BECOMING ADULT

"To Everyone, Homeland is Kashmir":

Cultural Conceptions of Migration, Wellbeing, Adulthood and Future among Young Afghans in Europe

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Researching young migrants' uncertain futures

I have relatives and friends in Europe. They send money back to their families. They have jobs and documents. I saw their photos in Europe and they looked good. I knew that if I go there, I could work and have a good job and send money back to my family. I did not come to the United Kingdom to enjoy the landscape. I only knew it is where I can have a good job. I did not come here for leisure. "To everyone, homeland is Kashmir."

Afghan youth: new destinations, new aspirations

In the opening quote, Abdullah, a young Afghan under immigration control in the United Kingdom, uses a proverb in Pashto to express his mixed feeling about migration: *Har châta khpal watan kashmir de* (هر چاته خپل وطن کشمیر دی), "To everyone, homeland is Kashmir." In South Asia and beyond, the famed valley has the reputation to be the most beautiful place in the world. Although mobility in its various forms is part of the Afghan social and cultural landscape, past and present, Abdullah metaphorically expresses the idea that he would not have left his country of origin unless forced by some compelling reasons. Abdullah's brief statement weaves together themes explored in this paper. It expresses the feeling that there is no future in the homeland, how dear it might be. A meaningful life can only be built going to Europe, through tangible things like getting a document and finding a job. It also tells stories of family dispersion and circulation of images, of social expectations and obligations.

Studying Afghan youth and its transition to adulthood in a situation of mobility is challenging in many ways. With the eclipse of the modernist notion of 'social class,' terms such as 'generation,' but also 'gender,' 'race,' 'ethnicity,' have gained unprecedented prominence (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 293). The category of generation has been classically understood as people whose identity has been structured by the same historical and social event (Mannheim 1952). Among Afghans, people who became adult in the 1980s and 1990s have been marked by the Soviet invasion and ensuing war. For many among the younger generations, the most significant experience was to have been socialized as refugees in Pakistan and Iran more than conflict and flight per se. They grew up with the feeling of being estranged from both their countries of origin and asylum, of being a wandering generation searching for its own place. Even if they may have – like Abdullah – a projected nostalgia for Afghanistan, a homeland they have never seen in peace, their cultural aspirations and references are inevitably different from those of their parents.

The literature about forced migration has focused mostly on adults and to some extend children. Anthropological studies of refugee youth only recently developed. They have shown that young people living in situations of prolonged displacement are capable to engage in activities transcending national borders and local cultures. Their strategies often allow them to be independent of humanitarian aid structures (Chatty, Crivello, Lewando Hundt 2005; Chatty 2007). It is increasingly recognized that youth is more than a transition period from childhood to adulthood; being young is not merely being in-between and has to be grasped for itself. Young people are not just learners but creators of new values and behaviours (White 2016). However, although it is now an object of study in its own right, youth has to be situated within family organization and broader social structure. Nobody would deny that boundaries between age groups vary across time and space. But in the case of Afghans, intergeneration – as well as gender – relations are renegotiated in a dramatic context of violence and forced displacement.

Triggered by the Communist coup of 1978 and the Soviet intervention of 1979, the Afghan refugee crisis has been one of the most massive and protracted of the last decades with more than six million displaced people in 1990 (approximately 40% of the people of concern falling under the mandate of the UNHCR at that time). After the fall of communist government in 1992 and the advance of the Taliban, Afghans kept seeking refuge in Pakistan and Iran to escape repression. The invasion of Afghanistan by US-led forces in late 2001 caused a short-live wave of optimism. From 2002 to 2014 some four million Afghans repatriated mainly from the neighbouring countries of first asylum (UNHCR 2014). However, the National Unity government formed in 2015 has proven incapable of tackling insecurity, unemployment, inequality and poverty. Despite hundreds of billions of dollars of foreign aid money, Afghanistan still ranks at or near the bottom of many human development indicators. The urban population continues to swell, while rural areas are not able to integrate more people due to demographic pressures and limited agricultural potential.

