Between Two Worlds: Feelings of Belonging While in Exile and the Question of Return

Marije Braakman and Angela Schlenkhoff

Introduction

> 'I exist…as the tension between all my "versions", for that tension, too (and perhaps above all), is me'. (V. Havel, *Letters to Olga*, 1989)

For millions of people around the world, the condition of 'refugee-ness' is a daily reality. They do not live in a place of their own choice, and live there amid a web of complex relationships and processes. These encompass two different universes: firstly, their own socio-cultural, historical and political roots, which in themselves carry a highly conflictive potential, having forced the refugees into exile; and secondly, the often alien and hostile characteristics of the host society where, at the same time, new localities and senses of homes are created. Such uprooted people are under constant pressure to integrate into the host society as quickly and smoothly as possible without causing too much disturbance, and at the same time to retain their socio-cultural particularities as a conscious decision to be members of the moral community of their fellow compatriots. As Havel's quotation illustrates (above), this creates various 'versions' of the same person, depending on the situational conditions and demands, and these versions often contradict and conflict with others. Unsurprisingly, then, many of these migrants ask themselves 'Where do I belong?'[1]

Over the past two decades the focus of social anthropology as well as that of a growing body of interdisciplinary research has increasingly shifted towards issues of identity and identity formation amongst immigrant populations.[2] As the subjects of anthropological research change, the discipline increasingly seeks to understand identity processes amongst population groups which link more than one country through physical and mental processes. This growing research interest is also timely

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[1] Shah 2000.

[2] E.g. Al-Ali, Black and Koser 2001; Bowman 1994, 2002; Cohen and Vertovec (eds.) 1999; Eade 1999; Fortier 2001; Fuglerud 1999; Loizos 1981; Malkki 1995a and 1995b; Min-ha 1994; Rapport and Dawson 1998; Shaw 2000; Sword 1996; Talai 1989; Vertovec 2000; Werbner 2002.

in occurring at a point when growing conservatism in the European Union is giving rise to negative imagery of an essentialised 'refugee'[3], thereby having an adverse effect on refugee populations in the region. Ultimately, these studies explore the construction of identity in terms of a sense of belonging to a home and homeland in exile based on the experience of memories and images of the homeland as well as experiences in the host society in a national and international climate of suspicion and conservatism towards those seeking refuge outside their country of origin. Thus, inquiring into the basis of entrenched notions of 'refugee-ism' and constructed essentialised identity categories, this literature not only adds to the growing body of work which explores the relationship between migrants/refugees and the host society, but examines the very framework in which these inquiries take place.

Such questions of belonging and identity gained new significance for the thousands of Afghan refugees living in European countries. As the prospect of peace in Afghanistan seemed dim for years, many of them had given up hope of being able to return. After the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001, they were suddenly confronted with the possibility of travelling to the country they had not seen in years and staying there for a few weeks, years or possibly even forever. At the same time, those amongst them without a secure residence permit face increasing pressure from governments across Europe to repatriate to Afghanistan. These developments compel Afghan refugees to re-evaluate their bonds with their places of origin as well as with their current places of residence.

This paper is based on the collaborative and comparative work of Marije Braakman and Angela Schlenkhoff, who have conducted extensive fieldwork amongst different Afghan exile populations in Europe[4], viz. in Hamburg and London respectively. The paper elaborates on a joint presentation made at the Annual Conference of the Afghan Research Group in Berlin in January 2007. Although the fieldwork locations are different, the common themes of analysis revolve around questions of return, longing and belonging in exile, the creation of an identity as well as intergenerational issues which often play a role in this process. The main means of data collection were participant observation and in-depth interviews with Afghans from a variety of backgrounds, who were located through snowball sampling. All in all, 60 people were interviewed in detail (40 in London and 20 in Hamburg) in addition to many more who provided input in a more informal manner. Life stories and focus-group discussions provided further data.

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[3]   Demmers 2005, Fuglerud 1999.

[4]   Braakman (2005): *Roots and Routes. Questions of Home, Belonging and Return in an Afghan Diaspora*. Leiden: Universiteit Leiden (MA thesis); Schlenkhoff (2006): *The Conditions for Imagining and Enacting Identity in Exile: The Discursive Production of Afghan Identity in London. Canterbury*: University of Kent (PhD thesis).

