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Belonging to Nowhere: A Phenomenological Study of the Identity Crisis of the Second Generation of Afghan Refugees in Balochistan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how the second generation of Afghan refugees who are born and raised in Balochistan feel about and express their sense of belonging and identity in the hosting community. The main purpose of this study is to analyze and understand how the second generation of Afghan refugees feel about their identity in terms of who they think they were, how they perceived themselves, whether they felt comfortable or uncomfortable identifying themselves Afghans in local community, and that how their identity affected their sense of belonging and their day to day life in Balochistan. This phenomenological study intended to explore the sense of identity of the young Afghan refugees by drawing on their individual and collective narratives of self and others as they struggle to be part of the social fabric and feel safe and accepted in Pakistani community. It also aimed to highlight how the identity crisis and the feeling of being other affected the needs, attitudes and perceptions of second generation Afghan refugees in the hosting community, and that how the second-generation Afghan refugees experience their sense of belonging and identification in two different national contexts (Afghanistan and Pakistan). This study uses qualitative phenomenological approach. It uses analysis of relevant secondary data, focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that the identity crisis is still a challenging and major issue for Afghan refugee children.



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1. Background

The Afghan-Soviet war of 1979- 80 followed by a bloody and devastating civil conflict has culminated in one of the world's largest, longest and oldest waves of refugees into the neighboring countries. The developments of the past four decades in Afghanistan has generated unprecedented and successive waves of Afghan refugees to Pakistan. The first wave of Afghan refugees reached Pakistan just prior to and immediately after the Saur revolution that took place in 1978. Since then, the flow of refugees from Afghanistan to Pakistan has continued. The American attack on Afghanistan generated yet another wave of refugees to Pakistan.

The Afghan – Soviet war 1979 – 90 forced millions of refugees into Pakistan alone. After almost 4 decades, an estimated 2-3 million Afghan refugees still live in Pakistan, 79% of whom are second generation (born and raised in Pakistan). United Nations records show that by the year 2007 a whopping 74% of Afghan refugees inside Pakistan were under 28 years of age. (Registration of Afghans in Pakistan 2007, 2007) Similar projections suggest that 13% of Afghan refugees in Pakistan will be under the age of five years. These figures suggest that a vast number of Afghan refugees comprises of people who are born and raised in Pakistan. (Khan 2020) Mostly these refugees have little to no experience of going to or living in their home country. Thus, for these refugees, Pakistan is, therefore, the place they know better and attach to. However, despite being born and raised in Pakistan, these second generation young refugees haven't been integrated in Pakistani society.

While Pakistan's response to Afghan refugees on the government and social level has been exceptional and one of the best in the world, and that in spite of Pakistan's own economic problems and difficulties, the government and people of Pakistan have received these refugees well. There is no doubt that Afghans have experienced much better environment in Pakistan as compared to Iran. The Afghan refugees in Pakistan have not only enjoyed freedom of movement but they also have had a considerable access to education, health, services and job opportunities. By some accounts it can be stated that the Afghan refugees in Pakistan have had better living opportunities than Iran.

Despite the welcoming gesture, many Afghan refugees feel they "belong to nowhere" as they are on one hand, "dis-integrated" in Pakistani context and on the other hand, "out of place" in Afghan context. While millions of Afghan refugees have returned back to Afghanistan since 2001, a second or even third generation of Afghan refugees is still currently living in Pakistan. Most of the Afghan refugees have settled in the provinces of Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa which border Afghanistan. Besides, a large number of Afghan refugees have managed to settle in various cities across Pakistan.

The year 2006 represented a major shift in the legal status of Afghan refugees in Pakistan such that these refugees were not in possession of, or required to have any legal document. The Government of Pakistan decided that Afghan refugees be registered by issuing Afghan refugees Proof of Residence cards by UNHCR. As of present, on legal basis Afghan refugees may be distinguished as those refugees who have a legal status (PoR card holders). The second category of Afghan refugees comprises of a vast number of Afghan refugees who live in Pakistan without legal status. In Balochistan province, which has the second largest Afghan refugee population after Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the Afghan refugees are mainly concentrated in the refugee camps of Chaghi, Saranan, Loralai and Muslim Bagh.

Generally, leaving one's homeland is a profound occurrence in a refugee's life which mostly result in powerful and lasting material, humanitarian, psychological and ideational costs. For almost every refugee it becomes the starting point of a long struggle of rebuilding life in a new and estranged environment. Beside the myriad of issues that refugees face, two of the pressing problems nearly every individual or a refugee family has to face is the challenge to rebuild and reconstruct the material aspect of their lives, which is finding shelter, security and a source of income and work.

