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SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF WAR PICTURES DRAWN BY SYRIAN CHILDREN

Suriyeli Çocukların Savaş Resimlerinin Göstergebilimsel Analizi

Abstract

Protests that began on December 18, 2010 in Tunisia and spread to many Arab countries. While governments are falling as a result of public actions, a civil war that will last for many years has started in many countries. One of these countries is Syria that is Turkey's border neighbor. Protests started in Syria in 2011 first replaced by civil war and then things came to a point that other countries started to involve themselves in Syria's civil problems. The long-lasting Syrian war has created some negative results in social, psychological and economical fields. As it is the case in many wars, civilians have been the targets, many people died and, as a consequence, millions of Syrians left their lands and started to migrate to other countries. Although these people changed the place they used to live, they were not able to erase the memories created by war. Some Syrians children choose to reflect these memories on papers by drawing pictures. This study aims to understand Syrian children's perception of war, from which they managed to escape in 2011, by analyzing pictures drawn by them. In this context, these drawings are analyzed by using semiotic analysis method.

Keywords: Semiotics, Syria, War, Picture, Syrian Children

Özet

18 Aralık 2010 tarihinde Tunus'ta başlayan protestolar birçok Arap ülkesinde yayılmıştır. Halk harekâtları sonucu iktidarlar devrilirken bazı ülkelerde uzun yıllar sürecek olan iç çatışmalar baş göstermeye başlamıştır. Bu ülkelerden biri de Türkiye'nin sınır komşusu olan Suriye'dir. Suriye'de 2011 yılında başlayan gösteriler yerini önce iç çatışmalara daha sonra ise dış ülkelerin Suriye'nin iç sorunlarına müdahalesine bırakmıştır. Uzun yıllar süren Suriye savaşı toplumsal, psikolojik, ekonomik gibi birçok olumsuz sonuçlar doğurmuştur. Her savaşta olduğu gibi bu savaşta da siviller hedef olmuş, çok sayıda insan yaşamını yitirmiş ve bunun sonucunda da

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milyonlarca Suriyeli kendi topraklarını bırakarak başka ülkelere sığınmıştır. Bu kişiler topraklarını değiştirmelerine rağmen savaşın onlarda bıraktığı izleri silmeyi başaramamıştır. Silip atamadıkları bu izleri kimi Suriyeli çocuklar resimlere taşımıştır. Bu çalışmanın amacı 2011 yılında Suriye’de başlayan savaştan aileleriyle birlikte kaçan çocuklar tarafından çizilen resimlerden yola çıkarak onların savaş olgusuna bakışını ve algısını tespit etmektir. Bu bağlamda Suriyeli çocuklar tarafından çizilen resimler göstergebilimsel analiz yöntemi kullanılarak incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Göstergebilim, Suriye, Savaş, Resim, Suriyeli Çocuklar

Introduction

When recent times are thought it can be clearly seen, there has never been a day passed without having a war in the Middle East. Petrol, which is a significant economic element, on its lands has made the war inevitable in this area. This economical element has not only caused its own countries to have civil conflicts and war but also the world's leading countries not to give up on these lands. Although there have been attempts to bring peace and democracy to the Middle East, these lands have never experienced peace and democracy, bloodshed has continued and economical problems have increased day by day. People living on these lands had no other option but to migrate to other countries simply to survive. They have been named as asylum seekers and migrants as a consequence of their migration and mostly died in the countries that they do not belong.

According to 2014 data, more than 53% of Syrian migrants in Turkey are children and youths under the age of 18, while more than 75% are children and women in need of special protection (Erdoğan, 2014: 4). 2019 data present that the number of Syrian migrants in the 0 - 4 age range is 14.7% that is 539 thousand. More than 1 million 694 thousand Syrians, or 46.4% of the total, are children and youths under the age of 18 (Erdoğan, 2019: 7).

With whatever name you call them, children of these refugees have experienced different psychological problems caused by the images of war that they cannot manage to erase from their memories (Büyükalın Filiz et al., 2018: 10-18; Gez, 2018: 1). Not being able to stand the pressure created by their psychologies, these children have chosen to reflect their emotions on drawings and used them as a tool of communication. Some of these children are staying in Malatya Beydağı Service Area (MBSA) and migrated from Syria to Turkey in 2011 when the Arab spring started to spread in Syria. Syrian children living in Malatya, a city in the East of Turkey, have reflected their emotions about the war on their drawings. In this context, it is aimed to analyze the way how Syrian children reflected their perception of war on their drawings created in 2015. The semiotic analysis method is used in the study.

