



Mothers who move: Traversing refugee experience, overcoming shame and reclaiming motherhood

by Jess Baker



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Abstract

When women are forcibly displaced, structurally violent migration processes can have dramatic and devastating effects on experiences of motherhood. This paper shares stories of two women who overcame narratives of shame and guilt, individually developed second stories of motherhood, and then came together through letter writing and narrative conversations to collectively create a renewed sense of belonging. The paper discusses ways narrative practices can support women facing forced displacement to rewrite their identities through themes of survival and collective strength, rather than individual failure.

Key words: *motherhood, displacement, collective externalising, re-membering, outsider-witness, double-story development, enabling contribution, family reunification, narrative therapy, narrative practice*

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It would be great to share my story with other mothers. The idea of the village has changed a lot recently. It's not something you can take for granted; you have to create that village first. Sharing our stories reduces our perception of isolation and contributes to looking for our sisters and becoming a village of mothers that support each other, sharing our happy and sad moments. (Jacqueline)

Telling my story would mean that some woman out there would have a similar experience to mine which they can relate to, and it can be an inspiration to other women who are struggling and separated from their children. When you share your story, it affects people in very different ways, but I think it will affect them in a positive way when it talks about hope. (Mariam)

I first met Mariam in 2021 when we were working in Manchester, UK, with an organisation called Women Asylum Seekers Together. In an environment that was hostile to refugees, this organisation was part of a flourishing grassroots campaign movement. Mariam led the management group, which represented women experiencing detention, destitution and “failed” asylum claims. When we met again online in 2024, I had returned to live in Australia. Mariam was 47 years old. She was still waiting for her asylum claim to be processed because the UK Home Office was convinced she was from Somalia, despite her country of birth being Kenya. She told me it had been a 16-year wait – 16 years separated from her children. When Mariam told me this, I asked whether she had been asked about her personal experiences of motherhood and displacement, knowing she had spent years campaigning to change policy for other mothers who were unlawfully detained in immigration detention because of their “failed” asylum status, an experience Mariam herself shared when separated from her children. Despite supporting other mothers, many of whom were pregnant, in these

hostile settings, it seemed she had not had the chance to reflect on her own journey. She said she was ready and happy to do so.

I met Jacqueline in 2023 when I was working with a humanitarian settlement program in Sydney. Our conversations were instantly drawn to topics of motherhood, spirituality and the policies that shape family reunion on stolen land and favour the nuclear family ideal. Jacqueline told me of her experience leaving Venezuela and becoming a mother in Australia, and the consistent barriers she faced when advocating for her extended family to join her. When I broached the idea of a project about motherhood to Jacqueline one year later, she was 58 years old. I had relocated to Northern New South Wales and was working as a strategic consultant in the settlement space. As we had maintained contact, I asked if she would like the opportunity to talk to me about motherhood, and she was curious and obliging. I also asked if she would like to meet Mariam to discuss motherhood, careful not to mention any details about Mariam’s journey. Jacqueline was excited at the prospect of speaking to another woman who shared her eagerness to discuss motherhood from a different cultural perspective.

I wanted to create space for a collective conversation about motherhood, agency and social justice. We welcomed motherhood into the conversation in ways that broke from single-storied accounts (Adichie, 2009) in which “migrant”, “refugee” and “asylum seeker” were the centred aspects of their identities. Through engaging in individual and collective externalising; re-authoring conversations about motherhood; and re-membling conversations, we generated together a rich second story of “mothers on the move” and an ongoing dialogue began between women who had once been strangers. This dialogue through the written and spoken word enabled Mariam and Jacqueline to speak with passion about the politics of motherhood and to share their stories of resistance.

Along the way, as a white queer woman with a professional background in community development, research, policy and storytelling,

I needed to be aware of how I may inadvertently replicate colonial constructs. Having pre-existing ideas of the cross-cultural challenges mothers may face would have blockaded the pathway to second stories. Ensuring I was opening fields of inquiry about acts of resistance was one of the biggest learnings and simultaneous challenges I encountered throughout the process.

