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Telling Stories of Resistance and Ruination: Women Seeking Asylum¹

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationships between narratives which have come to dominate in the twenty-first century about people seeking asylum and women's stories of resistance and ruination. Identifying two narratives – the “hate figure” and the “female victim” – I develop understandings about some of the social, legal and historical contexts in Britain in which these narratives have come to dominate. Drawing on an Economic and Social Research Council funded project with women seeking asylum to explore some of the ways narratives can generate possibilities for some women, this paper also identifies how narratives can be deeply problematic for those who struggle to tell a story. Taking a feminist perspective and narrative approach, four analytical frameworks are used to make sense of how and why women tell their stories, offering a critical theoretical engagement with the concepts of resistance and ruination. The analysis opens up an important space that highlights the importance of narrative forms of resistance and consequently enriches our understanding of the diversity of forms of feminized resistance in the context of the emerging field of resistance studies. In doing so, I also explore how and why women might tell stories of ruination and some of the constraints placed on their stories. I position resistance as necessary for research processes that seek to disrupt and challenge the formation of dominant narratives. I argue for new and different narratives which accommodate some of the complexities and

¹ My appreciation to the women whose stories are represented in this paper. The impact of their accounts have been central to my ongoing work alongside women seeking asylum. Thanks and acknowledgement to the Economic and Social Research Council for the financial support (ES/H011803/1) for the research on which this paper draws. Warm thanks to the reviewers for their constructive feedback that helped improve the quality of the paper and the positive feedback on the final draft. My gratitude to the editors for their respectful and relational approach that is both radical and necessary.





contradictions of women's lives and open up the possibilities for women to tell their own diverse and different stories.

Introduction

Drawing on my own Economic and Social Research Council funded research, this paper examines the relationships between dominant narratives about people seeking asylum and women's own stories of resistance and ruination. Bringing together feminist perspectives and narrative approaches, I highlight some of the ways research can be employed to understand the lives of women seeking asylum. The analysis opens up a critical space that emphasizes the importance of narrative forms of resistance and the diversity of forms of feminized resistance in the context of the emerging field of resistance studies. Caring deeply about the issue of migration, I came to this research consciously motivated by my academic, political, personal and intellectual biography. A researcher and practitioner with a long history of working with women and children seeking asylum, my commitment to the defense of human rights and civil liberties has included highlighting and opposing the grave inequalities and injustices faced by people seeking asylum across the globe. Over the decades I have increasingly come to recognize that many injustices are sanctioned or carried out by different social actors within powerful structures (such as the state, public, and media) which increasingly vilify and dehumanize people seeking asylum (Cohen, 2002; Tyler, 2006). Dominant narratives told about people seeking asylum have come to position them in particularly negative ways (Chakrabarti, 2015; Cohen, 2002; Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013) and I feel a sense of responsibility to explore, understand, disrupt and challenge dominant narratives. This has fuelled my commitment to ensure my research endeavors are progressive and try to generate different ways of making sense of stories. As Plummer (2013: 209) states, "we need always be mindful of the tales we tell and the tales we hear: for stories have consequences. We should always be careful of the tales we tell for stories and their documents are our futures".

My own interest in asylum derives from and is grounded in the capacity of women seeking asylum as agentic subjects, whose lives are not simply represented in dominant narratives, but are also produced by their own stories. As such, my epistemological approach rejects the





view that there is one “truth” or one story for researchers to discover, but rather that all stories are liberated, informed and constrained by the social, political and historical contexts of their telling (Plummer, 1995). I suggest that the concept of “one truth” delimits the possibilities for telling stories of asylum and leaves those whose lives do not fit neatly into this narrative framework without a story to tell (Woodiwiss, 2014). Taking a feminist perspective and narrative approach, this paper explores how and why women seeking asylum come to narrate their lives. Whilst there is a large body of literature concerned with either narrative or feminist research, this paper contributes to that body of literature whilst also seeking to expand the scarcity of literature that brings feminist perspectives and narrative approaches together. In doing so, I attend to some of the concerns of feminist narrative researchers in the context of the emerging field of resistance studies.

Drawing on the work of Cindi Katz, I develop an analytical narrative framework of nuanced resistances, in order to make sense of how and why women might tell the stories they do. The transformative potential of diverse resistances is one of the ways in which dominant narratives are negotiated, circumvented and resisted. Furthermore, drawing on the work of Arthur Frank, I go on to explore how and why women also tell stories of ruination which exposes the constraints placed on women’s stories. In order to create possibilities for women’s lives and to potentially improve the lives of women seeking asylum, this paper attempts to open up a space that resists narratives that constrain and delimit the lives of women, and allows for different stories to be told and heard. This approach reflects some of the social changes that many of the participants said they wanted from their participation in this research:

I would like you use me as a case study... to enlight people about refugees and most especially about women refugees... I think use this opportunity now... pass the information. (May)²

Make a difference, make a difference. (Naomi)

² Every attempt has been made to retain the words and expressions that each woman used in their interview. I have consciously presented all of the women’s quotes verbatim and have not corrected grammatical errors.





Telling Stories

For women seeking asylum, where being granted asylum depends on the credibility and authenticity of their stories of persecution (Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013), the meaning of asylum can be profound. However, stories about asylum (like all other stories) are contingent on the available narratives that shape and inform what we know and can tell of asylum. None of us are entirely free to tell any story and the articulation of stories is accomplished in relation to available narrative frameworks (Plummer, 1995). Shaped, informed and constrained by the circumstances and contexts in which we tell our stories, the relationship between narratives and stories is necessary in order for stories to be understandable and “tellable” (Andrews, 2014). Narratives impact the way in which storytellers understand, respond to, negotiate, and resist stories about their lives. They can serve as powerful social forms of control (Lockwood, forthcoming) influencing the particular stories told about certain groups of people and also informing the stories that people tell. As such, our lives are not simply represented in stories, but are produced through, and at times constrained by, our own stories and the storytelling of others.