1. The Concept of War

When the history of mankind is taken into consideration, war is one of the unique facts that never changed from primitive man era to this century. There are a lot of definitions of war. While Grotius (1967: 17) defines war as a state in which disagreements are tried to be solved by force, Clausewitz claims that it is an art of having your enemies do what you want as an extent of politics and a cruel way of negotiation (Sheehan, 2013a: 152). Kaldor defines it as an act of violence created by two or more organized groups by using political terms (Kaldor, 2010: 274). Even though it has many versatile definitions, it is clear that war is a state of conflict based on violence at least between two actors with no difference of place and time. These actors can be people, local communities, small war groups, city-states, kingdoms, empires or nation-states in the modern century (Eker, 2015: 34).

Throughout history, war has been a wide-ranging and dynamic notion that has different methods and practices, and it happens to be a natural truth in which societies and nations find themselves since the first ages. A war, seen as a key to reach the target, sometimes happens either to protect beliefs and values or to gain prosperity and fame (Eker, 2015: 33). With a look from the historical angle, it can be seen that there has been small and great wars or short and long term peace times. There have been many books, stories, songs, movies and analysis about trust, independence, brotherhood, and wishes for peace which are thought to be universal values. However, the war continues to exist as a real phenomenon despite defense alliances or powerful armies and weapons made to prevent malignity caused by itself (Demirtaş, 1991: 42). The reason is that the art of war means a vital significance for a country. It is a matter of life and death because it is accepted as a one-way ticket to reach safety or to be destroyed. It is a subject of inquiry and should not be neglected by any means (Tzu, 2018: 5). On the contrary, it should be regarded as the last political tool that a nation has to solve its problems and continue doing politics (Clausewitz, 1976: 87).

In parallel with social and technological developments, parties, targets, strategies, and performance of war have had outstanding changes in time. Wars have stopped being at nations' monopoly, and they have transformed into processes in which non-state actors take part (Gurcan, 2011: 74). In other words, technological developments determine war strategies of their times (Gurcan, 2011: 89). Wars ongoing recently spread to wide areas, have no time limits set and deeply affect the social base. That's why they cause more harm than classical wars (Münkler, 2010: 127). Accordingly, wars are based on principles aiming to destroy enemies completely and annex large areas rather than gaining small lands (Sheehan, 2013b: 41). At this point, privatization of using power monopolies of a nation, replacement of interstate wars by

civil wars, non-state formations' being fundamental actors carrying out wars have caused aims and motivations of a war to end up with a huge transformation (Eker, 2015: 31).

2. Arab Spring and Syria

As it is stated above, rapid changes in technology have also affected the methods and practices of war. Arab spring, which emerged in the last ten years and spread to many Middle East countries, can be given as the most vivid example. “Arab spring is an anonymous term used to express different reactions of the public against repressive and oppressive rulers and define this process as a positive wave to democratization” (Doğan and Durgun, 2012: 62). Massive protests against government started in Tunisia on December 18, 2010, and spread to Egypt, Libya, Syria, Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Yemen and Lebanon in 2011. Public protests in the above-mentioned countries are called Arab Spring (Paksoy et al., 2013: 170). Citizens who want to protest unemployment and high cost of living poured into the streets after a Tunisian teen burned himself and things have evolved into something different than expected (Taşkesen, 2011: 264).

The negative effects of economic depression in 2008 on the countries experienced Arab Spring and poor citizens' getting even poorer during the depression times can be counted among the reasons of Arab Spring (Öztürkler, 2014: 8). Accordingly, many problems like unemployment, deficiency of food, inflation, political corruption, lack of freedom of speech, irregularities and poor living conditions in Arab World have caused these protests to spread to the Middle East and North African countries (Dede, 2011: 23-24; Bacık, 2019: 17). The fact that Arab countries have closed economies, they still have agricultural foundation although they own many oil reserves and individualism is dominant can be given as reasons which delay democracy and inspired Arab Spring (Öztoprak, 2019: 9).

