of the *Queens of Syria* narratives, the interplay is between ontological narratives belonging to a group of displaced Syrian women exiled in Jordan and public narratives circulating in Europe around/about the humanitarian refugee question in the context of a contemporary master narrative: the migration crisis. These narratives give voice to what is unheard – in this specific case, the women’s translated narratives – which, by taking inspiration from Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*, give origin to acts of ‘artivism’. We maintain that translation, as well as art, can intervene to challenge preconceptions and stereotyped constructions of facts and events, becoming a form of activism. As Baker puts it, translation can be seen “as a form of (re-)narration that constructs rather than *represents* the events and characters it re-narrates in another language”.<sup>12</sup> Translation contributes to the transformation and circulation of narratives intervening in the processes of (re)narration that “essentially construct[s] the world for us” (Ibid.).

Emerging from the context of the civil war in Syria (started in 2011 and still going on today) and the subsequent mass migration of people from those territories (5,558,123 are the registered refugees in 2020 according to UNHCR),<sup>13</sup> the case study analysed here subverts prejudices about conservative Muslim women and refugees in general and helps us reconstruct the experience of the Syrian population by reversing anti-refugee narratives.

The Greek tragedy, which dates back to 410 BC, represents the first dramatisation of a war crime and its female victims (the fall of Troy determined the death of numerous people, and those who did not die were left in a condition of waiting for their fate among their enemies), and is intertwined with the real stories of the refugees. The project was conceived in 2013 with the grassroots initiative “The Syria Trojan Women Project” by Refuge Production,<sup>14</sup> a workshop/performance conducted by Omar Abusaada, which was held in Jordan and centred on the Arabic re-creation of Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*.

The fifty refugee women participating in the psycho-social project were helped to overcome the trauma of war and displacement, since they arrived in Jordan suffering from various forms of illness, among which depression, isolation, PTSD, etc. They were guided in a process of recovery with the help of storytelling and performance, and managed to gain a sense of self-confidence as well as increasing public interest in the refugee question, which was undervalued in terms of international communication

<sup>10</sup> Baker, “Translation as Re-narration”, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Baker, *Translation and Conflict*.

<sup>12</sup> Baker, “Translation as Re-narration”, 159.

<sup>13</sup> See the UNHCR website for more information and data about the conflict, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>, accessed 8 January 2020.

<sup>14</sup> It was founded in 2013 to help refugees in Jordan cope with PTSD through the therapy of participatory drama and in order to humanize the refugee crisis.

and mass media coverage. One of the women involved in the project, Faten, expresses her concern saying:

I would like to go to London to deliver the message about our life and the conditions in which we live. We want the whole world to hear that. I mean the whole world is not treating us as humans. Some people ran away from death only to meet death. Some drowned in the sea while they ran away from death. Some people were trying to cross illegally. They died on the borders.<sup>15</sup>

Reem follows her and claims:

It is not enough that you just see the things through the television, the radio, the social media. You need just to meet these people, speak with them, understand them. Then you can decide what's the wrong, what's the right.<sup>16</sup>

In 2014, filmmaker Yasmine Fedda, released her 70-minute documentary *Queens of Syria*,<sup>17</sup> following the story of these women forced into exile and called to perform the plight of women in war, being on stage for the very first time in their lives. In the synopsis of the project there is a clear reference to the power of narrative, since these women wove their own stories of loss, exile and suffering into the narrative of the Greek tragedy:

What followed was an extraordinary moment of cross-cultural contact across millennia, in which women born in 20th century Syria found a blazingly vivid mirror of their own experiences in the stories of a queen, princesses and ordinary women like them, uprooted, enslaved, and bereaved by the Trojan War.<sup>18</sup>

“It’s old, but history repeats itself”,<sup>19</sup> they affirm in the documentary trailer, where they stress the fact that the play talks about something real to them. Apart from allegiances and political opinions, the aim was to work together and get to know one another through the stories. As a result, everyone was transformed. The refugees were able to transform the painful experience of displacement into art, also through acts of translation; the directors and the other people involved in the project were able to come into real contact with the experience of migration.

By 2016, the conflict in Syria was reaching its sixth year and the number of displaced people was estimated by the UNHCR to be 4.8 million, and the majority was composed of women and children. Refuge Productions, the Young Vic<sup>20</sup> and Developing Artists,<sup>21</sup> assigned a new production of the play (performed by thirteen women) to Zoe Lafferty, which crossed the theatres of Oxford, Brighton, Liverpool, Leeds, Edinburgh, Durham, and London. What impressed the critics and the public, and brought widespread acclaim to the play, was the fact that the voices of ordinary refugee women, whose lives had been destroyed by the Syrian conflict, were to be heard by a wider audience eventually.

With the help of the British Council, the project also involved an educational part aimed at informing the British public about the refugee crisis and the situation in Syria. It included school visits, teaching

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<sup>15</sup> See the fundraising video for the project. Transcribed verbatim, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=193&v=dFUunYi5t2E&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=193&v=dFUunYi5t2E&feature=emb_logo), accessed 10 January 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> The documentary won the Black Pearl Award for Best Director from the Arab World at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, 2014, and received a special mention from the UNHCR at the 3rd edition of the Human Rights Film Festival in Tunis 2014 (Human Screen Festival 2014).

<sup>18</sup> See the description of the project on website of the artist, <https://yasminfedda.com/Queens-of-Syria>, accessed 8 January 2020.

<sup>19</sup> See the documentary trailer. Transcribed verbatim, [https://vimeo.com/86996865?utm\\_campaign=2617611&utm\\_source=affiliate&utm\\_channel=affiliate&cjevent=62b03c5733c511ea83cc01160a18050f](https://vimeo.com/86996865?utm_campaign=2617611&utm_source=affiliate&utm_channel=affiliate&cjevent=62b03c5733c511ea83cc01160a18050f), accessed 10 January 2020.

<sup>20</sup> This theatre produces classic, new plays and forgotten works, musicals and operas, touring in the UK and worldwide.

<sup>21</sup> It is a registered charity working to support the arts in post-conflict nations, and deprived communities.

packs, webcasts and discussions on this advocacy issue around the country, including a special session in the House of Parliament and a panel hosted by the Scottish government and Creative Scotland.

