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Mohajers in camps

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Anna Knappe:
Mohajers in camps

MA essay

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Mohsen: *“A camp is a place where mohajers from different countries live. The mohajers come from different cultures and have different opinions, but they share the same space. And almost all of the mohajers living in this camp have problems or their lives are in danger. At least, this is a safe place, but it’s only a temporary place. We are waiting here for our residence permits, which we hopefully will receive, and we hope to be free from the things that made us mohajers.”*

It was a late October afternoon when Mohsen was speaking, and I was sitting and drinking tea in an asylum seeker reception center, located in a small town in Finland. I was there trying to get to know some of the center’s residents, who had arrived in Finland only a few months earlier and were now sharing their living space in a closed hotel with 300 other asylum seekers. This reception center, like most of them, is practically in the middle of nowhere, and the people there have nothing to do. Although reception centers are not prisons, they are often located in remote areas, isolating the individuals living in them. For me, this was not the first reception center I had visited, but among many others, where I go regularly to meet people and to speak with them.

This is one of the things I do as my artistic practice: I film discussions and interviews with people and use parts of the discussions as research material or as elements in my moving image works. My aim is not to find interesting stories or personal histories, but to try to allow the complexity of different overlapping realities to be visible and understood. By allowing the existence of the sometimes contradictory stories, I believe it is possible to represent the people’s lives in a dignified manner and more truthfully than their typical simplified representations as the poor and victimized migrants. The victim stories of refugees shown in media are also the same stories performed by the asylum seekers in asylum interviews, in which they are judged based on the consistency of the story because, tragically, it is seen as an evidence of representing the truth.

Languages and foreign words

Mohsen: *One problem is the language, we can’t speak the language and can’t tell the people about our problems and sorrows. We didn’t become mohajers to have fun or to travel around*

the world. Everywhere we go, we are unable to communicate with the people there. We can't even say hello, so how could we talk about our feelings? This is the worst thing, we can't talk about our sorrows and they can't understand.

I was at the reception center with my translator Amir, whose native language is Farsi. We were accompanied by a group of Afghan asylum seekers, who had all recently emigrated from Iran to Finland: Mohsen, Cobra, Mohammad, Hussein, Arman, and their family members. They were speaking Persian: Dari and Farsi and Amir was translating to my native language Finnish, which has then been translated by me into English. Translating twice between three very different languages easily leads to mistakes and misunderstandings, especially when the translators are not professionals, but it is still the best option available to ensure that each participant gets to use the language he or she is confident to speak. In this setting, we were discussing how to define the place we were in, the place I called reception center and the people living in there called camp and how to define the people in there, who my translator called refugees and they themselves called mohajers.

The German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno defends his frequent use of foreign words in his writings in the essay *On the Use of Foreign Words in Notes to Literature*, arguing that foreign words introduce a tension into a language. They are not harmless, but an explosive force and the foreign in them should not be denied, but used. Since I do not speak Persian, I can only understand Persian words through someone else's definitions. The word camp is adapted to the language of mohajers from English and the word mohajer itself is a loanword from Arabic, camp being more recent adaptation while mohajer is already deeply rooted in the language. Translating these words to Finnish or English is problematic, so instead of trying to find the correct translations, I try to embrace them and welcome the difficulty of understanding them as a non-Persian speaking, non-mohajer person.

The people called mohajers in camps

Cobra: *In Iran Mashhad was our camp. It was a camp in a size of a city. We were not allowed to leave it or go to another city, we needed a permission if we wanted to do so and the permission was difficult to get. In some other cities, it's even written that they are forbidden*

for Afghans. You can imagine how life was like. That was just a big camp and here we have a small camp.

A camp can mean any kind of place where refugees, asylum seekers or any other type of migrants are staying while making their journeys or while their cases are being processed. This includes asylum seeker reception centers, processing centers, detention centers and prisons, and also the tent camps in places like Calais in France and Patras In Greece. Camps are considered to be temporary, even though they often function as permanent structures for storing people. What is in common between all camps, is that the people living in them are not considered to be residents of that place, and they do not share the same rights with the actual residents within the surrounding community. Mohsen refers to these people and to himself as mohajers.

Who are mohajers then? They are asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, migrating workers and students, depending on their status, their country of origin and their migration history. The original Arabic word refers to hijra, the migration of Prophet Muhammad and his followers from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE and the exile that followed. Hijra is also the starting point of the Islamic calendar, known as the Hijri calendar. For Muslims, it is a word that refers to the religion and the Muslim Era itself. The Persian speakers tend to use the word mohajer much more freely than Arabic speakers, perhaps because parts of the words original content disappear and new ones appear when it is adapted to a new language. The English translation from Persian includes, at least, the words: migrant, immigrant, emigrant, expatriate, refugee, evacuee, traveler, colonist, and fugitive.

