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Voices at the Margins: Nepali International Students' Experiences and Resilience in Denmark

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the experiences of Nepalese students pursuing higher education in Denmark, illuminating the distinct challenges they encounter as international students. Framed within the context of globalization, the research critiques the dominant, often homogenizing narrative of international student mobility, which centers on English-speaking nations and overlooks diverse cultural identities. These students encounter significant economic pressures, cultural isolation, and instances of societal prejudice, intensified by growing anti-immigrant sentiment across Europe. Drawing on Doreen Massey's concept of space alongside the philosophies of Wittgenstein, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and others, the study challenges the notion of a singular international education experience and emphasizes the resilience of Nepalese women as they balance cultural values with academic pursuits in a foreign setting.

Keywords: International education, mobility, Europe; Denmark; Nepal; space

INTRODUCTION

It is Friday morning, June 30, 2023, in Copenhagen. Shruti (21) woke up at 3 am to turn off the alarm on her mobile phone. At 4 am, it is her roommate Nirmala's (20) turn (all names are changed to protect the identity of the actors). They prefer to call them 'sisters' in local Nepali culture as opposed to the global rhetoric of a stranger in next door. They

argue that any female person could qualify to become a 'sister' in Nepalese culture whether they are related to or not by the mother's side of the family or the father's side of the family.

The sister duos are not going to college straight this early hour of the morning but rather to work as housekeepers in a downtown hotel overbooked by European tourists until the college opens at 9 am. From July to August, when most citizens of Denmark go on to their long-awaited summer holidays, they are switching off and set alarms for day, afternoon and night shifts. After hurriedly gulping a glass of water and munching a loaf of bread, they rush to work. Their college ends at 2 pm, but they cannot come straight to their room to nap, cook food, or perform college assignments without completing their day shifts at another company from 3 pm to 5 pm. By the time they arrive in their room, it is 6 pm. After brief cooking followed by a nap, the alarm goes off the mobile phone, reminding them of the nightshift. This time, they go to McDonald's to clean before it closes at midnight. They arrive back in their room the next morning at 2 am. I met them first at Copenhagen's Central Station and followed them to their college, room, and workplaces to understand how they manage their work-study in Denmark, how they earn 276,000 Danish kroner (40,000 Euro) to pay for their college, and what they think about their international education in Denmark and Europe.

As soon as they landed at Copenhagen International Airport, the first task was finding a place to sleep and cook their country dishes. After a weeklong search, the two sisters found a room and a shared kitchen with another family in Copenhagen for a monthly payment of 2,500 Danish kroner (DKK). The next challenge was finding a way to register their address, as the apartment was shared with another family and lacked the space to accommodate renters officially. After a week of searching, they could register with the help of a Bengali and Pakistani family, who allowed them to use their address for a monthly fee of 1,000 DKK each. While legal systems remained inflexible and indifferent to their predicament, these individuals, guided by shared cultural understanding and compassion, provided the much-needed assistance.

The main challenge was to find at least two works (one of them must be paid in cash since the law allows them to work only 20 hours a week) to pay each of the six installments of 23,000 DKK to college while saving some for room rent, and course registration. According to these students, the local educational counseling agency charged another 100,000 Nepalese rupees (NPRs) just to complete their online application form. Prior to that, Shruti had paid 500,000 NPRs to an overseas student recruiting agency for Australia but was rejected for scoring 6 in the

English test out of the required 6.5 points. Nirmala spent another 450,000 NPR to an agency for processing student visa for the United States.