One of the countries that have experienced the Arab Spring for a long time in Syria which is Turkey's neighbor with the longest border. Sunni Muslims make up nearly 70% of Syria's population. Kurds and Turkmens are the ethnic minority and Sunni Muslims are the majority in the country. The other Muslim denominational minorities are Arab Alawites (Nusayris), Druze and Isma'ili Muslims. However, there is a considerable amount of Christian communities in the country (Orhan, 2012). The Sunni majority is ruled by the Alawites minority in Syria. Syria has an authoritarian and totalitarian regime (Güngörmüş Kona, as cited in Duran, 2011: 504). After the former president, Hafez Al-Assad, died in 2000, Bashar Al-Assad first elected as the president on July 10, 2000, and then re-elected on May 27, 2007, by referendums on both elections (Mfa.gov.tr, 2011). Since Arab Shia communities hold the key points in civil and

military units, security forces consider any rebellion against the government as a threat to their existence and they support Assad government accordingly (Orhan, 2012).

Syrian people organized protests against the government during the Arab Spring and rebellions started when the government used forces against its people (Canyurt, 2015: 128). Rebellions turned into a deep civil war and made up an example of what is called "new wars". While the Syrian regime ruled by Besar Esad was quelling the rebellion by using forces, local opposition groups were emerging and thus there started gunfight (Eker 2015: 45). During these times in Syria, the state has lost its monopoly to use power and non-state forces have started to act a fundamental role in chaos (Eker, 2015: 46). Although things happening in Syria have an economical aspect, political freedom stands out more when the protests are compared to others in different countries. People's will to end the state of emergency since 1963 is a remarkable fact. The roots of these rebellions go back to the Damascus Spring in 2000 (Çakmak et al., 2011: 13).

Throughout history, it has always been women and children who have paid the heaviest price of war and conflict. Some studies present that although children have actually left their countries, they continue to carry the effects of war for a long time ((Büyükalan Filiz et al., 2018; Gez, 2018).

3. The Perception of War Reflected on Drawings by Syrian Children

Wars are created by adults but children are left with the biggest traces in their minds. Children sometimes do not keep these traces in their minds, but they reflect them on art forms like poetry, pictures, novels, and movies. This is a way of outpouring or reflecting the facts in mind. The way how Syrian kids, grown up under the shadow of war, have expressed their feelings about war in their pictures is analyzed in this study.

3.1. Method

The way Syrian kids reflected their perceptions of war and how they commented about it in their pictures are analyzed in this study by using semiotics method. In semiotics, which studies how signs are created in a certain context or how they create meaning, a system integrated by signs produces a social code and reveals the meaning of it (Madison, 2005 as cited in Glesne, 2012: 254). According to Barthes (2005: 47), who thinks that signs are not only what is seen but also what is wished to see, a sign is made up of a signifier and signified, and signifier levels form meaning levels, signified levels form context level. Pierce has divided signs into three types as an icon, index, and symbol. While there exists a definable similarity relation between

an object and a sign, index signs are a collection of natural signs. There is a cause and effect relationship that can be recalled by associations between an object and a sign. In symbolic signs, the process between a sign and an object is based on learning. Symbols are signs that are mostly used in visual messages (Ekim, 2011: 21).

3.2. Findings

15 pictures are chosen to be analyzed among 40 pictures drawn by Syrian children in 2015. The reason to choose these pictures is that they reflect the children's perspective of war well, especially viewed from a semiotic perspective. All of the Syrian children under the age of 18 were living in Malatya Beydağı Service Area when the pictures were drawn.



Sign: War picture

Signifiers: A girl and a boy, fighter jets and tanks, Star shape on Israeli flag or Jewish symbol

Signified: War, escape, fear, despair, cry, fatigue

Semiotic Analysis: In the picture, fighter jets and tanks are drawn as they are moving. The star shape on the tanks indicates that these tanks belong to Israel. A bearded man (probably the dad or a relative) escaping with a fainted or dead child in his arms is depicted in front of the tank and the fighter jets. The shape of the man's beard shows that he is a Muslim. It can be understood from the body of the girl or her closed eyes that she is either fainted or dead. It can be seen from the depiction of the man with the girl in his arms as if he is escaping or his facial expression that he needs help. The pain in his face and his mouth drawn like he is crying indicates his need for help. The floor is drawn in a circle shape which means that they will come back to the place where they are already trying to escape from or this place has no escape.

Israeli or Jewish symbol in the picture signifies the long term war between Israeli and Palestine. While Israel is depicted as powerful and cruel, Palestine is weak and oppressed. Israel's strength is reflected through tanks and fighter jets and Palestine's weakness can be understood from the helpless man carrying the little girl in his arms. The denotation of the picture is a scene of war while the connotation is of fear, despair, fatigue, and rebellion.