After the withdrawal of NATO forces in 2014, people are massively leaving again, including urban families who have lost protection and fear to be the target of retaliatory action for their supposed connivance with foreign troops. In 2015, there are still more than 2.6 million Afghan refugees – second only to Syrians – and nearly one million internally displaced persons (UNHCR, 2015). Unfortunately for the Afghans, their options may seem significantly more limited today than they were during the anti-Soviet *jihad*. The strategic context has changed and Afghan refugees encounter an increasingly adverse protection environment and a gloomy economic situation in Afghanistan's neighbouring countries. Nowadays Afghans do not leave for Pakistan or Iran like in the 1980s. They have to find new destinations and try to reach Europe. Indeed, new generations of Afghan refugees are forced to move due to comparable factors as their parents, but they are compelled to seek

protection in more distant places and resort to even riskier routes. The number of Afghans arriving to Europe gradually grew in the 1990s; the number of asylum applications in the European Union (EU) reached in 2001 a first peak of 48,000. The international intervention in Afghanistan in late 2001 and the prospects of peace and reconstruction prompted a decrease in applications. But in recent years, this trend was again reversed. Since 2009, with more than 20,000 new cases per year, Afghans were regularly among the largest groups applying for asylum – along with Syrians, Eritreans and Iraqis. In 2015, about 1.3 million first time asylum seekers applied for international protection in the European Union (EU). With 178 200, Afghans were only second to Syrians.[1]

Young men are overrepresented among those arriving in Europe, often from Pakistan and Iran. Many refer to the tremendous social pressure they feel from their relatives left in the country of origin or first asylum. For them, success is understood as getting an official form of protection, an education and a job, and eventually marrying a girl from home and bringing her to Europe to build a family. Failure is not an option. Being returned signifies that the money that was collected for the journey has been lost. In addition to the serious repercussions of an individual's repatriation on his or her security, it is a blow to the domestic economy and would be experienced as a social shame by the whole family.

These young men and women use social media to express their frustrations or put on stage their lives. In so doing, they circulate images and contribute to shape expectations and conceptions of wellbeing and success. They are at the same time consumers and producers of a new imaginary that oscillates between a very controlled representation of themselves and a cathartic release of emotional tensions and anxieties caused by the experience of displacement and solitude. Through this flow of information that cuts across national borders, Afghan youth coming to Europe invent new forms of social inclusion and political participation. In online chats and rap songs, they often convey a double feeling of estrangement towards host populations in the places they have crossed or where they currently reside, but also towards their kith and kin in the places they have left. They also talk about their common experience of displacement and the hardship they suffer, oscillating between ontological loneliness and a form of universalism from bellow that transcends parochial expressions of belonging.

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[1] eurostat newsrelease, 44/2016, 4 March 2016.

Methodological consideration on situated knowledge

Using a qualitative approach, this paper examines the cultural narratives that Afghan youth in Europe develop on social media to express their views on migration, wellbeing, and transition to adulthood. Thematic and semiotic analyses have been used. The research material was drawn from a range of sources. Face to face as well as Skype interviews with young male Afghans who have gone 'illegal' in the UK or young female asylum seekers on the way to and in Europe have been done specifically for this paper. The ethnographic materials were also drawn from contemporary literary works, mainly created by Afghans who have experienced long-term displacement in their life. Online media, which play a key role in expressing ideas about migration and wellbeing, were therefore one of our key field sites. There were issues with anonymity and identifiability of the young people we interviewed face-to-face. We used personal network in Europe and social media to identify young Afghans who decided to live 'out of system'. They were generally happy to speak provided that no trace of their real identities were mentioned on the paper.

The authors – one Afghan born in Iran and residing for some time in the UK, one European working for years as a researcher among Afghans – participate in their different capacities in the social networks of Afghan young refugees and asylum seekers. With regard to content analysis of Internet-based social media such as Facebook, it should be mentioned that they had already had previous contact with most people who appear in this paper. Some were based in Afghanistan, others were of varied age and legal immigration status in Europe. Both authors are based in Europe and that may have impact on the accessibility of cultural materials produced in Afghanistan. We tried our best to continuously study newspapers that have on-line versions. Many prominent Afghan TV channels are accessible by satellite as well as YouTube website. This paper is based on situated knowledge on how social media shapes ideals of migration and wellbeing.

Social media and the Afghan transnational space

Since the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001, Afghanistan has witnessed a spectacular development of media. In 2016, there are more than thirty TV channels operating in Afghanistan, most of which are accessible via satellite for Afghans living outside the country. There are more than one hundred and forty radio stations, more than twenty newspapers, and an increasing number of periodicals. Similarly, the usage of information and communication technologies has become increasingly popular. Besides, many Afghans have skipped the computer experience and use their smartphones with access to the Internet to connect to the world. Among the various types of Internet-based social media, the usage of Facebook is growing fast among Afghans. It has provided a transnational space for

instant dialogue on various issues between people scattered in different places. Many Afghans who live outside Afghanistan post comments in Persian, Pashto or Uzbek; they react to current affairs in Afghanistan but also offer a window on their countries of residence. For Hadiya, a young female asylum seeker living alone in the Netherlands, Facebook gives an opportunity to be away from family and at the same time be home:

> Facebook is the best way to keep in touch with my friends because they update their status and post pictures. As I am alone here, it is a perfect way to fill up my loneliness. For me, Facebook is like going home. It is like seeing people I know. It is a good way to keep my old friends.

