

**RESEARCH**

# Genres of Departure: Forced Migrants' Family Separation and Personal Narratives

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The absence of family members is often inseparable from the phenomenon of forced migration. This article examines how forced migrants make experiences of family separation bearable and meaningful through personal narratives. Following narrative theory and methodology, we understand that people organise their experiences and memories of past incidents predominantly in the form of stories. Narratives also play a crucial role in managing emotions. Earlier literature emphasises that there is no uniform refugee experience or story, but telling a story may help in reconstructing identities and coping with losses. Our data set consists of interviews with 55 forced migrants living in Finland who have experienced family separation. Our narrative analysis reveals that forced migrants make sense of their lives by telling three types of stories: fractured tragedies, salvation narratives and absurd stories. These genres provide different ways of presenting one's experiences and oneself as an actor. At the same time, each genre limits what can be considered appropriate within a given story. As our study shows, forced migrants may use different types of narratives very creatively to make their hardships more manageable. And stories may enable breaking free from oppressions.

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**Keywords:** Forced migration; refugees; family separation; story; narrative methods

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**Introduction**

Forced migration is always a catastrophic life event that forces an individual to reconsider their life story. Even after dealing with traumatic events in the country of origin and during the migration process, an individual is often left in a precarious situation for a long period. This involves the loss of familiar surroundings and social networks, while one's position in society can change dramatically. Forced migrants have to rethink their identity and try to find some meaning in their situation. As Eastmond (2007: 248) has noted, analysing the personal stories of forced migrants can 'provide insights into how forced migrants seek to make sense of displacement and violence' and 're-establish identity in ruptured life courses and communities'. In this article, we focus on how forced migrants make sense of experiences of family separation by integrating those experiences into their narrations about their lives.

Earlier scholarship emphasises that there is no uniform refugee experience or story (Eastmond 2007; Malkki 1995). Despite similarities in their general predicament, forced migrants have extremely divergent backgrounds in terms of, for example, early life conditions, education and wealth. Some may be able to draw on the types of financial, social and cultural resources that others do not have any access to (Hiitola 2019). Many forced migrants have lived their whole lives in a liminal state, where distinctions between 'country of origin' and 'destination country' can appear quite obscure. Instead of facing a momentary crisis that causes a rupture in life plans, forced migrants often construct their life stories on shaky ground, where all aspects of their surroundings are constantly in flux. We refer to our research participants as forced migrants, as they have all received their residence permits in the asylum process. Meanwhile, we also understand that the phenomena of forced and voluntary migration are often overlapping and hard to separate (see Erdal & Oeppen 2018).

Although there are some widely shared features in 'refugee narratives', the reason for these similarities is not so much the shared common experiences as it is the shared procedures and expectations that forced migrants face when they seek citizenship in a new country. A common refugee story seems to be a product of people emulating stories that the authorities want to hear (Adams 2009; Eastmond 2007; Jacquemet 2009; Rud 2018; Vogl 2013). State officials decide the destiny of asylum seekers based on the narratives they tell, which creates a strong incentive to copy successful ways of presenting one's story. Previous rulings teach forced migrants to construct stories in ways that are considered legitimate and believable by state agencies. Forced migrants may end up narrating isomorphic stories so that their plight is taken seriously and their suffering is considered authentic. The context of the storytelling and the asymmetric power relations involved end up dictating the narration more than personal conceptions or actual efforts of making sense of past experiences. Given the heterogeneity of the actors involved, one should pay attention to variations in the way individuals narrate their stories and try to find the logic behind the forms of storytelling.

Knowledge about family separation of forced migrants is mostly situated within psychology and trauma studies. These scholars suggest that family separation can have long-lasting effects, which include a variety of post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms, depression, anxiety and insomnia (Nickerson et al. 2010; Rousseau et al. 2004; Wilmsen 2013). Some scholars touch upon the issue of personal narratives; for example, De Haene, Grietens and Verschuere (2010) suggest that internalised narrations of intergenerational support may offer psychological relief. Understanding that one's parents tried their best to offer protection in the middle of a conflict seems to support feelings of security as an adult. In addition, the vast literature on transnational family relationships (e.g., Baldassar et al. 2014; Bryceson & Vuorela 2002; Goulbourne et al. 2009; Hiitola et al. 2020; Tiilikainen, Al-Sharmani & Mustasaari 2019) offers insights into how family life and care is performed across borders. However, only a few researchers have touched upon the issue of family separation when analysing transnational relations. Some recent notable exceptions, such as Pellander and Leinonen (2020) and Näre (2020), highlight the violent nature of the slow administrative procedures of nation-state agencies that cause or prolong family separation. Hiitola (2019) suggests that experiences of separation are also shaped by migrants' capital and resources before and after migration (see also Kofman 2018).

