A STUDY OF THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY OF AFGHAN REFUGEES RESETTLED IN NOVA SCOTIA

by

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This thesis is dedicated to the Afghan refugee girl who knew that she wanted to be a high school physics teacher when she grew up.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents a qualitative study of the experiences of a sample of Afghan refugees who have settled in Canada. The concepts of structure and agency, as articulated in Anthony Giddens's structuration theory have been deployed as the theoretical framework of this study. I focus on the concept of culture, as both an "enabling" and "constraining" structure and the role it plays in the life of the refugees who form the study group for this thesis. The interviews explore how the respondents use culture as a means to express and explore their agency. Several themes emerge from the interviews, which are analyzed in dialogue with the literature on refugee and immigrant settlement. In light of the research findings, the role of the refugees in Canadian immigration policy is discussed, and it is suggested that there is room for a broader and more comprehensive role for refugees within national policy.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

CCR - Canadian Council for Refugees

CIC - Citizenship and Immigration Canada

GAR - Government-Assisted Refugee

IOM - International Organization for Migration

ISIS - Immigrant Settlement and Integration Services

NSOI - Nova Scotia Office of Immigration

PDPA - People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan

RAP - Resettlement Assistance Package

SA- Social Assistance

UNHCR – United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees

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This thesis is the result of a mid-life crisis which blew myself, my children, and occasionally their father half-way across the world, out of our home, and into Halifax. Many of my nearest and dearest thought I was making a huge mistake in embarking on this project, and they told me so in no uncertain terms, repeatedly. Perhaps they were right, but it doesn't feel like it. I enjoyed every moment I spent in the hallways and classrooms of Dalhousie University, and my only regret is that I wasn't able to spend as much time as I would have liked on my data and my study group to do them the justice which I feel they deserve.

The list of people who helped me over the past two years is too long to mention. Thank you all. It was an incredible experience.

Chapter One: Introduction

"You come, pick out our women, children and best-educated men, and send them to foreign countries, where they forget our values and traditions. Resettlement is destroying our culture" (Afghan elder to UNHCR staff-member, Zahedan, Iran 2005).

1.1 Research Background

Afghan refugees resettled in Canada as Government-Assisted Refugees (GARs) have undergone a long journey. Fleeing violent events which rocked their country of origin over the past thirty years, they sought asylum in neighbouring countries- the majority in Iran and Pakistan, but many further afield, to Turkey, India and Europe. As far as they were able, they established livelihoods in these countries; working in a wide variety of skilled and unskilled positions, going to school, marrying and raising children who had never seen Afghanistan. But ultimately, they could not stay in the country of asylum, as they never had the opportunity to regularize their status in these host countries. And they remained unable to return to their home country due to continuing fear of persecution and the possibility of serious human rights' violations.

For those in this unenviable position, the United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) recommends resettlement as a tool of protection, that is, legal admission into a third country willing to accept them as permanent residents, with possibility of acquiring citizenship in the near future (UNHCR, 2004).

UNHCR staff -members interview resettlement applicants through several stages to assess the "genuineness" of their claim, and subsequently refugees are introduced to the foreign missions of countries such as Canada who are committed to resettlement. Once selected, they will undergo further interviews, medical and security checks, and other bureaucratic measures. If everything is completed successfully, the refugees are issued documents which allow them to enter Canada legally and become permanent residents. The place of their landing and residence in Canada is pre-determined by the Canadian

government, and they are guided through settlement in their new community by government–funded organizations. The whole process of resettlement can take anything from six months to two years. It is a lengthy, complicated and highly bureaucratic process involving three or four states and state-like organizations: the authorities of the country of asylum, the authorities of the receiving country, or the country of resettlement, UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), which organizes the logistics of travel. The process is set out in detail in *The Resettlement Handbook* (UNHCR, 2004), and is implemented more or less consistently in UNHCR offices throughout the world, with minor variations as required by local conditions.

And then, there are the refugees themselves, who, alone in this process, represent no organization and no interests other than their own and their families'.

The opening pages of *The Resettlement Handbook* state "resettled refugees have also made important contributions to the countries that have received them" (UNHCR, 2004:I-2). Within a few paragraphs, we learn:

> Accepting refugees for resettlement is a mark of true generosity on the part of Governments and UNHCR welcomes the opportunities that continue to be offered by States for the resettlement of refugees. In turn, resettled refugees could – with the appropriate integration measures in place - eventually prove to be an asset for the resettlement State, through their contribution to society at large.(Ibid: I-3)

But how do the refugees perceive this incredible "true generosity"? How does the interaction between refugees and the host state and society take place? Another UNHCR Handbook, *Refugee Resettlement: An International Handbook to Guide Reception and Integration* (UNHCR, 2002) sets out the basic guidelines on "appropriate measures" for integration: adequate reception measures, language training, education and employment and such like are set out in policy-friendly language (the handbook is aimed at policy-planners) and there is little mention of how refugees interact with or embrace these measures. What are these contributions that UNHCR hopes the refugees will make to their host society? How do refugees experience the process of resettlement and integration in a

new society? What kind of adaptations must they make? What does it all mean to them? How are they affected?

Not surprisingly, there is no UNHCR handbook to address such questions which were floating in my mind after working closely with Afghan refugees as a UNHCR Resettlement Assistant from 2004 to 2008. Meanwhile, the formalized and narrow structure of my interaction with Afghan refugees as a UN staff-member meant that almost by default, neither my colleagues nor I had any great hope that resettlement would prove a benefit to the resettled refugees. True, they gain a certain legal stability which they had lived without for twenty or more years in Iran, but they could also lose the close network and socio-cultural connections that they had had here. We speculated that while their children might integrate at school, they would return home only to be confronted by their often illiterate and traditionally-minded parents. They might be marginalized, even perhaps ghettoized, left to eke out a minimal existence on grudging government handouts, potential victims of the institutionalized racism prevalent within developed countries towards poorer ones, a phenomenon to which we, Iranian staff-members of a so-called international, but wholly western-based organization were completely sensitized. These assumptions were nourished by media reports on crimes relating to "honour" which sporadically erupts amongst immigrant families in western countries. There was no feedback system in place and once the refugees moved out of the country, we completely lost touch with them.

My former colleagues in Tehran found it amusing, if not perverse, that I had chosen to conduct my MA research doing *more* fieldwork with Afghan refugees. "Haven't you had enough of Afghans? Of refugees? Now that they're not chasing you, you are seeking them in Canada?" they asked me[1]. "But it's all I know" I answered, "Almost all

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[1] I had in fact undergone a particularly nasty experience shortly before my arrival in Halifax, of an Afghan woman with a rejected resettlement claim following me to my home, and following my husband to his office, confronting us on the street in an attempt to reactivate her file, resorting to offers of bribes and threats.

my professional life has passed in working with Afghan and Iraqi refugees. What else should I do?"

After I entered Dalhousie University as a graduate student I realized there is a whole body of academic literature presenting vibrant and lively portrayals and discussions of the resettlement and social and cultural adaptations of refugees and immigrants from a variety of countries. By embarking on this thesis, I determined to contribute to this literature by considering the situation of Afghan GARs who were resettled in Halifax. I was curious about their subsequent adventures after they embarked on a plane at Mehrabad Airport in Tehran, holding bags emblazoned with the blue IOM symbol, their children waving little paper Canadian flags, and I meant to satisfy this curiosity.

1.2 Statement of Research Question

This research was not undertaken to prove or disprove a particular hypothesis, but rather to develop an understanding of the impact of the resettlement process on the cultural identity of Afghan GARs, and how they meet the cultural and social challenges of their new country. This research intends to generate a new understanding regarding the effects of refuge and resettlement in the lives of refugees, as well as deeper insights into the socio-cultural identity formation of Afghan GARs. Within the framework of structuration theory as articulated by Anthony Giddens (1984), this thesis asks the question:

From a social and cultural standpoint, how do Afghan government-assisted refugees adapt to life in Canada, where the culture, value and lifestyle of the dominant majority is very different to both that of their country of origin, and the country of first asylum?

Through ten open-ended interviews with Afghan GAR families living in Halifax I explore various aspects of their daily life, customs and future aspirations, and this thesis attempts to address this question. I questioned how they engage with the very real structures with which their lives are embedded, and, in emerging from the long and complicated process of resettlement described above, whether, if, and how they find the

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space to exert and develop their own individuality. To use a term which will be more fully explored in the theoretical framework, I wanted to investigate their "agency". What kind of choices are they making, in this new Canadian life, and why? Anthony Giddens talks about people knowingly and consciously engaging in social practices, but modifying them, perhaps over time, according to their own individuality and choices (Giddens, 1984). What are the social practices of this population, and, more interestingly for me, what are their individual modifications, and why?

In exploring the answers to these questions, this study will argue against the simplistic representations of refugees as helpless, victimized, marginalized and passive people, which are perpetuated by media and policy and can even be occasionally found academic literature. Based on the research findings, a more realistic portrayal which emphasizes the diversity, resourcefulness, agency and capacities of these people will be presented. Certain implications and recommendations for migration policy at a local and national level can be drawn from this development which will be discussed in the conclusion. Although the study is not representative of "the refugee population", or "Afghans", yet it emphasizes the diversity and agency of vulnerable people in caught difficult circumstances. In this sense, it will contribute the academic literature which is increasingly challenging the homogenous representations of "refugees", "Afghans" or "Muslims" frequently occurring in the media, policy and even some academic discourse.

And on a personal level, in embarking on this research, I was hoping to seek answers to a question which had been nagging at me throughout the years I was working as a Resettlement Assistant: are the resettled refugees happy? Were we doing the right thing? Is the resettlement programme a "good" programme? Afghan refugees are transplanted from a society they have known all their lives to a different country, where they do not speak the language, do not know the culture, and any prior knowledge of it that they have may be tainted by the prejudiced and politically-charged representations of "Western"

countries constructed and relentlessly disseminated by the official discourse of the countries where they had been living all their lives. How can they gain peace and contentment here?

1.3 Literature Review

I took up this thesis to discover what happens to Afghan refugees at the other end of the journey, and how they adapt into the new socio-cultural environment of their new country. In conducting the research for this study, I realized that scholars have shown a great deal of interest in the effects of journey and flight on the identity issues of refugees and immigrants. The experience of crossing borders offers a compelling point of departure for the discussion of the challenges and adaptations individuals must face:

> The experience of flight highlights the dynamic character of identity. By transcending borders and embarking on a life in a new cultural environment, refugees normally question old and self-evident collective identities and change them. Either new identities emerge, or sometimes old ones even get strengthened. (Binder et al, 2005:610)

The moment of flight and border-crossing is thus portrayed as a momentous event, which entails a series of internal transformations and also external repercussions. Scholars have approached the issue of flight and the resultant events from a variety of angles depending on their interests and motivations.

Considering the moment a person becomes a refugee, philosophers and political science theorists ponder the meaning of taking refuge and seeking asylum, exploring the reactions of States and societies to the arrival of a newcomer on their doorstep (Kristeva, 1988; Arendt,1994; Nyers, 2006) while lawyers analyze their rights to asylum and protection (Hathaway, 2005). The political significance of organized responses made by states, state-like institutions, and societies to forced displacements is also discussed in the works of Hyndman (2000) and Malkki (1996). As refugees settle in, shedding their legal status as refugees, with all the temporariness and fragility inherent in this status, and taking

on the more acceptable and permanent one of "resident" or ultimately "citizen" we come across a substantial body of work devoted to the mental health issues of refugees in their new societies (some examples: Nann, 1982; Lipson and Mileis in Hinshawe et al, 1999; Michalsky, 2001; Witmer and Culver, 2001). Economists present data on their financial situation (Hiebert, 2008; Siggner, 2007), while anthropologists and sociologists, using a different language from that of the mental health practitioners but talking about fundamentally the same sorts of issues, worry about their identity and cultural issues (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 2001; Tastsoglou, in Tastsoglou and Dobrowlosky, 2006). This interaction amongst various disciplines in studies on flight and refugee issues reflects what one scholar, an anthropologist, has called "the necessity of a multidisciplinary approach due to a complex interplay of the social, cultural, psychological and political aspects of flight" (Binder *et al*, 2005:609).

Julie Kristeva, writing as a literary theorist, speaks in an intensely personal and poetic manner of the fear and wonder evoked by the presence of a stranger, and how this morphs into hostility and hatred (Kristeva, 1993):

> For the foreigner perceived as an invader reveals a buried passion within those who are entrenched: the passion to kill the *other*, who had first been feared or despised, then promoted from the ranks of the dregs to the status of a powerful persecutor against whom a "we" solidifies in order to take revenge. (Kristeva, 1993:20)

Thus, refugees, through the sheer force of their presence, are constructed as powerful agents: through their very powerlessness, crystallized in their lack of both linguistic and legal voice, they jolt the members of the receiving society out of complacency and spur them into some form of recognition, and eventually, self-recognition: "Living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility of not being an other. It is not simply –humanistically- a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself." (the author's italics, Kristeva, 1993:13) Their arrival on the doorstep is a

challenge to society, and the response given to that challenge provides a form of self-awareness and self-knowledge.

Hannah Arendt's refugees are also powerful voices capable of frightening –or at least rattling states. States placate them by offering meager handouts as they fear refugees can create a "national splinter", where somehow their disarray may spill over and cause disaffection and unrest in their own citizenry (Arendt,1994). Refugees, through their presence, challenge the borders, and thus the identity of states. These are intensely political constructions of refugees, analysed more recently by Peter Nyers (2006), in which refugees are viewed as a counterpoint to the boundary-setting of States. I will return to Nyers in greater detail when considering my theoretical framework, as his representation of refugees as informed agents is one that provides a further theoretical cornerstone for this study.

Moving out of the realm of political science and the political significance of refuge and considering the actual settlement experiences of refugees, a significant body of scholarly work on refugees and their adaptation into new societies is devoted to mental health issues. Nann (1982) provides a detailed argument about how the "culture shock" resulting from resettlement exacerbates the stressful and precarious situation of refugees resettled from various countries to North America. The problems are as much to do with the mentality of refugees as the situation of the host country:

> When migrants resettle into a new environment, they are usually exposed to a different culture, different ways of living and perhaps, to various forms of discrimination and prejudice. Previous research of migration populations has shown that homesickness often persists along with an obdurate clinging to the past, thereby prohibiting successful adaptation to the present. Among people who have been oppressed in their home country, a lingering fear of persecution may continue long after migration. (Nann, 1982: xii)

In the same volume, Maria Pfister-Ammende categorizes various forms of mobility and migration, and comments on "forced unplanned mobility…, usually (as) a result of political upheaval":

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This type of movement involves high risks to the mental health of those people [*who have experienced it*]. In many cases, their reaction to this type of move will include lingering fear of the persecutor which may be later projected onto the new country, and be followed by depression, overt aggression, and apathy. Much later they may come an identity crisis of the next generation; the question "Who am I?" (Pfister-Ammende, in Nann, 1982: xv).

In this vein, Michalsky (2001) assesses Canadian health care services provided to Iraqi GARs, criticizing the unpreparedness of the government to the deal with their mental health issues after having committed to accepting them. Michalsky highlights the necessity of providing adequate and professional counseling to facilitate successful integration, taking as a point of departure that the refugees arriving to Canada are traumatized and in need of psychological care.

While Lipson and Mileis concur that "migration is a stressful experience requiring accommodation, adaptation or coping", consequently classifying migrants and refugees amongst vulnerable populations (Lipson and Mileis, in Hinshaw et al, 1999:88), they take issue with what they consider to be the two dominant paradigms in the literature on refugees and health: the first views refugees as "a poverty-stricken and political class of excess people", and the second objictifies refugees as medical phenomena. The authors present a critical feminist view of refugees, which instead of concentrating on health and illness, views refugees as resilient, stating that "refugees provide a vivid example of the human capacity to survive despite the greatest losses and assaults on human identity and dignity" (Muecke, quoted in Lison et al, 1999: 89).

Witmer and Culvert (2001) also critically review the literature available on refugee mental health, specifically the "trauma" and resilience" of Bosnian Muslim families. They argue that the available research is focused on the "post-traumatic stress disorder, psychopathology, and individual-based assessment and intervention, with few studies addressing concepts of adaptation, functioning or resiliency, and even fewer focusing on the family as a unit" (Witmer and Culvert, 2001:173). They argue for more

cross-cultural research, positing that: "with Bosnian Muslims an accurate understanding of their culture is particularly crucial given the central role of their ethnic identity in the trauma they have experienced… (Witmer and Culvert, 2001:181). Nevertheless, "there was minimal description of Bosnian Muslim culture in the literature reviewed, there was also serious confusion as to what aspects of culture were being described" (Witmer and Culvert, 2001:181).

Stack and Iwasaki (2009) study the role of leisure pursuits in the adaptation of Afghan immigrants and refugees in Winnipeg through a qualitative study in which they intend to give and honour "voices" to Afghan interviewees. Their study takes as its point of departure that "globally, Afghan immigrants/refugees are a marginalised minority group who encounter substantial hardships and stress in the processes of adaptation to a new environment..." (Stack and Iwasaki, 2009:241). They go on to narrate a true story of Afghan minors travelling to the U.K. after their parents were killed by the Taliban. The hardships and trauma experienced by these refugees

> explain(s) the complexity of negotiating identity and prejudice (in this case, anti-Afghan prejudice) in the modern era of international wars, inter-ethnic conflict and mass migration across the globe. Those Afghan children's adaptation to their new life in a landed country was undoubtedly challenging due to this complex reality (Stack and Iwasaki, 2009:241).

Katrin Eun-Myo Park (2002) points out the gendered nature of mental health afflictions.

> One of the most pressing issues facing Afghan refugees, especially women, today is their mental health, according to the World health organization (WHO) and advocates for women. Although the issue of survival takes priority, more people are recognizing the importance of the mental health of refugees…Noting that over 2 million Afghans are estimated to suffer from mental health problems, WHO urged the reestablishment of mental health services to treat them… (Eyun-Myo Park, 2002:14)

She goes on to list all the possible reasons why Afghan women are more susceptible to mental health issues, which basically revolve around the ongoing atrocities and human rights abuses to which women are subject.

There can be no doubt that these studies address serious gaps in mental health services to refugees and immigrants, but the point I wish to make is that *not all refugees* are traumatized, requiring mental health services; *not all refugees* encounter such severe culture shock as to necessitate professional health interventions, and without denigrating the morally correct compass of these studies, is it not possible to wonder if they perpetuate the refugee-as-victim trope, positioning refugees in a binary opposition to bureaucratic and institutionalized service-providers? Parin Dossa, herself a mental health worker, is a scholar who developed resistance to the usual tropes of mental problems in her work on Iranian immigrants (Dossa, 2004). She argues that these labels hark back to the political silencing and problematizing of refugees which was touched upon above. Referring to a dominant world order which defines the practices of multiple nation-states, she states:

> Displaced people are as seen challenging and subverting this order, and this is why national and international bodies control and manage anyone who is perceived not to have territorial roots. A common strategy is to use the idiom of mental health as exemplified in constructs such as "refugee mental health" and 'post-traumatic stress disorder'" (Dossa, 2004:4).

In particular with regard to Afghan refugees resettled from other countries of asylum into Canada, it is necessary to emphasize the lengthy period of time that has generally elapsed from the time of their original flight from their country of origin, and their eventual settlement in Canada. During this period, although they are likely to have experienced harsh and unforgiving life-circumstances in their country of asylum, many of them were able to establish some semblance of stability and normalcy. Furthermore, in general, few have direct experience of violence and individual persecution, and not to the same extent as say, Iraqi or Bosnian refugees (or an Afghan woman living in Afghanistan) may experience. Of the participants in this particular study, only one spoke of symptoms of trauma and psychological unease, and even in his case, when one considers the circumstances of his journey and arrival into Canada, one cannot help but appreciate his

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fierce determination to get as much out of life as it can offer, for his family at least if not for himself.