Jacqueline's externalisation of heaviness

In our initial conversation, Jacqueline wanted to focus on the “heaviness” of motherhood, which she described as emerging from a shift in identity and responsibility in a personal, geographical and cross-cultural context that often amounted to guilt and shame when separated from extended family. We externalised these feelings via a landscape-of-identity conversation about the environment of her childhood. We Re-membered the importance of her grandmother and mother and the spiritual, physical and emotional roles they played. This was made possible through a comparison of Jacqueline’s cultural home in Venezuela and her new physical home in Australia. This helped to establish values relating to interaction and community. We drew out these values by identifying the barriers she encountered when speaking with white Australian mothers in Australia: the heaviness would creep back in when Jacqueline attended predominantly white mother-support groups, but was absent in the “compadres club” she had formed in Australia with members of her Venezuelan culture.

Jess: So, when you were having these interactions with [the white] mothers, did that look different to the interactions you were having in your compadres club?

Jacqueline: Yeah, completely different, because it is not just cultural but [inter]generational ... And it's more familiar, more intimate, more close.

Jacqueline identified her values that stemmed from Venezuelan culture within the transitions of women more generally as they move physically

and emotionally across geographies, roles and expectations. This helped her to stay close to her identity despite being in a different “village”.

Jess: And where is the heaviness now?

Jacqueline: It's way different ... especially in a safe environment like this. Yes, you feel like that burden, when it's shared, is much less of a burden.¹

As Jacqueline referred back to her skills, knowledges and ancestral connections, this evoked storylines that related to being a woman, a mother, a Venezuelan and a member of her compadres club. These storylines offered very different possibilities than those associated with being primarily a migrant, refugee or a humanitarian-visa holder.

When we next met, I asked Jacqueline questions including:

- If you weren't here now, what would you be doing?
- What has the heaviness been doing since we last spoke?
- Who do you think is in charge of this heaviness?

In response, Jacqueline offered a historical, spiritual, political story:

Jacqueline: And remember that in the beginning the ones that were worshipping with the women as a goddess, then men with a patriarchal system started to, you know, make us believe that God was just a male energy figure, but no, actually, it's off both energies ... I always remember this book I read a long time ago that God was a woman. It's an omnipresence. It's being in five places at once.

Jess: I'm just wondering what's good about having this peripheral vision in relation to how women perform? How are you standing up to these expectations? How do your family see you now?

Jacqueline: In my work. They now see me as a more strong woman, more assertive.

These explorations of identity and externalising processes redefined success by shifting the narrative from Jacqueline's feelings of "guilt" at being far away from her homeland, to externalising this notion of guiltiness and replacing it with an alternative story of "communitas" (Turner, 1969, p. 96). It seemed also that externalising "the heaviness", guilt and shame that had been accompanying Jacqueline in relation to motherhood had led to an acknowledgment of patriarchy as a system of global governance. For Jacqueline, this enhanced peripheral vision had led to renewed connection to community, spirit and ancestors.

Mariam's identity landscape: From remote to constant mother

I met with Mariam around the same time as I met with Jacqueline, but due to time constraints, the difference in time zones and Mariam's ongoing Home Office appointments, we were not able to meet as often. I was made aware of this when I asked what it took for her to be here and she told me about her numerous appointments and having no recourse to public funds because of her ongoing asylum case.

Jess: What does motherhood look like to you now compared to motherhood in your village?

Mariam: It looks different. Quite, quite different. And when I was separated from my children, that was something that I struggled with for a long, long time because it's very rare for mothers to leave their children, very rare. In our community, that doesn't happen ... It's like I'm a mother remotely, whereby I want to know what [the children] are doing, how they have woken up, what they have eaten, where they're going.

Jess: And did you have a choice about doing motherhood remotely?

Mariam: It was my choice at first. I came here with the understanding that my children will join me. As the system has been, you know, your children cannot join you once your status have not been settled.

Jess: I'm curious about what you're up against being a remote mother? How are you fighting back about those ideas?

Mariam: In Mombasa, a child belongs to the community ... I think whether you call yourself a mother or a remote mother, you're still a mother, right? Yes, that's just a label that you're giving yourself ... but there hasn't been a choice involved in that for you. No-one's taken that power away from you, right?

In another conversation, Mariam told me of her constant fight against the system to regain her agency when she was consistently criminalised despite no longer being in detention.

Jess: And what would you say to your children if you could see them right now?

Mariam: Well first of all, they know that their mother loves them first and foremost ... And it's like changing that story of it being remote to it being constant ... They see me as patient, resilient now.