Migrants' financial resources have gained increasing significance in family reunifications because Finland – along with many other European states – has adopted a number of restrictive migration policies. For instance, effective since 1 July 2016, Finland extended the income requirement for family reunification to apply to migrants receiving 'subsidiary protection' status, which is part of the category of international protection. Currently high-income requirements are also enforced for migrants with a status called 'compassionate grounds' (most often given to unaccompanied minors) and status as a victim of human trafficking

(see Finnish Immigration Service 2019a). For example, for a family of three children and two parents, the income requirement is 2,900 euros of net income monthly, which corresponds to about 4,000 euros per month (Hiitola 2019; Finnish Immigration Service 2019b). This is often impossible to fulfil by the single 'sponsoring' migrant living in Finland. Currently, only forced migrants who have refugee status (asylum) are allowed to reunite with their families without meeting the income limit if they submit their family reunification applications within a three-month time limit. In addition to these financial obstacles, forced migrants typically face several structural and administrative hardships in submitting their applications (see Hiitola 2019).

This article proceeds in the following way. We start by discussing the many functions that narratives serve in society for both individuals and groups. We explore the relationship between cultural scripts and personal narratives. Following that, we discuss the data and methods of the study. We then present our empirical findings by going through the three narrative types found in our data. We conclude by examining our findings in the context of earlier literature concerning narrative analysis and forced migration.

### **Cultural Scripts, Personal Narratives**

Personal narratives are always embedded in interaction and constructed with a certain audience in mind (Bruner 1991). Hence, research interviews also offer a specific context for forced migrants to tell their story and to perform identity for a wider audience. This context allows for a lot more freedom compared to the interviews conducted by the immigration officials (concerning the latter, see Puumala, Ylikomi & Ristimäki 2018). Given a more empathetic environment, people may feel comfortable with challenging the common narratives that others might expect from them. In the words of Eastmond (2007: 254), these stories can partly serve the purpose of 'reaffirmation of self, in order to contest over-generalized and de-individualizing images promoted in a receiving society or a camp situation'.

According to Bruner (1991), people organise their experiences and memories of past incidents predominantly in the form of stories. This makes narratives profound sense-making devices. Narratives do not exist in the world by their own force but need to be actively constructed and told by someone. Stories are an instrument that people use to bring order and unity to an otherwise quite chaotic reality (Bamberg & McCabe 1998: iii). By organising events and actions into comprehensible sequences that seem to follow some sort of logic, they can be rendered understandable and meaningful as part of a larger whole. People use narratives to make sense of their experiences (Czarniawska-Joerges 2004: 5; Widdershoven 1993: 2) and construct images of themselves, both for external audiences and for their own benefit (Bruner 2004).

Narratives are significant tools for dealing with hardships. It is no wonder that many stories are centred around overcoming grief and misfortunes. On the one hand, presenting a protagonist facing many adversities is almost a universal feature of storytelling (Greimas 1983; Propp 1968) and a prerequisite for constructing a story considered worth listening to (Bruner 1991). On the other hand, people often find consolation in taking the suffering and obstacles they face and constructing a narrative that infuses them with meaning. When difficult situations are made understandable and meaningful, they may become bearable, even if there is no happy ending (Bruner 1991; Brockmeier 2001; Eastmond 2007). They can alleviate the suffering of individuals and communities, and even be turned into symbolic tools in the fight for a brighter future (Eastmond 2007; Jackson 2002: 16–17).

Individuals find themselves immersed in the vast reservoir of stories provided by their culture from very early on. Among this inventory of stories, there is a more limited body of canonical narratives describing typical life stories and events for individuals (Bruner 2004). In

the field of narrative studies, these canonical narratives are considered *cultural scripts* (Bruner 1991: 11–12; Hyvärinen 1998: 454–456). They act as models and yardsticks for individuals who are constructing their own life stories. Cultural scripts tell what kinds of life paths are considered ordinary and successful. Hence, there is always a normative aspect involved. In the words of Bruner (2004: 694), these cultural scripts offer prevailing theories about ‘possible lives’. They create expectations of what one should anticipate from life: What are the normal stages of life, what kind of achievements and behaviour are appropriate for each stage and how one transitions from one to the next.