And finally, I now consider a body of work concerned with similar issues of adaptation and integration within society, but not through a mental-health lens. These studies focus on the concepts of adaptation and integration, asking what does adaptation mean? How do immigrants adapt and integrate in their new society?

A variety of studies have addressed issues surrounding the settlement experiences and integration processes of immigrants and refugees in their new countries. Dyck and McLaren (2004) study the methodology of researching settlement experiences of women in Vancouver, focussing on the narratives provided by in-depth interviews with female immigrants as tools to construct their understanding of "'womanhood' in Canada, [and] desired 'integration'" (Dyck and McLaren, 2004:513). They argue that interviews are tools which provide space for immigrants to provide their own narratives of hardship and frustration, often running directly contrary to the official narratives of "desirable" immigrants and refugees (Dyck and McLaren, 2004:513). Dossa (2008) also looks at narratives of immigration provided by Afghan female immigrants in the Vancouver area. Her study focuses on the "Politics of Exclusion", critiquing the legal-political structures which brought these women into Canada under the headings of "family class" and "refugee class" in the first place, thus by default labelling them as excluded, dependent and vulnerable. Accordingly, her participants become the "Wounded Story-tellers", and much of their narratives revolve around their harsh and sometimes horrific experiences of their pasts, still affecting their present, leading to a state of "*parishani*" or ceaseless worry and anxiety (Dossa, 2008: 13-14). As regards their present and future, they express concerns about finding jobs and their continued dependency on the government. Dossa discusses three specific socio-cultural practices "by which the women endeavoured to create a space

where they could claim an Afghan-Canadian identity, however fragmented and uneven it may be" (Dossa, 2008:16). These are: food, prayers, and transnational networking.

Both the studies by Dossa and Dyck and McLaren are premised on the "human agency" of immigrants, and argue that not only is this often overlooked by policy-makers, indeed it presents a "counter-discourse" to the "homogenization of immigrants" in official discourse (Dyck and Mclaren, 2004: 528). This is consistent with the framework and aims of my present study, and although the participants here study also discuss the themes analysed by Dossa, they also sometimes present highly differing accounts on each of these issues, illustrating the expression of agency and the development of individual indetities within narrow social confines.

While the studies above concentrate more on the actual narratives of the settlement experience provided by immigrants, other scholars have approached the issue differently, positing "integration" as an objective entity and then researching how immigrants have succeeded, or not, in attaining it.

> Key domains of integration are related to four overall themes: achievement and access across the sectors of employment, housing, education and health; assumptions and practice regarding citizenship and rights; processes of social connection within and between groups within the community; and structural barriers to such connection related to language, culture and the local environment. (Ager and Strang, 2008:166)

In this view, the cultural adaptation of immigrants and refugees is one of several dimensions which together encompass a whole way of life. Valtonen (2004) explores the experiences of settlement and integration of refugees and newcomers in Finland throughout the 1990s. She defines integration "as the ability to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural activities, without having to relinquish one's own distinct ethnocultural identity and culture" (Valtonen, 2004: 74). She looks at goals such as labour market participation, education, political activity and civic activism, cultural retention and social relations, and critiques the barriers which are set against the

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achievement of these goals. Tastsoglou and Miedema (2000) and Tastsoglou (2006) also critically explore the integration process of women immigrants and refugees specifically in the Canadian Maritime provinces. These studies take as their point of departure that integration is a "complex and multi-faceted process" (Miedema and Tastsoglou, 2000:82), and that immigrant and newcomers undergo a duality regarding the "old" and "new" cultures to which they are exposed:

> For example, while the host society expects newcomers to integrate, newcomers often resist total integration and seek to preserve aspects of their 'old culture", thereby creating new ethnicities (Tastsoglou 1997). Such efforts and resistance can create tension and conflict in immigrant familes, as well as between immigrants and societies at large...(Miedema and Tastsoglou 2000:82)

Tastsoglou and her colleagues place particular emphasis on community involvement and social activism as tools by which immigrant women, marginalized and constructed as voiceless, may "break isolation, make friends, enact citizenship" (Tastsoglou and Miedema, 2000:84). Later mention is made of instances of such involvement leading to jobs and labour market integration. In her 2006 study, Tastsolglou develops these stratagems further, arguing they are deployed by immigrant women to develop a sense of belonging and "creating a new home in Canada"- what she also refers to as "adjusting" (Tastsoglou, 2006: 213-220). This involves:

- Claiming a voice for ethnic community; referring to immigrants seeking out and networking with others of the same cultural and geographical background.

- Becoming involved in the community and social justice; the involvement of immigrants in various projects against racism and the promotion of social equality.

- Networking and friendships; stressing the importance of building relationships as a step in the process of adjusting to life in Canada.

- Sharing and exchanging across cultures; implying a sense of give-and-take, exposure to different practices and cultures, choosing and creating new cultural forms.

- Maintaining close connections with families of origin and extended families, regardless of the geographical distance.

- Integrating in the labour market;

and finally,

- Religion. Here reference is made to the sociologist Durkheim on the role of religion in social integration. Tastoglou asserts that "either in the form of a community of people or in the form of spirituality and faith sustained by ritual and symbol, religion provides a very important factor in the process of adjustment for some immigrants" (Tastsoglou, 2006: 220). These are cross-cutting themes which emerge in my interviews also, albeit in sometimes very different ways.

This thesis hopes to contribute to this substantial body of work, of which only select excerpts have been discussed here, by providing a deeper understanding of the ways in which Afghan refugees adapt to their new life in Nova Scotia, and how they deal with the new, and perhaps radically different, cultural norms and values which confront them.

1.4 Research Methodology

Qualitative Research with Refugees

This research, taking its cue from similar studies referenced above, is based on qualitative research, as described by Esterberg (2002):

Qualitative researchers try to understand social processes in context. In addition, qualitative researchers pay attention to the subjective nature of human life- not only the subjective experiences of those they are studying but the also the subjectivity of the researchers themselves. In other words, qualitative researchers try to understand the meanings of the social events for those who are involved in them… (Esterberg, 2002: 3).

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Thus, it seemed appropriate to use this research methodology in a study concerned with the subjective experiences of Afghan refugees as they settle into Canadian society. Furthermore, Esterberg notes that qualitative researchers typically do not set out with a theory which they then attempt to prove or disprove through gathering empirical "facts"; rather, they begin by "examining the social world", and develop a theory consistent with what they are seeing (Esterberg, 2002:7). Again, this is consistent with what I had in mind as I embarked on this study, for I had no set theory of how Afghan refugees were settling, but I was hoping to gain some knowledge of this process.

Qualitative research can be considered as particularly apposite in studies on immigrants, for it provides a counter-point to the prevalent discourse on the homogenization of immigrants, touched upon above; where immigrants from a particular country or of a particular religion are assumed to have a "common personal history" and "a sameness of experience in Canada" (Barber, 2003: 46). But,

> Qualitative research reveals that this is decidedly not the case; immigrants (regardless of their visa status) have distinctive personal histories and are as socially, economically, and politically differentiated as more longstanding Canadians (Ibid).

And if qualitative research is well-suited to documenting the experiences of immigrants, for refugees in particular it can be very apt, for it has the potential to provide space for the "voices" of the refugees while critically situating the researcher in relation to the research subjects. As discussed above, refugees are typically lacking in political and legal voice. Their movements and access is heavily controlled by administrative structures with no space for critical reflexivity, and they are subject to a homogenizing discourse in both popular and academic media which emphasizes their victimhood and silent suffering. In this environment, then,

> Refugees' perceptions and knowledge of their problems are designated as subjective, biased and uninformed. They are even ultimately viewed as misleading because institutions interested in absorbing or rehabilitating refugees impose their own

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definitions of relevant facts, needs and goals in a way that the institute can `handle them`(Mazur, 1987: 54).

I do not by any means wish to portray the academic researcher on refugee affairs as some kind of hero who somehow nobly provides space for the unheard refugee voice where such space is lacking. The sheer remoteness of the likelihood that the research results may ever be implemented in some sort of policy which noticeably improves refugee lives is enough to deflate such a portrayal, and I think most refugees have been through enough without wanting to bare their soul to another stranger/questioner. I think back to my years in UNHCR, and wonder whether we could have or would have acted any differently in the given situations with the given resources, if I had had my present knowledge on critical thinking and qualitative social research, and I cannot come up with an answer. What would Nyers, Binder or even Julie Kristeva, quoted above, make of quotas, forms, deadlines, and extremely small resources set against very numerous demands? How to confront and `manage` the mess? Small consolation to speak of refugee voices and refugee agency! But I do believe this type of qualitative research provides for another viewpoint on extremely difficult and intractable human situations; a useful counterpoint, as it were, to the kind of quantitative and positivist policy thinking and decision-making, which despite its fall from philosophical and academic fashion continues to dominate so many institutions (Benton and Craib, 2001). Qualitative research thus provides a moment in which it is possible to step back and think, well, there is another way to think about this.

Data Analysis, or, Listening to Stories

Regarding data analysis of the interviews, Silverman (2006) contends that there are two ways to approach interviews: one is to consider them as providing an "index to some external reality", whether "facts", events", or "meanings" and "feelings" (Silverman, 2006:823)

For the qualitative-minded researcher, the open-ended interview apparently offers the opportunity for an authentic gaze into the soul of another, or even for a politically correct dialogue in which researched and researcher come together for mutual support and understanding. The rhetoric of interviewing "in-depth" repeatedly hints at such a collection of assumptions.

This is what he calls the "*realist* approach to interview data" (italics in the original). The alternative is the *narrative* approach for interview analysis, which "treats interview data as accessing various stories or narratives through which people describes their world". In this approach, the interviewer does not make any claim that the respondents' accounts provide a "true" picture of "reality", rather, they are "cultural stories": "This means examining the rhetorical force of what interviewees say", for "interviewees deploy these narratives to make their actions explainable and understandable to those who otherwise may not understand" (Silverman, 2006:824). Silverman then goes on to analyse interviews transcripts with girl street gang members to illustrate the difference between these two approaches. The realist researcher digs for correlations between the external circumstances ("objective social structures") of the girls and their "subjective dispositions", all based on the assumption that gang membership is "bad", and ultimately leading to recommendation on how to alleviate this social evil. However, the narrative approach focuses on how the words of the girls build up a challenge –not to the public view of gangs as 'bad", but to the notion that the interviewee is "bad" for being a gang member. Silverman concludes that

> These narratives directly challenge stereotypical cultural stories of the gang…such accounts are "cultural; stories" that "resist the cultural narratives about groups of people and tell alternative stories (Silverman, 2006:824)

I have dwelled at some length on Silverman's distinction between realist and narrative approaches and his example of girl gang members because there are interesting parallels between the situation of refugees and girl gangs - both are treated in public imagination as groups of people who are marginalized, ignorant, impoverished, potentially criminal and threats to the well-being and welfare of an orderly (middle-class) way of life.

Just as the interviews with the girls can be depicted as narrative constructions through which the respondents challenge stereotypes, I became very conscious of the interviews with my respondents as being deliberate, formal representations of their "life in Canada". I had become aware, as I sought GARs to interview for this project, that only families who were confident enough or comfortable enough with their ability to talk about and portray their experiences in Canada were willing to be interviewed. And through their depictions, they too challenged the notion of refugees as "silent", powerless, lacking the capacity to know and to choose. As an illustration of this, none of them considered themselves as being "selected" by the resettlement programme, or "chosen" by immigration officials. Rather, they all described a certain degree of forcefulness and resourcefulness in the manner they pursued resettlement as a viable option open to them and their families. For example, one person left Iran upon being rejected by UNHCR in Iran, moved to Turkey and re-applied. Another man gave the credit for being resettled to his sister, who is literate and very clever, and "who knows how to write letters to UNHCR in way which got their attention." Another respondent described in some detail and with some pride how she approached the head of language school where she took English lessons and complained about being forced to take the same lessons over and over and again, which resulted in her moving up to higher levels. So through the interviews, we find refugees building up this challenging portrayal of themselves as active, tough and resourceful, capable of considering, choosing and protesting. Where they are denied choice, they react, becoming frustrated or restless, casting around to find ways to deal with it. The issue of individual agency and the manner in which it interacts with constraints, such as those facing girl gang members or refugees, is pivotal to this thesis, and ties in with the narrative approach of treating interviews as conscious narratives deployed by active, knowing agents.

"Do you think you can introduce me to your friends and acquaintances, so I can interview them, similar to what we had now?"

"No, I am sorry, I cannot do that. Of course now I know you, so I didn't mind being interviewed, but others do not know you, and if – God forbid - anything unpleasant should arise from these interviews, I don't want to bear the responsibility…" (Hossein, an Afghan interviewee, November 2009)

Recruitment and "Access"

Difficulties of access proved to be one of the major challenges and constraints of this study. The readings I had done on Nyers, Kristeva and Arendt, cited above, together with my own weak position as a student researcher unaffiliated with any particular service-provider and lacking "insider" contacts had somewhat prepared me for the difficulties of getting interviews, and the travails of other scholars in conducting research with refugees encouraged me. Barbara Harrell-Bond and Efthia Voutira (2007) detail the almost surreal and at times Kafkaesque bureaucratic and administrative obstacles in gaining "access" to refugees, whom they call "invisible actors", placed in their way by UNHCR and government authorities.

> It is the *problematique* of studying these refugees which was the main stimulus for writing this paper, but our concerns with the general problems of accessing refugees for research purposes and disseminating the findings led us to include a more general discussion of the challenges raised in the context of accessing the 'refugee' as a persona, as a person, and as a public perception, within spaces that are visible and identifiable, but largely inaccessible to researchers for a variety of reasons. (Harrell-Bond and Voutira, 2007:283)

They go on to speculate about the reasons: responsible agencies, whether governmental or UN, do not wish to expose their shortcomings in rights-protection which is their mandate; they have a stake in safeguarding their reputation in doing good and so on. I had thought at the outset of my research that none of these reasons would apply to the non-government agency which is the main service-provider to government-assisted refugees in Halifax, and I was hopeful that with the production of credentials, the friendly

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staff-members at the Halifax NGO would assist me establishing contact with Afghan

GARs. I was wrong. As Foucault reminds us:

> Refugees as persons are subsumed under elaborate bureaucratic structures that
> 'control' them. A key feature of these structures of control is the exercise of power by
> individual actors who represent authority structures at different levels of the hierarchy
> and often perceive their role in life as saying 'no' (see Voutira and Harrell-Bond 1995:
> 212ff). In this sense, arbitrary denial of access becomes part of the exercise and
> wielding of power (Foucault, 1977: 186).

The NGO staff-members were not willing to assist in identifying respondents.

This could be positive, since it ensured that refugees, for whom this NGO is their main and

only service-provider, were not under any pressure to accept interviews. The Dalhousie

Ethics Review Board had already voiced concerns regarding this method of recruitment.

More disappointing was my failure to interview caseworkers who were working with

Afghan GARs. I had been particularly interested in getting a third-party viewpoint on the

settlement experiences of Afghan GARs, to provide for triangulation of the data, and it

seemed to me that these caseworkers were ideally situated to do so. The only third-party

interview I was able to conduct was with an Iranian translator who provides translations

services for Afghan and other Farsi-speakers and who has been working in this capacity for

eight years in Halifax.

For recruitment, I sought out Afghans in public spaces: the mosque on Robie

street where a couple of families brought their daughters for Saturday Quran classes, the

Dalhousie Multifaith Centre, and open immigrant events gave me the opportunity to

approach a few Afghan families, who somewhat reluctantly allowed me to enter their

homes and interview them.

I was agonizingly aware of my nuisance-value. These people had filled enough

forms and answered enough questions to last them a lifetime. The interviews were framed

as far as possible as friendly afternoon chat, with my notebook, or on the rare occasion

when permission to record was granted, my audiorecorder kept discreetly out of view,

together with the forms required for signature. None of the individuals interviewed wished to sign any form at all; they could not understand, if I was promising them confidentiality as far as possible, why I needed them to sign their names, and I didn't seem able to provide a coherent or convincing answer. After the first few tries where the interviewees simply ignored the form I had placed in front them and remained silent in the face of the explanation I had provided, adapted from the Ethics Review guidelines, I gave up on the consent form, and contented myself with obtaining oral consent for quoting them. Which in the majority of cases could not be recorded.

I also became aware that I was interviewing a particular profile of Afghan refugees. I have no claim that my study is in any sense representative. However, I am well aware from my former work at UNHCR that at least 80 percent of Afghan families resettled out of Iran fell under the Women-at-Risk criteria; they were single mothers, widows, divorcees. But I was getting traditional families for my interviews; fathers and mothers, together with their children. Where were all those widows and divorcees we had resettled? I couldn't find any in those public spaces I just described. None of the families I was interviewing referred me to any. Eventually, I came across a couple of single mothers in English language classes. They were polite but firm. They did not want to be interviewed, they did not want to me to call, they did not want anything to do with me. They themselves were their own gatekeepers.

I realized then that only families who had a certain amount of public confidence and voice, who already considered their settlement in Canada in a positive light were willing to let me in and to talk about it. This natural sifting would inevitably bias my results. Not that the settlement experiences of a family where both parents are present are necessarily less valid or less real than those of a single-mother family, or a single woman. But they are very different sets of experiences, and this has to be considered in the conclusion.

Another factor, which may not be necessarily a constraint but which certainly affected the character of my interviews was the family settings for most of them. Three of the interviews (out of ten) took place individually, almost by accident, simply because the other family members happened to be not at home at the time of the interviews. The others all took place within the family, with both parents and the teenaged children talking, discussing, considering.

In my initial research design, I had in fact foreseen this situation, and had talked about families. However, at the insistence of the university Ethics Review Board and their concern for confidentiality, I changed this to individuals. Later, when actually interviewing within the guest-host framework described, I felt it was impossible to ask to separate family members (although if I mentioned I wanted to talk to the mother in the family about "medical issues" the father may have left the room, or may not)- what kind of formal guest asks to talk to her hosts confidentially and separately? I proceeded with the family interview. I took some comfort in the fact that other scholars had gone the same route, and were able to rationalize it better than I: "Individual-focused research may be inadequate, as it tends to reflect the individualistic nature of Western culture, ignoring the structural realities of the trauma experienced and the social context of Bosnian refugees" (Witmer and Culver, 2001:178). Dossa (2004) also describes her research taking place within families, and reproduces conversations taking place amongst family members as important parts of her narrative.

My former occupation in UNHCR also necessarily affected the interviews. Although I had resigned from UNHCR Tehran, and do not at the present time intend to return, it is inevitable that after working for the organization from April 2000, and from September 2004 as a resettlement assistant, my interactions with Afghan refugees should be coloured by my background. I took care to clarify before each interview that I used to work with UNHCR Tehran, hence my interest in Afghans and refugee affairs. In fact, a

couple of families had heard of me, and one family had been interviewed by me (although I could not recall it at the time). The families did not display any particular uneasiness at my professional background; I, on the contrary, was very well aware of the difference in my position before and now. As a UNHCR staff-member, we made recommendations on cases that were determining factors in the final decisions on them; our clients knew this, and we knew that they knew. If they refused to answer any question, it could affect their case. If they contradicted themselves, it could affect their case. The amount of details we asked of them in order to build up a credible case was troublesome, even to us. They had waited at least a year before their first interview with an UNHCR official. That interview was their chance in a lifetime.

But now, the power dynamics were wholly reversed. I was only there by my hosts' goodwill and grace. I had reassured them that the interview was solely a favour to me, and had no bearing on their official interactions with the Canadian government and service-providers. These circumstances contribute to the reliability of the interviews, as they were conducted wholly based on the good will of the interviewee, with no additional motivation in form of pressure from outside institutions or promises of future assistance. And since the bulk of the discussion concerned their experiences here in Canada, after their resettlement, the fact of my former profession should not unduly influence the quality and validity of our discussions.