Watan

'Har kase ke dur mand az asl-e khish, ruzgari baz juyad wasl-e khish': 'Everyone who stays far away from his own roots seeks to get back to the day he was together with them,' a classical Persian poem by Rumi says. It has long been considered the ultimate wish of all displaced people to return to where they came from, that is, to return 'home'. By the mid-1990s, scholars of refugee and migration studies began to question such static views about the connection between people and places.[5] With the passage of time, both the refugee and the country of origin undergo changes, affecting senses of home and belonging and having important consequences for the question of return. Although many Afghans (though certainly not all of them) long to be reunited with their place of ancestral origin one day, there are large interpersonal differences in the strength of this longing as well as a huge gap between nostalgic longing and efforts to transform this dream of returning into reality.

In the event that a certain longing exists, it might spring from a variety of reasons. The dream to return can be a longing for a return to an Afghanistan of idealised memories. Such a longing might be found amongst those Afghans who claim to have had a better life in pre-war Afghanistan than they will ever have in Germany or the UK. Furthermore, male Afghans who experienced a loss in status and authority as head of the family and in their professional life may be prone to the idea of return, as are conservative Afghans who find it hard to cope with the German or British value system, i.e. that of an individualised society in contrast to the norms and values of the communal society they are used to. Dreams of returning seem to be especially strong amongst those Afghans whose family and friends still reside in Afghanistan and who feel socially isolated abroad. Some young Afghans with few memories of Afghanistan yearn to feel they belong somewhere, and they project their desire for a true home on Afghanistan. A return to Afghanistan is often seen as a panacea for all the problems encountered in exile and specifically related to being a refugee.

Behind many dreams and longings there seems to lie a feeling of being deprived of something, a sense of not belonging to German or British society completely, and hence an unfulfilled 'homing desire'.[6] But is present-day Afghanistan able to fulfil such longings? The changes that both the individual and Afghanistan have undergone become apparent as soon as one thinks about how to put dreams of returning into action. Afghans who express a longing to return to Afghanistan often motivate this by stating that Afghanistan is their *watan*, their homeland, the place where they truly belong. However, a longing for their *watan* is at odds with the acute awareness that present-day Afghanistan does not possess the qualities that make it a 'proper' place to live. In the ideal conception, *watan* is a geographical and social area where

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[5]   E.g. Al-Rasheed 1994; Black and Koser 1999; Malkki 1995; Warner 1994.
[6]   Brah 1996.

one feels at home and upon which one's identity is based, a place where one's family and friends live and where security, social warmth and a strong connection to the soil are experienced.[7] These ideal qualities call upon many attributes that contemporary Afghanistan fails to offer. The people one feels close to may be dispersed all around the globe, and protection and nourishment are not guaranteed on Afghanistan's soil either.

Because of this rift between the ideal situation and reality, which forces Afghans to live *dur az watan* (far from the homeland), discourses on *watan* are infused with a high level of tragedy, nostalgia for the past and a sense of loss or even homelessness. A love and pride in *watan* can continue to be expressed no matter what cruelties are taking place in Afghanistan. *Watan* itself is not to blame for this; in fact, it could be imagined as an innocent female victim 'raped' by malevolent people with weaponry. A Pashto proverb says: '*Har cha ta khpel watan kashmir dai',* 'One's homeland is like Kashmir.' Munir in Germany explained it the following way:

> Everybody feels his or her country is as beautiful as Kashmir. Regardless of how poor, destroyed and full of misery your country is, it keeps on being the most beautiful place on Earth for you: Kashmir.

Ironically enough, the proverb itself is an illustration of the discrepancy between the ideal situation and reality, as Kashmir, once known as a paradise on Earth, has been ruined by conflict and war as well. Nostalgic images of Afghanistan invoked in songs, poetry and pictures sing the praises of a pristine countryside, brave people and a rich and ancient cultural heritage. However, these images of Afghanistan as a heaven on Earth coexist with images of Afghanistan as a living hell, a country at war, with destruction and suffering everywhere.

