Reconciling Expectations with Reality

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Abstract: I will use the photography of two young Iraqi asylum seekers as a mirror in which we can clearly read the problem of reconciling the expectations of a country and the realities one finds upon arrival. An important process of auto-ethnographic work is conveyed through their lens and it is one that I would like to explore in this paper with regards to traditionally anticipated ideas of refugee and asylum seeker's experiences.

The road to safety is often long and dangerous and for young people undertaking such travels, there is little realization of what lies ahead except that it must be something 'better'. Realities of legal issues, social services, as well as the negative views many people in Britain attach to the words 'refugee' or 'asylum seeker' are all obstacles to confront upon arrival. However, more unexpected are the mixed feelings one faces regarding those who remain 'back home' – sporadic correspondence with family in war zones is hardly a place to complain about the realities of life in the UK, rather, it is through these conversations that myths are often propagated, through the simple assurance that 'everything is fine'.

A strong sense of duality pervades the work of these two 18 year old photographers, who arrived in London in 2006. They explore their new home in relation to the home left behind, they photograph their daily realities and illustrate through this process their need to recreate the idea of belonging and to project their findings back to others.

In the following paper, I will introduce you to the photographic work of two young Iraqis, who arrived in London to seek asylum in 2006. A strong sense of duality pervades their work. They document feelings towards their new home in relation to the one left behind, they photograph their daily realities and the difference between the UK they anticipated and the one they found upon arrival. Though the photographers explore very similar feelings, these are articulated visually in distinctly different ways, and the camera accompanies them along their journeys, and manages to convey through images what words sometimes can't. Moreover, their work is an interesting testimony to the manner in which young asylum seekers are treated, to the political landscape of the UK, as well as their own personal journeys in the quest for belonging in their country of sanctuary.

It has been my aim to keep my own interpretation of things to a minimum and to read the situation as much as possible from the images themselves, as well as the words supporting them. Therefore, I will explore the photographic work through the three interlinked ideas that emerge most poignantly from the images – firstly, what is expected and what is found; secondly, the relationship with those left behind; and finally, the need to recreate a home.

1 - What is expected and what is found

In his *Map for Lost Lovers*, Nadeem Aslam writes:

> Once, marvelling at the prosperity of England, a visitor from Pakistan had remarked that it was almost as though the Queen disguised herself every night and went out into the streets of her country to find out personally what her subjects most needed and desired in life, so she could arrange for their wishes to come true the next day; it was what the caliph Harun al-Rashid was said to have done according to the tales of the *Thousand and One Nights*, with the result that his perfumed Baghdad became the most easeful and prosperous place imaginable.

It is with this quote in mind, that I will introduce you first to the work of Hassan, a 19-year-old asylum seeker from Baghdad, Iraq.

Hassan's photography records his new life in London, with an aim of dispelling misconceptions. He photographs all that he finds incongruous, out of place, compared to the idea he once had of the country he is seeking asylum in. Hassan's photography is aimed at those who don't (yet?) know England, a means of dismissing myths. "First, I want to show the reality of the place, of London. (…) Nobody tells you what life looks like. (…) Photography is like my proof," he states.

<laundry picture>

> My friends in Iraq would be shocked if I told them that I took this photo in London. They would not believe that some Londoners live in such poor housing. It is just like Iraq – the washing line, the drain pipes, the badly painted door, the only thing which looked out of place were the windows, they looked new.[1]

<homeless man picture>

> It was a busy road near the British Museum, the man was asleep, his clothes were dirty, there were people passing him by and nobody was asking him if he was ok. In poor countries, we are used to seeing people sleeping in the street but I didn't expect to see it in England. When I saw movies of London back in Iraq it would only show the good things – the buildings, the wealth, the people… not the rubbish and the homelessness.[2]

<breakfast picture>

> This is my breakfast. I made two eggs, some bread, tea. Then I thought I could take a picture of it. For someone here, it is just my breakfast. But if I showed someone in Iraq this picture, they wouldn't believe it. When we were in Iraq, we imagined England was just like what we saw on TV, in films. Breakfast tables had bread and orange juice. But my breakfast is the same as in Iraq. The only difference is the tea bag. (…) I want to show people, people not from UK,

[1] Quoted from Hassan's photo-essay 'An Unexpected London' in *New Londoners: Reflections on Home*
[2] *ibid*

people outside of UK, that there are a lot of things here that are similar to my country. They have better stuff, but life isn't that different.[3]

These words point to Hassan's feeling of having left one prison only to come to another. "There is a difference between having a choice and not have a choice. Having to go straight, no left, no right. (…) Here is like a big prison. Friends at college go on holiday, go home, and they ask me 'what about you?' But I don't tell them. I don't say I don't have a passport to go home. I can't go outside. I'm here to have safety here. A lot of people come to this country for different reasons, but there are a few countries – Algeria, Somalia, Iraq – these countries are in war."

