

## Constructing Narratives through Storytelling: A Study of Refugees in Estonia

Aminul Islam\*

**Abstract:** *Very little investigation is done on refugees in Estonia and their construction of narratives in a new society. Refugees portray their memories of their own country while in exile in order to create their present individuality in a new land and to adapt to a new culture. This paper attempts to investigate refugees placed at a refugee accommodation centre and to analyze their present and past memories and stories to associating them with their coping mechanism. Using qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, this paper brings out the argument that, in spite of being displaced from their homeland, refugees portray their country of origin via idyllic stories; family and community life are emphasized with the contrast of individualism. This paper argues that specific narratives can produce doubly-marginalized people, while at the same time, stories and memories from the past are significant for developing agency, so as to establish counter narratives.*

**Keywords:** refugees, Estonia, narrative, storytelling, identity.

### Introduction

We are living in an era where changes are constant and societies that remained unchanged are quickly turning diverse. Socio-economic and political aspects, global communication and conflicts are proof that we are

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\* Aminul Islam is a PhD candidate in Sociology at Tallinn University, Estonia. He works as the Head of the Curricula for the Program Creativity and Innovation at Estonian Entrepreneurship University of Applied Sciences. He has a Master Degree in Asian Studies from Lund University, Sweden and a Bachelor and Master degree in Sociology from Bangladesh. He has published several articles on Migration and Refugee issues.

going through an era of diversification. Cooperation between countries, business organizations, intercultural communication and human migration are the features of today's world, which signify the fact that countries and societies are changing and diversity is a part of it.<sup>1</sup>

From within these diverse societies, there are people who are forced to take part in this diversity. We are, however, living in an era that is the 'age of the refugee, people who are displaced and mass migration' and the number of refugees all across the world has been increasing over the past decades.<sup>2</sup> European Union (EU) countries have received large numbers of refugees in recent years. More than 600,000 asylum seekers were received by EU countries in the year 2014; there were 400,000 in the year 2013.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the increase rate is quite high.

Traditionally, Estonia has been viewed as a less attractive country for asylum seekers and refugees.<sup>4</sup> Estonia joined in EU in 2004 and signed the Schengen treaty in 2007. The 1951 UN convention relating to the status of refugees was signed by the Estonian state in 1997. According to the Estonian State portal on refugees, "Estonia has received a relatively small number of

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<sup>1</sup> Aminul Islam, "A Study Of South Asian Refugees Settlement Experiences In Estonia", in: *Khazar Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2016, p. 98.

<sup>2</sup> Idem, "Refugee Quota: Is Estonia Ready To Receive Refugees? A Review Of The literature On Migration and Ethnic Minorities In Estonia", in: *International And Multidisciplinary Journal Of Social Sciences*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2016, p. 290.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Bourgeois, *Asylum in the EU. The number of asylum applicants in the EU jumped to more than 625 000 in 2014*, Eurostat Press Office, 20 March 2015, available at <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/2995521/6751779/3-20032015-BP-EN.pdf/35e04263-2db5-4e75-b3d3-6b086b23ef2b>, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Aminul Islam, "A study of South Asian Refugees...", p. 99.

applications for international protection compared to other EU member states, but the number of applications has increased every year.”<sup>5</sup>

The number of applications Estonia received from 1997 until May 2015 was 709, out of which 114 were granted protection. However, this number is increasing, as in first five months of 2015, Estonia received 90 applications for international protection and it was expected that this number would be even higher for the next period.<sup>6</sup> Be that as it may, all these statistics were comprised before the 2015 summer crisis in Europe, when the President of the European Commission announced the proposal that “120000 additional asylum seekers will be distributed among EU nations with binding quotas.” According to the state portal of Estonia, Estonia’s positions on the refugee quota was that “Estonia does not intend to remain a bystander in the Mediterranean crisis; Estonia does not dispute the refugee distribution formula”.<sup>7</sup> Estonia received the first war refugees on March 29, 2016 as a relocation quota.

Drawing on the existing literature on migration and ethnic minorities in Estonia, Islam,<sup>8</sup> in his study, ‘Refugee Quota: is Estonia ready to receive refugees’, stated that “migration research in Estonia has mostly been built on four major categories and none of them particularly focused on refugees or immigrants having ethnic background outside Europe”. In the year 2009, in

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<sup>5</sup> \*\*\*, *Refugee crisis*, Republic of Estonia Government, available at <https://valitsus.ee/en/refugees#statistics>, accessed on 19 December 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Aminul Islam, “Refugee Quota: Is Estonia Ready To Receive Refugees?...”, p. 292.

