

# MIGRANT ACADEMICS' NARRATIVES OF PRECARITY AND RESILIENCE IN EUROPE



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Olga Burlyuk and Ladan Rahbari (eds), *Migrant Academics' Narratives of Precarity and Resilience in Europe*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0331>

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ISBN Paperback: 978-1-80064-923-1

ISBN Hardback: 978-1-80064-924-8

ISBN Digital (PDF): 978-1-80064-925-5

ISBN Digital ebook (EPUB): 978-1-80064-926-2

ISBN Digital ebook (AZW3): 978-1-80064-927-9

ISBN XML: 978-1-80064-928-6

ISBN HTML: 978-1-80064-929-3

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0331

Cover image: Filip Kominik, 'Before the Czech' (2017), <https://unsplash.com/photos/IHtVbLRjTZU>. Cover design: Jeevanjot Kaur Nagpal

## 2. Unbelonging as a Post-Colonial Predicament: My Tryst With European Academia

*Sanam Roohi*

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I am an accidental academic. Don't get me wrong, I do not suffer from any severe form of imposter syndrome (Wilkinson, 2020) and have enjoyed learning and teaching from a very young age. In fact, I think teaching is my *ikigai* (reason for being). As the second eldest in a large family of six siblings and four cousins, it was my default task to teach my younger siblings and cousins, and even neighbors. The most fulfilling part of my academic life so far was when I slogged as an assistant professor at a university in Bangalore, doing 18 hours of contact teaching with Bachelor's and Master's students every week. I use the term 'teaching' here in a rather uncomplicated way, fully aware that it is not a top-down process and is co-created between students and teachers. So, when I say I am an accidental academic, I mean I never planned or foresaw myself becoming a part of the community of scholars who engage in intellectual debate and knowledge production, not till I left my first job after my Master's. Yet today, with a PhD degree from the University of Amsterdam and having worked in German academia for more than four years, I have become a part of the growing group of migrant academics in Europe whose relationship with academia is often tenuous—threatened by an end date when the fellowship concludes and the visa expires. In this short piece, I reflect upon the struggles and embodied negotiations I experience as a temporary job-holder who is a part of the growing 'international academic precariat' (Drażkiewicz, 2021).

## Learning through trial and error

I am a first-generation university graduate and my academic journey so far has been about learning and adapting through trial and error. With no experience within my (extended) family to fall back upon, I have always found academia to be both alienating and emancipatory. That contradictory feeling persists to this date. While my corporeal marking in India as that of a Muslim girl always threatened to 'other' me and make me a misfit in my classroom ('Muslim girls are not interested in studies', 'they are married off early', 'they are forced to wear *burkha*' were some familiar refrains I'd hear in school), because of my current physical location in the Western part of the globe, I am marked as a brown body—inherent within whom is the valued currency of diversity but the use of which is only temporary and marginal. Traversing through India and Europe, there are many overt and covert ways in which both these markers have inflected my precarious academic life.

Notwithstanding the precarity, I owe it to my mother and aunt who laid the foundations of my academic journey. In my world, they are the giants on whose shoulders I've stood, rather than being guided by any academic mentor, the repercussions of which are hard to miss. It was my aunt who dreamed of an *English medium*<sup>1</sup> education for us, marching up to school after school and learning the ropes of getting the coveted 'admission'. She set the ball of aspiration rolling but got married soon after, and the task of our schooling fell on our 'uneducated' mother who had only studied till the fourth standard because the middle school was in a neighboring village and girls from conservative Muslim families did not have a lot of freedom to travel for education in rural India in the late 1960s. Married to my father in a big metropolitan city, she was enamored by educated women, the respect they commanded and the financial independence some of them had. She regretted her own lack of formal education and told us sisters repeatedly 'you all must at least be a graduate and stand on your own feet. You should become (school) teachers...it brings you respect'. I agreed with only the first half of this advice and went on to do an Honors degree in political science with the aim of becoming a

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1 While ubiquitous now, English medium education is associated with India's growing middle class and their global aspirations (see Sancho, 2016 for details).

journalist or working in some think-tank—inspired as I was with the discipline of international relations. My love for the discipline did not last long once I got into the MA program.

