"Too black to be Moroccan" and "too Afrikan to be Black-British": A conversation about unsafe lives of black-Afrikan refugees in Britain

Anonymous Immigrant and Rumana Hashem [1]

This is an extract from hours of conversations between the two authors, an Anonymous Immigrant who is an indigenous Moroccan and a displaced black student in Britain, and Rumana Hashem, a displaced sociologist and an unestablished academic in the UK. Both authors are people of colour from the Global South, who experienced immigration control in the UK and regularly confront British prejudice and white supremacy. The authors have known each other since 2014 and have co-worked on a number of projects, including one civic engagement project with asylum-seekers, one higher education programme for refugees, two political campaigns on freedom, secularism, and gender and sex equalities, and one ecological project to save the Sundarbans. Our conversations cut across a range of issues including political, economic and cultural disparities, and politics of humanitarianism, but reflect mostly on displacement, im/mobility, surveillance and border struggles, instability and individual resilience of the displaced, violence and collective resistance, climate poverty, and racial discrimination. For the purpose of the "Displaced Voices" volume for Refugee Week 2020, the extract focuses on resilience of the displaced persons from the Global South and hostility towards Black-Afrikan refugees in the UK.

For those of us currently engaged in the Black Lives Movement[2], whether in person activism and protests, or online campaign, writing, and policy advocacy, it is important to appreciate the different experiences of "Black" people themselves. The extract below considers the hard to imagine resilience of black refugees and Black-Afrikans which many Black-British and Black-Americans are yet to know – let alone the white people. In considering experience of an ex-Muslim Black-Afrikan refugee from Morocco in the UK, Anonymous, we discuss how individuals' experience varies based on their ethnicity, nationality, class and legal categorisation as interwoven with "race". This extract uses quotations, derived directly from a completed civic engagement project, called "Democratic Access or Privileged Exclusion: Civic Engagement through the Preservation of and Access to Refugee Archives," where Anonymous was a participant and Rumana was a researcher.[3]

Anonymous gave a 2-hours life history recording to develop the Living Refugee Archive which Rumana has recorded.[4] The discussion was held in

unstructured and open-ended conversational settings, where Anonymous talked about his moving memory in Morocco, and hostility, resilience and subversion which he and other Black-Afrikan refugees experience in Britain. Anonymous was an asylum-seeker, when his life story was recorded in June 2015 before the referendum. He has subsequently been granted permanent residence in the UK before Brexit, but still experiences hostility, poverty, and racial inequality. We revisit his life narrative at this time as hostility towards refugees has increased, as Black and Afrikan refugees have been accused as being illegal,[5] as violence against black people in America escalates fear, and the Black Lives Movement becomes ever more important. The time and space of our conversations are significant because they also relate to four historically important political phenomena, namely the referendum, Brexit, COVID-19 and the ongoing Black Lives Movement in the UK and across the world.

The snippets included here highlight the experience of Anonymous in Britain as a country of sanctuary, and also draws on his lived experience in Morocco as the home country. The medium of our exchanges is primarily English and combined with occasional dialogues in Arabic languages. For the sake of clarity, Britain and the UK have been used inter-changeably. Black is used as a human racial classification and enforced category, while black is the skin colour of an individual. Quotation marks are used for direct quotes drawn from the civic engagement project, where Anonymous was a research participant. [6]

Being black and indigenous in Morocco is a "crime"

Anonymous is an indigenous-born 30 years old black human being from Morocco[7], a country which he describes as "Rich in natural resources, surrounded by beautiful mountains, and ruled by various monarchs. Morocco is located between Algeria and Western Sahara. The Kingdom is a North African country bordering the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea, currently ruled by an Islamic dictator. Morocco's history is complex and full of wars and revolutions." The country was colonized by the Phoenicians, Romans, Arab Muslims, French and Spanish colonizers, but indigenous Moroccans had fought them. Anonymous is "Proud to be a Moroccan because they have refused to accept colonisation". Despite his deep sense of belonging to Morocco, is he recognised as a Moroccan citizen?

" I am 'too black' to be a Moroccan. It is a Kingdom of White-Muslims. Morocco is ruled by a dictator. The country has been destroyed by the Islamist dictatorship. This regime does not see black and indigenous persons as citizens," told Anonymous in response to Rumana's question

about his sense of belonging, recognition and citizenship in Morocco. Indigenous Moroccan's do not get recognition, which made Anonymous an "invisible and subverted individual" in his homeland. His skin colour, and his non-Muslim and indigenous identity are seen as his offences. "Being black in Morocco is a crime". This is why Anonymous had fled Morocco.