<sup>7</sup> \*\*\*, *Refugee crisis*, Republic of Estonia Government, available at <https://valitsus.ee/en/refugees#statistics>, accessed on 19 December 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Aminul Islam, “Refugee Quota: Is Estonia Ready To Receive Refugees?...”, p. 296.

her research on the readiness to accept immigrants in Europe, Masso<sup>9</sup> enquired about the willingness to receive people from outside Europe and of different races and ethnicities; Estonia ranked at the bottom of the table, scoring 22, right after Hungary (23), while Iceland and Sweden, respectively, were at the top. This research was done on a scale of 23, 1 being highest and 23 being lowest. Islam,<sup>10</sup> in his study on existing literature on migration studies in Estonia, posed the question whether Estonia is ready to accept quota refugees, who would probably have non-European ethnic backgrounds. In this study, Islam<sup>11</sup> also pointed out that Estonia has very little experience in handling migrants with non-European backgrounds, as the existing literature is mostly on Russian minorities in Estonia and their integration aspect in different sectors. The Estonian State portal also suggests that the number of asylum seekers from Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Sudan has been increasing in Estonia, while previously they came mostly from Russia, Georgia and Ukraine.<sup>12</sup> Islam<sup>13</sup> pointed out that “policy makers, academics and researchers will have to address this aspect to tackle the challenges which are emerging from the migration crisis to build up a cohesive society.”

With this background of asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia, this study would like to provide contributions to the literature by exploring

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<sup>9</sup> Anu Masso, “A Readiness To Accept Immigrants In Europe? Individual and Country-Level Characteristics”, in: *Journal Of Ethnic And Migration Studies*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2009, p. 269.

<sup>10</sup> Aminul Islam, “A study of South Asian Refugees...”, p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 99.

<sup>12</sup> \*\*\*, *Refugee crisis*, Republic of Estonia Government, available at <https://valitsus.ee/en/refugees#statistics>, accessed on 19 December 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Aminul Islam, “Refugee Quota: Is Estonia Ready To Receive Refugees?...”, p. 297.

asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia and their common memories of their experience at the refugee centre and their own country while being dislocated to a European country and to utilize their stories of present and past in order to construct their current and future self or identity.<sup>141516</sup> To be precise, this study attempts to explore the role of memory and the narrative of the continuing process that the refugees and asylum seekers in Estonia are experiencing. The aim is to contribute to the literature that investigates the importance of storytelling and of the past and present memory of asylum seekers and refugees.

### **Asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia and their placement**

Over the last 18 years, from 1997 to May 2015, Estonia has received a total of 709 applications and, among them, permission was granted to 114 people, including 74 refugees and 40 who received complementary protection. In the year 2012, the number of application was 77; in 2013, it went up to 97 and in 2014 it was 147. By mid-2015, in about six months, Estonia received 90 applications and it was expected that the total figures for that year would go past 250. Therefore, the number of asylum seekers and refugees is on the increase.

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<sup>14</sup> Mary Chamberlain, Selma Leydesdorff, “Transnational Families: Memories and Narratives”, in: *Global Networks*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2004, p. 231.

<sup>15</sup> Robin Cohen, “Diasporas And The Nation State: From Victims To Challengers”, in: *International Affairs*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1996, p. 508.

<sup>16</sup> Rogers Brubaker, “The Diaspora Diaspora”, in: *Ethnic And Racial Studies*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2005, p. 15.

The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for helping and finding residence for refugees. For families or individuals who seek asylum for protection, the state provides a housing centre which is located in a village called Vao, in the Laane-Viru county. It takes around one and half hour by train to get to that village from the capital city of Tallinn and this is the only convenient way to communicate with the capital.

At the moment, the Vao accommodation centre (by the end of December 2016) houses 73 persons. Out of those, 54 are asylum seekers and 19 are refugees with a residence permit. Once a person receives international protection, i.e. refugee status, he or she is not supposed to stay at the accommodation centre, but should be living in a home rented from any social housing or from the free market and the Ministry of Social Affairs should help them find it.

The centre also houses 24 children at the moment and 15 women, which comprise 11 families. Currently, the asylum seekers and refugees are from 16 different countries. The largest numbers of residents are from Ukraine, Armenia, Iraq, Palestine, Syria, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Afghanistan and Georgia. The number of applicants from outside Europe is currently on the increase.<sup>17</sup> The village has a small shop selling very basic groceries, which is why the residents from the Vao centre usually go to the nearby town, 15 minutes away by bus, with two buses per day that go to and from the town to the village. “House rent, essential translation services and Estonian language instruction costs are covered by the state for up to two years once they get

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<sup>17</sup> \*\*\*, *Refugee crisis*, Republic of Estonia Government, available at <https://valitsus.ee/en/refugees#statistics>, accessed on 19 December 2016.

the residence permit as refugees.”<sup>18</sup> It is expected that refugees should learn the language and other social aspects so that they could adapt swiftly and find a job to become self-dependent. However, refugees (not asylum seekers) are allowed a state pension, family benefits, employment services and other benefits like any permanent resident of Estonia. Asylum seekers, who are waiting to gain refugee status, are not entitled to work at the moment but from 2017 it is expected that, after having waited six months after their application, they might be allowed to work.

