

# **JUHA THE WHALE**

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## **Abstract**

*Juha the Whale* is a short coming-of-age fiction film that explores the isolation a refugee mother and her young daughter face as they await the status of their claimant hearing in Toronto, Canada.

Najah (45) and her daughter Noor (8), spend the days leading up to their hearing in cramped refugee housing, awaiting the verdict, which will determine whether they can remain in Canada or be deported back to war-torn Syria. The story is told through fragmented scenes, conveying a lost sense of time as the hours blend together. Striking visuals capture the alienation of their cramped apartment, while fleeting snapshots of bustling city life from their small bedroom window emphasize their isolation. This domestic reality is juxtaposed with Noor's disjointed auditory memories of her father as she struggles to mentally cope with war-related trauma. Through these creative elements, *Juha the Whale* seeks to authentically portray the complex and desperate experiences of a broken family caught between hope and despair.

# **Dedication**

To Mama and Baba.

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I give my deepest love and gratitude to my family. Thank you for your unconditional faith in me.

# Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Dedication.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Table of Contents.....	v
Introduction.....	1
Development of the Story.....	3
The Refugee Claimant Process.....	3
Reflecting and Reframing.....	7
From the Political to the Personal: <i>Juha the Whale</i> .....	8
Cinematic Influences.....	13
Themes and Ideas.....	17
Previous Works.....	25
The Production Process.....	27
Pre-Production.....	27
Creative Process with Actors.....	30
Production.....	32
Conclusion.....	33
Bibliography.....	34
Filmography.....	36
Appendices.....	37
Appendix 1: Najah and Noor, Rehearsal.....	37
Appendix 2: Noor drawing Juha, Rehearsal.....	37
Appendix 3: Drawing of Juha, Rehearsal.....	38
Appendix 4: Najah and Noor, Production.....	38
Appendix 5: A Listless Noor, Production.....	39
Appendix 6: Drawing of Juha, Production.....	39
Appendix 7: Purple-licious the Betta Fish.....	40

## **Introduction**

As a Palestinian-Canadian female filmmaker, I have always been interested in seeing diverse Arab female experiences in film, especially in displaced, Western contexts. Coming into my thesis, I knew that my work would be influenced by my parents' experiences as Palestinian child refugees in the years following the *Nakba*. The *Nakba* (translated as “the catastrophe” or “disaster”) is known as the Palestinian mass exodus, in which more than 700,000 Palestinian Arabs were expelled or fled from their homes during the 1948 Palestinian war. This experience rooted my parents' eternal feelings of displacement as they moved from village to village in Palestine, eventually moving to Jordan, then to Saudi to make a family, and finally to Canada in their search of a better life for their children. As a female, growing up in several conservative Muslim countries provided me with a diverse range of experiences of how women operate in each culture, and the boundaries in which they exist. This, along with the current refugee crisis, made me want to make a film specifically about female refugees.

Currently, numerous countries in the Middle East bear the effects of societies in flux, with droves of Palestinian, Iraqi, Egyptian, and Syrian refugees escaping to Western countries willing to provide visas and a life away from violence and war. While the complex and traumatic ocean journey of a refugee tends to receive the most news coverage, I felt I needed to explore another stressful period: the weeks and months refugees are caught in limbo within the claimant process, waiting to see if they are accepted into a new country. I feel that focusing on this moment in a refugee's life, this significant transitional period that could be the calm before the storm or the path to a new

life, can provide a range of emotional and psychological insight to an audience. Refugees who attempt to claim status in Canada are subject to grueling, stressful, and arguably unethical processes. While Justin Trudeau's leadership has brought some positive change for refugees, the claimant process inherited from the Harper era is quite closed and difficult for newly-arrived refugees to navigate.

## **Development of the Story**

### **The Refugee Claimant Process**

To get a detailed and authentic perspective into the refugee claimant process in Canada, I engaged in intensive primary and secondary research. I was able to interview three different Toronto-based immigration lawyers: Preevanda Sapru, Matthew Oh, and Cornelia Mazgarean, who have represented many refugees in claimant processes and were able to provide valuable insights into their clients' experiences and struggles. To explain why I wanted to explore this problematic claimant process in my film, I feel it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the information I obtained in my research.

The Canadian refugee claimant process is incredibly complex, but the gist of it involves several key steps. First, the refugee must make a refugee claim at their port-of-entry to the Canada Border Services Agency. They are placed in temporary housing (and are sometimes kept in detention centers), most often isolated from any other Arab-speaking individuals, and with limited access to the outside world. Second, they must be eligible to have their claim heard at the Refugee Protection Division (RPD) of the Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB). To do so, they must complete a very lengthy "Basis of Claim" form within the first 15 days of their stay. There have been instances of refugees with weak English comprehension receiving insufficient aid at this step, which I have shown with Najah in the film when she is shown trying to fill out the forms herself.

Third, a hearing is set within 60 days from the date of the eligibility decision for the refugee claimants. The claimants must then prepare for the hearing and file evidence ten days before the hearing. The fourth step is the hearing stage, which sometimes can last several days, and largely depends on the personal biases of the Immigration and



Refugee Board (IRB) Adjudicator, who is the sole decision-maker in this process<sup>1</sup>. The final steps follow once a decision is made, and if the application is accepted, the claimant can apply for permanent residency. If the application is rejected, the claimant is led through a web of steps in which they can try to change the decision, including an appeal (unless they are deemed to have no right of appeal), or applying for a Pre-Removal Risk Assessment (PRRA) which entails another torturously long waiting period. If they are rejected again, they face deportation to their country of origin – where more often than not they face danger and risk of death upon their return.

