

What We Leave We Carry

Amaal Said

'I feel like I haven't had the opportunity to go to Somalia. Maybe I'm waiting to be invited in some way. Maybe it's that I'm also a bit terrified too.'

— Amaal Said

[Music]

Presenter: Amaal Said talks about feeling Somali without ever having been there. This is *WritersMosaic, What We Leave We Carry*, the series that tells the true life stories of migration to the UK.

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Amaal Said: My name is Amaal Said. I am a writer and a photographer. I'm based in London. I am of Somali origin. I was born in Denmark in a town called Odense, and I moved to Copenhagen and spent a couple of years in Copenhagen before coming to London as an eight-year-old. My family came to Denmark by way of Somalia. And I think it's a story that a lot of people can relate to. I mean, they were escaping war. They were coming to not only better their lives, but survival. And so they came to Denmark. Quite a few members of my family actually came to Denmark: my uncles, my aunts, my mum's cousins. And so they came together, and they kind of set up life in Odense, basically.

My dad came first, and he was processed through the immigration system. And my mum remembers arriving and meeting my dad. And she said that it was snowing, and she'd never seen snow before.

I don't actually know if I've ever asked my parents, 'Why Denmark?' And maybe now, as an adult, it has to do with, of course, immigration policy. Maybe you go where it's easiest to go. Also, my uncle and my dad went first, and so my mum followed. And so maybe it's a thing of okay, you try your luck somewhere and it sticks, and then you're able to vouch for family members and bring them over. But in terms of Denmark, I don't know if it was a conscious decision. I know that a lot of my friends,

their families settled in Holland or Italy or other European countries. So maybe it's just about ease and immigration policy at the time, probably.

[Music]

I spent eight years of my life in Denmark. I came to London as an eight-year-old, and I've never really left London. But those first eight years, I mean, I have memories here and there. I have memories of speaking Danish fluently. I have memories of being in school, living in flats, moving from flat to flat. I have those memories. But it's—I used to go back every single summer, actually, and so I think maybe those are also where the memories are. Maybe I'm not so sure about actually being a child in Denmark. And also, I know it via pictures, or I know it through pictures, the photo album, and so I don't know if my memories are just looking at a photograph and being, *oh, this happened* [laughs].

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It's really interesting that the way I remember Denmark now is very different from being a child. I think when I was a teenager going back, I always romanticised it, as in, it was so different from how cold London felt, how distant we were from loved ones in London, that even if you had a cousin or an auntie that lived in London, it

would take you two or three buses or a train or a car ride to get there. That didn't exist. That didn't exist for me in Denmark. It was that we all lived in the same apartment building block. So what you have is, over there, you have these neighbourhoods that are interlinked, and then you have these blocks of flats, and in between every block of flats is a little garden or a little green space. And so I really romanticised it in my head. It was beautiful. We played out in the garden together. We went to each other's houses. No doors were ever closed. And actually now, when I've gone back as an adult and I look at the neighbourhood and I think, *oh wow, this is dire. This is bad.* The government puts immigrants in one neighbourhood, and those people never really leave those neighbourhoods. So this thing about Denmark is one of the best places to live and the mental health there is—people have great mental health and have great air and all of this stuff, going back and actually knowing that that doesn't extend to my family or to people that I know that live there, it's quite interesting to me.

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In Denmark, they really—my cousins, for instance, speak fluent Somali at home. My auntie is very much of the belief that when you're in my house, you speak my language, if I speak to you in Somali, you speak back to me in Somali. And when we moved to London, we were obviously learning English, and I think it just consumes

everything. And so we—Danish, completely lost it, and also Somali, lost it too. But my aunt, actually, in Denmark, just—there's a way that they try and hold on to their culture, their Somali culture, that perhaps we didn't really hear because we were so busy trying to fit in and trying to just be like the rest of our classmates, really. Me and my siblings, we wanted not to—we didn't want to be different. But yeah, I mean, the food—now even too, my mum cooks the same cultural foods. Of course, it's more religious actually, but you celebrate Eids and things like that. So there is a retention of custom and all of that stuff.

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I remember we stayed with a family member for a couple of weeks. My dad was—I think he'd worked and he had saved enough money for a deposit. I think he was trying to rent somewhere. But I remember staying with family friends, and I remember actually where it was. It was West Drayton in West London. And it's so interesting because then, years later, we actually ended up back in West Drayton. So we made our way back. But yeah, I remember distinctly the house that we were in. And I just remember it feeling so cramped and tiny because the family friends had their family there and we were there, three of us kids and my mum, so it felt like a lot.