There is a firm distinction between asylum seekers and refugees. Asylum seekers are the ones who asked for protection and their application is being processed, while refugees are the ones who applied and got protection, therefore they have a residence permit and can enjoy all other benefits like any other permanent residents in Estonia. Asylum seekers also have a permit to stay, but on different grounds, which does not allow them many benefits, other than staying and waiting for their decision to come. In this waiting time, they are placed in an accommodation centre and are given 130 Euros per month for their living. They also have some medical services and language lessons.

## Storyline

For the migrants, narratives are quite significant for the construction of meaning or to make sense. In a study of migrants, Farah<sup>19</sup> stated that

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>19</sup> Nuruddin Farah, *Yesterday, Tomorrow: Voices From The Somali Diaspora*, London and New York, Cassell, 2000, p. 37.

“stories poured out, their memory flowing out of their mouth with a broken string”. By the means of narratives, humans swap their memories of incidents and produce accounts in order to build certain memories of a group. Assmann<sup>20</sup> argued that stories have their plots and themes and that the way they tell the stories are certainly driven by their cultural narratives.<sup>21</sup> We can find symbols from conveyed language and narrative, as Bruner<sup>22</sup> pointed out: “our mind needs cultural symbols to express”. Therefore, however we try to make relations and whichever way we try to relate, we have these tools at our disposal. Hence, a society or a particular group tells its story by using narratives and via its cultural framework.<sup>23</sup> Stories can be a problem-solving strategy and can make use of the present situation for the validation of experiences.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, it drove many researchers to investigate narratives and how we talk about current events and not just to focus on what is being said, to construct ‘an unmatched opening into opinions or subjective experience’.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Jan Assmann, John Czaplicka, “Collective Memory And Cultural Identity”, in: *New German Critique*, vol. 65, no. 1, 1995, p. 133.

<sup>21</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Fascism In Popular Memory: The Cultural Experience Of The Turin Working Class*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1987, p. 46.

<sup>22</sup> Jerome Bruner, “Life as Narrative”, in: *Social Research*, vol. 54, no. 1, 1987, p. 31.

<sup>23</sup> Robyn Ramsden, Damien Ridge, “It Was The Most Beautiful Country I Have Ever Seen: The Role Of Somali Narratives In Adapting To A New Country”, in: *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 26, no. 2, 2012, p. 231.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 29.

<sup>25</sup> P. Allotey, L. Manderson, “Storytelling, Marginality And Community In Australia: How immigrants position their Difference In Health Care Settings”, in: *Medical Anthropology*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2003, p. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Ocheberg, “Life, Stories and The Psychological Construction Of Cares”, in: *Journal of Personality*, vol. 56, no. 1, 1988, p. 175.



By recalling experiences and making choices on narratives, individuals or people at times could retake control over their life after any major events like displacement or any kind of disaster; the term ‘survivorship’ is meant to interpret how people could take control of their life. Ramsden,<sup>27</sup> in a study on narratives, came out with a proposition that what we exclude or include in narrativization, how we plot things and how they are interpreted depends on human agency and imagination. Among the immigrants, storytelling, at times, highlights their resettlement aspirations and their attempts to construct or reconstruct identity, which creates an opportunity to design a vision for the future. Hence, the focus of this study is to gather narratives in order to comprehend the experiences from the refugee centre and from their life in a new country and to gather memories of their own country so that it could resonate with asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia.

### **Narrativization and memory sharing**

Existing literature regarding memory tends to indicate that individuals try to reconstruct and restore order by using memory, which helps

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<sup>27</sup> Robyn Ramsden, Damien Ridge, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

them integrate their past in a recent context.<sup>282930</sup> Agnew<sup>31</sup> stated that ‘our memories can generate new definition and sense of our understanding for our past and also for our present’. Refugees have complicated ways to explain their experiences and to assert a specific place as their homeland. Malkki,<sup>32</sup> in a study on refugees, pointed out that ‘because of the mobile nature of people and because of being displaced, they continuously invent homes and homeland, while it is impossible to stay in their past land or territories. Transnational families reconstruct their identity while in search of a home and homeland and, at times, build a vessel for immigrant’s belongings and non-belongings when in search for a place which can be called as home.<sup>3334</sup> Levitt<sup>35</sup> even wrote a report entitled ‘Transnational migrants: when home means more than one country’, where respondents stated their homeland is not just a place where they are being born, it has emotion and feeling of attachment in it.

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<sup>28</sup> Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory And Identity: A Search For Home*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2005, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Liisa Malkki, “National Geographic: The Rooting Of People And The Territorialization Of National Identity Among Scholars And Refugees”, in: *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1992, p. 37.

<sup>30</sup> Paolo Jedlowski , “Memory And Sociology: Themes and Issues”, in: *Time and Society*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2001, p. 31.

<sup>31</sup> Vijay Agnew, *op. cit.*, p.20.

