

# “I Live Here; I Have a Right to Be Here”

## An Afghan Refugee’s Disorientations and Insistence on Inclusion through Theater

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### Introduction

The principal of the language school exclaims in a loud voice:

Dear students, we are very excited about the debate with our local politicians. Our very democratic politicians are coming here, and we are so pleased that they have agreed to talk to you. Please remember that we want a respectful debate with our democratically chosen politicians, so don’t be too critical, angry, or inappropriate in any way.

He looks directly at Aliah and adds, “Especially you Aliah, we know you, so please do not say anything and don’t be critical.” Aliah smiles in discomfort.

After the debate, the principal thanks the politicians for coming and asks for questions from the audience. Aliah immediately raises her hand, as the principal looks at her discontented, and asks one of the politicians a question:

Is it not possible to change the “*integrationsydelse*” [a benefit that refugees receive from the state] to ‘SU’ [a state-financed grant given to students above the age of eighteen] instead? Because it is very difficult for us with children and school and internships on the side; it is too hard for us, both physically and mentally, and we don’t have time for our children. Is it not possible to have only the student grant and then remove the internships?

The politician responds:

You come here to Denmark and get everything for free! Food, a place to live, education. Everything is for free! And you get the taxpayers' money. We give it to you so you can live in peace and everything; you should really be grateful. I don't understand what the problem is. You should work for it, work for us and everything that you get for free.

The principal exclaims, "We have a few minutes left for the last couple of questions." Aliah raises her hand and stands up. The principal gently pushes her down and says: "Not you, Aliah." She tries to protest, but he hushes her.

Aliah enacted this scene at a theater workshop in Copenhagen, Denmark, to focus on the difficulties involved in creating the future she hopes for in the Danish welfare state. In this chapter, I will explain how Aliah critically engages on stage with the idea that politicians depict refugees as welfare exploiters, with her enactment reflecting her insistence on being included as an equal. Aliah is a twenty-year-old woman from Afghanistan who arrived in Denmark four years ago with her parents and two younger siblings. They applied for asylum just before the so-called "refugee crisis" in 2015, when unprecedented numbers of refugees were seen walking along Danish highways—scenes displayed on television screens, radio, and social media across the country. Aliah became a cog in the wheel of the Danish asylum and integration system during a period that was hugely affected by restrictions on family reunification, cuts in social benefits, and (perhaps most significantly) the granting of more temporary forms of protection with fewer rights (Gammeltoft-Hansen 2017: 106). The temporary nature of this protection means that refugees who flee from war, but are not individually persecuted, are granted temporary protection for only one to two years at a time—with their cases being reviewed for possible extensions at the end of each period (Verdasco 2018: 1444). At the same time, the public and political debate focuses on who should be regarded as a Dane, and who should not. Aliah and other young Afghan refugees in Denmark face very uncertain futures. In 2019, Danish immigration policy changed its focus from integration to deportation, further exacerbating this insecurity. Young refugees must navigate this uncertainty while negotiating their positions not only in Danish society, but also within their own families.

In this chapter, I argue that futuremaking can be a disorientating process that happens in a temporal friction shaped by ideas of self-determination and obligations toward the family and the Danish welfare state. In constructing my argument, I draw on Sara Ahmed's (2006) work on orientations/disorientations as outlined in her book, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. According to Ahmed (2006: 1, 158), orientation is about how we find our way in the world, which is never casual but organized along certain lifelines. Ahmed (2006: 20) writes that a sense of disorientation can

arise when we lose our aim or purpose, thereby losing a sense of who we are. Disorientation is a condition that can be shattering, but also contains the potential to open up new futures (Ahmed 2006). When Aliah goes on stage to fight exclusion, I argue that she is attempting to open a path toward a new future. The notion of disorientation/orientation must be understood as a temporal condition in the sense that lives get directed toward certain points rather than others along a life course. Whether we succeed in pointing toward the future is conditioned on our history (Ahmed 2006: 21, 159). In the second half of the chapter, I focus on the temporal dimension of disorientation and argue that Aliah's battle is not limited to the systems governing refugees, but also involves a continual struggle to orient herself anew in relation to her past, her family, and society.