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I don't remember having an image of Britain in my head. This is the thing; I left when I was eight, so I was pretty young. The language probably was a bigger thing for me at eight years old, and just the thing of everybody speaking around you and you not having an idea of what they're talking about or what they're saying. And I think, especially in a classroom setting as a young kid, that feels really heavy at that point. You're like, *oh my God, what's going on?*

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For me, I was striving to be as quick as possible. I was like, *I'm going to be as quick as possible. I'm going to learn this language. I'm going to master it. I will understand what they're saying.* And it wasn't just also the language, it was that when I came to—I remember that classroom—I went to school in Hayes, Hayes End, actually, in West London. I remember that everybody around me in that classroom, Somali girls specifically, were wearing a hijab. I remember that. That was also another thing. And I wasn't, as an eight-year-old in Denmark. We didn't until you're a certain age—you don't really. And so when I came here and everybody else that was in my classroom that was Somali was wearing it, I remember going home and being like, 'Mum, I'm the only one. I'm the only one. You have to get me a hijab. You have to get it right

now. I can't go back to school tomorrow without it.' I remember that distinctly. And so yeah, there was this feeling of like, *I want to be like everyone else.*

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It was very reassuring to not be the only one. And I think, for instance, in Denmark, I was one of the only ones in my class that was Somali. I think there was literally maybe two of us. It was me as a Somali and then another girl, and she was an African girl. I forget the country that she was from, but there was only two of us. So when I came to this school in West London and there were so many of us, I was like, *whoa. This is quite new for me.* And one of those people, actually, she was my buddy. They gave me a buddy. So she spoke my language. Well, she spoke Somali. And her name was Najma. And she would take me from classroom to classroom, and she would speak on my behalf. If I wanted to say something, she would translate. And so she was actually a family friend. Our parents knew each other. And so, yeah, so she just said the first day like, 'I know her.' And so they were like, 'Yeah, okay. You're assigned to her then. Stay with her and be with her.' So I really appreciated having somebody that was there that I—could translate for me.

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And I think, actually, ever since then maybe of having that experience, it's kind of shaped who I am as an adult. I'm somebody who's very—I hate when somebody doesn't feel like they're part of the group or when somebody feels left out. And I'm very sensitive to things like that. I'm like, *okay, that person's not talking a lot. Let me see what's going on, or let me go to the person who's alone in the room.* I'm just one of those people that's very sensitive to that. And I think maybe it's because I've experienced it, and I just—I don't like the feeling. I don't like the feeling at all.

[Music continues]

My mum would only ever really speak Somali to us. And it's, I think, our fault that, as kids, we didn't speak it back. Even now as an adult, she'll speak to us in Somali and we don't speak it back or speak in English. She's very, 'You need to know your language. You need to know where you come from.' And she's very proud. She's a very, very proud woman. She's proud of her people. She's proud of her lineage. And so growing up, it's like, 'Oh mum, I don't care.' [Laughs] It sounds harsh, but you're thinking so much about where you are and who you're around, and you want to be English to the people around you. And it's like, *okay, but I'm trying to be a different person. And this is important to me, and that is important to me, and I want to go out.* And so it's very—I think she might have had a hard time. Also, I'm the eldest, the eldest daughter. I think she had a hard time with the image that she had in her

brain maybe of a Somali girl or a Somali daughter and the person that I wanted to be. And especially, I think, when I was a teenager, that was a fight. That was a big, big fight. Not to say that I was crazy, but it was just to say that I wanted to have freedoms that she didn't want to give in certain ways.

She really wanted me to get a good education, so everything was around, 'You need to study. You need to do well. You need to go to university. You need to get a good job. You need to be able to support yourself.' So I say she's traditional in one sense, but in the other sense, she's also like, 'I don't ever want you to rely on anybody because I rely—' Because my mom was very traditional. She never worked. She looked after us as kids. She was a stay-at-home mom. So she was like, 'I'd never ever want you to rely on anybody.' So I take that from my mum. But I think there is another part of that where it's like she also wanted us to be meek and quiet and respectful, and if somebody is older than you and they are disrespecting you, it's fine; they're older than you. So it's a kind of very traditional Somali thing of be respectful no matter what.