<sup>32</sup> Liisa Malkki, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>33</sup> Anastasi Christou , “Deciphering Diaspora-Translating Transnationalism: Family Dynamics, Identity Construction And The Legacy Of ‘Home’ In Second Generation Greek-American Return Migration”, in: *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 29, no. 6, 2006, p. 1046.

<sup>34</sup> Constance Sutton, “Celebrating Ourselves: The Family Reunion Rituals Of African Caribbean Transnational Families”, in: *Global Networks*, vol. 3, 2004, no. 2 , p. 244.

<sup>35</sup> Peggy Levitt, “Transnational Migrants: When Home Means More Than One Country”, Migration Policy Institute, 1 October 2004, available at <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/transnational-migrants-when-home-means-more-one-country>, accessed on 10 December 2016.

The argument that Halbwachs<sup>36</sup> put forward on the subject of memories is quite significant. Individuals tend to remember and locate their memories through their group memberships, religious identity or the class with which they are affiliated. Kinship is also another aspect through which an individual could gain and remember memories. Schwartz<sup>37</sup> argued that memory is not something which is static; rather he argued that it comes out as a result of dynamic influences or interactions between and among members of a community. We, as an individual or group, tend to forget and reinterpret our past and invent new aspects of our life through shared common experiences.<sup>38</sup> It is quite evident that much of what we remember or what comes out as memory is actually influenced by our membership or families, different social groups or societies, in what Zerubavel<sup>39</sup> termed ‘mnemonic socialization’. When we remember something from our past, we try to recall it through what our parents and elderly people told us and, through enduring memories, we try to identify ourselves. In this study, I started with the premise that memory is a complicated matrix of narratives, in terms of current or present requisite both at collective and individual level.<sup>40</sup> This study focused, on the one hand, on the narratives of asylum seekers and refugees (considering them a group of refugees) and, on the other hand, on their resettlement in Estonia. The focus is on the reconstruction of

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<sup>36</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, New York, Harper and Row, 1980, p. 18.

<sup>37</sup> Barry Schwartz, “Post Modernity And Historical Reputation: Abraham Lincoln In Late Twentieth Century American Memory”, in: *Social Forces*, vol. 77, no. 1, 1998, p. 100.

<sup>38</sup> David Middleton, Derek Edwards, *Collective Remembering*, London, Sage, 1990, p. 8.

<sup>39</sup> Eviatar Zarubavel, “Social Memories: Steps To A Sociology Of The Past”, in: *Qualitative Sociology*, vol. 19, no. 3, 1996, p. 290.

<sup>40</sup> Robyn Ramsden, Damien Ridge, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

memories and narratives so that they can be considered a vehicle of combined management issues in the present. Therefore, this study attempted to investigate how refugees in Estonia form connections with each other, as well as their experiences and sense of belonging in a new country, through storytelling and memories of past and present.

## **Methods**

### *Selection of participants*

Field work was carried in two different periods: from March 2015 to May 2015 and from December 2016 to January 2017. The Vao centre, which is the house for asylum seekers and refugees in Estonia, was selected for field work. Police and border guards gave permission to carry out field work and afterwards good communication was established with the manager of the centre.

The Vao centre currently houses 72 persons: out of those, 54 are asylum seekers and 19 are refugees with a residence permit, from different ethnic groups. At present, the centre accommodates persons from 16 different countries: Iraq, Ukraine, Palestine, Georgia, Armenia, Sri Lanka, India, Afghanistan, Albania, Sudan, Iran, Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Bangladesh and Syria. The centre houses 15 women, there are 24 children and 11 families.

According to the UNHCR definition, “an asylum seeker is someone whose request for sanctuary has yet to be processed, while refugees are people fleeing conflict or persecution. They are defined and protected in

international law and must not be expelled or returned to situations where their life and freedom are at risk”. However, according to Estonian law, an asylum seeker is someone who has applied for protection and a refugee is someone who gained protection and has been given a residence permit card with all other facilities that a permanent residence in Estonia receives. In this study, both asylum seekers and refugees are considered refugees,<sup>41</sup> since they have common feelings of being displaced from their homeland and of living in an accommodation centre while in exile.

The findings of this study are based on group interviews with 24 refugees. 19 were men and 5 were women. They originated from Sri Lanka (3), India (2), Iraq (3), Syria (4), Sudan (4), Afghanistan (2), Albania (4), Cameroon (1), Bangladesh (2), Ivory Coast (1) and Palestine (2). 18 of the 24 participants among the group interview agreed (16 men and 2 women from Sri Lanka, India, Iraq, Sudan, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and Syria) to be interviewed individually. Interviews that were carried individually were conducted with 8 key informants who were selected as a result of observation and also suggested by other fellow refugees. These 8 key informants originated from Bangladesh, India, Iraq, Sudan and Syria.

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<sup>41</sup> Annette A. M. Gerritsen, Inge Bramsen, Walter Deville, Loes H. M. van Willigen, Johannes E. Hovens, Henk M. van der Ploeg, “Physical And Mental Health Of Afghan, Iranian And Somali Asylum Seekers And Refugees Living In The Netherlands”, in: *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2006, p. 20.