I met Aliah in April 2019 after she responded to a Facebook invitation to join my research project by participating in theater workshops with other Afghan refugees. When researching imaginaries of the future, it is necessary to venture beyond conventional methods in order to grasp people's inner experiences, which are in constant flux and exist outside the ordinary linear structure of time (Dalsgaard and Frederiksen 2013; D'Onofrio 2017a; Irving 2011: 25). Within the current polarized political climate relating to refugees, I want to challenge the idea of what it means to tell your story as a refugee and add nuance to the stereotypical pictures of refugees' lives portrayed in the media. I agree with Alexandra D'Onofrio (2017a: 75) that "through the words, dilemmas and visions which emerge from protagonists during theatre improvisation and storytelling, anthropologists have the opportunity to unpack and critically contest some overarching terms and concepts on migration common in public and political discourse that tend to objectify people's experiences." Broadly speaking, the objectification of the stories of refugees tends to portray them as either victims or criminals (Plambech 2014). Stories matter in the sense that they give access to resources (Bune and Lykke 2014; Danneskiold-Samsøe 2011; Zetter 1991), whether this means a residence permit (Whyte 2011a, 2011b) or (on a more existential note) a feeling of empowerment in disempowering circumstances (Jackson 2002). In line with Joel Robbins (2013: 457), I attempt to move beyond the notion of the suffering subject and explanations of people's misery. Instead, I focus on their dreams and longings, using theater methods to facilitate articulations of how Afghan refugees imagine things could be or should be.

## **Afghan Refugees in Denmark**

Following decades of war, more than five million Afghans currently live outside Afghanistan. Approximately 19,200 of them live in Denmark, many of whom have lived there for decades. They fled the civil war in the late

1980s and 1990s when mujahidin groups took over the state administration from the Communist People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan. With backgrounds as Tajiks, Uzbeks, or Pashtuns, they were part of what can be described as an intellectual elite. The second cohort of refugees from Afghanistan fled the Taliban regime that seized power in 1996 and the so-called war on terror initiated in 2001, and are predominantly young minors and families with a Hazara background (Rytter and Ghandchi 2019; Rytter and Nielsen 2019). During the period between 2015 and 2017, more than 420,000 Afghans applied for asylum in Europe. The rate of recognition granted to Afghan asylum seekers varies widely among the European countries. With the lowest recognition rate in Europe, Denmark granted asylum to 16 percent of its Afghan asylum seekers in 2017—whereas Italy in comparison granted permission status to more than 90 percent of its asylum seekers in the same year (NOAS 2018: 11). Afghan asylum seekers constitute one of the largest groups of asylum seekers in Denmark, but their numbers declined after 2015 due to the increasingly restrictive asylum policy implemented by Denmark’s newly elected liberal-conservative government and the growing influence of the nationalist Danish People’s Party (Verdasco 2019: 555). In 2015, a total of 2,331 Afghans applied for asylum in Denmark. In 2016, this number was halved to 1,127. And in 2017 there was another significant decline—there were only 188 Afghan asylum seekers in that year (NOAS 2018).

## **Using Forum Theater as a Method**

This chapter is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork among twenty refugees from Afghanistan living in or around Copenhagen, Denmark. The fieldwork ran on and off from April 2019 to October 2020. I conducted life history interviews with my Afghan interlocutors, as well as participant observation: visiting them in their homes and following them during a day at language school and so forth. As a central element of my fieldwork, I conducted five theater workshops. The principal method used in these workshops was forum theater. Forum theater was developed by the Brazilian theater practitioner and activist Augusto Boal in the 1970s as a part of what is known as the Theater of the Oppressed and as a tool for collective empowerment and emancipation (Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008). The method challenges the idea of audience members as passive spectators and engages them as what he terms “spect-actors.” Breaking down the boundary between the actors and the audience, Boal intended to create a space for liberation and social change by inviting people to rehearse how to challenge social injustice, power inequalities, and oppression (Erel, Kaptani, and Reynolds. 2017: 307; Österlind 2008: 72). Boal’s fundamental hypothesis

was that if someone performs an action in theatrical fiction, they will be able to perform it in real life as well (Österlind 2008: 72). As a research method, forum theater aims to engage participants in sharing stories of conflict and oppression through performance. Participants construct scenes in small groups, which they perform for the rest of the group. Other participants can then step in and act out different strategies for action. In this way, forum theater challenges the given. I regard the theater space as political in the sense that my interlocutors and I, the anthropologist, could collaboratively address and explore sensitive political issues.