*Queens of Syria*, in all its three formats (workshop/documentary/play), can be considered a counter narration of the refugee women's situations seen, initially, as totally disempowered and passive and, subsequently, transformed into active communities performing happy memories and sad experiences. As we read in Fatima's words: "My participation in the play revitalised me. It gave me a sense of responsibility, I feel more optimistic now, it empowered me and made me feel stronger. It helped me overcome some of the issues resulting from our crisis".<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the master narrative in which both ontological and public narratives on migration are immersed, sees the contemporary mass displacement of people across the Mediterranean only as 'the' problem that politics has to solve. On the extremist political wings and in populist propaganda, migrants are depicted as a threat to the safety and sanity of Europeans, while most progressive groups support the idea that the welcoming of people in need is a duty and a responsibility that Europe has to face.

As Turkish feminist writer Elif Shafak points out, by expressing her concern about the lack of the 'emotional factor' in the mass and social media treatment of certain topics,

We have entered a new stage in world history in which collective sentiments guide and misguide politics more than ever before. And through social media and social networking, these sentiments are further amplified, polarized, and they travel around the world quite fast. Ours is the age of anxiety, anger, distrust, resentment and, I think, lots of fear. But here's the thing: even though there's plenty of research about economic factors, there are relatively few studies about emotional factors.<sup>23</sup>

Within this context, it emerges how Syrian voices have been suffocated for a long time and have been freed thanks to the growth of a series of counter narratives that tell stories (as facts, events, experiences) from the perspective of the migrant subject and in emotional terms. These stories and their new angles show that there are very different modalities by means of which it is possible to look at the question, and also that there are numerous nuances that go beyond the dynamics 'us VS them',<sup>24</sup> which is polluting the discourse on migration in media platforms and in everyday life settings.

Drawing on Stein and Stamselberg's 2014 work, Alessandra Rizzo and Karen Seago put emphasis on the proliferation of studies and practices that are meant to translate 'marginal voices' into art:

Recent research has highlighted the function of aesthetic discourse as a way of translating marginal voices and this interrogation of and engagement with borders, the centre and the periphery through art, has also attracted everyday citizens as never before. Of particular interest has been not the narration of why marginal realities exist or how immigration has taken place, but the representation of marginality in aesthetic forms in terms of how words and texts, images and visuals, within artistic platforms, are used in order to give shape and voice to marginal contexts.<sup>25</sup>

As a matter of fact, a number of artistic projects relating to theatre, films, web videos, documentaries, street art, etc., and depicting migrant people as subjects regaining their agency and power (Mazzara 2015), have been produced and also discussed in academic and public frameworks. Nonetheless, a lot has to be done especially as far as the relationship between the subject (migrant human beings) and the object (migration experiences) is concerned, considering the possible interference of persistent colonial

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<sup>22</sup> See the project report, <https://www.developingartists.org.uk/queens-of-syria>, accessed 8 January 2020.

<sup>23</sup> See the conference video, [https://www.ted.com/talks/elif\\_shafak\\_the\\_revolutionary\\_power\\_of\\_diverse\\_thought/up-next](https://www.ted.com/talks/elif_shafak_the_revolutionary_power_of_diverse_thought/up-next), accessed 10 February 2019.

<sup>24</sup> See Teun Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in Deborah Schiffrin *et al.*, eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 464-484.

<sup>25</sup> Alessandra Rizzo and Karen Seago, "Introduction", in Alessandra Rizzo and Karen Seago, eds., *The Aesthetics of Migration: Reversals of Marginality and the Socio-political Translation Turn*, *InVerbis* (special issue), 1 (Roma: Carocci, 2018), 8.

narratives. Thus, attention has recently shifted from the simple informative or spectacular narration of the migratory experience (in terms of facts and figures) to its representation through aesthetic and emotional forms. As stated in Rizzo and Seago's studies:

The concept 'migratory' within the context of aesthetic discourse from a political perspective is a leading term according to which migrants and migration – where migrants are the subjects, and migration represents both the performing act and the state of being or living in conditions of transition –, are inevitably a part of contemporary societies that significantly contributes to societal cultural transformations.<sup>26</sup>

Counter narratives are indeed allowing the emergence of migrant people, privately and collectively, as questioners of given narratives and promoters of social change. They are also fostering acts of intervention (also through procedures of translation), activism and 'artivism'. Given that the visual arts possess strategic linguistic and cultural functions for the dissemination of individual and public stories as both celebrating and challenging migrant identities, we maintain that they encourage processes of empowerment and acts of co-participation, while contributing to the dismantling of pre-conceptions.

### 3. A Decolonial Perspective on Refugees' Stories

As Maldonado-Torres claimed in his 2016 work on coloniality and decoloniality, we have moved beyond the dehumanisation that characterised colonial societies to a status in which the expression of hate and social phobias, and other forms of social, economic, and political control, are constantly increasing. The current debate about and around the migration 'situation'<sup>27</sup> is a case in point.

While the arts are showing new realities about migration by transforming the aesthetic discourse into a space where people can share a more human environment, and where they find it possible to produce acts of subversion, where counter-mapping and counter discourses destroy walls,<sup>28</sup> material and immaterial borders are being strengthened by political language and policies triggering people's extremist sentiments.

Since the Arab Spring, people in mass have migrated from Syria to destinations within the region and beyond its borders. The so-called 'refugee crisis' has continued to develop and is set in the larger context of mass migration across the Mediterranean. Major questions such as protection, hospitality and the impact of migrant people on the host neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt) and on the other countries providing protection (Sweden, Germany, the UK and the U.S.) have been at issue,<sup>29</sup> with a tendency to forget about individual stories.

We are in particular witnessing, as claimed in Maldonado-Torres's decolonial perspective, the emergence of social groups that demand change, empowerment and co-participation and not only tolerance and inclusion:

After civil rights and decolonization struggles in the 20th century, liberal societies have continued building on the various lines of dehumanisation that were characteristic of their colonial and segregationist older versions by limiting equality to a formality that is most effectively used against groups that demand change, and by considering demands for empowerment and co-participation as calls for tolerance and inclusion.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>28</sup> Federica Mazzara, "Subverting the Narrative of the Lampedusa Borderscape", *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 7.2 (2016), 135-147.

<sup>29</sup> Nicole Ostrand, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Comparison of Responses by Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States", *Journal of Migration and Human Security*, 3.3 (2018), 255-279.

<sup>30</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality", 4.