Research Settings

All the interviews took place at the home of the interviewee, based on prior appointment and at the invitation of the interviewee. As it so happened, all the families lived around the suburbs of Halifax, in Clayton Park, Lacewood and Fairview areas. This is in accordance with statistics released by the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration (NSOI) which states that 99 percent of GARs live in Halifax. All the interviews took place during the fall academic term staring in September 2009, with the exception of one interview

which I conducted later in February. I approached and gained consent for the interviews from Afghan people directly, with the exception of two families were referred to me by other respondents, and one family who was introduced by an Iranian translator residing in Halifax who is contracted by government and non-government agencies to provide translation services to Farsi speakers. The interviews were all conducted in Farsi, our shared mother tongue.

Open-ended interviews

Although I did have series of questions developed, starting with "Can you describe your ordinary day for me?" the interviews were loosely structured, embedded within a general conversation about how we all, as immigrants, found life in Halifax. The interview schedule can be found in the Appendix . I followed questions on certain themes from the literature relevant to the settlement experience, such as food, religion, child-rearing and kinship networks. These themes were presented in the form of specific questions, some of which I have witnessed my own compatriots grappling with: "How do you feel about your children visiting Canadian children?" "Do you let them have swimming lessons?" "Do you let them go to sleepovers?" "How would you describe your interactions with officials and bureaucrats here?" "What kind of social experiences do have, for example, do you spend a lot of time with other Afghans? And what about immigrants of other nationalities? And first-generation Canadians?" These questions often became starting points for the respondents to develop into their own set of statements on a particular theme, for example, the question about swimming could unleash a tirade on how Canadians and Afghans differ in the way they raise their children. In the next chapter, as I consider the theoretical framework, I will return to these questions as stemming from important concepts of "routinization" and "encounters" which Anthony Giddens discusses in his articulation of structuration theory, concepts which he puts forward as a fundamental

part of our social integration, "the fabric of social activity", as he calls it (Giddens, 1984:60).

As a two-way conversation, I volunteered information about myself and my family almost as frequently as I requested it, and I often found my questions politely reflected back at me, sometimes even exceeding the level of detail I had asked for: "Do you receive a student loan? How are you funding you studies? Does your husband contribute to your tuition fees? How often do you travel back and forth between Canada and Iran? Why did you leave Iran- was your only problem the *hijab*?" In general, I tried to make sure that I covered the same themes within each interview. However, given the different backgrounds, experiences and interests of my interviewees, it is inevitable that each seemed to have more to say, or be in interested in different topics. For example, an interviewee might not have been interested in discussing food, or religion, or parenting, but talked at length about the human rights situation in Afghanistan, and the difficulties of getting professional foreign credentials recognized in Canada. Another however might have a lively interest in discussing food and food preparation, and not be prepared to talk of politics or professions. I tried to respect these differences as far as possible, and encouraged them to speak on what interested them, while trying to make sure that similar themes were covered and, where the interview took place in a family setting, the conversation was inclusive and the respondents all had chances to speak.

Data Collection

Out of the ten interviews, I had permission to tape three, using a small audiorecorder device. For the others, I took notes by hand. All the notes were later transcribed into full-length interviews. When I had about six or seven interviews, I began identifying the dominant themes across the interviews. Relevant quotes and comments from each interview were then classified under thematic headings in a table, which grew larger as the interviews proceeded and more entries were made. With this arrangement, I

could access and analyze rapidly the different comments on each theme across the study

group.

Chapter Two: The Theoretical Framework

This chapter situates the empirical data presented in this thesis within the theoretical and conceptual debates framing immigration and refugee studies. My study endeavours to understand more clearly the relationship between culture, adaptation and resettlement of refugees, specifically asking, how do Afghan government-assisted refugees adapt to life in Nova Scotia in socio-cultural terms? I have looked at this question through the lens of structuration theory by Anthony Giddens, as it provides a powerful tool for acknowledging and expanding upon the individuality and humanity of refugees as a counterpoint to the prevalent homogenizing and almost pathologizing discourse on this group. I have also looked at other researchers on immigration and refugee affairs who have deployed the concept of individual agency and the interaction between agency and structure in their work, which often includes a discussion of culture as a construct which can prove both constraining to individuals and also liberating, as a means for people to assert their identity and maintain connections in hostile or indifferent surroundings.

Thus, after presenting Giddens's theories and his discussion of the structure/agency duality, I consider its applicability to a study on refugees, referring particularly to the work of Peter Nyers in this regard, and the depoliticizing and indeed dehumanizing discourse surrounding refugee aid, and the role of culture for refugees. I will further examine the works of Naila Kabeer and Elaheh Rostami-Povey, who also approach their studies on immigrant women through a structure/agency lens.

In the second part of this chapter, I will focus on the concept of culture and cultural identity for refugees. After discussing culture in a general sense, I will turn to several studies which focus on the issues surrounding culture germane to refugee groups.

2.1 Structuration Theory and Why

In *The Constitution of Society* (1984), Anthony Giddens puts forward "structuration theory", which resonates deeply with the way I find myself thinking about refugees and provides a convincing and meaningful theoretical platform not only for my (re)constructions of the interviews I conducted for this thesis, but also for the reason why I chose to conduct these interviews in the first place.

Giddens states that he developed structuration theory as an attempt to end the "empire-building endeavours" of what he sees as the two dominant trends in sociological thought (Giddens,1984: 2): structuralism in which "structure has primacy over action...and the constraining qualities of structure is strongly accentuated" and where a social whole is given primacy over the individual components, and what he calls "interpretive sociologies" where individual action and meaning provide the prime "explication of human conduct", and structural concepts are disregarded (ibid). Giddens concentrates on the relationship between the individual action and societal structures (structure and agency), and in particular, how individual actors lead to the reproduction of the structures which define or give meaning to their actions. In doing so, he criticizes the "naive" view of structure as external to human action, "as a source of constraint on the free initiative of the independently constructed subject" (Giddens, 1984:16).

Before developing this relationship, he offers some definitions of the notions of agency and structure as follows:

> Agency refers not to the intention people have for doing things, but to their capability of doing those things in the first place. Agency concerns events of which the individual is the perpetrator, in the sense that the individual could at any phase in a given sequence of conduct, have acted differently (Giddens, 1984:9).

Giddens emphasizes that agency is linked directly to power, and that the capacity to make some sort of difference is in fact an exercise of power (Giddens, 1984:14). Structure, on the other hand, refers to:

> Structural properties...which make it possible for discernibly similar social practices to exist across varying spans of time and space and which lend them 'systematic form' (Giddens, 1984:17).

But structure is more than social practices:

> Structure refers not only to the rules implicated in the production and reproduction of social systems, but also to the resources... The most important aspect of structure is "the rules and resources recursively involved in institutions" (Giddens, 1984: 23-24).

With rough working definitions of structure and agency in place, Giddens comes to a crucial feature of the relationship between the two, a key concept in structuration theory, which he returns to again and again in the course of his book: the duality of structure.

> The constitution of agents and structures are not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality...Structure is not external to individuals...Structure is not be equated with constraint, but is always both constraining and enabling (Giddens, 1984: 25).

Thus human actors, through their individual choices and intentional actions, actively reproduce the conditions which form the structures of their societies, and in fact, it is only through these structures that their actions gain significance and meaning. Furthermore, this duality entails that while it is possible for the structured properties of social systems to "stretch away" beyond the control of individual actors, it also means that individual actors' "own theories of the social system which they help to constitute and reconstitute in their activities may reify those systems" (Giddens, 1986: 25). That is, the structures which are formed through the actions of individual actors are not necessarily precise reproductions of existing circumstances, since systems may be "reified" through the activities of individuals. Social systems and relations are dynamic and always change, even if these changes are not the precise intended consequences of each individual. The point I take is that social practices and systems - including those institutionalised "rules and resources" mentioned above - are not so limiting or constricted as to prevent meaningful and significant individual action. Just as individual actions gain meaning from

being embedded within, or arising from a social context, so they can change the form of contexts and the conduct of practices- if only within a small space: a space around their family, or even smaller, a space around the individual.

But in order for individual action to be capable of engaging in this duality, it must be knowledgeable, conscious action. Giddens speaks of "the reflexive monitoring of activity" conducted by agents:

> The reflexive monitoring of activity is a chronic feature of everyday action and involves the conduct of not just of the individual but also of others. That is, actors not only monitor continuously the flow of their activities and expect others to do the same for their own, they also monitor aspects, social and physical of the context in which they move (Giddens, 1984:5).

Giddens thus places a great deal of emphasis on the *knowledgeability* (emphasis mine) of individual actors: "The knowledge they [competent members of society] possess is not incidental to the persistent patterning of social life, but integral to it...structure has no existence independent of the knowledge that agents have about what they do in their day-to-day activity" (Giddens, 1984: 26). Further on he reiterates that: "All human beings are knowledgeable agents. That is to say, all social actors know a great deal about the conditions and consequences of what they do in their day-to-day lives", as one of the basic concepts of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984: 281).

This is essentially informs my approach to refugees in this study: understanding that refugees are not simply statistics, and not just victims of haphazard circumstance, but they are in fact knowledgeable agents, like all human beings living in society, who assess their conditions and act appropriately to achieve their desired goals within the framework of these conditions, and in doing so, reproduce social patterns and practices which give meaning to their individual actions.

Considering how routinely and how freely the generic refugee is depicted as a silent victim of circumstance, I think this point cannot be emphasized enough. This is a depiction which state or state-like institutions project, and with which the media,

academicians, and even refugees themselves concur – even though it is ultimately more harmful to the interests of both refugees and states.

For example, the false binary of the "genuine" refugees, who waits in silence in a far-flung refugee camp for whatever decision the powers-that-be will make on his or her fate, as opposed to the "bogus" queue-jumping asylum-seeker who has the audacity to knock on the door of a rich developed nation and claim protection is one which has recurred with particular political significance in the very recent past in Canada, invoked by Minister Jason Kenney as he pushed through the visa restrictions on Czech and Mexican visitors to Canada with the explicit aim of cutting down asylum claims from those two countries:

> It's ridiculous that Canada provides enormous benefits to fake refugee claimants, who are de facto immigrants, who have the effect of clogging up our asylum system and delaying processing times for real victims of persecution, and of wasting hundreds of millions of dollars of public resources on people who are making fraudulent asylum claims, while at the same time there are millions of people stuck in UN refugee camps who can't return to their home[s]." (Kenney, quoted by Peyton. *Resources better spent on UN-approved refugees: Kenney.* Embassy, 9 September 2009)

I am not stating that all asylum-seekers have valid claims, or that all refugees should rush to empty the refugee camps. However, I concur with the Canadian Council of Refugees (CCR) who criticized this distinction, stating that a person may be in need of protection regardless of the state in which she or he finds themselves (CCR, 17 September 2009)

The refugee-as-victim trope has also received sharp criticism from the academic world. Susanne Binder and Jelena Tosˇic (2005) point out how it problematizes refugees, implicitly burdening them with guilt stemming from their "passive" reception of aid, and their inability to help themselves:

> Refugees are always seen as a 'problem': a humanitarian, a legal or a psychological one. We do not want to deny the significance of existential crises that are caused by the difficult experience of flight: it is a false conception that refugees can passively receive aid, and that they are not able – in spite of difficult conditions – actively to shape their life after the flight. The step from the obvious need of help to a silent

implication of the incapability of refugees of taking action is a small one. (Binder *et al*, 2005:610)

Binder and Tosˇic also highlight the relentless media portrayal of refugees as a mass of suffering and sorrow:

Mute, genderless and nameless 'streams' of people parade across our television screens...within brief television presentations of refugee movements, the total and concrete individual biography simply dissolves into the 'miserable sea of humanity" (Malkki, 1997a: 223) (Quoted in Binder et al, 2005:612).

Peter Nyers (2006) is another scholar whose work is premised on the agency of the refugee, and he analyses the political significance behind the apparent de-politicization of the discourse of refugee and humanitarian aid:

The discourse on the subject of refugee works to codify displaced people with empty, invisible, and voiceless identities...it is a discourse which provides no place for the displaced human...that affords no place for the refugee and the refugee's voice (Nyers, 2006:16).

Nyers emphasizes the inherently political nature of humanitarian aid, contrasting it with the de-political veneer that it presents. To show refugees as active, or having voices would diminish or destroy this depoliticization and lend political significance to a practice which casts itself in a strictly benevolent and non-political framework. To make his point, he discusses the images used by UNHCR which depict refugees, focusing on one particularly controversial one which shows an empty shirt flapping in the wind. A refugee is an absence, a disembodiment. The lack of state equates with the lack of identity, the lack of being (Nyers, 2006:15).

Nyers discusses culture and cultural activities as a fruitful means by which refugees can express themselves:

In the shift from citizen-subject to refugee-human, refugees do not lose their capacity to sing, to dance, to recite poetry. In fact...they continue to engage in cultural performance even in environments (such as refugee camps) which do not appear at all hospitable to the arts (Nyers, 2006:62).

While pausing to remark that international humanitarian agencies are beginning to understand the therapeutic value of culture and the promotion of cultural identity, he goes on to link culture and politics:

> The significance of culture amongst refugees is not limited to how international humanitarian agencies use these practices to fulfill their mandate and promote the smooth functioning of their operations. The impact culture has among refugees and their communities exceeds the problem-solving perspective of these agencies...these practices are better assessed for how they work as a transformative force, unsettling the "proper" (i.e. negative) relationship between the refugee identity and the political. There is growing recognition of how cultural practices act as an intervening force within world politics (Nyers, 2006:62-3).

Thus cultural acts, or cultural production, as one may term them, whether writing poetry, performing a dance, or simply telling a narrative of settlement and integration in Canada, challenge the viewer, the listener to look upon and to observe the refugee as a person, not as a disembodied absence, nor as a generic icon of misery and sorrow, but as someone with something to say, who can hold our attention.

There are other studies built upon actors' (in this context, immigrants and refugees) willingness to engage with the structures of their life, to set boundaries and determine courses of actions within the admittedly limited sphere in which they find themselves. One such study, which led me to Giddens initially, is Naila Kabeer's detailed analysis of the labour choices of Bangladeshi women in Dhaka and London (Kabeer, 2000). Kabeer speaks at length of the complex and ongoing 'negotiations' which Bangladeshi women conduct in order to achieve their preferred economic outcomes in what are seemingly very constrained socio-cultural circumstances- both in their home town of Dhaka and in London. Her arguments are illustrated with extracts from interviews with Bangladeshi female workers in garment factories. All of these narratives accumulate to present a portrayal of a very heterogeneous group of women, each with individual circumstances and personal ways of coping with those circumstances, albeit set within the overarching socio-cultural fabric of their society, of which her participants show a strong

awareness. Kabeer's participants are all intensely aware of their life-conditions, what they can manipulate, and how, and what they cannot. Thus, she demonstrates that her participants are neither the "cultural dopes" which one encounters in crude (mis)representations of victimized Muslim women, languishing in "purdah", oppressed and unable to demonstrate any meaningful agency and purpose, but neither are they the "rational fools", the fictitious man of pure economical theory with his enviable ability to coolly consider a list of possible options, oblivious of any social and emotional context, and to choose the one which will clearly lead to this maximum economic benefit.

Culture plays a vital role in Kabeer's construction of women and their "accomodating agency", and this is something I will return to when considering the concept of culture further on.

Elaheh Rostami-Povey also develops a portrayal of Afghan women which shows them to have a strong sense of identity, agency, and a willingness to engage positively with the sometimes horrific constraints of their real lives (Rostami-Povey, 2007). Her study analyses stories from Afghan women during the Taliban regime, in "exile" in Iran and Pakistan, and as settled citizens in Europe and America. Rostami-Povey offers numerous examples of women working in solidarity to run schools, to protect their children and menfolk, to generate an income, and to preserve what they perceive as valuable cultural mores and traditions in a variety of circumstances. Her women too show themselves adept at resisting stereotypes and cultural constraints, while remaining within, and consciously asserting that they are acting within a very Afghanized and Islamic cultural framework.

Both in academic refugee studies, as noted above, as well as in the public imagination, representations of refugees are constructed as figures constrained by circumstance, in conditions of passive receptivity of aids and services, mentally traumatized and victimized. Anthony Giddens's structuration theory provides a theoretical perspective through which it is possible to construct an alternative, more challenging and

more heterogeneous representation of refugees, as it emphasizes the individual capacity for knowledge, conscious decision-making and active engagement with societal structures. Giddens does not dismiss the force of social constraints, indeed, individual action gains meaning and significance within the context of social practices and relations out of which it arises, and this provides a framework for studying the social and cultural routines and activities of the study group. While it is acknowledged that these routines and activities are strongly embedded within an imaginary of "Afghan culture" and "Afghan identity", yet at the same time it is clear that members of the study group bring their own individual understanding and interpretation of "Afghan culture", which accordingly then shapes their actions and choices.

Giddens's framework is comprehensive enough to be inclusive of the social constructs which inform our identity: gender, race, class, age, religion, without limiting the study to specifically any of these, allowing the respondents the space to develop their own ideas of what they consider important to their own identity and the representation of it. Within this framework, culture may be viewed as a structure which is, to use Giddens's terminology, both "enabling and constraining": as Nyers stated above, it is enabling for the way it allows the respondents a means of expression and identity-construction in circumstances which are otherwise quite limiting. But culture can be constraining as well, as Kabeer discusses in her study of Bangladeshi women, and the part of the process of integration and adaptation in Canada could well involve the challenge of overcoming the narrower aspects of an inherited culture which does not fit in the vision of what the respondents want for themselves and their children. In the next section, I will consider the concept of culture in a transnational, cross-border context with more depth.

2.2 The "Culture" and "Cultural Identity" of refugees- do they have one?

A comprehensive review of the literature on "culture" is beyond the scope of a thesis. Hence all that is offered here is a précis of relevant points about "culture" vis-à-vis refugees in general, for Afghan refugees in particular, and very specifically, for Afghan refugees who have moved (or who have been moved, depending how you look at it) from one very particular social-cultural milieu to another.

I can identify three distinct interlocking discourses on the term "culture" which are relevant to a discussion of refugees, all of which have been subject to much critique: international, national, and local. The first, which has already been referred to in the discussion of Nyers above, is the notion of an internationally dominant, benevolent, politically de-sensitized and culturally neutral aid and development regime, pitted against the harmful and abusive socio-cultural practices routinely conducted in "other", non-western countries. For example,

> It might be argued that the whole aid industry rests on the assumption that greater economic power implies superior wisdom and hence confers the moral duty, not merely the right to intervene in the lives of those less fortunate (Eade, 2002: iv).

Resettlement, as a manifestation of the international humanitarian aid industry, enshrines this proposition, in as much as it can be seen as a direct intervention in the lives of people unfortunately placed, uprooting them and transplanting them in a completely different society- albeit for their own protection.

Second is the idea of a national or state culture, bringing with it a national cultural identity. This is a construct deliberately built and deployed to foster a sense of national homogeneity, perhaps at a time when a country is emerging from colonialism, or when it preparing for war:

> National activists, in the effort to throw of the yoke of imperialism in a post-colonial world, construct a national culture in order to assert their independence, and identify this national culture with a homogenous "cultural identity", subsumed in the political agenda of the day (Pieterse, 2001:61).

Jean-Francois Bayart discusses the over-identification of cultural identity with State interest *The Illusion of Cultural Identity* (2005), when he argues with convincing examples that States build up and manipulate (an illusion of) cultural identity to promote their own power, often by violent means. This idea is takes it to its logical extreme:

> …identity-related strategies (are) potentially totalitarian, first because the culture imagined to be authentic is defined in opposition to neighbouring ones that are seen as radically different, and because this alleged alterity entails a principle of exclusion whose logical conclusion is ethnic cleansing: intercultural exchange is then deemed to involve alienation, a loss of substance, even pollution. And second, because the imagined culture assigned to individuals who are supposed to belong a simplified identity –one is tempted to call it an identity kit-that they are expected to endorse, if necessary via coercion (Bayart, 2005:38-9).

