Displaced Voices: A Journal of Migration, Archives and Cultural Heritage Vol. 3, No. 1 © The Author(s) 2023, pp. 38-53.

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The Inaudible Bereaved: A Critical Narrative Analysis of the Voice of a Bereaved Syrian Refugee in the UK: A Case Study.

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Abstract

This paper presents a case study from a larger research project on the experience of bereavement in Syrian refugees in the UK. In the larger study, five participants were interviewed for their individual bereavement narratives. The qualitative methodology employed was Langdridge's Critical Narrative Analysis, which follows six distinct iterative stages. This paper describes the individual narrative of one of the five participants in the study and follows it through these stages. This includes contextualising the narrative within the broader overall themes from the research, and looking at the narrative through a postcolonial lens. The aim is to provide a rich sense of the participant's experience as described through his voice, as well as offering an alternative perspective developed using critical theory. It is hoped this research might contribute to mental and social care provision in the UK, especially bereavement services and organisations, for this population.

Keywords

Bereavement, Critical Narrative Analysis, Case Study, Refugees, Lived Experience.

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Introduction and Context

The Syrian refugee Crisis began in 2011 and was described by the High Commissioner of the United Nations Refugee Agency as "the biggest humanitarian and refugee crisis of our time" (UNHCR, 2016). 6.7 million people have fled Syria since the insurgency in 2011, and millions more are internally displaced (UNHCR, 2021).

Throughout the crisis, death, loss and bereavement have been a constant phenomenon. Many people lost their lives directly in the war or in refugee camps around Syria, or through "border deaths" occurring as they endeavoured to cross oceans in overpopulated dinghies. The picture of a lifeless Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy whose body was washed ashore in 2015, appeared to jolt the world into an awareness of the horrors of the exodus (Barnard & Shoumali, 2015) and provided momentary awakening to the experiences of these people, who suddenly appeared more real and human to the western world.

Five years on, the UK has made good on its pledge to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme (Government digital service, 2020). All of those resettled will have experienced multiple losses of country, culture, language and people. They face the task of integrating into a new home, culture and community with all the stresses and challenges this involves. Yet, it appears that little has been written specifically about the issue of bereavement within this group. Lane & Tribe, (2014) noted the importance of considering culture, religion and explanatory frameworks when working clinically with refugees whilst also remembering the uniqueness of each individual and their meaning making when considering issues of loss and grief. This study attempts to do this.

This research aimed to explore questions such as: How are Syrian refugees in the UK making sense of their losses and bereavement in the midst of the crisis that encompasses them? More specifically, how is this experience of bereavement storied and situated by the individuals themselves, within this large-scale humanitarian crisis? It is argued that phenomenologically exploring subjective bereavement narratives within the context of a wider powerful socio-political narrative about Syrian refugees, would help situate and give clarity to the experience of its survivors.

Method and Procedure

The research utilised Langdridge's Critical Narrative Analysis (CNA) (Langdridge, 2007) as its methodology. CNA incorporates the narrative methodological frame as the means of making sense of the participant's experience. It then goes one step further by bringing together the narrative and the meta-critical by interrogating the narratives typically through the lens of a social theory selected for its relevance. The alternative view, however, is not meant to subsume the experience narrated by the participants but to add to it as a possibility from a different perspective. CNA thus acknowledges that even a narrative comes from somewhere, is not unconstrained by lines of power, and can be viewed from another position that could open up new possibilities.

Five participants, all male, agreed to participate in the research. The author spent time detailing the purpose of the interview and explaining that she had no political influence in relation to the asylum system or the wider politics.

The method used was unstructured interviews (with minimal, open-ended questions) that focused on asking the participant to narrate their experience of bereavement in any way they felt comfortable. The act of storying one's experience is known to help create new meanings (Reissman & Quinney, 2005), which could be captured in subsequent stories. The author conducted two sets of interviews with the same participants, arranged four months apart. Although not typical for CNA, this element was added to study the trajectory of any meaning-making processes in bereavement. As none of the participants were comfortable with the English language, an Arabic speaking interpreter was employed after carefully considering the ethics of doing so.

Once data was collected, the six stage CNA procedure delineated by Langdridge (2007) was employed to analyse the data. The stages are briefly explained below:

1. Critiquing the illusions of the subject. This is a stage of reflexive engagement where the researcher interrogates her own assumptions about the topic, after the first reading of the data.

