

Stateless: To Belong Nowhere

By Margarida Pereira Martins

“*Stateless* asks important questions about where and to whom we belong, what constitutes home, and what our moral obligation is to one another. Unfortunately, it doesn’t give its refugees the chance to answer for themselves” (Fontoura 2020). The Australian mini-series which aired on Netflix in 2020 spans six episodes and focuses on the daily struggles and interactions at a detention centre for migrants and refugees seeking political asylum in Australia. The socio-political message of the series is the stateless identity characters like Ameer and his daughter Mina, Rosna, Javad and his family, and Farid have been subjected to while inhabiting this indefinite intermediate zone that exists between their home country (they have fled from) and the host country they await residency for. However, although *Stateless* is meant to be about refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan and other countries experiencing war, humanitarian crises and political turmoil, the lives and background stories of these characters are not dealt with in sufficient depth.

Stateless was based on an idea by Cate Blanchett who created the series along with Tony Ayres and Elise McCredie and was directed by Emma Freeman and Jocelyn Moorhouse. In an Instagram post for Australia for the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees), Goodwill Ambassador Cate Blanchett says, “consider for just one minute what it would be like if the country you were born in and had lived your whole life didn’t consider you a citizen, no country did. You belonged nowhere. That is the shocking reality for millions of people who have no nationality. They are stateless” (2020). Statelessness “deals with indefinite detention” which is an unjust condition refugees are forced into when entering Australia. However, *Stateless* focuses viewer attention on this issue which is not only a problem in Australia, but of global scale, and which requires immediate attention and increasingly worldwide support.

The series has been criticized for a “a gross imbalance in storytelling” since, according to *Rolling Stone*, “the Australian drama focuses on the wrong characters, giving its refugee stories short shrift” (Fontoura, 2020). Most of the attention seems to be on the character of Sofie Werner, a flight attendant, played by Australian actress Yvonne Strahovski, who despite wrongly ending up in the same detention centre as her asylum-seeking counterparts, her need to “escape” is of a different nature. Her story is based on Cornelia Rau, an Australian woman, suffering from a mental illness, who was wrongly detained for 10 months at the Baxter Immigration Detention Centre in Australia, which closed in 2007. “I want to be loved” Sophie Werner tells Gordon Masters, leader of GOPA (Growing One’s Potential Achievement), a cult she turns to when seeking an escape from a family she doesn’t identify with. What is this love she refers to and what does it mean in the context of refugees? To love is to accept, to care for, to welcome and to protect, and this love is imperative to the stranger or foreigner in need. Sofie quits her job, runs away from GOPA, abandons her family and escapes from her own life and identity, unknowingly driving herself into voluntary

statelessness. However, while all the detainees at the centre are trying to find a way into Australia, she is desperately, and at any cost, even absurdly, trying to get deported out of her own country.

The series brought in real-life refugees such as Bartholote Selvaraja, Fayssal Bazzi and Stephen Tongun as actors, allowing them to voice their experiences. As actors in the series, they are agents of their own narratives, being able to tell their stories on screen and through social media, thus raising global awareness to their situation. According to Marta Dusseldorp, allowing individuals to tell their stories calls to our humanity. “We need to have compassion,” she says in an Instagram video, “so for me story is the best way for that. Through imagination we can build compassion and understanding and then action” (Dusseldorp 2020).

Lives intersect at the detention centre as the series focuses not only on the experience of the refugees, but also on the lives and struggles of the guards, the staff and bureaucrats, the journalists, and activists. Even though six episodes is not enough to fully portray the immensity of the crisis of refugees that already existed and is now further intensified by the over 5 million Ukrainians who have had to leave their country, “it has something profound to say about how injustice can snowball into catastrophe. Institutional power compounds the effects of choices made by deluded, self-interested, poorly trained individuals; even good intentions can backfire, with lethal results” (Berman 2020).

As viewers, our humanity is awakened as *Stateless* draws our attention to the need to be aware of, understand, and hear the stories of those who have had to leave their lives behind and who have lost their home, their nationality, their rights and their families. “Statelessness exists everywhere” (Blanchett 2020) and as human beings occupying the same world we must share the responsibility, work together to protect refugees, welcome asylum seekers, and find ways to increase the support they need. It is important to be educated on what it means to be a refugee and to be willing to listen to their stories and to understand what makes people flee their countries. Without a doubt, *Stateless* has a strong impact on viewers as we are invited to reflect on the devastating effects that detention centres have on human lives, especially when those who have come in search of a new home and love are enclosed in barbed wire fences, separated from their loved ones and denied entry into a new life.

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