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Dimensions of refugee identity in Dina Nayeri's *Refuge*

Виміри ідентичності біженки у романі Діни Найєрі «Притулок»

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Abstract

The article concentrates on Dina Nayeri's novel "Refuge". The focus of this article is on the processes of formation of refugee's identity of the main character, Niloo. It has been argued that the construction of her agency is based on the continual dialogue between her and her father as well as between her and the exiled Iranians in Amsterdam. The main character's initial reluctance to support connections with her father and, in a broader sense, with her native country is transformed during the novel's diegesis. In the end, Niloo admits that she needs to embrace her Iranian self and establish a dialogue with her past. The second part of the article deals with the notion of the refugee community and the idea that exiled collective identity is constructed on the primal injury of oppression and exclusion. Niloo's meetings with her people stimulate her to reconsider that part of herself she was trying to suppress. Moreover, the reconciliation with her former neglected self becomes possible after meeting the Iranian immigrants. The diegetic narrator tries to make sense of her life and construct her agency through negotiations with others. It is concluded that the refugee's past experience cannot be forgotten or refused during the formation of an exiled identity. Instead, it must be integrated and acknowledged by a forced migrant.

Key words: refugees, identity, Dina Nayeri, the novel 'Refuge', fictions of migration.

Introduction


We live in an age when different conflicts, economic problems, and catastrophes force people to leave their homes and search for a secure life. According to "The Oxford Handbook

Анотація

Стаття зосереджена на романі Діни Найєрі «Притулок». Процеси формування ідентичності біженки, Нілу, головної героїні твору, визначають основну наукову складову дослідження. У романі конструювання суб'єктності вимушеної мігрантки відбувається через постійний діалог між нею та батьком, а згодом між нею та біженцями з Ірану, які проживають в Амстердамі. Головна героїня поступово долає початкове небажання підтримувати зв'язки з батьком, а ширше і з покинутою батьківщиною. Зрештою, наприкінці твору Нілу усвідомлює необхідність визнати і примиритися зі своїм минулим. Друга частина статті зосереджена на колективній ідентичності біженців і її центруванні на травмах минулого. Зустрічі Нілу з іранцями, які живуть у Нідерландах, допомагає їй вибудувати цілісну самість. У статті зроблено висновок, що заперечення минулого перешкоджає формуванню позитивної ідентичності біженців. Минуле мусить бути опрацьоване та засвоєне як частина міграційного досвіду.

Ключові слова: біженці, ідентичність, Діна Найєрі, роман «Притулок», міграція у художній літературі.

of Refugee", in 2012 alone "7.6 million people [were] newly displaced due to conflict or persecution" (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014, p. 29). What is more dramatic is that two-thirds

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of refugees and displaced persons “continue to wait in exile for over five years, in some cases for generations, with no solutions in sight for millions of Palestinians, Somalis, Afghans, or Colombians among others” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014, p. 29). During the unjustified Russian invasion and war against peaceful people in Ukraine, more than 7 million Ukrainians became refugees. It has become the largest surge of refugees in Europe since World War II. To them we can add the countless “invisible” displaced people, not officially declared as such.

The aim of this article is to explore the processes of the formation of the refugee identity of the main character, Niloo, in Dina Nayeri's novel 'Refuge.' The research seeks to analyze how Niloo's agency is constructed through ongoing dialogues with her father and the exiled Iranians in Amsterdam. It delves into the concept of the refugee community and the idea that a collective exiled identity is shaped by the primal injury of oppression and exclusion. It ultimately argues that a refugee's past experiences cannot be ignored but should be integrated and acknowledged in the formation of their exiled identity.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Although migration has always been a part of history and a cause for historical changes, only during the period of nation-state formation did migrants and refugees become distinctively visible. Giorgio Agamben (2000) observes that “the first appearance of refugees as a mass phenomenon took place at the end of World War I, when the fall of Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and Ottoman empires, along with the new order created by the peace treaties upset profoundly the demographic and territorial constitution of Central Eastern Europe” (Agamben, 2000, p. 16-17). On the other side, Rina Benmayor and Andor Skotnes (1994) conclude that “massive migration has been a constant to the last five centuries of world history and has frequently been a key determinant of global developments” (Benmayor & Skotnes, 1994, p. 9).