Hassan's words carry with them an acute political awareness, something that is perhaps unusual for young people his age. In a paper examining changing politics of belonging in East London, Shamser Sinha points to Lefebvre's argument that "everyday life is saturated with politics even though our conception of politics is often confined to privileged moments such as elections.[4]" In the case of young refugees, this argument takes particular significance, for indeed all aspects of their lives – "the web of immigration, healthcare and welfare legislation and institutional procedures[5]" are political, and as a result, the lives of young refugees are intensely politicised. Sinha adds that "one might regard young separated migrants going to college, attending youth groups and simply carrying out banal and seemingly everyday routines as forms of resistance to the inhumane effects of their differential immigration status on their life situations.[6]"

Elements of this rebellion can be detected in Hassan's photography – his aim to display the truth, and in the process to uncover myths and false misconceptions is also a way of pointing to the stark realities of his life and of those of his friends in similar situations.

<cobwebs photograph>

> This photo was taken at a friend's house – he lives in rented accommodation. I was shocked at the state of the toilet, the corners were covered with cobwebs, it was dirty and needed repair work. It reminded me of a horror film.[7]

Moreover, Hassan's leitmotiv comparison with Iraq is an indicator of how situations here – through having to depend on others, for instance a landlord, social services, the home office – become comparably stark to how they were there.

<electricity cut picture>

> My friend did not have electricity for three days because the landlord did not pay the bill. Every day I took the battery from his mobile to charge it back at my house. This reminded me of Iraq where each day we only had one hour of

[3] *ibid*
[4] Sinha, *Seeking Sanctuary: Exploring the Changing Postcolonial and Racialised Politics of Belonging in East London*
[5] *ibid*
[6] *ibid*
[7] op. cit. nº1

electricity; people who had their own generators could have power all day, but this also cost lots of money to pay for the petrol.[8]

2 - The relationship with those left behind

Yet, more unexpected perhaps than what is found upon arrival, are the mixed feelings regarding those who remain 'back home' – sporadic correspondence with family in war zones is hardly a place to complain about the realities of life in the UK, rather, one could argue, it is through these conversations that myths are often propagated, through the simple assurance that 'everything is fine' – myths that as I have argued above, Hassan's photography tries hard to dispel.

There is an important epistolary quality to Hassan's work – his photographs are clearly a dialogue with others. Film scholar Hamid Naficy writes of this technique as paramount in the construct of one's exilic identity: "epistolary media play a constitutive part in the life-world of displaced people; it is with them that they think and construct their affiliative identities.[9]"

Moreover, in Hassan's photography, the ongoing epistolary engagement and constant comparisons are also a way of remembering the past. "Exile and epistolarity necessitate one another, for distance and absence drives them both.[10]" This, in the absence of an obviously designated individual for the correspondence, compounds the idea that in exile, memory takes on a new importance – as the binding factor with one's home and as the only thing in common with those who have been left behind.

In this paper, I chose to examine the photography of these young people specifically because Iraq is tied up in the UK's present political landscape. The British public had a very vocal and generally negative opinion about the war, yet another opinion entirely about refugees and asylum seekers, as if the two weren't linked. On one hand, Iraqis are being denied asylum every day on the basis that 'Iraq is now safe', whilst on the other, these young Iraqis have seen their homes and families destroyed.

Here, I introduce you to the work of a second young photographer – Chalak, a Kurdish Iraqi from the Northern Iraqi town of Kirkuk. About his current status in the UK, Chalak states: "I'm from Iraq. I like my country but it's dangerous. If it's not dangerous for me, why would I come here? I ask you one question – why do you not go to Iraq?"

Chalak's photography is a testimony to the strong sense of duality he lives with. He requests that his pictures be exhibited in twos – reflecting his constant state of mind: "My body is here but my mind is there"

<photograph of leaves> <photo of boy in gym>

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[8] *ibid*
[9] Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exile and Diasporic Filmmaking*
[10] *ibid*

In her article *Refugees and exile*, Liisa Malkki's brief remarks 'on being emplaced and displaced' draw attention to an entity seldom noted in refugees studies: those who remain. Indeed, scholarly focus and attention often sits with refugees, but what of those who remain, those "who do not become displaced, people who stay behind, for whatever reason[11]".