As personal narratives are constructed in relation to surrounding social and cultural expectations (Bruner 2004; Hyvärinen 1998), a clear deviation from standard cultural scripts demands an explanation. On the one hand, these breaches of expectations are precisely what are considered to make personal stories worth telling (Bruner 1991; 2004). For a story to be understandable, it needs to build on familiar elements, but a competent storyteller combines traditional (cultural) scripts with novel elements that take the audience by surprise or at least keep them from falling asleep. The deviations do not have to be monumental. On the other hand, when one does encounter traumatic events that shake the foundations of one’s personal life story, the crisis can put to question one’s identity and core values. Falling seriously ill and going through bankruptcy are some of the common crises that force people to reflect on their life story and revise their conception of self and of purpose in life (Bruner 1991).

In coping with hardship and loss, individuals have to find a new way to construct their personal story to make their experiences feel manageable. When difficult situations are rendered understandable and meaningful, they may become bearable (Brockmeier 2001; Bruner 1991; Eastmond 2007). It is when the rug is pulled from underneath one’s feet that telling stories becomes crucial for carrying on. Inventive ways of using narratives to deal with disastrous life events may end up being taken up by others in similar situations. Through circulation, they may transform into canonical cultural scripts that get added to the cultural tool kit of storytelling at each individual’s disposal (Bruner 1991; 2004).

## Data and Ethics

The interviews in this study were conducted during 2018–2020. The study was part of a project Family Separation, Migration Status and Everyday Security (Academy of Finland 2018–2021). The data consist of 45 group and individual interviews, which the participants took part in either alone or with their family members. These semi-structured interviews involved 55 forced migrants altogether (18 women and 37 men). Sixteen interviewees had come to Finland as unaccompanied minors and 39 as adults. One family was interviewed twice, and one family was interviewed three times (in the beginning and middle of the process, and after reunification). The interviewees had lived in Finland for between one and eight years. The ages of the interviewees at the time of the interview ranged from 17 to 61 years. The interviewees were from Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Ethiopia. As the research assistants in the project who had helped to recruit the interviewees belonged to the Afghan, Iranian and Iraqi diasporas, the numbers of Afghan and Iraqi interviewees were the highest. The interviews were conducted in Finnish, English, Dari or Arabic, depending on the participants’ language skills.

The main guiding ethical principle in this study was to ‘do no harm’, following the Oxford Refugee Studies Centre’s (2007) guidelines. Additionally, recent refugee scholars have highlighted the need for a more reciprocal relationship with research participants. Instead of ‘stealing stories’, scholars should seek to benefit the vulnerable groups themselves (Krause 2017; Mackenzie, McDowell & Pittaway 2007). These issues were addressed in this study on the micro level by guiding the participants towards non-governmental organisations and officials who could help them with their often-complicated family reunification processes. On

the macro level, the project team actively engaged in societal discussion about Finnish family reunification policies through stressing the effects of tightened policies on refugees' lives.

The interaction between the interviewees and the interviewers was often shaped by the interviewees' strong desire to share their experiences of oppressive and even, at times, violent (see Leinonen & Pellander 2020) bureaucratic procedures while seeking family reunification. The research interviews offered a context where the interviewees could tell their full stories, which they often felt were not heard by the immigration officials. Another important factor shaping the interaction in the situations was that the interview call was targeted for forced migrants who already had or were hoping to reunite with their families. The participants knew beforehand that the interview would focus on this intimate topic. Forced migrants whose experiences were too difficult to share probably did not consider participating. Nonetheless, several interviews needed to be discontinued because of the interviewees' psychological distress (see more description on research methodologies with people in precarious and vulnerable situations: Hiitola 2021; Puumala, Ylikomi & Ristimäki 2018). The interviewee and the research assistant translators shared the urgency of the interviewees' pleas. This affective atmosphere also led them to engage in public discussion and in attempts to influence decision-makers (see Hiitola 2021).

The project plan, interview questions, consent form and other relevant documents were reviewed by the Ethics Committee of the University of Turku before the data collection (in the spring of 2018). For the interviews with minors who were still living in a group home for young people, a separate research permit was sought from the group home, in addition to the consent of the interviewees themselves. All identifying information, such as cities of origin, places of work or specific identifying circumstances, has been omitted from the interview quotations. The interviewees' names are pseudonyms.

Our study approaches narratives from a constructionist framework and focuses more on *how* the story is told instead of looking only at the content of the story. This approach is influenced both by *interactional* analysis that narrows down to the interaction involved in generating narratives and by *performative* analysis that looks at the way the narrator uses a story to do things, for example, to construct one's identity (Riessman 2005). We will use selected quotes from the interviews that best illustrate the style of narration.