### Collection of Data

It is difficult to access refugees and often they are termed ‘invisible actors’.<sup>42</sup> In a country like Estonia, immigrants from third countries can be identified easily, as the number of immigrants from outside of Europe is very small.<sup>43</sup> At the same time, refugees are very hard to access for research purposes, as Bond and Voutira<sup>44</sup> proposed: ‘perhaps they are visible and can be identified but largely inaccessible for researcher for different reasons’. Refugees are given a support person in Estonia to help them get their primary information and support and to get settled in Estonia. I secured a connection with such a support person; through them, access to the Vao centre became possible and I also gained access to the participants.

A two-month stay at the Vao centre and living like them helped build a relationship with them: “This assisted in creating bonds of trust and facilitated openness and engagement in the research process”.<sup>45</sup> Throughout the study, notes were taken at all times and all the events that took place during the field work, as well as all the interactions among them were observed and have been included in the analysis. A semi-structured approach was taken to conduct both group and individual interviews,<sup>46</sup> to be able to switch off to the story-line mood of communication; open-ended questions were utilized, which helps participants address certain aspects of their story

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<sup>42</sup> Voutira Bond, “In Research Of Invisible Actors: Barriers To Access In Refugee Research”, in: *Journal of Refugee Studies*, vol. 20, no. 2, 2007, p. 283.

<sup>43</sup> Aminul Islam, “Refugee Quota: Is Estonia Ready To Receive Refugees?...”, p. 285.

<sup>44</sup> Voutira Bond, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

<sup>45</sup> Robyn Ramsden, Damien Ridge, *op. cit.*, p. 242.

<sup>46</sup> Norman Denzin, Yvonna Lincoln, *Handbook Of Qualitative Research*, London, Sage, 1994, p. 11.

regarding the migration process, their settlement experiences and the set up they had been through. To elicit narratives of their past and presents situations, they were asked to envision their aspiration for the future.

Participants had enough time to express their lives in their own way of speaking, so that whatever aspect significant for the study would come out. This also helped in collecting narratives on issues that concerned them. Since the participants were placed in a detention centre before they were sent to the Vao centre where this study was carried out, the stories had a starting point relevant to this study. Phenomena included communication, treatment, migration and settlement issues in a new country and views about detention, the current centre and the country where they currently live.

Group interviews lasted around two hours; they were recorded in audio format and the permission was taken from both the centre manager and from the participants. All the interviews were conducted in English, except two individual interviews that were conducted in Bangla, the language this investigator speaks as well. All individual participants were fluent in English, which helped them express their narratives and give voice to their concern. All the notes were taken in Bangla and then translated and transcribed in English. Most of the individual interviews were around 40 minutes long and some of them even lasted for more than two hours while lunch or dinner was taken together with the participants. To collect narratives, individual interviews were very significant. These individual interviews not only helped highlight new insights, but also contributed to the validation of the data obtained from group interview.

### Analysis

After transcribing the interviews, they were checked by the participants for any kind of misconceptions and for accuracy. All the names in the analysis are anonymous. Transcripts were checked and rechecked to inspect any common design of themes in order to create narratives<sup>47</sup> and to highlight the differences in content. Transcripts were continuously reviewed and categorized to identify links between categories.<sup>48</sup> The main analysis of narratives based on their present and past experiences was carried out from the final categorization.

### Limitation

Most of the participants were men and it might be the case that the findings of this analysis relate their views. While a diverse sample of participants were interviewed from different countries and different ethnic groups, this study did not set out to accentuate the difference between these participants, rather considered them a set group of refugees. Furthermore, this study did not intend to generalize the findings to all refugees in Estonia but to explore the situations of refugees' lives in the Vao centre and to prioritize their own constructed narratives.

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<sup>47</sup> Janice Morse, Peggy-Anne Field, *Nusing Research: The Application Of Qualitative Approaches*, London, Chapman and Hall, 1995, p. 29.

<sup>48</sup> Sullivan Browne, "Analyzing In Depth Interview Data Using Grounded Theory", in: V. Minichiello, G. Sullivan, K. Greenwood and R. Axford (eds.), *Handbook for research methods in health sciences*, Sydney, New South Wales, Addison Wesley Longman Australia pty. Ltd, 1999, p. 49.



