

# Refugee Heritage: An Oral History of Asylum

## \*Sample Chapter\*

### Note on the text

Some of the material in this book covers topics such as war, torture and sexual violence, which may be disturbing. We believe that it is important to share people's life stories and oral histories exactly as they have been presented to us and have not removed any of this content.

All of the quotes are based on verbatim transcripts from oral-history life-story interviews and have not been overly edited into standard English. We have adopted this approach in order to preserve the sound of each speaker's individual voice as faithfully as possible. We all use grammar differently when we are speaking, as opposed to when we are writing, and people who have different first languages will construct English in different ways. We felt that strictly correcting everyone's syntax would just airbrush out all of these interesting differences and would not stay true to the people speaking.

Full versions of these and other interviews can be streamed or downloaded at the Refugee Radio website, where you can also view the accompanying documentary film: [www.refugeeradio.org.uk](http://www.refugeeradio.org.uk)

## Trouble with the authorities

I used to go to those gatherings which was in the streets. But after some time, the regime started to attack these kinds of gatherings- which was open, which was public- and they attacked us and beat us. And, in one of the places that I was going, once a boy of fourteen was shot, and he died.

So, when these kinds of public gatherings couldn't take place, we went underground.

*Yasmin (Iran)*

I started as a reporter. And, as a reporter, I used to report on certain things. And I was asking myself: how is this possible that our government, that's supposed to protect his own people, can do these kinds of things?

*Idris*

I took part in mandatory military-training and open-ended national service which contributed to my decision to flee the country, Eritrea.

I was taken to Sawa, a military training camp, when I was only sixteen, to undertake intensive military training and participate in the matriculation exam for grade twelve students. I then went on to complete a bachelor's degree at the Eritrean Institute of Technology, as I say. After that, I was recruited into the indefinite national-service where I had no control over my day-to-day activities. I tried to speak up and resist the violent structures set up by the government, but it wasn't safe for me. So I had to leave Eritrea.

That's why I started by calling Eritrea a "carceral state".

Open-ended national service, arbitrary detention and forced disappearance, coupled with the country's isolation and sanctions at the international level make the condition of life in Eritrea worse for every citizen. These explain why the country has been haemorrhaging its youthful population for four decades.

*Yusef*

I had to leave my job. Because every time I was coming home from work, especially if it was late: I was interrogated. You know, they had barriers between some places, and when we were going out of Tehran, or coming back, they would come up to the buses and ask people to come out. Not everyone. They would choose people. And even they would stop taxis. They would get you in the street asking you, "Where are you going? Where you come from?" Lots of questions.

*Yasmin*

And I got deeper into this, because again, I was now seeing the injustices that was happening. And I was like, no, no, no, no, no, no, this is something that I have to take a stand on.

*Idris*

Once I remember, I was in a taxi. It was late. And they stopped the taxi and asked me to go out. And they interrogated me and they searched my bag. And when they asked me to go out, they asked the taxi driver to leave.

And I thought that the taxi will go because there were other passengers. And I was very worried they might arrest me. And even if they don't arrest me, how can I go home now

*Yasmin*

I was under political surveillance. So it would take me one hour to get home, something that I can do in twenty minutes, because I used many, many, many different means to get home. Like: you get off here, you get off there, you get to another bus, you get off.

So that's how we used to move around. Because I was under political surveillance and people were following me.

And sometimes I used to talk on the phone, and I know people are listening.

*Idris*

After the revolution and the struggle for independence, the government came about in a perfect condition to behave in the way they wanted to behave. There were not any checks and balances, there were not any institutions, nothing in Eritrea. It was for the government to build a new system of governing the country and taking it forward. And that's where they failed from my own perception.

There were a lot of other challenges as well, like the border war with Ethiopia, which happened when Eritrea was in the process of like creating laws and drafting its constitution. And then when the border war started, the whole thing was completely suspended forever, for indefinite time. And that has made Eritrea to become a completely self-colonising state, where it became a lawless state. And that's what I call it a carceral state.