Malkki questions: "Are they not connected to the people who fled? In many works of refugee studies, there is an implicit assumption that in becoming 'torn loose' from their cultures, 'uprooted' from their homes, refugees suffer the loss of all contact to the lifeworlds they fled. It is as if the place they left behind were no longer peopled.[12]"

In these young people's attempt to rebuild their lives in England, they are set apart from those who continue to suffer the realities of the war that has torn Iraq apart.

To be a unaccompanied child, like Hassan or Chalak, seeking asylum alone in the UK, points to the reality that either you have left your family behind, or that you have no family left. It does not signify that you no longer foster an attachment to the family you once had.

Moreover, in the case of Iraqi asylum seekers, whether they have family left behind or not, what they see of their country is at the forefront of the media – through the twisted angle of British foreign politics. Iraq is a war zone, and became one, in part, at the hands of the British.

And indeed, both Hassan and Chalak's photography reflect the fact that they are connected to events 'back home' through the media, through news. All that is depicted of Iraq on our TV screens now are images of war. This is not the country they once knew, but it is the one they were forced to flee.

The photographs below point to the photographers' own dualities – these television screens represent both projected images and lived realities for them – but as a viewer, seeing the screens through their lens, I see them also as a reminder of the double standards that our government operates with.

< Hassan photograph of Al-Jazeera >

> People here still ask me why I have come. They tell me, 'Go back to your country.' When the Home Office asks me 'Why have you come to our country?' I will answer 'Why did you go to my country?' I would like to go back to Iraq, my country, with a camera. I want to show people what it is really like. People are dying every day in Iraq. Some are beheaded, some are injured. If someone gets caught in an explosion, and he loses his arm, there is nothing I, or anyone else, can do for him.

[11] Malkki, *Refugees and exile: from 'refugee studies' to the national order of things*
[12] *ibid*

[13]

< news channel man crying > < Hassan crying >

These images illustrate the real and raw connections that these young people foster with images that others have long been desensitised to, through media overload and compassion fatigue. In this, they are harrowing testimonies to true tragedy.

Let us consider the impact of such realities on one's state of mind. Susan Sontag argues in *Regarding the Pain of Others* the importance of memory and the subsequent impossibility of complete world harmony: "too much remembering (…) embitters. To make peace is to forget. To reconcile, it is necessary that memory be faulty and limited.[14]"

Chalak is acutely aware of this duality: "The photos I have taken were put together to show how my thoughts are. Always in twos, for every happy thought, an unhappy thought. For every time I think of being here, I think of there. Wanting to be here, but missing there. Not being a part of here, but also beginning to be.[15]"

3 - 'New Londoners': the need to recreate a home

To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul.
- Simone Weil

The last element I shall examine in relation to the photographer's work is the concept of home, of belonging and the need *to be rooted*, in the words of French philosopher Simone Weil.

Through the pictures you have seen, it is clear that the relationship of the photographers to London as their new home is at the forefront of their lens. Naturally, also, they explore this new home in relation to the one left behind. But the process of photographing their daily realities and routines illustrates more than just recording – it points to the need to recreate home and the need to project their findings back to others.

The late Edward Said wrote extensively on the subject of exile and displacement, and particularly about the artistic production intrinsic to exiled artists. Said maintained that for an exiled person, the need to reconstruct or replace is inevitably tied up with creation.

> Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense, exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the

[13] Op. cit. nº1
[14] *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag, p. 103
[15] Quoted from Chalak's photo-essay 'Maybe…' in *New Londoners: Reflections on Home*

> communal habitation. (…) Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. (…) Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives.[16]

Being from Iraq is something that colours both photographer's work, and their perceptions of themselves. But both photographers also foster a hope that they will one day be given a visa, that they will be accepted. Their words and images point to the fact that their lives are tied up with the hope that they will be allowed to remain in the UK. This hope is moreover subject to an intensely bureaucratic system, which treats individuals as no more than pieces of paper, and children as adults.

Concerning his feelings and his photographs, Chalak states: "maybe I'll be happy here. I have not chosen to be here, and I have no choice if they want to send me back. I should be happy but I am not. Not until I get my visa. I am always thinking about my city Kirkuk. I want to live in my city, but can't. My thoughts are like this all the time, I want to be here but I don't know if they will let me stay. I want to be there but I can't be there either. So what can I do?[17]"

Chalak's work is enigmatic at first. A closer look reveals that he often photographs children, perhaps pointing to the childhood he wasn't able to indulge in. "I like taking pictures of children, because you can't tell children 'do this' or 'stand like that'. And because I want to do things like them," he states.

