

# **Creative approaches to migration**

## **Literary texts & ethnographic methods**

Time: 8<sup>th</sup> of December, Location: DPU (AU) - D120

Organizer: MIAU | Centre for Migration and Integration Research at Aarhus University

*Abstract* - Can words enable us to recreate lived lives, experiences of suffering or distress, and aspirations dreamed of in the past and encounters with unprecedented realities? What do words depict when vulnerable individuals [refugees??] express their experiences, feelings and aspirations through other means of expressions beyond everyday dialogues, such as poetry, prose, and drama? What are the advantages and challenges with creative methods as a mode of ethnography, and what do these modes reflect in studying migration? This seminar aims to study the case of Afghan refugees and diasporic groups and concentrates through creative methods on the aspirations of life, bonds of belonging, illusions and disillusionings pertaining to the situation of migration in relation to Afghanistan and to the global forces dealing with Afghanistan before and after the Taliban seized the power in the country.

Afghan culture has historically benefited from art, in general, and literary genre, in particular, to voice people's distress and aspirations due to decades of war and political turmoil before, during and after multiple ideological power transitions. Fiction and poetry have been mainly the prime avenue for ordinary people and intellectuals to express what they had on their mind in everyday life. New means of art have also added to the capacities of expressing the self—particularly, through migration paths. Additionally, these means of expression are advantageous when saying one's words is rather complicated and the person/locutor needs to go beyond cultural or political boundaries, heal the wounds of the soul, and speak out with less clarity that might attract the direct attention of the holders of power. In this sense, creative means as such teach us about people's inner voice. In addition to this aspect, these creative expressions present opportunities for the refugees to form and celebrate their togetherness around shared cultural trends.

Finally, this seminar aims at generating a prospective network for creative engagement with migration.

## *Time schedule*

11:30 - 12:30 Lunch

12:30 - 12:45 Welcome & Introduction by MIAU hosts

12:45 - 14:15 Block I

12:45 - 13:15 Helle Bundgaard | **Ethnographic writing and the role of imagination**

13:15 - 13:45 Zuzanna Olszewska | More Information will be provided later.

13:45 - 14:15 Liza Schuster | **The Uses of Poetry: Migration in Afghan Verse**

14:15 - 14:45 Belgheis Jafari Alavi | **WALL INSCRIPTIONS OF MIGRANTS:  
Resistance against forgetting and loss**

14:45 - 15:00 Break

15:00 - 16:30 Block II

15:00 - 15:30 Khadijah Abbassi | **Rap music and transnational young Afghan refugees  
in Europe**

15:30 - 16:00 Julie Nynne Bune | **Navigating friction through fiction: Young Afghan  
refugees in Denmark performing fictionalized futures and haunted pasts**

16:00 - 16:30 Narges Ghandchi | **Fiction as a lens to learn about Afghan people on the  
move**

16:30 - 16:40 Break

16:40 - 17:30 Discussion | Trine Brinkmann (University College Copenhagen | KP)

## Abstracts

**Helle Bundgaard** | Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen

### **Ethnographic writing and the role of imagination**

The paper introduces ethnographic imagination, suggests ways it can be used in ethnographic writing, and reads a passage from my ethnographic fiction *Painting Stories*. In Line Dalsgård and my recent book *Ethnographic text* (2023) we argue that imagination is not merely complementary to empirical observation but fundamental to perceived reality. Drawing on phenomenology, particularly the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, we propose that 'the real' is not a pre-existing entity to be discovered, but is constituted within a nexus of experiences. We use Wolfgang Iser's concept of "gaps" to illustrate how meaning is co-created by the text and its readers, emphasizing the need to leave space for the reader's engagement and the ethnographer's further reflection. We advocate for the ethnographic imagination as a valuable analytical tool, crucial for grasping the temporal complexity of the world and enhancing communication.

**Helle Bundgaard** is Associate Professor at the Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen. Her current interest is in creative ethnographic writing as a path to analytical insight, as reflected in the publications *Painting Stories: Lives and Legacies from an Indian Crafts Village* (2021), based on her work over a period of 30 years with traditional Indian artisans, and *Etnografisk tekst: Om at forstå verden gennem skrift* (2023), co-authored with Anne Line Dalsgaard. Her previous research has focused on educational issues, first with ethnic minority children in Danish preschools and later with university students.

**Zuzanna Olszewska** | Department of the Social Anthropology of the Middle East, University of Oxford

**!!!More Information will be provided later!!!**

**Liza Schuster** | City, University of London

### **The Uses of Poetry: Migration in Afghan Verse**

In this paper, Liza Schuster and Belgheis Jafari Alavi reflect on the use of poetry as data – how should it be used, the challenges associated with using poetry as data or as an output, before turning to an examination of oral poetry in Farsi and the functions it fulfills in exile. We argue that, in addition to offering catharsis and expressing collective suffering, the verses are also used to urge return and, more recently, to voice complaints to and about host societies, as well as to critique the Afghan government for its failures.

Dr **Liza Schuster** has spent most of the past decade conducting fieldwork in Afghanistan, where she was based at the Afghanistan Centre at Kabul University. Funded by the Leverhulme Trust (2012 – 2013), she has studied the consequences of deportation for Afghans, their families and communities. Her most recent work, funded by the ESRC (2016 – 2018), and in collaboration with Afghan colleagues at ACKU, included an examination of representations of migration in Afghan Oral Culture, a study of the Hopes, Plans and Fears of Afghan Families, and an exploration of the influence of the EU on the development of Afghan Migration Policy. Dr Schuster prepares expert reports on Afghanistan for Immigration tribunals in the UK, and across Europe and contributes to debates on migration in a number of countries.

