Agricultural Culture: Cultivating *Afghaniyat* in Diasporic Life

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Keywords: *diaspora, spatialisation, cultural identity and Afghaniyat, reflexivity, positionality*

Introduction

During my PhD fieldwork in summer 2024, while interviewing the Afghan diaspora community members in Hounslow, London, I met Ziar (pseudonym). He invited me to visit what he called in Pashto *"وړوکی افغانستان"* (Small Afghanistan)—a garden. I expected a routine interview. Instead, I found myself sharing green tea and *gurr* (Afghan sweets) while observing the cultivation of *Gandana* (Afghan leafy vegetables) and apple trees variety from Wardak province—an experience that transcended typical researcher-participant boundaries.

As an Afghan researcher who has recently resettled in the UK, I hold a complex positionality that provides community access and cultural understanding. This requires rigorous reflexivity to reduce potential biases and blurred analytical boundaries in research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

However, this garden observation challenged my conventional understanding of identity preservation, which I had previously seen through visible community practices and engagement, such as religious and cultural events. The gardening activity seems silent, but its equally powerful way of cultural preservation acts as a multifunctional space: connections to home through specific plant varieties, intergenerational knowledge transfer, and spaces for socially isolated people, such as elderly women.

In this reflection, I discuss how these gardening practices embody what Sadat (2008) calls *Afghaniyat* (Afghan-ness) as cultural identity, while reflecting on the methodological and theoretical insights gained from these experiences.

Research Context

Current literature on diasporic communities emphasises urban spatialisation and negotiation of belonging (Brah, 1996; Massey, 2005; Vertovec, 2007; Anthias, 2008; Çağlar and Glick Schiller, 2018; Nowicka, 2021; Ratnam and Arambewela-Colley, 2024). However, this research often

overlooks how small agricultural practices within urban spaces contribute to re-spatialisation and identity preservation among diaspora communities. In my research context, re-spatialisation refers to the process by which Afghan diaspora transforms and create spatial meanings in host environments to maintain cultural identity and establish belonging. This gap is significant for the Afghan diaspora in the UK, where academic research remains limited despite the community's substantial presence.

To understand these processes, I apply Henri Lefebvre's (1974) spatial triad from his seminal work *The Production of Space,* which was translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith in 1991. Lefebvre conceptualises space through three interconnected dimensions: *perceived space* (the daily routine and activities), *conceived space* (how space is formally planned and designed), and *lived space* (lived experience shaped by emotional and personal experiences).

Small-scale urban garden spaces are theoretically significant because they represent sites where these spatial triads converge. Ziar's gardens simultaneously function as perceived space (cultivation practices), conceived space (adaptation to British conditions and land-use regulations), and lived space (emotional connections to homeland). This convergence academically contributes to understanding diasporic re-spatialisation and how communities navigate adaptation while preserving *Afghaniyat*.

Reflections

My journey to explore Ziar's *Small Afghanistan* started when I was conducting interviews with Afghans in Hounslow, London. As a recently resettled Afghan researcher, I initially relied on an Afghan-established mosque in Hounslow. Through a casual meeting with Ziar after a community gathering, Ziar mentioned his *"Small Afghanistan"* (Figure 1). When he offered to visit his project, I assumed visiting a shop or an authentic Afghan restaurant, not a garden that would challenge my understanding of cultural preservation.

When Ziar led me to a locked gate in the Hounslow allotment area, I was unprepared for what lay beyond. My previous knowledge of Afghan identity preservation had focused on visible cultural practices such as mosque gatherings, Eid, and cultural days celebrations. The garden demonstrated something unique: a private and intimate space operating outside formal community structures.

Upon entering, I observed rows of *"گندنه" Gandana* (Afghan leafy vegetables – used in Afghan cuisine) and apple trees variety from Wardak, Ziar's birthplace. These were not only plants but a connection to homeland cuisine and agricultural adaptation. The most profound moment came when Ziar said, *"this is not about the trees and vegetables, we can breathe differently here, especially when my mom joins me,"* while preparing green tea with *gurr* (Afghan sweets).

For Ziar's elderly mother, who experiences significant social and linguistic isolation in British society, the garden helped her to engage in familiar practices without cultural translation.

"She saw people cultivating the land her entire life in Afghanistan," Ziar explained. This observation revealed how *Afghaniyat* could be maintained through embodied practices that require no explanation.