The second challenge, which is an even bigger and pressing one, is to come to terms with the psychological impact of being a refugee. The most pressing and tricky issue in this aspect is the formation or reformation of identity or adopting a new identity. Moreover, while setting life materially may not be a big problem in rich societies where shelter and the opportunities for job and income are relatively easy, the issue of identity and sense of belonging however remain a long term issue no matter which society or country the refugees are living in. Therefore, identity,

acceptance and developing a sense of attachment and belonging remains a long-term issue that refugees have to cope with.

The literature on refugee studies suggest that the issue of identity or the number of issues surrounding the identity can be tricky. One perspective is that coming to terms with the impact of the inevitable experience of dislocation from one's homeland is a difficult experience for a refugee. (Said 2000; Warner 1994; Walzer 1980)

The literature also suggest that "refugee identities are complex and formed not only by internal feelings, beliefs, ethnic and cultural traditions, but also by external factors, such as resettlement practices, forced migrant policies, cultural traditions and the economic, political and social conditions of his/her new host country." (Hein 1993; Capo Zmegac 2007; Holt 2007) With the passage of time refugees have to go through an intricate and difficult process of identity reformulation. (Griffiths, 2001)

2. Purpose

As common in the case of Phenomenological studies, the purpose of this study was to explore how the second generation of Afghan refugees, who are born and raised in Balochistan, feel about their identity in terms of who they think they were, how they perceived themselves, whether they felt comfortable or uncomfortable identifying themselves as Afghans in hosting community, and that how their identity affected their day to day life in Balochistan. This study intended to explore the sense of identity of the young Afghan refugees by drawing on their individual and collective narratives of self and others as they struggle to be part of the social fabric and feel safe and accepted in Pakistani community. Another aim of the study was to highlight how the identity crisis and the feeling of being other affected the needs, attitudes and perceptions of second generation Afghan refugees in the hosting community , and that how the second-generation Afghan refugees experience their sense of belonging and identification in two different national contexts (Afghanistan and Pakistan). For the purpose of this study identity was defined as "the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future." (weinreich, 1986).

3. Literature Review

Refugees all across the world have a number of challenges to cope with. Besides coping with the difficulties of rebuilding life on a material level like finding physical security, shelter and fulfilling other basic needs, on the psychological level, refugees have to deal with impact of leaving ancestral homelands and the lasting question of identity. For refugees the feelings associated with being consider 'other', stigmatized and labelled becomes an inevitable part of their overall experience. These feelings become even more intense when a refugee finds himself when refugees find themselves in an area where people have a strong sense and pride of their identity.

The literature on refugees and identity formation is both interesting and diverse which takes into account various dimensions and contributing factors related to identity formation and reformation. In fact "identity is an ever-changing aspect of a person's life," particularly in the case of a refugee. The identity of a person has two aspects namely individual and collective. These two aspects of identity are based on a number of important variables that generally include environment, location, age, nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion.

(Kuus (2007: 91) defines identity as " not as a single, monolithic thing, but as an amalgam of contested elements... [and] a moving and contested target..." In this sense, identity is considered to be strongly related to the creation of an individual and his personal histories. Holt (2007) Moreover, "the social, cultural and political aspects as well as contextual situations also play an important role in identity formation, and refugees are active in the reshaping of their identity" (Ager 1999).

According to the literature, the role of an individual is important not only in the formation of identity but also in the maintenance of a particular identity. This is a continuous process in which an individual continuously plays a mediating role. "Identity politics deals with both the collective and personal facets of one's identity – the plurality of

these facets creating a ‘hierarchy of identities’ that an individual must choose how to organize.” (Pani 2011: 46). A number of scholars suggest that “identity reformulation is based on factors that unify or differentiate an individual from others with the individual actively choosing the ways to identify themselves” (Mutanen 2010); however, in some cases the choice is not made by the individual but by the society or state in which they live (Penn 2008).

The literature also emphasize the importance of situations in which an individual tends to emphasize a particular aspect of his or her identity. As the formation and construction of identity depends and is based on numerous elements, individuals therefore have to choose which aspect of their identity to emphasize in particular situation which they face. (Sen 2006).situations therefore become even more important for a refugee. According to the literature, the place where a refugee lives acts as a major influence on his identity. (Brun 2001, Griffiths 2001, Hein 1993, Holt 2007, Parker and Brassett 2005, White 2002). Humans use their “intellectual, social and political resources to construct identities that transcend physical and social boundaries, and they are rarely, particularly today, mere victims who are acted upon by the larger society” (Agnew 2005:5).