*Yusef*

The good thing about being a crime reporter is that you cannot become a good crime reporter unless you have contacts. And the good news is that I had contacts within the police. And of course, when I had to talk with the police, I was also advised the best place to hide is within the police unit itself. I had a cousin who was a policeman. So I was living within the police quarters, yet I was being hunted by the police.

*Idris*

It's the failure of the government to recognise the challenges that they would face after they become independent. They were revolutionary fighters. They know nothing but the war and fighting and trying to remove the colonial powers.

But the colonisation has totally changed the social-economic organisation of the people in the country. It was a subtler type of colonisation during the Italian time where people were put in hierarchies that they have never known before. People were not allowed to even move or walk across the street and live in the villages that they used to live in, where their ancestors were born. So it's completely changed.

It was kind of a chaotic situation for the government to come and start a new way of organising the society. And, it may be small, but things like the family as a unit of social organisation were completely broken. Even after independence, because people are

completely disintegrated in the country, where some family members are in the national service for an indefinite time, some other are in an arbitrary detention, and some other people are leaving the country.

So the family itself as a unit of social organising doesn't exist in Eritrea, and many people feel homeless in their own homes for that reason.

*Yusef*

My professor told me [that I would get in trouble]. He said, "With your temperament? Three things. Either you're going to end up in jail for a very long time. Or you're going to end up in the grave. Or you are going to go into exile. You cannot escape these three things with your temperament."

*Idris*

Some people are involuntarily immobilised in the country because they are unable to move. Maybe they're put in detention centre, maybe they are stopped at a checkpoint. It is not easy to escape.

But some of the people who have the resources to escape, or the desperate people who are around the border areas, can try to escape the country. They are trying to leave the country for their own safety. It isn't for economic reasons, or for some other reason, it's people fleeing to save their lives, to stay alive and to survive. And that's what they are denied of in the country for most of their lifetime.

*Yusef*

It is the joy of a journalist: you do all your investigations, maybe for months, and then you write a report and you lift up the phone and call the concerned Member of Parliament. "Alright, sir, I have this story. This is the introduction, please. What is your comment?" I mean, that's the most fantastic part of doing a very long report.

And then they're like, "No, no, no, no, your report is not complete, come and talk to me."

And then you got there and they stall and stall and stall, until the time for going to press comes, and then they want to bribe you or something like that. But to cut a long story short, this is what characterises the work of a journalist. It's always very dangerous.

And sometimes a journalist is called in this manner, and when you get there they have already set a trap and they trap you: somebody puts something in your hand and then they arrest you for extorting money, or they damage your reputation completely.

So these are some of the ways that the powers that be use to discredit and sometimes to arrest and incarcerate journalists. They frame you with obtaining money by false pretence, or by trespassing, whatever it is that they can put on you at particular time is what you go down for. So it is a very dangerous thing sometimes to report on these

things.

And of course it is true. Because there is a drama that I did in the Parliament House where the MPs meet. And it also made my case a little bit notorious because this is a news story that I had worked on where I was being bribed [to suppress the story]. It was the first time I saw a real money bribe. And of course, I thought I was being entrapped and then I would be arrested. So I threw the money up in the air. I just made a drama. And everybody was in shock in the room. And then that is when they said, “The rude boy with nothing! The rude boy with nothing. He is proud but doesn’t have anything.”

But again, I didn’t reject the bribe because it was morally reprehensible for me to do that, it was simply because I panicked. I thought I was being entrapped. So it was just like my survival instincts kicking into place. So that’s why I did it.

And at that particular event, my own uncle was in the room, and he saw what happened. So they used to call me the rude boy without anything.

I would rather be the rude boy with nothing but I have my integrity intact. Because I grew up as an orphan and I saw what happens to us. And my mum used to tell us, “My son, let me never hear that people, especially the rich people, and the powerful people use you to oppress the poor. Shame be upon you if you do such a thing. And the curse will always be upon you.”

So these are some of the words that I used to think about. And the injustices that I grew up seeing is actually what made me to see things in a black or white. But, of course, I’ve outgrown that simplistic way of seeing things.