Attention to migration and immigrants, and sensitivity to their “otherness” are the results of nation-state ideology and rhetoric. As Hanna Arendt (2007) and later Giorgio Agamben (2000) and Donatella Di Cesare (2020) point out, in the system of the nation-state there is no place for something like the pure human in itself. That is why “the status of the refugee has always been

considered a temporary condition that ought to lead either to naturalization or repatriation” (Agamben, 2000, p. 20).

Until the 19th century, refugees did not attract so much attention as they were not a threat to the idea of the nation-state. Agamben (2000) has argued that refugees are a destabilizing element in the order of the nation-state as they bring the originary fiction of sovereignty to a crisis. Writing about the crisis of today's nation-states, Agamben (2000) has emphasized that “Nation-state means a state that makes nativity or birth [*nascita*] (that is, naked human life) the foundation of its own sovereignty” (Agamben, 2000, p. 21). According to Agamben, birth comes into being immediately as nation. This idea is shared by Guy S. Goodwin-Gill (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014) who rightly underlines: “The movement of people between states, whether refugees or migrants, takes place in a context in which *sovereignty* remains important, and specifically that aspect of sovereign competence which entitles the state to exercise *prima facie* exclusive jurisdiction over its territory, and to decide who among non-citizens shall be allowed to enter and remain, and who shall be refused admission and required or compelled to leave” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al., 2014, p. 51). Thus, refugees are intertwined with the nation-states and border control. Moreover, their status and existential position are predetermined by the ideology of nation-states and the mythologizing of space, its idealization, and even sacralization. Mariya Shymchyshyn has summarized that “The history of perception of space and place in different historical periods and different cultures shows fundamental changes in the ways people have imagined the world” (Shymchyshyn, 2021, p. 14). To this we can add that during the emergence and consolidation of nation-states, the concept of space took on a central role, influencing not only their territorial boundaries but also shaping their cultural identities, legal frameworks, and socio-political structures.

Michael N. Barnett (2014) has claimed that refugees were not taken into consideration until the beginning of the 20th century because “states did not exert strict legal, political, and physical controls over their borders and hence for the most part people who were forced to flee their homeland had somewhere to go” (Barnett, 2014, p. 202). He writes that the legal category of refugee was formulated “only with the rise of nationalism and the consolidation of national states in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that governments began to introduce

immigration laws, passports, and other legal and administrative barriers to entry” (Barnett, 2014, p. 203). These new realities assigned new meaning to the category of refugee.

Just as the number of people who are forced to leave their country of origin continues to grow every year so are the fictional writings about them. Among many recent fictions of migration, the following bear mentioning: Kamila Shamsie’s *Salt and Saffron* (2001); Rose Tremain’s *The Colour* (2003); Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner* (2003); Caryl Phillips’ *Foreigners: Three English Lives* (2008); Julie Otsuka’s *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011); Jean Kwok’s *Girl in Translation* (2011); Evelyn Conlon’s *Not the Same Sky* (2013); Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah* (2013); Christina Henriquez’ *The Book of the Unknown Americans* (2014); A. (Alec) S. Patric’s *Black Rock White City* (2016); Mohsin Hamid’s *Exit West* (2018); Viet Thanh Nguyen’s *The Refugees* (2019); Luis Alberto Urrea’s *The House of Broken Angels* (2019); Valeria Luiselli’s *The Lost Children Archive* (2020); and Alberto Manguel’s *A Return* (2023). They all confirm that the experience of immigrants are of ontological and existential importance nowadays. Within this context, Michel Agier (2008) in his astute study of refugees has insisted that we need to write and talk about those who are left on “the margins of the world” and “excluded from the distribution of goods, spaces and powers” (Agier, 2008, p. viii) to challenge the stereotypes about them.

Methodology

Using both textual analysis and discourse analysis methods in the process of reading Dina Nayeri’s ‘Refuge’, I will examine the novel’s language and narrative structure to understand how it constructs the identities of migrant characters, as well as how those identities are shaped by broader social and political discourses. I will also look at how the novel’s language and narrative structure reflect or challenge dominant discourses about migrants and migration, and how those discourses relate to issues of power and inequality.

