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Rights for Some, Not for Others: On the Move and Margins of Human Rights

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Abstract:

Rights are meant to make meanings and to have positive impacts on people's lives. By having space ordained by the interests of dominant powers and people confined within a space that is delineated, controlled, and divided into class, racial, and gender hierarchies, the right to space and freedom of movement, mostly for those in the Global South, is rendered meaningless. Drawing on my lived experience, I explore the connection between space and power on two different levels: national institutions, and across international borders over six-years period between 2011 and 2016. Reflecting on the policies and politics of space, I examine the implications of control over space on people's lives and identities. I argue that the dominant discourse of human rights, as it appears, not only violates the basic right to free choice but also serves as instrumental to the maintenance of the current world order and hierarchies. The fact that rights, today, very much rest on spatial, capital, gender, and racial divisions suggests that the UN human rights political project is insufficient and requires us to seriously consider its devastating effects, even when these are unintentional. Thus, we must rethink rights beyond nation-state and its ideological institutions and open up its scope for constructive alternative mechanisms and strategies that center the marginalized rather than maintain a hierarchal system in which some people are unfairly privileged over others. Until we rethink and rewrite international human rights discourse in a way that stands for justice for all and that fosters creative alternatives, it will continue to be hollow, dysfunctional, and even instrumental to existing racial, class, and gender hierarchies.

Setting the Context

The Syrian regime used different methods to control space and spatial representation. Some of these tools were dominating the public space with visual pictures and images of the Assads, forcing "spontaneous" mass public marches in support of the regime and its policies, including the emergency law; and establishing more than 13 security and intelligence services through which practices of abduction and torture were conducted (Haugbolle, 2008; Malmvig, 2016). Power, as in the tower of Foucault's panopticon, was personified by "Syria" as an imagined nation (Lacoutre, 1970) and presented in public spaces as the gaze of the leader through posters and statues (Sacranie, 2013; Malmvig, 2016). Sacrane (2013) explains that the excessive celebration of the Assads through images across the country's public (and even private) spaces served as a constant reminder of the dictatorship. As W.J.T Mitchell (2005: 47) argues: "visions are as important as language in mediating social relations." Visual representation also met the discourse of the three only-permitted governmental newspapers to appropriate public space, spread the regime's propaganda, and discipline the people (Sacrane, 2013). In addition to visual representation and discourse, the police-state relied on visible and invisible acts of violence. Forced disappearance and torture of prisoners of conscience, for example, invoked fear and terror among people (Haugbolle, 2008). It thus produced a public sphere in which one "is seen, but does not see; he is the object of information, never the subject of communication" (Foucault, 1991: 200). Sayings like 'the walls can hear'[1] emerged to articulate people's own self-censorship and confinement to the powers. As such, the power of the dictatorship lied in its ability to discipline its people within the politics of acting "as if," as termed by Wedeen (1999), that construct loyalty and obedience as performative rather than genuine. This even extended beyond the national borders to include Lebanon, specifically between 1976, from the onset of the Lebanese civil war, to 2005, following the assassination of Rafiq El-Hariri. Joking about the Syrian regime was not possible in Lebanon, lest one of the Syrian intelligence were to know about it. A Lebanese friend of mine told me that even as a child, her parents forbade her from saying anything negative about the Assad regime.

Attempts to revive the suffocated public space have been increasing since 2001. Initially, the 2011 dynamic, diverse, decentralized, and organized-from-below underground movement in Syria manifested in demonstrations that made use of the spatial routines of daily life, such as mosques, squares, and big and small streets and neighbourhoods. This movement delineated the group boundaries of various people, creating a new social and spatial order. During the 2011 uprising, significantly, Syrians led a counter-narrative to spatial and visual representation through graffiti, cartoons, posters, banners, paintings, videos, and street demonstrations, aiming at "being seen and visually represented" and thus reclaiming public space (Malmvig, 2016: 258). Further, the uprising marked a direct targeting of the images and statues of the leader, and replaced them with revolutionary "critical art," defined by Mouffe (2007: 4) as "art that foments dissensus, that makes visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate." People's physical presence and the use of visual representation proved powerful and threatening to the authoritarian structure. That, perhaps, explains the massive campaign of violence against the protestors. Not only has this violence been exercised in physical terms but also through discourse, visual productions, cyber aggression, and forcible exile. Using violence, the spaces that people had been able to peacefully reclaim were reduced, and once again controlled by the parties in power.