Several examples illustrate how idealised images of the *watan* intercede with current German/British and Afghan realities. Tamana in Germany, for example, stated: "*Watan* expresses a very strong feeling of longing. Afghanistan is in my mind exactly the same way I left it." "Idyllic" was the way she typified it. "*Watan* is connected to memories… with images of certain places… with celebrations. The whole family was together and we celebrated *Eid* together." She then focused on the routes that both she and Afghanistan had taken and which would complicate a reunion: "Here, I am confronted with totally different values. I'm not a real Afghan girl any more. It's truly a clash of two totally different worlds." Feeling uncomfortable with a hybrid identity, Tamana longed to have an unambiguous sense of belonging and know exactly who she was and where she belonged. She therefore tried to cling to her roots as well as to idealised images of *watan*. But she could not escape the fact that living in another society had influenced her a great deal. Although she did not define herself as a German, Germany was the place that she was familiar with, where her family and friends lived and where she had established a life of her own.

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[7]   Glatzer 2001.

Contemporary Afghanistan was an alien place to her, far removed from everyday reality in Germany. "Sure, I would like to go to Afghanistan. I have a strong longing. But Afghanistan is not the same any more. It's a completely new Afghanistan… It has changed so much." Tamana concluded: "I don't know if I could live there … Certainly not forever."

Watan is thus not so much an actual place in the here and now to which one must return at all costs. The importance of the notion lies in the sense of identity and belonging it offers. It can serve to create a niche, a space of belonging, within another country. A feeling of belonging to Afghanistan is not just a bond with Afghan territory, but is often based on a sense of closeness to a social network of relatives and friends, personal and collective memories, language, and cultural products and practices.[8] Because these aspects are not necessarily bound to a specific place and can be recreated in Hamburg, London and elsewhere, there is no pressing need to return. In the light of the various conflicts in Afghanistan based on ethno-politics and religion, *watan* may also be the only concept that provides some unity in exile where members of all conflict parties suddenly find themselves in the same locale.

This concept of *watan* is often based on an antagonism amongst the Afghan population not only in terms of the 'Western' lifestyle characterised by individualism and immorality as perceived in Hamburg and London, but also by the impression that British and German narratives of Afghanistan reveal of 'backwardness', 'violent barbarism' and 'terrorism'. It is this antagonism that enables the imagining of a 'community' and leads to a common sense of identity and belonging to the *watan.*[9] All of the narratives that were collected fit in with how Afghans see their country historically, namely as the stage for the 'Great Game' between the various superpowers who had an interest in keeping Afghanistan under control, functioning as a buffer zone between them, e.g. in the case of the three Anglo-Afghan Wars in the 18th and 19th centuries. These narratives of continuously having to defend one's territory against outside intruders as well as the moments of success when this was achieved (e.g. when the British colonial forces were forced to withdraw from Afghanistan after the Anglo-Afghan Wars, as were the Soviet forces at the end of the 1980s) has created a sense of an 'imagined community'[10] and national pride amongst Afghans.

Furthermore, the 'refugee discourse' is threatening the specific 'Afghan-ness' of this particular population. This discourse, as used in research, the media and politics as well as in other strands of society, has become detached from all specificities and has acquired an all-encompassing 'culture' of its own. The refugee discourse tends, misguidedly, to group all refugees together as one 'refugee culture', and turning everyone who fits this label into beings with the same needs and characteristics, thus

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[8]   E.g. Centlivres, Centlivres-Demont and Gehrig 2000; Fortier 2000, Loizos 1981.
[9]   Bowman 2002.
[10]   Anderson 1983.

creating a 'stereotypical refugee'.[11] As a consequence of this 'refugee-isation' there is a tendency amongst researchers and practitioners in the refugee sector to address generic 'problems' rather than individual people, and very rarely to address the people themselves except in the context of these problems. Where cultural differences are taken into account, these are often reified and the respective population stereotyped. Individuals are then perceived as representatives of these imagined communities and as being able to speak on their behalf.

This communal condition even enables a factionalised population to imagine itself as a 'community', leading to momentary identity transformations, if not on a national level then on a more encompassing level of 'us' against an external 'them'. However, this can also lead to the break-up of this conglomerate on the basis of different ideas of what the 'community discourse' should entail, making the macro marker of 'Afghan-ness' an inherently unstable construct.