A shift in the conversation from describing motherhood as "remote" to "constant" because of hopes and dreams of reunion allowed for re-authoring conversations about motherhood and re-membering strength through culture despite forging new ideas of home in the UK. We explored together the ways in which Mariam still visits her homeland through memory and embodied experience (Lee, 2023). Mariam also described the ways she and her children are with each other despite distance. The idea of distant embodiment through advancements of global technologies was richly explored.

The ways in which Mariam overcame state language of "failed asylum seeker" and created a second story of being a "constant mother",

could be linked to Jacqueline's feeling of omnipresence and the idea of God being a woman rather than the weight of her duties as a "heavy" single-storied motherhood. These linked themes prompted me to reach out to them both about the possibility of meeting and writing some letters to be read to one another in the future. They both responded eagerly.

Re-memobering motherhood: Letter writing for collective strength

I chose letter writing as a way to bring Mariam and Jacqueline together because of its introspective ability to evoke silence and knowing simultaneously, without the potential pressure of a therapeutic setting. Both women had advised their preference to do this in their own time, without me being present while they wrote their thoughts. I crafted the following prompts for Jacqueline and Mariam to write letters to their younger selves with the idea that these would then be shared with each other.

- Write and address a letter to your younger self, before you became a mother, or perhaps when you found out you were pregnant.
- What are some of the obstacles you may face in being a mother, based on your life experience and journey?
- Have you seen other mothers navigate this? Or women in your family?
- What story would you have told yourself to give you strength? (This could be a story, a poem, or a song from your language or culture)
- How could you use this story in times when you will need it the most?
- What do you know about women in your family who came before you? What are their stories of motherhood?
- How can you draw on the strengths of women in your family to help you fulfil your hopes and dreams of becoming a mother?

- What does motherhood look like in your hopes and dreams?

I asked them to return their letters to me within two weeks. Here are the letters they wrote to themselves:

Dear Mariam,

I am writing to you with the hope you are fine and have time to read this letter. I can see you have grown to become a beautiful young girl from being the baby who was crawling and wanting to touch everything you saw. A few more years and you will be given for arranged marriage. For now, enjoy your youth, and make the most of it. I do not know what your dreams and ambitions are, if you have any. You feel you should not dream: it is like your life ahead has been planned by someone else.

Girls in our village have only one thing to think about, which is to grow older and become a good wife and have children. It is not known who you will marry. I hope he will be a rich handsome man. That is always a girl's dream. Becoming a mother, especially when you are young, can be challenging. There are older women in the village, we call them Bibi. They teach newly married women about arranged marriages and how to care for their husbands, and when the women have children, the learning continues. This practice has carried on for generations.

You may be worried about how you will cope with motherhood, imagining that giving birth is sacred and painful as the young mothers say, yet they have more than one child. How many children are you planning to have, or is it for your husband to decide, once you get married? Always remember, Mariam, you are the little girl who once played hide-and-seek games and danced with the stars under the moonlight.

Dear Jacqueline,

All this time that you have been looking for children, it's a time for preparation for motherhood. Enjoy the journey and relax. Avoid the frustration. When the medical treatment fails, keep going and have faith, because from those failures, you will learn what is not working—the excessive use of drugs and medications—and you will realise other ways, natural ways. When your body, mind and soul are ready, then the perfect timing to welcome your children will come. Other mothers have navigated health issues and infertility. But your paternal grandmother, Carmen, had 13 children, and your maternal grandmother, Maria, had five children. You have inherited that fertility from your ancestors.

My family's strengths are their sacrifices for the life and wellbeing of the family, the children, the future generations. I hoped and dreamed of becoming a good mother, like my ancestors. In December 2002, a beautiful lady, with a special energy and a spiritual aura, when she met me, said: "Your waiting time is over, what you were waiting for is already here. Your children's energies are here, or you are already pregnant, or you will become pregnant any time soon. You will go on the 1st of February 2003 and the pregnancy test will be positive for your eldest son, Sebastian".

I always remember this story to reinforce my new belief system: having faith in love, destiny and natural and herbal medicine. Motherhood is the continuation of love, care, heritage and family. It's a soul's journey, full of life lessons, learnings, hope and the ultimate unconditional love between mothers and their children. Motherhood is a monumental life mission.