We pay special attention to the *genre* of the narratives. By genre we refer to the relatively stable and widely recognisable conventions of storytelling that concern both the content and the form of narratives or, in more technical terms, the semantics and syntax of narratives (Altman 1984). Knowledge of generic conventions can be used both by the narrator and by the audience in managing expectations (Altman 1998; Neale 2000). It is mutually beneficial to the narrator and the audience to have at least some level of shared understanding of the story that is about to unfold: What are the likely character types and their relations, is the audience expected to be joyful or sad, what elements should they pay attention to and so on. Our analysis distinguishes genres of storytelling by focusing on a set of stylistic attributes of the narratives like: How much agency is given to the protagonist of the story, how emotional is the narrative, the fluency of narration and the use of meta-narration. In the following section, we present the three genres that we distinguished from the interviews: Fractured tragedies, salvation stories and theatres of the absurd.

### **Fractured Tragedies**

The stories we have grouped under the category of *fractured tragedies* are, perhaps, what one would expect in a situation of forced family separation. The narratives are typically highly emotional, and the people telling the stories often seemed particularly unwell during the interviews.

One Iraqi man, who we will call Ali, had converted from Islam to Christianity and received international protection based on the category of subsidiary grounds. For this man, with three children and a wife in Iraq, family reunification would have required a monthly salary of about 4,000 euros, which in Finland would correspond to a professional-level salary. The man was unable to read or write in his mother tongue and had not been able to learn Finnish either. Thus, his chances of acquiring work were slim. Below is his answer to a question about his feelings with regard to the situation [translated from Arabic]:

It is not only difficult. Death is better. It is better because then one forgets when he dies. What's the meaning of your life when your children and wife are somewhere else displaced? What is the meaning of life in that case, or what kind of future? I can't go back [to Iraq]. Without a doubt I would be killed if returned to Iraq. The religion and the tribal customs say that the one is not allowed to change their religion. What's the sense in living if my family has left me?

(Interview with Ali, from Iraq, in Finland for three years)

Ali's narration has the storyline of a tragedy. He uses strong emotional expressions in his narration. The nuclear family, which he had to leave when fleeing, is what gives meaning to his life in his narration. As the story evolves, we learn that Ali's wife, who still lives in Iraq, also condemns his conversion to Christianity. Now, given his difficulties and the long waiting time in the family reunification process, his wife is thinking about leaving him. Ali's parents and those of his wife are also pressuring her to leave Ali, who has now become an 'infidel' in their eyes. The only possibility for Ali's wife might be divorce, which would also then condemn her to the position of a divorcee, a difficult life in the patriarchal Iraqi society. The tragedy is intensified through these several threads of excruciating circumstances, where Ali himself is presented as having very little agency. The villains in Ali's story are his wife's family members and the other Iraqis who have condemned him. 'In Iraq, a brother wouldn't help a brother', Ali explains, as he sees his dire circumstances as a result of evil forces in his country of origin.

Ali's story plays out on several different levels, all of which include struggles. The family reunification process in Finland seems impossible, but so does the situation of his nuclear family in Iraq. Ali's narration is similar to many other tragedies in that it is not fully coherent. The stories jump back and forth between events, and it can often be hard to determine how a section fits into the larger story. Although awkward temporal leaps were found among all the story types, they were most present in the often-hopeless tragedies, whose narrators were also ostensibly unwell at the time of the interviews. This led us to connect the disrupted narrations to unresolved traumatic memories that the narrators were not able to form into concise stories (cf. Van der Kolk & Fisler 1995).

The next story is from an interview with two young women from Afghanistan, who spoke about severe physical and sexual abuse that had continued along their refugee journeys. One of the women, Bahar, is speaking in the quote that follows. When she was young, her mother was sold to another man as a payment for the debts of Bahar's drug-addicted father. The children were left with their addicted and abusive father, but years later they managed to escape and find their way to Finland as asylum seekers. All the children received residence permits in Finland and, after already living in Finland for some time, they discovered their mother's whereabouts. The following narration concerns a time when the mother was living with her second husband, the man to whom she was sold [translated from Persian]:

**Ahmed (research assistant):** When? When your mother was in [place] and you were calling her?



**Bahar:** Yes, that time. I mean when I got to know where she is. I was in shock for a week and had nightmares. One time, there was snow on the ground. I was sleeping and dreamt that my mother came to my room and said 'come with me. I go and you follow'. Then I stood up without having shoes or proper clothes on. I went to the street running to find her. I was screaming on the street [starts to cry].