Bayart goes on to list a sad roster of events where such dangerous identity politics have been in effect: the Rwandan and Bosnian massacres, Islamic fundamentalists, Israeli "men in black". He could well have added the decades-spanning inter-tribal wars and barbarity in Afghanistan, almost always sharply divided along sectarian lines, and always fanned by outside States pursuing their narrow short-term interests.

However, as Giddens reminds us, nation-states are not the same as societies, however bureaucratically convenient that may be and however much governments would like it to be so:

> It is essential to avoid the assumption that what a society is can be easily defined, a notion which comes from an era dominated by nation-states with clear-cut boundaries that usually conform in a very close way to the administrative purview of centralized governments. Even in nation-states, of course, there are a variety of forms which cross-cut boundaries (Giddens, 1984: 283).

And so we come across a third sort of culture which is positioned against both of the constructions discussed above: the global, benevolent dominant international culture which provides aid and protects, and the State-projected national culture which aims to develop and promote qualities in direct opposition to that of the international regime. This is the much-glorified "local", traditional culture, which runs rife particularly in aid and development circles, as evidenced by the popularity of development methodologies which

theoretically privilege local knowledge and ways of knowing: for example the much-celebrated and much-critiqued participatory action research, etc. As Pieterse (2001) argues, "…the tendency is to view local culture in terms of prelapsarian purity and unity, homogenizing the local community…" (Pieterse, 2001:63). But there can be no static, homogeneous local culture: "However, like national culture, local culture is a terrain of power with its own patterns of stratification, uneven distribution of cultural knowledge and boundaries separating insiders and outsiders…" (Pieterse, 2001:65). In fact, "ethnic culture is no more homogeneous than national culture, for ethnic groups are crosscut by multiple differences along lines of gender, class, place, religion, ideology" (Pieterse, 2001:69). Other scholars have also critiqued the ugly turn which "culture" can take when constructed in these rigid categories of international, national and local: culture is "a nice name for the exoticism of outsiders…culture becomes a euphemism for the exoticist project of 'othering,' that is, of constructing a difference as a way of affirming one's identity…the modern culture of the West stands in contrast to indigenous or local cultures yet to be modern…" (Spivak, quoted in Li, 2006:81).

All these three constructs of international, national and local or ethnic culture are at play in the consideration of resettled refugees. Refugees can be viewed as participants and beneficiaries of a powerful international (western) regime which provides them with the capacity to cross borders and establish new lives, at a period when they do not have the ability to make such movements in an ordinary, routine way (consider that refugees, even if financially affluent, cannot just get passports, visas, tickets and travel to a desired destination in the manner of regular citizens of a recognized State). At the same time, they are bearers of their national identity, and yet their inability or unwillingness to return to their country of origin signifies the fact that they have literally stepped away from the culture of their home country and are seeking a new home, even while retaining the label of their national identity, hence we speak of "Afghan", "Bosnian" or "Mexican" refugees.

And finally, they have already developed evolving forms of local and traditional cultures in their various countries of asylum and residence which may or may not accord with the state (or state-like) -endorsed culture of their home country, but which is uniquely theirs.

The interesting thing about these three levels of culture is that they are mapped to very particular places or "geographies": the international aid and protection regime operates through institutions informed by policies, practices and beliefs of western countries; the construct of national cultural identity is by definition tied up with a particular country and has evolved out of the specific historical circumstances of that country, while local culture brings the focus down to a community (perhaps a village? Or a neighbourhood? Or a refugee camp?) level. In all three levels, the discussions suggest that there is little trace of individual agency and the will of a group (be it countries or communities) seems to be the dominant factor. What I would like to focus on now is a counter-definition of culture: culture as a fluid concept not mapped on any particular place, rising out of sets of social practices, but taken up by individuals - regardless of the geographical place they have found themselves - and modified according to their unique beliefs and desires.

In "Beyond Culture" Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson (1992) acutely analyse the almost unconscious, yet highly artificial mapping of culture onto specific territorial states and societies, and their target of criticism is as much anthropologists and academicians who maintain this myth, as the States which benefit from it.

"It is so taken for granted that each country embodies its own distinctive culture and society that the terms "culture" and "society" are routinely simply appended to the names of nation-states..."(Gupta et al, 1992:6). However, "the fiction of cultures as discrete, object-like phenomena occupying discrete spaces becomes implausible for those who inhabit the borderlands...in the case of those who cross borders more or less permanently-immigrants, refugees, exiles and expatriates, in their case, the disjunction of

place and culture is especially clear" (Ibid: 7). Gupta and Ferguson argue that "People have undoubtedly always been more mobile and identities less fixed than the static and typologizing approaches of classical anthropology would suggest" (Ibid:9). With this, they emphasize that refugees, migrants, displaced and stateless persons are the first to live out the reality of fluid, problematized cultural identities, yet they maintain that this sense of blurred "cultural certainties and fixities" is something which affects those who remain as well as those who are on the move. And "The irony of these times, however, is that as actual places and localities become ever more blurred and indeterminate, ideas of culturally and ethnically distinct places become perhaps even more salient"(Ibid). Thus people seem to feel the need to assert their cultural identity even more strongly as or because the reality of their daily life entails a merging, a fluidity which, if confronted too baldly or head on, might be seen as a sort of betrayal of the self, a compromise in personal integrity-as mentioned by Bayart above (2005).

So we are now moving away from the idée fixée of culture and cultural identity, and approaching the kinds definitions that will work within the framework of this thesis, a concept which is not too elastic to mean anything and everything, which is consciously and indeed, creatively taken up by individuals as they negotiate their way through the mazes of daily life:

> A given culture has three "dimensions": the symbolic (such as values, symbols, archetypes, myths, spirituality, religion – or often several different religions), the societal (organisational patterns for family and community linkages and support...) and technological (skills, expertise, technology, agriculture, cooking etc)... Culture evolves in response to outside influences and to the fact that people innovate and create new cultural traits. In a given culture, there are, therefore, some elements which are adopted and some which are created...(Verhelst and Tyndale, in Eade, 2002: 10).

This working definition touches on precisely the traits and issues which I am exploring in this thesis, that it, how the Afghan participants of this research adopt and create some cultural traits, and why, and how others are preserved, and why. It has little to do with the essentialized portrayal of Afghan culture, and less with the refugee-as-silent-

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victim trope, instead presenting a holistic, integrated definition of culture. Indeed, such a definition of culture works particularly well in a cross-border study, where we are examining the permutations and reification of culture as individuals cross boundaries under very particular circumstances.

The idea of "cultural mixing" is also to be found in Glick Schiller's work on transnationality. She argues against a "discrete, stable and historically specific local system of meanings" for culture. (Nina Glick Schiller, in Nugent *et al*, 2004: 250) Instead, in the realm of migration studies, she identifies transnational ways of belonging: "a realm of cultural representation, ideology and identity through which persons reach out to distant lands or persons through memory, nostalgia and imagination" (Ibid, 258).

Matsuoka and Sorenson (2001) concentrate on the experiences of Ethiopian and Eritrean refugees in Canada, specifically focusing on how historical experiences affect their present interactions and settlement experiences within Canada. A further aspect addresses how the politics of the homeland continue to "structure diaspora communities in receiving countries." Asserting that "[d]iasporas are productive spaces for generating and transforming identity and culture", they conduct an in-depth study of such transformations, rejecting an essentialist, static definition of culture, and instead maintaining that cultures are the product of previous interactions. This is similar to the argument found in Tastsoglou who argues that migration entails crossing cultural boundaries, experiencing another culture, and making a new home in another country, with "all the internal transformations of the self" (Tastsoglou, 2006). Matsuoka et al speak of a "cultural mixing…through which distinct identities are invented and enforced" (Matsuoka and Sorenson, 2001:7-8).

Also relevant is Parin Dossa's study (2008) on the consciousness and experience of female Afghan immigrants in Vancouver. She describes how they create an Afghan-Canadian identity for themselves through strong adherence to their Afghan social and

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religious norms. Her depiction of her study sample suggests that these Afghan women, while recognizing that resettlement to Canada was a way out of a harsh and potentially abusive life in their home country or second country of asylum, remain very unhappy. They are chronically anxious and suffer from psychosomatic symptoms, and their main solace lies in their Afghan cultural identity which they express through their attempts to recreate Afghan foods and uphold religious norms in their households.

Maroussia Hajduwsky-Ahmad (2008) also discusses the identity of refugee women and their interaction with the concept of culture as they proceed through refuge, resettlement and settlement. She discusses the conflicts which refugee women may face in new environments where they have been resettled; on the one hand, they have "opportunities for equality and emancipation" but they also have to uphold traditional values and they may fear "cultural alienation" precisely because of these new horizons. (Hadjuwsky-Ahmad, 2008: 27). The challenge faced by Afghan individuals of any gender in this situation must be considerable, given the patriarchal norms of their homeland. Indeed, it is impossible not to be sharply aware of the gender differentiations in Afghan society, which remains highly and strictly patriarchal in Afghanistan.

Joseph Nyemah (2008) investigates the link between gender equality and immigration. His study of five Liberian couples in Halifax analyses the decision-making processes concerning domestic budgeting, household labor, and control over personal income, and concludes that resettlement opportunities in Canada are conducive to gender equality. Within a framework of feminist discourse, Nyemah explores how resettlement has affected the traditional gender-proscribed roles of Liberian couples and how they have found themselves able to navigate the boundaries set by their patriarchal traditional culture, developing new norms which are more in tune with Canadian notions of legal gender equality. This work by Nyemah in only one example in a wide range of studies which are concerned with examining the effects of immigration on gender roles, basically revolving

round the question of whether immigration (from countries with less gender equality to countries assumed to have more) can potentially at least bring about more gender equal outcomes or not? The answer seems varied across different groups. For example, Cha (2009) concludes that Korean immigrant women in Halifax benefit from increased decision-making and bargaining power within the family, while Yu (2006) finds that Chinese women who have immigrated from the Maoist regime to the United States have experienced a reinforcement of traditional gender roles. Yu in fact argues that women hold on to former gender roles in order to maintain traditional cultural norms regarding the place and position of women, out of a sense of tradition and also family solidarity and stability, which is also indicated by some of Kabeer's respondents.

Other scholars also contribute to a context within which it is possible to sharpen the local and regional focus of this study. Echoing Kristeva, Christopher Armstrong speaks of the migration experience in the Maritimes provinces as a "vehicle for social critique" (Armstrong, in Messamore, 2004: 248). What is cherished as "home" or "being at home", what evokes nostalgia and longing, "a lament for severed family bonds", and finally, how a region "comes to grips with modernizations" can all be illuminated through analysing the migration experience. While discussing how specific works of fiction contribute to the "cultural imaginary" of Maritimers, Armstrong believes that the migration experience is an important aspect of this imaginary of the Atlantic region (Armstrong, 2004: 246). He defines "cultural imaginary" as the "matrix of images and ideas, symbols and stories" whose shape is codified by all members of the "imagined" community of Maritimers, but in particular by the "cultural intellectuals". It is interesting to see how refugees respond to this matrix, and how they see themselves (or imagine themselves) fitting into it. Armstrong's paper highlights the specifically "Maritime" culture of Nova Scotians- thus Afghan refugees residing in Halifax must not only develop Afghan-Canadian identities, as

described by Dossa in her study cited above, they may create specifically Nova-Scotian (or (Maritime) versions of this identity.

These are the kinds of things I am looking for in the interviews, examining ways in which people use cultural constructs both to reach out to their past and to render their present significant and acceptable.

Chapter Three: The Setting

"Of course, you Swedes are here to take, how many? 150-200 refugees, already pre-screened for you by our friends UNHCR. Whereas we, the Islamic Republic of Iran, are afflicted with hundreds of thousands illegal border crossings, as you well know. There are 900,000 registered Afghans in Iran, and many more unregistered. What does the international community suggest we do with them?" (Iranian government member to a member of a Swedish resettlement selection mission during a meeting in March 2007)

This chapter begins with a brief overview of what are considered to be the national and cultural characteristics of Afghan society, to be followed by an account of the spatial and temporal trajectory of Afghan refugees. It commences from Afghanistan at the moment when the Soviet Union attack triggered the first mass exoduses in 1979. After covering the historic events which led to waves of refugees fleeing their homeland, in particular underlining how these different types of events produced - and indeed continue producing - refugees with very different profiles, I will present the situation of Afghan refugees in other countries of asylum, namely Iran and Pakistan. This factual narration serves not only the purpose of historicizing the experiences of Afghan refugees, but also contextualises their present statements and future expectations, which can be better appreciated in light of past experiences. The research questions underpinning the interviews do not delve into the specific past events and memories of each individual, although these are recorded as they spontaneously occur, but they do try to build a well-rounded and multi-dimensional portrayal of the experience of settlement as each family or individual experienced it, and this inevitably involves understanding something of what has passed before.

This chapter also discusses Canada and the resettlement of Afghan refugees, finishing with an analysis at the provincial level, namely, Nova Scotia and the role of refugees within local immigration policy.

A further objective of this chapter is to contextualise refugees within the international arena, and bring home the point that they are not simply a random group of people who had the misfortune to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Thus, refugee policy is not a simple case of charity towards unfortunately-situated persons. The plight of refugees is just one of the many expressions of global relations gone horribly wrong, which partially explains why States and societies manifest an uneasy attitude towards them, as discussed above. The case of Afghan refugees in particular is a vivid manifestation of skewed international relations, as we shall see.

3.1 Who were Afghans refugees before they were refugees?

What are the Afghan people like? Who are they? What is their culture all about? Nancy Dupree lists what she considers to be the essential defining elements of Afghan identity:

> Honour is the rock upon which social status rests and the family is the single most important institution in Afghan society. Individual honour, a positive pride in independence that comes from self-reliance, fulfilment of family obligations, respect for the elderly, respect for women, loyalty to colleagues and friends, tolerance for others, forthrightness, an abhorrence of fanaticism, and a dislike for ostentation, is a cultural quality most Afghans share. (Dupree, 2002:972)

The list is remarkable for what it leaves out as much as what it includes, and seems determined to present a portrayal of Afghan culture palatable to Western sensitivities, more used to associating images of intense religiosity, extreme gender discrimination, and general victimhood and misery with the Afghan people. But Dupree makes it clear that the variety of tribes, ethnicities and histories in Afghanistan has led to the evolution of what she calls a "complex ethic mosaic" (Dupree, 2002:977). However, she argues that this complexity and diversity does not preclude a sense of a national cultural identity. This is consistent with the theoretical construct of "culture" presented above, whereby culture is considered not a fixed and static constraint to regulate the lives

the people, but a fluid and multi-dimensional structure which individuals can adapt and through which they give shape and meaning to their lifestyles.

The "complex ethnic mosaic" which Dupree ascribes to Afghans is replicated in the refugee subset, which contains remarkable diversity. Indeed, the disruptive and violent events which have overtaken Afghanistan throughout the past three decades have been of such encompassing and enduring nature that Afghan men and women of all social classes, ethnicities and religions have been deeply affected.

Lack of space will not allow consideration of ancient feuds and the impact of colonialism on Afghanistan, both of which were significant factors in the events leading up to the attack of the Soviet Union in 1979, exacerbating and feeding into Afghanistan`s fragmented, weak position. Afghans began fleeing their country since 1978, when the Marxist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), overthrew the government of Muhammad Daoud. However, it was the Soviet invasion of 1979 which caused mass exodus of Afghans into neighbouring countries and further afield, India, Europe, and the USA.

The authoritarian nature of the Soviet-imposed government combined with the fanaticism of the various native guerrilla "Mujahidin" groups which sprang up to fight the invaders in the name of religion and patriotism, (albeit armed and encouraged by outside States who shared neither their religion nor their love of Afghanistan) to create a harsh climate of terror and persecution. In this climate, a provincial farmer who found himself on the wrong side of a local armed warlord over a land feud might have had sufficient cause for flight as an intellectual Maoist activist facing political imprisonment in Kabul. Afghanistan thus "became the world's leading producer of refugees and displaced persons. At the height of the war during the 1980s, about 3.5 million Afghan refugees lived in Pakistan and another 2 million in Iran..."(Writenet, 1996). Government employees posted in the provinces could be at risk of harassment from their more traditional fellow-

countrymen, while at the other end of the spectrum, devout Kabul citizens who were not quite sympathetic enough to the regime were candidates to be reported on by their local chapter of the notorious secret service, the KhAD.

The Soviets never managed to gain control over Afghanistan, and in 1989, withdrew their troops. The guerrilla fighters "remained fragmented along ethno-linguistic, tribal, sectarian and personality lines" (Saikal *et al*, 2004:210) Not only did the major Shia and Sunni group lack harmony, the groups within each major section had little cohesion. Now lacking a common enemy, the infighting intensified, resulting in "ferocious battles" (Saikal, 2004 *et al*:212). Mass displacements to avoid the worst of the fighting took place, with many members of the previous government and the now-shattered Afghan communist party, the People's Democratic Party also forced to flee, as they were regarded with hostility and suspicion by the Islamic Republic. Those who had once enjoyed comfortable salaried positions as Kabul's middle-class were now forced into harsh manual labour in the inhospitable black labour markets of Iran and Pakistan for survival.

The fragile Islamic Republic not being able to establish itself effectively in Afghanistan[2], the Taliban managed to gain control of Afghanistan by 1996 (Saikal, 2004). Now it was their turn to add to the waves of refugees; their fondness for harsh punishments for transgression from their fanatic view of Islam, and their racism and naked hostility towards minorities, most notably the Shi'a Hezaras, caused further flows.

With the fall of the Taliban in 2001, peace and security did not return to Afghanstan. In September 2009, the Secretary-General reported:

> Insecurity continues to be the single greatest factor impeding progress in Afghanistan. The insecurity is caused by a politically driven insurgency, but it has also been exploited by criminal groups, drug traffickers and others. In many parts of the country it has overwhelmed the capacity of Afghanistan's State institutions (UN, 2009).

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[2] For a detailed discussion of the turn of events which led to the downfall of the Islamic Republic, and the role of foreign States in these events, please refer to Saikal, 2004

Although repatriation programmes from Iran and Pakistan initially reported high figures of return, by 2008 repatriation dwindled, and it became apparent that there would remain in these countries a sizeable population of long-stayer Afghan refugees who, for a variety of reasons, which may or may not be linked to the initial cause of their flight, had no wish to return to their home country. According to the Afghanistan Situation Operational Update, September 2009, just 53,500 Afghans had returned to their homeland as of the end of August 2009, one-fifth of the number that returned in 2008. Such a reduction was not initially foreseen for 2009 (UNHCR, 2009). Thus there remain approximately 1.7 million Afghan refugees residing in Pakistan, with 935,000 in Iran, plus an estimated one million unregistered Afghans in Iran (Margesson, 2007).

UNHCR confirms that repatriation cannot be recommended for all Afghans living outside Afghanistan, and the Eligibility Guidelines of 2009 note that:

> Afghans with particular profiles, as elaborated upon below, may continue to need, subject to an assessment of their individual circumstances, international protection as refugees under the 1951 Convention. Others, depending on their profile and place of residence, may require international protection due to indiscriminate human rights abuses and generalized violence in parts of the country (UNHCR, 2009).