[1] My translation from Arabic, the original reads as: الحيطان إلها آذان

The regime banished people from public and private spaces and, in doing so, forced them to leave and go through an endless cycle of denial of space and mobility by other nation-states (including long asylum processes, laws denying access and criminalising rescue boats and people solidarity, and forced reversed displacement like the experience of refugees in Turkey and Lebanon). The local and international response to the movement for a democratic Syria where human rights, including the rights to space and mobility, are respected has put the seriousness of UN claims about Human Rights into question.[2] The control over space and the restriction of people's movement has brought about serious violations for billions of people in the Global South since World War II. In light of this claim, I use my personal journey of mobility as a Syrian to examine the inherent practice and natural right to freedom of movement in relation to individual and collective development.

Personal Experiences of Space and Power in Syria

My first conscious encounter with space restrictions goes back to primary school. When I left my desk to borrow an eraser from a classmate, the teacher asked me to open my hands and accept being hit by a wide wooden stick. I refused. As a result, she asked me to stand against the wall, outside the classroom. At the principal's office, I was lectured on the importance of seeking permission before moving around the classroom. As the school principal asserted, "discipline" was an important skill for me to learn and I was made to apologize to the teacher who had punished me. Asserting dominance over space in the classroom meant denying my right both to free movement and, paradoxically, to education. It was also a process through which I felt humiliated and then pushed to feel self-blame and guilt. Avoiding such incidents in the future meant asking for permission, thus complying to the rules of space and movement.

Simultaneously, I had to comply to the rules of boy bullies beyond school authority. When the school built walls around its premises, two of the boys who used to wait for me by the school gate, punching me and kicking me until I could find a space to run. School, for me, had come to signify intellectual and physical prison, in a way that parallels a context where public and private spaces were not seized by the government alone, but by gendered social norms and traditions.

In one of the silent candlelight protests that took place in February 2011, in a square in the old city in Damascus, security agents were taking photos of us, for personal profiling, investigation, and maybe even detention. Then, they all disappeared. That was a known but disconcerting tactic. Ten minutes later, we were surrounded by security agents in civilians' clothes, and they attacked us with their fists, feet, or belts. I was rescued by a male friend with whom I ran in the old city streets until we lost them. At the original meeting point, we met some of the protestors, we decided to take the challenge and file a complaint at the nearby police station against those who had attacked us because we had taken photos of them. It was too risky for the men to go in, so we, four women, walked in through the building and

[2] For example, a statement released by Syria First in November 2012, entitled "we are the ethical alternative" emphasized the features of the revolutions as non-sectarian, inclusive, democratic, plural, civil, and seeking to preserve dignity and freedom. For more insights on the non-violence movement in Syria check: *The Syrian Non Violence Movement – Perspectives from the Ground* [Available online: www.dawlaty.org]

requested that a file be opened. The officers made us wait in the hallway. Police officers passing by would stop and stare at us. From time to time, they would start trivial conversations to ask what the event was about and what we, women, had to do with politics or protests that could turn violent, alluding to our physical weakness, ‘helplessness’, and inability to defend ourselves. They took it upon themselves to advise us to stay away of trouble and stick to “women’s” business. They even said that we should learn from what happened in Egypt, hinting to the systematic sexual harassment and attacks that were used against women during the protests and demonstrations. The more time we spent there, the scarier the place became. The corners, the walls, and the people – everything was pale and sad. Finally, two big men arrived. To our astonishment, they deleted our photos. One woman who tried to argue was kept in the office and we were sent out to wait. We heard loud and angry shouts – death threats mainly – followed by a violent slap. The two men then opened the door, came out, looked at us, and left. A heavy silence filled the whole building. I had just been introduced to a new type of horror, that of facing a brutal authoritarian regime as a woman.