[ ... ]

**Bahar:** Five of the staff went to get me. Also, there was my sister's representative, she had a meeting with someone. She was in our camp. Five people came to get me. I was just screaming and calling out for my mother. I tried to find her. I was going towards the street when the staff captured me.

**Johanna:** So, your mother. When you contacted your mother, she was still living with the man? Then she was able to escape, or what happened to her?

(Interview with Bahar, from Afghanistan, in Finland for four years)

It was difficult to follow this story during the interview, and the translator also repeatedly tried to find the storyline of the narrative by clarifying the questions and taking affective responsibility for the situation. The start of the narration is typical for such stories, which are fractured and disorganised. When asked about keeping in contact with her newly found mother, Bahar goes on to explain her nightmares instead of answering the question. She gives a very detailed explanation of one particular nightmare and about how she wandered outside of the reception centre in her sleep.

Bahar's main story, of keeping in contact with her mother, is lacking details, but instead the memory of the state of mind at the time is invoked with detailed sensory information. The emotional, fragmented memory about the nightmare is then interrupted while the translator tells the interviewer what has been said. Johanna then redirects the story to the original narration, the mother's situation at the time when the children found her. We see this as a process of the interviewer and translator co-constructing narratives. This aspect was especially present in the fractured narrations that tended to jump from descriptions of events to sensory details, thus losing the storyline.

Finally, Bahar's story continues from where it left off. After the moment quoted above, Bahar starts to describe how her mother's husband was 'always beating her' and tells about the plight of the children, her younger siblings. The story jumps from one event to another. Like many other fragmented stories, certain incidents tend to become highlighted, whereas some seemingly significant events – even long periods of time – are fast-forwarded.

As a genre, the fractured tragedies in the data shared a main structure in which the narrator was a victim of different malevolent forces. These tragedies depicted a story of suffering wherein the narrator's own motives were pure. Thus, the stories had a clear theme of good versus evil. The evils consisted of actors in the country of origin, such as terrorist groups, corrupt government officials, or quite often also one's own family members who had turned against the narrator. In some stories the villain was the Finnish immigration system, often represented in the story by a specific evil person who had written the case file on the interviewee. Quoting one interviewee's words: 'I cannot forgive this person. It's so wrong'. In the fractured tragedies, case files were often presented as transcriptions of the damning views of individual officials instead of an outcome of a faceless immigration control.

## Salvations

Another way of telling one's story was to construct a narrative of salvation: A type of a story about heroic struggles, where the protagonist ends up overcoming the misfortunes they encounter. As in the fracture narratives, the protagonist is presented as a morally pure actor.

However, in the salvation stories the good finally triumphs because of the actions taken by the protagonist. These narratives were carefully crafted, and the person telling the story was presented as someone who had a good grasp of what was happening and always had at least some agency. These narratives were also characterised by descriptions of the narrator's emotions and thought processes along the journey. The inner feelings of the protagonist were integrated into the storyline throughout. These narratives were the most fluent and coherent in the data set. With one exception, these stories were only told by migrants who had been successful in their family reunification. It seems that the outcome of the process is a key factor affecting the narration, although it should not be considered a direct cause for choosing a specific genre of storytelling.

One Iraqi man, Yasin, who had recently reunited with his family, tells an exceptionally well-constructed story starting from his refugee journey:

I was wounded in my feet while getting through the razor-wire, about ten centimetres cut. Although my trousers were torn and stained with blood, I didn't feel it, because I was just focused on how to get out of there. That's the one sensation that I want to deliver: when you are injured but you can't feel the pain because you just want to continue your journey, to proceed on your way.

(Interview with Yasin, from Iraq, in Finland for three years)

The narration is full of reflection on his feelings at the specific time of the story. The quote ends with Yasin's narration about what he wants to convey to the interviewer. He has already carefully thought about his story and reflected on how he wants to tell it. In contrast to fractured tragedies, this narration is coherent and follows an exciting plot that is carefully constructed.

Another aspect that salvation stories shared was that they always included metanarratives. The narrators were conscious of how long the story should or could be and constructed it accordingly. At one point in his story, Yasin continues:

This is one of dozens of things that had taken place which I am willing to mention, because I don't think that the time is adequate to cover everything. It's a long story that might need a long film to cover all of its aspects; a film of two hours, just to explain such a topic. I hope that I have answered your question.

Yasin acknowledges that his story is exciting and interesting. He also hints to the listeners that he could offer much more than what the interview has time to cover.

