

'But You Don't Look Like a Syrian': Migrant Narrative Beyond the Dichotomous Divide in Migration Studies

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'I have learned and dismantled all the words in order to draw from them a single word: Home.'

Mahmoud Darwish - 'I Belong There' (in Darwish et al, 2013, p. 7)

Prelude

I am looking out of the window midway through a taxi journey to the BBC's offices and studios on Holyrood Road. I had worked as an Arabic interpreter at the time and was invited by a BBC producer to interpret for a Syrian man who had come to the UK seeking refuge and is now sharing his story for an episode of The Untold on BBC Radio 4. I feel anxious about this encounter: I was warned that this would be a heart-wrenching story, especially for a Syrian like me. The ride, too, is making me anxious and I start making mental notes on how best to circumnavigate the driver's lines of questioning. Having paid our tribute to the Scottish weather, the conversation now took an unexpected turn. Seeing I did not look Scottish, my taxi driver wanted to know where I was from. Before I could answer, however, he interpolated with an emphatic proclamation saying I definitely was Spanish or Italian. 'How can you be so sure?', I asked, to which he responded with pride: 'You speak very good English, but you have Spanish looks about you'. I found his condescending confidence humorous, but I could not wait to prove him wrong, so I said: 'close, the Mediterranean, but not Spanish. I am Syrian'. What he said after that was completely unexpected: 'But you don't look like a Syrian'.

I learned later that apart from those Syrians he read about in the media or came across in the news, I was the first Syrian he had ever met.

This paper is a personal piece, which also aims to draw upon academic research using insights from current discourses of and on migration, to ask questions about migrant and refugee experience of everyday microaggressions and internalisation of colonial forms of narrative. Employing a reflective approach redolent of experience and memory, the paper draws on my own first-hand experience with migration and, in particular, comments I heard over my time in the UK, the ensuing discussions and reflections, and my own ongoing research. I do not claim to provide answers: the main focus will be on keeping the conversation going by engaging with current debates (or the lack thereof) on migration by placing this paper in that space that opens up when research departs from dichotomous thinking and the dualities of right and wrong. Writing this is also about catharsis; it is a form of therapy that allows for processing, sharing, and externalising emotions and turning them into elements that can be scrutinised more rationally against the body of literature. In writing this piece, I echo Toni Morrison's sentiment: 'we speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal' (Morrison, 2015). Following this logic,

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for people in the diaspora, writing becomes a form of therapy and healing, a way to stay connected and break the silence. More broadly, and because, as Bhabha (1994, p. 306) unapologetically declares, 'transnational, "migrant" knowledge of the world is [still] most urgently needed', this piece is also a form of activism and an ode to all those displaced voices.

In teasing out themes from my chance encounter with my Scottish taxi driver, I reflect on the migrant's place in everyday conversation and, consequently, migration discourse(s). In doing so, the taxi becomes a microcosm of the city and the country where I have now lived for 14 years under different but interrelated identities: student, academic, mother, migrant, refugee, immigrant, citizen. By framing this piece through a personal narrative, my aim is to inject real migration into migration, beyond the 'cookie cutter approaches' (Gupte and Mehta, 2007) and borders of 'categorical fetishism' (Apostolova, 2015; Crawley and Skleparis, 2018). I argue against the homogenisation of migrant narrative and experience and in favour of 'historical contextualisation' that appears to be missing in migration and refugee studies (Bhambra, 2017). Such contextualisation demands an accounting for an intersectional understanding of racial hierarchies and colonial histories. Grosfoguel et al (2015, p. 636) state that 'part of the problem is how, with few exceptions, migration theory has focused on human mobility across borders, underestimating the significance of race and racism in processes of migrant incorporation.' This necessitates a closer examination of marginalised experience that focuses 'on the fabric and routines of their everyday lives, because marginalisation is so often experienced and felt at the banal level - eating, washing, travelling and socialising.' (Mayblin et al, 2020, p. 108). In other words, this is a call for an understanding of 'how hierarchical conceptions of human worth impact on the everyday' (ibid., p. 108) and the need for adopting fresh outlooks and frameworks when we talk about migration.

Thinking back to that brief taxi conversation, the driver's preconceived idea of what a Syrian person should look like is a stark reminder of Edward Said's study of the phenomenon of orientalism which he defines as 'the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient [...] despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a "real" Orient' (Said, 2003, p. 5). Here I was, a Syrian woman in the flesh, a 'real Orient' that the man resisted for not complying with his expectations of and assumptions about what a 'typical Syrian' should look and sound like. He explained that away by saying that he thought all Syrian women wore the hijab and asserting, quite triumphantly, that I must have stopped wearing it after 'having been liberated' in/by the UK. It was very presumptuous. Here I was again, being 'instructed [...] in the ways of the modern West' (Said, 2003: 86). Like the Orient, I was being ontologically captured, treated, described, improved, and radically altered, exactly as Said (2003: 95) intended. The fact that 'I spoke very good English', as the driver approvingly remarked, was what pardoned my otherness, if only momentarily. I do not know why but I am immediately reminded of David Cameron's stigmatising £20m language fund to help migrant, refugee and Muslim women learn English in an all-too-familiar rhetoric of adhering to British values, a view that expects the other to strive towards a 'native' standard of living and becoming and being. The blatant insinuation that I had earned my place in this country filled me with a sudden and strong urge to prove my worthiness, that I was a 'good' and 'safe' migrant' (See Bhabha, 1994; Shukla, 2016), by listing my achievements. I wanted to talk about my privilege, that privilege is not only

white, that I, in so many other non-western ways, was privileged too. I wanted to talk about my education, my career, my life, but I did not. I resisted it, knowing that to succumb to that pressure was to say that other Syrian immigrants and refugees like me for whom Britain is now home, can only earn their place by parading their achievements for the world to see. I had nothing to prove to anyone; my accomplishments belonged only to me.