The bias of board members was something I wanted to showcase in the original script of my film. Several articles revealed concerns about bias of certain board members– with Islamophobia in certain areas of Canada linked to members’ decisions in the process. These concerns were linked to the numbers coming in: the lowest acceptance rates came from a Caucasian woman in Montreal who accepted none of her cases, while the highest acceptance rates came from an Indian man from Toronto who accepted 80% of his claims.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the most troubling point about the way this process is carried out is that these individuals in power often do not have the proper legal background to make informed decisions. Notably, these adjudicators are not required to have a legal background to occupy their positions. Peter Showler, a former chairman of The Immigration and Refugee Board and the current director of The Refugee Forum at the University of Ottawa, expressed his concern that the government only appoints individuals in these positions if they have similar interests regarding refugee and

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<sup>1</sup> “The Refugee Claimant Process”. *Refugee Rights in Ontario: A Project of Community Legal Education Ontario*. 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Humphreys, Adrian. “Refugee claim acceptance in Canada appears to be ‘luck of the draw’ despite reforms, analysis shows”. *National Post*. April 15, 2014.

immigration issues<sup>3</sup>. This may be more positive now with Trudeau in power; however the years of anti-refugee sentiment caused by the conservative Harper Government has created negative perspectives with board members who are currently employed.

Ultimately, the process by which these members are chosen is flawed. The position, which has a salary of up to \$266,000 a year, is cabinet-appointed. Showler argues that this hiring process “opens the door to patronage, since there’s no mechanism to ensure transparency or accountability”<sup>4</sup>. Hence, this leads to flaws in the decision-making process; for instance, a refugee who enters Canada with forged visa papers cannot have this point used against him in the claimant decision, based on Canadian law. Yet, one of Preevanda’s clients had his application rejected precisely for this reason – she said that she saw the Adjudicator’s mind was made up the moment he knew the claimant entered the country with forged papers. In addition, many of these adjudicators would not review a claimant’s file prior to the hearing, forcing the refugee to recount traumatic experiences, leading to an unnecessary drawn out, frustrating, and triggering process.

The fourth step in this process, the hearing stage, was the key setting for my film in the original script. I wanted Najah and Noor’s story to be revealed from the conversation between the board member and Najah throughout the hearing. From these exchanges, the audiences would learn that Noor’s father had been abducted and is missing, presumed dead; that Najah was imprisoned and tortured for her activist work; and that Noor had acquired troubling PTSD through the trauma of war. Ultimately, through the adjudicator’s interrogation, it would be revealed that Najah entered the

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<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Tobi. “Ex Chairman raises bias concerns as refugee board seeks new leader”. *NewsNational*. March 1, 2013.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

country with forged papers, as it was her only way into Canada. The adjudicator's bias would negatively affect the proceedings, and the film would end at an ambiguous point, with the audience unsure of whether Najah and Noor would be able to remain in the country. The reason I originally wanted the story in this setting with female refugees was because I felt it was necessary to reflect the immense hardships female refugees encounter, more so than refugee families or refugee men.

According to the Canadian Council of Refugees, Harper's changes to refugee policies in 2012 created key issues facing refugee women and girls that serve as added barriers in navigating the system. First, many women find they don't have enough time to prepare for the hearing because it requires an immense amount of trust to speak about their experiences, especially in regards to sexual violence. It is even more difficult when they are juggling childcare. The second issue involves the barriers to legal representation in the claimant process. Many refugees end up being unrepresented in this process, particularly women who have limited access to education, which increases their chances of deportation. The third issue is the implementation of the appeal: if their claim is rejected, they can appeal, however, claimants are denied this right, and in some cases women fleeing persecution based on sexual orientation will have their fate determined by a single decision maker. As mentioned previously, an adjudicator's bias truly can be the sole determinant for the fate of a claim. In many cases, being granted acceptance into Canada seems to be a game of pure luck based on which adjudicator a claimant ends up with. Lastly, the Harper Government placed a new ban on refugees applying to a claim on humanitarian grounds. This created a large barrier for female refugees attempting to come into Canada, as many women in the past were accepted under these grounds.

## **Reflecting and Reframing**

With John Greyson's help, I met up with administration at Osgoode Hall School of Law at York University to find a court room location, as I did not have any luck securing one on my own in the downtown core. They were very accommodating in showing me Osgoode's facilities, and we were able to narrow down our selection to the two court room spaces: the Helliwell Centre for Alternative Dispute Resolution, and Moot Court, with only the latter being available for my filming schedule. However, after showing the space to my DOP and Production Designer, we found that the location wouldn't work – the classroom type setting couldn't be hidden without making our shots of the scenes very limited and two-dimensional, as we weren't free to use all the angles in the room without revealing a row of desks and seats. This point, in addition to added logistical difficulties of bringing everyone up to the set at York, made me opposed to the location. As mentioned, this film was initially written with Noor and Najah at their refugee claimant hearing, with the audience given a glimpse into the intense hearing process. The audience would have left with insight into the desperate lengths Najah went through to get to Canada. However, I found I was feeling more and more distanced from my story. I was really struggling to convey Najah and Noor's story through a personal lens – the importance of hearing their journey through the guide of the adjudicator's questions was blocking out what I thought to be the most important element of the story: Najah and Noor's relationship. I realized I needed to step back from this courtroom-centred story and reframe it to make it more personal to these characters.

