

“And as the sun sets in the West,

You will shed a tear,

Longing to be back in the East.

Immigrant. ”Nishant Akhtar (Akhtar, 1999, pp.20)

This poignant quote delicately articulates the losses that migrants experience when leaving their home country. Being forced to leave one’s homeland entails an immeasurable amount of pain and is often a disorienting endeavour as giving up all one has ever known is an agonising loss. This can create a complex mourning process within the individual, leading to different internal responses. Mourning can be described as a set of conscious and unconscious mental processes brought into play by the loss of a love object (Freud, 1917). Put simply, the love object is anything the individual directs love and affection towards. Freud (1917) explains that this could be a person, one’s country or even an ideal. Here, the task of psychoanalysis is to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how migrant groups face the loss of an object and the ways this can transform into a pathological process.

The topic of forced migration has been at the forefront of media coverage since the European migrant crisis in 2013 and even before this. In recent years with the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan, the Ukraine war, ongoing protests in Iran following the killing of Mahsa Amini and even more recently the Turkey-Syria earthquake an even greater surge in refugees seeking asylum has followed, making it an important topic to address, especially through a psychoanalytic lens.

Psychoanalysis in particular is an effective psychological tool to investigate this as it holds a unique element other psychological techniques lack, as throughout the twentieth-century many Jewish analysts were forced to emigrate across the world due to the rise of the Nazis. Despite this, many early analysts shied away from discussing their experiences of dislocation. Perhaps since they did not want to be labelled as the ‘other’ in their adopted countries. This led to the concept of migration being described “in the unconscious of the unconscious of psychoanalysis ”(Rozmarin, 2017, pp. 470). However, with time a new realm opened within the discipline whereby the notion of forced migration was more open to psychoanalytic theorisation.

Much of the psychoanalytic theories today discussing mourning focus on the loss of individuals. Nevertheless, for refugees many of the losses they experience also focus on places and environments (Volkan, 2017). This article will aim to discuss the various ways in which refugees mourn over their acute losses using contemporary psychoanalytic theories. It will then discuss the ways in which these theories can be implemented in the psychoanalytic setting to help the refugee embody feelings of safety.

Idealising What Has Been Lost

Akhtar (1999) discusses the important role idealisation plays in mourning the loss of one’s homeland. To overcome this difficult separation the migrant will often over-idealise their homeland. This process often leads to an excessive desire for their past life, a familiar sentiment for anyone who has left their homeland which Akhtar refers to as idealisation. This idealisation focuses on places and environments rather than actual people as our inanimate surroundings play an important role in childhood and adolescence. The memories the refugee holds for their old environment e.g., countryside, houses, and shops manifest themselves into intense nostalgia. In a sense, they are trapped by their nostalgic memories, unable to return to the home they once knew and unable to move forward and build a new life in their adopted country.

Consequently, this intense nostalgia leads to wishful thinking, if he or she were still in their home country then they would be whole. Here, the migrant is stuck between two worlds, the past and the present.

Akhtar explains that a consequence of this is a “temporal fracture of the psyche” (pp.1065). This fracture can embody itself whereby the migrant makes plans to ‘someday’ return to their homeland (Akhtar 1991, 1994). These ‘if only’ and ‘someday’ sentiments trap the migrant in a state of nowhere-ness, wedged between the past and future they are unable to live in the present.

Perennial Mourning and the Lost Object

Psychoanalyst Vamik Volkan has also put forward another form of mourning that many migrants face- perennial mourning. This is a process in which the mourner is confined to a state of evaluating their relationship with the lost object in an attempt to overcome their loss (Volkan & Zintl, 2018). Another way in which they attempt to overcome their loss is by creating ‘linking objects’. Volkan describes this as an item from their homeland “that the perennial mourner makes magical” (Volkan, 2020, pp.8). This creates a link between the lost object (in the migrant’s case their country) with the mourner’s self-perception in their home country. However, the author argues that we should be careful in generalising that every item cherished by the mourner is a linking object. An item which the migrant saves as a ‘keepsake’ act as a “continuity between the time before the loss and the time after the loss” (pp.9), whereas a linking object externalises the complex mourning process the migrant is facing.

This concept is demonstrated in an example that Volkan (2017) gives of a family he worked with who left their home in Abkhazia, Georgia to an internally displaced camp in Tbilisi after the war in 1998. The author explains that the family left behind their dog in their hometown. At their new camp, they found a stray dog and took it upon themselves to adopt it. This animal served as a ‘linking object’ to the family and so they cared for it greater than normal. It symbolised their desire to go back home and simultaneously their wish to accept what they had lost in their hometown. And so, the creation of linking objects eases the mourning process for refugees.

Clinical Implications

Understanding the various mechanisms refugees undertake to ease the mourning process can have significant implications for refugees going through psychotherapy. As contemporary theories have demonstrated, the role of the environment and objects play an important role in their mourning process. This coupled with the fact that upon moving to a new country their lives are often riddled with instability and uncertainty, makes the psychotherapeutic setting even more important. Varvin (1998) argues that if the therapeutic setting is consistent for the patient, this can instill a sense of stability and security within them, thus enabling them to internalise this feeling. The therapeutic setting can act as the ‘holding environment’ (Winnicott, 1953) for the refugee. The safety within the room’s four walls can act as a container for their often traumatic and unsettled experiences. Therefore, therapists should make a conscious effort to create a consistent and familiar environment for the patient with objects that remind them of their home country, helping them to mourn their losses in a safe and secure environment.

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Anna Streeruwitz for her guidance, feedback and valuable insight throughout my Masters dissertation project.

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