The Internet has opened up new possibilities and new forms of technological and geographical mobility give rise to new publics and new public spheres that transform the meaning of community, citizenship and nation (Bernal, 2005). Social media can be significant for refugees when the social ties do not exist or are not solid in the place of residence. Some migrants and refugees do not know anyone in the country where they live and rely on their Internet-based social networks. Through social networks a migrant can feel close to home by receiving not only daily but perhaps hourly updates on how the family and friends are doing back in home country.

But feelings of loneliness are not only caused by the complex negotiations with the host society. When Hadiya claimed for asylum, she had to stay in a refugee camp until her application was processed. She found disrespectful the attitudes of fellow Afghan refugees including Afghan families towards her as a single young girl. People did not approve her decision to leave Afghanistan alone. Similarly, Tahira, a young female Afghan asylum seeker in Turkey, has cut any relationship with most Afghans in Turkey and Iran where she grew up. She keeps in contact only with a few selected and trusted people. According to her experience, women among Afghans are expected to travel either with a closely related man or with their families, while young single, widowed and divorced female migrants are stigmatised. Those women are less likely to benefit from social networks of Afghans in transit or in destination countries. They might only get support from other Afghan single women, or UN officials or charities aimed at single women. Here Internet-based social media can play an important role to gain help and support. Both these young women use social media to rely on their trusted networks.

Both Tahira and Hadiya treat Facebook as a platform to raise their voice. Tahira uses Facebook as a space to question the conceptions of family life that dominate among Afghans and produce alternative values and ideas. She is raising controversies and likes to be satirical in posting photos that normally a woman from Afghanistan would not post. In one occasion she posted a photograph of herself in a shop trying a new pair of trousers. In reaction to that image, many men tried to intimidate her by asking if she was wearing any underwear. Another man messaged her privately to say he managed to

masturbate with that picture. Tahira thinks her posts are influential, especially among Afghan refugee girls back in Iran who can easily connect with her as they share the same experience, and that is the reason they trigger reactions. She finds a degree of security and less vulnerability in social media compared to the physical world. In addition, she finds Facebook easy to handle as there is little logistical needs.

Social media have gained a key – although inherently ambiguous and ambivalent – significance in the Afghan transnational social field. They enhance communication between distant relatives and friends; they may foster a feeling of co-destiny between people with a shared experience but also of being negatively judged; they also offer an arena for contesting prevailing moralities, for playing with burdensome social norms, a virtual space of projected solidarity but also a channel for social expectations and sanctions.

Pain and opportunity: migration as a double bind experience

Migration is on Internet a recurrent topic, which is addressed with ambivalent feelings. The two faceted representations of migration coexist: suffering and separation, but also opportunities and autonomy. When Afghans talk about their experience of mobility, the term *âwâragi* is most used. It means 'wandering,' 'vagrancy,' while *âwâra* refers to a person who is in *âwâragi*, a wanderer, a vagrant, a vagabond. The semantic field also implies the idea of being separated from one's homeland and having to change one's location unwillingly, a feeling expressed by Abdullah in the opening quote. *Ghorbat* is another word recurrently associated with *âwâragi*. It describes the status of being stranger and lonely in a place different from one's homeland. The two terms have negative connotations and are often interchangeably used. The term *mohâjerat*, which means 'migration,' and *tab'id*, 'exile,' are less common. *Mohâjer* designates a person who has migrated out of his/her home country and has a more religious connotation (Centlivres 1988; Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 2000; Edwards 1994). The term *panâhenda* also exists as a literary reference to a refugee – without the religious connotation. The term *mosâfer* literally means 'traveller' and tends to designate anybody who is away of his or her usual residence.

Zari, a female Afghan under immigration control in Germany, writes the sentence below on her page on Facebook:

> *Âwâragi* means to be born in Tehran, to be thrown away to Kabul, and, to stay in Berlin; but nowhere you live the 'life'.

The post triggered many comments. Zari describes herself as an *âwâra* who cannot enjoy journeys imposed on her.

