

Refugees' Perception of Racism: A Case Study of Iranian Refugees in Sweden

Chnoor Maki

Independent researcher, Sweden, chnoormaki@hotmail.com

ABSTRACT: This research is based on a case study regarding Iranian refugees in Sweden and it strives to find out how Iranian refugees have experienced racism in Sweden; if they have been exposed to racism or not? The aim of this study is to give voice to marginalized people so we might discover the hidden aspects of racism that might not be obvious for any researcher. The data for this article is based on semi-structured interviews that have been conducted with Iranian refugees in Sweden in 2017. Most of the participants in this study were Iranian refugees who have been in Sweden for less than 5 years, at the time of this research. In this paper, drawing on 13 semi-structured interviews, I show that in Sweden, racism emerges in two important levels; individual level and structural level. Furthermore, I show that racism is not limited to a specific group; different ethnicities and nationalities are prejudiced against each other. In addition, the discourse of “them” and “us” exist amongst refugees and immigrants. This distinction has been built upon supposed “cultural superiority” of Swedes which brings about a distinction between immigrants and Swedes in this case.

KEYWORDS: Iranian refugees, individual racism, structural racism, cultural superiority

1. Introduction

Sweden as a Social Democratic country has been characterised for its neutral approach or its middle way attitude towards immigrants. However, this approach has led to a conflict between the right wing and left-wing politicians over the Swedish government's approach towards immigrants (Nordin 2005, 127-129). In recent years and coinciding with the new wave of immigration to Europe, the anti-immigration policies and feelings have risen in Sweden. Although in 2015, there was a huge demonstration by Swedish people to support refugees, the Swedish policies towards immigrants have started to change recently (Culbertson 2017). According to the YouGov poll, the popularity of the Sweden Democrat party, anti-immigration party, has doubled between 2014 and 2017 (Sharman 2017).

In this context, which statistics show growth and development of anti-immigrant attitudes, how refugees and immigrants have experienced racism? In this research, I aim to investigate racism in Sweden from the immigrants and refugees' perspective. Indeed, by studying the marginalized people in Sweden, I aim to discover more facts about social and political relations in Sweden which might impact on producing/reproducing racism in different arenas.

In this research, I investigate Iranian refugees' attitudes towards racism. According to statistics, among nationalities that have been applying for asylum in Sweden, the Iranian population has a significant share (Schierup and Ålund 2011, 47). I aim to study Iranian refugees' attitudes towards racism in Sweden to find out how they perceive racism in Sweden and how they have experienced it in their daily life in Sweden.

2. Methodology

This article is based on semi-structured interviews with Iranian refugees in Sweden. Most of the participants had been in Sweden less than five years by the time of this research. The reason that I chose this specific group is that I assume in case of immigrants it takes time to move from marginalized positions to upper layers of the host society. Due to a language barrier, even for those who have received residence permit, it is hard to integrate into the Swedish society (in case of

immigrants in Sweden). Indeed, I aim to study racism from the perspective of refugees as marginalized people who are more likely to be exposed to racism.

The data for this article is derived from semi-structured interviews with 13 Iranian refugees; 9 men and 4 women in 2017 in Sweden. As a political activist from Iran and through my contact with different political activists in Sweden, I reached Iranian refugees to participate in my research. Although I do not have access to the statistics about Iranian refugees in Sweden, I assume that a considerable number of Iranian refugees are political refugees. I also include Iranian refugees with non-political background in my research. Most of the interviews that I conducted were face-to-face interviews. However, some interviews were conducted via phone and Skype.

I have adopted an iterative-inductive approach for analyzing the interviews. As O'reilly has argued, iterative-inductive is an approach 'in which data collection, analysis, and writing are not discrete phases but inextricably linked' (O'reilly 2012, 30). Indeed, I started to conduct interviews without trying to follow a pre-existing theory. In the process, I found out some patterns in the data that guided me towards the theory. Then, I went back and forth to make sense of data and analyze it within the specific themes.