Intergenerational issues and home

The question of belonging, home and return takes on an even more complex note with regard to intergenerational issues. Parents and children largely hold different views about the role played by the second and third generations with reference to the *watan*. The parents interviewed almost unanimously stated that while they were glad they had managed to save their children's lives by taking them to the safety of Britain or Germany, they felt they were now losing their children to 'Western culture'. They felt that their children did not feel any affiliation to the land of their forebears as their parents do (or at least not as much) and that the offspring are ultimately closer to the Western antagonist. As one informant in London expressed it: "My children do not love Afghanistan, and they would not be able to go back. When you drink the water of Europe, you cannot drink the water of Afghanistan." He added that he himself lives "under two skies, the Afghan and the English one, which I need to reconcile, and it causes me headaches, whereas my children only live under the English sky." All his children were born in the UK and have no personal memories of Afghanistan. Many parents in both locations share this view of parents and children living under 'different skies' and they often struggle with the idea that their children will not accept the lifestyle they were used to themselves, but instead question it. Parents can often be heard complaining about the behaviour of their children, which they ascribe to the fact that the latter were born and raised in Germany or the UK rather than on Afghan soil, almost as if they were of different blood.

Conversely, parents are often told by their children that "this is the 21st century, but you're still living in Afghanistan." The almost unanimous view that Afghan parents living abroad have is that they are raising a lost generation, a generation too individualistic and Western to be interested in sharing their parents' memories of the

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[11]   Fuglerud 1999.

homeland. There are probably many examples of young Afghans denying their Afghan-ness for various reasons, such as the teenage boy in London who told his classmates at school that he was Italian. When his younger sister started attending the same school, he had to bribe her not to 'correct' this statement.

However, it also seems that the parents' narrative about their children does not give the next generation enough credit for their attempts to combine their roots and routes – i.e. attachment and movement – in their search for a true home. Generally, this pressure is enormous for the second generation as it also means having to decide whether they consider themselves to be living in exile along with their parents or whether they want to make Germany or Britain the centre of their lives. Obviously, this is not a spatial boundary but a cognitive and mental one; however, according to the standards of most families and of the imagined community, it demands an irreversible decision to be made.

A young, unmarried and highly educated Afghan woman in London, for example, expressed frustration because of the cultural dichotomies she faced, saying that she had always identified with her own culture and home country, but that she did not feel she had been adequately rewarded for doing so. Speaking not only of herself but also of the general process of negotiation between the different strands of belonging, she said:

> I held myself back on numerous occasions because I knew it would be disapproved of in the terms of my Afghan culture. However, on the other hand, I have not received anything back in return but, instead, feel overwhelming pressure. My family reveres me as an ideal example of a 'good Afghan woman', educated, chaste and pure to my younger cousins, but I don't want to play this role any more as I think it gives them the wrong impression.

This ties in with how Sword described early Polish migration to the UK.[12] He showed how people recall their earliest experiences of being children under a 'dominant Polish discourse' as very negative encounters with 'Polish-ness' rather than taking from that discourse the positive cultural experiences which their parents intended for them. As children, they were more concerned with blending into the mainstream culture, but participation in the Polish community and following the family's Polish discourse made them conspicuous and hence vulnerable to bullying, which many experienced. Thus, 'rituals which are intended to function in an integrative way – to bind the group together – can sometimes be dysfunctional'[13] in that they also exclude members of the community from the wider society which is supposedly their home (at least temporarily).

However, many Afghan children feel a very strong connection to their origins through their parents, especially girls and young women. Generally, girls conform more than boys to the standards and expectations of the Afghan culture and their

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[12]   Sword 1996.
[13]   Ibid: 148.

families, carrying on the virtues of Afghan-ness and being *khub dokhtar* (a good Afghan girl), and they themselves are very aware of this. They are usually also the ones who plan to go to university and get a degree which will allow them to return to Afghanistan to help the people there, e.g. a qualification in medicine or law (especially women's rights). They are brought up under closer protection by their family; parents worry more about the reputation of their daughters, while sons have more freedom in their activities and social contacts. Girls and young women are very much aware of this dichotomy, and in their narratives they speak about boys who struggle with this freedom. As Zuhra in London explained:

> An individual is given a choice between good and bad as defined by our culture. Many [boys] get involved in drugs, smoking and alcohol to excessive amounts. Many spend less and less time with the family and more and more outside on the streets. Girls, on the other hand, have always behaved better and do better at education and finding a good job as well as family and friends and religion and culture. Unfortunately, there is a minority who believe they should be offered 'equal rights' as men and thus lose themselves in the 'new culture' – [they're] neither English nor Afghan.