Anonymous has moved to the UK from Morocco under religious persecution and extreme racialisation in 2014, and sought asylum as he believed that the human rights standard would be high for anyone in the UK. But he has been proven wrong on this. He has frequently been exposed by prejudice and inequalities relating to 'race' and nationality in particular. Racism and xenophobic nationalism are two of the common experiences that Rumana, too, has faced in the UK. However, the level of racism that Anonymous experiences as a Black-Afrikan asylum-seeker is cruel. Anonymous is not a Black-British. He is an indigenous Moroccan who can be identified from his dress, such as Jillaba, and different hair when he walks on the street. This reminds him about the harassments he confronted in sub-Shahran Afrika, where human rights for "Black" people hardly exists.

Anonymous was 24 years old when he moved in Britain. Although he is fluent in English and has come to the UK with a reputation for his writing and talents, he had little formal education. Anonymous could not complete formal school education in Morocco. The education system in Morocco is corrupt and extremely religious, which made it difficult for an indigenous and non-religious Black-Moroccan to finish his school education. He was forced to study in a Madrasa, which is a form of religious school where Islamic education and Quranic knowledge are taught to everyone regardless of pupil's interests. Anonymous has left Madrasa as he did not want to spend his youth by learning only about the Quran. Leaving school has resulted in his religious persecution. On top of his skin colour and indigenous identity, which were seen as a crime, he has been accused of blasphemy.

"There is no space for a Black-Moroccan in the Kingdom. Indigenous Moroccans are not valued citizens of Morocco. I am seen as enemy and threat to the Kingdom. My skin colour and indigenous identity were my crimes", stresses Anonymous. But you could hardly protest under the dictatorship of Saadeddine Othmani. Stories of black and indigenous Moroccans are hardly discussed in Morocco. "Everything has been controlled in Morocco, from the politico to economy of Morocco and sub-Saharan Afrika, the dictatorship is controlling everything and forcing many aboriginals from the region to move in the UK". These are common stories

that Rumana has heard from other refugees from Sudan and sub-Saharan countries that she worked with in the civic engagement project and in the "refugees in higher education" programme. What is notable is how Black-people and indigenous Moroccans are excluded and racialised in their home country, and that these experiences are hardly protested or discussed. Morocco and Algeria are often represented by white and Muslim citizens in the West.

What it means to be a "Black-Afrikan" in Britain?

Anonymous fled from Morocco with a hope that he would get education when he comes in the UK. But his experience as a "Black refugee" from Morocco is "depressing and unacceptable". Although he has received a permanent residence permit, recurrent race inequalities, cruel comments on the high streets in London, deprivation and difficulty in accessing higher education, exclusion at work, and experiences of health inequalities relating to "race" in the British National Health System (NHS) have made him vulnerable. Six years on asylum, his search for a safe home, a suitable job, income, wellness and passion for higher education have not ended.

Anonymous finds himself as someone "too Afrikan to be a Black-British in the UK". His experiences are un-heard by most people of Black and Asian Minority Ethnicity (BAME), because their past and his past do not match. For Anonymous there is a "serious issue with British values", which many BAME members embrace, but it is one that Anonymous recurrently confronted since his arrival in the UK. Anonymous is a black Moroccan migrant, who misses his sub-Saharan dress, food, language, and the natural landscapes every day since he arrived in Britain. People in this new country do not recognise the value of his sub-Saharan lifestyle. This state has denied access to his education, health, and work for years, and he has been forced to practice "British value" of what he calls "a name of a joke". His asylum was granted on the condition that he would demonstrate integrity to British values, but not that the Britons would have shown respect to a sub-Saharan man.

Anonymous used to wear Moroccan national dress before coming to the UK and continued to wear that dress in the first months of his seeking asylum here. He noticed soon after his arrival in Britain that the British and European people could not take it easy because "Jillaba is always seen as a religious dress". Although he wore the dress simply because it is "comfortable and warm" and keeps him well in winter, people could not see

the point. "It has nothing to do with the look of a Southern man" or 'the Camel Man'", but people here stared at Anonymous as if he is a "Camel Man". Anonymous says that when people looked at someone in this way he feels "like a monkey in the 'zoo'. There is this perception about certain dress and food in Britain and a meta narrative about how a sub-Saharan Afrikan man looks like." There are stories about their cultural dress code which make life even more difficult for an Afrikan refugee on top of immigration control of the UK Home Office. "These everyday issues of identity politics in the UK are unbearable for many Afrikan and black people with refugee status." Anonymous find it hard to cope with.