During the workshops I played the role of facilitator. At the same time, I was an anthropologist at work, collaborating with my interlocutors about developing shared knowledge. Because I use theater as an ethnographic method, I do not aim to empower the participants, as Boal intended. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001: 7) have critiqued what they frame as the “tyranny” of participation, referring not to the techniques or the methodology but the discourse of participation. They interpret tyranny as the illegitimate and unjust exercise of power by nongovernmental organizations, who often end up replicating the power differences they want to change (Cooke and Kothari 2001: 4). It is vital to discuss the power structures inherent in any scene and contextualize the conflicts in order to understand the many levels within which the power relations relating to refugees operate (Dwyer 2008; Erel, Kaptani, and Reynolds 2017: 309). I position myself in line with Erel, Kaptani, and Reynolds (2017), who have done extensive research among migrants using participatory theater. In other words, I approach the method in terms of its usefulness for social research in exploring questions about lived experiences, as well as hopes and longings that can be difficult to verbalize, in this case, questions relating to the future.

## **On Stage: Protesting Exclusion**

In what follows, I return to Aliah’s stage enactment to show that she is protesting feeling excluded from the Danish welfare state. I draw on Sara Ahmed’s (2006) notion of disorientation and argue that what Aliah is fighting against is a certain kind of future made available to her as a refugee.

After the scene has played out, Aliah smiles and looks around as if eager to hear the comments of the other participants. She looks casual in her tight sweatpants, sneakers, and black tank top. Her dark brown, almost black hair hangs loose as usual, reaching just below her shoulders. I realize it has grown since I originally met her. Aliah’s story is a dramatization of an experience she had shortly after having arrived in Denmark. She told her story to portray the obstacles she faces in creating the future she wants. For

Aliah, this story is about her past, her present, and her future, in the sense that it represents the power structures within the political system that governs future opportunities for refugees. At the same time, the attitude of the politicians toward refugees is also reflected in the social spaces that refugees encounter, affecting their opportunities to create good futures in Denmark.

The six participants in this workshop comprise a diverse group of both men and women originating from different regions in Afghanistan. The majority of them are in their twenties or early thirties. A few of the young participants have lived in Denmark since they were a few years old, while the rest of them arrived in the country between four and twenty years ago. Precisely because of their differences in terms of ethnicity, religion, language, social and educational background, and time spent in Denmark, this group constitutes a small cross-section of the fragmented Afghan diaspora in Denmark (Khosravi 2018; Rytter and Ghandchi 2019).

The participants agree that the story is about refugees being treated differently than Danes on many levels. As shown above, the principal singles Aliah out and asks her to refrain from entering into a dialogue with the visiting politician. Although the principal wants to teach values such as democracy to newly arrived refugees in language schools, he excludes one of them from the democratic process. Moreover, the politician does not understand the needs of refugees, but categorizes them as welfare exploiters, who should show gratitude for what they get. One participant joins the scene to try to argue with the politician, stating that it is in Denmark's interest to give refugees the best possible opportunities for integration to make them equal members of society. Another participant says that politicians only portray negative images of refugees, and that, even though she has lived in Denmark for twenty years, she is still treated as different. Indeed, scholars have concluded that immigrants in Denmark are often described as different and are therefore seen as outsiders (Hervik 2004; Larsen 2011: 344; Rytter 2010). With a small population of about 5.7 million inhabitants, Denmark is often seen as a monocultural nation-state based on homogeneity in relation to ethnicity, religion, and language, and with a narrow definition of who belongs (Hedetoft 2006). Homogeneity is a norm in Scandinavian countries, where differences can be perceived as a threat to society (Gullestad 2002). The Danish welfare state is based on the universalist Nordic model, with national agencies providing welfare services that are part of the public sector and funded by taxation (Olwig 2012: 2). In exchange, the welfare system, which the population views generally positively, provides free education, free medical aid, and so forth (Olwig 2012). All accepted refugees in Denmark are enrolled in a three-year comprehensive state program called the self-care and repatriation program (*selvforsørgelses- og hjemrejseprogrammet*), under which they are allocated to local communities throughout the coun-