Sign: War picture

Signifiers: 3 women, 3 children, 2 wounded men, fire, tears

Signified: War, fear, despair

Semiotic analysis: The devastating impact of war on human development and life is increasing day by day. Conflicts cause death, disability and disease, while at the same time creating a situation that destroys families, cultures and communities (Bilgin, 2014: 135-151; Masten and Narayan, 2012: 227-257; Saçaklıoğlu, 2005: 13). This situation is illustrated in the picture by two men lying wounded because of a bomb and three women wearing hijabs trying to escape with their little children in their arms with tears. The fire behind the women attracts attention. It can be understood from the wounded or dead people lying on the ground and the women trying to escape in tears that the fire is caused by the bombs. The denotation of the picture is a place under the bomb attack while the connotation is of victimization caused by war, death, and tears. The tears and the fear on the faces of escaping women is a sign. The hijab indicates that the war is taking place in of the Muslim countries, either Palestine or Syria. Another connotation of the picture is victimization and oppression of Muslim countries.



Sign: War picture

Signifiers: Three children, three guns, patched clothes, a carpet

Signified: Distrust, fear, rush, poverty

Semiotic Analysis: There are three girls, with two or three age gap between each other, and three guns pointed at them in the picture. The age gap between the children shows the probability of being siblings. Patched clothes of them signify poverty. They are sitting on a carpet near the wall and feeling scared because of the guns pointed at them. The way they sit on the carpet is particular to Middle East societies and this indicates that children are from the Middle East and there is a war. The oldest girl is putting her hand on her cheek frightened, the youngest girl's covering her one eye and observing the area with the other and their sitting with their knees touching their stomachs are strong signs showing that the children are scared. It can be seen that war affects mostly the psychologies of children.



Sign: War picture

Signifiers: Syrian flag, two boys, blood, umbrella, rockets with countries name written on them, arrow signs, written sign

Signified: War, death, anxiety, injustice, discrimination, negligence

Semiotic Analysis: Rockets written England, France, United States, Israel, China, Russia and Iran on them are shooting the boy wearing a shirt with the Syrian flag on it and he is lying on the ground in blood. Another boy is standing under an umbrella written: "Convention on the Rights of the Children" both in Arabic and Turkish and this boy is wearing a sweater written, "Children of the World" also both in Arabic and Turkish and he is watching the boy lying on the ground in blood. The picture attracts attention to the war in Syria and gives a message meaning that Convention on the Rights of the Children takes every child in the world under its umbrella except Syrian children (UNICEF, 1989). The denotation of the picture is that the children protected by the convention are more overweight and better-taken care while Syrian children are thinner. The connotation is of injustice, unlawfulness, and discrimination.



Sign: War picture

Signifiers: A woman, a child, a written sign, a mosque

Signified: Hunger, despair, hope, sadness

Semiotic Analysis: The picture is indirectly related to the war and there is a mosque written Syria on it. Mother and the child are hugging each other and the child explains his need for food saying "I'm hungry" and the mother replies sadly and in despair "You will eat something soon in heaven". The despair and sadness of the mother are depicted through the lines on her face. There are lines on the child's back signifying weakness, poverty and the

negative effects of war. The picture exactly signs the despair of the Syrian people after the war in their country. It is such despair that the hope is in death according to the written sign. In the Muslim religion, people believe that the ones who go to heaven after death will gain eternal happiness and get everything there. There are hadiths about the fact that children who pass away at a young age will go to heaven (Ekinici, 2012: 293). It can be said that this belief is symbolized in the picture.



Sign: A picture of Syria

Signifiers: Map of Syria, three children, tears, barbed wire

Signified: Fear, sadness, despair, captivity

Semiotic Analysis: Three children are hiding in the map of Syria in tears in the picture. The fear can be seen from their faces and the way they stand. Body language of the children clearly shows their emotions. Their tears signify the despair and the pessimism of Syrian people because of the war in the country. Besides, children have barbed wires, which can be found in borders, in their hands indicating the captivity of Syrian children. According to the findings of the research conducted by Kirmayer et al. (2011: 959-966) the greatest fear children experience during migration is to leave the caregiver, to be exposed to violence and harsh living conditions (such as refugee camps), malnutrition, uncertainty about the future. It is also possible to see this situation in the helplessness of the children in the picture drawn above.