I discovered my (in hindsight, not unproblematic) adoration for academia during my Master's. My professors, aloof and distant yet scholarly, opened my intellectual vista to the possibilities of knowledge, introducing me to the thoughts of Marx and Gandhi, Arendt and Foucault, Said and Chatterjee among many others. I thought knowledge for knowledge's sake was a noble pursuit beyond an instrumentalist end to enter the job market. I did get a job right after my Master's, working in a small research institute for 18 months, which introduced me to the whole environment that makes up higher education and research. While my work was largely administrative, I realized that I wanted to be a part of a coveted circle of erudite men and women who got together for workshops and conferences, and shared (but mostly exhibited) their knowledge. I set a self-goal to get into a PhD program and picked migration as my topic of interest. But beyond these two vague objectives, my plans were unclear. In the face of resistance, I also moved cities to marry a man who belonged to a different caste, religion, and region—an increasingly difficult proposition in a rapidly radicalizing India.

Indian academia overwhelmingly consists of people belonging to the upper castes who have (often unreflexively) set the higher education and research agenda circumscribed by their own caste and class locations. The last couple of decades has seen many first-generation graduates from marginalized communities challenging their hegemony. Yet, outside of the classed, casted, and deeply privileged Indian academic circles, PhD horror stories circulate regularly. Relations between students and their supervisors are described as feudalistic and extractive—the worst of which entails all forms of abuse, and the better of which entails a perpetual relation of subservience. This was a key reason, apart from the coveted international degree and shrinking academic freedom, why I planned to study abroad. The US was my desired PhD destination, but without enough resources to prepare for the GRE exam and being unsure of myself, I chanced upon a PhD project that suited me just fine—a collaborative PhD program (Bourdeau et al., 2007; Banks and Bhandari, 2012; Knight, 2012; Almiada et Al., 2019), for which I had to be in India

most of the time with short travels to the Netherlands, and would be awarded a degree from the University of Amsterdam if I successfully defended my thesis. Touted as an ideal blend of providing international training to 'developing' countries' students without necessarily fostering their migration to the 'developed' world for a degree, inequality and an anti-migration agenda is inherent in these programs (as I was about to experience for myself).

### PhDs—*Rites de passage* or cheap (racialized) laboring bodies?

The start of my PhD marked my real entrance into academia. In the absence of any credible networks to rely on, I navigated my fledging academic aspirations by the simple diktat: just keep moving forward, one step at a time. What I did not take into account in this simplistic, almost algorithmic logic was the messiness of human emotions and the power relations that can make or break academic careers. It took me six years to complete my PhD and get a degree and these six (in my perception, long) years brought me into close contact with the realities that many have experienced in their academic trajectory but only a few have written about. Like any other structure designed to ensure that the balance of power resides with the powerful, academia too rewards those with position and rank who accrue more power in the process. The gendered reproduction in academia and the disciplinary limitations on women and people of color has garnered some scholarly attention (Muhs et Al., 2012; Behl, 2019). Certain institutions have also come under intense scrutiny<sup>2</sup> more than others. But perhaps what has not been discussed much is how the PhD has transformed from a rite of passage to enter academia under a mentor's tutelage to becoming a way for group leaders and principal investigators to have access to cheap but skilled labor to gather primary data in labs and fields, with no commitment to long-term mentorship.

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2 Vita Peacock's work (2016) on the Max Planck Society (MPS) highlights how the Dumontian paramount values of excellence engender hierarchy and dependence, where the directors with a permanent position encompass their subordinates, who have contractual jobs. It generated a lot of discussions thereafter, which were published in the journal HAU as rejoinders, including those of Julie Billaud and Cristoph Brumann.

As part of a couple of Facebook groups where doctoral and post-doctoral researchers share their academic experiences, anxieties, and problems, I have read many entries that tackle issues of gendered or racial discrimination, but exploitation is still rarely discussed—either out of fear or the feeling that it is the natural order of things, ‘part of the bargain’. A few posts or memes that do hint about this under-represented aspect of academic practice receive huge responses in the forms of likes, perhaps exhibiting silent solidarity or even identification with the author’s travail. Of course, PhD supervision and mentorship are relations of dependence where power is always skewed. But in such protracted and often intense interpersonal dynamics, there is a fine line that distinguishes subordination and subjugation from enabling forms of stewardship.