3. Analysis and discussion

Macedo and Gounari (2006) with analyzing racism in different historical contexts, argued that "The end of racism" as some scholars and politicians have argued, is a false proposition; Still, race and racism exist in society and operate as mechanisms for exclusion and inclusion (Macedo and Gounari 2006, 6). Studying Iranian refugees' attitude about racism in Sweden, different aspects of racism were discussed.

The findings of my iterative-inductive analysis suggest that there are three main themes regarding racism in Iranian refugees' everyday lives. These themes can be classified as: 1. Individual and structural racism, 2. Immigrants are prejudiced against other ethnicities/nationalities, and 3. The discourse of "them" and "us".

3.1. Individual, and structural racism

Iranian refugees in this study appeared to have different attitudes towards racism in Sweden. Although some refugees were satisfied with their situation in Sweden and did not complain about racism, some others had experienced racism in different ways. One of the participants noted the following: "Swedes by their body gestures tell that they do not like immigrants. In the public space, in the train, Swedish people do not sit next to the immigrants."

Scholars have distinguished three categories of racism or racial discrimination; individual discrimination, institutional discrimination, and structural discrimination (Kamali 2009, 5). Since the "theoretical differentiation between structural and institutional discrimination is not clear" (Ibid, 6) institutional and structural racial discrimination, can be discussed in one category; structural racism. Therefore, I classify racism into two categories; individual and structural racism. I would discuss that the form of racism that the above-mentioned informant had discussed is individual.

Regarding individual racism, another informant discussed his own experiences. He said: "One day in a shop, my friend and I opened the refrigerator and we waited there to decide what to pick up. A Swedish woman shouted to us: what are you doing? I am sure if a Swedish person does that, no one cares about that."

In addition, informants mentioned that some Swedes attacked refugee's camps and put camps on fire. It is very problematic to classify such acts as individual or structural acts. The reason is that it has not been revealed who is responsible for these acts; whether it was done by individuals or it was initiated by specific groups.

One of the participants indicated Swedish different attitudes towards male and female immigrants. She said: “Swedish people are very nice to immigrant women. But they are very hostile towards immigrant men.”

Regarding the different attitudes towards immigrant men and women, Ware (2003) has observed that “white men are set to protect their white sisters and to rescue non-white women from dangerous and sexually aggressive dark men” (Cited in Bredström 2003, 82). The idea behind this different behaviour towards immigrant men and immigrant women is based on a presupposition that men belong to a marginalized group, for instance immigrants or the working class, are more patriarchal in comparison with white men. Also, women from third world countries have been perceived as more oppressed women, and therefore they should be protected from their men (Ibid, 80-85). As Mohanty (1988) has argued there is an assumption that third world women are poor, uneducated and victimized (Mohanty 1988, 337). This assumption can result in different behaviors towards male and female immigrants in Sweden.

One of the participants, although he had not experienced racism in his daily life, has criticized the Swedish society for the strong racism that exists. He said: “In Sweden, racism is a strong movement. Look at their political parties and their demonstrations against refugees.”

This form of racism, racism as a movement, can be identified as structural racism. I assume structural racism could appear in every societal sphere that is composed of organized movements or acts directed against inferiorized groups. Indeed, the presence of the SD or Swedish Democratic party (and its policy against immigrants) in the political sphere in Sweden indicates that structural racism is strong in Sweden.

Another informant drew a connection between racism and immigrants’ situation in the labour market in Sweden: “For refugees it is very hard to find a good job according to their own wishes, or according to their studies in their homelands. One reason can be the Swedish language. The other reason is that most Swedes do not like refugees to get well-paid jobs. Most refugees have no choice but to work in the black market.”

Regarding unequal opportunities in the labour market, I argue that we could not conclude that racism is the only reason for immigrants’ unequal situation in the labour market. I assume intersectionality approach can demonstrate the structural complexity of the whole society and labour market as well. Thus, analyzing the mechanism of racism’s impact on the labour market in Sweden needs careful scrutiny.