Sign: A picture of Syria

Signifiers: Syrian flag, map of Syria, a woman, blood, tears, three pigeons, barbed wire

Signified: Sadness, despair, hope, freedom, captivity

Semiotic Analysis: The picture can be analyzed by signs that seem irrelevant but actually relevant to each other. There is a map of Syria, a bird with the Syrian flag's shapes on it and a woman with bloody tears in the picture. The cover on the woman's head is of the Syrian flag. There are many signs related to Syria which make it clear that the picture is about the situation in Syria. Pessimism is reflected through the black color of the Syrian map. In Syria, black means mourning and pessimism. The bloody tears of the woman signify the bloody war in Syria. It is meant to give a message through the woman because women are the ones who shed tears the most during the wars. A pigeon symbolizes freedom and barbed wires symbolize captivity in semiotics. Barbed wires in the picture seem attached to the Syrian map and flag. The protective side of the woman is given through the Syrian flag-shaped cover on her head. The picture indicates that Syrians want to be free but they cannot escape from captivity.



Sign: A picture of Syria

Signifiers: A written sign, a woman, the map of Syria, blue sky, wall

Signified: Hope, captivity, and missing

Semiotic Analysis: A woman is looking at the blue sky through a hole that looks like the map of Syria in the picture. The Syrian map indicates that the picture is about Syria. There is a sign written as “We will come back” and it is depicted as if the woman says it. The woman is looking forward, the map is blue and the words indicating a longing for Syria show that Syrian people still hope to go back to their countries. Also, the woman is standing behind a wall which symbolizes captivity. It can be understood from the signs that Syrian people feel themselves as captured and foreign in the countries they migrate.

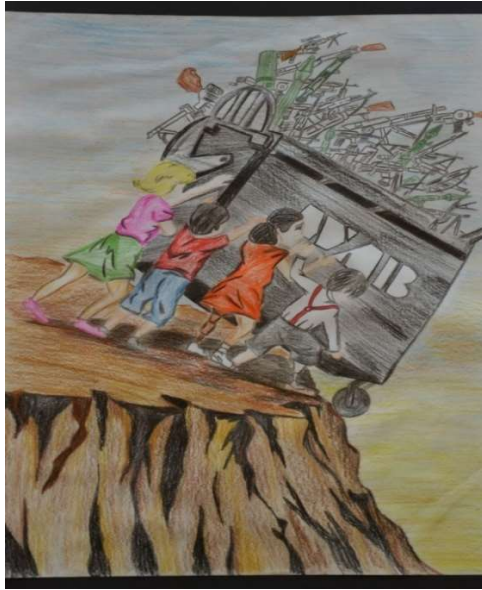


Sign: A picture of Syria

Signifiers: A woman, a picture of Syria, butchered corpses, blood, tears

Signified: Death, sorrow, pain, pessimism, despair

Semiotic Analysis: There is a woman in tears in the picture. There is a Syrian map drawn both on the head and the nail of her. Butchered corpses on the floor explain the reason why she is crying and shows the merciless side of the war. Both denotation and connotation of the picture is war, pain, tears, and pessimism in Syria. These signs are given through women because women experience the most painful process during the war since they lose their brothers, children, and husbands.



Sign: A picture of war

Signifiers: Children, garbage truck, guns, a cliff

Signified: Peace, freedom, tranquility, love

Semiotic Analysis: Four kids are pushing the garbage truck full with guns of the cliff in the picture. Here, the connotation is more important than denotation. Connotation of the picture is that children, who are accepted as future and the ones experiencing the most damage in the wars, do not want wars, but they demand peace, love, and tranquillity. The truck is a garbage truck which is significant because it gives the message that guns are unnecessary things.



Sign: A picture of war

Signifiers: 4 children, Flags of Palestine, Syria, Egypt and Iraq, blood, tears, written signs

Signified: War, death, tears, sadness, fear, anxiety

Semiotic Analysis: Four children are wearing the flags of Palestine, Syria, Egypt, and Iraq and there are written signs on top of them indicating the countries. Blood is dripping from their bodies and there is a blood bath under their feet. The children are in tears and sad which indicate the war in those countries. There has been no peace and tranquility in those countries since the Arab Spring started. Many people had to migrate to other countries and experienced being refugees there. The war in those lands affected the children mostly and this picture reflects this truth.