## **From the Political to the Personal: *Juha the Whale***

I found that in order to re-write the story, I needed to expand my research and explore how the mental health issues of refugees evolve once they have left immediate danger. At the time, I was reading many articles about refugees who had recently arrived in Canada – those who were privately sponsored, those who were going through the claimant process, and those who were part of the 25,000 the Liberal Government sponsored – and I was finding that the latter two groups were really struggling to adjust. While the privately sponsored refugees had help integrating into Canada from extended family members and communities, the latter two groups were very isolated in refugee housing. Many Middle-Eastern cultures are incredibly dependent on community-networks and family ties – so that when they are placed in a new country, and they don't know how to speak the language, navigate the city, or know when they will be placed in more permanent housing – they become clinically depressed. They develop anxiety, and existing PTSD symptoms may be exacerbated. In fact, a recent article in *The Star* provided further insight into the re-traumatization of refugee adults and children when held in isolation; adults develop psychiatric problems even after being isolated for a few weeks. They become “depressed, highly anxious and often — especially because many have already faced war, violence, loss of family members and persecution — are re-traumatized, developing post-traumatic stress disorder”<sup>5</sup>. Children are even more vulnerable within these circumstances. Several studies have shown that previously healthy children deteriorate. In one study, “most children had trouble sleeping, some

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<sup>5</sup> Beder, Michaela and Rachel Kronick. “Stop detaining migrants without cause”. *The Star*. February 21, 2016.

stopped speaking, many wouldn't eat, [and] others developed behavioural problems, separation anxiety and exhibited signs of trauma'<sup>6</sup>.

As I wrote scenes of Najah and Noor exhibiting these symptoms of PTSD, I knew their relationship would be greatly affected by Noor's attachment to her missing father and her violent memories of war, while Najah would be deeply stressed and traumatized from her loss and the burden of trying to keep what's left of her family in a safe place. To gain more insight into how PTSD affects young girls and older women, I interviewed Anjana Aery, a former Research Coordinator at St. Michael's Hospital, who was responsible for meeting with newly arrived refugees in the past few years and assessing their mental health for a World Health Organization study. Once I saw how powerful PTSD can be in victims of war, and how it can adversely shape a mother and daughter's relationship through already difficult circumstances, I knew that I wanted to move the story to the days before the hearing, to the waiting period. This look into their private lives, away from the barriers of a cold and sterile courtroom setting, could provide an authentic and human representation of this experience. My conversations with Anjana helped shape my character construction of Noor. Anjana saw that the six to ten-year-old children she assessed would reveal their PTSD symptoms through feelings of guilt, recurrences of nightmares, repeated traumatic/violent play and storytelling, angry outbursts, regression in their behaviour, loss of interest in activities, and distractibility. Since Noor was an eight-year-old, I wanted her possessing some of these symptoms while clinging to a fantasy/story throughout the film – the story of Juha the Whale.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Noor, from the start of the film, is absorbed with Juha. The film opens with a memory: the sound of her father telling her a bed time story about Juha the Humpback whale, who lost his tail when he was young and spent his whole life searching for it. She keeps this idea of Juha – and thus her father – alive by obsessively drawing this whale on every available scrap of paper in their small, cramped apartment. While Najah is mostly high-strung and anxious, stressed by the upcoming hearing, Noor is withdrawn when she is near Najah’s tense presence – the only moments she comes to life is when she is alone.

The idea of the whale storyline came from a *Discovery* article I read about Arabian Sea humpback whales. They are the most isolated whales on the planet, and are a breed of humpbacks that have remained in the Arabian Sea for 70,000 years. Because of this, they are classified as “endangered” on the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s (IUCN) Red List of threatened species<sup>7</sup>. They are distinctly different than Southern and Northern Hemisphere humpback whale populations, due to the fact that they don’t migrate, which is highly unusual behaviour for whales. I thought this point would be a great parallel to refugees, who before the war, didn’t migrate, but are now forced to under devastating circumstances. I then came up with the idea of Juha, an Arabian Sea humpback whale who lost his tail, his most vital feature of mobility. He leaves his home to search for it for many years to no avail – however, as Bassam (Noor’s father) states to Noor – there is nothing wrong with Juha; despite the hardships he has endured, he is normal and should be treated like everyone else. I also made the figure of Juha symbolize Noor’s hope to see her father again, as she obsessively draws this whale, over and over again, hoping to capture him in just the perfect way, having him reunite

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<sup>7</sup> “Arabian Sea Humpback Whale Isolated for 70,000 Years”. *Discovery*. Dec. 3, 2014.

with his lost tail. This hope is then extinguished when Najah crumples all her drawings in anger and declaring it “garbage”, after Noor deliberately sabotages Najah’s Basis of Claim forms. Noor then ends the film as a changed person, slightly older and more realistic than she was previously: just as the notion of Juha finding his tail was crushed, so were her hopes of her father coming back.

“Juha” is a well-known name throughout the Arab world, as it is heavily entrenched in Arabic folklore. Juha is the name of an everyman character, a mainstay of Muslim humor, similar to “Joe Shmo” in Western culture. He has been featured as a humorous figure in many anecdotes and jokes in Islamic societies. He serves as a character “who holds a mirror to society’s foibles and falsehoods. His stories often represent deep wisdom in the garb of irony<sup>8</sup>”. I came to this when I was recalling the childhood bedtime stories my dad would recite to me. My dad, eternally young at heart, would gather my siblings and me together to tell us stories of Juha with exaggerated facial expressions and laughter. Despite his incredibly playful demeanor, my dad would always slip in life lessons with his jokes. This used to deeply unsettle me. As the serious content of these lessons would be a great change of tone from the light-hearted and silly stories of Juha; in these moments of joy, my father wanted to pass on all the life lessons that he and my mom learned from their parents, when they were living in poverty in the West Bank. Because of these reasons, I found the name Juha to be fitting for this whale – he represents the everyman of the Arab world today; one of the million nameless refugees searching for a home.

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<sup>8</sup> “Literary Reflections: Jokes from Juha, the Everyman Character”. *Bridging Cultures Bookshelf, Muslim Journeys*: Ali Vural Ak Center for Global Islamic Studies at George Mason University, 2012.