Nirmala initially aspired to study information technology but ultimately enrolled in a business program at a notorious profit-seeking business college in Denmark. The college provides no scholarships, and international students struggle to get a job with this degree. A recruitment agency specializing in European placements advised the sisters that the quickest path to securing a student visa was to apply to lower-tier business colleges in Europe, where admission requirements centered primarily on financial proof. Eventually, the two sisters arrived in Copenhagen to pursue a bachelor's degree in international business. They view their chosen program skeptically, as many of their predecessors have ended up in low-skilled jobs, such as cooking and cleaning. Nonetheless, they felt strongly compelled to leave Nepal, driven by a collective belief in embarking on this "grand tour" (De Wit, 2002, p. 9). This urge was fueled by the discourse of international development circulated in Nepal, portraying Europe and North America as lands of abundant opportunity (see Shrestha, 1995; Pigg, 1992 for more), where material wealth, including cars and homes, was within reach. Pressed by a persistent sense of urgency, anxiety, and aspiration, they had little time to evaluate their options carefully. Their international education dream was shaped by a curriculum in Nepal that emphasized belonging to a broader, idealized vision of global prosperity.

The sister duos live in the suburbs of Copenhagen, commuting between work and college. Shruti takes a nap on the train, whereas Nirmala calls her mom in Nepal over Facebook Messenger. When asked how they navigate between college and work or visit a café, Shruti replied:

> I have no time for fun, nor any proper room to sleep and dress. In March and April, I must pay 50,000 DKK to the College for the second and third semesters. I do not know how I can manage it. I do not know any European or Danish students. I only see them enjoying themselves in the streets when I return from work late at night. They are not there in my class. My class has 29 Nepalese and 10 Bengalis who have no time for fun.

After the two sisters, I had a lively discussion with several Nepalese female students in Copenhagen who narrated their heart-wrenching stories of finding accommodation.

> Dai (brother), do you know anyone who can rent me a place to sleep? Please will you help me? I am having rashes all over my skin. have not been to work and college for almost a week now. Nobody gives us a damn here (Rupa, named changed).

Rupa called me to see her room. She sleeps in underground room offered by a man in his villa. Her bedroom had no lights; the kitchen was depressingly dark and stinking with dampness and shared by a dozen more students. These students are enrolled in a for-profit business college situated in Copenhagen, which does not provide student housing. This institution, affiliated with a UK university, offers UK-accredited bachelor's and master's degrees in business administration. Its student body primarily comprises Nepalese, Bengali, and a few Indian and Chinese students, many chose this institution as a final option after failing to meet English language requirements for other destinations. The annual tuition at this college is approximately 276,000 DKK, or 40,000 Euros.

Students at this college are ineligible for accommodation in university dormitories and face limited career prospects after graduation. Spangler and Adriansen (2020) suggest that Denmark's international education system fosters an 'international classroom' where global perspectives converge, offering international students a 'cross-cultural space'. While this may hold true for some, the sisters observe their European counterparts only from a distance—seeing them enjoying the Copenhagen nightlife as they return from their late shifts. These observations reveal a gap between the theoretical ideals of international education and the lived realities of certain international students, underscoring the difficulty of capturing such individualized experiences through general narratives of international education and mobility.

This story I encountered in Denmark led me to contemplate the diversities and multiplicities in global cultures that neither modernism nor postmodernism is adequate to explain. The sister duos do not fit into the description of a singular space of thinking known as 'globalization', which 'stands for the general condition of our being together' (Massey, 2005, p. 154). Neither do they fit into the descriptions provided by anthropologists (e.g., Liechty, 2003). Instead, they represent what Massey refers to *coeval others* with their own trajectories and histories.

In this essay, I aim to explore the unique, individualized experiences of these students through the lens of Massey's ontology of space, in dialogue with the philosophical insights of Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard. Rather than drawing definitive conclusions or representing a singular interpretation, this approach offers a multidimensional perspective—an interdisciplinary dialogue bridging science and spirituality. The data were gathered through informal interactions with the participants in various everyday settings, including trains, buses, rented rooms, workplaces, colleges, and cultural or religious events across Denmark. This ethnographic approach allowed for face-to-

face conversations over tea or meals, conducted without the constraints of formal time or structure, fostering a natural exchange of ideas and reflections.

SETTING

The setting for this international education journey into Denmark took place against the backdrop of a fear. It coincided with the rise of the far-right, populist, and right-wing conservative movements, which started to harbor 'a passionate hostility to outsiders' (Said, 2000, p. 141). Instead of accepting all the people with 'openheartedness, humor and smile' (Madsen, 2011), or with the 'warmth of communitarian existence' (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020, p. 121), the sister duos were greeted with bombshells and gunshots from the nationalists when they arrived on European soil.