* As previously explored in our co-authored article “Between Remembering and Confession: A Refugee Narrative in Dina Nayeri’s *Refuge*” (2022) written together with Mariya Shymchysyn, I delved into certain aspects of this topic, providing a foundational framework for the analysis presented here.

Results and Discussion

Refugees’ Individual Memory

One of the main issues in migratory fictional works is the formation of a migrant’s identity under new social and cultural circumstances as well as the processes of negotiation between multiple identities. Writing about the various significations of migration, Carmen Zamorano Llana (2020) asserts that “the thematic analysis of how contemporary transnational migration redefines collective and individual identities as articulated in contemporary fiction is one of the most salient approaches to the study of contemporary literature in the age of globalization” (Llana, 2020, p. 7).

The present article will make an attempt to analyze the role of individual memory and remembering during the process of a refugee’s identity formation in Dina Nayeri’s novel “*Refuge*” (2017)*. Tabea Linhard and Timothy H. Parsons (2019) have noted that “Identities, and more specifically the identities of migrants, are not mere fusions of different nationalities or ethnicities; they are fractured and contradictory constructions” (Linhard & Parsons, 2019, p. 9). In Nayeri’s novel, the identity of Niloo, one of the main characters, is constructed partially through the revision of her childhood as well as her adult experience as a refugee. The realities of her life as a refugee produce a particular mode of narrative which contains fragments of traumatic moments, remnants of important memories, and feelings of loss and betrayal. They are all contextualized by her immigrant identity. These acts of memory are verbalized through her first-person narrative. What is important in this process of remembering is the gap between the narrator’s perception of the same events in the narrative past and narrative present**. Here we are dealing with the gap between the narrating I and the narrated I that was described by the narratologists Gérard Genette (Genette, 1983); Franz Stanzel (Stanzel, 1984); Paul Ricoeur (Ricoeur, 1986); Mark Currie (Currie, 2007). In the context of the novel due to this distance between the narrated episodic memory and its re-interpretation by the autodiegetic narrator, it is possible to follow the dynamics of Niloo’s identity formation. Changes

** More about the retrospective narrative in Dina Nayeri’s *Refuge* in Shymchysyn, M. & Chernyshova, S., 2022.

in her attitude to the narrated past signal the transformations she experiences in her life. The difference between her past self and present self shows the dynamics of her identity process, which moves from the resentment of Iranian belonging to its complete acceptance. On a broader scale, it is a movement from the 'other' she was to the self she has become.

The novel's plot concentrates on the relationships between Bahman Hamidi, a dentist in Isfahan, and his daughter Niloo. In 1987, his wife and children left Bahman in Iran and immigrated to the U.S. Using multiple focalizations, the novel tells the story of traumatic personal and political events. After some years of separation, Bahman and his family meet in Oklahoma, London, Madrid, and Istanbul. Family members bring personal tragedies as well as new expectations to these meetings. They suffer as they cannot unite the reality they left behind and the reality that has been transformed during their absence. With the passage of time everything changes: places, people, buildings, and everyday life. Apart from that, their relationship is burdened by Dr. Hamidi's addiction to opium.

The diegesis of the novel features the meetings between a father and a daughter that are described mostly through her first-person narrative. As was mentioned above, the important moment is when Niloo does not just remember or re-live those encounters, but when she begins reconsidering the emotional reactions, she had during them. Through external analepsis, Niloo selects those events from her past life experience that she regards as significant for her with the perspective and distance of time. Writing about narrative and memory, Astrid Erll observes, "While reconstructing the past we never proceed chronologically but jump from here to there, creating 'prolepses' and 'analepses'. Important events, and especially those which have a traumatic quality, tend to be remembered in a 'repeating' way" (Erll, 2009, p. 214). Therefore, first-person literary narrative is a fiction of episodic remembering, continues Erll.

To grasp Niloo's identity it is necessary to figure out what precise moments she personally considers the most important, how she connects them within the narrative, what the degree of their significance is, how often they repeat in the narrative, what their relation to each other is, and what the narrator's feelings about them are. The integration of this or that event into the plot and the omission of others give the reader the

understanding of what was important, traumatic, or pleasant for Niloo. In this context, Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson (1993) have suggested that the primacy of the narrative theme or competing themes "determines how events are processed and what criteria will be used to prioritize events and render meaning to them" (Somers & Gibson, 1993, p. 29). The novel's theme of refugee agency defines the evaluation principle of selecting events, experiences, and characters.