Our conversation moves on to orientalism, which Anonymous as a black Moroccan has repeatedly encountered. In his early months of asylum, when he was walking along Oxford Street in London, someone would come and ask: "can I touch your hair,.. ..is this real"? This features a Black-Afrikan man as a stranger and creature to play with. Rumana has also experienced orientalism in the UK which led to a racist attack on her. During her PhD studies, as an international student she would encounter direct violence in London's street for walking silently and on national train for wearing a Bangladeshi dress. She would be approached by drunk white young men on train telling her to leave the train or would pour beer on her face. These experiences of non-British, brown migrant-woman, and Afrikan and black refugee man, show the level of prejudice that the "British values" poses, while these are also causes that connect us and reminds us to resist and unite for Black Lives Movement.

Notably and dishearteningly when an unprovoked attack by intolerant men is launched on a Black-refugee on the street or an Asian migrant-woman on a national train, there would be no one or very few people to stand against such assault. It is this "problem of categorisation", as Anonymous points out. The categorisation is not about legal categories but also socially constructed that puts us at risk. We are not British citizens, and it becomes visible in our appearance. For Anonymous, there is not much to be proud about being British but we know that most Britons are proud about their "Britishness". When a British -Bangladeshi or a Black-British say proudly that "I am a British" it concerns Anonymous about "the sort of prejudice this person might be embracing". The notion of "British values" and "Britishness" automatically discriminates others in the UK, regardless of refugees and migrants. The ongoing Black Lives Movement in the UK needs to address this.

Anonymous points out that British "People take pride for NHS, a health system that does not recognise Black-refugees' health." Anonynous had been denied access to health for 11 months and did not have any health check before his asylum was granted. When he first went to give interview for asylum at Home Office, he mentioned this to the UKBA officer who had asked him about his health and fitness. The officer told him that "It's okay. In his saying there was an expression as if a black Moroccan refugee does not need any health service." [8]

The right to access health, education, and work are reserved for certain groups of people in the UK. The treatment of refugees and asylum-seekers has worsened with the pandemic. Anonymous and other refugees in his home in London have been denied basic support for health and wellbeing. He has not received any attention or support from the NHS and the government, although he was told that he has been infected in the beginning of lockdown. Instead of supporting refugees, the Home Office has insulted people seeking asylum in Britain by offering them just 26 pence increase on their daily rates to help them through a deadly pandemic.[9]

Solidarity is Situated

Despite the dreadfulness of pandemic, there has been growing social solidarity and community support available for people in crisis. Do refugees and asylum-seekers in the UK get included in congregation and community solidarity? Anonymous does not receive any community service. He sees there is a discrepancy and hostility towards black and displaced people even in times of pandemic. The community support is limited and reserved for "community people", not for those who come from another country to remake home in British shore. Apparently solidarity is also situated and community support is restricted in the UK. The support is reserved for UK nationals or community members - people who belong to certain community based on their particular religion. The experiences of both authors in the UK are informed by racism that does not necessarily rely on "race" or only skin colour, but also their nationality and ethnicity.[10]

This conversation spanned around revealing many contradictions in politics of belonging and cultural identities, legal categorisations, social divisions amongst Black migrants and Black British, and the intersectionality between class, culture, "race", religion and nationality which can only be understood through a situated notion of border struggles and identities.

These experiences are similar to some complex narratives of border struggles of migrants and refugees in Calais Jungle and across EU borders as discussed by Yuval-Davis et al. [11] Anonymous see the concept of community as a politics of belonging. For him even the Moroccan community here suffer from some sort of prejudice relating to their British immigration and "Britishness", thus embracing British supremacy if not white supremacy. This is where the fight for Black Lives Movement and refugee rights gets lost.