The full list of the profiles which are of concern is reproduced below, in order to provide an overview of the various kinds of backgrounds and problems which an individual who happens to be an Afghan refugee may have:

1. Afghans perceived as critical of factions or individuals exercising control over an area.

2. Government officials

3. Afghans in areas where they constitute an ethnic minority

4. Converts from Islam to other faiths

5. Women with specific profiles

6. Unaccompanied children

7. Victims of serious trauma (including sexual violence)

8. Individuals at risk or victims of harmful traditional practices

9. Homosexuals

10. Afghans associated with international organizations and security forces

11. Landowners

12. Afghans associated with the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan

Given this very comprehensive list, it is not surprising that:

> Afghanistan has been the leading country of origin of refugees for the past three decades with up to 6.4 million of its citizens having sought international protection during peak years. As of the end of 2008, there were still more than 2.8 million Afghan refugees. In other words, one out of four refugees in the world is from Afghanistan (UNHCR Global Trends 2008: 9).

To put the figures of Afghan refugees in international context, the chart below has been produced using UNHCR figures which compares asylum-seekers of different countries of origin in industrialized countries only (excluding Afghans living in Iran and Pakistan):

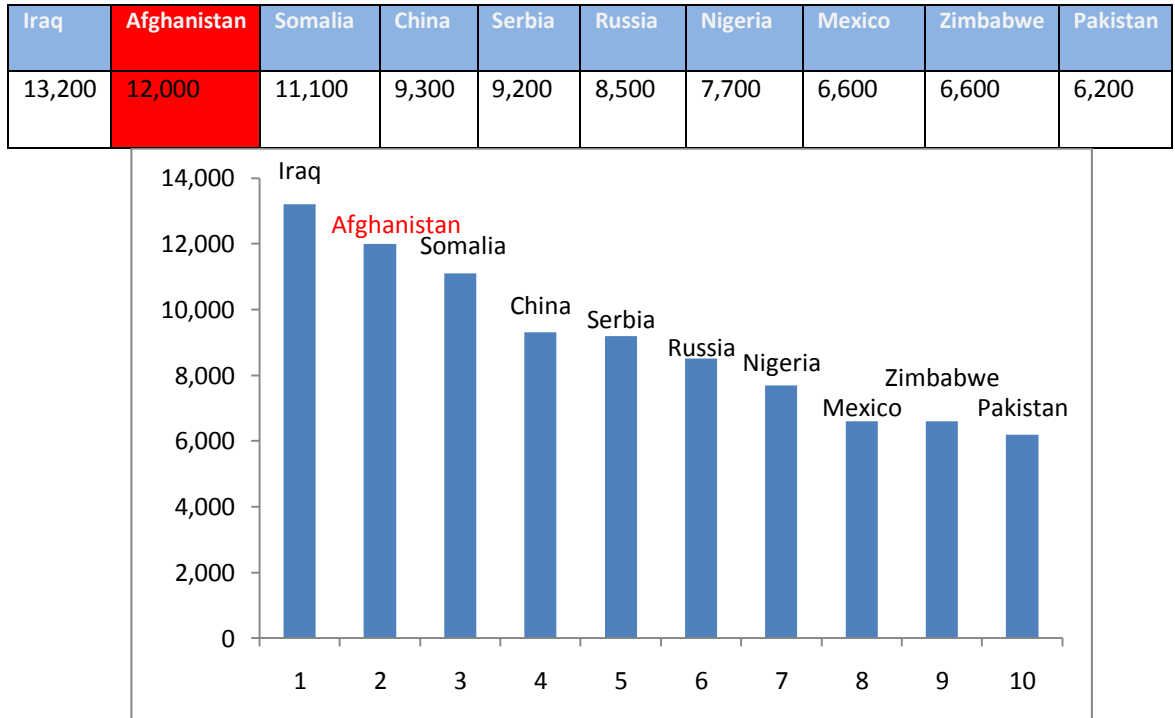| Iraq	Afghanistan	Somalia	China	Serbia	Russia	Nigeria	Mexico	Zimbabwe	Pakistan
13,200	12,000	11,100	9,300	9,200	8,500	7,700	6,600	6,600	6,200

*Fig. 1 (*Figures from *Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries First Half 2009: Statistical overview of asylum applications lodged in Europe and selected non-European countries,* UNHCR, 2009)

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Meanwhile, the number of claims from Afghan asylum-seekers has doubled from the same period in 2008 (Ibid).

Thus it can be seen that Afghan refugees will continue to figure prominently in the global profile of the world's refugees. Hence policy-makers in both international and domestic arenas will need to rise to the challenge.

3.2 And where did they take refuge?

Although Afghan refugees are resettled from many countries in the Middle-East/southern Asia region such as Turkey, Tajikistan and India, the most significant and entrenched concentrations of Afghans can be found in Pakistan and Iran. "Even though Afghan refugees were to be found in 69 asylum countries worldwide, 96 per cent of them were located in Pakistan and the Islamic Republic of Iran alone" (UNHCR Global Trends 2008: 9).

There are noticeable differences in the treatment meted to Afghan refugees in both countries: Iran mostly has a population of urban refugees, with only about 4-5 percent in camps, whereas in Pakistan, refugees are mostly concentrated in camps and refugees villages. Pakistan has received substantial aid from the international community over the years for the refugee population, in contrast to Iran, where the government assumes full responsibility for the registration and management of refugee affairs. Accordingly, in Iran UNHCR acts more as a form of a service-provider, assuming the functions which in many other countries would be done through NGOs, whereas as in Pakistan, UNHCR co-operates more closely in the government in the management of refugee affairs.

However, these differences are more superficial than might appear. Neither country has ever offered the realistic prospect of full legal integration through provision of citizenship to refugees, nor have they, with or without international aid, ever managed to implement a stable and consistent refugee protection regime, as exemplified by the unwillingness or inability of either Pakistan or Iran to offer identity documents with any

form of permanency attached to it. Moreover both countries experience sporadic xenophobia and hostility towards refugees fanned by media and political accounts about refugee criminality, drug use and smuggling, and other security concerns. Yet simultaneously refugees in both countries are utilized as an inexhaustible supply of cheap and generally uninsured labour (Margesson, 2007).

The lack of reliable and stable protection regime in practice leads to easy abuses of human rights of refugees. This is evidenced by arbitrary arrests and forced deportations (UNHCR, 2008), denial of registration and primary education to refugee children (Margesson, 2009), and as UNHCR caseworker, I regularly documented instances of abuse in the workplace and of labour rights and abuse of women refugees in cases of forced and or temporary marriages and domestic violence. It also meant that a whole generation of young Afghans had grown up in Iran, educated in Iranian state schools, with no knowledge or memory of Afghanistan, and yet with no legal status in Iran either.

UNHCR uses resettlement as tool for the individual protection of Afghan refugees, for those who are identified as somehow being more at-risk or vulnerable to abuse of their human rights. However, with a registered Afghan refugee population of 935,000, and yearly resettlement quotas of 1000 persons or less such routine issues as mentioned above were not in themselves sufficient for resettlement consideration, and some additional justification based on the personal circumstance of resettlement applicants was required to warrant resettlement. Resettlement cases from Iran usually fall under the Woman-at-Risk category, as ample evidence exists that Afghan women without capable and adequate male support face undue hardship and are at higher risk of human rights violation. Traditional families were also considered if they were able to substantiate an individual threat of persecution and harassment in Afghanistan over and beyond the general harsh living conditions in the secondary country of asylum.

Thus it can be assumed at the outset of any study on Afghan refugees finding themselves in Nova Scotia that they have undergone years of instability and insecurity in a secondary country of asylum other than Afghanistan, this coupled with daily exposures to abuse and violence.

Having clarified the legal and human rights situation of Afghan refugees prior to resettlement, it is also worth mentioning the other side of the coin: the general similarity in culture and lifestyle between Afghan refugees and their Iranian and Pakistani hosts.

Afghan refugees share the same languages and religions as their host societies (Pashto-Sunni in Pakistan, Farsi-Shiìte in Iran). In poor urban slum-type neighbourhoods, there is little visible difference between Afghan and Iranian children. Local mosques and charities do not discriminate, at least on a regular or documented basis, against Afghan beneficiaries, while even the vast state-run Welfare Organizations do not deny services to Afghan children and at-risk women –sometimes going against government decrees in doing so (Rostami-Povey, 2007:87-89). In Iranian society, Afghans were tolerated as workers and labourers.

The porous borders between Afghanistan and its neighbours meant that refugees could, and in many cases did, go back periodically to visit "home", without dire legal consequences (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 81). Lack of legal identity and state recognition can have its upside: refugees had a more fluid, flexible life, they felt no obligation towards the state, as it were, and within the framework of harsh economic-political realities of Iranian society, were able to carve a space for themselves. Refugee men who worked as labourers, peddlers and small businessmen were economically self-sufficient, and able to provide reasonable standards of living for their families. Despite the restrictions on refugee movements, many refugee families moved around the country at will, following jobs and family members, bribing or evading not-too-vigilant officials en route.

Gender roles were also more comfortable, proscribed within a shared traditional, Islamic framework. Indeed, Afghan families often regarded Iranian women as more forward, more open. Iran's legal framework is heavily and notoriously influenced by Islamic Shari'a, which is compatible with Afghan patriarchal norms.

Thus, in resettling in Canada, Afghan refugees left behind a familiar and comfortable society–in the sense that it was known to them and value-compatible, and embarked upon a journey to a foreign society which offered them legal protection and socio-political security, but in an unknown and alien cultural environment. This momentous journey itself becomes a simultaneously enabling and constraining event, as it removes them from an environment which was harsh and yet familiar and comprehensible, leads them to a new country which is as yet unknown- though not wholly so- and which promises them potential for a calmer and more secure life than that which they have known.

3.3 Facts and Figures

Resettlement and Afghan refugees

In 2009, UNHCR submitted more than 128,000 individual refugees for resettlement consideration by 19 individual states, the highest number in the past 16 years and six per cent above the 2008 level (UNHCR, 2009:12). Despite being one of the top source countries for refugees, Afghanistan is not amongst the top five countries from which large numbers of refugees are resettled. In 2008, UNHCR reported resettling only 1632 Afghan individuals. This can have various political and logistical explanations. UNHCR reports that in the past three years, there was a gap of approximately 80,000 places in resettlement delivery; that is, there were 80,000 more individuals on whose behalf UNHCR had requested resettlement than there were available places offered by resettlement countries (UNHCR, 2009:12). And so Afghan refugees on the global stage have to compete with refugees from other nationalities who may be considered to be in a

more immediately precarious or vulnerable situation. The United States, the world's largest resettlement country, does not send resettlement missions to Iran, which hosts a high number of Afghan refugees, and I have witnessed other countries involved in resettlement may also experience difficulty in obtaining visas for their officials on resettlement missions. By looking at the statistics, one concludes that although the refugee community in Iran and Pakistan has characteristics which conform to the international norms on resettlement, they are not, in general, considered as prime candidates for resettlement. Globally-speaking, resettlement remains a durable solution which is rarely implemented for this population.

Canada and Nova Scotia: Opening Doors A Crack

The United States, Canada and Australia account for 90 percent of all the world's resettlement places, with the United States taking the lion's share (60,200) in 2008, Canada coming in at third place, after Australia, with 10,800 (UNHCR, 2009). The resettlement programme is managed by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, as part of Canada's immigration policy and its mandate is to provide for humanitarian assistance to refugees. Therefore, although counter-intuitive, it makes sense to contextualize figures of refugees within the overall immigration framework. In 2008, three percent of total immigrants entering Canada were GARs, compared to 63.9 per cent who entered as economic immigrants, with Nova Scotia receiving only 1.1 per cent of the country's immigrants (CIC, 2008).

Of immigrants entering Nova Scotia, seven per cent are refugees, 69 per cent are economic migrants, while the rest fall under other streams. Of the refugee stream, 74 per cent were GARs. And of these, Afghanistan was the top source country (NSOI, 2010).

What emerges from this picture is that states in general, Canada being no exception, are painfully reluctant to take in refugees, and the figures lend some justification to an argument that resettlement constitutes mere token gestures. Yet I believe,

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after analysing the interviews of the refugees in my study group, there is good reason not to dismiss these people as mere tokens. I suggest that we can take their experience to contribute to migration policy debates in a far more robust and meaningful manner than is suggested by the relatively small figures.

Chapter Four: The Research Findings

In this chapter, I will first proceed by providing a brief description of the background of the research participants. Then, I will discuss how emergent themes in the interviews with this particular study group compare with similar groups in the literature. Bearing in mind that there is a degree of overlap, these themes are broadly categorized into two main categories:

1- *The culture of being "Afghan"*: this addresses the cultural constructs common to the group, important in contributing a sense of "Afghan-ness". These include an 'Afghan home' and 'food'. This is not to suggest that all the interviewees eat the same food or dress alike- (in fact we do see a lot of variation in dress which shall be discussed). Rather that these are areas where a stronger sense of tradition and consensus was articulated.

2- *Cultural experiments*: these are areas of daily life where there is a higher degree of fluidity and individuality. There is discussion occurring between family members, and one senses more of a resistance, to push back against 'traditional' Afghan culture.

The theory on the dual concepts of structure and agency, as covered in chapter two, provides an entry into the daily lives of refugees as agents; moreover, it allows the possibility of refugees as contributors. The respondents are highly conscious of their identity as Afghans, and of the construct of Afghan culture. Yet the interpretations they offer of these constructs, and the cultural identity they present varies from individual to individual, and from family to family. Afghan culture is the construct through which they order their social activities and practices; yet, it is within these activities that diverse

patterns emerge, sometimes leading to the resistance mentioned above, sometimes to greater compliance to traditional norms.

4.1 Situating the research participants

I conducted ten interviews, all with Afghan Government-Assisted refugees who had arrived in Canada within the past five years. Of these ten interviews, six were conducted in family settings, and four were conducted individually, with adult members of the same family. The chart on the following page gives a snapshot of the families and their general circumstances at the time of the interview.

Family interviews								
1	The Panahis 3 children	**Age range**	**Left Afghanistan aged**	**Previous countries of asylum**	**Previous Occupation**	**Present occupation**	**Education**	**Future Aspirations**
	Bahram (male)	25-33	12	Iran	Welder-factory worker	Language school	n-a	Go to college in Halifax
	Razieh (female)	25-33	5	Iran	n-a	Language school	N-a	Go to college in Halifax
2	The Rezais 7 children							
	Reza (male)	48-55	14	Iran	Used car parts vendor	Baker	n-a	Children`s education
	Maryam (female)	40-45	10	Iran	n-a	Language school	N-a	Children's education
	Arezu (female)	16-18	n/a	Iran	School girl	Student	High school	Attend university
	Bahar (female)	14-16	n/a	Iran	School girl	student	High school	Attend university
3	The Seyedis 5 children							
	Seyed (male)	55-65	Travelled to and fro	Iran, Turkey	Undefined	None	n-a	Children`s education
	Sara (female)	40-45	Travelled to and fro	Iran, Turkey	n-a	Language school	n-a	Children`s education
4	The Alavis 3 children							
	Hussein (male)	30-38	Teenager	Iran	Welder	Language school	High school	Own small business
	Zahra (female)	25-30	Small child	Iran	Hairdresser	High school student	Some schooling	College-nursing?
5	The Yavaris 2 children							
	Sina (male)	22-28	Travelled to and fro	Iran, Pakistan	Odd jobs, carpet-weaver	Language school	Some high school	College
	Meigol (female)	18-24	Teenager	Pakistan	Carpet-weaver	Language School	n-a	College
6	The Razavis 6 Children							
	Fallah (male)	45-55	Small child	Iran	Peddler	Language School	n-a	Children`s education
	Nasrin (female)	40-45	Small child	Iran	n-a	Language School	n-a	Children`s education

Individual interviews								
7	Sabrina (female)	20-25	Small Child	Tajikistan	University student	University student	Student	Professional work
8	Maliha (female)	48-55	Travelled to and fro	Tajikistan	n-a	College student	Diploma	Teacher
9	Mehrdad (male)	48-55	Travelled to and fro	Tajikistan, Germany, Denmark, Norway	Teacher	Painter	Teaching degree	Children`s education
10	Taher (male)	48-55	Travelled to and fro	Kyrgystan	Doctor	Owns small business	Medical degree	Develop own company

Table 1 Snapshot of families who were interviewed

Note: pseudonyms are used throughout for reasons of confidentiality and anonymity.

All the families were composed of a father, mother and their children of varying ages. One couple had one adult married daughter, and another young couple had two small children. In all the other households, there were three children or more. The ages of the children varied from twenty-two to under one year of age.

THE PAST

Where They came From

Six families had lived in Iran prior to coming to Canada, one family had lived in Kyrgyzystan, one in Tajikistan, one in Turkey and in one case of a husband and wife, the husband had lived in Iran, and the wife in Pakistan. All of the research participants had left Afghanistan at least fifteen years prior to resettlement, and their children- some of whom were young adults- had never seen Afghanistan or had only early childhood memories of it.

Education and Professional Background

One of the (male) research participants, Taher, had been a qualified medical practitioner in his own country. Another, Mehrdad, had been a university-trained and qualified teacher (also male). His daughter, Sabrina, had been a university student in Tajikistan. None of the other participants had beyond secondary education at the time of their entrance to Canada, and the adult members of three of the families were not literate.

Economic Circumstances

Two of the families, where the father had various medical complications, describe their economic circumstances in their previous country of asylum as impoverished. A young husband and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Yavari speak of working as carpet-weavers under very harsh circumstances in Pakistan. The other families and individuals, while never holding regular employment, mention that they had been self-sufficient and able to maintain decent standards of living for themselves and their children. Reza had traded in used auto-parts; Hossein and Bahram had worked as welders. The two men educated at

university level, Taher and Mehrdad, did not specify their profession in the secondary countries of asylum, but say that they were able to raise and educate their children according to their own standards and desires, and were able to have reasonable livelihoods.

THE PRESENT

Economic Circumstances

Here in Halifax, three of the men and one woman have been able to gain employment. Reza works part-time as a bakery assistant in downtown Halifax. Taher, who used to be a doctor, now runs his own cleaning company, while the former teacher, Mehrdad, works as a house-painter. His wife Maliha works in a hotel while also attending college. These families are now self-sufficient and do not receive special government assistance (beyond child tax benefits for Reza's small children). The other families, none of whom have been in Canada for more than two years, are still receiving the Resettlement Assistance Package (RAP), or are on Social Assistance (SA).

Ties and Networks in Canada

Two of the families are related to each other: Reza and Fallah are brothers, and their parents are also living in Halifax, as separate households. Bahram's elderly mother is also living with him and his wife. However, none of the other families have any relatives in Halifax, nor had they any friends or acquaintances at the time of their arrival. Taher has cousins and friends in Toronto, and they have visited each other several times.

Educational and professional prospects in Canada

The children of Mehrdad and Maliha are all full-time university students here, except the youngest who is still in high school. Taher's daughter, Mina, graduated from a vocational college in Halifax with a degree in hairdressing, where she met and later married her Latin American husband. She used to work in a beauty salon until she had a baby. When the baby is a little bit older, she is hoping to open her own salon.

Reza's eldest son will be graduating from high school soon and is preparing his university applications. His other children are still in school. Like the rest of the non-waged adults in this study, Reza and his wife are following English language classes offered by the Immigrant Settlement and Integration Service (ISIS- formerly known as MISA). There is one exception- Seyed does not feel well enough to attend classes, and has feelings of panic whenever in a class situation. His wife, Sara, goes regularly, placing her baby in the ISIS daycare while she is at class, and their other three children are all in school.

Zahra recently started high school after graduating from the English language programme. She is hoping to enter college to study nursing after obtaining her high school degree. Her husband, Hussein hopes to qualify for his former profession as a welder once he finishes the English language programme, though he is afraid it is too hard. If he cannot, he will settle for becoming taxi-driver.

Sina is also hoping to graduate from the English language classes soon and enter high school, after which he wishes to train as a carpenter.

These brief summaries of the participants' life history, class, education, employment, social networks and experiences in Canada are intended to present a framing background to the narrative detail and analysis which will follow.

