

## UNESCO RILA: The sounds of integration

### Episode 62: Narjes Hashemi on Afghan refugees in Canada (20/12/2023)

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#### Dr Esa Aldegheri

هه آل ووس ههال - أ، benvenuti, fàilte, titambire, welcome to the podcase series of the UNESCO Chair in Refugee Integration through Languages and the Arts at the University of Glasgow. We bring you sounds about integration, languages, culture, society and identity. with us.

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#### Narjes Hashemi

Hello, I'm Narjes Hashemi, a PhD candidate in the Department of Integrated Studies and Education at McGill University. My research project focuses on Afghan refugees and their academic integration. It's been inspired by my personal background as a Canadian of Afghan descent and a former Afghan refugee. My academic path has taken me to various places, including a valuable experience I had recently as a visiting scholar at Glasgow University. During my time in Glasgow, the Refugee Week opened my eyes to the challenges refugees face in the Scottish context. Witnessing the struggles, particularly among the youth in the community, made me more aware of the challenges that they experienced and I became more interested in trying to understand them. As a former refugee, I was born in the diaspora to refugee parents. I was born in Iran, then immigrated to Vancouver, Canada, in my youth. I lived most of my life in Canada, but I feel very strongly connected to my Afghan heritage. I often listen to Afghan music. I love to dance to Afghan music. I enjoy many aspects of Afghan art. And I think it has had a very important role in shaping who I am today.

In this episode of "Sounds of Integration" podcast series, we're going to delve into the theme of empowering Afghan refugees in Canada through art, culture, and community involvement. I'm excited to introduce two guest speakers who will share their personal experiences of integration through community engagement, the arts, and the power of culture. I'll hand it over to our guests to introduce themselves and then we'll get straight into our conversation.

Hello, Mir. Can you introduce yourself sharing a bit about your background and your personal connection to working with Afghan refugees and migrants?

#### Sultan Mir

Hello. My name is Sultan Mir and I'm also from Afghanistan. Before I came to Canada in 2007, I used to live in Iran with my entire family for 23 years. Basically, my parents left Afghanistan during the Soviet Union. My father was one of the Afghan intellectuals that the communist government of Afghanistan would chase after him and kill him. So my experience of being an immigrant has started like long time ago, back in 1985 when I was only five. So

we left Afghanistan, we lived in Iran for many years, for 23 years, we've been facing discrimination, racism, and we had so many challenges in that country. So in 2007, I came to Canada. Sorry, I forgot to tell you that I have like a educational background in fields of history from an Iranian university. And also I'm a master degree student in Simon Fraser University. Since 2009, I am working with Fatima in a nonprofit organization called Mawj Afghan Cultural Association of Canada.

### **Narjes Hashimi**

Thank you Mir. Now we're going to go to Fatima. Can you please introduce yourself and sharing a bit about your background and your personal connection to working with Afghan refugees and immigrants?

### **Fatima Hasani**

Sure, Narjes. It's my pleasure to participate in this interview. My name is Fatima Hasani and I'm also from Afghanistan. I have a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from Simon Fraser University in Canada. And I have to say that I have been an immigrant all my life. I was born in Iraq and I went to Iran when I was 11. I came to Canada 18 years ago, so all my life until now was being immigrant in different countries. So I deeply understand pain or the challenge of immigrants' life. I have seen my children suffering in both countries, Iran and Canada. So I had my children in Iran, I brought them to Canada. And I said, I've seen them facing a problem being immigrant in both countries. So this gives me an idea and feeling to do something to connect the children to their heritage that they never been in that area to experience the beautiful culture they have for over 5,000 years. So me and Sotan were - decide to start an organization as a Mawj Afghan Cultural Association in 2009. And we have been working in this organization for almost 14 years.

### **Narjes Hashami**

Thank you. That's really fascinating to hear. So during our conversation today, we're going to delve into the remarkable healing potential of art, as you both mentioned that you've been involved with this organization. So we're going to talk more about that and explore how those elements have had profound and positive influence on the lives of Afghan refugees, highlighting not only the resilience but also their creativity and the capacity to discover comfort and strength through artistic expressions and also community involvement and engagement. So I have a couple of important questions for you guys to explore. So looking at you, Mir, how has art contributed to the healing and transformation from Afghan refugees in perspective?

### **Sultan Mir**

I personally believe that art is one of the building blocks of our culture. This art can be seen in different forms such as music, dance, a handmade carpet, a calligraphy piece or poetry. All of us know that the Canadian society highly values multiculturalism and diversity. Consequently, the Canadian government supports community activities and all of the related fields. I think in this multicultural environment, new immigrants feel accepted and they can overcome their stresses and anxieties related to their home.

### **Narjes Hashami**

Yeah, I agree with a lot of the things that you were saying. How about you, Fatima? How do you think art has contributed to healing and transformation within the Afghan community through cultural work?

**Fatima Hasani**

And I also believe that art has played a positive role in the lives of Afghan refugees in the world. Acting as a therapy, a means of communication and a source of empowerment. Using art and culture as a regular part of support for refugees underlines how it can truly help people heal, connecting with others and settle into a new society. And also language barriers and cultural differences can be isolating for refugees. In my belief, art give the ability to individuals to show their thoughts, fostering a sense of community and shared purpose.

**Narjes Hashami**

Thank you Fatima. Now I think it's time to delve into the intricate relationship between community, culture and preservation of traditions. I think that the special blend of art, culture and community ties provides vital support to Afghan refugees when ensuring that their rich cultural heritage continues to the next generations. So I want to ask you, do you have any personal experiences that clearly shows how art and culture helps Afghan refugees in Canada preserve their cultural heritage?

