Navigating the Quandaries of Asylum Storytelling in Dina Nayeri's *Who Gets Believed?*

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ABSTRACT

The current discourse on refugee justice poses a significant question: How do the asylum systems decide to dis/believe the stories of asylum seekers? At present, through a screening process, the asylum seekers are categorised as 'deserving' or 'undeserving', 'rightful' or 'unrightful', 'refugees' or 'migrants', and 'victims' or 'threats'. This reductionist approach overlooks the intersection of contextual factors that complicate the experiences of displaced people. This paper identifies the bifurcated nature of asylum storytelling: first as a conduit for conveying personal experiences and second as a barrier to getting believed. Through an analysis of five asylum cases, approaching them as metaphors, genre, and discourse, depicted in Dina Nayeri's book, Who Gets Believed?, the paper examines the vulnerabilities within the UK and US asylum systems that limit asylum seekers' voice in storytelling. Based on a consolidated narrative inquiry and conceptual content analysis framework, the paper complicates the determinants of belief, credibility, and consistency in the institutional subculture of the asylum system, the 'culture of disbelief'. The paper teases out the implications of the instinctive response of the asylum-granting authorities towards asylum storytelling as an illustration of the politics of believability materialising as a loss of truth, language, meaning, and narrative for the storyteller in the asylum space. Additionally, it highlights the role of new refugee literature in problematising the quiet politics of storytelling and envisioning solutions for centring asylum storytellers' voices, experiential truth, and narrative.

Keywords: agency; asylum; Dina Nayeri; narrative; storytelling

INTRODUCTION

In an era of precarity with ongoing attempts to decolonise a range of practices, an understanding of the constructed nature of believability seems urgent as it fosters discussions of the disproportionate authority over belief, veracity, and plausibility in the world order, thereby calling into question the very nature of our own and others' truth (Weiser & Higgins, 2023). For asylum applicants, who, on various grounds, are "routinely positioned as unbelievable and untrustworthy" (Ferreira, 2022, p. 305), one's truth is acceptable depending on where one falls on the believability spectrum defined by the asylum system's normative expectations of storytelling and narrative order. The exploration of the relationship between justice and narrative can demonstrate how the currency of doubt is used by the asylum bureaucrats against the asylum stories to deny refuge and the politics behind the establishment of the legal need for asylum seekers to demonstrate their victimhood with "repetitive performances" of pain, trauma, and suffering (Espiritu et al., 2022, p. 94).

The world has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the number of people who are forced to flee their homes and seek refuge elsewhere. A complex web of factors such as social, political, cultural, and economic produce crisis-like situations that push the citizens of a country out of its borders. Some of the major factors behind contemporary displacement are war, conflict, poverty, violence, and climate change. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), these factors have generated 26 per cent of refugees, out of which 4 per cent are asylum seekers. Almost 5.4 million asylum seekers are awaiting asylum in protracted situations (UNHCR). The high number of seekers has made it globally appear as a 'refugee crisis', posing challenges to the asylum courts to make decisions concerning granting and denying citizenship, including deportations. In the UK and US, the asylum system is strained with backlog cases whose claimants await decision for years. According to the report of the *International Forum on Migration Statistics*, there were 974,571 backlog cases in the US in August 2023, whereas in the UK, according to *The Migration Observatory* (2024), 132,182 cases were pending (till December 2022). Owing to a lack of reform in the existing immigration laws, the asylum system considers itself overburdened by the number of asylum seekers (Solodoch, 2023). The situation has been exacerbated further by the standards through which the credibility of the stories of displacement is evaluated (Bruine et al., 2023). The laws on asylum establish the need for a clear and logical story, and the questioning often follows this requirement (Bromley, 2021). The dominant trend in asylum law is to deny cases based on the "politics of exclusion" (Stepnitz, 2023, p. 23) because the system that governs immigration excludes, avoids, and rejects the stories of applicants.