*Idris*

My problem is that I claim here as an asylum seeker, but my asylum seeker is just been refusing so many times. So, you know, I’m so feared to go home because of that government is still there.

So even if they say today that they will send me back home, I’m just feared to say I don’t think I will come out from the airport. They will hand me to the [secret police]. And the [secret police], I don’t know what they can do to me. So I have got a problem. So I’m just stressing.

*Rose (Southern Africa)*

Women’s Bengali culture is not used to having pets. We badly treat on pet, but people in our country who are rich, they have a dog and they’re well looked after. But my time is there is no pets. But we had a connection with the wild crow in our family. My mum used to put them out some food. So all these we used to.

I realised our Asian women life are in a cage. And so, in my performance art piece, I want to do like bird in a cage, and in that performance I want to make them free. So that was my concept.

When I went to buy the bird in a shop and shopkeeper knows, I told them, I’m gonna let them free to go. And shopkeeper says they don’t want to sell their bird because

you've made them free and they're tamed. They're not going to be survive outside. They're tamed already. So the symbol of the cage is about the question: is it tamed by human power?

So Asian women is same.

*Kajoli*

In 2009, they started this sophisticated camera system, installing in all the corners, especially targeting the Uyghur neighbourhood. They installed the maximum cameras to make sure that everything is seen, people's movement, including the mosque, who is coming in, who's coming out.

They gradually made it into a police state. So now we know that every two hundred metres there are checkpoints for Uyghurs. All Uyghur households have the barcode. Uyghur's ID card is linked to its own DNA, bio data. In 2016, all Uyghur people, including other Turkic Muslims, received notice from the government that they must go to hospitals and give blood.

So everyone was summoned to hospital and they must give blood, five cubic millilitres of blood samples. And they must give a voice sample, so you'll have to read one paragraph of written notice twenty times; they record you twenty times.

And the facial recognition: so they are taking photo from all directions, including taking photo of your iris. In the room where you go in, they have very big equipment, very advanced. People are told to remove their clothes, naked, and stand inside. And that takes photo of all directions.

That is all taken and installed in a database with the fingerprints of every Uyghur.

So the state has everything about what is their blood types, their DNA.

Also, you must have heard about this notorious business of organ harvesting? So, that [the DNA database] made it very convenient for the Chinese government, when they need an organ, it's very easy for them just to look and check, whose blood samples match the people who needs organ.

So it's terrifying situation. It's... it's absolutely terrifying.

*Reyhan*

Despite not being able to return to my home since 2000, I kept a very close contact with all my sisters and brothers. I call them at least once a week, speak to them, and telling them about my music, anything not sensitive. And also they want to know my son who left when he was seven years old. So, you know, they always fascinated about life in UK and they really look up to me. All of them have very simple, simple life, and they very content with what they have.

And then in the end of 2016, suddenly, I couldn't get hold of anyone.

Calling the landline, calling the mobile, even my sister's children, my brother's

children, even the grandchildren, some of them I had a telephone number. I couldn't get hold of anyone. No one would answer my phone.

And then even in the New Year, I thought- it's the New Year, they must answer my phone call. And I actually already knew something really, really bad must be happening.

In the beginning, I thought oh, is that because someone died in the family and they feel uneasy to break the news or whatever? But then later, I just thought something is happening and they might lockdown the region, something is happening.

And then on the third of January, I just called my brother non-stop. I thought I won't stop until they pick up the phone, because his phone was ringing all the time.

And eventually he picked up the phone. It was very sad. Terrible.

Normally, every time when I called it's always like a joy, you know, the other side they just like lit up, "Hey, how you doing?" But he was very kind of silent, as if I'm a stranger.

I said, "Why no one is answering my phone calls?"

He said, "They did the right thing."

He was very, very quiet. The sound was just heartbreaking. I didn't know how to respond. And I knew it was as if he was being watched when he when he was speaking to me. And then he just said, "Leave us in God's hands."

*Reyhan*

**\*Sample Chapter\***