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Rahbari, L.

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MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



EDITED BY
OLGA BURLYUK AND LADAN RAHBARI



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21. ‘Who Deserves a Chair?’ Performative Kinships and Microaggressions in the European Academy

Ladan Rahbari

I used to go to a lot of conferences. As my former roommate—who will remain anonymous—used to say, it seemed like this was a way for me to compensate for all the years I could not travel to/in Europe because I had no way of entry to European territory or its academic institutions before migrating. My roommate did not say this out of pity or judgement, but because she knew what it meant to be allowed to move around. She had gained similar advantages by temporarily moving to Europe, but for her, crossing borders had become such a stressful exercise that she just wanted to stay put unless she was forced to do so. Nothing made her more upset than the holiday season when our European colleagues talked about moving around the world, with no worry about visas and only caring about where they would have most ‘fun’ for the lowest price: ‘price-for-performance,’ as a German colleague put it.

I am not attending as many conferences abroad anymore. I try to stick to the local ones. I am at a bilingual Dutch-English conference in a Belgian university at the time of writing, and they serve all kinds of sandwiches for lunch. The vegetarian options, to my despair, all contain some kind of green pesto, which my digestive system cannot handle. I have decided not to eat them, and this has become a reason to have

a conversation about meat with two European academics who are not vegetarians.

There are many vegetarians in my new home country, Belgium. There are also more seasonal vegetarian types and part-time vegetarians who occasionally go for large pieces of steak 'to connect with the hunter-gatherer they have inside.' I get irritated when people talk about hunter-gatherers to justify their 2019 lifestyle. Some detox enthusiasts eat meat for a while and then fast it out with juices that supposedly cleanse the flesh and stench of death out of their bodies. They are, of course, doing more than the full-time meat-eaters, in my opinion. It is a worthy effort, no matter what the extent. Still, even those seasonal animal lovers in Belgium may consume more meat in their meat-eating periods than a constant meat eater does in Iran.

That is why I find this conversation that I am having at the lunch table with the two Belgian academics quite absurd. I get asked whether people eat a lot of meat in my 'country of origin.' They have already asked me where I am from, and I have already told them that I live in Belgium, but I come from Iran. So, I am not sure why they do not just say Iran and instead repeatedly say 'your country' or 'country of origin.' I try to explain to them that, on average, an Iranian consumes much less meat than a Belgian. They protest, 'surely this must be wrong. You do not have vegetarians there. We have so many vegetarians in Belgium.' They confirm each other by nodding with confidence. The 'you' and the 'we' have a funny ring in my ears. I answer that even though I am a vegetarian, that does not make me an expert on meat consumption, so I would not be able to give them correct statistics. All I know is that vegetarianism is not the only factor that matters, and the average per capita meat consumption in Belgium is higher than in Iran. I have checked the data on this before because I am constantly asked why I, 'as an Iranian,' have become a vegetarian. I invite them to check the data. 'You probably became a vegetarian here, didn't you?' they say. I tell them my story in brief: No. I have been a vegetarian for a long time. I ate meat in my teens under family pressure. 'Your bones will be empty!' Nanah used to say to scare me. My family managed to feed me meat from time to time. I went back to being a vegetarian soon after realizing that the odds of bone diseases were not that much more favorable to meat-eaters. 'We will all die of empty bones one day,' I teased Nanah. I

was ready to take the chance, even if 'science' was not yet as clear as it is today about a purely vegetarian diet.

The colleagues at the coffee table do not look convinced about what I tell them. They stare at my hands and my clothes. Then they avoid eye contact with me. They are suspicious of my words. My story does not fit how I look, or perhaps their grand narrative of meat-loving and devouring Middle Easterners. I must have been making these things up. They then slowly drift away, like dead pieces of wood floating on the water. In a similar situation, in their shoes, I would have politely protested or just excused myself. What is so hard about disbelief and conflict that scares people away like that?