- Shafiqa, newly settled in Australia, reacts: *Stay* âwâra *as there is death in immobility.*
- Zari: *I feel upset when I remember the reality of being an* âwâra.
- Shafiqa: Âwâragi *is in the blood of our generation. Just imagine! In three decades, we have experienced the misfortunes of three centuries. Despites this, we still should stay alive.*
- Zari: *In these three decades, three generations became* âwâra *and the fourth generation is on the way but without home, in suspension, and with no identity.*
- Suraya, a woman based in the United States: *Dear Zari, life is not something beyond this. That's life.*
- Zari: *Our life is an absolute* âwâragi.
- Hashmat intervenes with a free verse: *We should put the framework of our identity under our arm (as a sign of leaving), as the walls of home are rotted and we are still* âwâra *in the streets that are not going to warm (welcome) us.*
- Zari: *The streets that did not warm us and the rotted walls that could not bear framework of our identity.*
- Hashmat: '*And if these rotted walls collapse, thousands and thousands of the lost people will rise from under soil.*'
- Kousha, based in India adds: Âwâragi *means to be uprooted (*kandah shodan*).*
- Munirah: *I was born in Kabul, granted asylum in Hamburg, but this is just the beginning of my story... Then, I am thrown to Norway – everything had to start from scratch – and then I am thrown to England – everything from scratch again –, then I am thrown to Scotland – everything from scratch again – and maybe soon I'll be thrown again to another place. Perhaps life is all about this constant* uprooting?
- Sadiq: *We are an* âwâra *generation.*
- Shafiqa: *The generation of being in continual* âwâragi*, moving from one* ghorbat *to another. Even if you are not thrown from one land to another, the fact that your mind is uprooted is enough to prevent you to rest in one place, even in the land that has granted you asylum.*

A similarly discomforting perception of migration is conveyed by the work of Mehdi Amini**,** a cartoonist based in Kabul[2]. In one cartoon, Mehdi Amini illustrates a man who is carrying a suitcase. Here, the suitcase is a symbol of migration. The man has crossed a line, which may symbolize a border. One of his legs is a loose and opening knit with the hank left in other side of the border (his home country?).
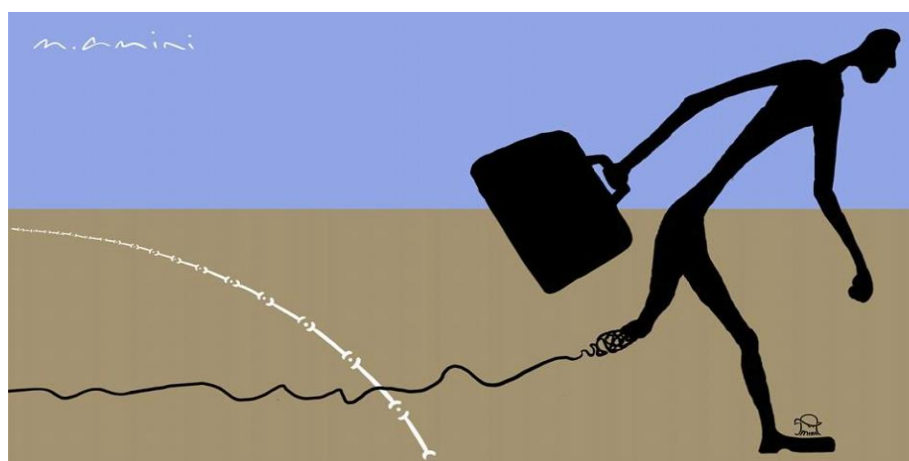
This cartoon expresses the idea that when a person migrates, he stays attached to the place of origin, he leaves one part of himself in his home country and migration might slowly destroy him as the

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[2] http://www.bbc.com/persian/afghanistan/2014/08/140824_k03_afghan_caricature_exhibition.

knitted body may eventually vanish. Living the place of origin is perilous but somehow inescapable. Indeed, the walls of home are rooted and may collapse at any moment. And what is home for people already born and grown up in a country of asylum? Shafiqa used a Sufi trope to respond to Zari's complaint of being *âwâra*: "there is death in immobility." But the streets in Germany, Norway, England, Australia, the United States are not welcoming. There is no apparent end to the wandering life of the *âwâra* generation; *âwâragi* is not a transient period of life but becomes an ontological status.

Migration is a painful experience but simultaneously also opens new possibilities. Europe is considered a place filled with opportunities, a place where asylum seekers and refugees are under pressure to be successful. Young men who migrate have to prove their masculinity and capacity to behave like responsible adult (Monsutti 2007). They are expected to find a job and send back remittances. Fewer young women migrate autonomously to Europe but those who manage to do it are also expected to support their family.