For the next month, I was trailed by a security agent, who followed me like a shadow. My constant fear of being attacked and beaten stayed with me until I left the country for a fellowship abroad. The night before my departure, I watched a man being kidnapped and forced into a car by security agents. With all the strength he had, the man resisted and asked bystanders, including myself, for help. I started moving towards them, but a friend grabbed me by the arm, intensely mumbling that I could do nothing, and that I would never catch my flight. He made sure to walk me home.

The classroom incident shows that the right to education was conditional to my compliance – and confinement – to a specific place. In the same way, the right to children safety and protection was undermined by the layout of the school and the construction of a fence around it. The school, inasmuch as it operated in complete fear of the regime, was also a microcosm of that regime. The use of corporeal punishment was designed to prepare its pupils to become submissive citizens. The concept of “human rights,” even in its UN definition, was completely absent – we were trained to be disciplined servants of the state and its institutions.

The experience of participating in the protest and the dynamics of interaction that took place in the police station illustrated the nature of interaction with agents of the state who, in typical inversion, claimed to protect while making direct threats. The stories of imprisonment and torture we had internalized made of the police stations horror sites where people would go in and never come out. The police, supposedly “at the service of the people,” was instead a source of human rights violations that served the regime.

That was not the first time I had witnessed state’s control over space. Back in 2010, and as part of my general civic engagement, I had joined an independent initiative led by friends that assisted the internally displaced communities[3] in Sa’sa’ and Kanaker camps with education and humanitarian aid. The

[3] Bad governance and poor unsustainable agricultural policies adopted by the Baath regime led Syria to fall into a severe drought between 2007 and 2010, where 75% of farmers in the northeastern “breadbasket” region experienced crop failure. This forced 1.5 million people to migrate from the region. It is worth noting that model studies suggest that the cause was not natural, but rather a result of human interference in the climate system and an increase in greenhouse gases (Kelley et al., 2014). The poorest among the displaced people settled in tents with no access to electricity, water, or any other services, and were excluded from any humanitarian or

initiative's main purpose was to bring schooling for children in these camps, located in the suburbs of Damascus, because they had to walk a long distance to the nearest school where they also suffered from stigma, which made many parents reluctant to let them go. Depending on small donations from friends and individuals who wished to help, the initiative started as a camp school and extended to include Eid (festival) and winter campaigns as well as a photography exhibition. In many of our visits, we were followed by state-security members and asked for our IDs. We were also accused of being agents for Israel and not nationalistic enough as we, by displaying the pictures, were tainting Syria's image. When they realized that we were persistent, they tried to pressure the people in the camp not to welcome us, threatening to remove the camp from the "government" properties. To our surprise, the next time we went, there was nothing but an empty space. The camp had been demolished, and the people asked to leave. We turned back and headed home, in shock and heavy silence. Like many others, a simple, and presumably constructive, social work was stopped, for no reason except to assert dominance.

What makes the situation more problematic in terms of human rights is the fact that the dominant human rights project, as rooted in the western ethnocentricity and the concept of ownership, casts out the common usage of land as an autonomous legal form of land tenancy and instead reduces it to "not yet property," a space without law and cultivation: "It represents the state of nature which is characterised by the absence of law in general and property rights in particular" (Schacherreiter, 2014: 231). In other words, one must afford a piece of property to survive in one's own country or to get legally recognised in another. "Arbitrary" is also a key word. Article 17 of UDHR does not secure people who fail to survive the capitalist system or who have their lives conditioned with the market which is controlled by banks and governments. The following section considers the damage inflicted by structures such as the dominant UN-led UDHR discourse on human rights, with the aim to open up spaces to discussing alternative collective agreement(s) that adopt a meaningful, inclusive, and effective justice model at its core.

