

Polemics of Healing: Storytelling, Refugees and Futures

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Abstract

The plight of refugees has been well documented in a number of countries. Refugees represent the failure of nation states to live peacefully and endow human rights to their citizens. A significant aspect of refugees' stories concerns the ways in which they express their distress. In this paper we locate storytelling in the lives of Afghan refugee women living in Australia. We explore the tie between the body and metaphor and how the later is articulated via a language of distress. We also tie current constructions of refugees to the wider social sphere. Here, refugees are viewed in an array of negative stereotypes which mirrors the moral crisis of post-modernity. We suggest for the fostering of empathy towards refugees in the future as their stories allow us to become more humane, thereby providing a means of developing a higher level of consciousness.

Keywords: refugees, human rights, metaphor, agency, storytelling

Introduction

In his book *The Politics of Storytelling* (2002), Michael Jackson writes that life is poised between two spheres - the world within our existential control and the world beyond our sphere of governance. "Stories help us to negotiate this balance," he goes on to say (Jackson, 2002, p.102). Stories allow a way for negotiating and re-negotiating meanings within sociality. It is the power of storytelling as an existential narrative which oftentimes discloses the experiences of refugees which concerns us in this essay. Refugees are people who have been made to suffer inordinate disruption. Their lives and bodies are storied with pain. Their journeys beyond their countries' borders are bro-

ken journeys, since they have become ostracized from the everyday web of social relationships. In this sense, refugees' stories call into question the human need to "reclaim some active purchase in the world" which has rendered them void (Jackson, 2002, p.67). While the range of choices storytelling offers in "symbolic reempowerment" is vast (Jackson, 2002, p.35), it warrants us to question to what extent does privation etch itself onto the domain of self so as to disorient it. If the stories that refugees tell others involve the reclaiming of self, then such narratives may constitute a method of healing and reconciliation with the world. As Jackson says, metaphors mediate a transference from those areas of marked "stress to a neutral area" (Jackson, 1989, p.149).

In this paper we locate storytelling in the lives of Afghan refugee women living in Australia. We explore the tie between the body and metaphor and how the later is articulated via a language of distress. We also tie current constructions of refugees to the wider social sphere. Here, refugees are viewed in an array of negative stereotypes which mirrors the moral crisis of post-modernity. We suggest for the fostering of empathy towards refugees in the future as their stories allow us to become more humane, thereby providing a means of developing a higher level of consciousness.

The data for this paper was conducted via interviews with various Afghan women who had fled Afghanistan during the Taliban rule (1996-2002). The interviews were conducted one on one within their homes. During the time of the interviews the author was a case worker for middle-eastern refugees. The age ranges of the women were between twenty six years old to forty two years old. All of the women were Hazara, a minority ethnic group in Afghanistan who are Shia Muslims. The interviews with the women were between one to one and a half hours in duration. Ten to twelve women were interviewed. The interviewees were chosen randomly. Confidentiality was guaranteed so that the women could speak openly about their lives. Some of the women were TPV (temporary protection visa) holders. At the time of their interviews the women had been living in Australia from six months to eighteen months. Most of the women were widows or had missing husbands. All of them had children. All of the women had experienced personal trauma and had family members killed by Taliban. Furthermore, the interviewed women did not have any family support networks in Australia. Their social contacts were other women from Afghan backgrounds. In addition, the interviewees had various physical and psychological malaise, and had previously visited medical practitioners, psychologists, and psychiatrists. The narratives in this paper have been translated from Dari, the language of the interviewees.

Refugees and 'the Transition of Agency'