Translating the word mohajer is not trivial since practically all the words used in the context of migration are problematic and often condescending. The words are also very difficult to define and the definitions and the associations that follow them are different in every language. Refugees are people who have been forced to leave their country in order to escape war, persecution, or natural disaster, and who qualify for refugee status by the criteria of UNHCR. Asylum seeker is administrative language, and it only covers the time period in someone's life between applying for asylum and receiving the decision. The people living in reception centers are asylum seekers and if they are granted asylum, they become refugees, but when the same people are on their journey through Europe, they are neither. They have the

potential to become asylum seekers and refugees, but before they reach their destinations they are just mohajers.

Mohajer is sometimes translated as migrant, meaning someone who moves from one place to another in order to find work or better living conditions. It might sound like a more neutral term compared to asylum seeker and refugee, but it is often used for the purpose of dismissing someone's right for a refugee status. Migrant also implies that the person migrating is welcomed in the receiving country and is allowed to settle there, otherwise, the term is illegal immigrant. All the words used about mohajers are definitions that come from the outside and they are usually not used by the people who are defined by these words, even though their treatment is dependent on the category they are labeled as.

Translating mohajer as refugee

Mohammad: *"Mohajer is someone who comes from a country where there is war. Only those who come from war are mohajers."*

Hussein: *"I'm a panahandeh in Finland. The word mohajer comes from hijra and it means traveling to another country. Even someone traveling with a passport can be a mohajer. They can be called tourists, but they are also mohajers. But if a panahandeh really has problems and his life is in danger, then he is a true mohajer. I'm a panahandeh, but I became a mohajer when I left Afghanistan."*

Mohammad's description of the word mohajer is refugee. He chooses to interpret the word in a way that reflects the expected status of the people in the camp. But mohajer is not the only word referring to refugees in Persian: Hussein describes himself as both mohajer and panahandeh, meaning someone asking for asylum. If mohajer is translated as refugee and panahandeh as asylum seeker, Hussein says that asylum seekers are true refugees when they fit the criteria for refugee status, but simultaneously any traveler can be a refugee.

Detailed definitions of the word are necessary because simply translating a word to another language loses all the nuances and associations included in the original language. For the

word mohajer this happens two times: first when it was adopted from Arabic to Persian as a loan word and second time when the word is translated into English as refugee, migrant or any other one-word translation. Adorno describes foreign words as bearers of subjective contents. Words are not simply born and evolved, they are performed, which means that their subjective content can also be altered. Mohajer seems to an excellent example of this kind of word. Outside the camps, mohajer can mean many things, but inside the camps, it translates to refugee because meeting the refugee criteria is what is expected from those who have applied for asylum.

The Finnish word for refugee, pakolainen, also has a very different feeling than the word refugee. Refugee is a passive word, implying someone who is at the mercy of others who are providing the refuge. Pakolainen is an identity word, similar to mohajer, literally meaning someone who is from a place or state called escape. The word is constructed in a similar way as words describing nationality or origin.

In Finnish spoken language, it is common to modify words to give them new meanings or add more meaning to existing words. Pakolainen has been twisted to pakoloinen, meaning escape + parasite. This is one of the reasons why pakolainen in Finnish has a negative connotation. Ironically being a refugee is something to be earned, but yet a negative label. But if mohajer is pakolainen or refugee, then the meaning of the word refugee also needs to be expanded, like Al Jazeera has decided when stating that they will not call the people crossing The Mediterranean Sea migrants, but to use the word refugee instead, arguing that the word migrant is de-humanizing.

Mohajer as migrant

Sepideh: *“Mohajer is a very poetic word. I’m interested in literature in Farsi, and mohajer is very much used in our literature and it’s attributed to birds. They are free and they fly from one place to another without any boundaries. So it’s a very poetic word. To me, mohajer is a very nice word, because you can live anywhere and you can go anywhere, but translating the word mohajer to other languages is very limiting because nowadays the definitions come with political statuses, which are different in each country. So the origin of the people becomes the*

most important thing when talking about mohajers, different mohajers get a different kind of treatment.”

Sepideh Rahaa is an Iranian artist living in Finland. Her artistic practice, which involves traveling between international artist residencies and exhibitions, and living and working in a country where she was not born in, makes her a mohajer artist. But despite being a mohajer, she is not a refugee and does not want to be associated with them, even though she shares the same language and the same country of origin as many mohajers in the camp. She says that she lived a privileged life in Iran and did not come to Finland for economic reasons, but out of curiosity. The word refugee sounds negative to her and she refuses to translate mohajer as refugee.