Their international education journey to Europe coincides with the rise of a new radical right concerned with anti-immigration and protecting Western values (see Busbridge et al., 2020 for more). Norwegian white supremacist Anders Breivik murdered 77 people in broad daylight. In Germany, right-wing extremist Alex Wiens murdered an academic just for being an Egyptian (see Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020 for more). The message is clear: 'The radical right-wing want to protect national sovereignty and traditional values against immigration and globalization' (Kutiyski et al., 2020, p. 2). As Ahmed (2014) shows us, there is this fear that 'the non-White people are threatening to overwhelm and swamp their nation' (p.2). The notion of 'Whiteness' as a realm of thinking is limited not just to political rhetoric. Still, it has become an unquestionable domain of reason, and an embodied practice in the European academy (see Oliver & Morris, 2019 for more). In higher education studies and international students' mobility, it is already being used as a concept very popular (e.g., Edward & Shahjahan, 2021). The sister duos find themselves entangled within this problematic of reason.

The sisters' journey to pursue international education in Denmark unfolded amidst a growing wave of anti-immigration sentiment and a surge in right-wing movements across Europe. This social climate has shaped their experience, as public attitudes have increasingly emphasized protecting national values and identity. As scholars like Said (2000) and Ahmed (2014) highlight, these movements reflect concerns over cultural integration and a perceived need to safeguard local communities. Within this context, the sisters' experiences underscore the challenges non-European students face navigating an environment where attitudes toward

immigration and globalization remain complex and often polarized.

Leaving their home country to pursue international education in Denmark, the sisters hoped to achieve an educational future that had not been available to previous generations in their family. Denmark, and the broader Nordic region, is often recognized for its high levels of happiness, social equality, and opportunities for personal development (Partanen, 2016; Bjørnskov, 2021). However, while these ideals suggest that everyone can achieve their potential regardless of background (Brandal et al., 2013), the sisters find that their reality in Denmark requires working extended hours on weekends and holidays, unlike their European counterparts, who have more leisure time. Assuming that the international education market in Denmark offers young people from the Global South opportunities for personal and social advancement (Valentin, 2015), many graduates from such backgrounds end up in low-skilled jobs, highlighting an unfulfilled aspect of the promise of international education.

In recent years, Western Europe has become a more complex destination for students from diverse backgrounds, as societal integration and cultural adjustment can present challenges. While the Nordic region has a strong reputation for social justice and combating discrimination (Lothe & Larsen, 2016), the sisters observe that many privileges, such as work-life balance and certain social supports, often seem more accessible to native-born residents. Despite these challenges, the sisters find value in their experiences, even working long hours, returning home after dark with limited time to engage in local culture. This experience reflects the nuanced reality of navigating life as international students in a socially progressive yet culturally distinct environment.

Theoretical and methodological reflections

The sister duos are viewed in Denmark and Europe at large through such a lens as out of place and time. A critical interdisciplinary approach is required to reflect upon the unique experience encountered by the sister duos.

Following Wittgenstein, terms such as ‘internationalization’ and ‘mobilities’ are not a shared form of truth but rather our fascinations for a ‘linguistic mold’ (Ambrose, 1978). This article, therefore, moves beyond linguistic or cultural discourses to understand the unique struggle the sister duos undergo in Denmark, which cannot be reduced to a totality of experience called ‘international education’ or ‘mobility’. I find the concepts of ‘whiteness’ or ‘otherness’ equally problematic for

understanding their struggle in a foreign land, since what they refer to are 'heterogeneities' (Massey, 2005).

As Massey noted, we have focused only on human geography to make sense of our place and time through a tectonic shift in the earth's movement or the galaxies' formation. Such geographical thinking 'excludes those who are different'. Hence, as Massey tells us, what we experience at the moment is not genuine globalization or internationalization but a hegemonic story, similar to the old story of modernity, 'falsely self-evident… but powerful imagination of space' (p. 87). As a theoretical point of departure, I found the key inspirations in Massey's *oeuvre*: 'Everything can be challenged and reworked, nothing is (pre)given' (as quoted in Featherstone & Painter, 2013, pp. 4—5).