As non-white, non-British, and a black displaced activist from the Global south, Anonymous experienced complex categorisations within, which many Black and Asian Minority Ethnic communities in the UK do not always see. Even the ongoing Black Lives Movement in the Americas and the UK is yet to fully address this issue of categorisation of "Black" refugees and international migrants. We conclude by appreciating that the recurrent violence against black people can be prevented when all people of colour – regardless of their legal, national, political, and social position – will be united, recognising the Others (who may not belong to the same community and nationality), and working to eliminate the categories such as Black-Afrikans and refugees from the Global South.

Endnotes

[1] Anonymous is the pseudonym of the first author. A pseudonym has been used for the purpose of his safety in a hostile environment. The author was also a research participant in the civic engagement project from where the snippets have been derived, and the data of the original research are sensitive in nature. Therefore, we regard it is important to maintain first author's anonymity . The second author, Rumana Hashem is a political sociologist and an activist-researcher. Her research interests cuts across policy questions on gender, conflict, displacement and migration. Currently based in the department of Politics and International Studies at the University of Warwick, she is also a Research Fellow at the centre for Migration, Refugees and Belonging at the University of East London. She leads an international Working Group for archiving and documentation of History of Forced Migration and Refugees ..

[2] Coalition Letter – Request for UN Independent Enquiry Into Escalating Situation of Police Violence and Repression of Protests in the United States. 8 June 2020. ACLU [Online]. Accessed on 16 June 2020. Available from: https://www.aclu.org/letter/coalition-letter-request-un-independent-inquiry-escalating-situation-police-violence-and?redirect=letter/coalition-letter-request-un-investigation-escalating-situation-police-violence-and-repression

[3] Dudman, P., and Hashem, R. (2015) Democratic access or privileged exclusion? Civic engagement through the preservation of and access to refugee archives. *UEL Archives and Civic Engagement* [Online] Accessed on 19 January, 2016. Available from Living Refugee Archives http://www.uel.ac.uk/livingrefugeearchive/about/

[4] The Living Refugee Archive (LRA) is an outcome of the research project "Democratic access or privileged exclusion? Civic engagement through the preservation of and access to refugee archives". The project was a collaboration between the Refugee Council Archives at the University of East London and the Centre for Migration Refugees and Belonging . The LRA can be accessed from this link: http://www.livingrefugeearchive.org/

[5] The increase of hostility is also found in mainstream UK media. In an opinion in the Times UK, Melanie Phillip wrote, by accusing black refugees from Sudan, Ethiopia and Libya that "People 'with no right to asylum', packed on to boats... must be sent back to France" in Covid19 lockdown. See "Britain has lost the plot on migrant crossings". 25 May 2020. *The Times UK* [Online] Accessed on 26 May 2020. Available from https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/britain-has-lost-the-plot-on-migrant-crossings-92v3wxss3

[6] The first version of this narrative was read and kindly proofed by Paul Dudman, the editor of the *Displaced Voices*, who also happens to be a co-researcher in the civic engagement project and the sole curator of the *Living Refugee Archive* (LRA) – an open access site that was being established to document and preserve original life narratives of asylum seekers, migrants and refugees. We are thankful to Paul Dudman for his kind support.

[7] On 12 June 2015, when his life history was recorded for the research project, Anonymous was 24 years old. He spoke fluently and narrated his lived experience in Morocco and the UK.

[8] A detailed version of Anonymous's experience and race related inequalities of health service in the UK is available in this article by Hashem, R. and Dudman, P. (2016) Paradoxical narratives of transcultural encounters of the "other": Civic engagement with refugees and migrants in London, *Transnational Social Review*, 6:1-2, 192-199, DOI: 10.1080/21931674.2016.1186376.

[9] Catherine (June 2020) "It is an insult, not an increase". *Refugee Action* Video [Online] Accessed on 8 June 2020. Available from https://twitter.com/RefugeeAction/status/1270052153491697666?s=20

[10] Our experiences in the UK relates to the arguments made by Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval Davis ((1992) in their book *Racialized boundaries: Race, nation, gender, colour and class and the anti-racist struggle*. London, England: Routledge. The arguments that racism and racilaisation do not only rely on people's race or skin colour, that ethnicity cannot be described as identical to 'race', but interwoven with race, and that although both race and ethnicity are categories that are determined by the possession of criteria of entry, the markers for racial and ethnic groups are different, are reflected in our lived experiences in particular in the UK.

[11] See for details in Yuval Davis, N.,Wemyss G., and Cassidy K. (2019) *Bordering*. London: Polity Press.