Ontological Narrative as a Mode of Verbalizing Refugee Identity

To analyze Niloo's narrative identity, we will use the notion of ontological narrative developed by Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson (1993). While writing about social identity and narrative, they differentiate between ontological, public, conceptual, and "meta" narratives. Whereas ontological narratives are used to define who we are, public narratives "are attached to cultural and institutional formations larger than the single individual" (Somers & Gibson, 1993, p. 31). According to Somers and Gibson (1993), "the aim of conceptual narratives is to devise a conceptual vocabulary that we can use to reconstruct and plot over time and space the ontological narratives and relationships of historical actors, the public and cultural narratives that inform their lives, and the crucial intersection of these narratives with the other relevant social forces" (Somers & Gibson, 1993, p. 32). The last dimension of narrativity, metanarratives, overlaps with the grand narratives of Lyotard (1984) and Foucault (1972).

Extrapolating this typology on the fictional narrative discourse, we can argue that the narrative in Dina Nayeri's novel is ontological as the diegetic narrator tries to make sense of her life and formulate her agency through negotiations with others. Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson (1993) have written: "To have some sense of social being in the world requires that lives be more than different series of isolated events or combined variables and attributes; ontological narratives thus process events into episodes. People act, or do not act, in part according to how they understand their place in any number of given narratives – however fragmented, contradictory, or partial" (Somers & Gibson, 1993, p. 30). Nehamas (1985), who has insisted that ontological narratives make identity and the self something that one becomes, echoes Somers and Gibson. In the novel Niloo makes sense of the past events in her life mostly through

the revision of meetings with her father. These meetings define the narrative trajectory of the novel as well as the dynamic of Niloo's inner self. Writing about a foreigner, Julia Kristeva underlines the role of meetings: "He [the foreigner] does not long for meetings, they draw him in. He experiences them as in a fit of dizziness, when distraught, he no longer knows whom he has seen nor who he is" (Kristeva, 1991, p. 11).

The first encounter with Bahman in Oklahoma City after many years of living apart is a kind of torture for his daughter. "What I didn't tell him is that I don't want to see him. My real Baba is a thirty-three-year-old storybook hero: untouchable, unquenchable, a star" (Nayeri, 2017, p. 27). During that meeting she is ashamed of her father, of his Iranian manners. She remembers the episode in the water park:

Many of my middle school classmates hung out at this water park. And here I was, after years of trying to seem American, arriving with my mustachioed father, his great cask of a belly blanketed in ginger fur, his neon Persian script trunks, a cigarette barely hanging on to his lips. He was a spectacle just stepping out of the car, even before he bellowed in the ticket line, in broken English, 'This! Oh watery paradise! Let us find proper verse for this day!' (Nayeri, 2017, p. 115)

Following not only the description of their first meeting but also Niloo's reflections about it, the reader witnesses through the medium of narrative the transformations of her identity. The narrator finishes this episode of her memory with the acknowledgment that she had been insensitive and even rude to her father. "I was too young then to see the sadness in his eyes when I crossed my arms and looked away, when I didn't help him off that bathroom floor, and on our final day, when I hardly said goodbye" (Nayeri, 2017, p. 120). This duality between the narrator and the experiencer allows the storyteller to feature the changes in her attitude to the past.

As the narrative evolves, the initially negative dynamic of the relationship between the daughter and her father becomes positive. The reconciliation between them at the end of the novel is achieved through the long process of negotiations. Niloo makes sense of what has happened or is happening to her by integrating meetings with her father into a coherent narrative of her life. Considering the role of narrative for the self, Charles Taylor (1989) has emphasized that "because we cannot but orient ourselves to

the good, and thus determine our place relative to it ..., we must inescapably understand our lives in narrative form..." (Taylor, 1989, p. 51-52). In the context of the novel, Niloo makes sense of her life only after re-visioning and narrating her relationship with her father.