2. Identifying narratives, narrative tone and rhetorical function. Distinct narratives in the text are identified at this stage. The tone of the narrative is essential to understand the meanings expressed and made, and could change over the narrative from, for example,

pessimistic to hopeful. This is the phenomenological stage in the methodology, which privileges the subjective experience of the participant above all else. Next, the function of the narrative is identified to understand what a story seems to be doing or trying to accomplish discursively.

3. Identities and identity work. The researcher at this point examines how the speaker's identity is framed and constructed by the narrative produced, and how this relates to what is known about the person.

4. Thematic priorities and relationships. Themes in the stories are identified at this stage, with relationships between the themes being particularly important for meaning-making.

5. Destabilising the narrative. The researcher at this stage introduces an interrogation of the text through a suitable hermeneutic of suspicion that recognises the narrative as situated in and enmeshed with multiple environmental factors that could be social, political, ethnic, racial, sexual or gendered. The choice of which critical theory to use depends on what the previous stages of analysis reveal. For this study, the geopolitical context and the themes of power that emerged from the analysis called for a post-colonial lens.

6. A critical synthesis. At this stage the results are synthesised. Key narratives and their themes are presented, always privileging the voice of the participant. Finally, the work of the imaginative hermeneutic of suspicion is presented.

In this research, the collectivistic values espoused by all the participants immediately became evident in both the content and the functions of the narratives, as will be seen below. However, what this also meant was that it was only after the overlapping themes in the narratives were acknowledged and given their place, that individual divergences became apparent. Consequently, in the spirit of being led by the narratives, the researcher decided to interchange the order of stages 3 and 4 so that the thematic priorities (stage 4) took precedence in order of presentation over individual identities (stage 3). In some ways, this decision was an outcome of stage 1 of the analysis in action: A reflexive reading of the narratives necessitated holding lightly not only the assumptions of the researcher (that grief should be personal and subjective, and that collectivism equals homogeneity), but also those of the methodology.

Findings

The narrative of one of the participants, Ahmed Abdullah (anonymised) was selected for CNA analysis. While all the participants' narratives were impactful in their own idiosyncratic way, the author chose this narrative for its poignant use of poetry as a means of conveying his experience.

In the present case study, the narrative of Ahmed Abdullah (AA) is followed by the first, subjective stage of Identifying narrative tone and function (stage 2), which is presented in detail. Then, the stage of Thematic priorities (stage 3 in this research) is summarised as collective findings, since these intersected and overlapped across all participants' narratives including AA's . The stage of Identity construction (stage 4 in this research) then details how AA navigated his identity in his own idiosyncratic manner. Finally, the stage of the "critical moment" (stage 5) is presented in the context of AA's narratives.

In the information that follows, the words in quotation marks are the words of AA.

Ahmed-Abdullah

AA came to the UK in 2012, along with his wife and children. He is a Syrian Muslim man in his twenties. After the insurgency started, AA fled from Syria to Lebanon, where he waited for many months before being invited to the UK under the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme. During this time, he lost his brother in the war.

Stage 2: Identifying Narrative Tone and Rhetorical Function

Narrative 1. The narrative began with the story of the "beginning of incidents in Syria" itself. This formed a master narrative within which the story of the loss of AA's brother unfolded. He began with describing an ambush that led to a massacre in one of the cities, by the "regime forces, or governmental forces" in response to a peaceful demonstration. He was at that time living in Lebanon with his family, but his brother had returned to Syria for three days. After the massacre, his brother "disappeared" while on his way for Friday prayers.

AA described a period of uncertainty when there was no way to find out where his brother was; it was too dangerous to return to Syria in search of him. Meanwhile, every month "the government sent dead bodies in order to be recognised by their families". The family kept

desperately looking for him, showing his photograph to people coming from the area, or paying money in response to false promises of information "Have you seen him? Do you know anything about him?"

He then described the turning point in the narrative: "and then some dead bodies came". It was his cousins who recognised his brother amongst these bodies and asked AA to arrive immediately. When AA met them, they told him that his brother had died. AA said that the body was completely burnt and it was hard to recognise him. AA still doubts whether it was his brother he buried. "I was shocked to concentrate on whether he was or was not my brother." He said perhaps this is also because "it was a big shock for us". As AA spoke about this, he became choked and expressed that he felt pain because his first thought was that his brother's children will now grow up as orphans. He narrated the story of seeing his nieces and nephews when he went back to Syria after his brother's death.