I pick a panel to attend and sit in the back in case I find something catchier in the program. I need to remember to network, too. Networking has become a buzzword in academia these days. I never thought that it would happen to this extent. The conferences are turning into card exchange rituals. Every time I go somewhere, I end up gathering cards that I will hold on to for a few days and then dispose of later, feeling guilty and bitter because I cannot even remember which cards belong to who. Sitting in these panels, all I can think of is my less conventional academic writing, like this piece. I have been thinking about how my unconventional writing will be received if it is published. Is it going to be viewed as too emotional? Too subjective? I feel the shadow of the ruler of 'science' above my head. How many people will accuse me of playing the victim? Is it going to be judged for its literary, historic, or social value? Will my language be considered unrefined? I write in a language that is not my mother tongue, after all. Is it going to be received with an 'aargh! Yet another migrant story that we did not ask for'?

As others present their work, I drown in my thoughts until people start clapping around me. It is time for us to move on with the program, after a short coffee break.

I do not know anybody in the conference room, and I am not in the mood for networking. I pack my conference bag and follow the crowd to the coffee area again, a small hall with huge windows. One professor who gave a talk is now surrounded by people who want to talk about her presentation. I look around the room and see no familiar faces here either. The conference is bilingual, but I hardly hear anyone speaking English. I do not want to make anyone uncomfortable with my bad

Flemish. I pour a coffee into a yellow cup and head towards the small yard connected to the hall. The air smells nice here. I find a dry corner and put my heavy bag on the ground. I have carried my laptop the whole time, thinking that I would be able to do some work. Yet, all I have done so far is daydream.

I see another wanderer entering the yard. He turns in my direction, and we make eye contact for a millisecond. I am sipping my coffee when I realize he is approaching me decisively. He is coming straight towards me.

'We have not met,' he stretches his hands to shake my hand. I shake hands with him. He has a strong handshake.

'I just saw the program, and I saw this presentation about Iranian women. Is that your presentation? I would like to hear your talk,' says the man enthusiastically.

I confirm that it is my presentation. We then talk about Belgium. About the weather, the bikers, the train delays, and the language. We are both able to speak some Flemish, I learn. We say a few sentences to prove to each other that we can speak it. And then suddenly, he says:

'Let us speak some Farsi now!' in Farsi.

He speaks Farsi!

'You speak Farsi?' I almost shout in disbelief.

'Yes,' he responds with a glittering face. 'Farsi is my mother tongue. I am Afghani.'

This just became the highlight of my day. My mood changes immediately. It is one thing when you meet a new person at a conference, and it is a whole different thing when you meet someone who has the same mother tongue as you. This does not happen very often to me. I learn that the man's name is Iraj (pseudonym).

He tells me which city he 'originally' comes from. Suddenly, I realize that I am not as familiar with Afghanistan's geography as I would like to be. I cannot locate the city on Afghanistan's map, and I am ashamed of asking where it is. Is this shame legitimate? I try to ask a question to hide my ignorance. I ask him about his work here and if he is working on the same topic as me. He tells me he is not. He talks about his work and tells me that it makes him homesick to talk about it. He asks me something along the lines of, 'How can you not miss those landscapes of mountains and vast lands? The lands of warm people and strong hugs,

where you leave your door open for others, so you do not make them feel unwanted. It is a different world.'

I am impressed by how passionately and poetically he talks about home and his nostalgia, although I am not entirely convinced we have the same image of our motherlands. I feel like he has a much more romantic image than I have. But that is the thing about migration: it is experienced differently and in so many colors. I do not stop him. He talks about different accents and dialects in Afghanistan, and I am embarrassed again, as I remember that I know so little about the country and its linguistic diversity. We must end the conversation and join the next panels, so we go our separate ways. Iraj will not present a paper at the conference, but he will join another panel as a listener. We will chat again later.

Sitting in the new session, all I can do is think of Iraj's face when he was explaining the imagery of his land—the land he misses so badly. I have never been to Afghanistan myself. It is a place that you do not wish to travel to if you are Iranian. Instead of thinking of traveling to all those close countries with amazing landscapes, diverse cultures, and people, you spend your time dreaming of Europe, America, and Australia. We learn very fast that we need to compare ourselves with the West and aspire to be like them. Nanah would say, 'we miss so much around us by gazing too far.'