Within this context, it is crucial to understand how the conflicting anxieties and repercussions of normative storytelling become the quandaries that shape the narrative demands and limit the expression of truth in asylum spaces. With her new refugee consciousness, Dina Nayeri, an Iranian-American writer and a former refugee, interweaves the globally political and deeply personal experiences to dismantle the ambiguities of storytelling and listening that shape the narratives of asylum applicants. Nayeri's *Who Gets Believed? When the Truth Isn't Enough* (2023), a part memoir and part non-fiction book, explores the disbelief faced by asylum applicants. The book presents an insightful analysis of the asylum system in which truth is not believed until it is strategically demonstrated. It captures the mechanisms behind examining contradictions in true stories to justify denials, biases behind denying refugees the narrative agency, and the question of believing a stranger. Nayeri introspects on why asylum authorities accept certain stories and quickly disregard others, even when they are true.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the crucial steps in asylum-seeking is to undergo the screening process that determines the veracity of asylees' stories. This process is carried out within a politics of space that makes the asylum court a "dystopian space filled with defective workings of social formations, completely paralysed by social bleakness and constraints" (Asl, 2020, p. 161). The deeply disempowering experiences of storytellers in the asylum space refer to the disproportionate access to the "economy of credibility" (Fricker, 2007, p. 1) that affects the epistemic agency of vulnerable asylum storytellers. In addition, because of this unequal access to credibility, the experiences of displacement require entextualisation to exhibit a demanded context that is not made accessible to them before cases are heard (Maryns, 2005). As a result, the asylum decision-making process in its present form, still rooted in the 1951 United Nations convention, grants rights by accepting the

stories of persecution that conform to certain templates (Woolley, 2017) and rejects those that do not fit into asylum system's pre-determined cultural knowledge and narrative structures. In such a scenario, asylum storytellers perform the role of victims of persecution to demonstrate evidence of corporeal or mental harm, and this further perpetuates an approach that is entirely damage-based (Espiritu et al., 2022), designed to cater for the spectacles of suffering.

Within this atmosphere of disbelief, the workings of the asylum system, which are based on the process of storytelling by the asylum applicant, have become the subjects of increasing scholarly attention. For instance, in an ethnographic study conducted at Taylor House Asylum and Immigration Tribunal in London by the Refugee Studies Centre, the researchers illustrate that in the courtroom environment, disbelief creates "disorganisation, confusion, and chaos in many hearings" (Anderson et al., 2014, p. 13). In a similar vein, Olga Jubany's ethnographic study on asylum screening processes in Spain and the UK shows that an understanding of the asylum system's subcultures can expose the categorisations that nurture the prejudices in the system (Jubany, 2017). Thus, the nature of belief in such settings depends not only on the evidence but also on the stories that are manufactured, told, repeated, framed, reframed, and fabricated to fit into the pre-conceived narrative patterns in which the law wants the incidents to consistently and chronologically appear, rather than how they disjointedly occur. This scenario not only frames the nature of credibility and refugee agency in the asylum system but also directs attention towards the need to further critique the nature of the politics behind the selective privileging and disapproving of stories.

Further, studies suggest that asylum screening is the most obvious instance of how refugees are treated in the asylum system (Limbu, 2023). However, in the asylum space, one of the challenges for trauma survivors is to have a linear story based on the articulation of their traumatic memories that demand re-enactment. Whereas the stressors of memory and trauma are largely ignored in asylum storytelling, Rogers et al., (2014, p. 140), in their study on the impact of Post-Traumatic-Stress-Disorder (PTSD) on the testimonies of refugees, suggest that "under conditions of extreme stress, the integration of sensory and emotional information with the semantic information that helps us place memories in time and space is disrupted". Their argument is also supported by scholars in trauma studies who have proved that memory is not static but rather a flexible process that enables the past to be chosen, screened and reshaped based on current demands and future aspirations (Puvimanasinghe et al., 2015). Without discrediting this disruption, the cases that are discussed in Nayeri's book show that the asylum system's assessment criteria work on the indicators that rely on inadequate assumptions about traumatic memory and continue, in one way, to generalise human behaviour. Therefore, while different types of debates on asylum denials have significantly focused on the asylum environment, the nature of storytelling in the screening processes has not been adequately investigated in the context of asylum literature, including *Who Gets Believed?*, a book that solely focuses on these issues.

ASYLUM LITERATURE AND THE SITES OF CONTESTATION IN AGENTIC STORYTELLING

The growing anxiety around storytelling faced by asylum applicants has led to the disclosure of the critique of asylum literature on the "exclusivist legacies in policy, law, and perceptions of refugees themselves" (Estevez, 2022, p. xiv). It has been understood that refugee subjectivity is largely shaped by the repetition and citation of tropes of 'refugee-ness', which function to legitimise and naturalise certain representations as evidence on the grounds of protection but also place the true stories into danger because "while making the narrative recognisable and

understandable according to the norms of the legal process, the singularity and possibly the authenticity, of the account may be lost" (Luker, 2014, p. 91). In the asylum system, the performance of stories of displacement has become a site of contestation for the refugees as the system decides the credibility of their cases. However, this system, by enforcing a rigid and limited framework of what is acceptable, frequently disregards the subtleties and nuances of the refugees' actual experiences, failing to acknowledge that the narratives of refugees are dominated by the normative notions of the asylum system (Dawson, 2023). In this way, the system creates a power imbalance between the refugees and the authorities who have the power to (in) validate and (de)value asylum stories.