This linked to the next narrative introduced, that of the beginning of his journey as a refugee. AA and his family left for Lebanon, hoping for the situation to "settle". Instead, it worsened. They stayed on for three or four years before they were invited to the UK. It was seven years now since AA had seen his family, whose problems he then described, expressing the wish for a reunion with those who are still alive.

A new narrative then began about dashed hopes for a bright future towards which they had been working in Syria: "I feel my future gone…they came and they burned it, destroyed it". This change in his future was situated in a master narrative of a change in the future of every Syrian and of Syria itself. He introduced the tension between accepting this as God's will and yet feeling "psychologically ill" about it, expressing regret, helplessness, sadness and grief not only for his personal loss but for "all the people and the children that are dying now". There was a sub- narrative here of "children are more important than us" which caused him to feel frustrated about his brother's children never having a father to celebrate their milestones as his own children would. This personal tension of "what happened there was fate and destiny, and here, life will continue" shifted the narrative back onto the wider political problem in Syria.

In the end, AA summarised that he was angry about three things: his brother's death, the future of his brother's children and their family, and "what happened to Syria." He evoked the imagery of feeling handcuffed, a good person without any power, while those in power killed their own people.

This led back to how the whole situation in Syria began "for the sake of children" who wrote graffiti against the government and were punished harshly by the authorities, supported by the President, in response to which the demonstrations described in the first narrative began. Thus, the structure of AA's story was bound on both sides by the master narrative of the beginnings of the war in Syria, leading to the decision to "leave to protect your family".

Narrative tone and rhetorical function.

To begin with, the tone of the narrative was factual as AA was keen to educate me about the story of Syria. As the narrative about his bereavement began, the tone changed to one of a helpless uncertainty mixed with the guilt and a sense of longing and grief emerged in relation to his family as well as from looking back at the trajectory of their lives which changed with that of the conditions in Syria, from a future-forward, hopeful place to one that had been destroyed and razed to the ground. The tone was bereft, complaining, and disbelieving. There was a sense of fatalism with a consistent passive tone, but often conflicting with glimpses of anger and anxiety about a total lack of agency to help in any manner. There was an overall sense of waiting quietly, indefinitely, for tragic events to finish unfolding and peace to be restored in Syria. Towards the end, the tone changed to one of hope for a reunion as a possible result of the interview, which turned to disappointment when I reminded him that I could not directly help him with this.

The rhetorical function of the narratives seemed to show me the plight of Syria through words and video recordings he had been sent on his phone by the people back home, and to place the personal within the wider political situation. There was an embracing of the culturally canonical narrative of 'being there to care for your family' by not focusing entirely only on his personal grief for his brother.

AA chose instead to focus on the guilt and helplessness he felt towards his brother's surviving children as he made the choice to move away for the sake of his own. The narrative energy was invested in justifying his anxiety for the living and equally to justify his moving away, and to criticise the circumstances that coerced him to make this agonising choice. There seemed to be an overarching function of trying to convince me of the realness of the tragedy in Syria, by telling me stories and showing me pictures, which possibly criticises the dominant counter-narrative in the west of looking away from the human cost of the war in Syria. The author reflected, as a

personal hypothesis, that this was possibly directed at her, the 'researcher' who would hopefully for AA influence public opinion about the atrocities in Syria and possibly engineer a reunion with his family.

Narrative 2. AA began the second interview describing a "state of unknowing" that he was "still" in, as a result of the events unfolding in Syria and things "not settling down there". He related the story of how he was recently "badly affected" by hearing that his maternal cousin had been kidnapped, and had no way of knowing who did it as "we don't know what is going on in Syria".