**Belgheis Jafari Alavi** | INALCO (Institut national des langues et civilisations orientales)

### **WALL INSCRIPTIONS OF MIGRANTS: Resistance against forgetting and loss**

This presentation focuses on wall inscriptions of migrants in a temporary reception center in Paris. This research was carried out as part of the ANR LIMINAL project (Linguistic and Intercultural Mediations in a context of International Migrations). Different types of graffiti decorated this reception center for new arrivals. These inscriptions reveal the tendency of exiles to keep their memories alive, to assert their presence and leave traces in an extremely precarious context and in the face of imposing geographical and cultural otherness.

**Belgheis Jafari Alavi** is a lecturer at INALCO in Paris and contributed to the ANR LIMINAL project. She is also a member of the Centre for Study and Research on Global Literature and Orality (CERLOM). Her last research in Afghanistan was focused on migration and Afghan popular culture. She is working on travel literature and Afghan literature in exile.

**Khadijah Abbasi** | School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)

### **Rap music and transnational young Afghan refugees in Europe**

Europe has, historically, provided refuge for many Afghans. In recent years and after the Syrians, Afghan refugees became the second largest asylum applicants in Europe. A large number of these applicants have been young people and unaccompanied minors separated from their families. The protracted conflict in Afghanistan and having family members scattered around the world, have made Afghans to develop a transnational network. The transnational network provides a social space in which various activities are practiced. A growing number of young Afghan refugees in Europe use rap music to express themselves and use their transnational space to interact with their fans and peers. My preliminary research shows that rap music not only reflects the young Afghan's lifestyle and become a means to articulate ideas of home and belonging, but it is also used to confront authorities, immigration regimes, experienced racism, for expressing deep-felt feelings for family members, religious figures and the homeland. The European countries, however, know little about these young people and the dynamics of their social space. It is not known how these young people integrate in their new home countries and whether it is a smooth process. We do not know their concerns and challenges. In this research project, I suggest conducting a multi-sited ethnography to study rap music specifically amongst the transnational young Afghans and explore and analyze its multiple meanings and impacts. The pressing question is how to support this vulnerable community to become part of a thriving society in Europe.

**Khadija Abbasi** has completed her PhD in Anthropology and Sociology of Development at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva. Her PhD research was an auto-ethnographic account of communities of Hazaras in Afghanistan, Iran and UK and their identification process. She has worked for various local and international NGOs in Iran, Afghanistan and UK. She is currently working as

Teaching Fellow at Development Studies department of the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London.

**Julie Nynne Bune** | Anthropologist

**Navigating friction through fiction: Young Afghan refugees in Denmark performing fictionalized futures and haunted pasts**

Many young Afghans face precarious futures in Denmark characterised by temporality and uncertainty due to changing political climate, temporary residence permits and ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. Research accordingly tend to study refugees in relation to the systems, policies, and institution that they become part of and which govern their lives in critical ways (Griffith 2014, Jacobsen and Carlsen 2021, Whyte 2011). However if we are to move beyond seeing refugees as “suffering subjects” (Abu-Lughod 2013, Khan 2020) and come closer to an understanding of what is at stake in the process of settlement, we also need to pay attention to the silences, the fragments, the potential and the phantasmatic aspects of social life. In this paper I present how participatory theatre offer a collaborative methodology that may create the space for the unarticulated, the seemingly absent, silenced and contradictory to emerge. I draw on ten months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out in 2019-2021 in and around Copenhagen Denmark among young Afghan refugees who beside participation in more traditional fieldwork also took part in collaborative theatre workshops. I argue to the affordances of seeing participatory theatre as ‘Phantasmography’ (Desjarlais 2018) where the complex interweaving between the concrete and the imagined becomes particularly outspoken and possible to react to. I will argue how the participants used fiction to navigate the tensions from the pasts wars and pushed others to authorize their stories and potentially cause change.

**Julie Nynne Bune** is an anthropologist and theatre facilitator and has recently completed her PhD titled ‘Haunted Refuge, Forum theatre, insistence and open futures among young Afghans in Denmark’. She has experimented with the affordances of working with forum theatre as an ethnographic methodology to explore the role of the imagined aspects of social life. Julie has worked for several years on the topic of refugees and migration – both in the context of research, as an activist as well as a volunteer.

**Narges Ghandchi**

**“All merges together inside me and comes out as a story” – Fiction as a lens to learn about Afghan people on the move**

This paper involves the fiction (particularly short stories) that Afghan individuals (included refugees) contributed with in the Afghan literary festival Akram Osman. Although the festival is located in Sweden, it gathers multiple literary experts, writers, poets, and artists together to evaluate several short stories received from Afghan writers worldwide written in the two languages Dari and Pashto. The present pilot study investigates through the best-received short stories over the last three years (nr., 18), the concentrated themes before and after Kabul’s fall in August 2022 in search of aspirations of life, stay, or move with reference to Afghanistan and the rest of the world abroad. In addition, the study benefits from qualitative interviews and general ethnography around the festival in 2023 to make sense of the position of diaspora in celebrating literature as a universal means of expression. The paper concludes with several reflections about new methods to explore migration and understandings about migrants’ geographies of attachment.

**Narges Ghandchi** has recently completed her PhD in Educational Anthropology at Aarhus University. Her research since 2017 has centered around Afghan-origin diaspora and newly-arrived refugee families in Denmark and, to some extent, in comparison with similar groups in a number of other European contexts. Among other themes, she is interested in dialogs between new generations and old generations, the encounters between new or different and settled cultural trends, discourses about new and old migration, and transnational beings and communities. She has also worked with several sociolinguistic projects in Denmark and in collaboration with a few international academic groups.