4.2 How Not To Forget: The Culture of Being Afghan

The cultural variations evident among individual pieces of the ethnic mosaic add richness to the overall culture... Yet, in spite of the current emphasis on ethnicity, fuelled in large part by outsiders for political purposes, the search for unifying indicators reveals that, despite pride of origin, despite episodes of friction, despite plays for power, despite self-serving ethnocentric panegyrics by individuals, a sense of belonging, of being Afghan, is evident among the population at large... A sense of national identity does exist, elements of divisiveness notwithstanding. (Dupree, 2002).

An Afghan Home

Walking into the homes of my research participants, I was struck immediately by how culturally specific or 'Afghanized' the surroundings were, with far more Afghan and traditional furnishings and decorations than, say, my own home, or those of my Iranian compatriots. The hand-spun carpets which dotted the living rooms had patterns which were unfamiliar and unknown to my Iranian eyes, used to the distinctive whorls and curls of Persian carpets, and I saw embroidered wall-hangings, sofa covers and framed calligraphy and pictures of Afghanistan in abundance. Perhaps with the exception of Mehrdad's kitchen, where I was handed a mug of Canadian-style coffee from a coffee-machine, I could have told I was standing in the living room of an Afghan family even if I had not known it beforehand. Seyed kept the TV on, showing an Afghan satellite channel throughout our talk, and often turned to the TV and referenced his speech with gestures towards its wide flat screen. The women served tea, sweets and nuts, and were extremely courteous with their offer of meals and further social visits, and very attentive to my daughter. Of the women, Razieh, Sara, Meigol, Maryam and Nasrin were veiled in traditional provincial styles, with flowered *chadors*- long thin lengths of cloth covering the head and falling to the ground, held in place by the hands or wrapped and tied around the body; Zahra was dressed with an Iranian city-style head scarf and fashionable black *manteau*- a knee-length thin coat which has replaced the chador in workplaces and in the cities of Iran, often coming in tailored and figure-hugging styles, much decorated and

embellished. Sabrina and Maliha were dressed in casual Western clothing, with no veils. Even in this tiny sample of women, I came across striking examples of difference in dress, and given the highly politicized and ongoing debate about women's clothing both in religious and non-religious contexts, I believe the differences are meaningful, indicating not just personal preferences but expressing a range of religious-political beliefs and backgrounds.

My experiences, as described above, of being welcomed and treated as a guest were very similar to Dossa's:

> Jamila welcomed us and directed us to sit on the sofa, covered with a handwoven Afghan throw cover. This cover was one way in which families "covered up" the secondhand furniture from the welfare department. The throw cover provided an Afghan decor to the house, along with Afghan rugs placed on the worn-out living room carpet. Mixed nuts and raisins were placed on the table, a tradition to welcome guests. Jamila referred to us as "guests," not as researchers, a shift that reframes the power dynamics in field research. (Dossa, 2008:16)

Despite the similarity of experience, in particular with relation to the fact that I too was treated as a guest, with all the duties and obligations which the particular guest-host relationship entails, we draw different conclusions, and I cannot help questioning parts of Dossa's almost relentless portrayal of her participants as poor-but-proud. How can she be certain that the handwoven Afghan throw cover was to hide the second-hand furniture- might it not be simply to protect the sofa from the children's sticky hands? After all, many people –even those who do not have small children and who are not immigrants- cover up the furniture; I personally would be taken aback if a visitor to my house assumed that the covers on my sofas was to hide their being "secondhand" and by extension to conceal my poverty (and then actually wrote about it in a scholarly article to drive home the point of immigrant women being marginalized). Furthermore, why not consider the handwoven Afghan covers as proud markers of culture? Perhaps more than concealing their poverty, the covers are displayed as showcases of the craft and artistry of Afghan weavers, as reminders of home, as treasured heirlooms, or parting gifts from family and friends back in

Iran. I can certainly remember Afghan refugees who were accepted for resettlement and knew for certain that they were departing to a new country rush with their savings to Tehran bazaar to gather up as fine a selection of carpets as their wealth would allow them to buy and to take with them.

Despite the long period of absence from their native country then, the identity of the research participants was firmly established as "Afghans" with plenty of visual cues even before the discussions started.

Food

Food and culinary habits are considered a "symbolic expression of our sociality and along with language they are an emblem of our ethnic or cultural identity" (Van den Berghe 1984, quoted in Tuomainen, 2009). Cardona (2004) and Sutton (2001) are two scholars who have discussed the importance of food in migratory contexts. Sutton, who has more generally researched the relationship between food and memory, states that:

> Familiar food habits help them [migrants] retain a significant aspect of their sense of ethnic identity; ethnic food represents a symbolic and cultural connection with the country of origin...For example, the smell of food can evoke memories on which identities are formed (Sutton, 2001: 74).

Meanwhile, Cardona, in his study of Cuban immigrants in Australia, comments on the lasting significance of food:

> Migration to a new country is a situation in which one is confronted with alternative or different foodways and it is in many ways a challenge to individual identity...food habits are one of the last cultural traits to change in the context of migration and ethnic minority cultures (Cardona, 2004, quoted in Tuomainen, 2009:528).

In her study of Afghan women, Dossa develops a more gendered account of the cultural significance of food and makes the point of how the rituals of food-preparation is undertaken by the women as an expression of their individual agency. Furthermore, it is not simply an expression of nostalgia and memory, but a very vital, present activity. Food and food-preparation is a negotiation in daily life, through these activities, the women learn to shop, to bargain, to create a sense of home and comfort, even to heal minor ailments

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(Dossa, 2008:18-19). My Afghan participants had a slightly different attitude. For one thing, the menfolk were as eager to discuss food and were as involved in the process of food-preparation as the women- perhaps one of the advantages of conducting interviews in familial settings. Of course the process was gendered: men were responsible for obtaining "Halal" meat, and the women cooked it. The young (female) adults baked the kind of sweets they liked. The men got together every so often and travelled to an outlaying farm, where they could obtain halal meat, slaughtering the animals themselves. As for why they continue preparing Afghan foods, of course the scholars have a good point in emphasizing the link between food and culture. But my study group had a simple albeit non-academic explanation: they had tried Canadian food, and they simply did not like it. When I asked them about the foods they consumed, they almost unanimously stated that they prepared Afghan foods, Reza`s family going further than some:

> (*all Reza's family speaking*) Oh yes...We even bake our own bread... Afghan bread was popular even in Iran even though Iranians have very good bread. (*Reza continues*). But here, we can't eat this toast- I just can't put it in my mouth. So we get flour and starch and prepare our own.

However, the simplicity can be deceptive. For the Yavaris, Alavis, Seyedis, Panahis, Razavis and Rezais, all strictly religious households, food is a very important religious marker. They cannot eat food when they are not sure of their preparation methods, and they do not let their children eat "unsure" food either.

> Yes, my children are very careful; they never share any food with them (their Canadian classmates¸). They know that we do not know how it is prepared, so we cannot eat it...(Sara)

This naturally has implications for their attitudes towards socialization and parenting practices.

4.3 Cultural Experiments

Families, Friends, and Schools

The relationship between immigrant parents and children has received some scholarly attention, although as one study observes: "...researchers know relatively little about the early childhood experiences of young children of immigrants. Researchers know even less about the child-rearing practices of immigrant parents" (Turney and Kao, 2009:257). Ahn *et al* (2009) study the "cultural value gap" and "coping strategies" between Korean-American children and their parents, noting that the literature suggests:

> ...one of the possible outcomes for parents and children is the differential rates of retention of traditional Korean cultural norms. In turn, this difference in the adaptation process could lead to an increase in cultural conflicts between children and parents (K.C. Kim, Hurh, & S. Kim, 1993; J.C. Lee & Cynn, 1991; Park, 1994). Several studies have found that the correlates of this type of conflict include emotional distance between parents and children, interpersonal problems, lack of self-confidence and assertiveness, and anxiety and depression (J. C. Lee & Cynn, 1991; R. M. Lee, Choe, Kim, & Ngo, 2000; Lowinger & Kwok, 2001; Min, 1995; Rohner & Pettengill, 1985). (Ahn et al, 2009: 30-31).

The cultural norms set out by Ahn *et al* for Korean families seem to match perceived Afghan norms such as those enumerated by Dupree above: "collectivism, conformity to norms, deference to authority figures, emotional restraint, filial piety, hierarchical family structure, emphasis on academic achievement, and humility". (Ahn et al, 2009: 32). And these are placed in opposition to typically "American" values – what Ahn *et al* refer to as "dominant cultural norms" without spelling out exactly what those norms are.

Every so often, a horrible and violent tale of "honor killings" spills out in the media with details of daughters of Middle-Eastern or Southern Asian families being abused, threatened, imprisoned and killed by their fathers, brothers and even mothers for having boyfriends, or refusing to marry their first cousin. Afghan families are no exception to this- in July 2009, the headline of the National Post was "Rise In Canadian Honour Killings Should Not Be Ignored: Expert", with the story of an Afghan family where the

daughters had been murdered by their father in Ontario. The motive was never clarified- it appears to be assumed that the murder took place because of the daughters' Western lifestyles and friendships. These events, and their construction in the media, give an added urgency to the possibility of cultural conflicts taking place in the family site, and for me, it was of particular interest to see how Afghan parents handled the exposure of their children to Canadian culture and society. I asked questions regarding the extra-curricular activities of children, their friendships, and how their parents would feel if their children chose to follow traditions and religious norms different from their own. Of all the families and individuals interviewed, one father remained silent on the question regarding his children's hypothetical refusal to follow their religious norms, while their mother exclaimed that "such a thing could not be". In all the other families, the parents declared themselves willing to accept the choices of their children. For example, Hussein and Zahra, both observant Shiite Moslems, agreed that they cannot force religion on their children:

> I would not force them. We do not force our religion on anybody, though of course we would encourage them. You can see for yourself- she (their eldest daughter) is nine years old now but does not cover her hair. For us, morality is important, whether someone is good does not depend on their religion (Hussein).

Indeed, their daughters receive swimming lessons at the local YMCA, something which other families had never considered, and which can be viewed as the sort of "cultural experimentation" I was referring to above. A Shiite family allowing their girls to swim is a phenomenon which would rarely be seen in their home country, and is an instance of the individual modifications and adaptations of received cultural and traditional norms.

Maliha also seems willing to let go of traditions. She talks of marriage, and how she sees Afghan marriage, "which is for life", different from Canadian relationships, "who are with a different person everyday". Suddenly, following from the same speech, she stops talking about marriage, and exclaims:

But for us it is time to look to our own culture, and to see where that has brought us! To think about illuminating ourselves, to think how we can improve and change our own culture! What has our culture done for us? I do not believe in hanging on to the past! (Maliha)

In Fallah's response, himself a devout Sunni Muslim, there is a note of resignation:

But they are children, and we cannot force them. We cannot tell them to do anything they do not like. If they grow older and decide to behave differently, what can we do? Can we do anything? Once they are adults, they are 18, 19, we are released. It is up to them...

Mehrdad, a former teacher and a man who is self-declaredly not religious, echoes a similar note, implying that parents must be able to handle the choices of their children.

This problem which both Iranians and Afghans have, both you and us, we do not like our children too free and easy with their friends, to go and sleep at their friends' house and so on, yes, it is something we have to deal with.

For him, the possibly divergent paths of children are not a simply religious or traditionalist matter- it is something which can occur in any family:

Yes, it would be hurtful for me if my children got married without consulting me, or considering my opinion, but I think this is something which can happen to all parents.

Taher's son-in-law is from a Latin American country, chosen by his daughter. Taher has welcomed him into his household and seems delighted with his grandchild. His daughter, Mina, says that her parents never constrained her choices, and although it is "common" for Afghan girls to be married within the family circle, and although she had many such familial marriage prospects, she was never interested in a family marriage. However, she is also quick to point out that the main reason her parents are so receptive of her marriage choice is that her husband is "so good" that he is "almost like an Afghan"- indeed, her relatives in Toronto have paid her the highest compliment by remarking that he behaves "like Afghans":

He is a very good man- my family says you cannot tell he is not Afghan. He is very respectful to my parents, and calls them mother and father. He is very hard-working, like our young men...

Indeed, the young adults I questioned seemed very considerate of their parents' sensibilities, illustrating Ahn *et al*'s, arguments in the study aforementioned, that in households where there is "cognitive flexibility", referring to a "person's awareness, willingness, and self-efficacy to consider other alternatives that are available to address conflicts" (Ahn *et al*, 2009:31), there are less culture-driven conflicts. For example Sabrina, a university student who comes from a family where they do not "subscribe to religious practice", says:

> Actually, no, I do not like to bring my friends home, and I do not become close like that [with her Canadian friends and classmates]. What I mean is that in university we enjoy working and studying together…My brothers also, they have their friends and so on outside, I have never seen them bring their friends home.

Arezu and Bahar, both sisters attending high school, also seem skilled at defusing possible tension areas and negotiating tricky family waters. When I ask them whether they socialize with their Canadian friends to the extent of bringing them home, Bahar and her father Fallah both answer simultaneously "Oh no…" while the other family members look at each other and laugh. Bahar continues: "One of them wanted to visit me, but..." She looks at her father and they both laugh.

Rostami-Povey also describes in detail the negotiations and concessions which Afghan parents and children make while living in Western countries, though her study group highlights instances of subterfuge practised by young adults on their parents, often resulting in them leading double lives (Rostami-Povey, 2006:106). Perhaps due to the family setting of the interviews, my respondents did not mention any such practices, however, this is not to say that there are no family conflicts. Parvin, an Iranian woman who is appointed by the government to accompany Farsi-speaking families on various official errands, assures me that there have been instances of problems relating to notions of family honour amongst Afghan families. However, she concurs that in general there are relatively fewer problems (compared to families of other ethnicities such as Kurds), and that Afghan

girls in particular have good academic success and are flexible in adapting to the demands of both worlds. She explains:

> I think it is due to their religious affinities and traditional notions, which has positive results for the girls. The boys- they do not restrain the boys so much, and they run wild and get into all sorts of trouble- typical for teenagers. But they are careful with their girls, and so they get results.

The issue of girls' education is not an insignificant one in the context of Afghan societies, and the willingness of these families to "push" the girls into academic success, as well as the declared intentions of the young girls to achieve academic success is an important indicator in considering the cultural adaptation of families in Canada. Female education has long been a thorny and politically-charged issue in Afghanistan, where forced marriage still affects 70-80 percent of women, and the statistics on female education are depressing to say the least (87 percent are illiterate, 30 percent in schools)[3]. Historically speaking, when King Amanullah (1919-1929) passed laws on gender equality, outlawed child marriage, made primary education mandatory, and sent female students to school, conservative religious leaders were outraged, ethnic and tribal differences were laid aside, and with the support of British imperialists, continuous popular uprisings occurred, leading to his abdication in 1929 (Saikal, 2002:80-81). That the focus of outrage should have been female emancipation, a trend continued throughout the Soviet occupation and later wars, is troublesome yet symptomatic of Afghanistan today. Women's human rights continue to remain controversial issues (Ghosh, 2004). So when a teenage Afghan girl can sit next to her parents in Halifax and say calmly, "I have no plans to marry now. I will go to university first, and find a job. I am not thinking of marriage now", this means

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[3] Source: Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN), a project the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. IRIN is UN humanitarian news and information service, but may not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations or its agencies. March 2007.

something beyond a tribute to the educational attainments of second-generation immigrants. It means that these people, in becoming refugees and stepping away from their home country, are also pushing the boundaries of their home culture, which is steeped in patriarchy. They no longer conform to the norms and demands of a country where one in every three Afghan women experience physical, psychological or sexual violence (IRIN, 2007), where fathers, brothers, husbands and fathers-in-law have the final and ultimate say in all decisions relating to women.

I was not able to question any young male Afghan adults- none of them were at home or if they were, they kept to their own rooms and did not venture out at the time of my visits. It is clear that as Parvin said, very different gendered social practices and expectations govern their behaviours. However, their parents seemed satisfied enough with both their sons and daughters. Mehrdad has two sons in university, and Fallah spent some time describing to me the university application process of his son, recently graduated from high school.

Although the parents might declare themselves accepting of the choices of their children, that does not prevent them from actively trying to mould those possible choices as far as they can. This is not so very different from parents all over the world. The Rezais and Razavis send all their children to regular Quran school every Saturday, while Zahra gives her children lessons on religious principles:

> Occasionally, I teach them something... I use the internet, and I have taught them the basics. And we sometimes take them to the Bayers Road mosque. After all, I do not want them to completely forget our customs...

For the families which are more religiously inclined, instruction of the children is part of the religious lifestyle. However, for these migrant families, such instruction also takes on an aspect of "remembering" and preserving their Afghan identity. Talking of the weekly Quran lessons, Maryam says: "Of course they know Quran from Iran, this is more to make sure they do not forget."

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And her husband, Reza concurs:

We do not want to be obliged after we die... we do not want it to be said that they went to Canada and forgot everything...

Reza clarifies that by "obliged", he means he does not wish to have any religious debt on his conscience. The message is clear: they are doing their best to bring up their children in accordance to their own values and traditions. But after the children grow up, they (the parents) "are released".

Thus, in observing the interaction between parents and their children, and their attitude towards traditional values and norms, I argue that a sense of mutual accommodation and tolerance exists amongst the members of the study group. Parents agree that children must be free, as they grow older, to make their own choices, whether in marriage, religious convictions or decisions on their careers and education. Meanwhile, the young adults appear sensible of their parents` values and preferences, and actively try to accommodate them. In this two-way interaction, I see a vivid demonstration of the simultaneously constraining and enabling aspects of Afghan culture. It constrains the parents from allowing their children to socialize too freely, as they see it, with their school friends. Simultaneously parents encourage, or allowing their children to pursue academic studies- something which they clearly do not see as clashing with their traditional culture, and they acknowledge that ultimately the children are responsible for their own choices. And the children have a lively sense of respect for their elders which enables them to understand and appreciate their parents' mental boundaries, and so they appear willing to manage their non-familial social friendships outside the home, in a manner acceptable to their parents, but with the implicit, or even explicit understanding that they are in fact free to study, to have a career, to marry when they wish, whom they wish, and to follow religious practices to the degree they wish.

Transnational Family Ties

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The kinship networks and transnational family ties maintained by immigrants have attracted the interest of both scholars and policy-makers. The amount of remittances sent "back" by immigrants have become substantial enough to command the attention of the World Bank:

> Writing for the World Bank in October 2003, economist Dilip Ratha indicated that workers' remittances have become a major source of external development finance, providing a convenient angle from which to approach the complex migration agenda…Remittances are now more than double the size of net official flows (under $430 million) and are second only to foreign direct investment (around $133 billion) as a source of external finance for developing countries...In short, remittances have become a significant source of funds for some developing countries (Bonnet, 2009:15).

Bonnet studies remittances and their impact on "homeland development", sent by West Indian émigrés in the United States to their home country. His argument is informed by the perspective that remittances have cultural and social significance, as well as financial and material ones. Kivisto (2001) also suggests that remittances are based on emotional attachments between the sender and his or her dependents and are not mere instrumental transactions, while Pedraza (2006) goes further in arguing the emotional linkages that immigrants sustain across borders are foundational to their emotional well-being. Both Dossa (2008) and Tastsoglou (2006), as mentioned above, highlight kinship ties and family networks as significant strategies which immigrant and Afghan women deploy to adjust in life in Canada while at the same time maintaining their sense of identity.

Bearing in mind this literature, I included questions on overseas family connections and remittances in my interviews. The responses were varied and often surprising. As my study group is relatively recent refugees, as opposed to settled immigrants, it could be expected that their responses would diverge from the literature referred to above. However, they were also often contradictory to the received assumptions

about Afghan culture being particularly family-oriented, or Afghans placing a special value on extended familial networks.