Afghan families have been exposed to images of wealthy people living in Europe and migrants are required to fulfil these images. It is a source of pride but also competition for families in Afghanistan to portray their members as successful migrants. It is considered a shame both for the migrant as well as the family not to realise those rosy images. Shame forces many young migrants to hide the hardship they have experienced. It is considered inappropriate to forget about one's family and send no remittances. Social media such as Facebook represent one of the ways young migrants use to portray the positive images they are expected to achieve.

Mobility participates in a subtle mix of competition and solidarity. On the one hand, migration to Europe is conceived as a school of life where only the fittest will succeed. On the other, migration and dispersion are seen as a means to spread risk; it represents a kind of social, economic and political insurance. The unaccompanied minors and young adults who move to Europe are invested in the double mission to prove their individual value and prepare a better future for their community. While protection needs and access to livelihoods, education and other social services may be key driving factors leading to displacement, questions of prestige and status are influencing the choices which are ultimately made by Afghans on the move.

Claiming dignity

In a rap song called *Hoviat*[3], "identity," the singer Habib Teimuri, reacts to the production of shame from within. He is based in Canada but has previously lived in Iran and Turkey. *Hoviat* is a response

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[3] https://soundcloud.com/seyyed-sharif-saeidi/7rivi5jatya8 and also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kiTj9jWHmyQ

to a Hazaragi song by Mir Chaman Sultani.[4] Making fun of Afghans who speak Persian with Iranian accent, saying *nun* instead of *nân,* "bread," *khiabun* instead of *sarak*, "street," Sultani targets people who have left Afghanistan and have supposedly forgotten their real identity. Teimuri responds in his song that he might have acquired a foreign accent, but "under my skin, on the face of my bones, it is written, Afghani!", *zer-e pusht-em, dar sar-e ostokhan-em, neweshta shoda, Afghâni!* The clip proceeds. In what looks like an industrial zone in a Western country, a group of asylum seekers is checked by the police. Media images appear alternately with scenes of refugee life.

In an interview given to Radio France Farsi, Habib Teimuri comments on the clip. No matter if he has Iranian accent or not, he remains Afghan. People risk their life in order to build their future. They experience discrimination in host countries, but when ostracism comes from fellow countrymen, it hurts even more. Teimuri himself has been a migrant and has faced sarcastic remarks since he opened his eyes. He left Afghanistan because he did not have perspectives in the land of his family, he did not migrate 'for fun,' but because he could not predict what will happen to him in the next five minutes due to suicide bombings and generalised violence. *Jan shirin ast*, 'life is sweet,' in the sense that it is precious; people have to take care of themselves.

According to Teimuri, many young Afghans choose Rap or Hip-Hop to as a means of expression, because there is no border in these styles. Rap is about issues that harm human beings. Artistic expression is a vector to release emotional tensions and reverse the stigma attached to the condition of being supposedly uprooted. Teimuri identifies himself firstly as a human being, secondly as a Muslim, and thirdly as an Afghan. Against the parochial identity affirmation of Sultani, he valorises the fact of being a young Afghan migrant as a way of being attached to a place of origin and open to broader processes at the same time. The fact of being Afghan is not grounded here in peculiar cultural features or an accent but in an experience of displacement and exclusion, the feeling of rejection, the risk of deportation. Being an Afghan and being a Rap singer transcend borders. Teimuri's song and clip might be understood as a form of universalism from bellow. They convey the voices of Afghan refugee youth who face normative judgements and are seeking recognition at two levels: from older generations who might consider that young people on the move are betraying cultural values; from the host populations and asylum authorities who systematically doubt the veracity of their claims.

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[4] http://urozgan.org/fa-Af/article/1673/ and also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3uYmHmc-Ws#t=27

Material and social wellbeing

For many of our young interlocutors, the opportunity to have a stable job with a decent salary is the road to *khoshbakhti*, "wellbeing." A stable job enables one to address the basic and essential needs. One of the main inspirations for people like Abdullah (see opening quote) was his relatives who had migrated to Europe and came back to Afghanistan as European citizens with established life. Abdullah sends parts of his salary to his family in Kabul. He hopes that in few years, his father would set up a business so that Abdullah does not need to send money anymore. He needs resources himself to fulfil his wish to study civil engineering. He would eventually marry an Afghan woman who is brought up in the UK. However, Abdullah finds life in the UK disappointing due to his uncertain situation since he turned eighteen and his visa was not renewed. He has already appealed twice and hopes that through the third appeal he will obtain a residence permit. If the application fails, he will try to claim again for asylum in another European country. Returning to Afghanistan is not an option for him, considering the sacrifices made by him and his family and the deteriorating security in Nangarhar, the province he comes from.