In every discussion on identity, it is important to mention the concept of ‘othering’. The literature suggests that one of the most important concept in identity is the concept of ‘othering’ that can be considered as a “process of creating an identity based upon a perception, often of difference, that can affect identity both internally and externally” (Capo Zmegac 2007). It is described as something that ‘defines and secures one’s own identity by distancing and stigmatizing an (other)’ (Grove and Zwi 2006: 1933). The feeling of being the ‘other’ is often intensified when refugees face an unwelcoming or hostile environment in hosting communities.

It is important to mention that the question of and feelings surrounding identity may prove to be problematic for refugees. Scholars with an essentialist perspective specially, argue that, among others, the refugees have to deal with and come to terms with the painful experience of being displaced from their homeland – the place to which they belonged to and to which they have made strong emotional connections. (Said 2000; Warner 1994; Walzer 1980). The feelings of ‘us’ and ‘them’, and considering oneself as being the ‘other’ or an ‘outsider’ are elements that have deep and important bearing on the identity of refugees (Eide 2007, O’Neill and Spybey 2003, Papastergiadis 2006, Parker and Brassett 2005, Robinson and Rubio 2007, Zetter 2007).

Moreover, refugees are a part of and also excluded from both their country of origin and host country (Zetter 2007). Scholars maintain that in some cases exclusion can be a result of the policies of the hosting country. They maintain that sometimes it is such policies that create the category of ‘other’ (O’Neill and Spybey 2003, Zetter 2007). As Zetter (2007) states, the creation of the category or label of ‘other’ which comes as a result of the policy of the hosting country develops a sense of isolation among refugee communities. This sense of isolation or being the ‘other’ usually manifests itself between refugees and the hosting community (Eide 2007, Grove and Zwi 2006, Papastergiadis 2006, Robinson and Rubio 2007).

The ‘Othering’ according to some scholars tends to be a process of creating an identity, which is usually based on the perception of being different from the people of the host society. This process may have internal as well as external impact on the identity of a refugee (Capo Zmegac 2007). It is described as something that “defines and secures one’s own identity by distancing and stigmatizing an (other)” (Grove and Zwi 2006: 1933). The feeling of being the ‘other’ may get more noticed and worse in cases when refugees represent a dissimilar to the people of the hosting community ethnically, linguistically, or racially (Parker and Brassett 2005). Furthermore, the fear that refugees feel or might face in their hosting community is also connected with their refugee status and identity. (Griffiths 2001).

It is important to mention that with the passage of time refugees go through a process of change, formation, reformation and adoption of elements of a new identity. One important aspect of this whole process is the transfer of identity from a previous generation to a later generation. In other words the first generation of refugees pass their identity to the second generation through various ways. For example, “ethnic identity and culture [are] transmitted within societies collectively by maintaining and upholding cultural mores of behavior, belief, dress, and other traits from generation to generation” (Chacko 2003:501).

Studies have indicated that second generation of refugees tend to develop a less stressful relationship with their parents. This, and other related aspects of intergenerational transfer of identity constitutes an important point of discussion particularly when a study involves second generation of a refugee population.

4. Method

The epistemology of this study is based on Postpositivism. A positivist methodology is based on performing a series of steps that enables a researcher to get to the depth of a perspective, or perspectives. Postpositivist methodology also stresses scientific rigor in data collection and data analysis. It is because of this that multiple data collection methods have been utilized for this study, which are then followed by a rigorous process of analyzing data, specifically when it comes to qualitative transcendental phenomenological approach, as used in this study.

Phenomenological approach is very common and valued in qualitative research because of its ability to, as stated earlier, get into the depth of the respondent's perspectives, and its uniqueness to understand, analyze and present the meaning of the perspectives the respondents present during focused group discussions or semi-structured interviews. Moreover, generally the purpose of phenomenological studies is to describe the "commonalities" of the experience of the respondent group. In current literature there exist two principal types of phenomenologies, namely hermeneutical and transcendental. This study has adopted transcendental type of phenomenological approach.

4.1 Selecting the Respondents

The focus group discussions for this study were conducted over a period of four weeks at Balochistan University of Information Technology Engineering and Management Sciences, Main Campus, Quetta. A group of 24 respondents were carefully selected keeping in view the required parameters and diversity. Later on their consent for the interview was acquired. The principal researchers were present all along the focus group discussions.