My PhD was part of a program designed to have two India-based students who would visit Amsterdam twice for three months during their four-year project and one Netherlands-based PhD student who would have the opposite arrangement, with the final defense of our thesis at the University of Amsterdam. Because of the collaborative nature of the PhD, I had to fulfil the academic obligations of two institutes—one in India and the other in the Netherlands—while being paid one-sixth of my Dutch counterpart. Given my work on migration, the parallels of my situation with the literature critiquing migration management and the governance practices that expect migrants to be temporary (thus paving the way for their return to the home country and preventing their integration in the host country) were not lost on me. In case we missed the implications, we were repeatedly reminded by our Dutch colleague that we should stay in our country after the degree and not look for jobs in the Western part of the globe! Apart from the structural biases, discrimination in supervision, the hierarchization of team members based on their skin color, online surveillance (keeping a tab of what we posted on our social media), encounters with forms of casual racism (not just offensive stereotyping but opinions held on such prejudices) was part of the package. But more than the blatant forms of discrimination inscribed in the design of the PhD program—including gross underpayment, bias in supervision, or more than double the workload (including administrative work and work without any stipend in the fifth year of the PhD)—it was the

lack of any institutional recourse generally available to other students who were fully immersed in either of the institutes that left me most vulnerable. After working remotely, the second India-based PhD colleague eventually and unsurprisingly dropped out of the program.

Within the first year of the PhD, I completed the compulsory coursework, acquired the required credits (receiving As in all the graded courses), cleared the comprehensive exam, and had my eight-month paper—a 40-plus page review paper-cum-proposal submitted to a committee in the department—positively evaluated. The toughest phase, however, began thereafter, when I left for the year-long fieldwork. I realized that, behind the trappings of a PhD degree from a world-renowned university and the promise to have my own autonomous project, I was ultimately a research assistant, whose job was primarily to collect data and field insights for the supervisors. At one point halfway through the fieldwork, as I simultaneously wrote a 40-page field report, prepared for my supervisors' weeklong visit to my fieldsite, organized a half-day workshop with my respondents, and simultaneously prepared for the US leg of fieldwork (visa, tickets, accommodation, contacts etc., without any institutional help), I fell behind in typing my daily notes. My India-based supervisor punished me by making me cancel my US field trip, ultimately allowing me to reschedule my trip to a month later, after I had finished typing all the notes. Other arbitrary rules were set, forbidding me from attending conferences or working on publications other than the monograph—rules that were not applied to my Dutch teammate.

After an Indian post-doc was unceremoniously ousted from the program in the first year, I was gripped by a constant fear that I was replaceable, and if ousted, I would be alienated from my work that I felt passionate about—a fear that I feel, in hindsight, was recognized by my supervisors, who weaponized it against me. A supervisor even pointed out during my defense that I'd never broken down or called it quits! Finishing the degree became my solitary goal and by the end of the fourth year, I had submitted my work-in-progress monograph for feedback. The only feedback I did receive was being asked to rewrite my thesis completely from scratch because the present thesis 'dealt with too many things'. The decision felt not only arbitrary but unjust, because previous chapter submissions had received no feedback from one supervisor, while the other always gave me encouraging verbal feedback. After the



cool dismissal of the thesis without any proper explanation, the memory of being forced to join the group dinner that evening evokes a deeply unsettling feeling even today. Determined not to let this development break me, I started writing my thesis from scratch the very next day and submitted a second draft a year later. Unfortunately, my Dutch supervisor passed away before he could read the new thesis. It was only when a new supervisor came on board that I realized the significance of professionalism in a field that openly exhibits its reliance on networks and patronage as a badge of honor. Thanks to the new supervisor's swift feedback and interjections, I submitted my thesis to the committee a few months after he took over, and successfully defended my thesis at the University of Amsterdam.