Similarly, for Haroon, a young Afghan man who entered illegality after he turned eighteen, wellbeing means:

> to have a proper document so that one can work fearlessly and confidently and earn lots of money. Well-being is to be financially in a good situation. We can have good health by having money and of course we would be able to marry and have our own house.

For Haroon, more than having a value in itself, money seems to be a mean to achieve social autonomy and gain respect. He has an entrepreneurial mind-set. He tried to open a currency exchange business in London, but he did not dare to continue in the fear of being arrested. He preferred for the time being to go back to his uncle's pizza shop. Mahmoud, who is in his early twenties, has a similar experience. He went into illegality when he turned eighteen. He has kept in contact with some his English friends from high school. They are either in a university or have a full time job. He envies seeing them on the right track while he is in an uncertain situation. He hides his real situation from them fearing they would treat him differently. Having no valid document has made him very *tarsou*, a 'fearful person.' Every time he goes out with fear. This uncertainty and fear has taken away his confidence and had negative psychological impact. He has internalised illegality, almost as an ontological status (De Genova 2013; Willen 2007).

The risks taken by illegally migrating varies for young men and women. Young women are less likely to travel alone and travel most often with families. However, our interlocutors mentioned several cases of sexual harassment, not only by traffickers but also by fellow male refugees. Tahira

complained that young Afghan men who came to Europe bring their misogynistic attitudes with them and harass women on the way or once in the destination countries. She says: "Young Afghan men escape from Afghanistan, but we escape from these men who made life difficult for us." According to her, Afghan young men usually migrate because they have created a fancy future in their mind and they go to Europe to realise that dream, while Afghan young women strive to get the freedom these young men take for granted.

Concept of adulthood

Traditionally in Islam, a Muslim starts performing religious obligations when he or she reaches physiological and sexual puberty, which is considered to be the moment for stepping into the world of adulthood. For boys, the physiological puberty starts when they experience nocturnal emissions. Girls officially reach puberty with their menstruation. The age of puberty is called *sen-e taklif*, i.e. the 'the responsibility age,' when a person has to assume new duties in life, including religious ones. However, the determination of the exact age varies in different branches of Islam and jurisprudences.

In Europe, a bureaucratic conception of majority prevails on perceptions of physiological maturity. The age eighteen is legally defining adulthood. Afghans are therefore confronted to novel notions of childhood and adulthood in the migration context. As explained above, through various channels, Afghans have learnt the importance of age when one claims for asylum in European countries. Afghans on the move constantly deal with the expressions of *zer-e sin*, literally "under-age," and *bâlâ-ye sin*, "over-age." The difference between minors and adults is decisive in almost every aspect of the European asylum process. Afghans know that "under-aged" people are more likely to secure access to institutional assistance and services and eventually be granted asylum. Therefore, they try to either send off their children to Europe when they are young, or claim to be under-aged. In addition, many families try to travel with their children to reduce the risk of being rejected. Several people we have been able to interview, however, prefer to be qualified as adults to retain a higher level of control and freedom of movement. The benefits and costs of the two different statuses are often described as contradictory by young Afghans and contribute to a certain level mental stress and ambiguity.

Abdullah, about whom we already talked and who has been in the UK for a long time and exposed to a different narrative about adulthood, considers he never experienced adolescence as a transition period from childhood to adulthood:

> I used to work in Afghanistan in a mechanic shop when I was a child. I still work here in the UK where I am an adult. I am not like teenagers here who have lots of fun until eighteen and then they are considered adult. They have their family beside them and the family takes care of them. But I am the only one and I have been working since I was very young. I do not know when I became adult.

For young men like Abdullah, turning into eighteen often meant to go into illegality and not to become legally a adult. It is not about gaining new rights but about losing legal protection. The psychological consequences of having fallen into uncertainty is sever for them and has impact on their self-esteem.