Remembering meetings with her father, the narrator revises her past, her worldviews, and her attitudes towards her people. On the other hand, the figure of the father is a metaphor for Iran, Niloo's native country. She compares, "My Baba at thirty-three was Iran from a time. And now... his decline and Iran's are the same for me. On the rare occasions when he phones, he complains that I never visit: *Come and see your grandmother, Niloo joon*. But I ask him to meet me in other cities in foreign countries, whenever he can get a visa" (Nayeri, 2017, p. 27). Niloo is uneager to return as she doesn't want to face the changes that had taken place after she had left. Moreover, she was rejecting her Iranian identity; she did not want to be associated with Iran ever since she had arrived in the U.S. "At fourteen, most of my nightmares involved my classmates exposing me for this or that. I was afraid they would find out that I had missed an entire decade of American music, that I was from that country that forces women into drabness, that I knew only about a quarter of their slang" (Nayeri, 2017, p. 97). Later, the changes she feels toward her father are also symptomatic of her attitude towards Iran.

With every meeting, father and daughter become closer to each other. Niloo realizes that she could not hide under the mask of a successful American scholar and ignore her Iranian past. Step by step she recovers her Iranian self as an essential part of her identity. At the end of the novel, the acceptance of her father, his Iranian behavior as well as his philosophical parables explicate her own reclaiming of an Iranian identity. In this context it is worth quoting Amin Maalouf (2001), who in his work *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, writes: "In the age of globalization and of the ever-accelerating intermingling of elements in which we are all caught up, a new concept of identity is needed, and needed urgently. We cannot be satisfied with forcing billions of bewildered human beings to choose between excessive assertion of their identity and the loss of their identity altogether, between fundamentalism and disintegration" (Maalouf 2001: 35). Niloo's ambivalence toward her Iranian identity, her moral sufferance as a part of her migratory and refugee experience is resolved by the end of the novel.

Places of Refugee Belonging

In the context of migration and mobility, sense of place gains new perspectives and perceptions. Place is important for the identity of migrants as they settle not only in a new geographical space but in a place that has been assigned meaning before they arrived. Here we have the differentiation between space as the abstract container of human activity and a place that is full of memory, experience, everyday practice, and history. The notion of home gains new meaning in forced migration, which has been conceptualized in scholarship (Allan & Crow, 1989; Chapman & Hockey, 1999; Cresswell, 1996; Rapport and Dawson, 1998; Webster, 1998). For an immigrant, home is not “a static” place, but rather an assemblage of things, belongings, and fragments of material culture from a distant homeland put together in a new place. In the introductory part of the book “Uprootings/Regroundings”, which provides a framework for rethinking home and migration, the editors underline that “The affectivity of home is bound up with the temporality of home, with the past, the present and the future. It takes time to feel at home. For those who have left their homes, a nostalgic relation to both the past and home might become part of the lived reality in the present” (Ahmed et al., 2003, p. 9). Home is not only a place left behind, but it is also a future destination. Niloo’s experience of dislocation provides the conditions for her reconceptualization of herself as well as the notion of home.

The novel features the concept of home as a locus of individual private space that differs from a patriarchal semiotics of home as a family space. Niloo has lived in different places, but she does not connect her identity with them. She moves from one place to another and tries to experience the same intimate links with the locus she lost in Iran. It can be argued that she is yearning for a private physical place as she doesn’t belong to any communal space after leaving her homeland. Later, she would arrange her own private space, which her husband Guillaume called the Perimeter: “...in one corner of their bedroom, apart from the clutter, Niloo had arranged a neat little rectangle of items – two long umbrellas and two walls forming a border around Niloo’s backpack; her mother-of-pearl jewelry box; a small folder containing her passport, naturalization papers, and diplomas; and a box of sentimental books, her father’s photos, some rocks and trinkets from Iran” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 38). She needs her own place not only to keep the most valuable belongings but to signify her

identity, her desire to preserve some distance between the world and herself. Even her partner Guillaume cannot enter her private zone.

Migrants are deprived of their private spaces as they always share their rooms with someone else. Niloo’s idea of the Perimeter came during her years in Oklahoma City. “Our apartment was nothing remarkable as immigrant situations go, but to me, it was a nightmare. Some time spent in typical pass-through countries, Italy and the United Arab Emirates, had depleted the funds. We had Mama’s small income and dark, two-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a two-story complex” (Nayeri 2017: 98). Even in the tiny rooms of their apartment, she managed to carve out the smallest privacy.