It is this cultural and legal dominance of the Western host countries' notions of storytelling and believability that reflects the crisis of agency in asylum storytelling. To negotiate with a hostile institution, asylum seekers modify their testimonies in a narrative pattern to gain credibility. This modification raises concerns about the ethical and agentic implications of conforming to a pre-conceived narrative pattern and the impact of a power imbalance on dismissing or silencing the truth. The lack of agency is also apparent as the decision to conceal or reveal is crafted around a "peculiarly restrictive set of narrative conditions" (Woolley, 2017, p. 379) influenced by conceptions and misconceptions that skew the judgment of the cases. In this sense:

> When our notions of what a 'true story' sounds like are so profoundly influenced by what a 'good story' sounds like, as defined by literary standards, we risk conflating the two; we risk becoming confused about the distinction between a true story and a story well told, and perhaps increasingly unlikely to believe the stories of those who do not express their suffering 'well'.
>
> (Holland, 2018, p. 91)

When these narrative demands are not fulfilled, the asylum officers negate the truths and look for a single lie that rationalises their decision to reject the asylees' story. However, the questions related to the working mechanisms of traumatic memory and its shift into a narrative memory are ignored without any training on understanding the psychology behind traumatic memories (Nayeri, 2023).

In her study on the Australian immigration system, legal scholar Anthea Vogl (2013, p. 83) argues that "the immigration officers' expectations of asylum seekers' narratives were shaped by their conceptions of the *Bildung* form, demanding that the applicant present a coherent story of flight to safety." This is an instance of testimonial injustice, which, in the words of Miranda Fricker (2007, p. 1), "occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word". As a result, injustice fuels the hostile asylum environments by overlooking the array of factors that impede a fair judgment of refugees' stories. Fricker's observation further theorises the establishment of a 'culture of disbelief' that influences the decision-making capacities of asylum-granting authorities and obstructs the chances of asylees' stories to pass the credibility test. This prejudice does not operate only in one way–dismissing the stories of asylees–but can be of two kinds that either "results in the speaker's receiving more credibility than she otherwise would have–a credibility excess–or it results in her receiving less credibility than she otherwise would have –a credibility deficit" (Fricker, 2007, p. 17). In the asylum system, both the 'excess' and 'deficit' nature of prejudice leads to misjudgement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

After a thorough examination of the screening process in the asylum space and situating the issue of asylum storytelling in this context, this paper employs a consolidated narrative inquiry and conceptual content analysis framework to analyse the storied experience of five asylum applicants whose cases are discussed in Nayeri's book. For an exploration of the meanings that are assigned to the stories of asylum seekers under the conditions of scepticism, the constructed nature of these meanings, and the frequency of failures of articulating stories, which this paper considers as affected by 'quandaries', this framework is useful for interpreting how the asylum systems disengage the entire truth from the stories of asylum applicants and grip them into the stereotypes and prejudices situated in the politics of storytelling and believability. Further, the framework is effective in demonstrating how the Western narrative order (a convincing beginning, middle, and end) that "has canonised a distinctive set of narrative values characterised by tight economy and closure" (Lowe, 2004, p. 27) is accepted by the asylum systems and inflict the stories of displacement which are influenced by diverse cultural and trauma-related factors. Within this framework, the paper aims to signify the erasure of narrative agency as well as the resistant refugee subjectivity that does not give up on the true stories under difficult circumstances. The paper considers the nature of asylum storytelling in these cases as structured around conflicting narrative dynamics and presents these as the quandaries of storytelling in asylum space. The central problem with these quandaries is that they affect the unique perception of reality and truth of both the decision-maker and the asylum applicant. What happens to asylum storytelling when these quandaries are left unattended, and what does it mean for the asylum seekers to follow (primarily) the templates of storytelling determined by a system that disbelieves their accounts of violence? Considering each case as reflective of different quandaries of storytelling, the paper approaches, in different sections, the aftermath of these quandaries on the process of storytelling and asylum applicants' lives, as depicted in Nayeri's book.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