Moreover, the respondents represented three main ethnic groups – Pashtun, Tajik and Hazara- of Afghanistan. They comprised of both male (86%) and female (14%). They belonged to different areas of Afghanistan which included the north, south, center and eastern parts of Afghanistan. The participants for this study were predominantly those refugees who were born and raised in Pakistan. Some of them had gone to Pakistani educational institutions to get education. Others had a good experience of mingling in the local community and had travelled to other areas of Pakistan as well. In Pakistan these refugees were currently settled in Muslimbagh, Pishin, Loralai and Chaghi refugee camps. Some of the participants however were currently settled in the Hazara Town locality of Quetta.

4.2 Data Collection

Both of the researchers together developed the protocol for discussion. They together completed data collection and analysis of data. The authors have extensive experience in qualitative data collection method and analysis which ensured that biases, emotions are separated from actual data so that the accuracy of data can be ensured. The protocol for discussion was developed after thorough discussion among the researchers and keeping in view the aims and requirements of the research. For the purpose of record, all of the discussions with the participants were audiotaped. Furthermore, discussions revolved around the following points: the perceptions of second generation Afghan refugees vis a vis their identity, how the Afghan refugees felt about their identity in Pakistan, whether their identity ever contributed to any type of low-self-esteem, how their identity affected their life style, whether they felt accepted or not in local community, how they had tried to cope with situation that arose due to them being Afghans. All interviews were conducted in the presence of both authors.

In order to ensure accuracy and maintain rigor, a verbatim transcripts of all the discussions were generated.

Table 2: Focus Group Discussion Protocol Questions

To explore the perception of second generation Afghan refugees about their identity
How do you feel about your identity in Pakistan?
Have you ever felt a low self-esteem because of being refugees in Balochistan?
Probes: Sometimes, always, depends on situation or people you are with
Have you ever felt to change your socio- political views or lifestyle because of being refugees here?
Have you ever thought to present / introduce yourself in the society in such a way that contrasts your actual self so

that you gain acceptance here, or that you do not face discrimination from the locals?

Probes: Does your identity affect your confidence?

Have you ever thought to alter or change parts of your culture (dialect, moors, dress, behavior) because of being a refugee?

Have you ever felt any kind of difficulty while introducing yourself to the locals?

Probe: In what way?

Have you ever felt to give preference to any other identity over your national identity?

Have you ever been forced to change your identity?

How do you think you are viewed by the locals in Pakistan?

Probe: a) a guest b) a foreigner c) an alien d) a refugee

Do you feel any threat to your identity here in Pakistan?

The focus group discussions with the respondents covered all of the research dimensions as are described in Table 2. These discussions were extensive and spread on many hours until a saturation point was reached. The discussions were carried out in three different breaks which allowed the researchers to assess the transcript and important points and context into the next discussion and interview and sub-dimensions if any emerged. This the researchers thought would ensure to gain the best possible and productive insight into the experiences of the respondents.

4.3 Data Analysis

This study used Moustakas's structured method of inductive data analysis for analyzing data. Consequently, the transcripts of the discussions which were prepared earlier were reread by the authors. The purpose of doing this was to understand data in a better and thoughtful manner, which enabled the researchers to get into the crux of the data. This first step was then followed by another important step which was the development of concepts and determination of criteria for clustering. This step was then followed by another step which aimed at grouping related ideas, concepts and categories. As a result of clustering, themes were identified and developed. Later on, these themes were used to construct various descriptions that would ultimately present a coherent and overall picture of the respondents' experience.

4.4 Results

The overall essence of the data reflects the fact that identity is still a major issue for second generation of Afghan refugees who are living in Balochistan. In fact, they are not only living in Balochistan presently but are born here as well. The data clearly shows that the question of identity and "who they are" weigh heavily on the life of these refugees not only in the material sense but also on the emotional and psychological level. The data also suggest that the second generation of Afghan refugees see identity as a triangular relationship that has themselves on one point, their past on the other and their future on the third point of the triangle. This means that since the second generation of Afghan refugees living in Balochistan do not have any considerable experience of living in their homeland. Therefore they see themselves unfit in, or unaware of the Afghan context. On the other hand, these refugees do not feel themselves as totally accepted and integrated into the local community either. These two have resultantly added to a feeling of uncertainty and demotivation about their future.

The data depicts that identity was a matter of value and importance for the participants which was part of their personality. In contrast, the participants also showed resentment about their identity which at times resulted in low self-esteem or adoption of coping mechanisms. Another important theme that emerged from the data was that identity, or the Afghan identity had a varying effect and influence on the lives of Afghan refugees in Balochistan. This means that the impact of identity on their lives was to a constant but varied either positively or negatively and according to the general socio- economic and political context of Pakistan.