Sepideh: *“There is no one word to translate mohajer, but if I had to choose one it would be migrant. I think that in Finnish society there is a problem in political statuses and making policies because they mix different statuses together. You can be a foreigner, and not be an asylum seeker or refugee, but here I think they put everyone in one category. This is how I feel when talking to people. And in the news they mix the words too, they interview foreign students, who came here to study and to work, to show how the refugees are important. So when they want to talk about refugees, they talk to migrants, even though the migrants have different backgrounds. I’m not saying that people shouldn’t be treated equally, but still, I think there is a difference between people, there are different reasons and motives for moving to another country. But mohajer contains all of them.”*

Mohajer is migrant, but migrant does not include everything that mohajer is. In legislation the different statuses of different types of migrants are not mixed, on the contrary, they are very strict and categorizing. Legally a qualified refugee is treated very differently than an asylum applicant or a foreign student, but the categories are not necessarily exclusive and moving from one category to another is also possible. Translating mohajer as refugee or migrant leads to labeling, which the word itself does not contain. The understanding of the word mohajer seems to be connected more to identity than to status and thus it can mean different things to someone who is a refugee and someone who is not. For both mohajer is an identity, but a very different identity depending on the status and the preferred translation of the word.

By Sepideh's definition, I could also be a mohajer artist, since I am a migrant in Norway. But mohajer is not my identity or something I would claim to be. Even though the word is widely used as a general term for all migrants, it does have a long cultural tradition in both Persian and Arabic, in literature and religion, and as someone not belonging to that background, I am not in a position to redefine the word on my terms.

Mohajer as Afghan identity

Arman: *"Mohajer means that I don't know where my father went and what happened to him. He left one morning and never came back. Mohajer means not knowing which one of your hands is left and which one right, or how to write your own name. Not in any language. Mohajer means that the first time I learned to write my name, I learned it in the language of this land. Mohajer means that you don't even know your own language properly and you have to use a foreign language to be understood. It means that you always have to smile, even if your heart is full of sorrow."*

Arman's poetic definition of the word takes it back to its origin: hijra and Prophet Muhammad, who was an illiterate orphan and forced to migrate. It is the definition of someone who has been born in exile. To Afghans being a mohajer seems to be deeply rooted in identity, even something a person is born with. There are estimated to be around 3 million Afghans living in Iran: about third of them are registered and the rest are undocumented. Many of them have been born in Iran and even though many are designated refugees by UNHCR's criteria, they are still not able to obtain Iranian citizenship or permanent residency, and live in Iran under time-limited condition of stay. It is no wonder that under these conditions, the definition of the word mohajer means different things to Afghan and Iranian mohajers.

Adorno describes the role of foreign words as elements of alienation, writing:

"The more deeply society is cleft by the contradiction between its quasi-natural and its rational character the more isolated will foreign words necessarily remain in the arena of language, incomprehensible to one group of human beings and threatening to the other; and yet they have their legitimacy as an alienation itself, and also as the transparent crystals

that may at some future time explode human beings' dreary imprisonment in preconceived language."

The word mohajer in Persian is contradictory, making it incomprehensible to those who do not speak Persian and easily misunderstandable to those who speak Arabic and know the real meaning and the background of the word. For Afghan mohajers, the word contains their history and common distress, and if someone states being a mohajer, it tells the other Afghan mohajers that the person belongs to their group and has been through similar troubles as other Afghan mohajers. Maybe the word has the potential to become the transparent crystal Adorno is writing about if the struggles of Afghan mohajers are better understood through it. But reserving the word mohajer to only one group of mohajers would still be misleading and other mohajers would not be likely to agree with it.

Using the word mohajer can also cause problems for Afghan asylum seekers themselves, especially during the asylum interviews. The interviews are conducted by the immigration office in Finnish and translated into the language of the applicant. Since mohajer is so commonly used, it often happens, according to Amir, that the words refugee, asylum, and mohajer get mixed. The question: "why are you applying for asylum?", can translate to: "why are you a mohajer?". The answer then is very different depending on the word used and the misunderstanding, in worst case scenario, can lead to a rejected asylum application.

Cobra: *"When someone asks where I'm from, I say I'm from Afghanistan, but I've never been there. Mohajer means not belonging anywhere, not where you are and not where you're from or you parents are from. My husband says that we're born mohajers. There is no other name for us. When they ask your name, you should say your name is mohajer. Our umbilical cords are cut with the word mohajer. Even in hospitals, when a new Afghan child is born, they say a new mohajer was born. They don't say this woman's child was born, they say one Afghan mohajer was born. Those two words, Afghan and mohajer, are attached together, it's always Afghan mohajer. Then many who have migrated, try to detach themselves from the word mohajer. But in a new country, you're still a mohajer."*

Referencies:

Adorno, Theodor (1992). Notes to Literature: Volume two. New York: Columbia University Press
Translated from the German by Shierry Weber Nichol森

کمپ

camp

مهاجر

mohajer

مهاجرها

mohajerha (plural)

پناهنده

panahandeh