From time to time Niloo sits in the Perimeter and looks through “nine documents that entitle her to life” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 47). This square meter of space that she takes with her from country to country gives her a sense of belonging. “For decades she’s tried to make homes for herself, but she is always a foreigner, always a guest – that forever refugee feeling, that constant need for a meter of space, the Perimeter she carries on her back” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 47). Thus, the only place to belong is the Perimeter. Later, when Niloo finds a group of Iranian refugees in Amsterdam she agrees with Gui that they had become her new Perimeter. She includes them in her private space, while she denies this to Gui. In a broader sense, it can be argued that Niloo’s sense of belonging has been fulfilled after finding a diaspora community. Home is made and remade based on the process of her identification. The desire to isolate herself from the diaspora was later substituted by her eagerness to unite with the Iranians. As a result, the closed Perimeter opens to the world.

Meeting the Forgotten Self

Developing the concept of liquid modernity, Zygmunt Bauman (2000) has claimed that “Becoming ‘a refugee’ means to lose the media on which social existence rests, that is a set of ordinary things and persons that carry meanings – land, house, village, city, parents, possessions, jobs, and other daily landmarks. These creatures in drift and waiting have nothing but their ‘naked life’, whose continuation depends on humanitarian assistance” (Bauman, 2000, p. 40). Michel Agier (2008) echoes Baumann: “...displaced people and refugees find themselves for a time placed outside the *nomos*, outside the ordinary human law. Their existence is based on the loss of a geographical place, to



which were attached attributes of identity, relationship and memory, and likewise on the absence of any new social place” (Agier, 2008, p. 29). In new countries foreigners establish their places of belonging where they meet. Usually, they gather in abandoned loci, cheap street cafes, and public spaces.

Niloo’s experiences of being a refugee come to life in her memory after she encounters the Iranian immigrants in Amsterdam. One day she found the Persian squat and arts space in a former factory in Amsterdam where the Iranian people meet. First, Niloo is intrigued and excited to see those “who have familiar names and might be distant cousins” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 75). Niloo studies them as “she has studied people and objects her entire life” (Nayeri, 2017, 75). Initially, she comes to the gatherings out of pure interest and her inner crisis, but as the narrative evolves, these meetings become the beginning of her identity reconsideration as well as the revision of her relationship with her father. The meetings of immigrants are unlike any other meeting as they are strongly connected with the lost country. Immigrants enjoy shared recollections about places and practices they left behind.

Listening to the refugees’ confessions, Niloo recalls the moments of her suffering. On the first night in America, she along with her mother and brother, slept at Jesus House, a homeless shelter in Oklahoma City. This night and two years of being a refugee divides her life into two parts: “the years of idling among mulberry trees in her village, sitting barefoot with Baba on the cool stone floor of his childhood home, of sated calm, followed by the years of academic rise and financial gain, American prosperity” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 37). That one night staying in the shelter was as traumatic as two years of miserable refugee life. The memory of that night is so painful for Niloo that “it returns every time she wastes an hour, a dollar, an opportunity” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 37). Her successful career, her marriage, her desire to distance herself from the migrant communities can be explained through that traumatic night, through her fear to return to the shelter. In this context, it can be argued that the Perimeter is a kind of spatial opposition to that Jesus House in Oklahoma City. It guarantees her no return to that miserable locus.

Although Niloo was not apolitical, she had never considered the situation her people face abroad. After getting to know about the lives of Iranians in Amsterdam, she sympathizes with them and tries to help them with petitions. In return they

give her emotional support as she is trying to mend the distorted dialogue between her Iranian identity and her American self. This long process of negotiation between different identities is reinforced by encountering people with broken fates. The identity of a refugee is constructed on the primal trauma of oppression and exclusion. Niloo builds an imaginary bond with others who share in the suffering.

One of them is Mam’mad, a scholar and a university professor, who was arrested and harassed in Iran. His works “were torn apart by people without even a first degree” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 151). Living in Amsterdam, he still fears political persecution. Mam’mad confesses: “I came with Scholars at Risk. They invite you to give lectures, and if it's too dangerous to go home, they help you with asylum petitions” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 146). The other young Iranian Karim left his wife in Iran and lives illegally in Amsterdam. After meetings with the Iranians and listening to their confessions, Niloo realizes that they are left to themselves, and nobody cares about their lives. “She has watched the news from Iran every day since June. She wonders if people like Gui and his colleagues are aware of what the Iranian exiles suffer here in the Netherlands, without homes, always under threat of deportation, some living in squats, others on the streets” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 76). The continual focus on injury binds those who suffered from humiliation and discrimination. Focusing on the politics of suffering and on a fetishization of victimization gives rise to a refugee’s identity.