DINA NAYERI AND THE QUESTION OF BELIEF AND DISBELIEF

At the very beginning of *Who Gets Believed?*, Nayeri makes a distinction between 'truth' and 'fact', suggesting that 'facts' can be used to overshadow a lie, whereas 'truth' can be crafted in fictional terms. That is why, she emphasises, in evaluating asylum testimonies, what needs to be prioritised is a deep, rather than a shallow, conception of 'truth-as-fact'. Nayeri, while reflecting on her own life as a former refugee, shares accounts of asylum cases in which stories and storytelling are encountered by the narrative expectations of the asylum-granting authorities. These accounts include the story of a Sri Lankan man, KV, a Karen woman, Mimi, a Turkish woman, Elif, an unnamed Mungiki woman, and a Pakistani minister, Mohammed, all of whom have respectively escaped their home countries. All these cases share a similar pattern of denial of truth following the storytelling expectations of the asylum bureaucrats. The cases reveal 'truth' as a matter of cultural construction rather than accuracy in asylum storytelling, thus allowing us to take up believability and storytelling as lenses to explore these structural biases and the legal predicament of storytelling for asylum-seeking subjects. More specifically, they make us question how the asylum storytelling as an object of cultural fascination for the asylum systems is caught between the entanglement of the logic of exclusion and a culture of disbelief.

KV'S CASE: CORPOREAL EVIDENCE AND NARRATIVE DISCREPANCIES

The case of a Sri Lankan asylum applicant, KV, the first account in Nayeri's book, provides powerful details of "today's cynical justice systems" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 70) that neglect the unfamiliar accounts of true incidents. In Sri Lanka, KV is wrongfully suspected by the army for being a member of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), a militant organisation in Sri Lanka, and is arrested and detained in an army camp. After spending nine months in the detention camp, he succeeds in escaping torture with the aid of a smuggler, Sasi, and applies for asylum in the United Kingdom, where he tells his story of getting physically branded by the Sri Lankan army. But the Home Office, the department in the United Kingdom that handles immigration, finds his story unbelievable and rejects his claim by writing in their judgement, "You are a fit and healthy young male who it is considered suffered no problems in Sri Lanka" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 78). Next comes the eight-year-long battle fought by KV to repetitively perform his story and persuade the authorities of its truth.

The gaps between narrative and experience are reflected in this case as the officials ignore the reasons behind KV's narrative of corporeal punishment. Despite his protracted existence, which is characterised by the "years of gritted teeth, watching helplessly as the landscape melts into absurdity, all the wrong words crawling out of [his] mouth on their own like vermin, though [he] struggle[s] to hold them in" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 71) he is expected to trust the journey to justice. In KV's case, the imprints of corporeal violence and trauma are real but not in the authentic storytelling format existing in asylum officers' imagination. These officers are, as Susan Sontag (2003) mentions, modern citizens who have learned to be sceptical to disregard the narratives that deviate from the accepted narrative patterns and resist any emotional response to the suffering of others. As influenced by this training to disbelieve, the asylum authorities search for discrepancies in KV's story to discard his trauma, driven by their superior 'intuition' that he has inflicted himself to take the benefit of asylum.

The discussion around proving bodily torture is crucial in the discourses on testimonial injustice, given that there are devastating psychological repercussions of being disbelieved. In KV's case, the corporeal marks are visible, but the asylum authorities overlook the body and follow what Fassin and Halluin (2005, p. 598) consider "practices of torture that are more and more hidden and demands of physical evidence that are, therefore, more and more difficult to bring". Nayeri (2023, p. 176) points towards such mechanisms as the systemic deficiency of the asylum system in which "expert medical and psychological reports are ignored, and little attempt is made to train officers on the effect of trauma on memory". When KV's story resembles the stories of other Sri Lankan refugees, it desensitises the authorities, who consider it unbelievable and reject it "based on suspicion of self-infliction" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 177). For authorities, the maintenance of the 'culture of disbelief' requires a denial of the firsthand experiences of violence, trauma, and displacement that do not adhere to the structural format of stories that they want to listen to. She criticises the system that disbelieves stories because of their similarity and offers the reason behind this:

> Because something big is happening inside their small country–a tiny patch of the earth is spewing out refugees now. Yes, they are all young, brown men with many shared traits, and they look the same to you because you are white. They are fleeing a common villain, and that villain does have a single brand, a torture device, that he favours. As for why they tell their story the same way, it is because of language and culture and the fact that they all learned English storytelling from the same five helpers along the way.
>
> (Nayeri, 2023, p. 174)