In an article she wrote for *The Guardian*, Iranian-American novelist Dina Nayeri says that while the colonial centre demands eternal gratitude from the marginalised other, the refugee, what the other should do is 'tune their voices and polish their stories, because the world is duller without them. Because a person's life is never a bad investment, and so there are no creditors at the door, no debt to repay. Now there's just the rest of life, the stories left to create, all the messy, greedy, ordinary days that are theirs to squander.' (Nayeri, 2017). And so, in an act of rebellion, I started telling him about the Syria that he did not, or chose not to, know.

It was clear to me that the driver's questions projected thinking steeped in colonial values and how western forms of knowledge and rhetoric supersede and, by default, marginalise what is non-western. Did he realise that? Was he ever taught about race at school, at home? I realised that my responses were careful and calculated, brushing off his condescending entitlement to satisfy a 'categorical fetishism' that has permeated European and British politics and discourses around the migration crisis. His attempts to categorise me were relentless, evident in yet another question asking when I came to the UK: 'was it before or after the war?', followed by 'I see - so you're not a refugee'. 'The use of the categories "refugee" and "migrant" to differentiate between those on the move and the legitimacy, or otherwise, of their claims to international protection has featured strongly during Europe's 'migration crisis' and has been used to justify policies of exclusion and containment' (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018, p. 48). People's words stay with us and can manifest themselves in our narratives and the internalised discourses; they can become frames of reference that we use to define ourselves. I remember for a while after that, I subconsciously added 'I came before the war' to any statement I made about my 'status' and life in the UK - yet another dichotomous categorisation of my experience that seeks to pigeonhole me, viewing 'what happens "in between" [...] as being largely inconsequential' (ibid., p. 55).

How could the taxi driver make that distinction so effortlessly, as if the two categories of refugee and non-refugee subsumed all those 'plagued' by otherness? How could he do it with such ease, such conviction when I am still in the process of negotiating my identity and finding my place in the world? Who is responsible for instilling these brutally restraining frames of reference? These are perhaps questions for migration and postcolonial scholars to ponder. As the taxi navigated the streets of Edinburgh that evening echoing their cobbled noise, I thought of how my movement across borders was different from his: mine was migration, his was mobility.

Before arriving at my destination, he asked me if I had wanted to return home and I wanted to say: but where and what is home? It sounded like a well-meaning question; however, a profound sadness came over me. The question was patronizingly suggestive of the speaker's conviction that this, my here and now - Scotland - is not really my home but a temporary place

from which I can only return. This is problematic, not only because of the underlying microaggression and the reductive power these words have. What makes the act of returning more worthy of conversation than the act of being in the here and now? Why discuss what reminds us of our 'misfortune' and 'loss' when we can discuss what makes us 'strong' and capable of producing home anew? Why focus on the pain of being in the diaspora when we can celebrate the everyday quotidian effort by those displaced or, like me, now wilfully placed?

Taylor (2015) sheds useful light on the concept of home and explains how home comes with a certain sense of complexity for those who have been forced to migrate (or are, as in my case, better off staying). According to her, 'the lost home and the new home in exile are not discrete, dichotomous entities [...] but are rather part of a continuum' (Taylor, 2015, p. 2). How can I explain to the taxi driver that home was a concept in flux; that it certainly was not bricks and mortar but a process, a lifetime work of reconciling the connections between past and present and all those spaces in between? How can I explain that home is often no more than an act of putting one's shattered pieces together? How can I explain to him that in order to return, one has to arrive and that I am still in that liminal space in the process of arriving (Boersma & Schinkel, 2018)? I wanted to explain that I was away from home but I was not without it; that I, indeed, 'have many of them' (Massey, 1994, p. 172); and that the thereness and the hereness of my existence (Bhabha, H. in Kläger, 2017) are with me. I said that understanding 'home' might start with being-at-home and being-without-it but certainly involves an ongoing searching-for-home-again (Boccagni, 2017, p. 18). I told him 'we are all immigrants from the past, and home lives inside the memory, where we lock it up and pretend it is unchanged' (Nayeri, 2019). He was silent for some time after that. Perhaps, I thought, he was in search of home too.

This piece is a snippet of a longer auto-ethnographic paper I am currently writing that explores the complex nature of migrant experience and addresses some of the concerns outlined here concerning the heavy reliance on categorisation in migration research in understanding human experience, which is limiting and often erroneous. An understanding of race is vital in any conversation about migration, and necessitates a critical, in-depth, and wide-ranging encounter with race and postcolonial studies. Such encounter not only enables a historical contextualisation of current forms of hegemony and marginalisation, sovereignty and citizenship, movement and homemaking, but also provides alternative theoretical and analytical frameworks that move away from formal methodologies and embrace perspectives that pay equal attention to the everyday and circumstantial forms of narrative (Anderson, 2019). In the study of migration, in particular, researchers need to 'think more carefully about the use of categories, and the process by which the boundaries between them are constructed' (Crawley and Skleparis, 2018, p. 50). Perhaps, and just like postcolonial thought, what migration studies needs is a new 'emotive language' that can capture the intimate experiences of migration; a language that does not neutralise emotive issues by turning them into policy.

Arriving at my destination that evening, my driver stamped me with otherness one last time, saying he was happy he had finally met a real Syrian and that I seemed like a decent person. I smiled at all that that implied, before I slammed the taxi door shut behind me. Had he asked me about my name and my dreams, the greenness of our olive trees back home, the blueness of

the Mediterranean, the hustle and bustle of everyday life and the sunsets, we would have had a more colourful and meaningful conversation about migration.

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