try. The main goal of the program is to make them self-sufficient as soon as possible through employment. While they enroll in language schools or internships, refugees receive a monthly integration benefit (Ministry of Immigration and Integration 2019), which is what Aliah refers to in the introductory paragraph.

Aliah's representation of the attitude of the politician points to what Mikkel Rytter (2019) describes as an imaginary of Danish nationalism. Rytter critiques the concept of integration, which is widely used in Danish political discourse when addressing issues related to migrants, because it is imprecise and used uncritically in both academic analysis and public discourse. He suggests that the notion of integration seen as a social imaginary rests on three scenarios of contemporary Danish nationalism (Rytter 2019). I want to suggest that one of these scenarios, welfare reciprocity, resonates with what Aliah describes as being treated differently. Welfare reciprocity is the idea of a lifelong generalized reciprocity within the Danish welfare state, with citizens being given free education, medical aid, and so forth in return for the payment of high taxes (Rytter 2019: 686). Refugees who have arrived recently have not contributed by paying taxes and should therefore not benefit from the Danish system; as such, they are often regarded as freeloaders suspected of receiving resources to which they are not entitled (Rytter 2019: 687).

Having presented the notion of refugees as exploiters of welfare, I want to point to the exercise of power on which this notion is founded. Sara Ahmed (2006: 10) states that migration can be a process of disorientation in which it is necessary to reinhabit space in order to become reoriented. Feeling at home is about becoming part of a space and saturating that space with bodily matter; thus doing the work of inhabitation takes time (Ahmed 2006: 11). Drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed (2006: 159) writes, "What do we do, if disorientation itself becomes worldly or becomes what is given? . . . The 'upright' body is involved in the world and acts on the world, or even 'can act' insofar as it is already involved. The weakening of this involvement is what causes the body to collapse, and to become an object alongside other objects."

Ahmed (2006) continues by arguing that, since the world is more involved in some people than others, disorientation is unevenly distributed. Our life course is directed in some ways rather than others according to what is given to us. From this perspective, exclusion is a condition of not being able to act since some people are given less opportunity to be involved. I argue that Aliah is protesting against the idea of a certain life course being made available to her as a *refugee*. By enacting her story, Aliah objects to a future in which she is not involved in the world as an equal and does not receive the opportunities to realize her potential.

## Concerns over the Future

Like many other refugees and several of my interlocutors, Aliah feels a constant uncertainty and anxiety about the future. This uncertainty sometimes inspires her to work hard to secure her future. On other occasions she lies in her bedroom, battling insomnia for days or weeks. In 2019, the government introduced new legislation that was intended to mark a so-called paradigm shift in the immigration policy. The decision to frame the new austerity measures in the law as a paradigm shift was a political move designed to signal an entirely new way of understanding Danish immigration policy. According to the paradigm shift, the state no longer aims to integrate refugees and immigrants; rather, it aims to deport them. Current political debate discusses whether this actually represents a groundbreaking change or is merely symbolic (Ingvorsen 2019). Notwithstanding this debate, refugees are already feeling the effects of this shift and remain uncertain about what it portends in the long term. Some days Aliah just shrugs her shoulders and tells me that this is what it is like to be a refugee. Other days she admits that she is very afraid about what will happen if they decide to deport her to Afghanistan. I have heard similar concerns from Afghans in Denmark who have lived here almost their entire lives but who do not have Danish citizenship. They argue that, even with a permanent residence permit, they cannot be sure of staying in Denmark, because they can never know what laws might change tomorrow, which could turn their world upside down. Mikkel Rytter and Narges Ghandchi (2019: 14) argue that Afghan refugees in Denmark live in a state of extended uncertainty that reaches beyond the time spent in an asylum center and into their lives, with many of them working in temporary internships with residence permits of limited duration. The threat of deportation is always present because the Danish government has reached a bilateral agreement with the Afghan government about accepting rejected asylum seekers in return for development aid (Rytter and Ghandchi 2019). Denmark has already declared several areas of Afghanistan safe and has started to deport rejected asylum seekers.