Nevertheless, most young people would argue that it is exactly this 'new culture' which they are also constantly creating and performing. They know they cannot reconcile the different discourses ("it's different personalities, innit?" as Zuhra stated). Most of them wear what they identify as Western clothes, listen to both Afghan and Western music, eat Afghan and Western food and pursue an Afghan and Western future. They are rooted in Afghan discourse and its habits, but they pursue Western routes through the education system and the perspectives opened to them. For many of them (as described above, especially girls and young women), the ultimate destination of their route is also the location of their roots: they seek the opportunity to return to Afghanistan and help people there. Whether they will really pursue this goal in several years' time is unimportant; their plans may change along the way, but their origins are at the centre of their narrative.

While Afghan girls and young women generally conform to the family and imagined community norms, the behaviour of boys and young men is often a matter of great concern. Several informants said that their families had stopped attending official concerts in celebration of events such as the Afghan New Year because they were afraid for their safety from within the community. As Zakia stated:

> When we first arrived in England, our family and Afghan friends used to go to Afghan concerts for these celebrations. That was something to look forward to. Unfortunately, with Afghan boys and young men losing respect for religion, family, community and culture, this is no longer an option. There would be a fight after every single concert by drunken boys or sober boys who were hyper, and the police would almost always be involved. Someone would say something silly about another silly boy's family, sister, etc., and he would lose control. As a result most families now avoid these concerts.

As a consequence, some events are organised only for families, with no single men being allowed into the hall; other events which are not subject to such restrictions are not frequented by many families because of the anticipated trouble caused by

young single men. Young men are often suspended in a violent struggle between their roots and routes. On the one hand, they act against Afghan-ness when they get drunk and disrupt the celebration of 'community' and Afghan-ness in terms of music and poetry readings at such concerts, as well as trying to chat up girls from their own cultural background despite knowing of the socio-cultural implications for the girl. On the other hand, they are fervent supporters of their roots when they control and defend their sisters against other young men; they demand that the *attan* (the Afghan national dance) is danced at concerts and festivities; and they actively manifest and 'perform' their 'ethnic' identity publicly.

Neither girls/young women nor boys/young men are as rooted in the 'here and now' as their parents assume, but are at a halfway house, in between the two conceptual constructs in a 'new formation'. For both groups, 'identity' is not something that can be taken for granted, but something that needs to be justified, defended and fought for on a daily basis and against different 'others', such as German and English classmates from school or classmates who are also from an ethnic minority background and may be caught up in the same process of creating a sense of belonging in a conceptual space between two discursive worlds.

The dream of returning

Afghan respondents of all ages identify generational differences as the single most important factor influencing identity, attachments to Afghanistan and the host country, as well as attitudes towards returning. The story of Beltun illustrates how the question of a permanent return to Afghanistan is complicated by such intergenerational (and gender) differences. Beltun, who had lived in Germany since 1978, had a 22-year-old daughter and a nine-year-old son. As a journalist, Beltun had visited Afghanistan in 2002. Although he considered the situation in Afghanistan to be very bad, dreams of returning were still on his mind. These clashed with the reality of being a father and the breadwinner responsible for the well-being of his family. His wife Sukria treasured a small glass bottle of earth from her parental house in Afghanistan. She yearned to return to Afghanistan, but she was certain that she would not be able to find any employment in spite of her having an academic qualification. A few days earlier, Beltun's daughter had replied to his question about whether she would ever want to return to Afghanistan with a meaningful silence. "Ask my son if he wants to go to Afghanistan," Beltun said to the anthropologist. Nine-year-old Arman sat on the couch next to his father, absorbed in a Game Boy computer game. She asked him. Without looking up from his game, he curtly answered: "No." She asked him why not. "Because there are no swimming pools." "And if there where? Or only for a holiday?" the anthropologist enquired. "No…," he whispered with obvious unease. Beltun then revealed his dilemma:

> My son loves to swim, and for him it is a big deal that there are no swimming pools in Afghanistan… When I say 'Yes, I'll go', immediately the question of who will pay the house rent and who will take responsibility for my wife and children arises. Do I have

the right to take my child to Afghanistan, to misuse his future for my own desires? Or take my wife's freedom away from her? Leave my daughter alone in Germany for years or forever? Separate my son and daughter? My son doesn't know what Afghanistan is. Do I then have to prepare a kidnapping to put pressure on the family because I want to go to Afghanistan?