Given the widespread phenomenon of refugees, it is difficult to make universal claims about what constitutes 'refugeeness'. Maybe here we can recall Veena Das's notion that refugees force the question between the "cosmologies of the powerful" and the "cosmologies of the powerless" (Das, 1995, pp.139-140). However, by insinuating that refugees are powerless merely represents them as objects that are devoid of agency. We fall into the camp with those who readily objectify refugees. Here, Ghassan Hage's analysis of refugees as Other is insightful. For Hage (1998), refugees

have an ambiguous agency to the extent that it threatens authorities. Consequently, the will of refugees must be eroded in order to acquiesce to the will of the state. Hage uses the analogy of domesticated animals which are non-threatening to their owners. Like domesticated animals, the refugee must be transformed from his/her apparent 'wild state' into a tamed animal (Hage, 1998). In Australia, the use of detention centres placed in deserts, electrified fences, dehumanizing language, and monitoring strategies were ways of breaking the agency of refugees. However, the attempted emasculation of self was not to be. Some refugees at the Woomera detention centre in South Australia protested by sewing their lips. The symbolism of lip sewing was a stark political protest. The closure of the lips was a metaphor of the trauma which they had experienced. To close the mouth meant the cessation of dialogue, the beginning of death. This immobilization of the body gives rise to "conceptual and bodily distortions" in the struggle for bodily being (Jackson, 2002, p.218). For instance, in some Muslim societies the defacement of the human body such as the cutting off of hands signifies the cessation of communal identity; the loss of the right hand makes commensality impossible. The person in question is indefinitely marginalised.

Arguably, the trauma suffered by refugees is linked to the transitoriness of post modernity. After World War Two Adorno had written that the concept of home was no longer possible (Adorno, 1978, p.38-39; Jackson, 2002, p.81). He meant that the destruction of Europe presaged the unprecedented "emigration and statelessness" of millions of European refugees (Jackson, 2002, p.81). This post-war displacement of humans had shattered the agrarian world where many refugees had originated. This migration heralded a new way for "defining self and other" (Bussey, 2006, p.109), which for Das rendered the "self radically fugitive and the world radically fragmented" (Das, 1991, p.65). The polarisation of self has caused a growth of fundamentalisms as well as a loss of empathy of the individual (Bussey, 2006, p.109). The loss of empathy has prompted Inayatullah to suggest a change in the moral compass of individuals and societies (Inayatullah, 2005). For Inayatullah the process of empathy entails being in the other's shoes – in understanding their hopes and concerns (Inayatullah, 2005, p.56). In Martin Buber's words this would entail viewing the Other as subject. However, "such a recognition between oneself in the other" must be engaged with caution. As Hannah Arendt notes, empathy may become informed by utopian ideals which too readily categorise the refugee as martyr whose survival is contingent upon the kindness of others (Jackson, 2002, p.82). Disempowerment rather than salvation is the outcome of such a process. When Jackson writes that the refugee is an iconic figure of the twentieth century and beyond, he intimates the 'limbo' condition of many of the world's denizens (Jackson, 2002, p.85). Exhausted by our search for meaning in a fragmented world, marginality may offer us new futures to becoming more inclusive of others (Jackson, 2002, p.85).

Broken Pathways

According to Jackson, the metaphor of paths acknowledges the tie between bodily, social and conceptual domains into a unified image (1989, p.146). For refugees the pathways between the material world and the body have been either disrupted or

expunged. This condition often manifests in belief systems in which the diminished self perceives the ambiguous Other as snatching its vitality. In Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies belief in the evil eye cast by a stranger or spirit being can cause illness or even lead to spirit possession.

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out that the power of metaphors lie in their ability to inform perception and experience. Metaphors are ways of thinking through the body in Jackson's discourse (1989). It is not surprising, then, that metaphors of embodiment foreground refugees' personal accounts of the Other. Their stories connect corporeal existence with the body of the world. What happens to one domain effects the other domain. Both are inextricably linked. This may explain why refugees use metaphors in mediating illness and pain. Take for instance the following narrative of a female Afghan refugee and how bodily metaphors are interwoven in her story.

My head is heavy, it feels like a mountain, I don't think that medications help but my doctor thinks that they do, I feel that my brain is not working (Its like that its off and the expiry dates is over). My life and my memories play in front of my eyes like that I'm watching a movie and I can't stop thinking its on my mind and my brain .The medications make me drowsy, they don't help me to forget the past and they don't ease my pain. I sometimes shake like that I have wires of electricity in my body, while I'm on medication I don't feel anything and when I'm not drowsy I remember what has happened to me and I feel nervous again. It feels that my head doesn't belong to my neck, its heavy on my body. There is this story in Afghanistan about a camel when someone asked him why do have a hump at your back? And he said there is no straight bone in my whole body let alone my back! This story very much describes how I feel when I complain about different pains. I have pain all over my body so there is no surprise that I feel the way I do about my head being so heavy and painful.