As KV's case continues from the Home Office to court, to an Upper Tribunal, and further to the Supreme Court, the limited choice against him is "to live while waiting or suffer while waiting" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 177). He is stuck in what Bridget Haas (2017, 76) identifies as an "existential limbo" or vague, ambiguous, and contradictory space in which many asylum seekers are stuck for years. For about two years, KV spends his time in fear of deferment and keeps on performing his trauma. Towards the end of the second year, he is examined by Dr. Zapata-Bravo, an expert in Internal medicine and psychiatry, who validates the veracity of the incidents. Additionally, in a hyperbolic manner, Dr. Bravo also mentions that something similar can happen to someone with the assistance of medical practitioners who could have put a person under anaesthesia, which, in KV's case, he mentions "was unlikely (read: ludicrous)" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 180). Despite all the information reported by Dr. Bravo, the Home Office dismisses other arguments and zeroes down on the possibility of KV following the procedure to inflict torture on himself. KV's appeal is also declined by the Upper Tribunal, which, quite surprisingly, casts doubt on the doctor's report and caters to the culture of normalising the self-affliction narrative in the asylum system. It was in 2018 that KV's case was heard by the United Kingdom Supreme Court, which captures the tribunal's error in reading the doctor's report. Eight years later, KV's story is believed, and his prolonged performance of trauma ultimately triumphs over the 'disbelief culture'.

KV's case illustrates the gaps and inconsistencies that arise as narrative discrepancies in the personal accounts of trauma and the various interpretations of asylum stories. It takes KV eight years to gain asylum because he, till the end, refuses to surrender to the system that dismisses his story. The asylum system does not consider that long-term living in a protracted existence erodes memory and hinders the accuracy of the testimonies provided during the registration interview. Further, as a consequence of protracted existence and the passing of time, the true stories lose the linear and fact-based pattern. In the absence of the required credibility on a particular fact, the rest of the story is overtaken by what Fricker (2007, p. 121) considers "the overarching meta-narratives of suspicion and distrust".

MIMI'S CASE: JUDICIAL DISCRETION AND NARRATIVE CONFORMITY

What Nayeri wants to emphasise through the case of KV is that there is a range of circumstances that push people out of the boundary of their native country. Thus, giving credibility to some stories that easily fit into the narrative order of the asylum system is unjust. In the same vein, Olga Jubany (2017, p. 157) criticises the homogenisation of refugee stories, calling it a "cumulative labelling process" of recognising refugee stories. These categorisations that Jubany discusses further echo in Nayeri's book as she describes the case of Mimi, a Karen refugee in America. Mimi's story offers another perspective on how refugees are forced to convert truth into an acceptable story.

Mimi risks her life and escapes from Myanmar to Thailand and then to the United States of America with an unusual story. As an activist, her reason for fleeing is the fear of getting persecuted by the Myanmar government. Following the wave of refugees who resettled in America in 2011, she forges her date of birth to get a visa, intending to reveal her true identity after reaching a safe place. However, when she tells this to the immigration authorities, her story is dismissed because considering it true would raise questions about the credibility of the American immigration authorities who had issued her visa. They invalidate her asylum claim and disbelieve anything other than her false identity as a student, Dao, and not Mimi, who had entered America on a forged student visa of Dao. Her visa is already included in the official paperwork that had established her

identity as the Thai student Dao (false) and not the Karen refugee Mimi (true); thus, she is required to conform to the narrative that is already established about her.

As Mimi struggles to prove her membership in Karen ethnicity, a group largely targeted by the Burmese government, she has to appeal to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The bureau is only persuaded when the fact is declared by the people of the Karen community in Myanmar that Mimi belongs to them. However, the most important factor that works in Mimi's case is the judge, who is moved by the emotional elements in her story and grants her credibility. This brings into discussion a widely disseminated narrative about the judges in the asylum system in which "every refugee knows: your judge is your destiny" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 72). The impact of judges' emotions in decision-making can either positively or negatively affect the outcomes of a case. In any event, the notion of reliance upon emotions is not an efficient parameter in the case of refugees because, in different cultures, there are distinct ways of showing emotions.

ELIF'S CASE: NARRATIVE ARTICULATION AND THE 'THEATRE OF SUFFERING'

In the same asylum space, there are cases in which the asylum officer's failure to empathise with and acknowledge the history behind a claimant's story exposes the robotic nature of the asylum system. Such kind of empathy is required in the case of those refugees who are rape victims and survivors. Baillot et al., (2009, p. 219) explain that "those seeking asylum whose claims are founded on rape . . . require us to give more nuanced attention to the plight of vulnerable women" who seek safety from sexual assault. Articulating the trauma of rape is not easy for women who feel reluctant to share the physical details of the act of rape. Moreover, there are "vast differences in cultural understandings of the categories of trauma, remediation, fault finding, accusation, victimisation, and persecution" (Shumam & Bohmer, 2004, p. 410) behind the articulation of a traumatic incident. By describing a Turkish rape survivor, Elif's story, Nayeri refers to the nightmarish experience that some refugees undergo to perform their trauma in a "theatre of suffering" (Moyn, 2020, p. 34) staged in the asylum courts. In the case of Elif, the asylum system neither considers her gender or cultural background nor offers her any support in disclosing her experiences of sexual violence. The asylum-granting authorities demand evidence of rape and torture while disregarding the psychological, physical, and cultural barriers that prevent Elif from presenting such evidence to male authorities. Elif is dehumanised and objectified and describes her experience of the interview in these words:

> How did the police rape me? How many men raped me? Could I give them any evidence about the torture? It was as if my body was shedding its skin. I wanted to say, 'Stop it! I can't go on, I can't, I can't!' Why couldn't they have been women? . . . I felt dead explaining about my rape to those men . . . I didn't yet know that they were robots . . . I wanted to die. And then the interview was finished.
>
> (Nayeri, 2023, p. 88)

Such stories as Elif's can be understood as "constrained by a myriad of factors, including trauma" (Dawson, p. 16). Elif's case illustrates that in the absence of trauma-informed interviewing techniques, the asylum officers fail to acknowledge that memory works differently for trauma survivors. For officers, the factual details must be time-specific: year, month, date, day, and hour, whereas the traumatic memories are distorted, disordered, fragmented and intense.

MUNGIKI WOMAN'S NARRATIVE CHALLENGE OF NON-PHYSICAL TRAUMA

Whereas the judgment of the asylum granting authorities, in filtering the stories of asylum seekers, heavily relies on culturally constructed ideas, for Nayeri (2023, p. 109), "Each culture has their ideas of what a real victim sounds like . . . [and questions like] Does she cry? Does she dissociate? are answered differently in different cultures". The time taken to answer a question is also set in a cultural context: while some cultures prefer a long story as an answer, some are satisfied with a simple 'yes' or 'no'. In Nayeri's book, the way in which a lack of knowledge of culture can affect the decision of an asylum seeker can be ascertained by the story of an unnamed young Mungiki woman. She has escaped Kenya to save herself from an unsuccessful Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) attempt. Over time, the physical marks of the attempt disappear as the wounds heal, leaving her clitoris intact. Without a physical mark of the FGM, her story is disbelieved as the officers deny the social circumstances of FGM in Kenya. In the absence of proof of situations in which she resisted the attempt of FGM, her case is not considered reasonable because of the lack of a particular narrative of FGM with visible physical injuries. This is in contrast to KV's case, where overt corporeal marks led to disbelief, and the authorities charged him with SIBP–the asylum system's general acronym for Self-Inflicted by Proxy. The story of the Mungiki woman fails to gain credibility because the asylum system demands and expects a well-framed story from her, whereas the woman's cultural context is implicit in different scenarios, and her traumatic memory has been pushed deep within her unconscious.

MOHAMMAD'S CASE: ALTERING TRUTH THROUGH NARRATIVE REFRAMING

Another asylum seeker in Nayeri's book, Mohammad, illustrates struggles to situate his experiences into a credible account of his fear of persecution. Mohammad escapes from Pakistan as he is tormented by a powerful family for financially helping a young couple to elope. For a year, they harassed him and even fractured his thigh bone, asking for information about the whereabouts of the couple. The local police remain inactive because of the political influence of the girl's family. There is no choice for Mohammad to reside anywhere else in Pakistan because he could have been discovered and assassinated. When this story is presented in the asylum court, the authorities deny him asylum, considering his claim out of the grounds for protection that are mentioned in refugee law. According to them, "Mohammad was persecuted for information, which is not a protected ground for asylum" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 75), such as race, religion, nationality, social group, or political opinion (UNHCR). His lawyer, Haq, takes up the case and analyses the details, finally strategically reframing it by aligning the real story with the religious and political opinions of Mohammed. Haq does this by focusing on a small incident in which Mohammed mentions his belief in the choice of a person to choose love and religion, fuelling the anger of the men who wanted to kill him. Haq fabricates this as a political opinion, and Mohammad's story is believed. The real issue in this case is not the credibility but rather the lack of knowledge or understanding of what constitutes a refugee and a lack of commitment to listen to nonconforming stories. Another issue in the minister's case is the lack of attention given to the role of the translator, who influences the story with his subjective bias. While playing the role of a mediator, "translators may give the testimony of speakers a different tone or emphasis, and the presence of lawyers, journalists, and other professionals will also shape how stories are told" (Woods, 2020, p. 513). Occasionally, they can be regarded as specialists who can offer information on the asylum seekers' stories because they know the language and culture (Pollabauer, 2004). Although these role expectations seem underrepresented, Nayeri brings to attention that when a translator gets a detail of someone's life

wrong, it is as if they are altering the past. The error is accepted as the truth, and no evidence of the wrong translation is enough (Nayeri, 2023).