If Abdullah feels he did not experience adolescence like his British contemporaries, Haroon fears that he will never become an adult in a context of migration. His life as a young adult would have been different if he had stayed in Afghanistan. He is the eldest son of the family. He would have been married by now and had children, like his younger brother, and would have joined his father or his uncle in their business. Being still single in the UK, unable to fulfil the social and reproductive duty of an adult man, he believes that his younger brothers are taking on his role as eldest son. He acquired a preconception of life in Europe through Bollywood movies when he was still in Afghanistan. Many Afghans who spent time in Pakistan can understand Urdu/Hindi, the languages spoken in most of those films. Most Bollywood films are musicals with the recurrent feature that singing and dancing are not performed in the location where the main plot is set, but in European urban and rural landscapes that look fancy to non-European audiences. In addition, when the story is about a rich boy falling in love with a poor girl, the boy's family usually has a connection with a European country, generally the United Kingdom and more specifically London. Haroon was aware of London's landmarks, thanks to his familiarity with Indian cinema. He was so excited when he reached the city that he decided to go to the London Eye and take a river cruise on the Thames before lodging his asylum claim, in fear of not seeing them if the application would go wrong. He needed to appropriate a space that was the object of his imaginary and projected dreams.

Mahmoud was fourteen when he was granted a four-year visa in the UK. When he applied for social welfare, he was denied care and support on the ground that he did not look fourteen. The local council authorities took him to court and they won. Mahmoud became 'older' through an administrative decision. He appealed against the judgement and managed to 'get back his age.' After this battle, he realised he had a bigger challenge ahead: to renew his visa after he would turn eighteen. He spent years to convince the immigration officers that he was in danger in Afghanistan. He failed and had no option but to go into illegality. He said:

> I was very young and did not know how I should behave in a court. But court behaved to me as if I was an adult. I did not know what to bring to court to satisfy them. Whatever I brought, they seemed not to care. I was too young to deal with the court. I wanted to take care of my school and wanted to live like my classmates without having to worry about visa.

Hadiya, as a woman, also believes that she has not lived the teenaged life and adulthood life the way she would have preferred. She thinks her experience of these periods were not similar to the 'global

standard.' She believes that she could not live like a 'typical teenager' and her concerns were those of an adult, such as planning for her future. She says:

> Here in the Netherland, I must behave like an adult because I have no family to rely on. Here, teenagers have fun and let the family think of the serious matters for them. But I am the only one here who cares about myself and I have to be very careful.

She lives in an apartment alone and finds it the most difficult part as she has to deal with all problems by herself. However, she finds herself an independent person in the real sense. She believes migration allowed her to taste the flavour of independence that she never felt in Afghanistan.

Migration participates in the social and cultural landscape of Afghans, even those who did not travel to Europe or North America. For young Afghan men, migration might be a rite of passage to adulthood, an opportunity to build their masculinity and manhood and take on financial responsibilities (Monsutti 2007). Through their mobile trajectory, they may gain social autonomy from their parents. Once they are economically successful, they are ready to marry. However, many young men and women we have been able to interview, had a very different experience. They consider to have lost their childhood being away from their families, have had no adolescence comparable to the European youth they see around them, and be prevented to become full adults too. Indeed, their life in Europe does not give them access to the social markers that define adulthood among Afghans: marriage, parenthood, and economic sustainability. Turning into eighteen under immigration control, they are deprived of some social welfare services that they benefited when they were minor without acquiring the capacity to act autonomously. They get older without going through the normal stages of life as socially defined. Here migration with all its challenges is not a rite of passage to adulthood and way to build masculinity. In any form and by any means, Abdullah, Mahmoud, Haroon or Hadiya, as young men and women, all share nostalgia for adolescence and the feeling to go from one stolen age to another.

Concluding remarks

Millions of Afghans throughout Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and in the rest of the world have now access to the Internet and use their smartphones for communication and exchange of information. They increasingly use social media to reflect and comment on current affairs in Afghanistan, but also to express their aspirations and experience: What is their ideal for the future? How do they construe wellbeing? How is migration seen as a means to build a successful life? Among the various types of Internet-based social media, Afghans seem to prefer Facebook. Facebook has contributed to the creation of an open transnational space for debate among Afghans. It reproduces a way of communicating through interpersonal relations, direct encounters and oral expression. It is used to

keep people connected and amplify networks of communication. Neither television programmes nor the written press can play such a role.

However, the modes of communication need to be decoded. Most young people who aspire to leave do not announce that they have decided to leave Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran. There is usually a period of silence when they begin their journey and until they reach their destination. The difficulty of making this decision and the challenges associated with it are not shared on social media. People tend to keep the unhappy news to themselves and post success stories instead. Obstacles and difficulties encountered during the journey are considered too private – even shameful – to be shared; they are expressed through abstract statements on *âwâragi*. Staying behind, in Afghanistan, Pakistan or Iran, is equated to a moral and social disgrace, while seeking refuge in Europe – however distressing this might be – is conceived as an inevitable denouement of the current state of their life.