On the other side, state bureaucracy and authorities do not pay enough attention to refugees’ wretched living conditions and humiliation. Very often the decisions are unjust: “The embassies and the agencies are run by poorly educated Western bureaucrats. If your translator has an American or Dutch accent, like yours or Siavash’s, your story gets believed. If not, then not” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 147). The Iranian refugees disclose before Niloo the harsh reality of bureaucratic mechanisms that do not deal with the real situations but with the narratives that often are well-rendered lies written for those who are well-connected. Meanwhile, the real victims are “too traumatized to relive anything, and don’t know any good translators” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 147). All these meetings provoke Niloo to recall her situation in Rome, where her mother with two children petitioned for refuge because of religious beliefs. The reason why the officer believed her was because he interviewed Niloo about some facts from the Bible. A naïve child’s answers persuaded the bureaucrat and the United

States granted asylum to the Hamidis. After remembering that moment, Niloo agrees to translate for Karim who is trapped in the bureaucratic system of petitions.

The Iranians in Amsterdam are not as lucky as she had been. They struggle every day, but with no hope. Karim admits, “as far as I see it, every immigration office is the same. They are all like the *dehati* fiancé who takes you ring shopping again and again and never buys you one” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 153). Karim has spent ten years in Holland and still, he does not hope to be legalized. He has not seen his wife and children, but nobody cares about it: “... no Westerner has ever wanted to be involved in Karim’s life. The state provided shelter for a time, bureaucrats gave legal advice, charities gave clothes, but the hands that delivered these institutional offerings kept a cold distance. Maybe they know that, once invited in, refugees need a lot of favors” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 160). The negative dynamic of a refugee’s life is based on the reliving of oppression and suffering.

Taking into consideration the harsh realities of a refugee’s life, Niloo cannot imagine her father surviving in Amsterdam. Not belonging to this culture, he wouldn’t cope with the humiliation and misery that refugees encounter. His dignity would be ruined by the circumstances refugees are forced to face. Niloo remembers how proud her father becomes when he tells the story of their great-great-grandfather, a skilled doctor, who one day healed a sultan or shah and they paid him his weight in gold. The doctor later purchased Ardestoon, the village where the Hamidis live.

Joining the Iranian community in Amsterdam has become crucial for Niloo’s identity. There she finds not only people who feel and think as she does but also she realizes that her life has gained sense and meaning. “She is part of an important movement, she has friends linked to her by blood, culture, and native words, she feels something like purpose. It seems that for years she has lived under a mild, teetering sedation, waiting for a spell to break, for something to puncture her skin, releasing the weariness and bringing her back to the waking world” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 211). Therefore, the connection with the exiled Iranians leads to the resignification of Niloo’s identity.

The novel covers the historical moment when Ahmadinejad was inaugurated for a second term as the president of Iran. Protests against his dictatorship were organized in different European countries and the U.S. This crucial

situation evokes emotions of belonging in Niloo’s soul. She starts to identify herself with the misfortunes and difficulties of her people. After a long period of her distancing from politics, she takes an active part in opposing the Iranian dictator. “Niloo dresses in green and joins the protestors, holding the sign over her face as a small array of local magazine writers photograph them and ask for quotes” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 209). The fate of her people who suffer from humiliation abroad and terror at home force Niloo to reconsider her identity. The political domain becomes the space of her self-recreation. She places herself in the situation of exodus and refuses the comfort zone of being just an American scholar. As Michel Agier (2008) has observed, the forging of identity in the context of forced migration is burdened with different crises: “every human being, placed in this situation of exodus, waiting and non-definition must recompose themselves from a basis of destitution. By grasping human identity at the sites of its denial, we inquire more directly into its foundations: this is the revolt of life in contact with death” (Agier, 2008, p. 5).