SYSTEMIC MISTRUST, POLITICAL RHETORIC, AND HOSTILE INTERROGATIONS

The knowledge that frames the understanding of asylum authorities to assess the veracity of KV's, the Mungiki woman's, Mimi's, Elif's, and Mohammed's stories relies on an array of stereotypes, biases, and power dynamics prevalent in asylum space. Based on these notions, their truth is (mis)understood and (mis)judged. Nayeri (2023, p. 86) points towards interrupting this and mentions that "refugees come with need, so we tell them that there is no room for human error or flaws". The cases call for looking ahead at the vulnerability and victimhood of the displaced and giving them a fair chance to reflect their subjectivity through storytelling. Further, the cases project a pattern of arbitrary and inconsistent decision-making in the refugee law that often overlooks the truth and is guided by what Mogiani (2023, p. 403) considers the "dominant narratives of victimisation/criminalisation". This makes it clear that the attitude of 'mistrust' toward the stories of refugees is a system-born choice of disbelieving others who do not share race, religion, and nation. Asylum officers exhibit biases or errors in their decision-making that are unrelated to the merits of the asylum cases. In a crucial incident, Nayeri delves deep into the asylum interviews by mentioning the information found in a redacted file of interview notes that include the reasons for the rejection. Some of the phrases used in this file to reject the cases reveal the hostile nature of the interviewers who write, "How stupid is this guy . . . App is crying. For 1 minute. LOSER" (Nayeri, 2023, p. 122). When the applicant says that he is crying for his wife and children, the interviewer writes that his mistake is to leave his country.

The asylum interviewers in Nayeri's book do not perceive the metaphors used by refugees to tell their stories differently depending on their cultural context, emotional state, and traumatic memory. Not only this, but the metaphors used in media representation of refugees and their widespread negative portrayal also impact how their stories are perceived and the grounds of credibility established. She emphasises:

> When a president calls immigrants 'thugs' or 'criminals', he enters those words into history, an accusation that their children and grandchildren will have to answer for decades, privately, in the subconscious of their neighbours, classmates and coworkers. Simple visual metaphors become red herrings in the public memory. Once refugees are a swarm, Mexicans are rapists, women are banshees; it is trying, Sisyphean work to untangle the image from the reality–the red herrings remain lodged at the story's centre.
>
> (Nayeri, 2023, p. 217)

This exemplifies the language and imagery used by political leaders and media outlets that can limit the public memory regarding refugees. By using derogatory and dehumanising terms to describe immigrants and refugees, such as "thugs", "criminals", "swarm", or "rapists", they are not only demonised and stigmatised but also recorded in a lasting legacy of prejudice and discrimination that affects asylum storytelling. The negative labels are difficult to erase or challenge as they become embedded in the collective consciousness of the host society. They prevent from seeing the truth in complex and multifaceted stories of displacement and relegate them to simple metaphors that fail to capture humanity or agency. Books similar to Nayeri's *Who Gets Believed?* seek to dismantle these processes of metaphorization that reinforce "the cultural imaginaries of the refugee with those of innocence, haplessness, and immobilisation" (Klaas, 2023, p. 349).

Hence, based on the narrative analysis of the cases, the asylum stories become metaphors of silence, a genre of resistance to narrative exclusion, and a discourse of alienation in spaces of (un)welcome. As metaphors, these stories (turned from narratives) are suggestive of the asylum subjects' identities, points of view, cultural norms, beliefs, thoughts, and emotions. It could be seen that for the displaced subjects, these stories dually reflect reality by deliberately constructing it based on whether they have been believed. In other words, the way these subjects fit their stories into a narrative order omits the truth at significant junctures of traumatic experience that breaks apart the consistency in the asylum story. When collectively considered as a genre, the asylum stories in the cases demonstrate the repercussions of the dominant Western generic requirements of one starting point, one ending point, sequential events, chronological ordering, logical details, causal arrangements, and realism over the lived experiences of displacement. The genre also records the narrative violence in storytelling and illustrates different power dynamics at work in the asylum spaces in which the asylum applicants who do not learn the privileged art of manipulating and getting believed fail to fit their trauma and truthful details into a narrative, almost always requesting others to believe their stories. Stories such as KV's remain resistant to the imposed narrative order till the end, whereas the stories of other applicants, such as Mimi and the Pakistani minister, become performances of a modified truth. As a discourse, the stories illustrate the misunderstanding of asylum storytellers' truth, which is a consequence of the politics of believability and negates a cultural understanding of storytelling conventions differing across cultures and societies. In essence, it becomes apparent that asylum culture determines which stories to herald, reinforce, and propagate. The persuasive element of this discourse substitutes truth with performance, which makes the covert message difficult to understand in a different place, space, and time. As such, the forces constraining asylum storytelling are the evidence of the disoriented relationship between asylum stories and asylum storytellers, truth and the performance of truth, and lived experiences and given plot lines.