## Findings

Collective narratives have been evident in spite of the fact that they come from different backgrounds and because they mentioned idyllic interactions both in cultural and social dimensions with their own community before being displaced, which include support and strong family ties. Their country was rendered a place for joy and peace despite being displaced from its territory. Through observation, we can see that their memories of their former life are “attractive” and that they have a sense of belonging and safety when it comes to their country of origin:

*When my country was stable and everything was running smoothly, it was very nice and lovely. The environment was nice and weather was so good that you could go anywhere by walking and could spend time on the street, talk with other people, even with strangers. You would find nice foods on the street and they would be fresh.<sup>49</sup>*

All participants, despite their cultural and social diverseness, referred to strong family bonding and family support, involving unity and being part of an extended family. Family plays an important part of storytelling when it comes to their everyday life and, whenever they got the chance to express it, they mentioned it with joy. Supporting each other was, also, an obligation:

*If you get married, you don't get out of home, you rather stay at home. It's our tradition. Sometimes only one member is working and the rest are enjoying their life being part of the family. We take care of each other. As a part of an extended family, you contribute to your family in many ways. If you have a job, you contribute financially; if you stay at home you cook, you clean the house*

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<sup>49</sup> Sohan, 31, from Iraq.

*and sometimes we just offer company to others. There is no depression because we always discuss with each other and problems can be solved this way.*<sup>50</sup>

Not only family interactions, but also activities taking place outside the home are considered socializing by the participants. The concept of 'community' is regarded as the sum of interactions with neighbours and relatives. Peaceful and happy interactions with the neighbours are, also, a central part of their memory.

*You actually know everyone who is your neighbour. Children used to play with them outside. Elders gossip at home with other neighbours. It is a beautiful culture. If a new neighbour comes into the locality, we try to get to know them by inviting them and sometimes they also invite others. As the weather is good and warm, you do not need to stay at home all the time, so you know all other homes and their members while you are out in the street and spend time outside home. You can even sit under a lamppost together and talk.*<sup>51</sup>

The participants spoke of their relationship with their neighbours in a way that emphasized social interaction as the central part of their everyday life:

*While cooking something, if you discovered you don't have salt at home, you do not go to the shop. You turn to your neighbour. We, at times, go to the market together and even exchange things with each other.*<sup>52</sup>

The reasons for migration and their trajectories differ considerably; their narratives were linked to the memories of being displaced and positive relationships with family and community in their homeland. When pushed

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<sup>50</sup> Sahed, 28, from Sri Lanka.

<sup>51</sup> Rahim, 35, Sudan.

<sup>52</sup> Rahela, 28, Afghanistan.

and asked about their displacement period and difficulties that they have been through, five participants explained elaborately how their situations changed during the difficult period in relations to safety. At the same time, they concentrate their focus on the period before the difficulties and on their memories of a beautiful country. Their way of describing their home then becomes a version of a past in which they could live.<sup>5354</sup>

The period of difficulties in their homeland highlights their longing for the past and all the memories they have to offer of their homeland are before the troubled times:

*I have two kinds of stories or memories: the first kind is from before I was displaced and the other kind refers to when everything was running good in my country. My country was the most amazing country that I could ever find. I do not say that I do not like Estonia but your homeland is your homeland and you know every bit of it.*<sup>55</sup>

Participants in this study focused on positive narratives of their country in opposition to some studies on migration.<sup>56</sup> Participants did recognize their countries' situations and how unsafe it is for them, but then turned to memories of their happiness:

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<sup>53</sup> David Field, "The Peaceful Past Of The Violent Present", in: Howarth, D.R. and A. J. Norval (eds.), *South Africa In Transition: New Theoretical Perspectives*, New York, St Martin Press, 1998, p. 29.

<sup>54</sup> Refslund Sorensen, "The Experience Of Displacement: Reconstructing Places And Identities In Sri Lanka", in: K. F. Olwig and K. Hastrup (eds.), *Siting Culture: The Shifting Anthropological Object*, London, Routledge, 1997, p. 9.

<sup>55</sup> Saher from Albania.

<sup>56</sup> Louise Ryan, "Family Matters: (E)migration, Familial Networks And Irish Women In Britain", in: *The Sociological Review*, vol. 52, no. 1, 2004, p. 366.

*There is no proper government because of the war but still when I remember my country I can feel happiness. I was always laughing back home. I cannot remember the last time I laughed here in Estonia.<sup>57</sup>*

### Living in the detention centre

Most participants had to stay in the detention centre, which they termed as ‘prison’, before they were placed at the Vao centre – their current accommodation. Hence, most participants had a starting point for their story on Estonia and for their narratives. Stories of their refugee status included mostly the period they spent in the detention centre, waiting to be transferred to the Vao centre where this research was carried out; this helps frame their narrative in Estonia:

*Once you left your country without a passport and you are placed in a prison, being a refugee becomes your only identity. You are a refugee and spend your time with other people in the prison who do not have any option to go anywhere but to stay in a prison. So, you are in the middle of an ocean.<sup>58</sup>*

A number of participants told stories about the treatment they received, about not feeling human in the detention centre and how it keeps haunting them, which makes it difficult to cope even when they are placed in a relatively nice place to stay.

*It is a nice place. You can go to the shop, buy things and eat. You are given money and you can sleep and talk with your family members back home. While I was in the prison, I was given the chance to talk with my family only once a week and that, too, only for five minutes with my own money. There was no internet, no communication tools. I felt trapped, like when a mouse gets caught in a box.<sup>59</sup>*

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<sup>57</sup> Asfaq, 31, from Iraq.