He went on to narrate what he had heard from his relatives in Syria, using the language of 'we' even though he is outside it. When asked about the impact of the uncertainty on himself, he chose to focus on uncertainty as a global reality for all Syrians, who "are all affected". Once again this was connected to his anguish about his brother's children losing their father, and grieving on behalf of them. When I attempted to bring him back to any personal experience of grief, he repeated that he felt he has lost his brother, and that only God knows the truth about "where he is now." He added that his grief is not just for his brother but for everyone who lost someone in Syria – a collective grief. This concern for "the whole people" led to another story about doing voluntary work in the UK a month before this interview, when supplies were sent to Syria, and how the visual experience of seeing medical supplies like wheelchairs made him recall how Syria used to help other countries with the same things. Now, realising that Syria, which was in "a good position", was the receiver of the same things, had brought him to tears. At the same time, he added that doing such voluntary work helped him relax and feel happy that he was helping in some way.

This led to talking about other things that he does that give him relief from "the pain" including sitting alone reminiscing about Syria, and singing about Syria. He said that he made his own songs about Syria and shared some of them with me. The narrative of the first song was about asking the sea to send them to Syria:

Interpreter: He said he talked to the waves of the sea: where are you taking us?

Where are you taking us..umm..he sends..like.. regards to the sea that please let us live in Syria send us to Syria and let us live in Syria,

and then he wished to the rain to water the olives and the air there in Syria.

And I want my tears to be sent through the rains to Syria. For my tears to go to Syria as the rain.

It might wash the heart of the people or the shame of the people.

And most people who lost, had their homes destroyed

And those who destroyed their homes, must they go back to their homes, and will hug their homes, and their homes will. And will sit with their homes and their people there.

To hug its stones and to sit on the place of the homes.

Another song was about wishing that he was there to guard the soul of his country and respond to the call of his forefathers. He said that he hoped to someday gift these songs to the people of Syria to raise their spirits – to bring them back in touch with the Syria he remembered. He talked about being in a more accepting space:

The more we live here in this country, the more we understand that the pain will be inside us…not go…but there is other things, our lives and our kids. I want them to feel that things are normal and I want to continue now our life.

At the same time, he denied that this means that he is any less aggrieved: "I can live my life but I still will be affected by this pain….it is not easy to be forgotten by one year or a period of time."

He implied that this pain would always be maintained by thinking about the ongoing suffering in Syria and, as far as his brother's death was concerned, about how his children would grow up without him. He spoke about feeling sad whenever he spoke to them "but I don't show them I am angry. Because they are kids. I make them feel like I am with them."

Narrative tone and rhetorical function.

The narrative tone revealed a more accepting, depressive position about the state of affairs, as if AA had found some way of making his feelings about the goings on in Syria co-exist with the need to carry on his life in the UK. The pain in his story seemed to have found a place in his experience, and there was a sense of self-soothing in a way that could make his situation bearable without having to disown the pain or appear selfish or destructive. The tone of the story also betrayed a sense of increasing distance from Syria (although one of the functions of the narrative was to resist this), as a result of him not being in the country and only receiving second-hand accounts.

In this narrative, AA is a second-hand narrator of the incidents in Syria, and cannot know for sure "what is going on anymore". Once again, the rhetorical function of the narrative was to describe the realness of the suffering in Syria, but this time the narrative performed an additional function of justifying that AA is still an 'insider' rather than speaking from outside it. Perhaps this was a response to the counter-narrative of individualism and building a new life in the UK, and perhaps also a way of coping with the sense of disconnection and not-knowing.

Additionally, the narrative also functioned to demonstrate how he is trying to keep his image of Syria alive by talking about the days when Syria was in the position of giving aid to other countries, and being the "country of the red carpet". He said said that singing about Syria's glory was because "I had to do something so that the Syrian people relax", but sharing the narrative itself functions to make him relaxed in terms of both, keeping his image of Syria alive as well as giving him a sense of agency and justifying that his thoughts are still with his country.

With respect to his bereavement of his brother, the narrative functioned to move away from any attempt by me to focus on his personal pain. Once again, it became predominantly about grieving on the behalf of his brother's children and identifying with their loss. He seemed to make sense of his personal grief by situating it as just one drop in an ocean of grieving people in Syria. Towards the end, he said, "We have an expression, if you solve the problem for other people, your problem will be easier for you. If you saw a problem bigger than yours, your problem will look easier than his." This line seems to be the overall function of both his narratives with respect to coping with grief – to make his own suffering feel smaller, more bearable, by focusing on the bigger picture of collective tragedy.