## Caught Up by the Past

The idea of refugees as passive recipients of aid stands in sharp contrast to Aliah’s own experience as a refugee and her self-image of being a strong woman who helps her family. In the following, I show that the struggle to be involved in society and avoid a sense of disorientation relates not only to dealing with the immigration system but to coming to terms with the past and negotiating social relations.



When Aliah addresses the politician on stage, she enacts the role of a young woman who is part of a larger family unit. Indeed, Aliah's story about fleeing Afghanistan is closely intertwined with that of her family. Aliah's brother, who was a soldier in Afghanistan, was killed by the Taliban just before the family fled the country. He was the fourth child her parents lost, and when a Taliban leader wanted to marry Aliah, the family fled. After the family was granted a temporary residence permit in Denmark, they moved to Copenhagen. The municipality started to use Aliah as an interpreter for her parents and siblings during visits to the doctor or hospital and meetings at the municipality. She describes this task as very stressful, and it prevented her from going to school on those days. Eventually she had had enough and confronted the caseworker, refusing to perform the task any more. The death of her brother, the family's experiences fleeing Afghanistan, and Aliah's growing depression alienated her from the rest of her family, and at the age of eighteen, she decided to leave her family and live on her own. She still visits her family, but she does not feel a part of it—instead she feels like a stranger. Aliah's parents are ashamed that she does not live with them because their tradition dictates that daughters should live with their parents until they are married. Relations between the young generation of Afghans and their parents have to be renegotiated in a dramatic context of violence and forced displacement (Abbassi and Monsutti 2017). It seems impossible to identify the main reason why Aliah feels estranged from her family, but perhaps her situation is simply a part of her process of becoming a young woman within a context marked by significant ruptures.

It is not only her family from whom Aliah feels distanced. She also feels socially distanced from young Danes her own age, due to the profound differences between them. She explained:

I still feel alone. I feel like the new society does not understand me, and I cannot match it. When I am with young Danes my own age, they are very childish. When they talk about their problems, I am shocked that they see choosing destinations for vacations or not being understood by their parents as problems. My life is like a movie for them; they cannot understand. So I don't tell them anything.

Her sense of not being understood by the new society thus not only touches upon encounters with the political system, but also influences her social life and family relations.

Aliah was diagnosed with posttraumatic stress disorder and has frequent flashbacks to her flight from Afghanistan. The experience of her flight is inscribed in Aliah's body, sporadically invading her everyday life. When she talks about her flashbacks, she does so in a quiet voice: "When we arrived in Denmark our body and thoughts were still fleeing. Sometimes when I was about to fall asleep in the bed and tried to open my eyes, they were already

open. And now, when I begin to feel calm, the flashbacks come." Aliah and her family lived in three different asylum centers for a total of one and a half years. While they were waiting for their asylum application to be processed, Aliah felt she was still fleeing every time they moved from one asylum center to the next. When they moved to their own place after they obtained a residence permit, she began to feel calmer, but then the flashbacks came—like something she needed to remember. The feeling of having to flee is stuck in her, she explains. She describes it as a time she cannot escape.