My child can't decide, and I can't decide for him. I had a better life in Afghanistan than I have in Germany now. I have a lot of friends over there who'd help me create a nice new life in Afghanistan. But can I lead a comfortable life when there are people living in poverty in the same town? Why should I have a better life, but my child a poorer one? Do parents have to sacrifice themselves for their children, or children for their parents?

Afghan refugees in European countries seem far from eager to put possible dreams of return into action, intergenerational dilemmas being just one of the barriers. Only a handful of Afghans have taken the decision to return to Afghanistan permanently, most of whom are adult males who saw the prospect of re-establishing themselves socially and professionally. At the same time, however, the number of Afghans who visit Afghanistan for a few weeks or months is steadily growing.

For those who have gone back temporarily, the return has had various effects. Return visits are a stage for renegotiations of identity and feelings of home and belonging, and generally evoke strong emotions. Rahman in Germany recounted:

Last year, after 40 years, I returned to Afghanistan. I had such a strong hankering. In a way, you're happy when you reach the object of longing, regardless of whether it's a person or a country. At the same time, once I'd got off the aeroplane, I was struck by the poverty and the beggars. I felt like I was in a cloud, experiencing everything as if it was a bad dream. I was almost – like – paralysed… It was very sad to see the destroyed buildings, the misery, and I was unable to be happy. But at the same time I was so pleased about having been able to return again.

Photographer Suhaila Ismat in London has been back to Afghanistan twice over the past three years. On the first occasion she visited members of her family as well as the former family home, and on the second occasion she spent six months working for a women's organisation to collect data for her MA dissertation. On the basis of hundreds of photographs from Afghanistan and the UK, she constructed an interesting account of her journey between here and there, with 'here' and 'there' becoming geographically interchangeable concepts. Concerning her experience as a refugee between two cultures, she stated:

London is the place where I found myself. In Afghanistan, the surroundings of a person are more important, and the behaviour of somebody in relation to that environment, whereas in the UK, there is more freedom to find yourself, your true feelings, your needs and wants. In Afghanistan, life is easier in that sense because you are ignorant of yourself. I think that if I had lived all my life in Afghanistan, I would not have had the chance to find myself in the way that I have done here.

The difficulty as a refugee is that you cannot arrange and unite the two cultures that you know and own, and you cannot let go of either of them. For example, the way families live together here can never be a part of me, but the limits that are imposed on

life in Afghanistan through the culture can't either. These discrepancies make you more aware of and sensitive to questions about your identity. I think that, for myself, I have come to appreciate the best of both worlds; it has become my strategy for survival, but also a way of keeping you back because you long for the culture of home that you can't have here.

As for her experience of returning to Afghanistan and coming back to the UK again, she argued, in line with other respondents, that this movement back and forth makes many issues surrounding a refugee's identity much clearer and easier to bear, and creates opportunities for checking assumptions, images and memories against reality. However, it also became apparent to her that she has partly become a Westerner:

I found that you can only really understand yourself when you go back and then return again because you realise you fantasise about the good things, which you probably knew beforehand, but still denied, and it is also the moment when you see and understand the reasons why you left in the first place. I find that people settle much better when they have returned and come back again. When you are here, your homeland becomes your paradise, your religion. I remember from my childhood the freshness of the air, of the trees. Springtime in the UK often reminded me of home, and I wanted to feel it again when I went back to Afghanistan, but it had gone. Also, there are new people who have come into my life here in the UK: all my nieces and nephews. They were not in Afghanistan with me, and I can't imagine my life without them any more. What I saw in Afghanistan, in our old house, were ghosts of the past, the ghosts of my sisters and me sharing a room, playing outside our house.

I think that life can only be complete with both worlds; otherwise they are both only fragments. I also think that people who can't ever settle are those who can't go back because they don't see the realities of their homeland, and they live off a fantasy that drives them crazy. Returning and coming back to the UK has given me a peace of mind that allowed me to settle calmly.