There is a complex mechanism of cultural, social, economic, psychological, and other factors and intersecting hierarchies that are at play here concerning what truth in asylum stories is established, evaluated, authorised, and denied. The dilemma of deciding whether to tell the truth or to follow the templates of storytelling (as pre-determined by the asylum system) is reflective of the ongoing difficulty of asylum applicants in sharing their narratives while lacking the cultural and political recognition of being truthful. The subjective bias behind the assumption that asylum applicants' stories are false claims for seeking refuge puts them more at the performative dimension of truth rather than getting believed as individual storytellers. This performative labour of asylum storytellers becomes more visible as they negotiate with truth and performance that may not align with the expected performance of victimhood that is imposed on them by the power structures such as asylum courts that govern displaced populations.

For instance, in the cases discussed, the logic of believability is likely more centred on the convincing performance of victimhood in which the details of submissiveness, docility, and the storyteller's capability of replicating the tropes of suffering are prioritised. The voices of asylum seekers are not believable on their own, so expert opinions are needed to decide whether the pain is performed well or not. The cases further illustrate that without training to understand the performative expectations of storytelling, the asylum storytellers, while being selectively ignored, succumb to the quandaries perpetuated by the asylum system. This makes asylum storytelling a misrepresentation of the truth made possible by a performance of the narrow range of experiences of displacement as understood by the asylum systems. More than stories, these voices are defences

against suspicion, acts of seeking empathy and kindness from the asylum bureaucrats, withdrawals from the truth, and scripts to be enacted and re-enacted until they seem like truth.

CONCLUSION

The cases analysed in this paper reveal that the entanglement of literary and legal elements, the anxiety over narrative control, and the lack of the applicant storyteller's agency expose several quandaries of asylum storytelling. In the asylum systems, these quandaries are at play in multiple forms: the demands for a narrative order in the stories of traumatic incidents influenced by eroded memory, an acceptance of compliance to modelled narrative scripts as plausible evidence, the precondition of confirmation to the narrative expectations, control over applicant's voice, use of model refugee narratives as touchstones for testing all asylum stories, discrediting the cultural differences in storytelling, prioritising victimhood over resilience, temporal and chronological ordering of narrative that is influenced by the non-linear events, and looking for archetypes in the stories that are different from one another.

Thus, asylum space becomes a site of exclusion that operates through the regulation of storytelling, narrative, and selective truth. The screening, hence, requires a dismantling of the storytelling templates that disregard the polyphony of the refugee voices. By teasing out the implications of storytelling and believability for asylum applicants, this paper directs towards the poststructural significance of the need of all human beings to have their real-life stories heard and believed. It shows that the pain of being unheard and disbelieved suffered by the asylum storytellers invites a discussion of the politics of doubt that operates in various power dynamics that keep individuals, especially in the current post-truth societies, from believing in one another. This troubling paradox of believability is deeply at work in the asylum spaces in the form of restrictive storytelling and narrative order. Within these power structures, the racialised, gendered, and white supremacist logic of believability likely authorises asylum bureaucrats to decide the livability of the vulnerable populations of refugees and asylum seekers based on their storytelling capacities.

The analysis further allows us to understand that the quandaries of asylum storytelling seem irresolvable, but they are not if a serious commitment is made by all the actors involved in refugee governance to understand the mechanisms of storytelling that work differently for different asylum storytellers. The tragic failure of stories in the cases discussed in this paper illustrates that to address the complexities of asylum storytelling, it is crucial to empower refugee narratives by embracing multiple perspectives. To put simply, refugees should not be confined to binary notions of truth or falsehood, nor should they be seen solely through the lens of universal victimhood to justify their asylum claims. Instead, the fluidity of meanings in their stories should be acknowledged as part of a dynamic process, reflecting the lived experiences of individuals who are not static entities. By celebrating the plurality of voices and dismantling dominant Western storytelling paradigms, we can better understand the cultural dynamics that influence asylum testimonies. This approach respects the individuality of storytellers and enriches our collective understanding of their experiences. Nayeri's book invites us to critically reflect on the asylum system's positionality, credibility, and responsibility for refugees and the need to engage in a more empathetic, dialogical, and polyphonic mode of listening and believing.

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