While I loved “Juha the Whale” as the English title, I made sure to give the decision of the Arabic title to my parents. They are the core character influences for my film, and their resiliency and strength have proved to be constant sources of inspiration to my creative work. Although they understood my reasons for the “Juha the Whale” English title, they wanted to choose a title that spoke to them on an emotional level. The themes of isolation and the loss of family and country needed to be encapsulated in a title that serves as words of strength in moments of difficulty. As conservative Muslims, they chose a phrase from the Qur’an; an *aya* that encapsulated the life lesson they learned growing up: “With every hardship, comes ease” (Qur’an 94:6). This phrase is repeated throughout *Surat al-Sharh (The Relief)* in the Quran. The key lesson from this *aya* is that it provides encouragement; it teaches readers to be patient in times of trial and tribulation. As the title of the *surah* is that of respite, this phrase was a source of comfort and strength to my parents throughout their lives.

## Cinematic Influences

All my creative work at this point has been influenced by Bahman Ghobadi's oeuvre. His three films that influenced me most were those that used refugee children protagonists to reveal the plight of the Kurds in post-revolutionary Iranian society after the events of the Iran-Iraq war: *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), and *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). As I'm drawn to films with children protagonists within neorealist aesthetics, it would be significant to note the Italian neorealist films that have also influenced my film (and no doubt informed Ghobadi's body of work): Vittorio De Sica's *The Children are Watching Us* (1944) and *The Bicycle Thief* (1948).

The use of children protagonists for social and artistic benefit in Ghobadi and De Sica's films served as powerful symbols for countries in the midst of war – Ghobadi's in the aftermath of the Iran/Iraq war, and De Sica's following the end of WWII. I remember watching these films during my undergraduate years and being profoundly and emotionally affected by children experiencing the horrors of war and loss, being forced into adulthood at much too young an age. When audiences watch child protagonists in the midst of political, social, and economic hardship, they sympathize. At a time when Islamophobia and anti-refugee sentiment are again on the rise, I felt it necessary to have Noor encapsulate countless refugee children's experiences throughout this crisis. Hamīd Rizā Sadr explains this powerful use of children protagonists to generate sympathy: “in their social and geographical inclusiveness, [children represent] a bid to redefine the coordinates of national and cultural identity. . . Using children [converts] opinions

expressed in films into expressions of their being. They [convert] the question ‘why do people feel this way?’ to ‘how does it feel to have such feelings?’ ”<sup>9</sup>

Ghobadi effectively explored this question by utilizing poetic realism to focus on the young protagonists’ parents – or rather, their absence, which provided a commentary on dominant social values. Ghobadi’s use of poetic realism, Sadr observes, was “built around the central image of childhood and was inescapably social commentary . . . The continuing interest of poetic realism in Iranian cinema lies precisely in that it was neither a straightforwardly homogenous nor a unitary phenomenon, but successfully crossed the boundaries between high-brow and low-brow, tradition and modernity, engagement and pleasure”. With his use of child protagonists, Ghobadi thus actively uses poetic realism to highlight pertinent socio-political issues within the state of Kurdistan. I similarly used poetic realism throughout my film in the fragmentary nature of the editing, in which time and space are blended together to reflect the loss of time and increase the sense of alienation both Najah and Noor feel in the film.

Furthermore, Ghobadi’s use of children in his films allowed them to emerge as surrogate adults in realistic roles of their own. Sadr states, “Children . . . promote a privatization and personalization of structural determinants and a mass consciousness in the audience. Their personal troubles tend not to remain personal: they mark audience awareness of itself as a class by reconstituting social differences [and easing the problem of political judgment] in the audience into a new polarity of collective experience”<sup>10</sup>. By revealing the PTSD and effects of war through Noor’s character, I want the audience to

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<sup>9</sup> Sadr, Hamīd Rizā. “Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema: When we were Children”, *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*. Ed. Richard Tapper. New York; I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd.. pg 237, 2002.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

feel sympathy for every refugee's long, traumatic journey to safety. By the end of the film however, I'm showing how many refugee children are pushed into the margins of adulthood, shown through Noor's resolute response of "No. He's not here" – an acknowledgement of the loss of her father, brought about by the destruction of Juha.

I decided to have only female protagonists in my film because I feel the effects of war are profoundly different between genders. Samira Makhmalbaf's accurate portrayal of the effect of various traumas inflicted on females in *The Apple* (1998), and *Blackboards* (2000) was a great source of inspiration for my work. In Meysam Makhmalbaf's *How Samira Made 'Blackboards'* (2000), Samira provides insight into the portrayals of her female characters following the trauma of war: "Men go to war in a kind of madness, then afterwards the madness leaves them, the war disappears, but women are left to cope with the mines and their aftereffects." Najah and Noor, as the remaining members of their immediate family, are set adrift in this new country, caught in the constant in-between spaces: between East and West, safety and danger, happiness and anger, resolution and ambiguity.

Another cinematic influence to this work was Lucrecia Martel's *The Holy Girl* (2004). I found her carefully structured audio-visual approach very powerful in compartmentalizing the female form – creating a sense of claustrophobia, disorientation, and boundaries in her portrayal of Amalia. Martel's use of tight framing in her films "[creates] a sense of visual claustrophobia, yet she modulates this effect by varying the range of off-screen sounds and how they signal greater or lesser senses of space"<sup>11</sup>.

Influenced by her, I worked with my DOP to create decidedly fragmentary compositions

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<sup>11</sup> Beck, Jay. "Submerged in Sound: Lucrecia Martel's *La Cienega*". *The Cine-Files*. Issue 8, Spring 2015. Pg. 3.

of Najah and Noor, deliberately visually compartmentalizing the space to signify the emotional and physical barriers, not only between Najah and Noor, but also between them and the outside world. In some scenes, I was influenced by Martel's distinctive manner of framing, by filming scenes just in close-ups (the spilled beet scene in the kitchen), by shooting from behind necks (Noor in the opening bathtub scene), and cutting off essential body parts in scenes with the objective of throwing off the comfortable balance of the narrative. This manner of filming, coupled with my editor's radical cutting techniques, amplifies the leaps in time and place within the narrative, and adds to the blurring of spatial and temporal boundaries.