3.2. Immigrants are prejudiced against other ethnicities/nationalities

Some participants argued that racism is not limited to citizens of Sweden or western countries; immigrants and refugees are also prejudiced against other ethnicities and nationalities. As Kamali has argued “it is not only the member of the hegemonic and dominant group that can conduct ethnic discriminatory actions against the ‘others’” (Kamali, 5). Indeed, even people belong to marginalized groups can have racist attitudes towards their own ethnicity or other ethnicities.

Relatedly, one of the participants noted the following: “The culture of some Iranians is full of xenophobia, Arab phobia, Islamophobia, with structural hate for Afghans immigrants in Iran; they try to keep distance between themselves and other immigrants with reference to their Aryan race. Here in Sweden, they say that we have academic education and we have middle class culture and lifestyle and we have essential differences with people from Afghanistan, or Syria or Somalia.”

One of the participants had an argument that coincided with what the other participant discussed above. He tried to differentiate between himself, as a refugee from Iran, and other refugees that came from countries like Afghanistan. He said: “Our situation is different from Afghan’s situation. We are in Sweden because of the political situation in Iran. We want freedom. The Migration agency should take it into consideration.”

Although we cannot generalize it to all Iranian immigrants, the idea of “cultural superiority” is strong amongst most of the Iranian. They try to mark between themselves and refugees from countries such as Afghanistan. I assume the roots of this attitude can be traced

back to the Iranian government's approach towards Afghan refugees; In Iran Afghan refugees, specially Afghan women are under extreme oppression and they are deprived of their basic rights (Maki 2018). This situation contributes to reproduction of supposed "cultural superiority" of the Iranian over Afghan immigrants. In the case of some Iranian, even when they immigrate to other countries and are situated in inferior layers of society, they keep looking down on other nationalities, especially Afghans.

An important issue that always functions as a marker between different ethnic groups, especially between European citizens and immigrants is gender equality and women's rights (Bredström 2003, 82). The point is that even some immigrants use this discourse to mark between different groups. One of the participants discussed the way some immigrants behave towards their families. He said: Most immigrants and refugees do not respect their own wife and children. They have very strict rules in their families, for example women and girls have to wear hijab.

Participants also mentioned that some refugee women are under oppressive situations, especially in camps. Regarding families who live in refugee camps, it seems that although they are far from their homelands, they still are affected by traditional societal relationships. In this chaotic situation, women are more vulnerable and are more likely to be abused. Indeed, "vulnerability is also deeply gendered" (Aolain 2011, 4).

Identifying himself as a gay, one of the participants has justified the racist acts against immigrants. He noted following: "Muslim immigrants are homophobic. They do not accept people with different gender identities. Muslims' homophobic behaviors result in racist acts among Swedes."

This way of justification of racism is related to what has been articulated as femonationalism. In western countries, right-wing nationalists have instrumentalized women's rights in order to achieve their political goals, including stigmatization Muslim men and immigrant men in general (Farris 2017, 3). In this case, informants' approaches towards violence against women and LGBT communities contributes to legitimizing femonationalism amongst hegemonic and dominant groups in Sweden.

3.3. Discourse of "them" and "us"

As scholars have argued, the new racism does not use the rhetoric of biological differences, instead it articulates cultural differences and cultural superiority of specific ethnicities, especially white racial superiority (Giroux 2003, cited in Macedo and Gounari, 76). This false dichotomy between us and them, referring to cultural differences, brings about more segregation between people (Macedo and Gounari 2006, 6).

Some participants believe that racism is even stronger amongst immigrants. One of participants claimed: "Some immigrants think that all Swedes and European people are very wise and smart, and immigrants are stupid."

This attitude about immigrants and hegemonic groups in Europe (and Sweden as well) could be articulated as ethnic absolutism. Paul Gilroy has defined ethnic absolutism as "a reductive, essentialist understanding of ethnic and national differences which operates through an absolute sense of culture" which leads to more segregation between different groups (Gilroy 1990, 115). The forming of ethnic absolutism amongst immigrants also strengthens the idea of cultural superiority of hegemonic and dominant groups (swedes in this case), which brings about reproduction of racism.