Storytelling may be a deeply personal process and activity, particularly when we talk about our lives. However, as Woodiwiss (2014: 13) suggests, “In telling our stories we do not simply slot ourselves into readymade narratives but we do draw on stories or narrative frameworks that are currently circulating and these are both culturally and historically specific”. The subject positions that we take up within our stories may serve to explain our actions and decisions, moderating the ways people understand us. Through our storytelling, we can construct our identities, consciously or unconsciously. As such, those people seeking asylum make sense of their lives and tell their stories in relation to dominant narratives, whilst other asylum experiences will not fit neatly into these narrative frameworks and their stories are at risk of being overlooked, silenced, and unrecognized (Smith, 2015a, 2015b, forthcoming).

Seeking Asylum

Seeking asylum is not a new phenomenon; each year across the globe women, children, and men seek asylum in other countries. A feature of contemporary migratory movements, asylum seeking is frequently a



form of forced migration and an interrelated aspect of broader transnational mobility that takes place across and within the national boundaries of countries and states (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). The social, political and historical conditions under which women are forced to migrate has meant that the vast majority of displaced women never claim asylum (Freedman, 2008). Gendered relations and inequalities in different countries affect women's migration in varying ways and reduced access to the necessary resources, such as documentation and finances, may enable them more easily to migrate or constrain and limit their opportunities. Those who are fleeing persecution or have been displaced primarily remain within their country of origin or cross an immediate border to a neighboring (and potentially less prosperous) country, possibly living within refugee camps (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009).

Managing people who had been displaced from their countries of origin and who seek the protection of other states has become an increasing priority across Europe. In response to the gross human rights atrocities and significant gaps in the protection of people that were exposed in the latter half of the 20th century (particularly during the First and Second World Wars), a legal form of asylum seeking emerged (Chakrabarti, 2015; Sirriyeh, 2013). A number of international protocols were developed and ratified as states sought to address the social, political and historical context of migration, standardizing and globalizing state responses (Malkki, 1996). The concept of international protection is enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (adopted 10 December 1948 UNGA Res 217 A(III) (UDHR) art 5) which specifies, "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries" (Article 14). The Declaration sets out fundamental human rights to be universally protected and marks a clear acknowledgement of common standards for all peoples and all nations. The 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (Refugee Convention), and 1967 Protocol, form the legal basis for states to grant asylum and it is intended to ensure the rights, protection and provision for the adequate treatment of refugees. The principle of protecting refugees was formed on the basis that signatory States were legally bound to provide protection.





All contracting States who have ratified the Refugee Convention are able to grant asylum to individuals they feel demonstrate compatibility with the Refugee Convention definition of a refugee, or refuse people who they feel do not. The product of a particular time, the refugee definition is underpinned by the core principle of non-refoulement, which asserts that a refugee should not be returned to a country where they face serious threats to their life or freedom and dominated by the concept of “male” persecution within the “political and public” spheres. Gender-based persecution (amongst a number of other forms of persecution) is omitted as a determining factor for receiving refugee status and the gendered language of the definition overlooks the serious threats to the lives or freedoms of a number of groups, including women and girls (Sirriyeh, 2013). As such, one particular narrative framework to emerge in the twenty-first century is that of the “male political refugee”, a “morally untouchable category” (Cohen, 2002: xix) synonymous with a “genuine” need for international protection. Informed by definitions and judgments of refugees being “genuine” and “men”, women have been primarily viewed as the dependents of the political activities of men and “not genuine” (Freedman, 2008; Hunt, 2005; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005).

The Hate Figure

As Plummer states: “different moments have highlighted different stories” (1995: 4) and “as societies’ change, so stories change” (1995: 79). Stories about the protection of other human beings have become increasingly fragile and complex, with Britain an “especially bad point in case” (Chakrabarti, 2015). Political, legal and public debates have produced endless discussions and generated doubt and concern about the motivations and legitimacy of those seeking asylum (Hunt, 2005; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). In the last two decades, whilst the story of the “genuine refugee” has been maintained in various diminishing forms, those seeking asylum have become storied as “hate figures” and clear signals sent out that they are unwelcome “others” (Chakrabarti, 2015). The “hate figure” is constructed through a number of intersecting stories, including the distinct term “bogus asylum seeker” (Cohen, 2002) which emerged in the early 1990s in the media. This concept gave rise to a problematic binary that a person’s asylum claim (and indeed the





person claiming asylum) could be either “genuine” or “false”. Indeed, the “bogus asylum seeker” solidified the belligerent notion that people seeking asylum are not genuine refugees and are actually attempting to exploit public generosity and governments, and are unworthy of public sympathy or support (Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013).

Successive governments have contributed to the creation of the “hate figure” which includes stories of asylum seekers as illegal and threatening, positioning those seeking asylum as a threat to welfare benefits, public spending, employment opportunities and to national identity (Cohen, 2002; Hunt, 2005; Jordan and Düvell, 2003; Sirriyeh, 2013; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005). New measures have been instituted by governments including administrative detention, forced dispersal, and deportation. Much research over the last decade makes evident that the multiple social exclusions and vulnerabilities experienced by those seeking asylum emanate from a raft of damaging, tough, and punitive policies and practices brought to bear against them (Hunt, 2005; Tyler, 2006).

The dehumanization and denigration of people seeking asylum is rarely as evident as in the narratives that have come to dominate in Britain (Chakrabarti, 2015). A study of media reports concerning asylum seekers in Britain concluded that dominant narratives are generated and reproduced through repeated accounts of suspicion, and that there is public support for all efforts to deter migration, including potential exclusion of those seeking asylum (Kundnani, 2001; Sirriyeh, 2013). The “hate figure” has become a proxy for increased border enforcement and security on border entry. As Andrews (2014: 88) argues “... narratives play a critical role in creating and recreating history”. In an increasingly nationalistic and securitized era, the “hate figure” encompasses the exclusion and dehumanization of those seeking asylum. This dominant narrative serves to strengthen distinctions between those who are seeking asylum and those who have been granted legal protection and are recognized as “genuine” refugees.