Another aspect of Niloo’s identity crisis is the revision of her relationship with Gui. Suddenly she feels his otherness, his strangeness. An acute understanding of the gap between Niloo’s Iranian self and his French identity leads to distancing herself from him. Apart from that, she realizes that for a long time she suffered from an inferiority complex because she is a non-Westerner. Niloo wishes that her husband were from Iran. “She imagines being stronger than she was then, poor but independent, about having a young lover who speaks her native tongue, who eats the same dishes and understands Maman’s jokes, a man to whom her parents will sound as educated as they are” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 211). One Iranian immigrant notices these changes in Niloo, the acknowledgment of her core identity, “Now you’re in love with you. The original you. Not this boring American lady who makes lists” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 219).

The climax of the novel is Mam’mad’s suicide after long years of having fought in vain with Dutch bureaucracy. Having suffered and witnessed acts of dehumanization in a tolerant Western society where nobody cares about his desperate situation, he decides to end his suffering. For him, it was the only way to become visible as he constituted an invisible part of the collective identity of refugees, imposed on them by the dominant host society. They are perceived as unwanted victims, social burdens. Michel Agier (2008) has reflected on the

existential situation of refugees: “The states of apathy and depression, expressions of aggressiveness or intolerance, that are noted by psychologists in displaced persons, come back to this lack of definition, and ultimately to a more or less lasting space-time of anomie: a life without *nomos*, with no stable law to integrate their fate into that of humanity in general” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 30). Stigmatization of refugees reproduce the terms of segregation. Segregation aims to protect refugees from the superiority of the surrounding society “as well as to protect the dominant society from possible contamination by different groups, weak or abnormal” (Agier, 2008, p. 32).

The description of media coverage of Mam’mad’s suicide illustrates the attitudes of political forces toward refugees. The narrator underlines that the Dutch outlets sound different from the Persian ones. According to the Dutch media, Mam’mad argued with a group of strangers, while the Persian *Payvand News* reports that his motive for “the self-immolation was the Dutch government’s denial of his plea for asylum” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 221). The novel’s exegesis of Mam’mad’s suicide demonstrates different news outlets’ framing of immigration coverage. According to research done by several scholars (e.g. Aalberg et al., 2012; Costello & Hodson, 2011; Florack, Piontkowski, Rohmann, Balzer, & Perzig, 2003; van der Linden & Jacobs, 2016), media coverage of migration in Europe focuses mostly on cultural and economic threats that lead to negative attitudes toward immigrants. It causes stigmatization of immigrant groups and their alienation. Niloo’s sincere attitude toward the events in Iran and her support of the exiled Iranians in Amsterdam contrast with journalists’ sheer interests and lack of principles. Their real concerns are guided by political provocations and the absence of sympathy.

It is not a coincidence that after Mam’mad’s suicide Niloo decides to move into her new apartment although it has not been finished yet. The real and symbolic gesture of relocation signifies overcoming her inferiority complex as well as the masochistic logic of suffering. The broken trajectory of her life has led her to a solitary place, where she re-thinks her past, her neglected father, her feelings toward Gui, and “the new Niloo” (Nayeri, 2017, p. 263) she was trying to create. It is the place to mourn her friend Mam’mad and to heal her wounds.

Conclusions

It can be argued that Dina Nayeri’s novel *Refuge* contributes to the fiction of migration and exemplifies the increased awareness of the weight of migration in contemporary fictional discourse. The novel focuses on the Iranian family and their lives after leaving Iran. One of the main characters, Niloo, builds her identity through the ontological narrative that is concentrated on the revision of her relationship with her father and her meetings with the exiled Iranians in Amsterdam.

Her reluctance to uphold connections with her father is transformed through the novel’s dynamics. In the end, Niloo recognizes that she needs to embrace her Iranian self and establish a dialogue with her father.

The other important issue for a refugee identity discussed in the article is place and home. A refugee’s sense of home and place is configured differently to that of those who were never forced to leave their country. A migrant’s homemaking starts with a private isolated locus that as time flows opens itself to the world and merges with it.

The last part of the article deals with the notion of the refugee community and the idea that exiled collective identity is constructed on the primal trauma of oppression and exclusion. Niloo’s meetings with her people stimulate her to reconsider that part of herself she was trying to suppress. Moreover, the reconciliation with her former neglected self became possible after her meeting the Iranian immigrants. The negotiations of Niloo’s personal socio-cultural position end with her acknowledgement of her transnational identity.

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