Although Lenny Abrahamson's *Room* (2015) was not an overt influence while making this film, I did find certain elements in the film, particularly the mother/child representation restricted to one location in the first half of the film, to hold similarities to my film in the shooting and editing process. Abrahamson built a restricted 10 by 14 foot room for his set and kept all four walls up in the filming of the scenes to heighten the realism for his 7-year-old actor, Jacob Tremblay<sup>12</sup>. Furthermore, he found that he had trouble at first getting Tremblay worked up to do a fight scene in which he yells at his mother. These connections corresponded with certain moments in my film, where I worked in a restricted space and explored tense moments with a mother/child pair, heightening the realism for claustrophobia by having them remain in the same small confined space for hours on end.

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<sup>12</sup> Setoodeh, Ramin. "Lenny Abrahamson and Tom McCarthy on Claustrophobia of 'Spotlight' and 'Room'." *Variety*. Nov. 19, 2015.

## Themes and Ideas

As I wrote the script for *Juha the Whale*, I had several key themes and ideas that I wanted to repeat throughout the film. As the film deals with one facet of the complex subject of the refugee crisis, I wanted to be able to reference the main themes of loss, isolation, trauma, and displacement through Najah and Noor's relationship. While the refugee crisis has common themes and emotions that would resonate with many audiences, I wanted these themes to be rooted in objects, aesthetics, and mannerisms specific to this family's journey – characteristics that I drew from my own parents: Najah and Bassam, and my triplet sister, Noor.

The first idea was the significance of Noor's dolls, and the way she interacts with them. As an eight-year-old, she still plays with dolls, but her acquired trauma has her interacting with the dolls in troubling ways. The dolls themselves become characters, and her behaviour with them symbolizes the trauma inflicted on her and how this trauma operates within a cycle if it is not treated. She speaks to her dolls, especially her blonde, blue-eyed doll, as if they are sentient beings. They are real to her in a way – she makes sure she is alone when she speaks to them, and while she speaks to them as if they are her friends, she also treats them violently, mimicking the violence that she has seen in war. I specifically wrote the larger blonde-haired doll into the script after my first meeting with my young actress, Lamar. She was showing me all her toys and drawings, and she pulled out this creepy, interactive doll. Although the doll speaks in Arabic, her image is of the idealized Western female ideal: fair-skinned, blonde-haired, blue-eyed, and delicately dressed in a beautiful dress. I found the doll quite off-putting as Lamar showed me how the interactivity of the doll worked. Lamar would ask her a variety of questions and

requests, and if the doll hears key Arabic words, for instance “sing” and “story”, she then responds accordingly by singing or reciting one of the many songs and stories she has stored in her ‘database’. These Arabic stories are noticeably advanced in content for children, providing wisdom and anecdotes; one song, for instance, describes how fathers spend their lives growing old and crooked from working tirelessly to provide for their children. Most disturbing of all, I found that if you drop the doll face down on the ground, she stops conversing and starts begging to be picked up: “Help me. I’m getting dizzy. Please pick me up. This hurts me.” As an Arab girl who has become quite westernized, this doll was something quite alarming and foreign to me. It drew me back to the feeling I had when my father would tell me his bed-time stories that held wisdom encased in warnings: “Be self-determined. Choose your own path. Don’t let anyone lead you astray.” It is also fitting to mention a memorable proverb my mother was fond of repeating on birthdays, holidays, meal times, and mornings before we left for school: “If you are not a wolf, the other wolves will eat you!”.

By having Noor interact with this doll that talks back, the film creates an antagonist that she becomes dependant on but also exerts power over, as seen by her violent interactions. The small doll in the beginning of the film is a mere example of the destruction she could cause, brutally drowning her in the water every time the doll sings, dislocating her legs, and floating her face down in the water, discarded and lifeless like so many refugees in the ocean. The interactive doll, on the other hand, is alternatively a source of comfort and pain. The doll is her only friend, entertaining her with songs and stories. However, she is also just that: a doll. Noor becomes frustrated when the doll doesn’t have the right answers to Noor’s questions, and Noor consequently retaliates by

insulting her: "You're stupid!", "You keep saying the same things all the time", and "shut up!" When the name-calling isn't enough to rid Noor of her anger, she violently tries to shut the doll up by shaking her and throwing her across the room, face down on the ground. When the doll asks her for help, Noor delivers her final words to her "No. You deserve this." This reaction points to Noor's observations of how her family and refugees are treated. If their pleas for help are left unanswered by an ignorant public constantly and violently telling them that they deserve their hardship, loss, and despair – then why should Noor help this doll? It is significant to note here that the positioning of the doll in this scene is a reference to little Aylan Kurdi's body on the shore of Bodrum, Turkey; an image that finally shocked the world about the plight of the refugees.

I used the theme of water in this film to symbolize death, as the ocean for many refugees represents a burial site in which relatives, loved ones, and countrymen have died. The poet Warsan Shire wrote in her famous poem "Home": "you have to understand/that no one puts their children in a boat/unless the water is safer than the land". However, as is the case with the thousands of refugees who met their ends in those treacherous seas, and continue to do so, both the land and water are unsafe and inhospitable. This is shown in the doll being violently drowned by Noor in the beginning of the film, and in Noor's drawings of the seas that Juha searches and the tears that he sheds as he looks for his missing tail. And lastly, water is shown in the final beach scene, in the cold and brutal Canadian winter - the body of water that Juha could not possibly be in, because he does not exist. This water imagery symbolizes death for Noor in the way that she must shed parts of herself, must acknowledge the death of Juha and her father, to continue to cope and move on.