Stage 3: Themes and thematic priorities

Most of the overall themes constructed can be identified within AA's narratives, which intersected vastly with those of the other participants. The first major narrative theme was a focus on the living rather than the dead, which included an overwhelming anxiety about losing more people, and grieving on behalf of the people left behind. The second major theme was that of pain and shock, which pervaded the narratives and was often spoken of as indescribable. One can locate the grief in the content of these themes. The third major theme was that of transcending language to give the audience a visceral,

supra-verbal experience, through the use of embodied language and visual media. The fourth major theme was about the decision of leaving Syria, suggesting that not doing so would have resulted in further loss and grief, even death. These themes show the process of their grief. A fifth theme was that of locating themselves in between powerful 'Others', in between the past and the present, and in between here and there. This theme shows the position from which their grief is narrated.

Finally, each participant used his narratives to negotiate his identity in his own idiosyncratic way. A final narrative theme of a meaning-making process of making sense of their loss and grief was constructed, which takes form in the stage of Identity work, adapted as stage four in this research.

Stage 4: Identity work

Each participant diverged in how he made sense of his bereavement-in-its-context, and how he attempted to cope with his situation. Having reviewed the overall themes above, we focus back in to AA's own idiosyncratic meaning making process through the movement in his two narratives.

The main focus of AA's first narrative was grief in a societal rather than a personal context. His first narrative involved mourning in particular for the future of Syria, as represented by not only his orphaned nephews, but all of Syria's orphaned children. When he spoke about the loss of his brother, there was a sense of shock, ambivalence and disbelief about his death. Yet, it was his brother's children's future that he was most aggrieved about, which opened up his feelings about the future of Syria. From his position of 'refugee', he spoke as an insider from Syria, a spokesperson facing a western audience, relating first-hand descriptions of the condition of the country, positioning himself in the mass of ordinary Syrian people who are helpless pawns whose lives have changed dramatically because of the decisions of powerful others.

In his second interview, the tone of helplessness about controlling the situation in Syria gave way to a form of agency – that of keeping the old Syria alive, from afar. Thus, from being a powerless insider in the first narrative, AA constructed the identity of the custodian of all that Syria once stood for, creating and spreading songs and poems about the greatness of the country he called home. His sense of growing distance from Syria was evidenced in the second-hand narration of the occurrences in Syria, creating an anxiety about no

longer being an 'insider' spokesperson. He maintained his agency in the matter and resisted this distance through keeping alive his memories of Syria as it should have been, for himself and for his fellow-countrymen. Thus, he coped with his grief about the future of Syria by constructing a "serviceable narrative" (Willig, 2009) of nostalgia and hope, and the identity of a memory-keeper, which challenged the position of being a refugee who is powerless before authority, space and time.

Stage 5: Destabilising the Narrative

This stage in CNA aims to view the narrative from a position situated outside the narrative lifeworld of the participant. The narratives are interrogated through a teleological lens of social theory with the aim of "opening up future possibilities for the narrative rather than digging down to uncover the hidden meaning" (Langdridge, 2007).

This lens was Bhabha's postcolonial theory (Bhabha, 1994), as a political critique that can illuminate oppressive forces acting upon the participants and their narratives that serve to limit them.

Bhabha (1994) illuminates the relevance of postcolonial studies by challenging the notion that colonialism belongs to the past, and is something that the world has moved on from. He asserts that colonialism intrudes constantly upon the present in national, cultural and individual psyches – one such issue could be argued to be present day debates about geopolitical and cultural rights, seen most explicitly in issues surrounding migrants, asylum seekers and refugees.

This view is a challenge to early conceptions of colonialism like that of Edward Said (1987), who proposed that the colonising global north divided the world into the Orient and the Occident, with the Orient 'other' forever being in the position of the object of the coloniser's gaze (Said, 1978). Bhabha (1994) challenges this construction by problematising the binary between Self and Other, suggesting that the relationship is far more dynamic, reciprocal, and mutative.

This is evident in AA's narratives, where even as he talked about helplessness, powerlessness and choicelessness, and espoused canonical narratives of collectivism that approached binaries of us and them, his narratives were simultaneously performing negotiations that had an impact on himself, his audience, and his grief.