The Female Victim

Until recently, asylum seeking has been storied as the province of men and assumptions about the “asylum seeker” as “male” have prevailed. Women seeking asylum have been overlooked and marginalized (Freed-





man, 2008; Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009). Where there is an emerging body of research about women seeking asylum, narratives contain much discussion about victimization and particular forms of gendered persecutions. That gendered violence against women takes place during conflict and war has long been recognized, and is increasingly documented. Citing the ways in which women seeking asylum are commonly understood as victims of sexual violence, campaigners and political organizations have suggested women are also constantly under assault and perpetually victimized (Womankind, 2012). The literature assumes a linear progression and as a result of the trauma associated with such atrocities, women seeking asylum are often understood to be traumatized by violence (Herlihy and Turner, 2007). This is a story that relies on particular understandings of sexual violence and gendered victimization in which women seeking asylum are seen as: “de-served... disposed, disorientated, dislocated, dismembered, stateless, nameless, landless, homeless, and powerless” (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009: 38). Those women whose experiences do not fit within this narrative may be left outside of the “female victim” story, unrecognized and silenced.

Victimization and gendered persecution typically characterize stories told about women seeking asylum, making it very difficult to tell their stories of agency and/or resistance. The dominant narrative of the “female victim” (Smith, 2014, 2015a, 2015b, forthcoming) has contributed to a heightened awareness and understanding of women seeking asylum as vulnerable and much of the literature on women seeking asylum has exposed the disproportionately huge numbers of women being victimized in war (UNWomen, 2011; Womankind, 2012). These stories are often told as an attempt to increase legal protection and human rights for individual women and groups of women, and to expose undeniable poor treatments and abuses of women with the aim of improving their lives. However, the ongoing story of the victimization of women seeking asylum is told at a cost and has meant that (some) women have “stop[p]ed being [viewed as] specific persons and become pure victims in general” (Malkki, 1996: 378).

Stories about the “female victim” have become integral to dominant narratives told about women seeking asylum, providing (some) women with a framework within which to have their asylum claims rec-





ognized (Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013). Required by the Home Office to provide an “asylum story” as the central component of their asylum claim, being granted legal protection as a refugee demands a person establish their identity as a victim – “a person who has a well-founded fear of being persecuted” (Refugee Convention). Shuman and Bohmer (2014: 952) note, “... applicants have to be willing to present themselves in those terms, as persecuted and not protected.... [to] portray themselves as victims of persecution”. By producing their own victim identities, women can negotiate and resist the difficulties posed by the asylum decision-making process (Smith, 2014, 2015b).

The growing awareness about women’s migration and their role as caregivers and mothers has produced a further narrative synonymous with the “female victim”. The grouping of women and children together has become a popular way of representing women and a substantial amount of literature perpetuates the association between the two groups (Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009). Cultural perceptions of “normative” gendered behavior, with women as “mothers”, play a role in dominant narratives told about women seeking asylum. This is often done to highlight, in terms of numbers, the scale of the “problem”. For example, in 2016, the United National High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) put out the statement “just over 55 per cent of those arriving [on the shores of Europe] are women and children, as compared to only 27 per cent in June 2015” (UNHCR, 2016). The propensity to amalgamate women and children together potentially infantilizes and distorts any detailed understanding of women’s lives and the vast differences between individual women (and children).

When women do claim their status as storytelling subjects, judgments are made about women in relation to decisions about their children. Shuman and Bohmer (2014: 948) argue, “in some cases [asylum] judges decided that the behaviour of a woman was not credible because she didn’t conform to their expectations about motherhood, for example by leaving her children behind with relatives when she fled. Sometimes the reverse is true and mothers seeking asylum are not deemed credible because they didn’t flee immediately but waited until they could flee with their children”. These assumptions underpin dominant narratives which shape and constrain the stories women tell and prevent (some) women



from emerging as subjects with their own needs beyond those associated with children.

Listening to Women's Stories

Listening to the stories of women seeking asylum was a starting point of the research which informs this paper. I conducted in-depth narrative interviews with seventeen women which were tape-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews lasted between one and a half and three hours and were carried out in a wide range of different locations across the UK. The women had been living in the UK for different periods of time, ranging from a couple of months to seven years. They were aged between their early 20s and mid-50s and came from 14 different countries of origin: Algeria, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia, India, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Pakistan, Senegal, Sierra-Leone, Somalia, South Africa and Zimbabwe. To safeguard their anonymity, their names were replaced with pseudonyms and, to facilitate a more participatory approach, the women chose their own pseudonyms (including "Z", who wanted to be known by the 26th and final letter of the modern English Alphabet). Every effort has been made to ensure that no information could lead to a participant being identified.

All of the women had made a claim for asylum in the UK and at the time of the research interviews were at different stages of their asylum claims process. However, it was not an intention of the research to question the "credibility" of the stories that women tell when they claim asylum, but rather to value and listen to women's stories. Also, the analysis was not intended to listen to the participants' stories in order to validate "the truth" or authenticity of their lived experiences, but rather sought to ask questions about the accounts so that we can begin to understand not only the stories, but the context of the lives that informed those accounts. Asking questions about women's stories can enable us to look beyond dominant narratives to explore the constraints to those stories, exposing and potentially resisting those constraints and opening up other possibilities for women's lives.