What was striking in salvation stories was that the narrators presented themselves completely differently from the self-presentations in other story types. For them, the world had an order and rationality. With the right kind of preparation and actions, one could influence one's fate. This type of control over the situation was not present in other types of stories.

Salvation stories also jumped between different storylines but in a very different way from the fractured tragedies. Instead of uncontrolled shifts, the narrator composed the story like a skilful film director. Yasin, for example, explained how his story changed after he had submitted his family reunification application. He said: 'I started to check out my online account on [the] EnterFinland service on a daily basis, and this was a new story. Life is like that, consisting of certain phases. I was interviewed in February, and we had to wait until August, when we got the decision'. In salvation narrations, new stories are integrated into old ones, and events are presented as sequences that all have specific meaning within the main plot.

Another Iraqi man, Nasim, told a story that first emphasised tragic elements but was then moulded into a story of salvation once the discussion turned to the successful family



reunification. He had been placed in a reception centre in a small Finnish town, where he experienced continuous racism. His initial view of Finnish society as a whole was negative. The story takes a different turn after Nasim reaches the point where he receives a residence permit:

I bought stuff, like I started to adapt to the situation. [ ... ] I was trying to divert my wife's thoughts away from feeling hopeless and desperate and frustrated, so I began to tell her that now my life has become stable, and I hope that you come and join me. Finland is a beautiful country. I started to see it. I felt that my view has changed once I became a refugee compared to the time when I was an asylum seeker. I have been telling her that the life is beautiful. What I loved here is how Finns treat the kids. How they would escort them to the kindergarten.

(Interview with Nasim, from Iraq, in Finland for three years)

The turning point in Nasim's story is when he receives refugee status and can start to think about building his life in Finland. He starts to integrate his wife and children into the story at this turning point. The narration then starts to resemble a story of salvation. Instead of being a mere victim of circumstances, Nasim now becomes an actor who is able to influence his surroundings. The narration starts to include metanarrative. This is accompanied by reflective speech about emotions. The ending of the narrative is profusely happy:

They have arrived, thank God. It has been such a transitory point in my life. A new life has started, far away from war, from killings, from oppression. Far away from children's and human rights violations. So this kind of life has started for us.

The interesting thing about Nasim's narration is that it begins with a very positive speech about Iraqis as a group and negative characterisations of racist Finns. However, the narrative changes towards the end. Finnish people are depicted as being on the side of the 'good' forces. Finns are presented as the people who treat children well, and the Finnish state is described as protecting children's rights, in contrast to the state of Iraq. There does not seem to be any specific incident that would have changed the narrator's perception of Finnish people. Rather, it might be that a very negative image of the destination country would have been difficult to fit together with the salvation story that Nasim ends up telling. The genre itself, which he lands on at the end of the interview, may guide him to paint a very different picture of Finnish people than what he started with.

The abovementioned feature of salvation stories was striking. In all of them, the narrators spoke positively about living in Finland, the Finnish people and the Finnish state. It could be argued that by choosing the salvation story the narrators felt a need to highlight the positive aspects of their current surroundings and to belittle the problems that could be detected here and there in their narration. It would be hard to convey a salvation story where the destination society is depicted, for example, as a racist and unpleasant social environment. At least, this discrepancy would have to be explained to the audience somehow, as it goes against the expectations of a salvation story with a happy ending.

### **Theatres of the Absurd**

Finally, we found that many narratives shared an absurdist character. They were told from the perspective of actors who had very limited knowledge of other people's destinies and their own circumstances. No bird's-eye view was provided for the events of the story. This made the sometimes extremely fortunate events that some of the narrators experienced an incredible

surprise, as one was not expecting any kind of 'divine intervention'. This made these twists in the narratives quite humorous. The multiple surprises within a narrative could make the story either happy or sad, but overall, they appeared as a series of unlikely episodes that did not seem to follow any logic. These stories could very well have been told by evoking a divine omniscient character responsible for the fate of the protagonist and the curious events along the way, but the narrators chose otherwise. The narrators' perspective held very limited knowledge of what had happened and what was about to come.

One of these examples is a narration by a family from Somalia, where the father and daughter had escaped terrorists at different times and through different routes. The father had left first, as he was threatened by a terrorist group. The daughter left later, as there was an increasing threat of sexual violence at the hiding place for the family. They knew nothing about each other or their routes, but by chance they both ended up in Finland and at the same reception centre. The daughter tells the story:

**Ayaan (daughter):** By accident [laughing]. And think about this. I was at the reception centre for five or six months and then I was transferred [to a city] and we were in the same building.