5. Discussion

Identity formation, changing one identity and reformation of a new identity is an expected part of a refugee's life. In this regard, the opinions, views and perspectives of the people in hosting communities contribute greatly to the overall process. (O'Neill and Spybey 2003) Suh views greatly affect the day to day life of refugees living in host communities. Moreover, such perceptions, labeling or opinions of the people of the hosting communities particularly when the hosting communities themselves have a strong sense of their own identity or in certain circumstances, may sometimes lead to low self- esteem, emotional distress and psychological stigma.

Moreover, besides the use of labels and unfavorable opinions, there are numerous other factors as well that affect the emotional wellbeing and self-image of a refugee. These contributing factors include the overall socio-economic conditions as well as the contemporary political context of Pakistan. These contributing factors are in turn formed by media which has great bearing on local perspectives and opinions about refugees. Therefore, the negative or positive impact of identity on the lives of these refugees does not remain linear. In fact, it varies with the situation and with the overall political situation in their country of refuge. Since refugees mostly live on the fringes of the society, therefore it is common for the hosting communities to have or develop misinformed or uninformed and incorrect opinions about the refugees living in their communities.

Collectively, factors like labelling, local opinions, socio-economic and political situation of the hosting country affects the overall sense of belonging, identity and attachment of a refugee with the hosting country and its people. These factors are also crucial for the behavior of a refugee he adopts in the local community or during interaction with local people. In order to shield from the fear of being labelled, stigmatized, they tend to adopt a coping mechanism to protect themselves from psychological stigma. These coping mechanisms are psychological responses to the situation aimed at overcoming the hurdle of being a refugee. The main aim of all these coping mechanism is to prevent being distinguished and gain a sense of acceptance.

Such mechanisms may include more and more agreeableness with the views and opinions of the local people they hold on certain social and other issues. This at times deprives a refugee of expressing/ having his own opinion regarding a particular topic. Apart from agreeableness, the idea of survival or gaining acceptance might also include adopting local cultural traits. This coping mechanism is intended to cover identity so that a refugee may not be identified as one in an environment where he is unknown. But other than this, adopting cultural traits of the local community also intends to portray a gesture of good-will towards the people of the hosing community.

The next important point of discussion is to analyze how these Afghan refugees understand belonging which is essential to how they define themselves while living in the host communities. *As warner states that "the human need to belong is more than one for protection or for the means of individual development: it is also a need to be among one's own. Although this latter need varies in strength according to individual circumstances and to such factors as age (it seems to become stronger as a person grows older), it is normally a strong human need, the satisfaction of which is conducive to individual and social well-being and the denial of which is conducive to suffering and to social disorder (Warner 1994:163).* These words clearly show that the idea of belonging constitutes a 'human need'. Humans crave for belonging not only for the sake of their protection but also to be longed and considered as among one's own community, country, or people.

Therefore, it can be stated that belonging or having a positive sense of belonging to a country or a community is essential for human emotional development and overall wellbeing. For second generation of Afghan refugees living in Balochistan, their sense of belonging has certainly changed over times. For their parents – first generation of Afghans who took refuge in Pakistan, the sense of belonging was mainly defined by religion and partly by other markers such as culture.

The first generation of Afghan refugees strongly associated with the religion they practiced – Islam. But other than religion for those Afghans who were ethnically Pashtuns, the fact that the areas where they hosted spoke the same language and belonged to the same culture minimized identity problems. The areas in which Afghan refugees settled – Balochistan, in this case speak the same language and has similar culture. This might have helped them in developing a strong sense of belonging to the hosting community.

For the second generation this has further moved the line. As compared to their parents – first generation- they have more categories they have adopted which has further strengthened their sense of belonging to the host communities. The respondents reported that, in general, they felt a good sense of protection, freedom and security in Pakistan. They reported that they had to some extent internalized and adopted the local moors, dialect, cultural aspects, which enabled them to have a better degree of socialization, friends and connections with the local community.

The respondents reported that travelling to other parts of Pakistan outside of their refugee camps, and mingling with the local population gave them a better sense of attachment and belonging. Some of the respondents stated that their sense of exclusion increased when Pakistan launched zarb -e - Azb operation against the terrorist. During this time they felt a higher level of consciousness of their Afghan identity. In other words, for these Afghan refugees identity did not matter much until they found themselves in specific situations, in a specific place, and when they were to avail certain financial or health services. This means that the effect of identity or being conscious of a refugee identity is not a linear process, but a label that has varying psychological impact at various points in time and in various places. For them, the sense of belonging and consciousness of a refugee identity varied with situations and places, and with the prevailing security, political and social contexts.

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