After the thesis submission, I decided to take up a teaching job I was offered in a Bangalore college, which many in India consider to be a professional downgrade for international PhD students. After much deliberation, I also decided to make a clean break from the toxic professional relations I had to endure during my PhD, which still had me in their grip—a decision which would have far-reaching repercussions. I did not take this decision in haste but after careful consideration, fully aware that much of my academic prospects in India—and some abroad—would be over in the process. While consumed by teaching six days a week, I decided that giving up on research was not worth the travails I had endured earlier. I started working on a couple of publications and took unpaid leave for self-funded fieldwork trips, experimenting with a few vastly different research ideas. Twenty months into the teaching job, when I least expected it, I received a Marie Curie COFUND fellowship in Germany, and I made the tough decision to resign from my teaching job and move to Germany in search of a fulfilling academic career.

## Unbelonging as a (post-)colonial predicament

After Said, many scholars working on/in the East have written extensively about the post-colonial predicament the post-colonies and their inhabitants have to contend with (Breckenridge and van der Veer, 1993). As mobile academics from the Global South, our predicaments are compounded by our knowledge of the epistemic foundations of our scholarly encounters and adventures. As reflexive beings, we not only carry forward identities and categories inherited from our

colonial past: they are made and remade dialectically, co-constituted by our subjective experiences and interactions within the international academic setting. Even as our mobility privileges us in many ways, our post-colonial predicament presents itself in myriad other ways that may not offset the privilege but often reduce us to our national, racial, or ethnic identities.

Working for more than four years in German academia as a post-doc in two different institutes on two different fellowships, for the first time I've felt like my work is valued and my autonomy has been regained. I sometimes marvel at my luck at being paid to read and write (and teach, though not obligatorily). At a time when many countries across the globe see social sciences as redundant, it is heartening to see Germany not only provide financial and infrastructural support for quality social science research, but also give ample space to researchers to do their work without much institutional interference (and despite the bureaucratic hurdles). While in Germany the prospects for funding are high and the infrastructure is mostly top quality, not everyone succeeds in securing funding, flexibility (read: job insecurity) is encouraged, and universities do not support researchers beyond six years. The lack of tenure has prompted the #ichbinhanna movement (where accomplished post-docs and adjuncts exposed the system that encourages insecurity in the name of flexibility) to trend on Twitter in May and June 2021.<sup>3</sup>

My predicament is shown most starkly in this situation. I fully support the cause but I did not feel comfortable enough to join it, lest I be considered an interloper. After all, I am an outsider who does not even speak German (fully, yet) and is just a temporary researcher in Germany. During my PhD I was constantly reminded that I was an offshore worker, and as a post-doc, I feel more akin to a guestworker who is expected to do the stipulated task and leave. In fact, my situation is not very different from that of guestworkers of yesteryear, with one noteworthy difference—their contribution was significant in the rebuilding of post-war Germany, while my contributions are often meant for the limited consumption of a small academic circle. And even

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3 In the last couple of months, the #ichbinhanna movement has trended on Twitter protesting the normalization of job insecurity and flexibility in German academia, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ichbinhanna-german-researchers-snap-over-lack-permanent-jobs>

as I plan to stay here and build a career, I may not be successful, and if I do succeed, the journey will certainly not be easy.

The reification of the nation and national belonging is not limited to ordinary Germans, but is rife in academia too. Perhaps unlike US academia, the idea of (academic) positions ‘in Germany for Germans’ is an unspoken rule that many outsiders have to contend with. Some German academics I meet take it for granted that my time in Germany is limited and expect me to return to my country (to which I feel increasingly alienated from). Having spoken to a few of my fellow non-European colleagues about our particular kind of precarity (unlike other EU citizens, we do not have the privilege of staying even a day longer than our contract or stipend<sup>4</sup> lasts and our visa expires), they reveal similar anxieties. There seems to be a hierarchy in Germany where permanent academic positions are (perhaps based on some precept of *naturalness*) reserved for its citizens. As foreigners, you may stay on, as long as you succeed in getting funded for your temporary positions. I have applied to a couple of tenure track positions in Germany and got called for an interview for one of them. A professor whom I reached out for advice hinted that I should not get up my hopes, because the competition for these severely limited positions is extremely high, knowing German is a prerequisite and jobs are secured through ‘networks’. During difficult times, I am reminded of a meeting I had with one Indian researcher at a Max Planck Institute (who had many excellent publications and academic feats under her belt) telling me quite tersely that I should not dream of making an academic career in Germany. Giving her own example, she exclaimed: ‘I feel like a beggar, surviving from project to project and perpetually writing applications. I have a reason to stay here (marriage to a German) but you should not. Rather aim for the US’.