Recognizing that data analysis is a site where the power of the researcher may be particularly pronounced (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008), choosing an appropriate form of analysis was important. As Mauthner





and Doucet (1998: 139) foreground, “analysis is a crucial stage of the research as it carries the potential to decrease or amplify the volume of our respondents’ voices”. How we come to know narrated subjects relies strongly on our own subjectivities and reflexivity on the part of the researcher to explore the interpretations they bring to the analysis and research process (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). The method that I utilized is a reflexive and multi-layered interpretive approach called the Listening Guide (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Mauthner and Doucet, 1998, 2003). This feminist narrative method of data analysis provides a research process that can disrupt and challenge dominant narratives told about women’s lives. Described as a “resisting listener’s guide”, it enables listeners to “bring a different subjectivity to bear upon the old ‘universality’...” (Brown and Gilligan, 1992: 16).

Once the interview transcripts were collected, I carried out a minimum of four sequential readings, outlined in the Listening Guide, across the individual transcripts (Mauthner and Doucet, 2003). Simultaneously, the Listening Guide was used to listen to the women as agentic storytelling subjects whose lives are produced by their stories and who play an active role in reacting to, intervening in and resisting dominant narratives. Paying close attention to their stories and working slowly, I was able to “stay with the data” (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008: 129). As Plummer (2013: 212) states,

... stories are never transparent all at once: they are rarely immediately clear. Narrative understanding requires the space to sit and stare, ponder and puzzle and life often does not offer such a space. But like a slow moving veil or curtain, the wisdoms of our stories can be revealed gradually. We grasp our meanings slowly, bit by bit. We need time to appreciate stories.

I considered the question of why and how women told their stories and this process helped me to re-visit my understandings of how particular dominant narratives informed and constrained (some) women’s stories.





Hearing Resistance and Ruination

The women used the interviews as a site and context to establish accounts of sexual violence and persecution and that they feared persecution if they were returned to their countries of origin. As I listened to the women's stories of persecution, I came to understand that their stories had inter-related narrative frameworks embedded within them, many of which have been overlooked in the formation of dominant narratives. I identified these as analytical frameworks of resistance and ruination, working in relation to each other as resources for telling and listening to the women's stories and also making reflexive connections with my own activities and struggles. My stories of resistance were not the same but were relationally entwined with those of the women in this study and it became important to define and distinguish what I meant by resistance within the women's stories.

Concepts of resistance are frequently bound up with "acts of resistance" and everyday actions cast as resistance that can be considered as effective or ineffective (Scott, 1985; Riessman, 2000). Non-compliance as opposition to social relations has become a popular way of delineating resistance and a wide range of oppositional activities have been considered resistance, from overt acts of challenge to more subtle forms of survival (Katz, 2004; Scott, 1985). Troubling the notions of resistance as visible to an external audience, Bosworth and Carrabine (2001) acknowledge personal or intimate activities, as well as practices and behaviors of resistance in response to a subtle and complex set of different circumstances and situations. Particularly relevant to studies of women and resistance, Catherine Riessman's (2000) analysis of the stigma of childlessness in India suggests that women negotiated and mitigated the stigma through a range of everyday resistance strategies. Also, Lila Abu-Lugod's (1990) study of control over sexuality and marriage illustrates the different ways that Bedouin women attempted to use humor and create folklore through shared tales as a form of resistance. These studies both highlight diverse of forms that gendered resistance has taken.

Given the popularity of the concept of resistance, scholars have argued that resistance has become such an inclusive and romantic term that it is identified by researchers in everything and seen everywhere (Abu-Lugod, 1990; Katz, 2004). Concepts of resistances have also been





criticized for “misattribute[ing] women’s stories with intentions where none exists” (Abel and Browner, 1998: 322). Providing a useful departure point to make sense of the stories of women seeking asylum, I utilized the analytical framework of resistances developed by Cindi Katz (2004). Opposed to ambiguous definitions of the term resistance, Katz (2004) makes conceptual distinctions between “resistance” and the more subtle forms of “resilience” and “reworking” which resonate with the stories of women in my research. Seeking to build on, conserve and identify women’s personal resources within their stories, Katz’s (2004) three frameworks of resistance identify the capacities and potentialities that people have for promoting change, sustaining themselves and their communities when faced with adversity.

Utilizing a nuanced understanding of resistance that is both contextual and relational, I argue here for a shift in perception in the way we look at women’s stories. Katz (2004) assumes that through her observations, knowledge of resistance, reworking, and resilience become accessible, privileging a notion of resistance as an inherent, natural and individual attribute that one has or does not have. However, my interest in the role of resistance in this paper is premised on a different understanding. Taking a feminist narrative approach to women’s stories, I used the concepts of resistance within a narrative framework (Frank, 1995; Plummer, 1995; Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). The argument here is not for resistance as individualized, oppositional behavior/actions that reflect whether a woman’s actions have or do not have “transformative effects” (Riessman, 2000: 130), but rather a nuanced understanding of resistance to explore women’s stories. In this, I take my cue from Katz’s (2004) delineations of resistances, but use these concepts as narrative frameworks to explore the different ways resistance is constructed within women’s stories.

As I listened to the women’s stories, I also turned to the worrying attribute of resistance that has asserted a tragic story and demanded an aspirational heroic figure. As Conlon (2007: 206) suggests, people seeking asylum are sometimes burdened with telling stories of themselves as “... heroes in the face of omnipotent forces”. Expectation of resistance has given rise to euphoric celebrations of “the resourcefulness of human spirit” (Langer, 1991: xi). Heroic attributes of “resistance” are examples



of narrative frameworks that can constrain the stories of women seeking asylum. Drawing on work of Arthur Frank, I utilized the analytical framework of Frank's (1995) "Chaos narrative". Frank's work explores stories of critical illness told in relation to the body and he outlines the storyline of "the chaos narrative", which "imagines life never getting better" (1995: 97). The Chaos narrative reveals a life of "vulnerability, futility, and impotence" (Frank, 1995: 97) and stories are manifest with moments of irreparable "wreckage" (Frank, 1995: 110). These storylines served to develop what I have called the narrative of ruination, the fourth narrative framework which I use to explore women's stories.