The impact on himself is most clearly seen in the movement between the two interviews, where there seems to be a shift from "helpless insider" to spokesperson exercising his agency to "do something" by telling the world about Syria. While pedagogically he talks about powerlessness before a powerful audience, he is performatively exercising some power by fixing his gaze on this audience, and enunciating, through his narrative, that his experience of grief depends as much on them as on him. This enunciation changes the position of the audience from passive host to active agent, whether the audience likes it or not.

Finally, even AA's grief itself can be found in-between the pedagogical and the performative. Both must go together and indeed, they do in his narratives, where grief is at least three-dimensional in terms of content, process and position. AA's grief lies not just with the dead, but also with the living. It is a dynamic grief that subverts the finality of death through its continuous role in shaping identities and positions.

Discussion

The narratives of Ahmed-Abdullah were unpacked through the methodology of CNA in terms of both what they said and what they did, and further viewed from a post-colonial lens which is outside of his life-world. One of the crucial findings from this is the pains taken by the participant to narrate his grief as a political phenomenon. In narrative literature, Reissman (1993) views story-telling as a kind of performance, in which the teller has the fundamental problem of how to convince a listener who was not there that something important happened. Similarly, Burke (1950) states that language is not merely descriptive…trying to tell people how things are…it is trying to move people.

In demonstrating the tension between mourning the dead and mourning those who may yet die, in grieving Syria, and in trying to transcend language to show, as well as tell, AA's narratives challenge the assumption that grief is a private, purely internal affair. On the contrary, the overarching rhetorical function of the grief narratives is to move the audience to feel the same pain, even to activate grief in them, in order to galvanise what should really be a universal mourning for the atrocities in Syria. Discursively, the stories are not a tale but a call, to a powerful 'Other', not just for concern, but for advocacy. From a purely clinical point of view, the implications seem the span the stages of therapy – right from access to

psychological help, to engagement, assessment, formulation and intervention. For instance, a clinical recommendation at the stage of assessment is to not only create tailored assessments but to also acknowledge that a colonial encounter might be being re-enacted in the therapy room; formulation recommendations include formulating the place of power, and using non-dominant models of grief whilst still holding these loosely; therapeutic recommendations include using strengths-based counselling and galvanising peer support. The range of recommendations is far more exhaustive than the key ones suggested here. Many of them are further corroborated by some of the guidance from literature produced in the area of social justice, such as Lewis and Arnold Smith (1998), who recommend four foci of advocacy: (a) addressing professional collusion with oppression, (b) supporting community empowerment, (c) engaging in political advocacy, and (d) emphasizing a social advocacy agenda in our professional associations.

One of the limitations of this study's findings is that, although the inclusion criterion of the study was for adult Syrian refugees of any gender, all the participants who were eventually recruited were men. It is important to acknowledge that the gender dynamics of a research encounter where a female researcher interviewed men, with the help of a male interpreter, would likely have played its part in shaping the narratives. Various constellations of gender within the research encounter would have likely had an impact on the research – whether with participants who were women, a researcher who was a man, an interpreter who was a woman – and any permutation of these. While specific predictions cannot be made about the implications of these, what is clear is that reflecting on these possibilities introduces uncertainty, which must be acknowledged. It also means that we do not know whether the recommendations suggested above would apply to the womenfolk. This is an area that is therefore waiting for further empirical research.

Conclusion

The case of Ahmed Abdullah, as analysed along the stages of CNA, demonstrates that what psychology can offer to this area of study is not only a radically humanistic ethos that looks at the "person" behind conditions often labelled as "trauma", "complicated grief" or "prolonged grief disorder", but also a robust recognition of the oppressive forces in the situatedness of this person (in this case, the forces of geography, of politics, both in Syria and in the UK, and of the "othering" of their culturally and existentially shaped experiences

of separation, grief and adjustment), that equally construct the person's experience. Emotional distress can thus be viewed as a function of the individual's unique embeddedness in their social, political and relational structures, all of which exert power over them. Willig (1999) suggests that we can "do something" with such understandings, by opening up spaces for detecting and deconstructing oppressive structures in the interest of social justice. This approach also safeguards against the danger of localising the distress of socio-political power-play within the person and doing them a further injustice. This can have very real clinical implications in terms of how the host country can best serve the bereaved Syrian refugee, whose grief is not simply passive and personal, but active and political, as seen in Ahmed Abdullah's story- if only we, as the audience, choose to listen to it through his voice.

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