The mother and daughter relationship was a theme I wanted to explore in this film, since the depth and complexity of their personal relationship was my driving motivation to change the film from a hearing setting to their private life. I've read many stories about the struggles refugee mothers face, especially when they are traveling alone with young children. *The Guardian* did a piece on refugee mothers and children in Calais, providing personalized accounts of their experiences – one mother had to carry her severely ill 3-year-old daughter in a backpack to make the journey over; another mother had a terrifying encounter when an Eastern European man only wanted to carry her young son for her<sup>13</sup> – she was certain he wanted to abduct him. Considering the fact that over 10,000 documented unaccompanied refugee children have gone missing in Europe and are suspected to have been abducted into organized traffic syndicates<sup>14</sup>, it is clear that women and children refugees are highly vulnerable to danger.

Najah, as the sole caretaker for her daughter in this highly stressful and traumatic period in her life, is desperately trying to put on a brave face and work towards a better life – however, she is a woman at a breaking point. She is deeply burdened with the task of keeping them in Canada – she studiously fills out the Basis of Claim forms, painstakingly flipping through her cracked and worn English-to-Arabic dictionary to ensure she gets it just right. She tries to make sure Noor eats despite the sparse amount of dry and processed food they have at their disposal, and she tries to distract Noor from their stressful situation by taking her out for walks to get some fresh air. At the same time, the amount of trauma Najah has sustained throughout her life has broken her down

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<sup>13</sup> Khaleeli, Homa. “My baby, the refugee: mothers on the hardest journey of their lives”. *The Guardian*. December 19, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Townsend, Mark. “10,000 refugee children are missing, says Europol”. *The Guardian*. January 30, 2016.

– there is a darkness and heaviness to her that she attempts to hide from Noor, but in such close quarters it's hard to disguise, as seen in her angry outbursts following Noor's dropping of the beet can and Noor's destruction of the claim form. Najah tries to be patient with Noor, as she acknowledges that her daughter is struggling with PTSD by her withdrawn attitude and lack of conversation, but at the same time the immensity of her own struggle sometimes outweighs her patience, as seen in the ebb and flow of their relationship.

Noor, on the other hand, shines a bit brighter than her mother. While she herself struggles with PTSD, her fortune at being a young child and not having had experienced as much of life's hardships have left her with a spark that emerges in key moments: when she draws, when she plays with her dolls, when she's comfortably having her hair combed by her mother. These scenes of ease are juxtaposed with her withdrawn behaviour when interacting with her mother in the harsh light of day: minimal eye contact, only uttering a few words, and hoarding food for her father in the hope of his return. Noor's trauma also brings about moments of darkness, shown in her violent recreations of war, and ultimately in the final few scenes, in which she realizes her obsessive drawings of Juha are pointless – they're child's play, and she is now too old to depend on mere hope.

When creating this mother/daughter relationship, I used framing, color, and light to juxtapose Najah and Noor's characters and the emotional and physical boundaries between them, despite their cramped quarters. I chose to use tight, off-center framing and fragmentary spaces to reflect these boundaries. I achieved this by having two cameras filming at the same time, which was both a stylistic and logistical choice. I wanted to

embrace a more naturalistic and responsive approach to the scenes, since there was much improvisation between my two nonprofessional actresses. The use of this camera set up, one for each actress, along with tight framing on each, allowed the creation of “chunks” of space, in which only one character can occupy this space at one time. Even when Najah and Noor are close to each other, as seen when they are eating together, they are still divided and fragmented by this framing.

In regards to the lighting, blocking, and wardrobe choices for Najah and Noor, my motivation was to show Noor as lighter, emotionally and spiritually, while her mother has a darker, heavier, more worn presence. Noor is dressed in mismatched and vibrant pink, purple, and blue clothing, while her mother is dressed in muted gray-blue, green, brown, and peach outfits. In terms of blocking, Noor is faced towards the light; she is always turned towards the window, looking up, looking out, while Najah is turned away, painted in shadows and darkness. Najah’s very presence is slightly oppressing Noor’s vibrancy. There are key moments where Noor just wants to have fun and make light of her situation: in her colourful drawings, and by pressing her face to the window screen to catch glimpses of the outside.

Another visual theme I wanted to create was the sense of being caught in a liminal state of in-betweenness – a disjointed, disoriented condition that captures the blurring of spatial and temporal spaces in this film. The fragmentary way in which the scenes are filmed make them almost illusive – is it taking place in real time? Are they all Noor’s memories? This almost dreamlike approach is further amplified through the impermanency and ambiguity of their situation – we are aware that they are in Canada, but it’s hard to place where they are, where they’re from (unless you recognize the

Egyptian dialect), and where they're going. I didn't specify these details within the film, thus heightening the connection they have to Juha - they aren't tied to anything, and as such, like Juha, they are adrift, lost between the East and West with no definite answer as to where they will end up.

Lastly, a final theme I wanted to feature is the juxtaposition of decay vs frozen scenes of nature. Both of these themes are tied to how organic objects react to the elements; rot/decay is an active process of breaking down, often aided by warm temperatures, while frozen plants, ice, and snow signify harshness, an eternal preservation of an object in time. These states are tied to Noor's transformation in the film and how she reacts to life's 'elements'. In the first half of the film, Noor is linked to objects and moments that signify decay and destruction: the box of food that Noor is hiding for her father, filled with rotting food, including a black, mouldy banana, crushed chips, and broken biscuits; Noor's dolls, both in the bathtub and in the bedroom, that she destroys and throws around, breaking and cracking their plastic frames. However, by the second half of the film as Noor becomes hardened to the realities of her life, frozen imagery becomes more prominent: the frozen, snow-covered plants, the falling snow, and the freezing arctic-like beach that Noor and Najah stand on. Even when Noor participates in the creation of something nice, through her beautiful drawings, she does so by destroying all her mother's hard work on the claim forms.