I cannot find Iraj in the next short coffee break and then must go to my own panel. I hope to see him there. When I start looking for the panel room, I realize that the organizers have arranged a very small hallway at the other end of the building for the panel I am in. The hallway is not indicated on the building signs and is very difficult to find. It is a panel where 'foreigners' will present their findings from research on 'non-Western' countries in English, not Dutch. I have difficulty finding the hallway myself, and only manage to get there after being helped by a student guide. I see only a few attendees when I find it. 'Perhaps others will come later,' the panel coordinator announces, 'they might have difficulty finding the room.' There is at least acknowledgement that we have been given a lesser attractive space. It is not a room but a passage where some chairs have been placed, and people walk past us to go to the other panels. Our panel is the only English-speaking one at

this hour, and since it might not be as busy as the others, the organizers decided not to waste a room. Charming!

The panel coordinator asks us if it is OK that we wait ten minutes. 'This is not an easy spot to find,' she repeats with a huge apologetic smile on her face. We all nod that it is ok to wait. We do wait, and after ten minutes, no one arrives. We then realize that the panel comprises the presenters and two attendees, one of whom is the coordinator. I hope every second that Iraj will walk in. But that does not happen. The coordinator has difficulty pronouncing our names, and every time she starts calling for the next presenter, she finds her experience of pronouncing the names amusing and bursts into hiccup-like laughs. We, the presenters, pretend we find it funny too and make eye contact with each other. She does not know any of us and gives no background information except for our university affiliation which she reads from a piece of paper.

When my turn comes, she calls me Ms. Ghaa-baa-ghee. I am used to mispronunciations of my name, as are many other academics with non-Western names. I understand that, most times, mispronunciations include very subtle mistakes that everyone can make. But we had plenty of time before the panel to let her know how to pronounce our names if she cared and asked. This was not a priority, and that is not a surprise to me. I keep smiling. Above that, while other presenters were called doctors, she calls me Ms. It is indicated in my biographical note that I have a PhD and I am the only woman on the panel, so this bothers me too. Yet, I keep smiling. I feel like my face is going to tear apart. I start talking for 15 minutes. And then, I answer some questions about my method. I am the last one, so the panel ends there.

The coordinator thanks us for presenting and leaves hastily. She must be relieved she does not have to speak English anymore or pronounce our weird-sounding names. I step out of that impromptu space. After so many years of studying, teaching, researching, and caring for social issues, I do not understand academia anymore. I have been negotiating with myself about this for quite a while. It has become such an impossible thing to understand: why do we do what we do? We have turned into a bunch of snobs gathering in closed buildings and discussing our idealism behind closed doors—a bunch of people obsessed with self-promotion and ignoring all the problems that our

environments reproduce. We are not adequately connected with the world or with each other in these majestic buildings. It saddens me to think like this. This is the job I love and have dreamt of having all my life. I am looking around to find Iraj but cannot see him anywhere. It is a shame. I would have liked to speak Farsi some more. Suddenly I have a flashback to another conference incident.

It was one of the early years in Europe when I was actively traveling and conferencing. I was the first person to arrive in a conference room at an academic venue. I walked around the room to pass the time and looked out of the wide windows opening to a small and empty courtyard. Why do university buildings look so dull, I asked myself. So many wonderful things happen within walls, yet so little attention is paid to the aesthetics, colors, and comfort.

The room smelled damp, and I tried to find a way to open the windows, but there was no opening mechanism in view. A row of chairs and a table were placed at the end of the hall for the presenters. I chose a chair. It was not a special chair, but a chair perfectly identical to others. I made myself comfortable by hanging my coat on the chair and putting my mug on the table. I pulled out my laptop and started to go over my presentation to refresh my memory. Soon, I heard chatter in the hallways, and people arrived. A colleague saluted me, and I stood beside the window chatting with her when the fourth presenter, whom I will call Presenter A (A for anonymous), walked in. Presenter A was a European scholar who was relatively more senior than me. I remember that her work had received recent attention at the time. She declared herself with a loud and joyful hello, to which other people in the conference room and I reacted.