Personal Experiences of Space and Power Across Borders

Since 2011, I have lived in Bulgaria, Egypt, then Turkey, then Poland and the UK, and visited other countries. This route has been marked by a series of struggles shaped by my status and border policies adopted that flagrantly contradict claims to human rights. I have frayed it as a woman, a Syrian passport holder, and as someone who does not meet the stereotypical views of what a Syrian person "should" be. The connection between the denial of the right to free movement and other violations show how the human rights discourse is flawed from the outset and undermined by the existence of nation-states, propagating prejudice and injustices.

In late 2011, unable to go back to Syria, I headed to Egypt where the revolutionary spirit was still strong. Although I had no accommodation plans, I met a girl in Tahrir Square, Cairo, where I spent my first night, and she offered I stay with her until I could find a place to rent. For the next four months, she, and other new Egyptian friends, were my street mates and companions in the demonstrations; we chanted, danced, and faced tear gas and sexual harassment. Walking in Cairo streets meant to expect that my body could

development projects. The intention was to push the displaced population back to their dry lands, despite the government making no serious attempt at agricultural reform.

be violated at any moment. Any reaction, even shouting out loud, was ignored and none of the tens of onlookers would say or do anything to stop the abuse. Even worse, they might themselves make more comments or express their surprise and discomfort with my shouting or attempts to restrain the harasser.

I became hesitant to go out by myself, to walk in crowded streets, to take a train or a bus alone. Areas that were not marked by private corporate capitalism (such as high-end malls) and other public spaces were not women friendly; women, therefore, ought to own a car, or stay home and wait for *the* man of the family to take them somewhere.

At the end of the summer of 2012, my mother came to visit. Two days after she arrived, and while we were walking towards the Nile river, two men on a motorcycle dragged her along the street, pulling me with her. They had grabbed her handbag and forced her to let go of it. She ended up with severe bruises and no travel documents; our bodies, but also our movement and legal statuses, had been violated again. While filing a report at the police station, we were told by the police officer in charge that it was an individual incident and that Syria was worse – a comparison the aim of which was to put us in our place as Syrian "visitors." The Egyptian police did not seem at people's "service" either. Without documents, my very thin thread of hope in finding a job disappeared. I tried to contact human rights organization to explore possibilities of legalizing my presence in Egypt. The only options they could offer was a refugee status – a status I had been reluctant to seek, especially since Egypt demonstrated a massive failure/inability to protect its own citizens, let alone Syrians.

At that time, the Syrian embassy was considered an extension of the regime where many Syrian activists, if not denied services, had their documents held for a long time. Nevertheless, not having many options, I headed to the Syrian embassy to apply for a new passport. I was asked to fill the application, then to wait. Ten minutes later, I was asked to come in and meet the consul who showered me with all kinds of questions about my life and who wondered what a girl would be doing without her family in Egypt. Irritated that he called me a "girl," I explained that it was not my first time traveling alone and it would not be the last. I had to list the countries I had been to, before he revealed that my passport was with him. Before handing it to me, he lectured me about the conspiracy against Syria and, he said, because he cared for me, he warned me not to contact the opposition. I did not require his advice, I already had no trust in the opposition which, then, seemed to be just another fragile dysfunctional political institution.

I had to return to the embassy soon to renew my passport. Four extra years in my passport cost me 400 dollars at the time; the most expensive document of citizenship as far as I am aware. This was an amount that an average Syrian citizen in peace time, let alone forced, displaced, and unemployed in a war time, could not easily afford. In my case, this was for a document – a piece of paper – that I had not chosen to have, and which did not allow me to go anywhere without a visa that often costs another fortune and is granted to Syrians with great difficulty.