I don't eat much but I always feel very heavy, when I think a lot about stuff I feel that my stomach is full and I feel that I have put some weight on. I feel as heavy as a rock. I'm illiterate and I'm like a blind person.

When I stretch I get numb in my legs and arms, my hear is like being pressed by something it's like there is a spit which goes from by heart to my back (its like saying that there is a connection between back and heart and not so much to say that I have heart problem but more to say that I feel pain in my heart and that effects my back). I feel hot and I get red. Its like that I'm in fire , I feel that fire is coming out of my ears and my eyes. Every time I think about my life and what happened to me during Taliban and the trauma that I went through with my kids and my family I feel that my heart gets split into pieces and I feel hot like having a fever. After that I feel so numb it's like that I'm a plastic bag with no feelings and I feel the numbness in my legs and toes as well as the rest of my body. Most of the time, I feel that I have no energy left in me and I can't move.

Here, the notion of heaviness must be understood in the Afghan understandings of the body. In Afghan society life is carried on one's back and pain is felt in the heart, the site of intense emotion. The notion of heaviness is synonymous in Muslim soci-

eties with spiritual illness, in which the person has little control over. Heaviness restricts movement, the ability to move, to proceed with one's life in a meaningful manner. In addition, to have the heart rendered in two alludes to the dislocation of body from the home land. In the following story by another female Afghan refugee personal malaise is tied to loss.

I have different pains from heat to toe. Headache is something that I wake up with and go to bed with at night, its there all the time. My head feels heavy and it gives me headache all the time. I don't get good sleep at night and constantly thinking of my life and my past and all the problems that I have experienced. At nights I feel that my toes are in fire and then it gets cold and this hot and cold making me sick and cant get sleep. I wish there was something which could take it away. I feel numbness in my legs and I can't walk. Sometimes I feel that I can't breath and there is not enough air, it's almost like that I'm choking. I don't like the taste of meat and vegetables here. To me they have no taste. I think its all because of the chemicals. There is enough food available and even though I eat enough but I feel hungry most of the time. It's like nothing gets absorbed into my body.

Here, the metaphor between food and loss is important. Food is analogous to Michael Herzfeld's notion of cultural intimacy (1997). The serving of food is about controlling what one consumes. Therefore commensality is not only about "control over one's interiority" (Jackson, 2002, p.72), but also re-establishes those practices which one engaged in their everyday lifeworlds. Food making is synonymous with rebuilding one's life. However, Australian food, although abundant, is not something which is found to be nourishing. The perceived inability to absorb food may be viewed as a metaphor of loss from those ties which had nourished both body and soul. In Afghan society, food is connected with kinship ties and paths into other people's lives. Commensality is about establishing and maintaining pathways of intimacy, pathways which no longer exist.

Storytelling and Futures

Refugees and their treatment are a barometer of the West's moral crisis. Seminal events like the destruction of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, inadvertently accorded refugees with pariah status. In response to 9/11, Western governments ushered in a logic of paranoia and threat "dramatizing a publicly convenient link between international migration and security (Faist, 2002, p.7-8). In the post 9/11 world refugees have become the new world Other in which they are "subjected to inferiority" (Bussey, 2006, p.114). In Australia the plight of asylum seekers from central Asia and the Middle East was constructed in terms of their potential threat to Australian security. Hage points out that refugees were viewed as a threat to the hopes and aspiration of ordinary Australians (2003, p.3). Collective paranoia was fused with management of national space. This meant that ordinary Australians saw themselves as dictating the conditions in relation to who was allowed entrance into Australia. The collective narrative of national space management was juxtaposed by refugees' stories which foregrounded a people who no longer had any space to manage. The Tampa cri-

sis and the 'children overboard' affair which both occurred in 2001 were engineered by the Australian media to heighten the ambiguity of refugees.