While still chatting, I noticed Presenter A took the seat I had already taken. Now, to be clear, the chair did not look like it was not claimed. The chair was drawn away from the table; my coat was already hanging from it. In fact, she had to sit on my coat that was visibly placed on the chair. My laptop was open in front of the chair and was connected to a charging plug under the table. I had a coffee mug standing beside the laptop. That chair was obviously taken. I did not think much of all this. I apologized to the colleague I had been talking to and walked to

Presenter A. 'Hi, I am sorry. I am sitting on this chair,' I said with a smile. I wanted to let her know fast to spare her the trouble of relocating with an open laptop.

Presenter A turned her head toward me, and there was a long pause and reflection on her side. She gazed at me for an uncomfortably long time before speaking. As if she was evaluating me and pondering on whether I was worthy of a reply. And then she said to me word by word and slowly as if she were talking to a child, 'As you can see, I am sitting here.' And then, with an exaggerated head gesture, she continued, 'move these things' [or maybe she said, your stuff. I cannot remember the exact words anymore], looking directly into my eyes.

I find it funny that my first reaction was to look around to see if anyone saw or overheard what happened or heard her. No one did. Everyone was busy chatting. I will neither forget the aggression in her voice nor the look she gave me saying this. She then turned her back to me. My smile froze on my face. What do you do in the face of such unexpected blunt aggression? I, for one, did not do anything. Before I could even manage to think about how to act, she stretched her arm in a rather dramatic way and with a slow rightward motion, moved all my belongings away from herself to open the space in front of her. I had to quickly pick up the mug, fearing that it would fall, and tea would spill on the table. She then dragged the chair she was sitting on closer to the table, but my laptop bag was on the way, so she pushed it away with her foot and tried again. The room was getting busier, and I was standing there in disbelief and shock. My laptop was pushed too far from the side of the table where she was sitting, so I went around the table to be able to reach my laptop and charger. Another chair was empty at the end of the presenters' row, so I walked there and placed my laptop. I then had to go back and gather my laptop bag from under her feet. And then I remembered that I had to go back yet again for my coat. The room was getting orderly. The coordinator was now standing behind the presenters' desk and waiting for everyone to take a seat.

'Sorry, but you are sitting on my coat,' I had to whisper to Presenter A. She turned and again gave me the same irritated look. As if my presence was an interruption or, better yet, pollution. She did not say anything but lifted half of her body to allow me to pull my coat from under her. This was a rather comical scene as she was not lifting herself

enough, and I struggled to pull out my coat. I caught a few audience members watching us and smiling. I smiled back at them as I struggled to free my coat. I went back to my new chair and sat there puzzled and thinking, 'what just happened?' My mind was racing, and I was trying to make sense of her condescending gazes and uncomfortable pauses. But there was no time to reflect on all this. The room had quietened down, and the panel started.

I was so distracted throughout the panel that I did not even remember that Presenter A's talk was the one I had looked most forward to before arriving at the event. Ironically, her presentation was about academia, and she talked about toxic work cultures! I remember she put a lot of emphasis on being tired. The lecture received applause and praise from the audience. The Q&A went around her presentation as well. Someone mentioned 'sisterhood' as a way out of the toxicity; I do not recall if it was Presenter A answering an audience question or an audience member. When the panel ended, the audience went to her and congratulated her for the important work she was doing. I had had an internal struggle up until that point thinking of how she treated me, but I decided to be a good co-panelist and congratulate her on my way out. I waited for others audience members to leave. Presenter A was gathering her laptop when I went to her and said something like, 'that was a great presentation.' She raised her head and looked at me with a smirk, and then continued packing her bag without replying to me. This time someone saw the scene. I glimpsed at them but felt too embarrassed to make longer eye contact. I walked out, or better yet, fled that conference room, confused and feeling humiliated.

I met Presenter A years later. She was suggested as a speaker for an event I was co-organizing. She accepted the invitation to speak at the event, and in a few months, there she was. This time, I was part of the host institutions, and I was not an early-career scholar anymore. The experience I had with Presenter A taking my chair at the conference was by then part of a large inventory of microaggressions that I faced in academic spaces as a migrant, colored woman. Neither the experiences nor the gazes shook me as badly as they used to anymore. They did not become easier to bear either, but by then, I could place them and, as a sociologist, make sense of them. When Presenter A showed up at our event, she was still working on the same topic, which was, of

course, extremely welcome within a hall full of academics. I enjoyed the presentation as well, but it has always been ironic to see academics making a career out of talking about how academia is broken and yet maintaining the same orders. Sisterhood came up again, and by then, I was already allergic to that word.