Human rights as a political project do not question the hegemonic world system. This rhetoric not only claims equal access to opportunities for everybody but also poses serious violations to the basic right of freedom of choice. The right to nationality is an example of such an imposed status on every human being from the moment s/he/* is born. Eventually, those who do not identify themselves with such "rights"

are excluded, explicitly or implicitly, from full political participation and representation. One question that needs to be asked, therefore, as Aziz (1999) has noted, is who is deciding and doing the acceptance of human rights and how? Not only is the UN system representative of states not peoples, he clarifies, but it is also itself a very much as unequal and hierarchal system. Given that most of the governments in the global south rarely speak for the people they proclaim to represent, the entire validity of the current world system must be put into question (Aziz, 1999).

In so much as it might seem trivial and out-of-thought idea, I, and many others, deserve to be able to exercise our basic right to free choice. Our affiliation or belonging to a certain nation-state should not be assigned at birth. Other options of social and people's movement organisation should also exist outside the nation-state and its visa system.

Following the ouster of President Morsi in the summer of 2013, there was a rise in hateful discourse in Egyptian media, and the imposition of stricter policies towards Syrians, including requiring them to obtain visas in order to enter Egypt. This made it difficult for me to consider leaving without securing a job elsewhere, lest I end up stuck and entrapped in a new country. Towards the end of 2013, I found a job and moved to Turkey. The officer who interviewed me for my residency permit had questions about my life and family, and to my surprise he asked, in very good Arabic, if I supported Assad or the Opposition. I asked how that was relevant. He said it was just a question. My residency permit was in this person's hands. He had the power to let me stay or to deport me. How was I to make sure my answer was what he was looking for? And why should I be either pro-Assad or pro-Opposition? What about something completely different? What about the revolution led by the people on ground? I was not interested in discussing politics with him and, by the look on his face, neither was he. I knew I was entitled to my own political views and had a legal right to keep it to myself and so I did. A month and a half later, when I had my residency permit issued, I was told that I had to inform the police of my travels to any city inside Turkey if my stay was to extend beyond three days – a regulation that applied to all Syrian nationals. I was subject to a similar process in the U.K, where I was asked to go to the Social Science reception desk at university to sign in weekly. I was also required to inform the university of any travel plans. This policy did not apply to any of my Western classmates. The non-Western student's interest and intention to keep up with courses, for a degree that costs them far more than any British or Western citizen, is permanently in question, and their movement has to be monitored by virtue of the fact that they hold certain passports. This manner of controlling my movement in the UK added insult to injury when I came very close to missing the start of the academic term because of the visa process I had to go through while in Poland – a process that was extremely difficult to navigate.

The British embassy's website states that the visa process takes up to two weeks. I submitted my online application on 11 August, 2014, and a hardcopy at the embassy in Warsaw just over a week later. But after I was interviewed on the telephone and asked numerous bureaucratic questions (mostly ones I had already answered in my applications and for which I had provided hard copies of relevant documents) I was left with no decision on the outcome. I could not find a contact number that I could use to phone the embassy and check my visa status, so I had to go to the embassy in Warsaw in person. This was 2 hours by train from Lodz, where I lived. When I arrived, I was not let in to see an officer but rather asked to wait while they checked for me. The door guard returned to say the decision had not been made yet, but that it should not be too long.

Back in Lodz, my rental contract expired, and I was unable to relocate because I planned to leave the country once I obtained my visa. With no place to stay, I slept on a friend's sofa. More time went by without news from the embassy, so I went back to Warsaw to check in person once again. There, the same scenario replayed itself, and I was told that I should expect a decision within the next two days. Ten days passed, and no decision was made. By that time, I had moved to Warsaw to stay with another friend. I had one week until the 2nd and final extension for my registration at the university. This time I decided to go to the embassy and not leave until I had seen an officer. The door guard said the decision had not been made and he wanted to send me home. I insisted on seeing an officer and filing a complaint. He let me in.

> Me: I would like to check my visa status.
> Officer: Have you received an e-mail from us?
> Me: No, that is why I am here. It has been over 60 days since I applied.
> Officer: Yes, sometimes the process takes longer.
> Me: That is four times longer than the actual time. I am missing my classes.
> Officer (irritated): I don't have any of your documents. I don't know who you are and you're just sitting here angry.