The presence of Afghan and British flags in the garden struck me as a visual representation of the complex navigation between homeland and host country belonging. This navigation characterises diasporic experience: not complete assimilation or resistance, but creative synthesis.

Figure 1. Ziar's 'Small Afghanistan'.



From top left: the cultivation practice of Gandana, apples, other vegetables and the flags of Afghanistan and the UK over this site. Source: The author.

Theoretically, the garden experiences provided insight into how the spatial triad of Lefebvre can be operationalised in a diasporic context. The space manifested as a convergence of perceived space (cultivation of Afghan vegetables), conceived space (adaptation of Afghan agricultural knowledge to British conditions), and lived space (the emotional connections to the homeland). Rather than operating as separate analytical elements, these dimensions collapsed into a single, lived reality in the garden context.

The adaptive cultivation techniques Ziar developed demonstrated the complex nature of *Afghaniyat* preservation in diaspora. His adaptation to British climate and soil conditions was not only a pragmatic solution but indicated negotiations between his prior knowledge and challenges in host environment. *Gandana* growing in London soil became a material manifestation of how *Afghaniyat* persists through adaptation rather than strict preservation.

However, the garden observation can raise critical questions about the conditions that enable such cultural practices. Ziar's success story in the garden space production depended on his access to resources, knowledge of British regulations, and skills to work within the formal allotment framework. This suggests that such adaptation may not be equally available to all diaspora community members.

Beyond this, the *Small Afghanistan* challenged my initial understanding of integration and cultural preservation. Rather than representing a simple success story, it revealed the ongoing tensions diaspora communities navigate between maintaining cultural identity and adapting to host country conditions. It added to my knowledge of how such small-scale spatial practices can maintain cultural connections while remaining largely invisible to broader society. The garden's harmony with British allotment structure may explain its acceptance while raising questions about which forms of cultural expression are deemed acceptable within multicultural frameworks.

Research Positionality

The garden observation added complexity to my position as an insider researcher. A warm and deep conversation over a cup of green tea and Ziar’s invitation for future social gatherings fundamentally changed the research dynamic. The boundaries between my roles as a PhD researcher, community member, and potential friend became increasingly blurred. In addition, my shared Afghan identity and resettlement experience created immediate connections with Ziar and his family that extended beyond typical researcher-participant relationships. Our conversations flowed naturally between Pashto and English, and cultural references required no explanation. In particular, when Ziar's elderly mother joined us, her comfort in speaking Pashto and engaging in familiar discussions highlighted how shared language and cultural understanding facilitated access to information and experiences that might remain hidden from outside researchers.

The sensory familiarity of the garden space—the flag of Afghanistan, recognising the smell of *Gandana*, understanding the value of hospitality, and appreciating the emotional weight of

cultivating homeland varieties—created what I observed as an authentic cultural connection rather than academic observation. This personal resonance added to my knowledge but also complicated my analytical distance.

Had I been an outside researcher, several dynamics would likely have been different. The observation might not have extended beyond a structured interview boundary. Ziar's mother might not have felt comfortable participating, and the unique practices of preparing tea over a wood fire might have remained unexplained or performed differently for an outsider audience.

However, my insider position also created challenges. My emotional investment in narratives of successful *Afghaniyat* preservation may have influenced my interpretation of observation findings. The comfort I felt in the garden space reflected my yearning for home, potentially affecting my ability to keep analytical perspective.

Accordingly, following an established framework for reflexive practice (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), I maintained detailed field notes, audio recordings, and photographs documenting not only observations but also my emotional responses and their potential impact on interpretation. This approach helped me recognise how my positionality both enabled and challenged the knowledge I could produce from this fieldwork experience.

Conclusion

In essence, visiting *Small Afghanistan* indicated how diasporic re-spatialisation operates through intimate, embodied practices that transcend visible cultural markers. Ziar proved that *Afghaniyat* preservation in diasporic life requires creative adaptation rather than strict cultural practices. The convergence of Lefebvre's spatial triad within *Small Afghanistan* indicated how Afghan diaspora navigates complex spatial practices, adaptation, and lived experiences and belonging in the host environment. As an insider researcher, this experience provided me both the methodological advantages and analytical challenges of shared positionality, emphasising the significance of reflexive practice in understanding diasporic re-spatialisation. Such invisible cultural practices in the host area deserve greater attention in diaspora studies.

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