These groups are claiming the right to narrate, are claiming their humanity back, and are also daring to question both the colonial and postcolonial apparatus. Both postcolonialism and decoloniality have challenged the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions coming from Europe.<sup>31</sup> However, as Maldonado-Torres puts it:

In decolonial artistic creation, the subject as agent of social change emerges as someone who can not only reflect about but also mould, shape, and reshape subjectivity, space, and time. Decolonial narrative is a powerful means to challenge the coloniality of time; decolonial visual art directly impacts the terrain of the coloniality of place and space...decolonial performance can be seen as a ritual or enactment of a body that claims a body, a time, and space.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the decolonial paradigm does not isolate knowledge and creation from action, but conjugates practice and creative expressions in the attempt to actually change the society. It is not thus a matter of criticising and overcoming coloniality to reach the postcolonial, but the necessity of moving away from any colonial approach, of dismantling old and abused narratives that are soaked in colonialism. Critical questions are at the basis of such transition that encourages communication within the field of migratory experiences:

The transition from the solitude of damnation to the possibility of communication passes through the formulation of critical questions. Decolonial critique finds its anchor in the open body. When the *damné* communicates the critical questions that are grounded on the lived experience of the open body we have the emergence of an-other speech and an-other way of thinking.<sup>33</sup>

We maintain, drawing on Maldonado-Torres’ perspective, that the *damné* has been put in the condition of exploring narratives, appropriating means and sharing forms and modes of expression that can assist them in making and remaking themselves, their space and their sense of time. Displaced people, such as the Syrian refugee women performing their stories and the narratives of the Trojan women in *Queens of Syria*, have undertaken this mission and are able to fulfil four out of ten of Maldonado-Torres’s theses.<sup>34</sup> The four theses that are here examined and taken into account for the analysis of the *Queens of Syria* subtitles are indicated in Table 1:

Thesis Seven Decoloniality involves a decolonial epistemic turn whereby the <i>damné</i> emerges as a questioner, thinker, theorist, writer, and communicator	Thesis Eight Decoloniality involves an aesthetic, erotic, and spiritual decolonial turn whereby the <i>damné</i> emerges as creator
Thesis Nine Decoloniality involves an activist decolonial turn whereby the <i>damné</i> emerges as an agent of social change	Thesis Ten Decoloniality is a collective project

Table 1: A selection of Maldonado-Torres’s theses on decolonial thinking

<sup>31</sup> Gurminder K. Bhambra, “Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 17.2 (2014), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Maldonado-Torres, “Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality”, 27.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>34</sup> Maldonado-Torres defines the necessity to articulate coloniality and decoloniality in ten summarising points as follows: “This outline of ten theses is part of an effort to offer an analytics of coloniality and decoloniality with the goal of identifying and clarifying the various layers, moments, and areas involved in the production of coloniality as well as in the consistent opposition to it” (2016), 2.

Starting from the assumption that the colonial matrix of power “is the inextricable combination of the rhetoric of modernity (progress, development, growth) and the logic of coloniality (poverty, misery, inequality)”<sup>35</sup> individual and collective artistic productions of displaced people can be seen as an example of decolonial practice. In the case of the refugee women involved in the *Queens of Syria* multi-faceted project, the Syrian actresses have emerged as:

- 1) questioners, thinkers, theorists, writers, and communicators = they have questioned the stereotypes concerning their political status and gender, thought about and theorised their emotional conditions, wrote their stories and intertwined them with the Greek tragedy, and communicated all of this to a European audience using linguistic strategies (which will be analysed further on in this study) = thesis seven;
- 2) creators = their performance involves an aesthetic and spiritual decolonial turn, mixing times, genres and languages, and involving each woman physically and emotionally = thesis eight;
- 3) agents of social change = they actively work on how to inform the British and international audience in order to bring attention to the Syrian crisis = thesis nine;
- 4) a community, rather than single individuals = the project is the result of the international collaboration of various people and organisations = thesis ten.

*Queens of Syria* is, indeed, a collective project where the *damné* par excellence (the displaced, the refugee, the woman, the Arab woman, the Muslim woman) has the possibility of talking back. The ‘queens’ of Syria do it by using western narratives and disarticulating them through acts of powerful translation as (re)narration and co-creation, where resistance and interventionism are able to cohabit. By looking at *Queens of Syria* as a decolonial performance, we investigate it as a spiritual ritual played by marginalised identities who claim participation, not only inclusion, striving for empowerment, not only tolerance, through the use of their physicality and material language. “If you want people to understand you, you have to speak their language... Maybe this play will never save a life, or return people to their homes, but it is better to light a candle than live in darkness”, actress Reem affirms.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Decolonial Thinking in the Subtitling of the Visual Arts

In dictionary entries subtitles are described as the texts of dialogues, speeches, operas, etc., which are translated into another language and projected on the lower part of the screen. Subtitles are thus written translations of oral dialogues which appear in one or more lines placed at the bottom of films or video images. Apart from the technical dimension which encapsulates the process of subtitling, in the context of this study, subtitles are looked at as the recipients in which narrative accounts, or proper ontological stories, are located, and subtitling as one of the audiovisual translation modes that functions as a linguistic tool of semantic transfer from one language system into another language system in terms of activism, solidarity and mediation. Against this backdrop, the decolonial thinking from Maldonado-Torres’s perspective is set up as a recently grown and expanded instrument to investigate discourses on human rights and diverse forms of marginalisation from a qualitative research standpoint, thus, providing theoretical, methodological and epistemological ways with the scope of deconstructing stereotyped social issues. In the context of the visual arts (i.e., documentaries as the type under scrutiny), the act of subtitling marginalised narratives from a non-European language into English lingua franca has emerged as a practice that gives voice to minor subjectivities, while reversing conventional media

<sup>35</sup> Mignolo cit. in Gurminder K. Bhambra, “Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues”, 119.

<sup>36</sup> See Charlotte Eager, “A Modern Tragedy Told by the ‘Queens of Syria’”, *Financial Times*, 15 July 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/4f6e3a0c-4948-11e6-b387-64ab0a67014c>, accessed 16 January 2020.



frameworks in which marginalised people are considered victims or terrorists (e.g., migrants and refugees being today among the most significant cases).