Regarding remittances, I was not much surprised to hear that none of the families were able to send money to their family or friends. However, overseas family connections in general were maintained at a much looser level than I had expected.

Two of my female respondents had parents still living in Iran, and they expressed great anxiety for them, together with hope that they could one day be reunited. Specifically, they wish to bring their parents to Canada to join them. The other interviewees, all of whom had siblings and other extended family members in Afghanistan and also other countries, such as Iran, Pakistan, European countries and the United States, did not seem overly concerned with maintaining these ties. From the answers they provided, I did not receive the impression that overseas kinship networks occupied a particularly prominent place in their present lives.

For example, Maryam calls her mother in Iran regularly, but she called her brother in Afghanistan only once since her arrival in Canada two years ago. Considering she was ten years old when she left Afghanistan, the lack of close connection with her family there may be better appreciated. Seyed, who used to travel between Iran and Afghanistan before making the final move to Turkey and then on to Canada, mentions that he calls his family back in Afghanistan once every six months, perhaps on religious festivities, explaining that: "Connection to Afghanistan is very bad. However, family isn't everything. The absence of family, it is not so important."

This simple statement may sound surprising coming from a highly traditional elderly Afghan man, but placed in context of the interview, where he was describing the unstable and precarious life he and his family led in Iran, and the satisfaction he receives here from knowing his children are going to school and have the opportunity to study and

lead fruitful, secure lives, and it becomes clearer why, for some of these people who were refugees, "family is not so important".

Maliha, a woman who presents herself in a more liberal and less traditional light than Seyed, describes the process of maintaining contact in similar terms. She also calls her relatives every few months, since "it is so difficult, with the different times, and I am working so many hours, and so on. And the connection is too bad. We can hardly understand each other."

All the respondents stated that they would like to visit Afghanistan "some day", when there is peace and security, but Taher, already a self-sufficient Canadian citizen with a satisfactory small business, is the only one who has actually done so. He told me with a certain sense of pride that when they visited Kabul last, he counted two hundred of his extended family and tribe at a family gathering, not counting the relatives he has in Toronto and the United States. He is the only member of my study group who could be said to maintain and participate in a transnational kinship network in the sense described by the scholars mentioned above, where such participation forms part of his cultural identity and has emotional significance. For the others, it appears that the long years of hardship and exile from the country of origin have somewhat eroded the sense of the necessity of maintaining close connections, or at least relegated it to lower priority; it can be appreciated that for these people, basic survival and security has been on the top of their agenda for many years now. Neither do any of them have any desire to visit the other countries in which they sought asylum in the years prior to coming in Canada, despite the fact that many of them have family there. This can have strong implications for the willingness and motivation of refugees to adapt and integrate into their new societies, which will be discussed further. Of course, the impression I received is only based on the answers they provided to me, at this present point in time. It is fully possible and foreseeable that once their lives achieve a greater degree of financial and emotional ease,

like Taher, their thoughts too will turn to the kin that they have left behind so many years ago, and they will be better placed to appreciate the emotional significance of fostering such ties. At present, there was little evidence of strong transnational kinship networks amongst the respondents.

Interactions with Canadians

I have already mentioned the ease with which the children and young adults make friends across ethnic and national boundaries, together with the deep distrust of their parents towards these friendships. In this section, I wish to examine in more detail the interactions my study group had with Canadians, since such interactions are a part of the process of their integration into Canadian society. Tastsoglou refers to "networking and friendships", stressing the importance of building relationships, as well as "sharing and exchanging across cultures" as both important steps in the adjustment process (Tastsoglou, 2006). Such cultural exchanges, she argues, provides exposure to different practices and cultures, thus allowing immigrants to choose and create new cultural forms, similar to the cultural negotiation and experimentation which I observed in some instances amongst the study group.

However, there is literature, as well as reported incidents, showing that immigrants and refugees, far from sharing across cultures, experience racism and hostility in the western countries, and in some studies, the voice of immigrants in describing such incidents comes through clearly. For example, the participants in Rostami-Povey`s study on Afghan female immigrants in the UK and US were acutely sensitive to racism and hostility showed to them by the dominant majority, in particular after the 9-11 incidents (Rostami-Povey, 2007: 112-3, 115). Mohanty also uncovers systematic racism and othering of refugees and immigrants in the post 9-11 climate through an analysis of the Montreal Gazette coverage of events; she incorporates voices of Muslim women as narrated in newspaper stories, building a convincing portrayal of marginalized people for

whom societal racism is a lived reality in Montreal (Mohanty, in Jiwani, 2007). Other literature discusses "ethnic enclaves", and various perspectives on immigrants "sticking" to their own ethnicity, with little interaction beyond what is strictly necessary amongst various ethnicities (Qadeer and Kumar, 2006). This literature can be interpreted to suggest that racism and hostility is a two-way road, and immigrants may be equally suspicious and uneasy towards native-born residents.

The settlement experiences of my study group do not, however, reveal any such tensions or unease. For the present, and generally speaking, they are willing to attribute their lack of success in finding jobs and gaining economic success to their lack of language ability and knowledge, and lack of financial capital upon their arrival. In general, I can note that the respondents generally describe very positive interactions with the Canadian "system" and the bureaucrats that they deal with regularly.

For example, Maryam's experience of childbirth here in Halifax is noteworthy as it highlights the difference between the medical attention she received here and what she experienced in Iran and Turkey, where she had her previous pregnancies and births, and it impressed her and her family deeply.

Sabrina recalls how frustrated and unhappy she was when, upon arrival in Halifax, she was informed that she had to return to high school, although she had been a university student in Tajikistan. Now, five years later and an art student in one of Nova Scotia`s institutes of higher education, she states she is glad she did those two extra years at high school, not so much for the technical knowledge she gained, but because it was there that she learned how to deal with what she calls "the system". "And once you know the system", she states, "then everything is ok. Everything goes smoothly, after that."

There were only a couple of exceptions to the consistently positive appreciation of Canadian bureaucracy: Maliha vocally disapproves of the treatment she received at the

language school, and believes refugees are unfairly discriminated against, in contrast to the provincial nominees:

> If you want to research in refugee lives, the first thing you should know is that we are treated very differently from immigrants... refugees are brought here by the Canadian government. Immigrants, on the hand, pay to be here- they pay huge amounts of money to the government who then treats them differently, and facilitates everything for them... just because someone has more money and came as an immigrant does not mean they can learn English faster and whizz though the system, while refugees are held back...

Mehrdad too, who has dealt with immigration officials in various European countries, was taken aback with Social Assistance staff :

> The interactions were generally good, however Canadian officials are very different from other immigration officials in other countries. Here, they are focused on money, it is their first concern. I have not seen this in other countries. This detailed attention to financial matters, how much for rent, how much for food etc. The lady in social assistance, I was astonished by her obsession with money. I honestly do not have a good recollection of her. I went to them soon after my arrival, and after all these years of separation, she did not look at me kindly, and behaved as if I was trying to rob her from her personal money.

However, it struck me that apart from these official interactions, none of the families had extended social interaction with Canadian families, of any origin. There was very little, if any, of the sharing and exchange across cultures described by Tastsoglou (2006). The respondents seemed determined to keep their homes markedly "Afghan", managing non-Afghan socialization outside the home. Zahra, a married woman studying at high school, describes the "very warm and friendly" environment of her classes, which she enjoys very much, but adds that she does not socialize with non-Afghans in the sense of visiting each other at home, or seeing each other outside of school. Such socializing simply "does not exist", as she describes it, with no further discussion as to why. As mentioned above, Sabrina, a young woman in her twenties who comes from a relatively more open and non-religious background also emphasizes that she does not bring her friends from university into her home, and neither do her brothers. Upon questioning, she clarifies that

she does not wish to, implying that it is personal decision for her to keep her school friends apart from her family life.

When we consider the relative absence of socializing between adult family members with Canadian people, their reluctance to allow their children to socialize with Canadians over and beyond regular school relations becomes understandable. Such hesitation or reluctance may be due to the fact that they simply do not know any Canadians in a social, friendly sense, and thus view Canadians as strangers, inhabitants of different cultural and social spaces. This allows them to hold on to clichés and stereotypes about "westerners" living "irregular" or "immoral" lifestyles which are not in accordance with their values. Hence Maliha's assertion, quoted above earlier, that "Canadians are with different people everyday", unlike Afghans who have lifelong relationships. Maliha has been living in Canada for over five years now and is waiting to receive her citizenship, she attends college here and works part-time, she is from a non-religious and relatively open family, yet she echoes the same (mis)perceptions regarding loose and open Western lifestyles which I often hear from my grandmother and Iranian state media. Reza exclaims with horror that Canadian children swim together wearing nothing but their underwear. Not surprising then, that he cannot think of his children visiting Canadians or allowing them to visit their home.

Socializing thus for each family takes place with three or four like-minded Afghan families, generally of the same religious background, whom they have met through various NGO and immigrant-related events (such as the Supper NOVA), generally in the same neighbourhood. And of course there are organized religious and traditional events such as New Year celebrations or Ramadan festivities which attract greater crowds. Tastsoglou regards this socializing of immigrants with others of the same ethnicity as an active process whereby a "voice" for the ethnic community can be developed. It is noticeable that the Afghans do not have a local or community organization in Halifax. Mehrdad told me that

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he had had meetings with other Afghans to start up a community organization, but so far

the discussions have gone nowhere due to time constraints. And there are other problems,

in his view, regarding the manner in which Afghans come together and try to develop a

public life:

> Afghan people have not had the space to develop their culture, to flourish. Our unfortunate people! We are 'culture-starved'. We do not know how to behave in public, how speak with ease and effectiveness. Almost as if we are ashamed. We see this freedom here, the freedom to speak and express your opinions, but we have undergone such mental oppression and suffering that we are still tongue-tied and cannot use the freedom. This is just a stage, for when you see Afghans who emigrated thirty years ago, you can see how different their behaviour and attitudes are, how easily they move in the society. So the newcomers will also overcome this stage and obtain the confidence and ease (Mehrdad).

The experiences of refuge and exile then, have in some sense affected their ability

to develop an active voice, and to move easily across the public stage, developing and

maintaining ties beyond their immediate circle of friends and reaching out across other

cultures. This echoes the constructed images of refugees as silent, or politically-silenced,

which I was discussing earlier. However, Mehrdad is hopeful that this is a temporary stage

and Afghan newcomers will develop and gain their voice, and I see no reason not to share

his optimism.

The Religious and the Not So Religious.

"So who are you hiding your hair from? There are no strange men here! Take off that scarf- it makes me feel choked looking at it. Plus, I want Shiva to see your beautiful hair" (Parvin).
Razieh laughs and looks embarrassed, but she removes her scarf and runs her fingers through her hair. Parvin turns to me. "Look! Doesn't she have lovely hair? And she wants to hide it!"

Both Tastsoglou (2006) and Dossa (2008) discuss religion in their studies on

immigrant women in the Maritimes and Afghan women in Vancouver (although Dossa

uses the word, "prayer"- referring to an actual daily activity rather than a general lifestyle).

Tastoglou is interested in the social aspect and the possibility that religion can ease the

"social integration" (Tastsogolou, 2006: 220) of immigrants, while Dossa concentrates on the individual: prayers and praying is an activity through which women organize their time, their space, and find solace and ease.

Both scholars consider religion as an expression of human agency and there are other researchers who share this idea. For example, Afshar (in Eade, 2002) considers Iranian women turning to Islam as a form of resistance both to Western globalized images of femininity, which has "failed" to deliver the promises of equality (Afshar, 2002: 134) and also to the patriarchal and male-dominated State authority (Afshar 2002:137-8). "Women choose Islam because they feel it liberates them, allows them to have proper life-cycles and to be rewarded for what they do" (Afshar, 2002:136).

Bhimji (2009) makes a similar argument for British Muslim women. Based on a qualitative study, she examines how these women use their "agentic" presence in religious spaces such as mosques and study groups to "feminize" bastions of traditionally male authority. They actively engage in understanding religious knowledge which hitherto they had been passively expected to receive (Bhimji, 2009:376). Bhimji draws attention to the class-based nature of this activity. Women with more resources could travel and move freely amongst various religious spheres, and hence developed a more cosmopolitan, engaged understanding of their chosen religion. Alternatively:

> Women with less formal education, growing up in segregated, low income neighbourhoods tend not to have access to the same kinds of resources and networks. In such cases Islam may very well become a case of being limited to donning on visible symbols and the performance of basic tenets. (Bhimji, 2009:378)

Ver beek (2002) acknowledges that the presentation of religion as a means for affirming identity and "liberation" runs somewhat counter to received and general assumptions about the constraining and conformation-demanding nature of religion, but argues that nevertheless religious issues must be addressed:

> Spirituality and religion have often been sources of conflict and oppression, rather than development and liberation. But just as social scientists and practitioners have recognized that gender, class and ethnicity, while sources of conflict, are integral components of people's identity, so spirituality and religion, because they are so central in the lives of people living in poverty, must also be addressed. (Ver Beek, in Eade 2002: 61)

As these scholars show, religion is an area where the personal, social, and the political come together, and the study participants of this research also approached it from various angles. Of the eight families interviewed, six were visibly religious. This was as evident as in the framed Quranic verses on the walls, as in the prayer beads of the men and the full hijab of the women. All the activities and social practices described above –their food habits, parenting and socializing are informed by their religious worldview, though some, as we have seen, more deeply than others.

They observe religious practices such as regular prayers and fasting. The Sunni families make a point of participating in regular communal religious gatherings, most notably the Friday prayers, which have political significance as well as a purely religious one for the individual- it is supposed to be a show of the strength and solidarity of the religious community. Reza and Fallah take their elderly father with them to the prayers. And they send their children to Quranic and Arabic classes, as discussed. They engage in these activities even though there is no requirement for them to do so, because they are part of their mental and spiritual universe, not necessarily because it gives them social integration, as per Tastsoglou's argument.

Religion also helps them to cope with the uncertainties and challenges of their lives on a personal level. When I ask Maryam how she feels about the future of her children she responds simply: "I pray. I am always praying for my children to be good. What else can we parents do?" Fallah, describing the frustration of relying on government handouts, says:

A man must accept what is provided to him gracefully, with thanks. In Iran, we worked and earned 200 thousand a month, and we were grateful. Here, we do not work, and we are still grateful.

He uses the Arabic word "*shokr*" for gratitude, which is a word with heavy Quranic implications - to be "*shaker*" or grateful is one of the major characteristics of a good Moslem.

For other families, religion does not appear to be such a cornerstone of their identity. True, the women are veiled, but as the little exchange above shows, it could be little more than force of habit (I could never imagine Parvin, an intelligent, sensitive woman, engaging in the same friendly banter quoted above with, for example, Maryam, a strict Sunni woman) and custom. Asking the young couple directly about their religious convictions, Bahram, Razieh's husband shrugs and says "This is the way we have been brought up. No, we are not very religious like some others. It is not so important." Sina, another young Afghan responds in a similar fashion. They are happy enough to attend festivities based on religious events, but do not make a point of attending Friday mass prayers. For them, religion is something that has been part of their social landscape since they were born, but now that they are in a different country where religion does not have such a prominent public place, they might find themselves thinking differently, perhaps even challenging received religious wisdom which they had been taught. For example, after remarking on the kindness he has seen from Canadian officials, Hussein states that "I cannot believe that some of our mullahs and clerics would call these people blasphemers, whereas to me they are the kindest people I have ever seen." Asking about attendance at religious gatherings, Zahra says:

> Honestly we do not have time for such things. Yes, occasionally if it is an important *eid*, but, no, we cannot be going to prayers and sermons regularly. We need to concentrate on other things now, our language ability and studying...

Yet she dresses with full hijab, covering her hair and body with an Iranian-style manteau and scarf. During the interview, her satin scarf regularly slips back, showing her hair in a manner unacceptable for seriously devout or observant women, and she pulls it forward, adjusting it and smoothing her hair. In these families, it appears that incorporating the symbols of religion happens more or less for the same reason they stick to preparing Afghan food- it is what they know and are comfortable with, it is more of a custom than an integral part of their identity. Zahra says as much when she describes teaching her children about religion- to repeat the quote provided above: "I have taught them the basics…After all, I do not want them to completely forget our customs."

And finally we come to the two families who are visibly non-religious, the Miris and the Abbasis. The women appear in casual western-style clothes and there are no religious ornaments to be seen. The TV is showing Friends during my interview with Taher Abbasi. The point needs to be made that for people coming from countries where religion plays such a prominent public and State-mandated role, stepping into a public space as a non-religious person has social (if not political) significance. A woman appearing with her hair uncovered is making a declaration of her affinities, whether she likes it or not. In fact, a woman with her hair uncovered is making a statement about her husband's and family's affinities as well, not just her own. Just as Afshar (2002) and Bhamiji (2009) argue above that assuming a religious identity can be an expression of agency and liberation for women, the opposite can be equally true: assuming a non-religious identity for citizens of countries where religion is woven into their constitution can be also "agentic".

Taher and Mehrdad both emphasize that Afghans are not all religious, and it is clear through their talk that they associate religion with ignorance and intellectual poverty. They had both been educated during the former communist regime in Afghanistan, and it is characteristic that they should not have a high opinion of religion. Sabrina, Mehrdad`s

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daughter, uses the term "free-thinker" to describe herself and her family. They do not enjoy

using the term religion, preferring terms such as "prejudices", "sensitivities" and

"customs":

> In Afghanistan, people still follow very primitive, provincial lives... You can
> see now there is so much aid, so many international organizations, but they
> cannot do it [*implement international standards and norms of human rights in
> Afghanistan*]. Historically, people prefer to continue the primitive traditions
> which have been handed down to them through centuries. To break free from
> those traditions requires sufficient stability and security, which we never had.
> It is very difficult. First the communists tried to bring progress to Afghanistan,
> but they failed. Nothing works if it is presented by force, as a sort of dogma,
> running counter to people's sensitivities and traditions. Slowly, gradually,
> perhaps some progress can be made, as people become more enlightened...
> (Mehrdad)

They are worldly people. My questions on culture and adaptation must have

sounded naive to them:

> My culture here has not changed from what I had before. I am a free person; I
> have lived and studied in European countries and in Russia, thirty years ago.
> The culture here is nothing new or shocking for me. Of course it is not the
> same for all families. (Taher)

The categorization above is similar to that provided by Moghissi *et al* (2009) and their

classification of the religious tendencies of their Muslim respondents, as they study

Afghan, Iranian, Palestinian and Pakistani communities in Canada, focusing on their

religious identity. They discuss four groups: the "strongly committed", "ritual

practitioners", "virtual religious" and those tending to be secular, and their point is that:

> Again, contrary to stereotypes that all people of Muslim background are very religious
> and their communities are similar in terms of strength of religious belief and practice,
> we see that the…communities are quite different from one another, and that within
> each community, individuals show different degrees and kinds of religious affiliation
> (Moghissi *et al*, 2009: 93).

Thus, much like the other themes discussed, religion is a construct which for some

individuals in my study sample was agentic: a source of solace, an expression of identity,

or a familiar social practice, while for others it was constraining feature of Afghan society,

the cause of suffering and "backwardness", and their own individuality was expressed in

terms contrary to perceived notions of religiosity. The differences runs across genders and age groups: for some women, religious garb seems an intrinsic part of their identity; others are more relaxed in their attire, while for others, the lack of religious covering is an indication of their attitudes and opinions on the constraining aspects of religiosity. In regards to religion in different age groups, it seems that in religious families, religion is a construct which binds the family across the age groups: for example, the practice of taking elderly parents to the mosque, or sending young adults and children to Qur'an classes. Yet the parents acknowledge the temporary nature of their influence, and in many cases, seem to be mentally preparing themselves for a time when children may not subscribe to practices in the same manner as they do.

4.4 Looking To the Future

When I first realised I couldn't return to Afghanistan for three years, I felt my heart would break- I would die. He (*my husband*) told to me to be patient. And look, a year has passed already. In two years, perhaps I can see my parents (Meigol).