**Jamal (father):** The same place ...**Ayaan:** I think it was the seventh floor. The adults lived below and the children above. And then one day I was with my friend and we were headed to town and my friend was getting a bus card. So I went with her. And then I saw my father walking [laughing].

**Johanna:** And then what did you say? You didn't know at all where your father was?

**Ayaan:** Yes, and then I thought, that man looks like my father. But then when I saw his eyes. It was unbelievable!

(Interview with Jamal and Ayaan from Somalia, in Finland for seven years)

Although Ayaan and Jamal's story is exceptional, it also sheds light on a very common story in the data: That of absurd life events. This type of narrative was a surprise in our analysis. Previous literature did not offer us many tools to analyse these types of stories. However, they were common among the forced migrants interviewed. One of the defining features of these stories was that you never knew what would happen next.

What also set these stories apart from the others was that they were not emotional at all. Instead they were told as if the – often horrible – incidents were just something that happens. There was nothing that the narrator could do about it, or even feel about it. For example, Ayaan and Jamal talked about two children in the family being killed as a matter of fact. There was no emotion in the narrative:

**Ayaan:** Then after my father left, they killed my two older brothers.

**Johanna:** And where were you?

**Ayaan:** I was with the neighbour. So I didn't die. Fortunately, I wasn't there, or otherwise I would have been dead also.

In addition to the children in the family being killed, the narration also included other tragic deaths, those of Ayaan's cousins. However, no one brought up any feelings on the matter. The events were laid on the table as a matter of fact: This happened and there was nothing the actors could do about it. The feeling of not being in control of the narrative was tangible. There was no rhyme or reason to the events.

Another interviewee, Masooma, born to Afghan-Iranian parents, was an adult living in Finland. A central theme in her story, as in many absurdist stories, is confusion about identity.

Masooma's mother is Iranian and her father was from Afghanistan. Masooma herself was able to get Iranian citizenship at birth, but soon afterwards, the laws changed and a mother could no longer pass on citizenship to her children. This affected Masooma's younger sisters, who inherited their father's Afghan citizenship at birth and were thus denied many citizenship rights in Iran. Only Masooma was able to go to an Iranian school, whereas her siblings could only attend unofficial Afghan schools. She had to hide her origin and family relationships so she could continue her education. Living in constant fear of her father's ethnicity being revealed, she did not talk to any other children in school – all while witnessing the violent discrimination her father and siblings faced as Afghan nationals. This experience influenced her life greatly. She narrates how she finally expressed her deep shame to her relatives:

So I called my relatives and told them that my problem is that although my father is from Afghanistan, I cannot tell anyone. I said that I start feeling like I am going to suffocate. That I cannot tell anyone that I am from Afghanistan. And if I say, many years I could not tell anyone. [ ... ] Now when I meet people, I immediately tell them that I am two-edged. That I am from Afghanistan and Iran. So there won't be any confusion, because it's a bit hard to explain. Iranians don't accept that you are Iranian and Afghans don't accept that you are Afghan. And sometimes I myself wonder what I am. (Interview with Masooma, from Iran, in Finland for 12 years)

The stories of an absurd nature often shared this characteristic of confusion of identity and belonging. People in the stories – the narrator included – often were not who they appeared to be, or they were misrecognised by others. In fact, these stories were often told by people who had lived as refugees for their whole lives and were born to refugee parents. Masooma's difficult experiences of hiding her identity continued even after resettling in Finland. For a long time, she still felt unable to talk about her origins, and she still feels unsure about her real identity.

The question of identity is again highlighted when Masooma tells about her experiences of trying to arrange for family reunification for her mother and sister after her father's suicide. She calls the Finnish embassy in Ankara to enquire about the application. The official at the embassy tells her that 'we don't take Afghan applications. We only take Syrian and Iraqi applications'. Masooma is devastated. It seems that the shame of her double identity continues to haunt her throughout the story in constantly new and unpredictable instances. Masooma is an alien lost in a strange land.

The embassy does finally take the family's application after a struggle with several officials. Masooma feels relieved. Now her family can get to safety. But alas, there is another twist waiting around the corner:

I was sure they would get here. The Finnish system is so good. They will get here. I never expected that ... this kind of an answer, which came in [month]. My mother called and asked if I can check the message from her phone. That it says something. Okay, I went to the website [online service] and it said that family reunification is not granted. That is because they are not 'really dependent'.