Narratives of Women Seeking Asylum

My analysis produced four overarching narratives that framed the women's stories. I identify these frameworks as the narratives of resistance, reworking, resilience and ruination. In this section of the paper, I explore the participant's lives through their stories in order to make sense of how and why they might tell the stories they do. Maintaining the relationship between the different narrative frameworks, and hearing them as necessarily relational, avoids any one of the narratives becoming singular or dominant. Important too is the understanding that these four narratives are types of stories and are not intended to be representative of different types of women seeking asylum.

1. The Narrative of Resistance

The narrative of resistance is used as an opportunity for the women to tell stories of challenge and as a result these are also stories that directly challenge some of the dominant narratives told about women seeking asylum. Rather than focusing on the ways in which they survive and endure (the narrative of resilience), or telling stories of indirect resistances (the narrative of reworking), I illustrate the ways some women told stories of their political consciousness-building and oppositional activities and agendas. Speaking out about their solidarity with other women, they storied their commitment to improving the lives of women seeking asylum which was part of participating in the research. Taking up active subject positions as protagonists within their stories, resistance was storied as an active initiative that involved direct challenges and contesting





situations of oppression and conditions of exploitation. Suggesting they are political subjects (Cohen, 2002), these stories develop our understandings of women asylum seekers as “political refugees”, challenging the concept of the “political refugee” as “male” which is embedded in the origins of the Refugee Convention, and negates the passivity of the “female victim”.

Challenge

At the forefront of some women’s stories, they revealed how they wanted to be understood as political activists. Z suggests: “... I was involved, especially with the woman’s rights...”. For Lucy, her activism was related to human rights: “I joined human rights work...”. Telling stories about being involved with activities that work for human rights, these women refuted dominant narratives of passivity and stigma. In constructing a political sense of self and the activities in their lives, these women repositioned themselves as political figures, who actively engage in important political struggles. Claims about their activities in the past allowed the women to make declarations about their present and political campaigning. Bintou suggested that she was challenging the arrangement of polygamous marriage³ and levirate marriage⁴, both of which she said she had experienced and resisted. Shimmar suggested she was a victim of a child/early marriage⁵ in the UK. Brought into the UK, she said she became the victim of years of abuse perpetrated by family members. Locked in the marital home, not allowed to open the front door and forbidden to look out of the window, Shimmar said she was active in trying to end this type of abuse: “woman like me they are helping to stop it and help woman”.

A number of women also told stories about their roles as protagonists, struggling to challenge inequalities about wider issues. For Precious, campaigning for “gay rights”, as a direct response to the sexuality of her youngest brother and the subsequent discrimination and abuse

³ Marriage to more than one spouse.

⁴ A marriage in which a widow is obliged to marry her deceased husband’s brother.

⁵ A formal marriage or informal union entered into by an individual before reaching the age of 18.





he had experienced, was important: “I had to fight hard against these attitudes for gay rights”.

Utilizing their personal experiences as political stories, the women suggested a sense of their entitlement to speak out. This included the different ways in which some women storied the asylum system as deeply problematic. A number of women said they had attempted to challenge attitudes and improve the hostile environment. May, for example, outlined how she tried to change the general public’s attitude to the term refugee:

... there should be more understanding about diversity and equal rights and experience that surround the word ‘refugee’ which we promote. Promote to the people and keep talking about it. (May)

Some of the activities that women took part in contributed to building resistance (Katz, 2004). The women constructed their role in changing the broader public’s views and challenging politicians on asylum policies. For Naomi, this included campaigning and the associated risks of publicly speaking out against the practice of detention:

... my aim was to talk about child detention and I received a lot of support ... I made a lot of links with the media, lots and it was quite tremendous... I was like putting my life down for the sake of helping other people. (Naomi)

Speaking up and speaking out was an important part of being identified as political. By taking part in this study, a number of the women indicated their solidarity with other women and their commitment to improving the situations of women seeking asylum. For May, taking part in the research was about improving asylum policy: “I like to take part in this research because want to improve the policy for women refugee. I like the voice of women to be heard and for women to be respected” (May).

Highlighting their determination, several of the women spoke about challenging the inequalities that women face. As May said: “... no matter who you are, no matter where you are, all you have to do is have a view, walk towards it and be determined... I believe there is nothing you





cannot do”. Anne-Laure also talked about being a source of inspiration for other women: “... showing other women the chances or possibilities...”. Central to many of these accounts was the suggestion that the lives of women seeking asylum contained wider lessons. As Naomi argued: “...I thought I should contribute to this research so that my story can be part of a lesson...” (Naomi).

Speaking as agentic subjects who honored their own stories, a number of the women suggested that their own situations might not be improved by their political activity, but they worked for the greater good of all women. Bintou suggested: “I know I may not benefit from it now, but in future... if it is positive that women can benefit from it”. Queenie also noted: “...what I said can be contributed to making refugee woman that comes, or asylum seeker, their life a little bit easier”. The narrative of resistance illustrates that women seeking asylum tell stories within which they wish to be viewed as protagonists, engaged in resistance activities. Striving to be viewed as activists, the interview itself was a site of protest where they suggested lessons could be learned.

2. The Narrative of Reworking

The narrative of reworking is heavily orientated to stories of indirect resistance. The storyteller is able to construct positive self-meanings, albeit constrained by dominant narratives that position women asylum seekers as “hate figures”. Different to the narrative of resilience which enables women to emphasize the ways in which they survived their situations, the narrative of reworking illustrates some of the ways women attempt to change and negotiate the identity of being an asylum seeker. Some of the women suggested the ways they construct more positive self-meanings that distinguished them from being identified as an “asylum seeker”, which avoided being seen as a “hate figure”. I also illustrate the ways some women lay claim to their own legitimacy and validated their asylum identities through stories of persecution and by calling attention to the severe consequences for them and their children if they are refused asylum and deported. These stories negotiate the dominant narrative of the “female victim” and offer further understandings about this narrative, as well as upholding the dominant narrative of the “genuine refugee”.