Every single Ramadan, my mom would feed so many people. And so my uncles would have all these men that were friends that were unmarried, and my mom would be like, 'Yeah, bring them.' And so every Ramadan, I remember being upstairs or helping her out in the kitchen because the living room was full of men that she

was feeding. And I remember actually one time she was pregnant, she was heavily pregnant, she was still in the kitchen cooking. And I'd be like, 'Why?' And she'd be like, 'Well, where are they gonna go if I don't feed them?' So my mum—she finds it very important to cook. She finds it very important to feed people. It's actually, I feel, one of her love languages. She's gonna make you soup, she's gonna make you something, you're gonna eat it, and she'll get very upset if you don't eat her food.

I have a distinct memory of my mom giving me the buggy. One of my siblings was a toddler probably at that point, and so she had a toddler buggy. And she'd had this—my dad was always working, and so of course she needed help and support, and so I'm the eldest, it falls to me. So she'd give me the buggy and a shopping list, and be like, 'Go. Go to Iceland down the road and go and get all this stuff.' And I'm 12, 13 at this point, I'm thinking, *Oh my God, this is the most embarrassing thing ever.* And so yeah, I'd take the buggy, and I'd go to the shops and come back. Big milk and loads of this stuff that, of course, I'm not going to be able to carry. So she'd be like, 'Aren't you glad that you took the buggy?'

A certain part of me understands why my mum leaned on me in the way that she did. Of course she needed help and support. There's five of us as kids, and my dad was the breadwinner. And he was working nine to five, sometimes longer, did everything from taxis to driving big trucks. Everything that you can think of, he's

done it. And so my mum was alone in many ways, and so it fell to me. I understand that rationally, but at the other part of me, there is a small amount of resentment there too because sometimes I don't feel like I had a childhood, which is strange, but I felt like I was doing so much admin for them. I was reading letters. I was on the phone talking to people. I was at the shop buying this and that. I also remember one time having to take my brothers to the barber. I remember like, *why am I doing this? I don't want to be at the barber. This is such a weird space to be in as a young girl.* So yeah, there's things that I'm like, *oh, I wish I didn't have to do that.* And am I glad that it made me the person I am today? I don't want to have to say that, but maybe. I don't know. But I'm glad that my younger siblings haven't had to live that way and that they are just able to be young people, which is great.

I ended up pretty young being a translator for my mum. She struggled with English. I knew English. And so if she needed to talk to somebody on the phone or somebody didn't understand her, I was there. And I had to fill in and explain things and call the heat people, or call this people, call that people. I was doing that. And also, there was doing forms and doing emails. And of course, at a certain point as a teenager, you're on the computer and you can do certain things, right? And so my mum's like, 'Naturally. Okay, write them an email. Do this for me. Do that for me.' And so again, it becomes my role as a person who does the internet stuff, the

person who holds all the passwords and remembers all the passwords. I'm that person. And so that happened.

And then, later on actually, when I was uni age and things like that, and my mum speaks English, she has a part-time job, she can communicate with her co-workers, she speaks fine, but there's still that confidence that she lacks. And so when she's on the phone sometimes or she needs to call somebody, she's like, 'I know I can do it, but you do it better, so you do it for me.' And so what can you say to that? 'No mum, I'm not going to.' It's just the thing of being a daughter, of being a Somali daughter.

It's also—I think a lot of it is also religious for me, Islamically, that your parents are very, very—their status is very high. And so you know when you're kind of annoyed by somebody and you say, 'Ugh, you can't even do that.' So as a teenager, your mum's telling you, 'Do this for me', and you can't even go, 'Ugh', you just have to kind of go with the flow and be respectful. That did not mean that I followed that as a teenager, right? So as a teenager, me and my mum butted heads quite a lot—especially me and my dad. I wanted to be a teenager, I wanted to be independent, I was on Facebook, I was doing all this, and they really struggled with it. They were really like, 'Why are you online? Why are you talking to people? What

are you doing?' They just didn't understand it. And so yeah, we had loads of arguments, but I think for me there was always a line, always a line.