While the themes above portray the sense of differences and variations across my study group, the last theme I wish to consider seemed consistent throughout. The interviewees, regardless of their gender, age, background or religion talked on the theme of home, or to be more precise, where they consider home to be, as if with one voice. What is more interesting is that their responses are in tune with responses provided in other studies, conducted for very different purposes.

For example, in the latest update of the Longitudinal Survey of Immigrants in Canada, immigrant cohorts were asked questions regarding the level of their satisfaction with their experiences in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2005). Despite the statistical analysis which shows that the cohort, in general, are employed in lower-grade jobs than what they had in their country of origin, and also have lower economic performances than their Canadian counterparts of a similar educational and professional levels, "Six months after arrival, almost three-quarters of the LSIC population reported being satisfied with their

experiences... Immigrants in the family category, refugees and other economic immigrants reported the highest levels of satisfaction with their experiences (*compared with the skilled worker category*)...” (Statistics Canada, 2005:86).

Tastsoglou’s respondents in her study of immigrant women in the Maritimes also state that despite the emotional and financial difficulties associated with immigration, of which she provides an in-depth analysis, they do not regret the decision to migrate:

> The immigrant women interviewed in this study assess their experiences of migrating to and settling in Canada in very positive terms. Had they been given a second chance, they overwhelmingly assert that they would not hesitate to repeat their decision about migrating to Canada. Their responses are unequivocal, even for those who experienced hardship in the settlement process (Tastsoglou, 2006: 220).

The question cannot be framed in the same terms of my study group, since as described in the introduction, GARs do not really have a choice in selecting Canada as their country of destination, and refugees in general are distinct from immigrants in that they are presumed to have been forced to flee from their homes, with no option of return.[4]

Although they may not have been consulted when the decision to put their files in the Canada filing box was made, now that they are here, they show strong satisfaction and determination to build a viable and fulfilling life for themselves and their children. They consider Halifax their home, and see themselves establishing themselves in this city. They do not appear hampered much the memories and nostalgia which afflict Dossa’s Afghan and Iranian respondents (Dossa, 2004, 2008). They speak of the past with bitterness and little fondness, and seem intent on devoting their energies to the future, which is clearly Canada.

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[4] These definitions have not prevented them from in fact taking very active roles in the resettlement process, roles which albeit remain unacknowledged or un-programmed within the bureaucratic procedure for resettlement. One of the most interesting aspects of the interviews which at time threatened to completely sidetrack me was the extent to which the refugee families demonstrated agency within the process of resettlement.

It has been noted that the majority of the respondents left their native country of Afghanistan at fairly young ages, under conditions which are hardly conducive to develop nostalgia and longing:

> I was fourteen when we left Afghanistan, my wife was ten. We never went back. What I can remember from there- mud. Our village was known for having no stones or rocks, only huge piles of soft mud (Fallah).

> Like a dream I can remember, running with my grandmother through the streets while things were exploding around us. I`m not even sure how old I was then... (Razieh)

And even when things were not exploding, there was the dreadful aimlessness and uncertainty associated with living under insecure and wartime conditions:

> I had six years of primary education in Afghanistan. After that, I did nothing. I stayed at home, my parents' house all day. There was nothing to do (Meigol).

There are some fond memories, of course, but all was destroyed with the wars:

> In Afghanistan- my husband was a civil servant- we had the best life there! The best of everything! But then, these cruel imposed wars... our life in pieces...all was hardship, homelessness...(Maliha).

As has been discussed, the legal protection regime of countries of asylum where the refugees found themselves (namely, Iran and Pakistan) left much to be desired, and none of the respondents had anything positive to say about their experiences of asylum – considering that I am an Iranian myself, the fact that they spoke freely to me about their experiences in Iran in itself is telling:

> Iran places no value on Afghans- we are harassed, discriminated against. Here, you, I, another Canadian, we are all equal under the law, as you well know (Hussein).

Reza is more considerate of his guest's feelings: "Iran is not a bad place", he says courteously, "they just didn't want us".

Why am I asking them about those countries anyway? Surely I know as well as them how they were treated:

> You know the life of refugees in Iran... everyday a new problem. Today they are fining refugees 200 thousand tomans... today they won't take the children

at school...today they won't renew your cards. All your life passes in these problems (Fallah).

In Iran, I couldn't buy a motorcycle for myself- I would have to find an Iranian who would be willing to let me pay him and have the ownership documents in his name. Here, I can have my own car- if I have the money, of course... (Bahram).

The lack of legal status pervaded every aspect of their life:

There would be young guys, standing around the streets, looking at my daughters as they went to and from school everyday, shouting things at them. What could I tell them, move on you little puppies, do you think because we are Afghans, we are defenceless, you can treat us however you wish? (Fallah)

Nor was Pakistan much better:

Pakistan was terrible. Little girls, no older than six, working all day at the carpet loom for their bread. Both of us had to work all day too, weaving carpets (Meigol).

With this past, it can be appreciated why, even though they do not speak the language, do not share a culture, and do not socialize with longer-established residents, they feel at home in Canada. Here is where they can feel safe, and plan for the future. Even if they have different customs from the dominant majority, it is not a major issue:

They respect us here, and we are free to follow our own culture and customs. It is not like America, I understand there is so much pressure on newcomers to act like Americans, become Americanized. There is no discrimination here, there is peace and security, a future for us and the children (Sina).

In X-City, there were not so many foreigners, and we really stood out as Afghans, even though we were born there and lived there all our lives. Here, it seems like everyone is a foreigner, it is a land of immigrants, and we do not stand out at all (Arezu).

I have never seen anybody look at my daughter, or shout things at them on the street, (*as he described above*). They walk around by themselves, and I feel that they are safe (Fallah).

And while I frequently hear other immigrants (and non-immigrants!) complain about Halifax being too small and provincial, my respondents are in a position to appreciate the value of that:

This is a good place, I am working here, I like a small town. We have visited other cities. I have family members and many friends in Toronto, but I do not

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feel the need to live there. Whenever I wish, we can visit them...Canada accepted us as refugees, they allowed us in their country to live peacefully. We are grateful for this, we are both Canadian and Afghan. It is possible for a person to have and love two homes, you know (Taher).

They seem surprised that I need to ask:

Separation from the place you grew up, your country, of course it is difficult, there is no doubt. But the hardships and problems we had there, makes it impossible for us to remain. Of course we prefer the peace and security of here (Mehrdad).

Home is where you can plan your future:

You must realise, Canada was the first place we ever felt at peace, calm. It was the first place we could call our home, where we can plan for the future. Everywhere else, Iran, Turkey was just temporary. We were like froth on water (Zahra).

Tastsoglou's study group participants are positive about their immigration experience because of

...a sense that they had grown immensely since they had left their homelands and because they left. That sense of growth, of really knowing oneself, of exploring one's potential, the "eye-opening" experience is the most important reason (why they are satisfied with the choice they made to migrate) (Tastsoglou, 2006: 221).

Some of my respondents also talked about the sense of satisfaction and joy they have at the opportunity to learn, to attend school, to develop their potential while availing themselves of the opportunities of Canada:

It is a good place here, you can develop yourself and they have excellent universities and technologies... (Sabrina).

I enjoy high school very much- we study everything, not just English, but even history, geography. They tell me once I finish I can go to college or even university, which has always been my dream (Zahra).

But not all of them are thinking about acquiring knowledge – or self-knowledge - when they express satisfaction with their immigration experience. It is more fundamental and elemental; a deep sense of appreciation of having somewhere to call home. Houses are built before schools, after all.

In summary, I hope to have conveyed something of the individuality and heterogeneity of the Afghan people in Halifax through this discussion and analysis of our

interviews. More than that, I hope to have provided the feeling of people actively engaged in reconstructing their lives and imbuing it with meaning and significance through their daily practices and future hopes. They build upon the structures available to them, whether these are structures brought with them as part of their cultural baggage, such as religion and food, or those which are available here, such as education and stability. By exercising their agency, they are able to make these structures uniquely theirs, reifying and challenging stereotypes of fundamentalist, conservative attitudes.   Their eyes follow their children, and they make constant reference to them- the sense of future, of planning, of developing a livelihood is very present in these families. They are highly conscious of their identity and culture as Afghans, they present themselves publicly and purposefully as Afghan, but they do not consider this an obstacle to their settlement and integration in the society where they have found themselves. Perhaps Taher summed up their situation best of all: "It is possible for a person to have and love two homes, you know".

Chapter five: Conclusion

I embarked on this study to answer the question: how are Afghan government-assisted refugees adapting to a new life in Canada? I had seen something of the life they had before they entered Canada, and I knew they adhered to very different socio-cultural practices and value systems compared to those one normally associates with Canadian society. This difference, together with the policy and media literature with which I was familiar, and also the very formalized and, in a sense, artificial interactions I had with refugees as a UNHCR resettlement assistant, made me believe that resettled refugees could not be "happy" in their new life. They would have the basic necessities of life, but they would not be accepted, nor would they be able to accept the values and lifestyle of their new society; they would remain suffering victims, reliant on state hand-outs, unable to gain independence and self-reliance, marginalized, ostracized, homesick and grieving.

Even before I started the field research, the academic literature I began reviewing allowed me to mentally prepare the space for a different image. The idea that the refugee could be a politically silenced, deliberately muted construct was totally new to me, and I began reviewing the relationship I, and my colleagues, had with the clientele at UNHCR Tehran in a different light. I thought more deeply about the images, words and the institutionalised interactions we had, and were expected to have, and put this against the impassioned texts of those such as Hannah Arendt (1994), Julie Kristeva (1991), Liisa Malkki (1992) or Peter Nyers (2006). These scholars positioned refugees clearly against the state, unpacking state interest in the current and popular depiction of refugees. Meanwhile, from a sociological, rather than a political perspective, I realised there was a great deal of academic and policy interest in the adaptation and settlement of various immigrant groups in host countries, especially in a country such as Canada which has not only been "built" on immigration, but where there continues to be an active and vibrant

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immigration policy, predicated on the demographic challenges facing the country. In this regard, the works of Tastsoglou (2006) on the settlement experiences of immigrant women in the Maritimes and Dossa (2008) on those of Afghan women in Vancouver were particularly relevant to my research. Indeed, I was able to identify many of the themes they had discussed in their works in my own findings, as well as some interesting differences. Themes such as food, parenting, friendships and social networks, education and religion were covered, with the consistent underlying motif of how to be, or to remain "Afghan" while yet developing a sense of belonging in Canada.

The theoretical concepts of structure and agency expounded by Anthony Giddens (1984) provided the framework for thinking about these issues and bringing together the political (individual, agentic) and the sociological (structural, societal). It gave me the tools for examining the interaction of the individual within the social fabric, and the theoretical grounding for the "encountering" and "routinization" which forms the basis for this fabric. The interview questions were developed in an effort to concretise how the encountering and routinization takes place in the lives of Afghan refugees in Halifax. How do they spend their days? Who do they see? What are their current social and cultural practices, and what are their individual interpretations on the received practices, assumed to be uniform for all "Afghans", and, indeed as pointed out by Moghissi *et al* (2009), for all Muslims?

Thus equipped with a sharp personal interest, an academic context, a theoretical framework and a socio-historical background, I was able to turn my attention to the research findings and interviews. Through these interviews, I was able to glimpse the attempts of participants to normalize their surroundings and to establish routines through which they are able to express their identities as Afghans, but not the essentialized Afghans one encounters in policy and popular media, or even some academic literature. These people were neither passively waiting to be plucked into a particular bureaucratic system to shunt them towards a "better life", nor were they the dogmatic religious fundamentalists of

media imaginations. A very strong impression of knowledgeable actors, to use Giddens' term, was built up through the interviews, as it became clear that the participants are skilled at deploying cultural practices as a form of re-stating and protecting their identities as "Afghans", yet retaining a very clear sense of what they do not approve of in traditional, one could say "hard-core" cultural practices, thus "reifying", as Giddens would say, their Afghan identity. Although clearly appreciative of the benefits of life in Canada, they betray little desire to lose their constructed "Afghan-ness" in return for their appreciation, and their gratitude to the legal and international system which brought them here does not extend to a desire to adopt a fully "Canadian" lifestyle. Indeed, they show highly individual readings of what it means to be Afghan or Canadian, and seem adept at selecting or retaining what they think will work for them, out of each set of cultural practices. They do not negate or underestimate the hardships and difficulties they have been through as refugees, as people pushed by devastating wars into horrible, insecure lives, but do not see the whole of the meaning of their existence as bound up in that past. They are deeply appreciative of the safety and security of their present, and are eagerly anticipating an independent and self-sufficient future for themselves and their children.

I wish to emphasize that the generally positive and appreciative feedback I received from my interviewees and the undeniable sense of their resourcefulness and determination to succeed should not be read as a blanket, rosy-viewed approval of Canadian immigration policy in general, or refugee resettlement policy in particular. Indeed, there are compelling reasons why my respondents should wish to emphasize the more positive aspects of their resettlement, touching upon the negative very lightly, if at all. There could be a deep reluctance on their part to be seen as critical of system which has, in a very real and concrete sense, given them "so much", coupled with a fear that to be seen as critical may result in somehow having it "taken away" from them. Another point is that beside the nature of the hardship and the separation they have undergone, the problems they have

Canada are on a relatively minor scale. These problems require time, hard work and good fortune to be solved, but they are not of a nature to cause the kind of grief and misery which they have known previously.

But scholars and researchers do not have such causes for reticence, and accordingly, Canadian immigration and integration policy has been subject to much critique, both in the academic world and in the media. Abu-Laban (2008) has criticized the gendered, class-based nature of immigration programmes. Various studies have dwelled at length on the racism and hostility experienced by recent immigrants and new arrivals, in particular with relation to labour market access (Oreopolous, 2009; Suto, 2009; Bambrah, 2005).

Barber criticizes current research-based knowledge about immigrants:

...our research labels distinguish immigrants by their countries of birth and mark their difference from other Canadian citizens. But at the same time labels obscure migration histories and the social complexities that gave rise to im/migration trajectories. Such categorization is also presumptive, relying as it does on fixed, stable identities amongst newcomers and other Canadians...hence immigrants, as newcomers, are portrayed in overly generalized, often reifying statistical categories that...obscure the diversity, richness and shifting nature of their im/migration experiences, social identities, and cultural and national loyalties (Barber, 2003: 45).

Afghan GARs thus may be said to be subject to such categorization and generalization on several levels: they are newcomer immigrants, they are Muslims, and they are refugees. This study contributed to the deconstruction of these categorizations by presenting and discussing the "shifting" and "diverse" nature of their experiences, uncovering or at least indicating the "spaces" where their agency has been able act and find expression.

Erin Baines (2003) has analysed the gendered nature of Canadian refugee policy, highlighting the relatively fewer women who are able to gain access as asylum-seekers, and also the manner in which refugee policy reproduces oppressive international structures of "good" (e.g. countries such as Canada) vs. "bad" countries, where the good countries are

required to "save" women who are abused and oppressed within their societies (Baines, 2003). Resettlement itself deals with ridiculously small figures, as mentioned in Chapter three, and it is easy to dismiss those figures as mere tokenism, the absolute bare minimum done by wealthy and developed countries who have no intention of changing underlying structures of global suppression and enmity.

And yet, while those structures do require change, individuals need help, in real time, and resettlement has shown itself to be an effective program in helping individuals out of desperate and abusive situations. As these individuals cross borders and enter countries legally, States are disposed, indeed obliged to assist them with integration and settlement, increasing their chances of a positive and successful process.

Refugees are allowed to enter Canada as part of its humanitarian policy. According to CIC:

> Since 2002, Canada's immigration program...defines three basic categories of permanent residents, which correspond to major program objectives: reuniting families, contributing to economic development and protecting refugees...
> The family class is comprised of foreign nationals sponsored by close relatives...
> Economic immigrants are people selected for their skills and ability to contribute to Canada's economy...
> Refugees include government-assisted refugees, privately sponsored refugees, refugees landed in Canada and dependants of refugees landed in Canada who live abroad (CIC, 2008: 1).

The message is clear: economic migrants are considered necessary for the development of the country; refugees and humanitarian cases in general are gestures of charity and goodwill, to fulfill Canada's international obligations but not particularly useful to Canadian society. Refugees are not expected to "contribute". The wide disparity between the figures of the economic and humanitarian category has already been touched upon. These cases do not have the "points" on which economic migrants were assessed and allowed to enter.

For example, according to statistics provided by the Nova Scotia Office of Immigration, of the 25 percent of total immigrants to Nova Scotia who had no language ability, 56 percent of them were refugees. 45 percent of refugees in the 25+ age range have secondary or less education (NSOI, 2008).

My study shows that some Afghan refugees have qualities which, although not earning them any points in the immigration scale, are extremely desirable, and policy-makers concerned with the retention and attraction of immigrants to non-major urban centres would do well to take these qualities into account. They have a strong sense of belonging, of having arrived at home, of wishing to establish themselves and put down roots, of appreciation of the way of life available to them in a smaller city such as Halifax. They lack the resources and connections which make it so easy for other classes of immigrants to leave for larger cities, the Montreal-Toronto-Vancouver "MTV" phenomenon. Although the study group showed a tendency to socialise only with others of their same country of origin, and indeed in some cases harboured stereotypical (mis)conceptions about Canada and Canadians, this should not be read as ghettoization or marginalization, for studies have shown that immigrants across different ethnicities develop a strong sense of Canadian belonging and identity, despite their ethnic networks and backgrounds (Jedwab, 2004, quoted in Barber, 2006). A sense of identity and attachment to one's country of origin, then, does not preclude a sense of attachment to Canada.

Other studies have also questioned the notion of "contribution" of immigrants, asking whether contributions should be assessed only in monetary terms, and indeed whether it can be assumed that humanitarian cases do not make any contributions, by extension questioning what they see as the neoliberal, economically-driven agenda of Canadian migration policy (VanderPlaat *et al*, 2009). VanderPlaat's study focuses on family reunification and the contribution of immigrants who enter under this stream. I

would conclude from my study that there is space for considering the potential for contribution of refugees, and in particular GARs, thus returning to the original definition of resettlement as quoted in the opening pages of this study: the hope and belief that refugees may contribute to the receiving society (UNHCR, 2004).

Certainly the Afghan refugees in this particular study sample have shown themselves well able to integrate and negotiate the tricky waters of settlement, to the extent that a forward-looking, creative immigration policy must stop regarding them as a separate distinct component, the 'humanitarian" dimension of Canada's immigration policy, and think through the artificial boundaries of 'skilled worker' and 'refugees'. A province like Nova Scotia which has serious, well-documented labour and demographic challenges (Akbari *et al*, 2007), and which has difficulty in retaining the apparently highly desirable provincial nominees should consider these people not just as humanitarian cases, to be allowed in as cases of charity, but as (some) answers to (some) problems. Further, long-term research in this area, with deeper integration of refugee policy within general migration policy while studying the national migratory patterns of refugees once in Canada, would assist us in shedding light on these issues.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Schedule

- Very brief biographical background.
- Tell me about your typical day.
- How frequently are you in contact with your family members back home?
- Have you been able to visit other parts of Canada?
- Tell me about the social and cultural activities you do here.
- How do you feel your culture and social practice affect your daily life here?
- Tell me about your children. What kind of social and extracurricular activities do they have? Do they visit their schoolfriends?
- Tell me about your friendships and socializing. Are you friends with non-Afghans?
- What kinds of food do you cook? How do you get the ingredients?
- Where do you see yourself in the future?
- How do you feel about Afghanistan? Do you think you will ever go back? To live, to visit?
- Do you attend religious ceremonies, practices?
- If your children decided to marry a non-Afghan, how would you feel?
- If your children decided to follow religion differently from you, how would you react?