

## **QUEEN MARY CONVERSATIONS:**

### **Conceiving Change through Artistic and Academic Public Engagement**

A confluence of artistic practice and academic research, my conversation with Arji Manuelpillai - poet, rapper, actor and education artist with Kazzum Arts - proved to be revelatory and energising. Arji's work with young refugees has conspicuous intersections with my own research interests on minority narratives, subaltern individuals and communities and politically interrogative forms of independent cinema across the Global South. I have also been involved in harnessing different dimensions of the arts – drama, music and film to engage with the human histories that often remain hidden away behind simplified categories such as 'refugees', 'illegal immigrants' and 'asylum seekers'.

Our conversation highlighted the inadequacy of this stand-alone and cover-all terminology to capture a spectrum of human emotions, spatial and temporal particularities and experiential multiplicities. Each refugee journey and every person who undertakes these often perilous voyages are unique – a conception that challenges the monolithic one-size-fits-all image of the migrant outsider often proliferated in mainstream news media and political discourse in Britain.

In this context, we addressed the rising currents of nativism, insularity and populism, especially as Britain navigates the impact of Brexit. Also framing the backdrop to our interaction was the Conservative government's failure to devise robust policies to guarantee the safety, wellbeing and humanitarian rights of vulnerable unaccompanied minors seeking to be reunited with their families in the United Kingdom.

During the interaction, I highlighted the need for more holistic and nuanced interpretations of refugee journeys, taking into account the entire span – past, present and future - from 'domicile' to 'exile' - of young migrants who undertake hazardous journeys across the blue desert of the Mediterranean. This premise informs my ongoing work on a journal article - 'Caught Between Containers: Renegotiating Representation of Refugee Journeys', and some of my research themes resonate with Arji's anecdotes about the dreams, desires and aspirations of young refugees and asylum seekers with whom he conducts workshops.

Young voices that are often marginalised, and in some cases silenced, before they are presented with an equitable platform to express their potential, became a leitmotif of our conversation. I mentioned how Bruce Goodison's film

*Leave to Remain (2013)* serves as an important cinematic testament to the unaccompanied underage asylum seekers who countenance a wider range of problems, complexities and a hostile environment in their quest to gain a home in Britain. The film is based on the experiences of and features several young actors who undertook arduous journeys from sub-Saharan Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan to the UK and have themselves experienced conflict, displacement and dispossession. Their participation alongside renowned British actor Toby Jones and filmmaker Bruce Goodison epitomises the importance of film as a tool to raise social awareness and instigate policy change. As Goodison asserts 'asylum is always a bit of a dirty word in the UK' (The Independent, 2013).

We pondered on the question of preserving and celebrating multiple cultural identities in the UK. Monolingual monoculturalism as the totem pole of nationalism can often serve the pernicious interests of reactionary political powerholders, often stoking populist and xenophobic sensibilities. How can we work towards reaffirming cultural difference as a causeway to cross-cultural cohesion and understanding?

We agreed that the voices of those classified as young refugees and asylum seekers need to be amplified not suffocated by indiscriminate or prejudicial systems and practices. Poetry, cinema, music, literature and theatre can operate as pluralistic mechanisms to bring about meaningful conversations, but these conversations need to reach out to wide-ranging demographics. We concurred on the need to include and empower young refugee voices through co-curation and collaboration in the telling of their stories.

This invoked the poignant example of a young Sudanese migrant - Abdel Wahab Yousif, who prior to embarking on an unseaworthy vessel across the Mediterranean, composed a clairvoyant poem foreseeing his death on high seas. The poem narrated the unfulfilled dreams of a dynamic young life that would become curtailed, luminous hopes that would be dashed, and a desire to become rehumanised, ultimately denied. An excerpt below:

*You'll die at sea.*

*Your head rocked by the roaring waves,*

*your body swaying in the water,*

*like a perforated boat.*

*In the prime of youth you'll go,*

*shy of your 30th birthday.*

Crystallising our academic and artistic conversation, a responsive poem seemed a logical companion piece to pay tribute and express solidarity with Abdel Wahab Yousif's story of human suffering. Arji's own verse – *Before You Are a Refugee* is a nostalgic and pathos-inflected invocation. It is a reverie of a regular life filled with love and happiness that is interrupted and torn asunder by a brutal conflict that transmogrifies ordinary citizens into depersonalised refugees.

The poem paints an evocative picture of how the illusion of normalcy can be decimated in an instant by unprecedented circumstances. As we come to grips with the curtailment of previously taken for granted freedoms, and as we emerge gradually from the stultification of lockdown-induced confinement, perhaps the Covid-19 pandemic presents an opportunity to place ourselves in the shoes of refugees whose 'new normal' has already been a restrictive environment...

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