

NICHOLA KHAN, *Arc of the Journeyman: Afghan Migrants in England* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). Pp. 293. \$108.00 cloth, \$27.00 paper. ISBN 9781517909611.

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“In Pakistan we were refugees,” (137) begins Zmarai, one of the Afghan Pashtun taxi drivers in Nichola Khan’s ethnography, as he begins narrating his harrowing story of becoming an asylum seeker. But in Britain, he observes, “I was a refugee again” (138). Khan’s *Arc of the Journeyman: Afghan Migrants in England* offers insight into the psychosocial impact of displacement, as experienced by men like Zmarai, through an investigation of the aspirations, struggles, and mobilities of a group of Afghans living primarily in southeast England. These are men whose relocations to England, as asylum seekers in the 1990s, represented a secondary migration and period of resettlement after having already lived as refugees enduring state violence and chronic insecurity in Pakistan. Khan examines the work and personal lives of these journeyman taxi drivers in England as well as their pathways of return migration as they travel to Pakistan to visit families from whom they have been long absent. Thus, while this may be the first full-scale ethnography of Afghan migrants in England, as claimed on the book’s back cover, it is a definitively transnational account of a migrant community who, after forty years of continuous war and conflict, have come to constitute one of the largest refugee groups in the world.

In the book’s introduction, Khan describes how she came to know and “gather stories” (22) from Afghan taxi drivers over several periods of research between 2009 and 2017 in Sussex, London, and Peshawar in a range of sites including taxis, during planned and unplanned trips, mobile tours, picnics, weddings, local council

meetings, cultural events, and while eating and cooking in homes (both the drivers' and the author's). To gain access and trust, which the author notes was easier to accomplish with Afghan men than with Afghan women (23), Khan drew on previously established connections with members of the Afghan refugee community and prior research in Pakistan with male militants. Khan's analysis of the transnational lives of male Afghan refugee migration is organized through five "frames" (12): first, the relations of language and experience and especially the limits of language to express suffering and "the problem of how to recover violence in words" (27); second, the historical and transnational links between Britain, the subcontinent, and Afghanistan; third, challenging the Orientalist perspective of Afghanistan and Afghans; fourth, the psychosocial aspects of the post-conflict refugee condition; and lastly, a "descent into the ordinary"¹ struggles, losses, and hopes of migrants. For this reviewer, however, these frames constitute more of an intervention than a theoretically driven argument as Khan makes clear that one of the primary objectives of the book is to offer the stories of Afghan migrant taxi drivers as a disruption to the colonialist narrative of Anglo-Afghan relations that relies on historical travels of British armies, explorers, and anthropologists.

The book is comprised of five ethnographic chapters. The first chapter, "Lifelines: Transnational Labor Mobility on the Road," explores the drivers' work lives in Sussex and draws on both interviews as well as Khan's participant-observation as a passenger in their taxis. The drivers labor not just for themselves and their futures, we learn, but mainly to send money home to their families in Pakistan. In chapter 2, "The Taste of Freedom and Return," Khan takes the reader along on the visits that some of the drivers make to Pakistan. A "study of picnics" (119), this chapter draws on conversations with a few key interlocutors and focuses on their leisure experiences, as they gather for *chakars* or picnic outings on these visits to Pakistan. Khan juxtaposes the freedom the men enjoy on these visits with the constraints they experience working as taxi drivers in England and their desires to "create and protect memories and shared histories of untroubled times" (119). Khan delves into an analysis of subjectivity in chapter 3, "Immobility Dreams." Drawing on her experience as a mental health practitioner, the author describes, at several points in the book, having led community workshops on mental health for Afghan women in Britain. Likewise, drawing on her prior research on mental disorders, Khan takes a psychoanalytical approach to understanding the grief, suffering, and desires of several migrants through an intersubjective

interpretation of their dreams. In chapter 4, "Food, Water, and Wherewithal in the Time of Crossings," Khan draws on excerpts from conversations with interlocutors to analyze men's experiences of migration with the aim of "creating new textual and oral imaginings of migration" (156) that allow for fragments of violence and suffering to be shared. Here, Khan calls our attention to the role of sharing and telling stories as a worldmaking practice and looks closely at the ethnographic method itself, highlighting the ways in which friendship, kinship, and exchanges of care between the ethnographer and the observed (193) create possibilities for storytelling. In the final chapter, "Barth in Sussex: Community, Feasting, and Immobility Revisited," Khan draws on participant-observation at cultural and religious events and employs anthropologist Frederik Barth's classic notion of social organization to analyze the social and political tensions between different Afghan communities in Britain.

Readers with interest and background in the postcolonial Afghan and South Asian diasporas will be particularly engaged by the book but, at the same time, its historiographic focus may prove challenging for non-area specialist readers. Yet, there is another clear audience for Khan's work, one concerned with the very nature of ethnography both as a research method and a form of writing and its possibilities for capturing the fragmented, non-linear, and interior processes of subjectivity formation and personhood among members of a community who have experienced trauma and displacement. In addition, the book should attract students and scholars in interdisciplinary mobility studies through its analytical attention to the links between different scales of mobility: from the everyday to transnational migration. It is Khan's inquiry into and experimentation with ethnography and its conventions that perhaps make it most appealing to readers with at least some footing in anthropological conversations about the politics and approaches of ethnographic representation and narrative. Examples of such experimentation include the author's proposition that the book can be read in a non-linear fashion (out of chapter order, for instance) and chapter 4's focus on fragments from migrants' stories that constitute what Khan refers to as "words from everyday life" (165).

The book can be a bit clunky in parts, particularly in its review of relevant literature with whole paragraphs devoted to summaries of a single scholarly work. More significant for this reviewer, however, is its underdeveloped analysis of racialization processes in today's Britain from an intersectional perspective. I had expected to learn much

more about how these Afghans have constructed their identities, aspirations, and lives as Muslims, as Asians, as racial/ethnic minorities in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century UK society and their relationship and interactions with other members of this society. Altogether, however, the book makes an important contribution to the anthropology of the Afghan diaspora, a diasporic community vastly underexplored in the scholarly literature, as well as to anthropological conversations about the relationship between ethnographic form and content. The fragmented quality of Khan's ethnography and its inquiry into inner consciousness, in other words, mirrors the fractured nature of lives lived in the aftermath of war and advances our ways of knowing about the refugee condition.

NOTES

¹ See, by way of comparison, Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).