It was hard not to think about what had happened between the two of us a few years back. I was certain that Presenter A would not remember that incident, but as it appeared, she did. I learned this when two co-host colleagues, Presenter A, and I sat together to have food. This was the first occasion that we sat together during this event. My two colleagues went to bring us some sandwiches we had pre-ordered, and we stayed alone for a very short time. I decided to break the silence. After all, I was part of the host institution, and I wanted to be hospitable.

'How was your trip yesterday? Was it comfortable?' It was not just small talk. I had taken care of some of the bookings, and I wanted to know if everything had gone smoothly.

To my absolute surprise, she looked at me with the same smirky smile that I remembered from years ago. Then came the same long pause before she uttered, 'It was fine.' [or maybe she used 'OK.'] She then took her phone out and started playing with it. She had a 'do not bother me' air.

She had been so friendly until that point, and now, all of a sudden, after my Belgian colleagues left, she was the Presenter A that I had encountered at that conference years back. I still do not know what it was in her attitude that gave it away, but at that moment, it suddenly dawned on me that she remembered me. It is unlike me to try to talk to someone who avoids me, but I was reminded of the frustration I had felt the first time we had met. So, I decided to stand up for myself and said abruptly but in the friendliest way I could, 'we have met before, you know.'

Presenter A was holding her phone in front of her face. She did not change the position of her hand and the phone. She just tilted her head slightly and looked at me with a smile, and said, 'Oh, I remember.' She then continued looking at her phone's screen. My courage melted away, and we sat there in silence, waiting for my colleagues to come back. She, theatrically playing with her phone in an attempt not to talk to me. I, sitting still and wondering why this woman, this successful Western

academic, has decided to dislike me. The colleagues then returned to us with sandwiches (including vegetarian options without pesto, this time), and Presenter A cheered their comeback and was friendly again.

While eating, Presenter A told my colleagues about her highly educated background. She said that professorship ran in her family, and she felt a sense of belonging in academia. She explained that her work and passion came from that. She was meant to be there and did what she did because academia was her home. As she spoke about herself, her identity, and her place in the world, it became increasingly clear from where her aggression toward me originated. That sense of *belonging*, the almost proprietary claim over academic spaces that had passed on to her and that she so proudly talked about, was not only about access to knowledge but also extended to chairs, tables, walls, and lecture halls. Presenter A was the one who embodied, owned, and deserved European academia and was deserving of choosing and sitting where she wanted. She was entitled to decide who belonged in those spaces and who did not. I could not sit in 'her' chair, let alone be her 'sister.' I was the intruder, the obvious outsider. I reeked of difference. Perhaps my foreignness leaked through my skin. My skin color, accent, and hair texture did not belong to the 'academia' she belonged to. Whatever it was, it was clear to her that I was misplaced, and she had 'recognized' me at that first glance. I was not the one who could take the chair. *She* deserved the chair.

I suddenly see Iraj waving and walking toward me. I am very glad to see him. We decide to go to a café nearby and have tea. I tell him how my panel went, and Iraj has his own stories about conferences like this. His name (his real name, that is) has also been badly pronounced, and he has been made to defend his research topic, something Western European scholars never have to deal with. We start by criticizing the way our research topics are pushed to the realm of 'area studies' because they are not conducted in wealthy countries. We continue exchanging stories. Iraj has worked in other European countries and has many stories of microaggressions. I tell him about my incident with Presenter A. We talk about the irony that 'sisterhood' and the performance of 'intimacy' and 'kinship' is coupled with microaggressions. And for the first time—after

retelling the story to so many European colleagues who dismissed it as unimportant—Iraj is the person who gets it, empathizes with me, and does not attempt to reduce it to a mere 'misunderstanding.'

'We should call it what it is, and you know what? You should write about this experience,' says Iraj.

'Yes, I should,' I reply. 'Maybe one day I will.'