<sup>58</sup> Ruhan, 31, from Iran.

<sup>59</sup> Viki, 38, from India.

A number of participants continue to have those feelings of not fitting in and being trapped in the middle of nowhere. They did not refer to themselves as being victims of racism, but the participants' stories generated narratives of racism overall. As part of research on Finnish immigrants, Alitolppa-Niitamo<sup>60</sup> found out that, in Finland, Somali refugees are being treated more negatively than any other immigrant group. In spite of the Estonian government focusing on multiculturalism, it was evident from stories told by the participants that they had their own narratives on the local structure:

*In the detention centre, even the amount of food was so low that you would feel hungry all the time. The same food was given to all kinds of people. Does not matter how big or small you are and how much need you have, you will get the same quantity. I was still relatively lucky as I am not black. I think black refugees from Africa were treated even worse and refugees from Europe who look like them were treated much better than us.<sup>61</sup>*

Stories told by the participants indicated that their label of refugee will not vanish and that this identity might place them in a vulnerable situation to cope with and to adapt into a new society. Bhabha(1994)<sup>62</sup> stated that attempts to change the status within 'the border-line community migration' would not be successful. Vulnerability might be influenced by their economic condition, cultural standpoint, religious belief and skin

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<sup>60</sup> Anne Alitolppa-Niitamo "Somali Youth And The Context Of Schooling In Metropolitan Helsinki: A Framework Accessing Variability In Educational Program", in: *Journal Of Ethnic And Migration Studies*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2003, p. 86.

<sup>61</sup> Srimohan, 26, from Sri Lanka.

<sup>62</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The location of culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 22.

colour, as Fangene<sup>63</sup> stated that refugees from Somalia might face a more vulnerable situation than others because of their dire financial condition and their poor standard of living.

*I tried to find an apartment in town for my family after getting the permission and residence permit. But I could not find any. Initially house owners seemed willing to rent it out to me, but whenever I told them that I am a refugee, they switched off. I think it would be the same case when I will start looking for a job.<sup>64</sup>*

Being classed as refugees and the memories from the detention centre became the centre narratives for some participants, which even influenced two of the participants to change their status. Treatment by the host societies and the prejudice that they receive might reinforce their ethnic identity.<sup>65</sup> While two participants decided to change their residence status, narratives about their homeland continued:

*In my opinion, it would be very hard to fit in this society as a refugee. My appearance is different in this country. Not all people are bad here. Some are very good but some just do not accept us. I cannot forget the treatment that I received in the detention centre. I do not think even in my country in a normal situation people will be treated as badly. I have decided to find work. I am educated. If I get a proper job, I will stay here as a worker not as a refugee I will then apply for different kind of residence permit.<sup>66</sup>*

Feelings of anxiety and being ignored by society and by the human rights organizations was evident. Participants continued their narratives on

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<sup>63</sup> Katrin Fangene, "Humiliation Experienced By Somali Refugees In Norway", in: *Journal Of Refugee Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 2006, p. 72.

<sup>64</sup> Nish, 23, from Afghanistan.

<sup>65</sup> Katrin Fangene, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

<sup>66</sup> Sm, 21, from Afghanistan.

institution and related their memories regarding what they faced at the detention centre. One participant even asked this researcher to do field work in the detention centre: *‘since you are researching us, you better visit the prison to see the real scenario. We are far better here at the Vao centre’*.<sup>67</sup>

### *Feeling lost and life in Estonia*

*Before arriving in Estonia, I imagined that it would be a very beautiful, nice European country. It is more difficult being away from my homeland than I anticipated. I have to accept it and will have to recognize that I am here and I have to get used to it but I miss my life back in my country.*<sup>68</sup>

Their memories from the past in relation to their family and community drove their experiences of their current life in Estonia. In a migratory situation, identification and habituation takes place in sites, referred by Christou<sup>69</sup> when he carried out research on Greek migrants. Trying to find their identity and their feelings of belonging are not restricted by the home or the host societies. One Sudanese participant stated that:

*I have lost all my family members, my relatives and even my neighbourhood back home, but I had a beautiful life there. My memories are now my asset. They belong to me and I would live my life with all these memories.*<sup>70</sup>

As participants are quite detached from their networks back home, they conveyed the message of being alone, feeling sad while living in Estonia

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<sup>67</sup> Meraj, 30, from Iraq.

<sup>68</sup> Raihan, 22, from Palestine.

<sup>69</sup> Anastasi Christou, *op. cit.*, p. 1045.