Massey starts telling the story of *space* with how one Spanish conqueror found or conquered Mexico City, and such voyagers or discoverers came to be called 'makers of history' and the space they crossed or voyaged as geography and as a place of perfection or progress came to be objectivized as Europe as the center, with a singular notion of time and history. As Massey noted, it is this erroneous sense of time and place used to singularize cultures, histories, people and places as backward in time. Consequently, the sister duos are seen in Denmark as 'uncultivated people' (p. 2). This is because they bring incompatible cultures. The role of international education and policy is to convert them into 'cultivated people' or 'culturally produced people' (Levinson et al., 2011, p. 212). Applying linguistic discourse theory or critical Marxism would lead to the dismissal of the spiritual destiny of life or the different dimensions of time and space the sister duos represent.

What is presupposed in the singular narrative of international student mobility and the singular space of internationalization thinking is that all the international students are the same (undistinguished by gender, culture, and history). As Spangler and Adriansen (2021) noted, every single individual is expected to enjoy friendship and connections through 'international classrooms.' However, the sister duos find it extremely difficult to make friends or connections outside their own Nepalese communities. Unlike the United States which prevents the spouses of international students under its F-2 visa regulations from taking a paid job in supporting their spouse to cope with financial pressure (Bakhshalizadeh, 2025), Denmark allows the spouses of international students to take a full-time job. But the sisters, young to marry, decided they must come as singles. To cope with financial pressure, Nirmala is now looking for a husband from Nepal on her 20th birthday so that her husband will work full-time to support her education. Shruti is thinking

about going to Portugal or Spain to obtain a European passport so that she could enjoy life like her European classmates. Unlike in Denmark, she would not be obligated to work under the work-study regulations in Spain and Portugal.

A different path to navigate, but not necessarily bad

After landing at the Copenhagen International Airport, the sister duos called their Nepali brothers and sisters through Facebook Messenger because they had no place to sleep, let alone a job to pay tuition fees to college. They took for granted that in Denmark, as in Nepal, a host family can be found, a warm dinner would be waiting on the table, a friend or uncle would offer a room to sleep, and a decent job would be found. In contrast, they were stranded in Copenhagen. They found a Nepali family that gave them their living room until they found their accommodations. After a month-long haunt, they found a housekeeping job through their Nepali networks in Copenhagen. Like most South Asian international students in Europe, they find work and accommodation through their own networks and diasporic communities. Denmark simply issues them the visas, and the universities provide no accommodation, let alone career counseling. Ultimately, they end up cleaning and cooking.

It was one Sunday morning, to be precise, Nirmala phoned her mom in Nepal and said, 'Ama, it is too difficult to work in Europe!' She then added, sobbing, 'Ama, Europe is not exactly what we talked and thought about in Nepal.' The previous day, her manager punished her for not completing the task of cleaning one of the hotel rooms within the given time. She found a second job, but the manager wanted her to remain as a girlfriend as a precondition for employment.

The sisters share just one bedroom and a kitchen with their host. To cook or bathe, permission must be sought mutually. A small bed creak or a whisper in the next room would easily reach their ears. Utmost care had to be taken even to fart. However, for the *coeval others*, privacy does not matter. They are not bewitched by the touchy-feely site of the body or its emotional aspects of happiness. More urgent concerns are not the body, not infamy or disgrace from sexual fetishism or romantic engagements with boyfriends, but rather how to find an accommodation and then work to clear the tuition fee to college.

One day, a man in his 50s who was living single offered Nirmala his luxuriant apartment. One of the conditions was that she must live as a girlfriend. He promised her an easy way to meet her financial needs and to belong to Denmark, but she would not agree even if he offered all his golds and diamonds. Instead, she preferred Nepali spatiality to sleep with

a family in a sublet room and went through a cumbersome process of qualifying for settlement.