She disappeared for 10 minutes and came back to apologize for the delay, with a smile.

> She explained: It is the office in London. It's not our fault. But now I can see that you have an interview on Friday afternoon.
> Me: This is the first time I hear about this appointment. Why was not I informed about the interview before?
> Officer: It has to do with the political situation nowadays, you know!
> Me: I know many Syrians, including my sister, going to the UK from Syria and who are already there. What do you mean?
> Officer: The office in London found that you have some involvements.
> Me: What involvements?
> Officer: I can't explain to you because I am not eligible to do so. Everything will be explained on Friday. But don't worry, it's nothing criminal!
> Me: I am not worried. I know I haven't done anything!
> Officer: So now, can you make it on Friday?
> Me: I have no other option, do I? (she smiles) I will make it.

She said that I might get my visa the same day but warned that I should speak to the interviewer politely. She spent a few minutes explaining that I would be meeting a woman, not a man, and that it would be a very nice and friendly lady who would try to help me, so I had to be nice. I spent the next two days thinking about the upcoming interview, how serious it might be, and what type of involvements might be revealed. Ironically, the interview did not differ from the first interview I had done over phone. I was asked with whom I would like to work in the future, what salary I expected, and whether I had started to look for a job. I was told the decision would be made by the middle of the following week. I protested, explaining that the final deadline for registration at my university was a few days away, that I had already been

granted an exceptional extension, and that I had already missed important classes. I left the embassy feeling exhausted and thinking that it was over – I had missed the term. An hour later, I received a telephone call from the embassy informing me that my visa had been issued and that I could come and pick it up any time before 4.30 pm. That meant I had 40 minutes to cross Warsaw and make it back to the embassy.

On arrival in England, I was stopped at the airport in London and treated as a suspect. I sat while 500+ passengers passed through passport control, looking at me. From confused, to embarrassed, to worried, I almost sank into despair. But then I noticed a toddler sequestered in the same space as me along with his family of colour. The toddler kept stepping out of the space we were meant to wait in. An officer brought the child back and reprimanded the parents (one of whom had a broken leg), warning them to keep an eye on the child. From what I understood, they had been waiting for a long time and the child clearly could not bear being confined to 2 metres square of space. Bringing him back made him cry. My thoughts shifted to this child and his relationship to space. He seemed not to realize what this space stood for. At that moment, I wished I could just run away, but I knew my future, if not my life, would be at risk. Seeking to calm him, I spent the next few minutes playing with the toddler until I was called forward by two men. Yet again, I had to provide a detailed account of my life as well as how and why I had travelled to the various locales I had passed through. They even asked me about my previous visit to the UK back in 2009.

The mystery around why my visa took so long to issue was never resolved, but the process revealed the extent to which my freedom of movement – even when legitimised by a scholarship and university acceptance – could be halted by state officials. Retaining passports in official state premises (the Syrian Embassy in Cairo or the British Embassy in Warsaw) for the purposes of issuing a visa or otherwise, means that the document "owner" is unable to move safely or confidently without it, putting them in an effective state of detention. The excessive blocking of my entry into the embassy, my ability to speak to officials, and leaving me to negotiate with the door guard further enhanced what Foucault identified as the architecture of oppression – with the state apparatus controlling movement down to the smallest scale. While freedom of movement within Poland was allowed, my freedom of movement within the U.K. was to be monitored, controlled and recorded through declarations and weekly check-ins that resembled the treatment of ex-convicts required to visit parole officers on a regular basis.