The qualitative analysis of the *Queens of Syria* subtitles aims to shed light on what the deconstructionist approach has chiefly attempted to fulfil in terms of offering the possibility of understanding people's feelings, emotions, and sensations. In the narratives of migration transferred through the visual arts forms and modes (e.g., documentaries, theatrical performances, museum exhibitions, etc.), the language covering the space of subtitles becomes a core element for the identity (re)configuration of migrants, that is, it enables a person to "reconstruct the social and cultural reality of the subjects through the meaning given in the interaction generated by one and another subject of the enunciation".<sup>37</sup> Within the framework of decoloniality, language is therefore growing as a constitutive element that contributes to the discovery of identities within their physical and mental spaces (i.e., narratives stemming from the creative acts of the Syrian actresses in the place of exile), historical time, while breaking with both the colonial logic and the logic that recognises decolonial subjectivities as dangerous hordes of people. Thus, the investigation into the lexical-semantic dimension and the properties of grammar in the language of migrant narratives favours the encounter with the real subject(s) of the narrative(s), where the narrativisation of their effective decolonial being and thinking occurs. Against the backdrop of English as lingua franca and a means of communication, and of translation as "a form of mediation with a complex relationship to other forms of mediation assumed to precede and directly inform it to varying degrees",<sup>38</sup> the focus of the practical section is not on a contrastive analysis between the original Arabic texts and its English translations, but on the linguistic dimension of narrativity that is brought into constructive action, and on how these narratives, blossomed within English subtitles, have an impact on the context of arrival. In the case under scrutiny, the Arabic stories are performed in English visual text types, which, as remarked above, are encapsulated within subtitles that have become instrumental in telling facts and actions relative to everyday realities in countries at war and settings of exile.

*Queens of Syria*, combined with the whole artistic project promoted by London Developing Artists, is a container of ontological stories which opens up new horizons to hear new voices that witness migrant experiences in the countries of departure and also in the contexts of arrival as the places of exile. It also allows a kind of evaluation of what these stories are able to transmit to an audience that needs to be stimulated to (re)think and (re)consider migration from the perspective of human rights. Based upon aesthetic discourse practices as subversive and counter arguing systems of dissemination of marginalised narratives, the migrant actresses (i.e., the 'queens' of Syria, who are also Syrian women who lived in Syria as wives, mothers, and daughters) are the characters who enact real stories in *Queens of Syria*. Their stories intersect with myths and testify to the Syrian-Trojan queens<sup>39</sup> as the decolonial subjects to whom Maldonado-Torres refers in his formulation of the theses that depict decoloniality as a model of enactment and power. The Syrian stories are spoken aloud by migrant characters who personify what, in migratory aesthetic discourse, is represented as a condition of subversion and power stemming from states of subalternity and marginalisation. This concept, widely developed in Federica Mazzara's reflections upon the social roles of migrants, points out that migrant people, from "imperceptible bodies",<sup>40</sup> have been transformed into "subjects of power, the power of subverting the narrative around their journey, their past and their desires for the future".<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Míguez Passada and María Noel, "Discourses Analysis by a Decolonial Perspective", <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332180943>, accessed 13 December 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict*, 186.

<sup>39</sup> Alessandra Rizzo, "Transcreating the Myth: 'Voiceless Voiced' Migrants in the Queens of Syria Project", in C. Spinzi *et al.*, eds., *Translation or Transcreation? Discourses, Texts and Visuals* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), 150-179.

<sup>40</sup> Federica Mazzara, "Subverting the Narrative of the Lampedusa Borderscape", 135.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

We claim that the ontological aesthetic narratives produced by the Syrian women can be set within Maldonado-Torres' decolonial thinking, and we maintain that decoloniality is the scenario against which the 'queens' of Syria are plunged, and where they epitomise the figure of the *damné* – implying subversion and power – whose roles range from thinking, questioning, and theorising to acting for social change and for the creation of collective stimuli.

The narratives we are looking at are thus stories that frame migrant people as decolonial subjects within an enacting dimension, where the language employed for narrative purposes seeks to reinforce the role of aesthetic discourse as reversing standardising perspectives that are consolidated in conventional media within mainstream platforms. In this context, as already anticipated, subtitles acquire a strategic task that facilitates the dissemination of Arabic narratives of migration in English as a means of communication. This mechanism sheds light on the subtitle experience as an experience of exile and epistolarity, constitutively linked to the exchange of meanings "driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss, as well as the desire to bridge these multiple gaps".<sup>42</sup> As counter informative verbal texts, the *Queens of Syria* stories provide the public with authentic evidence which permits subtitles to be labelled as activist subtitles, that is, subtitles that are produced by "individuals or collectives highly engaged in political causes, with the objective of combating censorship and conformity by spreading certain narratives that counter-argue the truth reported by the powerful mass media".<sup>43</sup> These subtitles, which can be generated on a voluntary basis either by amateurs or professionals, have the advantage of producing counter discourses that circulate and permit subordinated social groups "to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs".<sup>44</sup> They are meant to perform a "practice that rebels against or resists legal media and translation frameworks".<sup>45</sup> Therefore, they function not only to subvert 'media regulation', but also to involve volunteer and activist procedures which strive to encourage minority documentaries and videos, while challenging hegemonic discourse.

The concept of 'narrative', which draws on Mona Baker's theorisation of narrative accounts from the perspective of translation and interpreting studies, is applied to migrant stories as considerably complex texts that aim to perform actions, express facts and permit identities to talk. At their heart are events and acts that have taken place in the real world, which the public will be able to evaluate, describe, and understand. As a rule of thumb, the growing production of stories disseminated within artistic settings, digital and non, are structured within the framework of a domain-specific language, where the argument structure of verbs is fundamental, and where the conceptual categories referring to the semantic verbal arguments of each lexical domain are contributing to creating specific text types. The acceptability and accessibility of these narratives depend on how narrated events and actions are lexicalised and expressed in language. This involves the configuration of semantic roles that can lead to the conceptualisation of migrant experiences through linguistic knowledge, since the narrative text and its lexicon are essential to unveiling which meanings the stories put emphasis on and seek to convey. To discover the meanings expressed in the stories, the linguistic unit that is taken into account is the verb. The verb constructs and determines the functioning of a sentence, on the one hand, and, shows which cognitive categories are activated in the narratives, on the other. Verbs produce performative acts and are strategic to identifying what lexical-semantic meanings prevail in migrant narratives.

## 5. Data and Methodology

<sup>42</sup> Hamid Naficy, "Epistolarity and Textualities in Accented Films", in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 134.