It became apparent that these letters to a younger self had invited Jacqueline and Mariam to speak about the politics of experience by reflecting on identity in the context of time and place, and to create double stories of themselves as mothers today, and young women with hopes and dreams in previous lives.²

Going backwards to go forward: Re-authoring home

A shared interest emerged in further exploration of "skills of living", intentions, hopes, goals, the positive directions in which Jacqueline's and Mariam's lives had taken them, and what this said about their culture (Denborough, 2008). Two months later, the three of us were able to meet together online.

Following introductions, I asked Jacqueline to read aloud the letter she had written to her younger self. I invited Mariam to listen for what stood out to her. Mariam then read her letter as Jacqueline listened.

Jacqueline: It's a common story in my family from Venezuela, of being displaced from my country. It's not just my mother, it is all the mothers. They are currently living separated from their own families, children and grandchildren.

Jess: You are hoping that this is no longer common for women in your family – can you tell me about that?

Jacqueline: Yes. Because of the political system, yes. We are hoping that the regime ended any time soon so we can celebrate Christmas back in Venezuela and we can have the opportunity for a family reunion, and we can see each other after so many years – 25 years.

Jess: What does it feel like in your body to imagine reuniting after 25 years?

Jacqueline: [Becoming emotional] Oh wow. It could be a great opportunity for reconnection with your roots, your family, your sisters. But in my body, I am feeling a lot of mixed feelings and a feeling of completion, that finally that circle will be closed.

Here, I was attempting to use Lee's (2023) practice of evoking embodied experience of community and homecoming. Listening for the absent but implicit (White, 2000) within Jacqueline's expressions of longing had led us to hear of the ways she treasures belonging for her and for all mothers.

Jess: Mariam, is there anything you would like to say to Jacqueline?

Mariam: What I'd like to say is that we live with hope because if we don't have hope in our lives then life becomes meaningless. We have that feeling that mothers can be strong but sometimes we can get broken, but having that hope really makes us hold on to life, that one day everything will be fine. Just like me – I have not seen my daughter for 15 years, and when I start to think of it, it can bring me down. But the moment I speak to her, I don't want her to know I am feeling that way. A mother always wants to be strong for her children. So now she is coming to terms, but before she was not talking to me, blaming me that I left her – that I did not like her, I do not want her, I don't know what her hopes are so why should I care. That breaks a mother to hear that, and I felt broken at times, but I don't want to show her I am broken. I give her hope, and I think now she sees me as a strong mother, and it gives her hope to carry on ... Motherhood has become very difficult for displaced mothers.

Jess: Where can mothers find this hope? How can they access it?

Mariam: When they are together, sharing stories, talking about life.

Jess: Have you both had experience of mothers coming together and sharing hope? Is it better to come together?

Mariam: Yes this would give hope to other mothers. When we see them struggling, we reach out to find out the problem and what would support them.

Jess: Jacqueline, do you have any ideas of how to support mothers who may feel what you have both experienced?

Jacqueline: As women, first of all we should be supporting each other. More mothers groups, sharing, supporting. Helping to fill that gap between ones who have kids with them and ones who don't. Mothers definitely should be supporting one another in every way, in every place, regardless of the consequences of that motherhood.

As the women compared once again the similarities and importance of community in their different cultural contexts, I asked:

- Is it about keeping traditions alive and also adapting? Or something else?
- What are some new things you have had to teach as mothers being in a different culture from your own?
- What would your children say if they were here now?
- When you think about young mothers on the move, where is that hope located in your body?

They responded with insights into a collective motherhood of the future:

Jacqueline: In your heart. I had to raise kids away from family, but I tried to have this community or network close to my home country of co-parents: compadre club. So we support each other and they help a lot. Regardless where you are, mothers and kids are always connected. Maybe you can find Mariam's children's have

other people who are supporting and caring for them, and the same, Mariam has the opportunity to be close to other kids who are not her biological kids. It's the balance in life. I didn't have parents, but friends became the co-parents of kids. That's where the hope is. Wherever you are you are always connected.

Mariam: There is one culture that unites us all, which is caring for children, respect for the elderly. So it doesn't matter your colour, but if you are from those countries, you always treat the child as if you are the mother. An Indian mother can leave her child with me, a Somali mother, and because of my instincts of being a mother, I can care. So whenever there is connection and people around you that can support you, you can mother, and I am able to do this in Manchester.

Jess: How do you think your stories have changed from the beginning of being a mother, to the three of us meeting here today?

Mariam: I always love to hear what a mother says. I want to hear about experiences and hopes and challenges of other mothers. A mother looks forward to hearing these stories.