It can be argued that the violence in which refugees worldwide are subjected to mirror the West's pathology, and its fixation with a language of violence. Michael True (2002, p.140), tells us that in the future societies will need to develop a language of non-violence while Bussey encourages the supplanting of current violent narratives for a neohumanism that is socially, ecologically, and spiritually sustainable (2006, p.114). Concomitantly, futures will need to transform the global top-down approach which fosters eco-suicide and multiple structural violences (True, 2002, p.140). The level of structural violence across the globe is evident in the way in which tens of millions of ordinary people are daily denied their humanity. It is this same pathology which deprives the masses of humanity while extolling those privileged with symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Harris observes how by this logic "three million souls can be starved and murdered in the Congo, and our Argus-eyed media scarcely blink (Harris, 2006, p.195). Harris (2006, pp.195-196) continues:

When a princess dies in a car accident, however, a quarter of the earth's population falls prostrate with grief. Perhaps we are unable to feel what we must feel in order to change the world.

The diminishing art of storytelling in the West has also brokered post-modernity's image based societies. Images are post-modernism's baroque art (Thompson, 1998, p.306). The bombardment of images has led to a collective psychosis, a baroque realm catered to the limitless whims of denizens, "flipping back and forth between moods as different channels" (Thompson, 1998, p.304). The apotheosis of post-modernity's imagery is depicted in the Hollywood movie *Hurly Burly* (2000). In one scene the cocaine addicted Sean Penn watches a series of images of third world suffering on television. Aghast by the terrible images he cries out, "What am I suppose to feel?"

The kind of evolution which we are faced with is one of increasing fragmentation. At the same time the bifurcations facing all societies allow for alternative futures (Laszlo, 1994, p.59). This entails increasing interconnections to ensure a sustained coordination between social spheres (Laszlo, 1994, p.60). Intrinsic to this process would be a global reconciliation with refugees and their crisis. An appropriate futures response would be fostering neo-humanist principles in dealing with refugees. It would also mean recognising their personal narratives. The safeguarding of refugees would be a positive future step in engineering more caring societies. Refugees' narratives reveal contemporary and future social dilemmas which many societies face. The role of storytelling is kernel to the human condition and is tied to macro features of society. If we agree that stories are ways in which people seek connection, then we can regard them as being emergent of a new evolution. Since refugees are a global problem their stories have world wide relevance. Their stories offer "significant positive impact" since they also raise issues of human and environmental justice (Laszlo, 1994, p.91). Laszlo goes further. He advocates a necessary shift in people's cognitive maps in the future which value cooperation and "valuation of diversity" (Laszlo et al, 1996, p.106). Our present cognitive maps have been influenced by the absolutism of Newtonian physics in that powerbrokers believe that the world can be engineered to

follow human interests (Laszlo et al, 1996, p.111). It is a worldview based on control. An emerging cognitive map would be influenced by systems theory which emphasises the unity of "human beings and human societies" as "co-evolving elements" (Laszlo, 1996, p.111).

Laszlo's call for a macroshift in global thinking is also important to mention here. Laszlo explains that modern civilisation has been propped by the myth of the separation of individuals from each other and from nature. This has been influenced by classical physics which views objects as being self contained (Laszlo, 2001, p.112). Furthermore, classical economic paradigms have reinforced the notion of the rational and self interested actor (Laszlo, 2001, p.112). Laszlo reminds us that such constructions are contrary to quantum physics which views nature as an inter-connected and inter-dependent matrix. Moreover, on a social level such intensive inter-connectedness has been crucial to the formation of global economic and social systems. Appadurai's famous notion of global scapes (1996) is a case in point. "Communication unfolds on multiple levels" of complexity; and that such multiple communication also reveals the formation of what Laszlo calls an "intensive evolution" which drives humans to a higher level of consciousness (Laszlo, 2001, p.113). Such a level of high consciousness not only enables actors to utilise the subtle, inter-linking connections that bind humans to each other and to nature, but also, widens human values to a global centered dimension (Laszlo, 2001, p.113). In this way, refugees and their stories play an important part in this paradigm shift as they serve in the formation of our changing evolutionary consciousness. Stories link up people with communities. Individual narratives can also be liminal which enable social renewal. It is precisely the power of refugees' stories which have the capacity for guiding the moral compass of our futures towards a more holistic world.

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