The anxieties surrounding my temporary situation impinge not only on my academic productivity, but also on the relationships I build.

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4 Contractual job holders can avail the Blue Card program that allows qualified academics to stay in Germany for three years, but early versions of it came with restrictions of language and salary limits. As of 2023, rules have been modified to allow for greater ease of mobility for non-EU members to stay in Germany but the conditions of a job contract with a salary threshold (58,000 Euros in non-STEM fields) still remains. As for academics who receive a stipend, the rule of returning to their country of origin the day their visa expires is still in place, disproportionately affecting many non-EU fellowship holders.

During the first year of my stay in Germany, I invited every member of my cohort and a few others for dinners, and it remained mostly unreciprocated. In my more than a decade of association, I am still surprised by many Europeans' inability to share meals. That does not stop them from inviting themselves over for 'curry' dinners, however! In such an equal setting, friendships become fleeting and temporary; forging meaningful relationships becomes difficult.

In Germany, the East/West divide and the language barrier are additional problems one has to deal with. My first fellowship (initially for a year, but extended to another after I successfully won another round) was in an institute which I personally feel has been the best place I have worked in so far. But my experience with the city was quite the opposite. As an East German town, it is known to be unkind to foreigners, and every brown/black body is seen as an unwelcome refugee. Barely a few days after moving to the city, at the city registration office I was scolded for not knowing German. The scolding turned grisly at the tax office. The language barrier felt insurmountable with the increasing number of interactions I had with native speakers. I decided to learn German, but courses clashed with my fieldwork initially and with no knowledge of whether I would be in the country for longer, I deferred learning the language professionally till I moved to another city for my second fellowship. I find German a difficult language to learn, and after ten months of evening classes twice a week, I still have a long way to go. In fact, the fear of not speaking the language is so paralyzing that I (and some others I know) avoid going to the doctor or seeking any other kind of professional help as long as we can.

Living in Germany during the pandemic also brought home the realization that the chasm between the Global North and South is not just about the economy or the market, or even the healthcare system. The differences are embodied and affective. During India's first wave of COVID-19, I spent hours talking to my extended family, childhood friends, and neighbors, explaining to them whatever little knowledge I had of the virus—teaching them caution and perhaps assuaging my guilt of staying in a relatively safer place through it. The virus still wreaked havoc in my family, killing my beloved uncle who loved me dearly. Not being there for him and not being able to say goodbye guts me, even two

years after his passing. The fact that one can have strong bonds with relatives who are not one's parents or grandparents is perhaps outside of the grasp of many Europeans, who could not sympathize with my loss. But the fear I felt in the first wave multiplied manifold with the second wave; I had constant prayers on my lips, eyes glued to news channels and social media for two months straight. Amplifying the calls for help and donating to volunteers via social media platforms became my way of reaching out from afar. And as some of us from the Global South suffered, the lack of empathy around us was initially shocking, till I realized that Europeans (particularly Germans) were largely shielded by their proactive government actions and superior healthcare systems, and empathy can only be built if one either goes through or witnesses devastation first hand.

### Parting thoughts

Despite the gnawing and ever-present precarity I am in, after spending more than a decade in academia, I (perhaps like many in my situation), do not wish to change my vocation. At times, I also feel ill-equipped to survive outside of academia, but it does not deter me from imagining alternate lives I could have led. These imaginary alternatives appear tantalizing, with the promise of a stable job, steady income, and work-life balance. I also reminisce about the fateful day—18 February 2010—when I had started from home in an autorickshaw to go for the PhD interview. Halfway through, I got a call from the manager at Nokia, Bangalore office, with a job offer. During the interview held a few months earlier, she had ominously narrated how she had switched from academia to the corporate sector, thoroughly disillusioned with the former. When she called back with an offer, I did not hesitate to decline it immediately, despite not knowing what the outcome of the interview would be, because I strongly felt that academia was my true calling. Today, if I ever begin to question my choice, I immediately recollect what academia has given me so far—the possibility to pursue my passion for research and teaching—and the feeling dissipates in seconds. And even if I may not feel I wholly belong here, my love for research and teaching belongs to me.

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