This poetic excerpt of her account of returning and re-returning not only brings us closer to the issues involved in perceptions of home, it is also an account of the circularity of home and how a 'shock' such as returning can bring about a new idea of oneself and possibly even lead to therapeutic effects. As Eade stated:

The search for roots located in a specific place of origin […] gives way to an increasing sense of routes along which people have moved and continue to move.'[14]

Thus, several informants who had been back to Afghanistan stated afterwards that they had been 'cured' of the idea of ever going back for good because they did not think they would be able to live in Afghanistan any more. They made a conscious and clear distinction between the real Afghanistan and the Afghanistan of their memories and dreams, and treated the two as separate narratives. Nevertheless, they want to keep their options open with a view to making future visits. Generally, it can be said that a return visit placed *watan,* imagined from a distance, back in time and geography. At the same time, it implied experiencing Germany or the UK from a

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[14] Eade 1999: 26.

distance, and rethinking the bonds with both places. Mahmoud in Germany told us the following:

> I spent six very nice weeks in my homeland, but I can't completely live there any more. When I arrived at Frankfurt Airport, I felt as if I were home again. A few days later I again missed my homeland Afghanistan in all its beauty and poverty. I think the Afghans who grew up here in Germany like me will never be able to fully choose one side. It's just like a little child that has to choose who to live with – its mother or its father.

Conclusion

The increasingly restricted asylum, naturalisation and repatriation policies complicate Afghans' identification with the German and British state and nation, and might amplify the importance of roots and their own ethnic community. However, most Afghans are more likely to persist in creating niches in which to build up an existence in Germany or the UK than to decide to return to Afghanistan voluntarily. Pragmatic considerations are likely to outweigh any nostalgic yearning for the *watan*, the homeland. The need for safety, economic security, education for the children, housing, medical care, the comfort of running water, electricity and heating, and closeness of kin may be fulfilled better outside Afghanistan. As one respondent proclaimed: "*Watan* is *watan*, but we still want to live in Germany."

For Afghans facing the threat of forced repatriation, on the other hand, returning to Afghanistan is more of a nightmare than a dream. They generally cling to the dream of being allowed to stay in Germany or the UK. More interest in returning and contributing to the reconstruction process seems to be shown by those Afghans who have the opportunity to return without endangering their residential status and giving up their centre of life in Europe. Even those who call Afghanistan their true and only home would probably prefer to return to Afghanistan with a European passport safely tucked in their pocket.

Instead of returning to their roots, the largest share of Afghans will most likely prefer to imagine their roots from a distance, replanting them in other soil and spreading them in new ways. Longing for *watan* can become a source of life in exile. Afghans have not so much been lifted from their local and familiar places and thrown into the global post-modern whirligig, but are constantly concerned with the creation of new localities and homes. A return would mean a new uprooting. Young Afghans, in particular, define identity, home and belonging in creative ways that refute simplistic answers to questions about the connection between place, culture and identity. Unfortunately, this process is severely hampered by legislation in host states. For thousands of Afghans without a secure residence permit, the search for a safe and stable place to call their home continues to this day.

Many of the issues raised in this article have particular implications for the younger generations of Afghan refugees as well as other minority communities, and are strongly felt amongst them. Western societies have been trying to come to terms

with a generation of disillusioned and alienated young men (and women) from an immigrant background living in their midst and yet, it seems, parallel to mainstream society (even before the terror attacks of 7 July 2005 in London). They attempt to understand how it could ever have come this far and why they did not notice or raise the issue beforehand, tending to point out one another's failures.

It could be argued that the answer to these questions is to be found in many of the issues raised in this paper, e.g. on one hand, the alienation of young people by the host society due to the latter's attitude and rhetoric enacted with regard to immigrants, and on the other hand alienation from what is meant to be their 'home culture' because of misunderstandings and miscommunication with parents and guardians in addition to pressure to conform from their 'imagined community'. It should come as no surprise, then, that this is sometimes seen as a suspension between strikingly different discourses, and at other times as not enough secure information to fill the void often felt by younger generations when they are looking for guidance. The environments in which these young people are trying to come to terms with their identity and seeking a sense of belonging, however, are not socio-cultural and political vacuums but rather are filled with other young people from similar immigrant backgrounds. This latter group has a different national and cultural heritage and finds itself in the same situation, also trying to come to terms with the question of where they belong. Often these different attempts clash in the construction of boundaries to help and guide those concerned. In a situation like this, 'identity' is never taken for granted; it is a right that needs to be justified and fought for on a daily basis with ever new antagonists.

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