These tactile, rotting objects echo the underlying trauma and fragility of the human mind – as seen by the trigger from the beets that look like blood and gore. While these moments of decay (a metaphor to Noor's destructive behavior from the PTSD) are tied to Noor, they are banished, cleared away by Najah in the moment of her outburst.

Najah yells at Noor, revealing that she knows about the rotting food Noor hoards, and how it pollutes and stinks up their “home”. Najah further underscores the decay that’s tied to their homeland: “Are you telling me you want to go back home? Where the trees are all burnt and the birds are starving!” Lastly, Najah engages in her own form of destruction in the crumpling of all of Noor’s drawings and declaring it as “garbage”. Najah only sees it as throwing away forms that are no longer of use to her, but Noor sees it as the disposal of the only thing she cherished, her only mode of expression. In the final scene at the beach, the extent of this decay and destruction has changed Noor. The murky, dark waves and the harsh winter scene serve as a backdrop to Noor’s changed state - you can see in her expression that something fundamental has altered within her: she’s forced to grow up and acknowledge the reality of her situation.

## Previous Works

The films I have made before and during the MFA have common themes, mostly of Arab females in transitional moments in their lives. Prior to entering the MFA program, I made *Halaawa*, a coming-of-age short film about a Jordanian girl living in the low-income *Sweileh* region in Amman. She's receiving her first *halaawa*, a traditional sugar waxing process most Arab females receive when entering adulthood. At the same time, she's in the midst of a turbulent home environment: she has a tense relationship with mother, while her father is absent, having left his family days prior to be with his mistress.

My films at York University's MFA program in Film Production included short narrative pieces of Arab girls in various contexts in Toronto, touching upon their encounters with race, gender, and hybrid identities – one short, *The Boshmafs*, is of two Circassian-Jordanian teenage sisters living in the downtown core, bickering over their newly acquired MAC lipstick and attempting to assimilate with their fashionable Western peers. Another short, *Café Tangiers*, is of a Syrian hijabi server at a shisha bar on the Danforth. She spends each day preparing *argeelas* for her mostly-male clientele while overhearing their misogynist conversations.

My previous films contain thematic links in Arab female identity, alienation, and personal conflict to *Juha the Whale*, shaping my work and serving as stylistic building blocks. All my films depict relatively young female protagonists at key moments in their lives as they 'come of age' and battle certain notions of personal identity in each film: In *Halaawa*, Zayna thinks her passage into adulthood through a traditional waxing process will resolve the domestic conflict in her household; in *The Boshmafs*, each sister thinks

that she will assimilate into Western culture by possessing a lipstick from a high-end brand company; in *Café Tangiers*, Lana thinks her passivity in serving misogynist customers is a typical part of her life and work. *Juha the Whale* does deviate slightly in style and protagonist, as this is the first time I've been able to find an Arab actress younger than thirteen-years-old. This difference certainly shaped my style of shooting, as children in younger ages, especially those who are dealing with PTSD, tend to internalize more. Since I was working with a claustrophobic setting and a character who subtly conveys her emotions through gestures rather than words, I focused on a tight, fragmented style of shooting, capturing emotions and nuances of character through close-ups and jump cuts.

# **The Production Process**

## **Pre-Production**

My first step in pre-production was to secure my cast and crew. I connected with Paul Lee, my producer, over the summer through MBA connections, and he was invaluable in helping me with the logistics of the film, although he was overseas during the production period itself. I had worked with my DOP, Daniel Valle, in my previous MFA films, and since we had a great working relationship and similar stylistic approaches to filmmaking, he decided to come on board, bringing Radojka Vrabac with him as the second camera operator and editor. I acquired the rest of my crew in terms of production design, sound, and production assistants through York's undergraduate program and through friends. I had made it a goal that I would have a majority of female crew for this film, and aside from Dan, the rest of the cast and crew were female.

Securing the cast was the hardest part of the pre-production process. Unsurprisingly, while Toronto has a large Arab community, I found it difficult to connect with non-professional Arab females willing to act in my film. I sent out multiple casting calls through local Arab community centres, mosques, student groups, casting offices, and various social media groups. While I did have some responses, I found that the professional actresses I did meet were not a good fit, largely because they could not speak Arabic. I knew coming into the casting process that I preferred non-professional actors, and if I was lucky, I would find a mother-daughter pair available, with an established natural chemistry and familiarity with each other. Through my outreach, I was able to have a handful of selections for the character of Noor, however I encountered problems finding the right actress, as the girls were either too old, too westernized, or did not speak



Arabic. Dialects added another layer of difficulty to this process – from the narrow pool of people I had to choose from, there were Syrian, Saudi, and Egyptian dialects. This was a major issue, as I needed to convey authenticity to my intended audience – Arabs would have been able to tell the actresses were from different countries. From a Westerner’s perspective, this would have been the equivalent of watching a mother with a Southern London accent and daughter with a Brooklyn accent – clearly not a feasible option to maintain realism in my film. I managed to find my actresses through my mother’s mosque group, where she was able to connect with Naglaa, an Egyptian woman who had only recently moved to Canada with her family, including her eight-year-old daughter Lamar. We were able to have eight lengthy rehearsal sessions before filming, two of which were at the set location. Having them rehearse on set proved to be excellent preparation when production started, as they were comfortable with the space and knew their blocking ahead of time.

In terms of location scouting, after much searching through friends, I was able to secure an apartment near Regent Park. My friend had just moved in, so it was fortunately sparse in furniture in the living room area, which served as the bedroom in the film. The building itself was old and had a lot of character, and my production designer was inventive in her use of space when creating the look of the bedroom. Using photographs of refugee housing as inspiration, she hung a clothesline from the windowsill to the wall, and used a variety of props like old suitcases, worn clothes, and threadbare blankets to prepare an authentic setting.