Chalak often appears to be looking at the world from the outside – a world he has not yet been allowed to enter. A world he may never be allowed to find his place in. He often captures fleeting moments, vague contours, unclear objects, blurred imagery…

<Tree photograph> <Children on bikes>
<Nelson and England flag> <Blurred window photograph>

These reflect the uncertainty and unclarity of his situation – indeed, all rests on whether or not he will be given a visa.

The legal reality means that hopes and dreams can only remain vague, and the future for Chalak is as blurred as many of his photographs: "There is a photography course at my college but because I don't have a visa, I can't do it. So sometimes, I don't think about photography," he states.

Many of Chalak's images also appear to be a quest for beauty – for something positive amongst the dark days, perhaps even a glimmer of hope for a positive outcome after the current difficult situation of uncertainty.

<Swan photograph>
This image of a swan is another example – the bird's pristine plumage stands out in the murky pond water, and yet its beak, at the centre of the picture, is blurred in movement.

[16] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays*
[17] op. cit. nº15

The focal essence of the picture is therefore not clear – and this is another reflection of Chalak's reality.

In relation to the idea of belonging, the prime focus of Hassan's work, aiming to dispel misconceptions, acts as criticism of the bureaucracy involved in the idea of belonging. As discussed above, Hassan's attitude towards his photographs is one of conveying the whole truth – creating proof of realities as they are, because in his experience, "nobody tells you what life looks like."

Underlining the hope that he will have a future in the UK, Hassan states: "whether I've been here 10 years or 100 years, you can't change it – I'm Iraqi. Maybe if I stay here my children will say they are British but originally Iraqi. But I am Iraqi."

The level of different people present on the streets of London is something that neither Hassan nor Chalak expected upon arrival. Chalak told me: "I didn't know for example that there are a lot of different people here, I thought there would be just English people, and that's why I like London." This cosmopolitanism is also something that bolsters the hope for integration and eventual acceptance in the form of a visa.

<Street photograph>

> In London you cannot tell where most people come from, there are so many people from different countries, who have different nationalities and religions. Sometimes, this makes me feel good, and more accepted, that there is not just one type of people here – all white.[18]

But the question at the end of the day is whether this is a false assumption, or hope?

The work of both these young photographers is predominantly self-reflexive and so their state of exile, seeking refuge, plays an important part in the development of their art. Through this, they offer unique insights into the experience of exile, into the realities of young asylum seekers in the UK, what it means to be unaccompanied, to be alone.

Hassan and Chalak are extremely talented young photographers and their work speaks for itself. Therefore, I shall not extend my opinion any further on the images that I have introduced you to here. Rather, I shall conclude by reflecting briefly on the value of their photography to us, to them.

In an age where new patterns of physical mobility and technologies have destabilised the ideas of home, nation and belonging, these young photographers' creative production can act as constructs that supersede reality. Whilst there is no certainty in what tomorrow will bring them – from the daily worry of housing or studies, to the all-encompassing issue of the visa – the very production of photographs becomes the only means of conceptualising themselves in the present, and of anchoring themselves in their current reality. Effectively, in the context of their present reality, photography has become these young

[18] *ibid*

people's only stability. But let us not forget, as our government seems to, that we are speaking here of *children*, and moreover children who are seeking refuge. Is it right for photography to be their only stability?

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Photography

Chalak Abdolrahman

Hassan al-Mousaoy

Interviews

Chalak Abdolrahman

Hassan al-Mousaoy

Jo Metson Scott

Research Context

Chalak and Hassan's work featured in the book *New Londoners, Reflections on Home*, a collaboration between Dost and PhotoVoice in which young refugees were teamed up with photographic mentors, in order to their photography. The images referred to in the present paper can be found in the book.

Elhum met Chalak and Hassan when they first arrived in the country and she was facilitating weekly photography sessions that were run as part of the Dost Education Programme in conjunction with the photographic charity PhotoVoice.

Chalak and Hassan are supported by Dost, which is a project of the Trinity Centre, a charity based in East London. Dost (meaning friend) is a community based service which supports vulnerable children aged 5 to 19, particularly young separated refugees. Through education, play, advice, advocacy and therapeutic support Dost helps children develop positive minds, rebuild their lives and become actively engaged in the community. For further information visit www.thetrinitycentre.org/dost