[Music]

The idea of Somalia that I have is not a positive one; it's a very negative one. It's one of war and warlords and of famine, of distress, of just trauma. And it's not just what I'm hearing directly, it's also what I'm reading, it's what I'm seeing in the news. It's of pirates, piracy. It's of hunger. It's just there's so much negativity around it. And also that when we were in school as young kids, it was not a good thing to be Somali. It was actually like you got made fun of for it. 'Oh, you're Somali. Oh, you're hungry. Oh, you're a pirate.' It was a lot of—I think that's completely shifted now, to the point now where I go online and people are like—that aren't Somali, who have no links to Somali people, will be like, 'Oh, they're really funny people. They're really great people.' And I'll be like, *whoa that's really shifted*, which I'm really grateful for.

It's taken years of seeking out alternative understanding of it, and also me as well having better access online to seeing people that have actually moved back home. And I use the word 'home' now. I can say this idea of people going back home. I struggle with it sometimes because the only home I've ever known has been

Europe; it's been Denmark; it's been here. The closest I've been to Somalia is Kenya. I've never been back home.

I'm still thinking through what that means, and can you really call a place home if you've never been, if you don't have any memories there? Because all of my memories, I say memories, but they're things that my parents have told me of their growing up and their childhoods. So am I just kind of inheriting that going forward? What do I tell my kids about it? I don't know.

[Music]

Watching the news and seeing migrants dying in boats and reading about it specifically and reading that a lot of those migrants were Somali, I remember that breaking me completely and feeling—I remember this feeling of, *why do I get to be here? Why do I get to have a good life in England and there's so many people that are over there and are not okay, are hungry, don't have clothes, don't have—?* I remember that distinctly.

There's an alternative to that where actually there are some Somali people whose families haven't really been affected by that and haven't really been touched

by that and don't come from poverty and actually have great, great memories of Somalia.

I feel like I haven't had the opportunity to go to Somalia. Maybe I'm being—I'm waiting to be invited in some way. Maybe it's that I'm also a bit terrified too, that I do—and it's not even that long ago there was—people died not that long ago. There was a suicide bombing or there was a car bomb or there was something and people that were at a cafe or people that were at a university graduation or—and now they're dead. So that is in the back of my brain, but I also am aware of there's so many conversations of people my age who are like, 'I want to invest. I want to give my energy, I want to give my time, I want to give my knowledge to back home, and I want to go there and I want to set up a business and I want to do things.' And I have weird feelings about that for me because I know a lot of the times that when you go back home and you have resources and you have education, a lot of the times actually when you get back there, what you end up doing is you're always going to set up a kind of hierarchy where you're European educated and you're coming here and you're of a different class, and that everybody else that is born and bred there is under you. There's that weird distinction of like yeah, you're Somali, but you're European. You have a European passport. I never want to kind of brush over that privilege because it is a privilege.

[Music]

Photography is—a lot of the times, it's actually how I remember. I look at an old photograph. So my mum keeps—it's the thing that's travelled with us from house to house, she has a huge stash of photographs. And we go back sometimes and remember about all the old houses because this thing happens when you move a lot that you lose things and you lose clothes and you lose [laughs] things. But going back to that photo album as a way of remembering the journey, I think, and maybe that's where for me it comes from. My mum placed a lot of importance in taking pictures of us at important times, whether it was a celebration, whether it was we were going to family's house, we don't know when we're going to see them next, let's all take a picture together. And that photo surviving even through all the distance and the moving and all of that, right? And I think maybe that's where for me the photography started as a thing that I do.

Actually, I remember even where I was when I was like, *okay, this is something I'm enjoying*. And we were on holiday in Denmark. It was a summer. I remember I was out with my aunt. We were—had a family camera, the family camera, right? And so I was like, 'I'm just going to take it.' And there was a shopkeeper, and I was just talking to him. And I don't even know how we were communicating because I mean, I don't know Danish anymore and he didn't really know English. And he was—I remember

he was Arab. And somehow we were having a conversation. And I remember I was like, 'Can I take a picture of you?' And I took a picture of him. And I just remember that feeling of being in conversation with somebody and then taking a picture of them and how happy that made him. And I thought, *oh, this is a really good feeling. I want to do this going forward.*

I stuck with the people that looked like me and were Somali or of Somali origin. And I actually also remember in secondary school, when I went to secondary school, we had moved to another neighbourhood, and this neighbourhood was predominantly white. It's a predominantly white neighbourhood; we were one of the only ones in the street. I remember our house used to regularly get egged.