The discourse of "them" and "us" is very problematic. Who can be included in "us" and who is "them"? In this regard, one of the participants noted the following: Most refugees even when they get European citizenship, consider themselves as refugees. They tend to describe their nationality according to their hometown.

What this participant says here led us to another ambiguous subject; identity. Regardless of theoretical debates around the construction of identity and the way people are identified, I assume that there is no absolute way of making and claiming identity. Therefore, as it has been mentioned above, some refugees even after receiving European citizenship (or Sweden

citizenship in this case), describe themselves as refugees from Iran (for instance). However, this way of claiming identity amongst immigrants reproduces the debate around “us” and “them”.

One issue that demonstrates the ambiguity of us/them and also indicates the “fluidity” of identity is the debate around those who commit crime. Here I need to emphasize that the way I use the “fluidity” of identity is different from how it has been articulated by most scholars. The “fluidity” of identity has been used to refer to characteristics of identities in the postmodern era which contradicted stable and collective identities (Karolewski 2009, 23). Here in this research, I use the term “fluidity” of identity to show how the external dimension of making identities is changeable according to social behaviours of individuals and their social status.

Relatedly, one of the interviewees said: “The Sweden citizens with immigrant backgrounds who commit crime, suddenly are considered as immigrants and not Sweden citizens. And those who are successful, Zlatan Ibrahimovic for instance, are considered as Swedes.”

According to this participant, the way hegemonic and dominant groups (Swedes in this case) perceive immigrants can change according to immigrants’ behaviour or their social status. This is what I refer to as the “fluidity” of identity. In addition, generalizing from few criminals with immigrant backgrounds to all immigrants widens the gap between “us” and “them”. This generalization can come from the perspective of hegemonic groups or those immigrants who take up the idea of ethnic absolutism.

In relation to the topic of “crime”, the problematic issue is describing the hegemonic groups in Sweden (white Swedes) who commit crime. In this situation, they are addressed as individuals, not Swedes. As Bredström has observed in Sweden when “white men kill, rape, or batter women, this is never attribute to Swedish culture” (Bredström 2003, 82). This contradictory approach towards crime and criminals has been generated by them/us dichotomy and also contributes to reproduction of this dichotomy (them/us).

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored Iranian refugees’ experience and perception of racism in Sweden. I tried to give voice to Iranian refugees as a marginalized group in Sweden in order to reveal hidden aspects of social and political relations. Iranian refugees in this study had different experiences of racism. Some participants have been exposed to individual racism; Maintaining distance by Swedes, hostile behaviour towards immigrants (especially male immigrants), attack on refugees’ camps. Moreover, participants argued that the anti-immigrant movements (including political parties and anti-immigrant demonstrations) are strong in Sweden which can be classified as structural racism. In addition, interviewees referred to unequal opportunities in the labour market which force immigrants and refugees to work in the semi-clandestine market (or black market as it is known amongst immigrants).

Interviewees have argued that immigrants also are prejudiced against other ethnicities/nationalities. In each context, the supposed “cultural superiority” of the dominant group contributes to prejudice against other ethnicities/nationalities. Immigrants’ violent acts against women and LGBT communities have been instrumentalized by Swedes and also some immigrants to justify anti-immigrant actions.

Participants argued that the discourse of “us” and “them” is present amongst some refugees. Even refugees who complain that immigrants overvalue the European citizens, themselves are using this dichotomy of us/them to refer to immigrants and hegemonic groups (white Swedes in this case). The hegemonic and dominant groups (white Swedes in this case) also use this dichotomy. This dichotomy also is tied to the “fluidity” of identity, the way hegemonic groups (white Swedes) perceive immigrants. The “fluidity” of identity manifests itself when the topics of crime and criminals are discussed. Citizens with immigrant backgrounds who commit crimes are represented as immigrants while successful citizens with immigrant backgrounds are represented as Swedes. On the other hand, those criminals who are white Swedes are represented as individuals.

Studying racism as a social phenomenon needs to have its historical roots into consideration. It is crucial to analyze the socio-economic conditions which had led to the emergence of racism in different contexts. These conditions, through different mechanisms, reproduce racism.

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