Daniel and I spent a lot of time preparing for the visuals of the film by visiting the location several times, taking photos and test shots each time, and 'sketching' how the

shots would evolve based on framing and lighting in the final film itself. At the first rehearsal on location, Daniel and I finalized the last of our shots, some of which are as seen in **Appendices 1 to 3**. Picking the shots that we liked best from this rehearsal, we then created our shot list based on these final selections. These images are shown in our production stills in **Appendices 4 to 6**.

## **Creative Process with Actors**

Naglaa and Lamar were excellent actresses to work with in the roles of Najah and Noor. As immigrants and relatively new Canadians (they moved here three years ago and only recently received permanent residency), they were outgoing, hardworking, fearless, and disciplined. Naglaa had taken improvisational acting classes when she first arrived in Canada as a way to improve her English, so she was very good at remaining in character and thinking on her feet, and excelled at adding local Egyptian sayings and texture to the dialogue. Naglaa would also practice with Lamar outside of rehearsal time and would have her daughter react to different scenarios, giving her different motivations in each fight or conversation so that she could grow accustomed to the improvisational process. That helped tremendously when I would meet them for rehearsal, as they provide a range of reactions to the same stimulus, and I was able to communicate to them what I felt was most fitting for their characters. I was especially taken with Lamar – for an eight-year-old, she was surprisingly disciplined and enthusiastic to throw herself into the role, and was never difficult to deal with throughout our four days of production, even at our freezing beach scene during magic hour. As a gift to commemorate her first lead role, I bought her a betta fish once production was complete (**as seen in Appendix 7**). After much deliberation, she decided to fittingly name him “Purple-licious”.

Working with non-professionals through this process was relatively easy for me because Naglaa and Lamar were performing material that was familiar to them. Naglaa in particular had a very strong connection to Najah. In Egypt, Naglaa was a respected professor, with a PhD and a very large home – her family was considered very wealthy. However, as an immigrant in Canada, her family now live at a much lower income level

than she was used to in Egypt. Furthermore, she has been struggling to find work, as Canada does not recognize her credentials. She had developed depression and some anxiety in her process of finding her ‘purpose’ in Toronto. Before one of our rehearsals, she came to me very upset – she was able to secure an interview for what she thought was a manager position in a kitchen. However, when she arrived, they put her through an intense interview process for a kitchen cleaner position. She was devastated. Although she wanted the job, she had hoped it would be closer to the high standards of qualifications she had spent years earning. It was a huge blow to her ego, and she was very frustrated with the lack of employment opportunities for immigrants within Canada. Because of these experiences, she was able to give an authentic portrayal of Najah throughout filming, and did a great job channelling these complex emotions into the role.

Ultimately, Naglaa and Lamar took full agency over their characters. They would even approach me at certain points during rehearsal and correct the Arabic translations, and we would re-write the dialogue to make it authentic to their voices. Although there weren’t large deviations from the script, they added rich nuances to the characters, inserting certain mannerisms or colloquialisms, especially during the fight scene. As the climax of the film, it was an incredibly tense scene for them to perform. Naglaa cleverly started instigating a real fight with Lamar in between takes, getting Lamar worked up for the fight scene, and consequently getting the expressive performance I was looking for. I found the best approach to working with these two incredibly talented non-professional actors was to adopt an approach of firm flexibility – I remained firm with how my story was going to play out, but allowed them to move within that space.

## **Production**

The production process was relatively easy compared to other productions I have worked on, largely because I was very economical and strategic with the location and the cast. I adopted this strategic approach after attending an evening event for Ingrid Veninger's *The Animal Project* last year at Innis Town Hall. Although adopting an economical and strategic method to filmmaking seems like common sense, Ingrid had said how multiple filmmakers get so caught up in the creative process that they sabotage themselves with adventurous shots and locations. Her best advice was to be brutally honest and knowledgeable about the resources you have, and then write a script that fits within these limits. Since my film was largely shot in one apartment location, everyone was comfortable and there was no time wasted in moving equipment and location changes. Furthermore, I was conscious of the fact that I had a child actor on set, which meant I did not want to go past nine hours of work every day, since it would be unethical and would have negatively affected her performance. Furthermore, because we only were able to shoot on weekends due to Lamar's school schedule, the cast and crew were able to relax and regroup in the week in between. I made sure that for continuity purposes I would have all the bedroom and kitchen scenes filmed in the first weekend, and then we would film the 'separate scenes' in the second weekend, which included the fight scene, the bathtub scene, Najah's phone conversation scene in the alleyway, and the beach scene.

## Conclusion

As a relatively new director, I'm still trying to find a distinctive voice, style, and approach to my films. I've found that I have always struggled to be content with my work, either because I had trouble expressing my stories in the way I envisioned, or the production was inadequately organized, was too low-budget, did not have experienced people on set, or because I didn't have enough rehearsal time with my actors. Although I look forward to honing my craft through future productions, I found that in the filming of *Juha the Whale*, I was able to fully visualize and execute the whole process close to what I imagined. I was shooting a film about a topic I was passionate about; I had managed to stay within my budget while achieving a high production value in the footage; and most importantly of all, had a fantastic support system of crew and resources. I realize that the process of making a film is very much dependant on whom you surround yourself, and having the ability to effectively collaborate with other like-minded creatives. I feel incredibly fortunate to have had such supportive, resourceful, and thoughtful colleagues and friends help make this film, and I look forward to the next step of my film journey.

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## Appendices



**Appendix 1: Najah and Noor, Rehearsal**



**Appendix 2: Noor drawing Juha, Rehearsal**



**Appendix 3: Drawing of Juha, Rehearsal**



**Appendix 4: Najah and Noor, Production**



**Appendix 5: A Listless Noor, Production**



**Appendix 6: Drawing of Juha, Production**



**Appendix 7: Purple-licious the Betta Fish**