Jacqueline: I think it's very important that all mothers around the world can be connected just from motherhood and what it means to be a mother, regardless if biological or not. The caring and raising of new generations is paramount for women. Mothers and women in general are the glue that keep everything together in that village that Mariam mentioned before.

While enabling Jacqueline and Mariam to address difficulties in their life, I also explored how this could be linked to broadening a horizon of action – to consider how our collaborations could be relevant to the lives of other mothers (Denborough,

2008). At this stage I found myself a participant whose position was on the peripheries of not just story listening, but story expansion (Young, 2020).

Jess: What do alternative futures look like for mothers beyond borders?

Jacqueline: Beyond borders is that hope that we can help each other through the journey to be a mother and the different stages and challenges from when they are children to when they have children. There is always hope to do work with, you know, refugees or humanitarian-visa holders, like what I am doing here.

Mariam: If a mother in this country needs support and she is the only one in her country then I will help through my [voluntary] work to make them feel supported ... So, we continue what we did in our countries, but now we are doing it on a wider scale with different nationalities, so that helps us to come together.

Jess: Does this collective feeling of a physical and emotional process mean that everyone can learn from one another?

Jacqueline and Mariam: Mhmm.

Jess: So, the idea of motherhood without restraint in the future, where does that sit in your body?

Mariam: Heart. I help with love and care.

Jacqueline: The same with me. I agree with Mariam. When you are a mother, there is only love. I hope from my heart, Mariam, that you can reunite with your kids soon, and you can be with them and enjoy your grandkids when the time comes. It could be a great way of closing the loop for you.

Mariam: That is a beautiful way to finish. Thank you, Jacqueline, and I hope one day I will come to Australia.

Jacqueline: Of course we can meet!

Throughout this exchange, it emerged that both women had gone beyond externalising heaviness and remoteness, to new narratives of belonging and connection regardless of global location.

A surprise letter

Three months after this conversation, I received a message from Mariam asking if she could share some news with me and also pass this on to Jacqueline. Mariam also gave me permission to share this below:

Dear Jacqueline,

I hope you are well. Last time we spoke you wished me the best in life. I want to tell you that your wish for me has been granted. Finally, I am free to travel to go see my children. I have missed some years of their growing up, and can never get them back.

Moving forward and making the best of the moments I will have with them. I feel like I have been released from country arrest (if there is something like that). It is very good news for me that I can go see them and be a mother again. The wonderful news received after 16 years, shows that a woman can have resilience when she is living on hope.

I look forward to the reunion.

Love, Mariam

It occurred to me that through interactions with others, we learn what we might be able to accomplish in life (Vygotsky, 1986). This ongoing exchange is an example of the transition from individual to collective strength and also demonstrates a type of collective alliance which, if nurtured in narrative spaces, I hope can create possibilities for mothers in different social locations.

Could we create similar solidarities between other women who are displaced from their children or navigating isolation? I'm thinking of mothers who are imprisoned, mothers whose children have been removed by "child protection" agencies, and also queer parents who may not fit into the heteronormative settings of "mummy meet ups". I don't know what this will look like in the future, but I learnt a great deal from my conversations with Jacqueline and Mariam about escaping narratives of shame and blame and generating sociocentric momentum around experiences of mothering. As I conclude this paper, I am thinking of Mariam's joy when she video called me telling me of her plans to come to Australia as a "free woman". I'm also thinking of, and wanting to acknowledge, all mothers who have taken and are still taking acts of resistance in the name of mothering, and who may have lost their lives or the lives of their children in the process. As I write these words, I'm particularly thinking of mothers and children in Palestine, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Notes

¹ This burden Jacqueline is referring to relates not only to the heaviness of guilt and shame that she had been experiencing in relation to being separated from her children but also the "burden of proof" that women in Jacqueline's situation are subjected to. Displaced mothers are expected to prove themselves in relation to patriarchal expectations *and* expectations of assimilation *and* expectations from their own cultural background. What's more, the ways that structural and systemic power operates within the lives of displaced women means they are often seeking to claim preferred identity in the context of white supremacy – where motherhood ideals are shaped by whiteness (Faulkner, 2024). All these forces can create a particular "burden of proof" that Jacqueline and I spoke about together.

² Together, we shortened these slightly to fit this article while maintaining the rich tellings.

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