[Music]

I remember that day. We were sitting in our living room when those neighbourhood boys chucked those eggs. And it's made more dramatic in my head because we had a huge window at the front. And I remember my uncle, actually—he was with us. He ran. I remember him, no shoes, pure instinct, no shoes, out of the door flying. And I remember him chasing them. And I also remember the police sitting in our front room and kind of going through and us telling them what happened. And I even remember being like, 'Oh, actually, I know I know those boys. I know who they are.'

They live there. They go to my school. They're in the year above. They've given me problems before. I know them.' So it was this really strange thing of actually, when they left, my dad being like, 'They're not going to do anything.' And me being like, 'Why?' It's that thing of being a kid and being like, 'But this is wrong. Why is this not going to be fixed?' So my dad distinctly knew that the police aren't going to do anything, that this will not get resolved. And I think also, that's why my uncle chased them. My uncle was like, *we're going to have to deal with this in the way that we know how*. And he didn't catch them. He didn't find them. Nothing happened. But I have those memories.

And those boys—loads of different things happened. I remember walking home and them following us with sticks. Just walking right behind us with sticks. I remember that. And going home and—that weird thing of being the first generation of us that are in the country, right, and are experiencing racism in this way. My parents don't have that experience. They didn't go to school in Europe. They don't have that kind of experience of what this is. They went to school, everybody looked like them. So when we're going home and we're telling them, 'Yeah, this happened in class and that happened', for my parents, it was like, 'It's fine. Just just put your head down, study. Put your head down, study, get through.' So it felt like, for me anyway, I felt like I didn't have that support and whatever I went through, I would have to go through it alone.

From Year 7, I stuck with the Somali girls. You just stick together. It's not something that said, but you stick together. And all the way through secondary school, we're still friends now. And so even in university, when I got to university, you just find the other Somali girls, and you stick together. And when my sister went to uni, I'm glad this wasn't her experience, where she just made friends with whoever she wanted to make friends with, and it wasn't about surviving and, *oh, I have to be in a pack. I have to be in a group to survive.* For her and for my other siblings, it's been very much like I'm with who I'm with, and they can be from wherever they want to be from. And I wish I had that experience, and I wish that I could have had that.

I struggle with this question of when I have felt myself becoming British or when I felt the most British, and I struggle with it because I think I resisted it a lot. I really, really resisted it. And it was because I was around, especially during secondary school times, I was around a lot of people that looked at me like that I was foreign and that I was from a different place and I had no rights to claim it. And so yeah, I internalised a lot of that. I was like, *okay, if you're saying that I'm not British, then I don't want it anyway.* And so growing up here—I've been here for most of my life. I am 28, I'm 29 this year. I've been here since I was eight. More than 20 years, right? So it's—I think anybody else that's lived somewhere for 20 years would be like, 'Yeah, I know I feel like I'm part of this country.' But for me, having been told so

many times, 'Go back home. Go to where you come from. You're not from here', it's like, *okay, I'm not from here then.*

But I do have this memory actually of feeling like I miss this place, and specifically missing London, specifically London, and feeling like a Londoner, like I'm from here, is when I'm on holiday and I go abroad and I'm speaking and they're like, 'Oh, you're British'. And it's that thing of like, 'Oh, yeah. Yeah.' But also, as somebody who was born in Denmark and who holds a Danish passport, it's very complicated for me. It's very complicated when you're going through border control or whatever and they ask you or they speak to you in Danish and you're like, 'I'm so sorry, I don't speak it.' And that kind of weird thing where it's like, 'Is this your passport? Why do you not speak it?' It's like, 'I've lived in London for X amount of years.' And so it's this weird thing of being in between places and not really knowing where you're from, and then it's further complicated by like, *oh, shouldn't my home be Somalia?*

[Music]

I'm a mum now. I'm a mum to a little baby who just got his British passport. It came through the mail, and me and my partner, settled status, but we're not British, and looking at this passport like, *wow, he is the first of us to be British, to be born here, to have the British passport.* It's that weird thing actually of feeling like no one can take

this away from him in a way that maybe you could take things away from us. But then again, that's also complicated, right? And I don't want to get into that—in the ways that the British state can take away British citizenship. I don't want to get into that. That's a lot. But I feel like I want it to be up to him. I don't want to overcomplicate things for him, right? I want him to know that he is Somali because his parents are Somali, but he was born here so he has every right to feel that he's from here too.

[Music continues]

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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