Another source contributing to shaping the aspirations of Afghans, especially the youth, in their country of origin or first asylum is represented by Bollywood, which produces movies that are more popular than US, European or Iranian ones. Afghans consume scenes set in Europe that contribute to inform their conceptions of what a good life means. Even before they migrate, they have acquired a somewhat stereotyped, polished image of Europe, organised by landmarks like Big Ben, the London Eye or the Swiss Alps.

Between Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, the intensity of cross-border mobility is high, although the circulation of people from one place to another was more developed at the time of the anti-Soviet jihad and ensuing war of attrition between factions (1980s-1990s) than since the fall of the Taliban regime and the installation in Kabul of a government supported by the international community in late 2001. People who reach Europe have another type of mobility. They underwent a long journey and might circulation from one EU country to another with the hope to settle down in a place considered as an ideal destination. They only go back voluntarily to visit the kith and kin in the country of origin or first asylum once they have legalised their residence status. Involuntary repatriation affects the migrant's and his/her family honour while representing a waste of resources for all. Conceptions of honour and shame, jealousy and envy, success and failure render ambivalent the relations of Afghans who reached Europe with their relatives left behind. Social networks appear a less immediate source of support than in Pakistan and Iran. Even if young people invest social media as a common healing space where they can share their experience with peers, the facility of communication also represents a constraint. Family expectation at home may result in a lack of freedom in the country of destination. More than a tool of communication, social media are an arena where people stage themselves. They have to carefully navigate between two opposite narratives

equally detrimental: first, advertising excessive success, which would raise expectations at home and force them to enter in an escalating cycle of redistribution; second, acknowledging the hardship of migrant life and confessing that have no yet received a legal status and found a job. The easy communication platform provided by social media is a source of stress as much as relief. Artistic expression, such as the song *Hoviat* by Habib Teimuri, expresses the quest for meaning of mobile youth, the attempt to have their living experience understood by both the host society and the people who left behind. It evokes experience of displacement and exclusion, ontological loneliness and universalism from bellow.

After almost forty years of conflict that prompted one of the most massive forced displacements of population since World War II, Afghanistan does not appear to be moving towards a better tomorrow. The partial withdrawal of foreign troops in 2014 is the expression of a political and military deadlock is not the result of the success of the nation-building effort. We are far from the optimistic picture promised to Afghanistan in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban regime in late 2001. While no segment of the Afghan population has not experienced displacement during the series of conflicts that has torn the country apart since 1978, unaccompanied minors and young single men, who have sometimes spent time in Iran or Pakistan, are overrepresented in the recent flows to Europe. They feel trapped between their country of origin, which does not offer any educational, professional and social prospect, and their country of first asylum, where they are doomed at best to remain a cheap labour force with no social recognition. In Iran and Pakistan, they face a growing pressure from national authorities and hostility from local populations. As a result, Afghan society is suffering from a massive haemorrhage of the young and educated people. They are obviously not the first generation of Afghans to flee hardship and persecution. However, successive generations of Afghan asylum seekers and refugees are not mobile along the same patterns. While their parents had taken refuge in Pakistan and Iran, trying to reach Europe becomes a distinctive feature of the new generation.

Afghans are fleeing from violence in their country of origin and from exclusion and lack of durable solutions in the countries of first asylum. However, the journey itself entails its share of suffering. The journey is costly both in terms of financial exposure of the individual (and the family back home) and of trauma – getting to Europe is not necessarily a relieving experience. The further they go from Afghanistan, the weaker social networks become, resulting in increased competition among Afghans and psychological stress.

The continued conflict and displacement of Afghans over three generations, has resulted in the adoption of a variety of coping strategies, including a high level of mobility combined with a dispersion of family members, and thereby of risks, and a corresponding increase of opportunities.

Even if the actual knowledge of particular situations or environments, such as European asylum systems, is often incomplete and patchy, a practical ability to adapt and a collective knowledge on how to succeed allows them nevertheless to overcome sometime highly adverse circumstances. New information and adversary conditions during their journey impact on people's objectives and aspirations, which are continuously readjusted and transformed before reaching the final destination. While protection needs and access to livelihoods, education and other social services may be the key driving factors leading to displacement, questions of prestige and status may be the decisive factors for the choices which are ultimately made by Afghans on the move.

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