Indirect Resistance

Some women spoke about the difficulties of being identified as an asylum seeker or refugee and the ways in which it attracts vilification. For Precious, being identified as a refugee was: “Horrible. Crazy. I don’t want to be a refugee... it’s not nice to be”. Similarly, Lucy emphasized some of the problems of being an asylum seeker: “It’s not a good term... You feel dehumanised when you are seeking asylum. You don’t have dignity”. The dominant narrative of the “hate figure” was understood by many of the women and they suggested it was deeply problematic for their everyday lives. A number of the women gave numerous accounts of the ways in which they felt they had been badly treated as a result of being identified as an asylum seeker or refugee. Bintou indicated that if you are an asylum seeker in the UK: “You are not welcome...”. Similarly, Queenie argued that people distinguished between people: “I think people who don’t realise you’re a refugee they treat you different. Once they realise you’re refugee it’s another story altogether...”.

In order to distinguish themselves from being identified as an “asylum seeker”, several of the women told stories about the ways they construct alternative stories. For Love, her story was bound up in the romantic notion of seeking love: “I always call myself love-seeker not asylum-seeker”. Shimmar also said she had chosen a less problematic identity and only told people she was an “asylum seeker” when necessary:

I don’t tell anyone I am an asylum seeker... say I’m just study here...

I don’t want to tell. If I don’t need to tell you than I don’t tell you.

(Shimmar)

Avoiding being identified as “asylum seekers” and offering differing accounts of their presence in the UK, a number of the women negotiated being identified as “hate figures”. Constrained by the available narratives, the women cast themselves in new stories (Katz, 2004).

While some of the participants said they did not want to be identified as asylum seekers, many of them suggested there was another potentially more positive identity. Utilizing the dominant narrative of the “genuine refugee” (Hunt, 2005; Yuval-Davis et al., 2005; Cohen, 2002),





some of the women emphasized the severe consequences for them if they were refused asylum. A number of women said they would be killed if they were returned to their country of origin. For Gloria, being sent home was a death sentence: "... sending me back to... my country is like sending me back to my grave". Bintou and Diane also suggested they would die if they are deported from the UK: "It would be death to go home" and "I will die if they deport me". Anne-Laure said that she would be killed: "I will be killed back home". Highlighting her own legitimacy, Bintou argued that she is concerned for the sexual abuse her children would suffer if the family was to be deported: "... if she [daughter] goes back to [country of origin] now she'll be circumcised again... she'll be cut [FGM]". Illustrated through the narrative of reworking, the women suggested they are "genuine refugees" because of persecution and the lack of State protection in their home countries. Through their stories, women were also able to indirectly resist other motivations that may have been associated with seeking asylum.

3. The Narrative of Resilience

The most subtle aspect of resistance is heard in the narrative of resilience, illustrating the different ways women survive and endure their lives in the face of great adversity. Different from the narrative of resistance and reworking (stories about challenge and indirect resistance), the narrative of resilience is used to emphasize the difficulties and pain of women's situations. I focus here on the ways in which the women suggested they survived and endured living apart from their children. As I have previously suggested in this paper, great significance is often attached to the "female victim" and the role of women and children in relation to women seeking asylum (Freedman, 2008; Hajdukowski-Ahmed, 2009). However, none of the women who participated in this research had all of their children living with them. Whilst existing narratives can provide meaning about mothering, women seeking asylum, who have seemingly fled without their children, may find it difficult to access "good mothering" narratives. Despite their situations, a number of the women described the diverse ways in which they protected and cared for their children. Living apart was in many ways the ultimate en-



durance, premised on their identities as good protective mothers meeting the needs associated with their children.

Survival and Endurance

Through their accounts of living apart from their children, many of the women suggested they were breaking with deeply held beliefs about mothering. Constructing stories of the pain of being separated and leaving her children behind, Queenie said: “That’s what makes me sad mostly. It’s being separated from my son”. Similarly Bintou suggests: “... it was very difficult having to leave them behind. It’s difficult”. Whatever choices the women said they had made about living apart from their children, separation was always constructed as a difficult decision, endured rather than embraced.

Reinforcing the tenacious link between women and children that ultimately upholds a gendered order of society with “good mothers” as child-centred and emotionally involved with their children (Hays, 1996; Lockwood, 2013), a major preoccupation for some of the women was to defend themselves against being seen as bad mothers (Kielty, 2008; Lockwood, 2013). The limited storylines which exist in relation to good mothering narratives are narrowly defined and as Gustafson (2005: 1) reminds us “few mothers are more stigmatised than those living apart from their children”. However, what constitutes good mothering may be constructed differently by women seeking asylum. A number of the women spoke about how they had sought to secure their children’s survival. For Precious, leaving her children was a safer option for the children than bringing them. Queenie also suggested that her son’s safety was of primary concern: “It was awful, really awful, and I was getting scared for my son... just feeling he is safe outweighs all this” (Queenie). Emphasizing how they had faced uncertain and dangerous journeys to seek asylum, a number of women presented themselves as protectors of their children. The decision not to bring their children on asylum journeys was constructed as a way to protect and minimize potential harm to their children.

