

Hope, Life and Death: The Syrians are Coming?

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The biblical tale of exodus in the Old Testament is a product of telling, retelling, revision and redaction over a period of centuries, which resulted in a narrative framework that is not deemed as reliable in the modern sense of narrative truth. In the year 2017, the tale of the Syrian exodus, though it is going through similar processes of making and remaking, is forced into grids of refugee law, citizenship applications, temporary status forms and counting the missing and the dead on land and sea. Numbers, numbers everywhere, drowning by numbers...

This picture-narrative of Syrian lives on the move re-examines the archetypal aspects of images that surfaced since 2011 pertaining to the events that occurred during the exodus. Through sketching, I try to connect the inner images of Syrian refugees derived from narratives collected by activists, scholars and advocates with the unresolved issues in the relationship between them and the societies to which they reach out for asylum. As such, these drawings explore the larger questions concerning the politics of grief and loss. They play with our very own fears of death and dispossession and I hope thus encourage the development of our capacity to discover the pertinent mythologies of exodus that animate the Syrians on the move, a working sacred story, a yearning of reaching beyond the life and death dichotomies imposed by asylum.

Faith and beliefs about living and dying are fundamental constituents of being human. However, refugees are seldom asked to talk about their experiences of life and death. They become numbers, charts, statistics, documents. Their bodies become two-dimensional. If we were to hear their personal stories of living, dying, and living on after losing dear ones, the context of their naming as refugees and their reception as a burden would undergo a significant change. Their stories and symbols of hope and grief are needed in order to develop a coherent horizon of meaning that intersects the lives of Syrians with the lives of 'others' in the places they are cast ashore. In academia, by and large, the relational dimension is missing.

Hence the act of drawing. While reflecting on paper about what I see in print, or in recording, or on the streets, in the camps, along borders, in legal clinics, and at NGO emergency desks, I try to go against some of the conceptual boundaries between the living and the dead, the insider and the

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other. As these boundaries become blurred, they break down and are rendered inapplicable. What is left behind is a residue of mere, naked, bare-bones humanness. In order to constitute a relationship between bereaved people, their deceased relatives and friends and the new surroundings and societies where they find themselves, we need new ways of remembering the bare bones of humanness that we share. The coping mechanisms used by survivors who seek to maintain bonds with their dead is all too elusive when Syrians become objects of journalistic, academic, or governmental lenses. The images I painted during long nights of not being able to sleep, dealing with my own stories of death and displacement, speak in another tongue. They reveal that dead – or, rather, dying – individuals actively encourage this continuing relationship with life by finding ways of reconstituting themselves in the act of escape. Grief transforms into hope, danger becomes mundane landscape, and nakedness and loss of all earthly belongings become gestures of dignity.

It is though the act of painting life, death, grief, and forward movement that I personally found solace in the heterogenous powers of life and death not simply relocated or reinscribed as affirming each other but instead leading to a different narrative of exodus altogether. By working through these falsehoods and imposed dichotomies, our understanding of the ethos of a ‘good life’ is undone. The emergent confusion requires us to relate to humanness through the intertwined freedom to live and the randomness of death, the exercise of choice to the sovereign decision of remaining alive taken out of the equation. Instead, another window opens which reveals that the lives of Syrians on the move are contracted to violence, status, citizenship and legal enforcement to keep them moving, whether dead or alive.

The bodies of Syrians in exodus I drew on paper personify both life and death. Through creating their images as agents of their own lives, archetypal notions of life and death, and the emotional and mental states we associate with them, become bogus. Death is no longer personified as an old man or some shadowy existence but perhaps simply as a three-year-old child. The reaper, the raven, the empty woods and stiff cliffs, become harbors of safety rather than symbols of the abyss. In ordinary lives at times of peace, in Syrian folklore, death is often seasonally associated with autumn, and its time of day is deciphered as evening or night. Its remembrance is traditionally associated with serenity, peace, and melancholy: a destined place to be arrived at with valor. Wartime inscriptions of ‘life’ are often worse than death. While on the move, all available interpretations of the ‘life and death struggle’ are suspended. Confronting mortality as a daily or even hourly occurrence is accompanied by unique moral challenges. Increased wisdom may well be one of them. Another and rather unsuspected one, however, pertains to the meaninglessness of life and the sole aim of being ‘alive’ becoming ‘remaining alive’. If humility is a key component of wisdom, self-knowledge, listening to and learning from others, and sharing with others are the other gains of those whose lives are parcelled out through waves of dispossession. And yet for those on the move, changing priorities and the imperative to live fully in the present moment are not necessarily the outcomes associated with what is to be endured. When one cannot bury one’s dead, going on with living itself becomes the biggest hurdle. Hence the changed posture, hence the invisible weight on the shoulders of even the youngest, and a new kind of hope that is not known to those who did not have to live with death, alongside the dead, and forced to be at home with the simple, unannounced possibility of dying.