Sign: A picture of war

Signifiers: Gun tubes, a family with a mother, a father and the children, some belongings

Signified: War, escape, fear, being refugees, immigration

Semiotic Analysis: There is a family with a mother, father and the children are escaping with their belongings or migrating by walking on the gun tubes. Children have anxiety on their faces while the mother and the father are in a rush. Gun tubes indicate war. The family symbolizes escape and immigration from the war. The connotation of the picture is that there is a possibility of death during this escape. Thus, the picture symbolizes the fact that these people, who have to choose between life and death, have to flee their homeland, put aside their feelings of belonging and see migration as the right choice (Gürpınar, 2016: 64-78; Özservet and Sirkeci, 2016: 1-4).



Sign: A war picture

Signifiers: Refugees, ISIS, a gun, fire, a boat, a river, a finger, men dressed as Arabs, a sign written Syria

Signified: Hope, betrayal, war

Semiotic Analysis: The war in Syria is depicted in the picture. The written sign indicates that is Syria. Syrians are escaping from the lands on fire in a boat or from the terrorist group ISIS. The countries they are escaping to be depicted as Arab countries which can be understood from the clothes of the men who are waiting across the river. The most striking point in the picture is that these Arab men are giving a message "Wait for a minute" with a finger pointed at the refugees on the boat while they are making a sign with a finger for ISIS to come showing their support and agreement with them. The connotation of the picture is a reaction, rebellion, and criticism to Arab countries. The criticism is related to Arab countries' being ignorant about the war in Syria and the Syrians themselves. On the other hand, these countries' relation to ISIS is criticized and condemned.



Sign: A picture of Syria

Signifiers: Public, Flag of Syria, banners,

Signified: Marching, a public demonstration, reaction, demand

Semiotic Analysis: People are holding a public demonstration with the banners written "We want freedom" and "End Syrian Regime". Syrian flags attract attention in the picture. It can be seen that there is every kind of people marching in the demonstration. It signifies that a reaction is given by all Syrians. The message is given through written signs. This message means that people demand freedom and an end to the current Syrian regime in the lands where there is a war for a long time.



Sign: A picture of war

Signifiers: A child, Flag of Syria, the USA, European Union, the United Nations, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation, four men, blood, guns

Signified: Peace, freedom, tranquility, love

Semiotic Analysis: European Union, The Organization of Islamic Cooperation, The United Nations, which are organizations established to protect peace and the security in the World and organize economic, social and cultural cooperation internationally, and the USA as a country attract the attention in the picture. These organizations and the USA is depicted through four men turning their backs to a child lying on the ground in blood with a Syrian flag on him. The child in blood demands help from these organizations that are saying they provide peace and support freedom in every platform. However, these four men have turned their backs to him and have an ignorant manner. This situation indicates that organizations to provide peace

and freedom are blind and deaf to Syria destructed by war. There is an indirect criticism of these organizations that they do not act accordingly to their established goals.

Conclusion

The reflection of war in the pictures drawn by Syrian children is analyzed in this study and the most significant thing here is that these children come from the lands of war. Thus, it can be analyzed how the children understand the war and comment on it. When the findings of the study are analyzed, it can be vividly seen that children see blood as a concrete sign and equivalent of war. The concrete examples and signified of the pictures are mostly the escape from the war, fear, despair, cry, fatigue, distrust, rush, sadness, mourning, hopelessness, and longing for the country. Almost all the pictures reflect the emotions that the stability that thought to be existing in the World now does not exist in the lands of war and the fear that everything can come to an end. One of the most striking findings of the study is that the war is depicted through children and women. The fact that physiologic and psychological structure of women and children are easily affected by events makes them stand out in the pictures, showing them as the losing side. In this context, when looking at the historical process, a conclusion has been reached that supports the argument that the most severe payers of wars and conflicts are mostly children and women. Especially witnessing injuries, deaths and torture of one of the family members of the children; their fear of losing their homes and lands (Gez, 2018) is also reflected in their pictures.

The general conclusion of the study is that there is a losing side in a war whatever its reason to come out is. In this context, most of the harm is done to the children, women and old people who have no military qualification. The findings obtained as a result of this study demonstrate that the children are only actually leaving their countries and continue to bear the effects of the war on them at all times (Büyükalın Filiz et al., 2018: 10-18; Gez, 2018).

According to the results of the research conducted by Kirmayer et al. (2011: 959-966) the greatest fear children experience during migration is to leave the caregiver, to experience violence, to struggle for existence in harsh living conditions and uncertainty about the future. It was revealed that this situation was reflected in the pictures of Syrian children analysed in the research.

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