<sup>70</sup> Johny, 24, from Sudan.

and a sense of disconnection. Despite the fact that once they were placed in the accommodation centre after the detention period, they had the global communication system in the form of internet and other tools, they still felt disconnected from their former networks. Their sense of family and community still manifested:

*The fact is: in our country, we live in an extended family, here we have to live like a nuclear family. I cannot have all my family members or neighbours here.<sup>71</sup>*

Their sense of “self” and the culture of individualism was invented by most participants when they arrived in the accommodation centre in Estonia. Most participants told stories which focused on collectiveness, rather than individual self. Participants were informed that they had to focus on their own self, rather than others or any country mate:

*Once I asked our accommodation centre’s manager to provide four pieces of bed sheets for the four of us from Sudan, I was told that I should only ask for myself. If the rest needed something, they should come and ask themselves. In our country, we do not feel this way. Even if you are not a family member, if you are just person they know, you could still do things collectively.<sup>72</sup>*

In spite of the difficulties that the participants faced at the detention centre and their feelings of not fitting in, narratives indicate that many participants are trying to cope with their new atmosphere and are optimistic in the sense that they have to re-establish themselves in this new country and have to build a community feeling with other migrants or fellow refugees.

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<sup>71</sup> Rahima, 29, from Palestine.

<sup>72</sup> Johny, 26, from Sudan.



Their collective narratives from back home are significant here and build a network through which refugees in Estonia can cope in a new environment:

*We need to come forward and, thankfully; we know each other there at the detention centre and, also, here at the accommodation centre. We have to work together and should help each other if any problems arise. We need to find a way to build a strong refugee community in Estonia, so we could help each other and could show the world that we are doing well.*<sup>73</sup>

Respondents also focused on the language and the hope to gain better understanding of Estonian culture and system. This would help them have a better outlook for themselves and their children. Many participants had the idea that settling in this country depended on learning the language and forming relationships not only with their own refugee community members, but also with host community:

*Going to school is important. There you learn the language and also you might have option to build up friendships with others. My children are going to school and I am hopeful they will have a better future in this country.*<sup>74</sup>

## Discussion

Participants conveyed their stories in connection to the nature of their detention centre and also the accommodation centre where they were placed afterwards. The argument can be made that their glamorized memories of their homeland could be an obstacle to adapting in Estonia. This analysis presents the role of memories and the narratives in explaining refugees.

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<sup>73</sup> Jetendro, 29, from India.

<sup>74</sup> A mother from Albania.

Refugees are presented as significant agents with their own capabilities and resources; at the same time, we should recognize that they have lost many things back home and that they have better experiences in the back of their mind. The outcome of this process of storytelling and creating narratives was not designed to prompt any policy making, but to provide an insight into the ways refugees in Estonia think of their country and construct narratives of adapting in Estonia; as Green<sup>75</sup> pointed out, “a sense of coherent identity can be provided by composing our past”. This study also tried to identify how their social connections at the detention centre make them construct a certain narrative of the host country via their storytelling.

The participants’ experiences in the past and present, along with their identity and the creation of narratives, are interconnected. The findings of this study suggest that the participants could be termed as doubly-marginalized people, if we take into consideration, on the one hand, their condition as refugees and of being displaced from their own country and, on the other hand, not being treated the way they expected in a European country and being forced to cope with living in a new country. This situation would be conducive to them creating narratives that enforce this feeling of marginalization, which is different from the findings of some other previous researchers.<sup>7677</sup> At the same time, many participants could create new narratives to help them combine past and current situations in order to cope in a new land.

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<sup>75</sup> Anna Green, “Individual Remembering and Collective Memory: Theoretical Presuppositions and Contemporary Debates”, in: *Oral history*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2004, p. 37.

<sup>76</sup> Katrin Fangene, *op. cit.*, p. 75.

<sup>77</sup> Robyn Ramsden, Damien Ridge, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

This study analyzes how participants construct their past in an idealistic way. This might highlight the manner in which the construction is important for adapting to their present situation, where the narrative of their homeland becomes the basis on which they will re-establish themselves in a new country. These findings can be matched with findings that Eastmond,<sup>78</sup> Chamberlain and Leydesdorff<sup>79</sup> drew in their research, pointing out that resorting to familiarity is a means of coping.

Understanding the participants' present experiences surrounding the detention centre, how they tell their stories around it and how they frame it negatively were the key points of the investigation. The refugee status became the central point of their stories when asked about the experiences of being a refugee. This might be a healthy argument for researchers who deal with refugees and, also, for policy makers who are tasked with resolving these issues. Islam,<sup>80</sup> in his study on Estonia, pointed out that little research has been carried out on refugees in Estonia, while Estonia is receiving quota refugees and that "the question that can be asked is whether Estonia is ready to receive quota refugees who will mostly have backgrounds from outside Europe".

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<sup>78</sup> Drik Eastmond, "Reconstructing Life: Chilean Refugee Women and the Dilemmas of Exile", in: G. Buijss (ed.), *Migrant Women*, Oxford, UK, Berg, 1993, p. 30.

<sup>79</sup> Mary Chamberlain, Selma Leydesdorff, *op. cit.*, p. 229.

<sup>80</sup> Aminul Islam "Refugee Quota: Is Estonia Ready To Receive Refugees?...", p. 287.

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