Statism: Social Life as the "Other"

As a woman with a Syrian nationality, restrictions on my movement are not the only struggle I have faced. Social interactions have often been frustrating; they are all too often based on orientalist stereotypes and mainstream media propaganda. In the countries I have been to, especially those in Europe, there is a lot of discussion around war and its logistics without any in-depth analysis of lived experiences of it, or the global injustices undergirding it. Such narratives appear to have left many people in the West thinking that what happens in Syria is just another war on terror. Again, the humanitarian and feminist rhetoric around Syria, as debated by different scholars, is also problematic (Cayetana, 2013; Mitchell, 2003; Abu-Lughod, 2002; Puar, 2007) and works towards further consolidating the image of Syrians as apolitical, leaving the complexities of the struggle and the agency of people ignored, or, worse, silenced. Syrians

that are forcefully displaced are not viewed or represented as active, nor is their specific (un)relation to the nation-state and international borders recognised. Looked upon as the "oriental Other," the forcefully displaced are viewed as either actors – terrorists (often men), or as objects – victims (often women and children). Both the demonization and the victimization of Syrians marks a continuation of what Edward Said (1977: 3) identified as the "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." On a daily basis I am told: "war is not personal" or, "poor you" and "wow, you don't look like a Syrian," or I am asked questions like "are you with Assad or ISIS?" and "how can you afford to be in Europe?" I spent a great deal of time explaining the non-violent account of the Syrian struggle and providing some contextual facts and figures. My personal life is thus turned into an ongoing awareness-raising session. It just so happens that my skin colour and lifestyle are within the accepted range of Western stereotypical standards. However, any mention of Syria has provoked stigma and discrimination – or has been a complete conversation stopper. People in the UK seem to be disappointed and confused about how to continue their conversation after I have ended the guessing game and revealed that I am not, after all, French (as my accent suggests). Their impression of me as "one of them" is quickly replaced with the perception of me as "the other." As a result, I have found myself stuck within the borders of those narratives and have even ended up reproducing and affirming them. This is similar to the colonized Algerians discussed by Fanon in the *Wretched of the Earth* (1963), in which he states:

> Because it is a systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominated to ask themselves the question constantly: "In reality, who am I?" […] You are forced to come up against yourself. (250; 309)

In my case, by trying not to embody the identity that dominant narratives have constructed for me, I have no time to be. I eventually realized this was not constructive. I also came to understand that insomuch as power is situational (externally imposed and exercised), it is also an interactive process.

Distance from Syria meant a physical safety to a certain extent but a lack of emotional or mental wellbeing. Any social interactions with family and close friends (regardless of their nationalities) has been greatly affected by the visa system and the restriction on my freedom of movement. Missing special occasions and not being able to be there for friends who have needed support have been painful. Parents and friends have been getting older, have gotten married or divorced, have lost loved ones or had children, have experienced professional achievements – all with me not able to exercise simple human sharing.

The question of identity has thus kept me company during my journey from one place to another. My stay in Egypt from 2011 to 2013 and the two months I spent without documents, in particular, marked a turning point in my thinking in terms of how I viewed myself and the world I inhabited. It also provided a new perspective on the very understanding of the oft-heralded human rights and claims that they are granted by virtue of being human. My first-hand experience proved otherwise. The truth was, I felt worthless; a feeling that was growing with every aspect of my life depending on interactions with official institutions, including the transfer process for the money my family used to send to support me. As time passed, millions of fleeting images crossed my mind repeatedly and constantly: the guy I left behind to

face abduction and probably torture (I still wonder if he survived), the huge financial debt I had incurred, and worst of all, the monsters in the streets who only saw in me a body.

Upon my arrival to the U.K. It took me three weeks to be able to smile again. I did not want to talk or meet anyone. I spent the next two months in the library trying to catch up with readings and assignments. To live and act in a normal fashion requires strength and positive energy that I was not able to keep up with at the time. The air felt heavy and loaded with colonial pride. The scariest thought was of the war going on for years – years I would spend away from family and with an uncertain future. In his novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, Milan Kundera (1982) writes: "The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." While the struggle continues, my memory has failed me, and I am left with scattered and random images of some of the darkest moments of my existence.