<sup>43</sup> Jorge Díaz Cintas, "Subtitling's a Carnival": New Practices in Cyberspace", *Journal of Specialised Translation*, 30.2 (2018), 134.

<sup>44</sup> Cit. in Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 134.

The corpus of this study consists of the transcription of the subtitles where the Syrian stories from *Queens of Syria* are rendered in English as the dominant language. The audiovisual script is the result of two processes of translation: the first one regards the production of an Arabic script on the basis of the Syrian women's interpretation of Euripides' Greek tragedy, whereas the second one entails the rendering of the Arabic stories into English, in visual written texts.

A key signal to the reinforcement of the subtitle framework in *Queen of Syria* as an enacting space of solidarity and collaboration is traceable in the presence of English as the dominant language which is forced to be spoken in a conversational way (i.e. the structure of English is often non-standardly conceived as far as the formulation of questions is concerned: "None of you saw that, right?"; "You felt you were treated unjustly?"; "Your husband refuses completely?"). The Syrian narratives gain power in the language of subtitles which offers an activist decolonial voice to the exiled women, while presenting lexical semantic choices and grammatical constructions as indispensable ingredients that posit the narratives themselves within the context of migrant text types that own their own potential "local grammar".<sup>46</sup> As special text types, the Syrian narratives and, in general, the stories disseminated through artistic platforms, are framed and constructed as stories that follow a determinate morpho-syntactic structure, on the one hand, and that are marked by lexical domains which feed counter discourse, on the other (i.e. "They had brought some corpses" [Subject-Actor; Past Perfect-Movement; Residue-Goal]; "they killed all the men" [Subject-Actor; Simple Past-Action; Residue-Goal]; "My name is Faten" [Subject-Identified; Simple Present-Existence; Residue-Identifying]; "He told her" [Subject-Sayer; Simple Past-Speech; Residue-Receiver]).

The whole corpus – which includes 5,598 words – contains 669 subtitles. Nevertheless, since this study focuses on migrant narratives and their dissemination across aesthetic platforms, the linguistic analysis has principally been focused upon the stories pronounced by the Syrian women, which have been extracted and isolated in order to form a sub-corpus. The sub-corpus has been subdivided into 51 stories, where the verbal category, as previously remarked, occupies a chief role as the most important lexical unit for the construction of sentences and argument structures that are placed in each narrative. Therefore, in assuming that the meanings of sentences are structured around verbs, it is implicitly declared that verbs "provide the relational and semantic framework" for the construction of sentences and represent "the most important lexical and syntactic category of a language".<sup>47</sup>

Attention is thus paid to predicative frames and their syntactic circulation, that is, verbs and their nominalisations or grammatical metaphors (i.e. the acts of 'telling', 'shouting', 'crying', 'shelling' as actions involving participants), which provide a predicative frame linking two or more semantic categories. The assumption is that verbs within the same lexical subdimension share similar syntactical constructions and, even more important, are combined with the same semantic types of argument. The language of these migrant stories presents some specific features, both lexical and semantic, which transform it into a type of sectorial language that is used for the fulfilment of specific objectives that characterise migratory aesthetics as visual textual genres. Predicative frames rather than concept frames – though semantically correlated – are thus descriptive of predicates that encode actions and events. They put emphasis on the participants and their actions in contrast to concept frames that activate categories depicted by nouns and nominal groups, consisting of relationships based on attributive-value exchanges. Thus, predicative frames encode actions and events and establish the relational context with the conceptual frames, thus, entangling participants, objects, means and effect.

<sup>46</sup> Catalina Jiménez Hurtado and Silvia Soler Gallego, "Museum Accessibility Through Translation: A Corpus Study of Pictorial Audio Description", in Jorge Díaz Cintas and Joselia Neves, eds., *Audiovisual Translation Taking Stock* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 277-298.

<sup>47</sup> Faber and Mairal Usón, *Constructing a Lexicon of English Verbs*, 84.

Drawing on Faiber and Mairal's classification of 12 lexical domains rooted in the lexical semantic analysis within their Lexical Grammar Model,<sup>48</sup> and on Halliday's functional grammar<sup>49</sup> as the system for deconstructing clauses and expressing social reality, the scrutiny has taken into account the following lexical domains and their relative superordinates in order to classify the semantic function of the verbs in the *Queens of Syria's* narratives: EXISTENCE (be, happen), CHANGE (become, change), POSSESSION (have), SPEECH (say, talk), EMOTION (feel), ACTION (do, make), MENTAL PERCEPTION (know, think), MOVEMENT (move, go, come), PHYSICAL PERCEPTION (see, hear, taste, smell, touch), MANIPULATION (use), CONTACT/IMPACT (hit, break) and POSITION (put, be). Other smaller classes include LIGHT, SOUND, BODY FUNCTIONS, WEATHER, etc.

The composition of these stories consists of parts, each of which can be decomposed into a set of meaning clusters. These clusters are formed by their predicate-argument structures with their relevant lexical domains and the conceptual categories of their arguments. This subdivision relies on the Frame-Based Terminology (FBT) perspective<sup>50</sup> according to which terminological meanings are based on a cognitive approach to domain-specific languages. Knowledge is transferred at the level of words, then at the level of phrases and, to conclude, in the codification of the entire knowledge frame, which is the syntactical space where processes, actions and events are located in the context of migrant narratives. In the *Queens of Syria's* narratives of migration, the frames are thus identifiable with actions embedded in meanings, where facts and processes, which also involve participants, provide a predicative frame that links two or more semantic categories.

If the migrant stories as verbal texts are made of language as a set of culturally and functionally dependent items, it is possible to maintain that all contribute to the overall meaning and make the text function as a full system of communication. Within the communicative frame, language use is developed according to three metafunctions which come into being simultaneously. The Syrian women tell us actions and events, and transmit feelings and perceptions by activating certain processes via the experiential or ideational metafunction. They establish social relationships among the language users within the communicative context via the interpersonal metafunction, and they also arrange their stories as narrative texts or speech forms (screened oral dialogues and monologues reproduced within subtitles) via the textual metafunction.<sup>51</sup> In particular, these stories of migration are viewed as language documents having micro-objectives, namely, telling and denouncing events, actions and facts, and sharing everyday experiences and difficult moments that took place in the lives of the Syrian refugees.