Returning to Ahmed (2006), I highlight the temporal aspect of disorientation. Ahmed (2006: 158, 160) describes moments of disorientation as bodily experiences—feelings of being shattered, in which the body moves out of the world and one moment does not follow another. Instead, the present moment is experienced as a sense of loss, with something being absent that was once present. According to Ahmed (2006: 160), it can be a violent feeling to have a failed sense of orientation and to have the experience that the lifelines you follow are blocked and cause stress rather than enable action. If we understand Aliah's flashbacks as moments of disorientation, we can say she is brought back in time to re-experience painful moments that disrupt her sense of time in the present and prevent her body from feeling safe. Instead, she is constantly reminded of a past that becomes painfully present.

Social conflict can often be caused by disagreements about how we measure time and space and may therefore result in an experience of being out of time or place with others (Ahmed 2006: 13). Even though Aliah inhabits the same social space as Danes—she is a student and works full time for a grocery chain—she often says that she needs to cope with her past experiences before moving forward in life and finding a boyfriend, making Danish friends, and so forth. Trying to navigate an uncertain future, she is caught up by her past to a degree that makes her feel lonely and incompatible with her new society. We often imagine our life in terms of having a direction, with the future being based on the present (Ahmed 2006: 20). At this point in life, Aliah's present seems to be temporally entangled with her past despite her efforts to forge her own future.

## **Conclusion: Future Potential**

"Do Muslim women really need saving?" asks Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) in her seminal article, which critiques the discourse used in the United States and Europe to justify entering the war in Afghanistan. I hope that my single case study of Aliah has enabled me to portray one of many young, strong women from Afghanistan with refugee backgrounds, who are fighting structures of power at various levels and insisting on defining their own directions in life.

Aliah's enactment on stage is not a story of submission or oppression. At the end of the workshop, she insists on showing us what happened after the debate, when she approached the politician. She starts to act out the scene, stands up, leans over the politician, and scolds her in a sharp voice: "What do you mean when you say we get the taxpayer's money? We pay full taxes here in Denmark. What do you mean when you say we are not a part of Denmark? I live here; I have a right to be here." Aliah breaks off and laughs: "I guess I am a rebel. I was really angry, but I am happy I did it; it was my right." Aliah has shared numerous stories with me about fighting for her right to live her own life, such as the time at the asylum school when she was bullied by young Afghan men and took up the fight, or when her father was reprimanded by an older Afghan man because she was not wearing a hijab, and she spoke up for herself. Aliah believes she has inherited her rebellious nature from her family. She smiles proudly when she talks about how her father always defended women's rights in Afghanistan in front of the other men in the village.

On stage, Aliah plays the part of herself, albeit a version of herself that is four years younger. When enacting her own story, various temporalities seem to merge, as she acts out her present and creates a bridge into her future. On stage in front of an audience, Aliah turns the power balance between the politician and herself upside down and shows that she is a fighter. Theater work is emotive and relies on an active embodiment of the experiences of the participants within a space of potentiality and possibility (D'Onofrio 2017a; Kaptani and Yuval-Davis 2008: 6). In this space of potentiality, I suggest that Aliah draws on her past experience to portray a glimpse of a future that she regards as good. In this future, she is not subjected passively to the insecurity of the political system and treated as a refugee; instead she bases her actions on important moral values of her own, such as strength, agency, and independence. Moments of disorientation are vital, and the feeling of being shattered might become a permanent crisis—or the body might reorient itself again (Ahmed 2006: 157–58). The question is what we do with these moments. In Ahmed's words, Aliah insists on being an upright body that acts and is involved in the world. By insisting on her right to be included as an equal in the Danish welfare state, she tries to overcome a sense of being objectified and to redirect her lifeline toward the future.

In general, this chapter points to the difficult conditions for futuremaking in Denmark as a consequence of the increasingly restrictive immigration policy aimed toward deportation. The temporary and insecure residence permits render Afghan refugees temporally excluded and continuously reproduce refugees as Others (Tuckett 2018: 149).

Aliah's case illustrates the many challenges that young refugees face when performing the difficult existential task of anchoring themselves (Verdasco

2018) in new ways and working to build their futures in a new society. It is not for me to determine Aliah's future or to assess her prospects in Denmark (Dalsgaard and Frederiksen 2013). Instead, I focus on the potential of disorientation in the process of opening up new futures.

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