A number of the women suggested their lives were further complicated and they had to make choices between their children. Striving to make sense of their decisions, some women discussed why they had





brought one or two of their children with them on asylum journeys, leaving other children behind. For Love, the process of deciding which child/ren to bring and which child/ren to leave was primarily explained by the constraints of her financial situation: "... because of the amount of money I had, I couldn't get both children. I brought one and I left the other". Establishing that finances influenced the decision, Love indicates the logic of her decision given the practical restraints she had faced. Bintou outlined that it was not a choice: "I am not able to bring the five of them so I ran away with the two". Her rationale for bringing two children emphasized the risks posed by leaving the oldest boy and the issue of treating girls and boys equally:

I brought the eldest son and the eldest daughter, because I had two boys and two girls and then a boy... in our culture they target the first born and if they don't get to the mum then they get to the first born boy. So to be fair I could not bring two boys and leave two girls there so I bring the first boy and the eldest girl. That's what I did. (Bintou)

The women's choices were limited and often difficult, but emotional care and consideration for their children was underlined. Whilst Naomi said she had to do things quickly, she also spoke about how she had made plans and explained the preparation that went into protecting her children: "I started preparing and saving money to move away and I had to take my children away and hide them somewhere". Talking about the potential risks to her children, financial considerations and the practicalities of hiding her children, Naomi said she had made preparations for the time when they would live apart.

Descriptions of preparation were important to the women's stories about "good mothering". Many of the women talked of the plans they had put in place that fulfilled their responsibilities as "good mothers" (Kielty, 2008; Lockwood, 2013). This included identifying other-mothers (Collins, 2000), in the form of grandmothers and other close female relatives, to care for their children. Living apart from their children (or some of their children), maternal nurture was considered a vital component for child well-being and some women said they had placed their children in the care of close female family members who they felt they could trust (Collins, 2000). Precious talked about leaving her children in the





care of her younger sister and the extended family. Queenie gave a detailed description of how she had left her son with his devoted maternal grandmother. Maximizing their stories of extended family connections highlighted the ways their children were cared for and loved by large, cohesive families (Falicov, 2007) and defended against the women being seen as bad mothers.

Constructing themselves as resilient women who could meet the challenges of living apart, some women also claimed they maintained a mothering role (Falicov, 2007). Lucy said she made frequent contact with her daughters through emails, phone calls, text messages and letters. Queenie suggested: "I ring and write whenever I can". It took a great deal of endurance to maintain their mothering roles and sustain their bonds with their children. Particularly difficult was the danger that women felt they might put their children in, or the people who were looking after their children. For Jen, this meant that she sustained contact with her children covertly: "... don't tell anybody you talked to your mum". While many of the women highlighted their efforts to ensure their contact with their children, it was particularly difficult for women to reconcile the constraints and complexities in which their lives have been restricted and the elements that are beyond their control.

4. The Narrative of Ruination

Standing in some contrast to the narratives of resistance, reworking and resilience, the narrative of ruination illustrates the diminishment of women's lives. Forming the basis of an exploration of the discontinuity of self and consistent with the chaos narrative (Frank, 1995), the narrative of ruination is used to highlight the precarity of women's lives and the ways in which their sense of self is fundamentally threatened (Langer, 1991). These were inevitably difficult stories to hear, and whilst I may have wished to find some hope in the women's stories, a number of women resisted any attempts to reach a "comforting conclusion" (Langer, 1991: 69). Used to illustrate the ways some women struggle to (re)claim a story, the narrative of ruination exposes the inadequacy of dominant narratives. Delimiting (some) women's stories, the dominance of available narratives does not accommodate the complexities and contradictions of the lives of women seeking asylum and the inadequacy of





existing narratives leave some women narratively “shipwrecked” (Frank, 1995).

Diminishment

The stories of women seeking asylum are often restricted to responding to the expectations and requirements of others. This is particularly pronounced when the asylum system demands that a woman establish her identity as a victim in order to be granted legal protection (Kea and Roberts-Holmes, 2013; Shuman and Bohmer, 2014). Some of the women were unable to construct a story that reconciles seeking asylum and being recognized as a genuine refugee. Whilst these storytellers constructed a sense of their own agency, this often emerged from a position of relative powerlessness. Unlike the narrative of reworking, the construction of the genuine refugee is impeded through stories of being identified as a liar and disbelieved by people in positions of power. Being identified as a “liar” was deeply problematic for a number of the women. As Plummer (1995: 167) suggests “...victims know only too well the frequent charge that they are simply making up their stories” and similarly, women seeking asylum are also frequently accused of simply making up their stories. Several of the women said they had been called liars by the Judge or Home Office caseowner:

... they don't believe me. I am liar. I am this. I am that... Everything I tell them they don't believe me. (Diane)

... when we went to court, yes the judge he called me a liar... (Bintou)

... he write it on my immigration statement that she is lying... he wouldn't listen to me as a woman seeking asylum. (May)

... she [Home Office] started screaming at me, it's rubbish what I'm telling her... it's lies... (Lucy)

Some of the women said these accusations had led to problems with being granted asylum. A number of women had been refused asylum as a result of being disbelieved in their asylum accounts. This was seen by some as a powerful rejection and dismissal that signaled a lack of





hope. Diane suggested the Home Office refusal to grant her asylum had a devastating effect on her life:

I came here for help. If they don't want to help me they have to explain why me... everybody is like me is asylum you know. If they don't help, why just every time my life they send me miserable letters. If I open it every time they refuse, refuse. (Diane)

Unlike the narrative of resilience, which illustrated the different ways women survive and endure in the face of great adversity, the narrative of ruination emphasizes their sense of utter powerlessness and abandonment.

... they [Home Office] came with a refusal and they said my claim has been abandoned... that case has been abandoned... the appeal has been abandoned... all abandoned. (Bintou)

Whilst stories of "good mothering" (highlighted through the narrative of resilience) often provided a sense of purpose, equally the narrative of ruination illustrates repeated threats to mothering identities. Such stories incorporate negative feelings of impending death. For example, the diminished possibilities of the future and the precarious situation of her children's future were concerns of Bintou. Precious also suggested she was going to die and her grave concerns for her children:

... they refused me and it was hard... what am I going to do now? The next thing is like I'm going to die and then if I'm going to die, what is going to happen to my kids? What is it going to happen to my children? (Precious)

Constructing the refusal of her asylum claim and the consequences of the negative decision as an irreparable disruption and utter dismissal, Diane said she could see no way forward with her life. The ever-present risk of removal from the UK was an unbearable anticipated future in Diane's story:

So many times, you don't believe me I was just trying to kill myself. Many, many times. But I didn't die. I don't know. I did it very hard to die because it was too much for me... I been on tribunal court and they





refused me... He [the Judge] say “Your case is dismissed. You are not allowed to do anything in this country. As soon as possible you have to leave.” (Diane)

By casting doubt on her asylum story, the pivotal point of refusal revoked any hope for Diane. Shrouded in stories of dismissal and rejection, several of the women dismiss any possible hope that claiming asylum might have provided.