## 6. Analysis

The analysis aims to demonstrate that all verbs within the same lexical domain share the same knowledge frame and have identical or similar syntactical projections, that is, lexical semantic types share the same argument and operate within the same syntactical context. Having said that, these narratives contain common arguments that are reinforced by lexico-semantic choices within the Lexico-Grammatical system. This system shows which functional elements exist in the narrative context, that is, how Transitivity, to put it in Halliday's terms, is developed within the stories, and how these are reflected within the morpho-syntactical organisation of the sentence, that is, how the Mood Block, to use Halliday's functional framework, is expressed.

<sup>48</sup> Faber and Mairal Usón, *Constructing a Lexicon of English Verbs*.

<sup>49</sup> Halliday M.A.K., *Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

<sup>50</sup> See Pamela Faber, *A Cognitive Linguistics: View of Terminology and Specialised Language* (Berlin & Boston: de Gruyter, 2012) and "Frames as a Framework for Terminology", in J. Kockaert Hendrik and Frieda Steurs, eds., *Handbook of Terminology* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015), 14-33.

<sup>51</sup> Michael K. Halliday, *Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

Based on these assumptions, firstly, we have identified the most dominant lexical domains. Subsequently, we have selected the most representative lexical verbs in each lexical domain in terms of frequency. This has led us to consider verbs belonging to the same lexical domain in semantically-related relations according to their semantic roles and grammatical position. Verbs with the highest number of occurrences in the different lexical domains indicate the most dominant conceptual areas in the stories, thus, emphasising which experiences have been mostly activated through the selection of certain verbal groups. They also shed light on their relations with other verbal categories within sentences. To conclude, we have highlighted the grammatical projection of the semantically-related verbs within the same lexical domain, but also within lexically-related domains, where verbal meanings satisfy the same communicative purposes (i.e. verbs belonging to the ACTION and MOVEMENT lexical domains have been found to transmit similar meanings in terms of argument structures).

A general overview of the *Queens of Syria*'s narrative context shows how verbs and phrases belonging to specific lexical domains contribute to the construction of the Syrian women's identities. The dominant lexical domains activate argument frames which transmit interrelated meanings rooted in the Syrian refugees' cognitive structures (i.e. grieving for their dead husbands and children, grieving for the destruction of their homes and the cruel devastation of Syria). The narratives are divided into collective stories, where the chorus expresses the general sense of frustration and solitude due to forced exile and women's exploitation, and individual stories, where a refugee tells about her tragic events which, nevertheless, have been experienced by the rest of the women who play the role as actresses in the project. The verbs signaling the lexical-domain types, which create the argument structures of each narrative, determine meaning-making processes and activate frames based on Existence, Action and Movement, Mental Perception and Speech. The narrative context encapsulated within the English subtitles opens and closes with collective stories told by the female chorus (the act of speech dominates all narratives, since it implies speaking out, denouncing), where the five lexical domains interact by activating Action and Movement, Mental Perception, Speech and Existence domains. Here some examples: "Oh my sorrow! I am so unhappy. I have reached the end of my sorrow. I shall leave as my city turns to dust. Old legs, carry me as fast as you can. So that I can salute my wretched city" (the Chorus' opening narrative). As the reported passage spoken out by the chorus demonstrates, verbs such as 'is', 'reach' (a movement verb which contextually refers to a state of Mental Perception), 'leaves' (semantically-related to 'carry'), 'turns to' (semantically-related to 'is'), 'carry', 'salute' (an act of Speech), activate connections between the existence of the Syrian women (i.e. 'I am so unhappy', 'I have reached the end of my sorrow') and the existence of the Syrian city, whose destruction is source of deep pain (i.e. '... my city turns to dust', 'I can salute my wretched city'). The same intersection of argument structures is present at the end of the documentary when the chorus concludes by speaking out what is here reported through the use of verbs belonging to different lexical domains among which 'fall upon', 'cover', 'winging', 'seeing', 'lived', 'is', 'exist'. The whole passage says: "You will soon fall upon the dear earth into anonymity. You will cover the earth with your destruction. The dust is winging its way to the sky like smoke. It is forbidding me from seeing the house I lived in. The name of our land will pass into oblivion. Each one of us has lost what is dear to them. Miserable Troy exists no more" (the chorus' concluding passage).

The individual stories also play a fundamental role in the meaning-making processes activated by lexical domains that form argument structures. As Suad, one of the Syrian actresses, narrates to her public, the production of meanings through the experience of the Trojan women is not fictional but true and real. The war Syria experienced is real, and it is not only happening in the mythological Troy. In Suad's words: "This is real, we feel something from it. ... I mean we are talking about the play, but these things are real and exist. It's not just in Troy. This has happened for real. It's happened to us even. We are slowly going to learn...how to breathe correctly and to discover the area below the stomach". Suad introduces the argument frames of the individual existences of people forced to exile, humiliated and tortured, and, at the same time, refers to a country destroyed and abandoned by its native inhabitants

because of war. These cognitive frameworks are activated by verbs implying Existence and Mental Perception (i.e. ‘is’, ‘are’, ‘exist’, ‘happened’, ‘feel’, ‘breathe’), Action and Movement (i.e. ‘learn’, ‘discover’), against the backdrop of speech categories that permeate the entire work.

Another woman speaks of an incident in which fifteen masked and armed men burst into her home and threatened her at gunpoint. The problem was that her brother refused to join the men, so they wanted to change his opinion. The woman tells her personal story saying that later she heard her brother was found dead. The ontological story activates cognitive categories derived from the use of verbs stemming from diverse lexical domains (i.e. Action and Movement, Speech and Mental Perception) that produce argument frames based on destruction, murder and violation of family intimacy: “Fifteen armed masked men came in. You could only see their eyes. My brother opened the door. They had come in through the gate and through the main door. They told him to go with them. He asked ‘where am I going?’ They said ‘come with us and don’t say a word’. He got up and came into the house. He sat on the ground and started fixing his hair. They said ‘come with us’, pointing guns at him. He said ‘shoot me here in my house, I am not going anywhere with you’. We started screaming. They said ‘face the walls, all of you’. They pointed their guns at us. ‘Whoever says a word, we’ll shoot you’”.