All things considered, no matter how strong I am or I decide to be, when I was trapped in a place where I had to go through sexual harassment every day; when I was subjected to unjust measures and highly stressful visa processes; when I was treated as a suspect, a burden, and an unwelcome human being; all of this shifted my sense of agency and deeply affected my self-esteem and my perception of myself. My story, and that of others from the Global South, should not be read as an anecdote or a mere sharing of personal suffering. Rather, the suffering should be examined as a matter of rights. The suffering that has, in my case and that of other Syrians, developed over decades, has intensified over the past few years through a lack of recognition of rights claimed to be universal. It is suffering that is political and multiplied and made more profound precisely because of restrictions on movement. In short, because of the denial of my basic right to freedom of movement, I was forced into a series of other situations where my human rights were violated: sexual harassment, unemployment, labour exploitation, education, stigma, and mental health risks.

Concluding Notes

Human rights activists in Syria, like their fellow activists across the globe, realize that liberation will always be elusive until both the hegemony and domination enabling internal and external oppression are addressed, inasmuch as they operate, simultaneously (Aziz, 1999).

According to Aziz (1999) alternative conceptions of rights emerging from the "third world" can enable a more genuine universalism and include multiple world views that tackle the inherent inequality that currently grants the West its dominant position of power and privilege. Any alternative view of rights must factor in the complex dynamics of space and geography. As Mitchell (2003: 81) clarifies:

> Space, place, and location are not just the stage upon which rights are contested, but actively produced by – and in turn serve to structure – struggles over rights. […] Rights have to be exercised *somewhere,* and sometimes that "where" has itself to be actively produced by taking, by wresting, some space and transforming both its meaning and its use – by producing a space in which rights can exist and be exercised.

The primary aim of this paper was to explore the ways in which what seem to be the good principles and values articulated in dominant human rights discourse are, in effect, rules put in place to maintain and reinforce the current hierarchal system, at the service of the neoliberal, capitalist, patriarchal nation-state. Such discourse is arguably rendered useless, since it neither questions nor challenges the current world order and the human rights violations it enables and depends on. A critical analysis of the global power relations within the current system and the dominant human rights discourse combined with an examination of the lived experience of people in the Global South, make it clear that there is nothing universal or equal about human rights as proposed. This is not to say that some of these rights are not legitimate and still efficient sometimes, but rather to emphasize the urgency and the importance of revisiting, editing, and improving human rights conventions. This constitutes an invitation from yet another scholar from the Global South to consider the power relations undergirding contemporary human rights discourses and to refashion them in response.

Rights, as the moral and legal entitlement to something, are not rights when they have no positive impacts on people's lives and do not contribute to their prosperity. Any set of rules that limits people's options with regards to how they should be or how they should live their lives is, by default, oppressive. Even when positive-like, if rules (such as the right to education, the right to work, etc.) do not question power structures, encouraging creative alternatives and critical thinking, they are of no use. In such cases, it is a must to abandon and replace those rules with a set of more effective, diverse and inclusive agreements about how to organise and manage social relationships. One should also bear in mind that alternatives should always be open and flexible lest they, too, become out-dated and ineffective. As such, it is astonishing that even after more than half a century of demonstrable insufficiency, exclusiveness and inequality within the dominant human rights framework, not only is it still imposed, but it is also used as a mechanism for abusing masses of people.

The argument around rights is not, and should not be, theoretical; instead, it should emerge from our lived experiences. Indeed, practice and implications are all that matter when it comes to social relations and interactions. The lived experiences of people should, therefore, be the most important criteria in evaluating, and even legitimatising, a social theory. Having said that, this paper only briefly addresses the critique around human rights and does not deal with the theories and history of human rights. Rather, it examines these rights within the context of the current world order and in terms of their impact on people's lives. I focused in particular on the relationship between geography, or space, and rights. I used my autoethnography to demonstrate how my journey as a human (who is presumably entitled to human rights) proves the current human rights system is not only oppressive but rather instrumental in facilitating oppression.

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