



VIOLENT UPROOTING: DIASPORA AND MIGRATION

- Farah Islam, PhD

Rootlessness.Place-less-ness.

I am interviewing a recent Bangladeshi immigrant to Canada. Alok sits with the window behind her, casting her face in shadow. She recalls when she first moved to Canada. The joy she felt at coming to a new land – and the hope. The shimmering, elusive hope. Dreams of a better future for her daughter, limitless opportunities for her husband, and happiness for herself. Alok doesn't dream like that anymore. Her husband, a trained physician from Dhaka, has been unemployed for the past 6 months. She lives in a cramped apartment in the heart of urban Toronto, where the halls smell forever of mustard oil and fried onions. She says she sits most days in this room, after her daughter has gone to school and her husband has left to search for a job he'll never find. The walls close in on her. Tears start to stream down her face as she recounts her loneliness. Suffocating, inescapable loneliness. I reach out to touch her hand, "Apa (Sister)..." not expecting this display of emotion, I don't know what to do.

Hopelessness.

I think about a passage from Tamim Ansary's history book, *Destiny Disrupted: A History of the World Through Islamic Eyes*. He narrates that the Assyrians, and later Stalin, believed in a theory of total and violent migration. They believed that if they moved entire peoples, uprooted them from their homelands, and forced them to settle amongst strangers, people would be too shattered to ever gather themselves in rebellion against their oppressors. Surrounded by a life so alien and incomprehensible, people would never be able to adapt and get their bearings. Forever lost. The cruel and unusual torture of being barricaded on all sides by an unfamiliar language and culture. Invisible walls are the hardest to break.



Is this what immigration is? A very effective strategy of divide and conquer? A war tactic to not only conquer the world at large, but effectively deployed to subdue the world within its borders? In epidemiology we speak of the “Healthy Immigrant Effect” – immigrants come to Canada (and other host nations) at better levels of health compared to their Canadian-born counterparts only to rapidly deteriorate. This is true of mental health as well. People migrate to Canada, a country with arguably one of the best healthcare systems and standards of living in the world, to become unhealthier? Does this make sense?

I sat in a lecture recently hosted by the Latin American Studies department at the University of Toronto. Professor Jason De León spoke about people literally dying to cross the Mexico-United States border. *Dying*. The American government, in another cruel twist of political strategy, has decided to leave border cross points open tactically in places of extreme and harsh terrain, such as the Sonoran Desert in Arizona where temperatures can soar to 50°C. The vultures completely annihilate the corpses, scattering the bones of the dead. People disappear without a trace. As if they never existed. Even in death, their roots cannot return to the ground. Without a body, anxious families back home in Ecuador or Mexico have no means to mourn.

Ambiguous loss. Perpetual limbo. Violent uprooting.

What is particularly tragic is that people are running to this death. Whether it is Alok's slow death as she watches the walls close in on her or the extreme and violent death in the desert, the hope of migration fools us all. At least the Assyrians prodded people along with spears. There was no ambiguity as to who the oppressor was. Here, migration policy holds that spear with a smile as we rip away our roots and run headlong into the blade.

About the Author:

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