On a first level of analysis, we have obtained quantitative data, that is, 3,590 words out of 5,598 from the Syrian stories, that is, clauses and sentences pronounced by the ‘queens’ of Syria. At a first stage, we have indicated the number of verbs in the whole corpus (789 verbal categories), including modals, infinitives, gerunds, lexical verbs, with the exclusion of ‘be’ and ‘have’ as auxiliary verbs, as shown in Table 2.

Words in the corpus: 5,598
Words in the Syrian narratives as subcorpus: 3,590
Number of verbs in the narratives as subcorpus: 789

Table 2: Quantitative analysis of the corpus and sub-corpus

On a second level of analysis, we have identified the main lexical semantic domains. The identification of the lexical domains has put emphasis on five specific lexical domains, namely, the lexical domains representing EXISTENCE, ACTION, MENTAL PERCEPTION, MOVEMENT and SPEECH. They have shown to own the highest number of representative verbal occurrences, as indicated in Table 3. This second stage has been associated with the creation of a frequency list including the most representative verbs for each category of the five lexical domains taken into account, apart from the identification of the principal verbs of each lexical domain category.

LEXICAL DOMAINS	REPRESENTATIVE VERBS	FREQUENCY LIST of SEMANTIC RELATIONS
EXISTENCE (179 verbal occurrences)	Be (85%)	Semantic relations with Live (10), Exist (2), Happen (9).
ACTION (136 verbal occurrences)	Take (9%)	Semantic relations with Burn (6), Sign (6), Kill (5), Used to (5), Shoot (4), Salute (4), Experience (4), Do (4), Let (4).
MENTAL PERCEPTION (103 verbal occurrences)	Know (14%)	Semantic relations with Want (13) and Miss (13).



MOVEMENT (76 verbal occurrences)	Come (20%)	Semantic relations with Go (14), Leave (14), and Carry (4).
SPEECH (44 verbal occurrences)	Say (20%)	Semantic relation with Tell (8), Call (6), Talk (4).

Table 3: Identification of lexical domains, representative verbs and frequency list

The most representative verbs in each lexical domain have semantic relations with the other major and minor verbs (in terms of occurrences) in the same domain, thus, forming subdomains, and also in relation to the other domains. The lexical semantic relations of verbs are relevant to establish a connection between the diverse narratives, where different lexical domains emerge in order to create an argument structure for each lexical domain area which, in turn, is semantically connected with the argument structures of the other lexical domains prevailing in the 51 narratives.

The principal argument structure, as demonstrated in Table 3, revolves around the EXISTENCE lexical domain, whose most representative verb is ‘Be’, followed by ‘Live’, ‘Exist’ and ‘Happen’. This implies that the actresses as performers of their stories aim to set up a relationship between two entities in terms of attribution or identification. This takes place between personal pronouns, proper names, abstract nouns, demonstrative pronouns (i.e., ‘We’, ‘She’, ‘Rasha’, ‘My name’, ‘This’), and a quality, a thing, a person (i.e., ‘unhappy’, ‘the queen’, ‘Faten’), where the process or verbal category (i.e. ‘was’, ‘were’, ‘is’), functions to signal the existence of the relationship. Strictly speaking, there is no process in the normal sense of defining something that ‘is happening’, since there is one real participant in the world of experience, what is called Carrier in Systemic Functional Linguistics, whose purpose is to establish either an attributive relational circumstance, where the Carrier is the entity that carries the attribute, or an identifying relational circumstance, where the aim is to identify one entity in terms of another, which means that the Identified is equal to the Identifying (i.e. “those are seats here; they are children; they are asleep; these things are real and exist; she was the queen of Troy; this is Andromache; their real reason was a rivalry between them; they were two equal states; my name is Bushra; my name is Faten; I am Hecuba”).

The argument structures of the ACTION and MOVEMENT lexical domains (the second and fourth ones) share similar meanings and mostly describe situations, events, physical actions, processes implying doing words, transitions, shifts, physical removal of things and persons. A case in point is the verb ‘wipe out’, which can also signify ‘remove or eliminate (something) completely’. Moving from the definitions of the generic terms for the lexical domain of ACTION (do and make), it is possible to state that the variety of verbs included in this category is semantically related to the meanings of ‘doing’ and ‘making’ according to dictionary definitions (i.e. ‘destroy’, ‘allot’, ‘pick out’, ‘kill’, ‘write’, ‘spend’, ‘commit’, ‘restore’, ‘pack’, ‘block’, ‘put’, ‘cover’, ‘get up’, ‘sleep’, ‘manage’, ‘buy’, ‘mess up’, etc.). The same semantic relations, whose evidence is provided in Table 4, exist among verbs cohabiting in the lexical domain of MOVEMENT.

SEMANTIC RELATIONS
MOVE/GO/COME
Move: <i>go in a specified direction or manner; change position; change the place, position, or state of; change one’s place of residence or work.</i>

<i>Go: move from one place to another; travel a specified distance; travel or move in order to engage in a specified activity.</i>
<i>Come: move or travel towards or into a place thought of as near or familiar to the speaker; arrive at a specified place.</i>
<i>Leave: go away from; go away from a place without taking (someone or something).</i>
<i>Carry: support and move (someone or something) from one place to another.</i>
<i>Raid: quickly and illicitly take something from (a place).</i>

Table 4: Examples of semantic relations within the MOVEMENT lexical domain processes

These verbs and their semantic relations construct the movement argument structures, whose lexical domain focuses on discursive strategies that highlight the position of migrant people as subjects forced to flee their country of origin, and who made the effort to cope with sufferings and humiliations derived from prevarication and abuse. As a result, verbs involving physical action and movement are used in order to offer a blazingly vivid mirror of the Syrian women’s experiences projected in the stories of a queen, of princesses and ordinary women who, like the Trojan women, are uprooted, enslaved, and bereaved. Action, transition and shifts emerge through the use of verbal constructions that entail dimensions of exile and torture: (“I shall leave as my city turns to dust; Old legs, carry me as fast as you can; They were forced from it; They left their city; She ran it; I used to run this place; The neighbourhood was being raided; We got in a car and left; We went from Bayyada; My brothers brought him home; He was shot in the mouth and thrown on the road”).