The sister-duo evokes a completely different picture of womanhood, gender, wisdom, morality, chastity, beauty, purity, and the purpose of life. They derive their sense of sanity and gratification from being religious and spiritual, which makes them hopeful of a future or a union with their rightful husbands to bring surprises and wonders. As Levinas (1961) notes, it is this hope for the future, 'what is no longer possible historically remains always possible' (p. 55). Following Levinas, the sister duos are in a 'relation with something that is absolutely other' (as quoted in Morgan 2011, p. 164). Their maternal home and social structure or moral codes of life led young women to believe that to live as a girlfriend with a man outside nuptial relations is a moral crime, sin, or shame. This makes their European solicitor angry or racist, for whom the body is devoid of souls or what Kant would refer to as 'the product of our own making' (as quoted in Cohen, 2008, p. 506).

The sister duos navigated a different path to international education. They construct a distinct sense of time and space and a unique route to modernity by being not valuable for the singles in Europe but rather to their own favored Nepalese. To recall Foucault (1995), globalization is not capable of treating the body *en masse* or wholesale here but rather in 'retail' (p. 137). This type of retail behavior is a problem for both left-wing socialists and right-wing nationalists in Europe. For the former, this is a 'dull' or 'deviant behavior' within the cultural program of modernity; for the latter, it is a sign unbecoming of a citizen or problem for integration.

The sister duos do not necessarily share a profound sense of humiliation to be students in Europe. Instead, they harbor a feeling of pride in being Nepalese, strong and resilient enough to not fall victim to singles but motivated to work hard to live within their Nepalese community. Before embarking on their international education journey to Europe, the sister duos' first dream was to go to English-speaking destinations such as the U.S., the UK, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand to experience sameness in globalization, but ended up in non-English-speaking destinations learning local languages that would not qualify them for relevant careers. Indeed, hundreds of others who graduated in Denmark and have ended up cleaning and cooking might think that their diplomas and degrees are an absolute waste. However, they have learned to play what Baker (2014) calls the 'game of education' differently. They have found an alternative way to obtain what Schultz (1963) would refer to as 'returns' from investment in education. They do so by becoming cleaners,

cooks and bus drivers in Copenhagen. This is not paradoxical or inconsistent with the original picture of international education mediated by the discourses of international development as some sort of 'greener pasture' in the Western Hemisphere (see Timsina, 2021, 2019 for more).

Reflecting upon

To rephrase Massey (2005), international education and student mobility understood through the single globality is a political project of 'ordering and organizing space' (p. 65). It excludes those who are different. Shruti and Nirmala found a different space, one that contested the claims of social democracy and its egalitarian values in Europe, shaped by 'a world of business and the power of money' (Lefebvre, 2009, p. 187).

> There is no longer colonies in the old sense of the word, but there is already a metropolitan semicolonization that subjects rural populations, large numbers of foreign workers, and … intellectuals, to a concentrated exploitation' (p. 181).

We tend to imagine that the Nordic model of social democracy is even more of an exception to American capitalism or the Anglophone world. However, the sister duos, rejected by the United States and Australia on English scores, nevertheless find themselves accepted by European colleges on financial scores. Whether they have found social mobility in English-speaking countries is only a guess now, but as Yilmaz (2024) shows, a similar experience is encountered by three Chinese, one German, and one Saudi international student at a U.S. university. Yilmaz's study revealed that international graduate students in the U.S. often feel discriminated against because of their different language usage. 'Additionally, professors tended to uphold the dominance of mainstream culture while silencing the voices of international students' (p. 508). However, the sister duos in Denmark learned to overcome such difficulties after being subjected to discriminatory practices.

In short, I attempted to bring a sense of 'place' or 'another set of stories' (Massey, 2005, p. 130) and to add emphasis from Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, which is more novel and beautiful than what is considered a normal and pleasant experience from the accounts of those who study under grants or scholarships. The sister duos are among the several thousand South Asian 'full-fee' paying students who are helping to salvage the economy of Danish universities.

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