Being a victim is a prerequisite for being granted asylum, but for some women this proves to be an inadequate framework within which to tell their stories of persecution and asylum. Those who had been refused asylum or disbelieved alluded to their disconnection to this narrative and such frameworks prove inadequate for some women. Z suggested her skepticism about whether she could be understood: “... you see yourself you do not belong... you feel that you will not be understood by other people”. Whilst Frank (1995) has argued that stories can heal and that wounded storytellers are engaged in recovering their voices, the narrative of ruination defies any sort of healing. Constrained by despair and diminishment, the narrative of ruination does not offer the comfort and protection of resistance. Exposing the inadequacy of dominant narratives, the narrative of ruination illustrates the limitation of dominant narratives and many of the women struggled to speak about events and situations.

Conclusion

The concepts of international protection and fundamental human rights to be universally protected are enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the 1951 Refugee Convention. Constructed around the concept of the male political refugee, gender-based persecution was omitted as a determining factor for receiving refugee status and the stories of women refugees have been largely ignored, overlooked and marginalized. However, stories about women seeking asylum in the 21st century have changed. The pervasiveness of political, legal and public debates has led to people seeking asylum increasingly storied as “hate figures” and women seeking asylum being understood as “female victims”, bereft of capacity and unendingly victimized. The dominance of





these narratives means that women seeking asylum may find themselves vilified and dehumanized by the stories they come to tell – or that others tell about them.

This paper contributes to the fields of feminist, narrative, and resistance studies by suggesting that research processes can seek to challenge the formation of narratives which come to dominate at the expense of all other stories that could be told. Taking a feminist narrative approach, I suggest there is an opportunity to add to different and diverse understanding of women's lives. The paper also contributes to insights about how and why we might use narrative methods to explore women's lives and demonstrates how stories and narrative frameworks that inform the stories women tell can be constraining as well as potentially liberating. Indeed, it has been my intention to include and highlight some of the ways in which women seeking asylum negotiate, circumvent and resist dominant narratives in their own storytelling. As this research has identified, narrative frameworks can offer meaning, facilitating the construction of a positive sense of self, and even in the most limiting environments women are able to tell stories that resist problematic identities and dehumanizing narratives. However, focused on the diverse and intersecting lives of women seeking asylum, this paper is not simply a celebration of women's stories. Acknowledging the role of dominant narratives, I raise awareness of some of the limitations of reinforcing those dominant stories that can delimit women's lives.

Developing four narrative analytical frameworks to make sense of how and why women tell their stories, this paper offers a critical theoretical engagement with the concepts of resistance and ruination. Drawing on the narrative of resistance, the research suggests that some women tell stories of challenge. Resisting the narrative of the “political refugee” as “male” and the passivity of the “female victim”, some of the women suggest they are political subjects and protagonists involved in consciousness-building and oppositional activities and agendas. In this context, these stories challenge us to recognize women as agentic. Drawing on the narrative of reworking, the research explores some of the ways in which a number of women's stories of change highlight their indirect resistance. Constructing positive self-meanings, some women attempt to change and negotiate the identity of being an asylum seeker or





claim their own legitimacy through stories of persecution. Drawing on the narrative of resilience, the research emphasizes that some women tell stories about the different ways they survive and endure living apart from their children, calling attention to the difficulties and pain of their situations. These stories illustrated their agency but also restricted them from emerging as a subject with their own needs beyond those associated with good mothering.

Delimiting women's possibilities for making sense of their experiences, dominant narratives directed some women to construct themselves as diminished and a number of women were "narratively shipwrecked" (Frank, 1995). Bringing awareness to the inadequacy and limitations of narratives told about women seeking asylum, a number of women explored the discontinuity of self and the precarity of women's lives. These stories suggest that some women are constrained by responding to the expectations and requirements of others, including those in a position of power making judgments on their asylum claims. Drawing on the narrative of ruination exposes the inadequacy of dominant narratives which do not accommodate some of the complexities and contradictions of women's lives. Whilst the narratives of resistance, reworking and resilience may reassure the listener, the narrative of ruination is a powerful story that challenges the listener to abandon orderly responses, placing a compelling responsibility on the listener. Important in helping us appreciate our own (potentially privileged) situations, the narrative of ruination may also challenge us to be transformed and compelled to use our capacities and activism.

Contributing to the fields of feminist and narrative research within the context of resistance studies and practices, the analysis opens up a critical space that highlights the importance of narrative forms of resistance and consequently enriches our understanding of the diversity of forms of feminized resistance. Where women's lives and sense of self could not be expressed within available narrative frameworks and they struggled to speak about events and situations, this research emphasizes how and why some women might be constrained and limited by dominant narratives. When we research women's lives, it is an imperative to be aware of the social, political and historical contexts that form the basis of dominant narrative frameworks. These particular contexts shape the



stories that are available and can be used to make sense of women's lives, but they also constrain and delimit (some) women. Listening to women's stories, and asking why and how women might tell the stories they do, can create new and different narratives which accommodate some of the complexities and contradictions of women's lives. In researching women's lives, there is an opportunity to contribute to a greater understanding of the diversity of those lives. New narrative frameworks open up the possibilities for women to tell their own stories and women seeking asylum are already shifting, expanding, and transforming the frameworks of our times through the narratives of resistance, reworking, resilience and ruination.

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