The MENTAL PERCEPTION and SPEECH lexical domains are the third and fifth domains which activate cognitive and verbal categories respectively. They have meanings in common, since they are constructed within cognitive and verbal semantic frameworks which navigate in the internal world of the mind, and a large number of them refer and describe processes of thinking, imagining, wanting. In this case, the Syrian women, in whose mind the mental process occurs, are not acting but are mainly undergoing the process of hearing, which implies that their voices are triggering the mental process of hearing. Mental Perception can be thus expressed through perceptive, emotive, cognitive and desiderative categories, such as in the lexical semantic relations of the verbs that are present in the Syrian stories (i.e. “We want the world to hear; For our struggles to be heard; I still don’t know the script well; I’m learning from what I hear; he who knew happiness; your soul yearns for a happy past; What can I dream about?; They don’t know pain; But those who knew happiness; I wanted to do; I want the world to hear our story”).

The fifth and last lexical domain, the SPEECH category, also known as verbal process in Halliday’s terms, is intermediate between mental and material processes, since the act of saying something is a physical action that also reflects mental operations. The Sayer (i.e. the Syrian woman and her relatives) addresses the Receiver (i.e. “My sister called me”), the second participant in the sentence to whom the actresses may be eager to say something. The Sayer can also involve another type of participant that may appear in the verbal process, the message itself (Verbiage), which is summarised in the form of a nominal group functioning as a participant, or which can include projected clauses such as “I want to say a poem; He said I should sign to say that...; He said ‘Sign!’”.

On a third and final level of analysis, we have demonstrated that lexical semantic relations can produce syntactical projections and formulations (active and passive structures, present, perfect and past tenses) recognisable within Mood and Transitivity systems, as Table 5 shows:

LEXICAL DOMAINS	VERBAL TEXT	MOOD BLOCK/ TRANSITIVITY
EXISTENCE	I am Hecuba I am nothing.	- Subject – Finite (Simple Present <i>-am; is</i> ).

	<p>I am like a flower...  I am very ambitious.  My name is Bushra.  My name is Faten.  My name is...  My name is Hecuba.  My name is Maysoon.  My name is Ghayda.  My name is Andromache.  My name is Mayda.</p>	<p>- Carrier – Relational Pr. – Attribute/Identifying.</p>
MOVEMENT & ACTION	<p>They had come into our house.  They had come into our house.  The had come in through the gate.  They had burnt down the whole city.  Their city had been destroyed.  my father had been arrested.  My father and my two brothers had been killed.  I had been sacked by the Greek spear.</p>	<p>- Subject – Finite (Past Perfect-<i>had</i>).  - Actor – Material Pr. – Circumstance.</p>
MENTAL PERCEPTION	<p>I wanted the curtains to be my style.  I miss my sheets and pillows.  I miss my teddy bear that I put on my bed.  I miss my curtains.  I’ve missed you my dear one.  I’ve missed your walls and doors.  I’ve missed your every corner.  I’ve missed your steps and standing by your windows.  I miss lying on your floor.</p>	<p>- Subject – Finite (Past Simple; Simple Present; Present Perfect – <i>ed</i>; - <i>present</i> - <i>'ve</i>).  -Sensor – Mental Pr. – Phenomenon.</p>
SPEECH	<p>He said ‘Sign!’  I said I won’t sign to anything I haven’t seen.  He said ‘Sign!’  He said I should sign to say that  They said ‘come with us and don’t say a word’.  They said ‘come with us’, pointing guns at him.</p>	<p>- Subject – Finite (Simple Past -<i>ed</i>).  - Sayer (Projecting) – Verbal Pr.; Projected clause.</p>

	He said ‘shoot me here in my house, They said ‘face the walls, all of you’.	
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Table 5: Identification of syntactical projections and formulations (Mood) and functional categories (Transitivity)

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The conceptual categories that emerge in the ‘queens’ of Syria’s narratives are rooted in the semantic arguments expressed through the use of verbs. These semantic arguments construct the stories according to specific morpho-syntactic and lexical rules to such an extent that the reader may be inclined to the hypothesis that migrant stories have their own local grammar. The identification of the semantic arguments that predominate in the visual textual narratives has relied on Halliday’s systems of Mood and Transitivity, on the one hand, and Faber and Mairal Usón’s model of lexical semantic relations, on the other. The two methodological approaches have helped us demonstrate that a) the lexicon of a sentence represents the interface of the grammatical and conceptual component; b) the meanings of words reflect the deeper conceptual structures and the specific domain where they function; c) the verbal lexicon plays a fundamental role in the composition of the sentence as the way in which the speaker experiences the world. In brief, lexical meanings are the bases for knowledge representation, and the recognition of the cognitive areas involved in the lexical networks reveals what areas of experience are activated in the viewer’s or reader’s receptive contexts. Such grammar has provided sets of recurrent lexical patterns which are syntactically and semantically unvaried, and which also share the same communicative function. Thus, linguistic patterns vary according to text types and specialised situations. In fact, the Syrian narratives have shown to be characterised by a recurrent local grammar, where the syntactic projection of lexemes and their semantic roles, which indicate the perspective from which the event is portrayed and textualised, indicate that each linguistic pattern aims to shed light on a specific actor, goal and result.

Results have proved that certain narratives of migration diffused through the visual arts can be specific text types, whose prevailing lexical domains and their syntactic projections, can become indicative of a structure that aims to reinforce certain experiences. The semantic classes of verbs that have emerged in terms of occurrences representing the driving force in the narratives can be conceived as a whole of structured clusters of acts entailing the spheres of EXISTENCE, ACTION and MOVEMENT, on the one hand, and, of MENTAL PERCEPTION and SPEECH, on the other. Of the five emerging lexical domains, EXISTENCE has been the most important one, since the whole stories put in the mouth of the Syrian actresses have been constructed through existential categories, whose utterances or formulations perform relational acts. The analysis of Mood structures has shown how the Syrian women have meant to communicate in terms of interaction with the others. Considering that language use is based on the exchange of meanings, the Syrian actresses have told things according to a certain lexical and grammatical structure as functional to a) influencing the audience, b) providing information that people may not have and 3) explaining and clarifying attitudes with regard to the world the target audience may be unfamiliar with.

Against this backdrop, language becomes the instrument that reverses conditions of subalternity and provides decolonial subjects, such as the Syrian actresses in this study, with devices that contribute to giving access to their stories and make them subjects of power before an international audience. Indeed, the linguistic analysis has proved that the *Queens of Syria* subtitles, where the stories of the real people are captured and translated, can be looked at as decolonial devices, in which language use is strategically relevant and functional to the understanding of both private and public refugees’ stories.