**Sultan Mir**

It's a very good question. So to answer to your question, I would like to draw your attention to one of the characteristics of Afghan culture, which is its meditation through art in different forms. Basically, many artistic subjects or objects are directly or indirectly connected to healing and meditation. As an example, I would like to share my personal experience as a calligrapher. In calligraphy, we usually write traditional poems from Rumi, Hafiz, or Saadi that all of their works are associated with meditation and psychological healings. So to create a good calligraphy piece, we also have to listen to traditional Afghan music simultaneously. So I personally think that poetry and all other sorts of art have their own positive impacts on individuals. More specifically, art is a way for immigrants to identify themselves in a multicultural environment such as Canada.

**Narjes Hashami**

Thank you, Mir. I agree with a lot of things that you're saying. That was very informative. What about you, Fatima? Have you had any personal experiences that clearly shows how art and culture helps Afghans preserve their heritage?

**Fatima Hasani**

Whenever I see the advertising of any event organized in community, I witness a significant number of people participating. They give us call and they text us, "Okay, where are they going to be? When are they going to be? Can you give us more information?" So that's - the interest gave me the sense they need it; they desire for the culture to be in the community, participate in the cultural event. The event, community organized, is lots of piece of art being active in that organization, which is reading poetry, playing music, exhibitions, theatre, dance, fashion show related to Afghan cult- which is related to Afghan culture. The whole program related to Afghan culture can have a profound impact on people as it brings them joy. Refugees for sure, they miss their culture, their families and friends back home when

they left the country, when they immigrated to different countries. So by participating in a cultural event that reminds of home, they reconnect themselves to their nostalgia and heritage. For example, every year we have a new year, we celebrate Nowruz, which is in the first day of spring, and it's our new year. In that event, people show with the beautiful, colourful handcrafted clothes. We also eat traditional food, which reminds people back home with tasting the traditions of their culture.

### **Narjes Hashami**

I absolutely believe that your involvement with this cultural group, Mawj, has made a real difference in helping refugees integrate. But I want to know your perspective. So, Mir, can you tell me what's your perspective in regards to your involvement with Mawj and how it has-- You think how it has made a real difference in helping refugees integrate and also what is the role of language and arts in contributing to this journey, especially in preserving the cultural heritage of Afghans.

### **Sultan Mir**

To be honest, Fatima is a good person to ask this question from, but generally speaking, I would say within our 14 years of community work, We build a great connection with the Afghan diaspora in lower mainland. This connection is not only with newcomers, but also with those who came to Canada so many years ago. Also, this connection covers different generations of Afghans, and that allows us to reach our goal, which is making a bridge between different generations of Afghans, as well as connecting them to the new society, the Canadian multicultural society.

### **Narjes Hashami**

How about you, Fatima? Do you think your involvement with Mawj has had a real difference in helping refugees integrate, and the role of language and arts in contributing to that journey?

### **Fatima Hasani**

I think so. I remember at the beginning of the Mawj weekly program when Sultan and I went to Afghan people's home to seek approval from the youths' parents for their participation in the program, we faced problems. The parents were not really confident to let their kids to participate in the program because they didn't know what kind of program Mawj will provide for the youth. But slowly after two or three weeks, we had four or five people from each family joining the program. And since most of the young adults from each family were taking part of the program. This demonstrates that the programs which involved activities such as reading poem and discussing their life stories in their native language and free debating and listening to the psychological lectures and successful people who have been living long time in Canada and they become successful - to keeping their culture and integrating themselves to the new culture and financially success and education -- educationally, success in their life: I could see they are really enjoying. I can observe that those who participated have become very fluent in their mother tongue and have gained substantial knowledge about their culture. You can also see that some of them take great pride in their roots.

### **Narjes Hashami**

That's really great to hear. Is there something specific that you'd like your audience to take away from the insights you've shared in the series? And is there any key message or lessons that you'd like the listeners to remember and reflect upon?

**Fatima Hasani**

I don't have any specific thing to take away from this conversation, but I have a key message for refugees to keep in mind, keeping their heritage, culture. What I mean is to be connected to your heritage and your culture and also to be integrated to the new culture.

**Narjes Hashami**

Thank you so much for that was very informative and I agree with you. And also, research backs that up that: for children who come from immigrant families, they have better sense of belonging and better sense of identity when they have connection to their cultural roots and they understand their native language and also they benefit from having a higher self-esteem.

So I thank both of our guest speakers to share their stories with us today. As we conclude this enlightening episode of Sounds of Integration. We've had the privilege of delving into the transformative power of art, culture, and community involvement among Afghan refugees in Canada. Our conversations with our esteemed guests, Sultan Mir Sultan and Fatima Hasani, have illuminated the remarkable potential of these elements to not only empower but also heal and safeguard cultural heritage for Afghans. A significant insight from this episode is how art silently, yet profoundly, contributes to the healing journey of Afghan refugees. It acts as a form of therapy and empowerment, providing individuals with the strength to express their stories and rebuild their lives in a new home. Also, seamless integration of art, culture, and community involvement serves as an unassuming yet effective method of preserving the rich tapestry of Afghan culture. It ensures that traditions, languages and customs continue to flourish even within the diaspora, all while promoting diversity and integration. Our aspiration is that this discussion not only educates our audience about these vital aspects, but also serves as an inspiration for individuals and communities to continue supporting Afghan refugees in Canada and beyond. Through art, culture, and community involvement, we've witnessed a profound and heartening transformation as it was discussed by our esteemed guests, Fatima and Mir. Thank you for joining us today on Sounds of Integration.

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**Dr Esa Aldegheri**

شكراً, grazie, tapadh leibh, totenda, thank you for listening to this episode. For the full show notes and for شكراً, more information about our work, please visit [bit.ly/UNESCO\\_RILA](https://bit.ly/UNESCO_RILA).

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