Masooma's last hopes were shattered by the decision. Throughout her story, one of the striking characteristics is that the Finnish officials, social workers and psychologists failed to support her and in fact just added to her trauma of not belonging. The final straw is the negative family reunification application and the words 'really dependent' on it. She also gives a possible explanation for why the Finnish officials' actions are the most hurtful: they go completely

against her previous image of Finnish welfare. Again, there is a misrecognition of identity. The Finnish officials that Masooma expected to be her protectors and saviours turned out to be some of her worst adversaries.

### Conclusion

Our analysis revealed three narrative genres: Fractured tragedies, salvation stories and theatres of the absurd. These genres provide different ways of presenting one's experiences and oneself as an actor. At the same time, each limits what can be considered appropriate within a given story. The narrator dictates the genre, and the genre dictates the expectations of the audience and, hence, affects the narration by defining what constitutes a breach of a recognisable script. Picking a genre for a personal narrative is seldom a conscious and calculated decision. Rather, one easily latches on to scripts that offer comfort, make one a likeable protagonist or help to avoid overly uncomfortable topics. Sometimes actors lean on ready-made scripts, and sometimes they revise them into novel models to be used by others going through similar situations. The cultural stock of acceptable personal storylines is constantly in flux.

Our findings concerning the genre of fractured tragedies lend support to Jackson's (2002: 94) observations with regard to narratives about traumatic experiences among forced migrants. According to his research, violence and displacement may pre-empt stories, constituting an 'experiential field in which narrative falters and fails' (*ibid.*). Those who have suffered extreme trauma will often find that those experiences resist narrative ordering and verbal expression. These fractures and awkward jumps can also be tied to the question of affective intensities: With traumatic experiences, certain memories can be so intense that they steal the foreground while others are swept aside. As Wise and Velayutham (2017) have noted, 'extremely negative affects such as fear and terror are inscribed in much more intense embodied modes through traumatic memory'. However, the tragic narratives can also work as coping strategies. They may help in constructing oneself as a victim who is pure at heart but has been subjected to suffering because of the wrongdoings of others. Narratives can help to deal with hardships by attacking difficult emotions full-on and sharing them with others. The typical strong distinction between the good and the bad in the world may offer consolation through the idea that amidst all the terrible things, there are also good people and positive forces at play.

The salvation stories also included tragic events, but they all had happy endings. The narratives were characterised by fluency and consistency. The narrators presented themselves as active agents in charge of their own fate. With only one exception, a story of a young wealthy man whose parents were diplomats and able to visit him regularly, the salvation stories were told by people who experienced successful family reunification. This is one of the crucial factors facilitating the ability to generate success stories. Willingness to tell a salvation story also seemed to entail painting a positive picture of the destination country to make the story appear coherent. Constructing a happy ending and an image of a positive outlook for the future may guide the narrator to diminish the negative aspects of their current surroundings, even when those appear prevalent in the beginning of the story. This is not necessarily about the narrator having transformative experiences but about their revising the genre of personal narratives, and hence the elements of the story are constituted anew: They are given a new meaning and role in a new narrative. As a coping strategy, salvation stories provide a feeling of control, order and agency: You can win if you just play the game well.

We call the third genre of narratives 'the theatres of the absurd', as they carried many resemblances to the absurdist stories popular among many playwrights and novelists such as Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov and Franz Kafka in the early and mid-twentieth century (See Esslin 1960; Kavanagh 1972). Similar to these plays and novels, the narratives of many forced migrants depicted the world as incomprehensible. The protagonist typically did not

comprehend what was happening to him or her and appeared as a passive figure at the mercy of circumstances devoid of apparent logic and meaning. Forced migrants may find this genre appealing as a coping strategy, as it emphasises their lack of culpability for their hardships. The events are not destiny preordained by God, some sort of moral punishment or the results of one's own decisions. Instead, the events evolve without any deeper meaning behind them. One is faced with a world devoid of order and justice, where things happen in a haphazard way. There can be a liberating effect in laughing at the absurdity of the world and the irrationality of human condition (cf. Esslin 1960) and in taking emotional distance from painful experiences.

The experiences of an individual affect how they tell their story, but past events do not determine the genre they use. Even horrendous events can be told by relying on different types of genres, and constructing a narrative can redefine the meaning and significance of past experiences. Certain events make it more or less convenient and likely to form certain types of narratives. For example, lack of family reunification seems to correlate with personal narratives taking the form of fractured tragedies. Then again, the decision between genres can be influenced by expectations of how the audience will react to the story and how they will perceive the narrator. The interviewees who have been unsuccessful in uniting with their families might find it inappropriate to tell a salvation story with a happy ending, even if they happened to feel overjoyed for having escaped a horrendous situation.

### Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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