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Between Remembering and Confession: A Refugee Narrative in Dina Nayeri's *Refuge*

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Abstract: This article focuses on the retrospective narrative in the Iranian American novelist Dina Nayeri's *Refuge* (2017). We argue that the novel's interpretations of acts of remembering, which presuppose confession and re-evaluation, define the ways of constructing the refugee identity of the main character, Niloo. Within the discourse of retrospection, the self appears in the mode of reflection over past events, and thanks to temporal distance, the self can verbalize changes in perception of the past self. Thus, retrospection becomes a psychological and narrative endeavor during which identity is created through the experience of re-evaluation. The interaction between then and now as well as their final convergence in the end of the novel result in the continuity of experience and coherence of identity. Niloo's ontology of becoming is possible through the re-living of the past, its interpretation, and its integration into the present. In other words, the possibility of reflection over experience is the very condition for her becoming. The main character concentrates on her meetings with her father in different cities (Oklahoma City, London, Madrid, and Istanbul) and her re-evaluation of her emotional experience during those meetings. These moments of re-evaluation explicate the dynamics of her identity construction, which shifts from a rejection of her past to an embrace of it.

Key terms: remembering, memory, retrospective narrative, confession, refugee identity, immigration, Iranian American literature, Dina Nayeri's *Refuge*

During Russia's unjustified invasion and war against peaceful people in Ukraine, more than 8 million Ukrainians became refugees as part of the largest refugee surge in Europe since World War II. To them we can add the countless 'invisible'

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displaced people not officially declared as refugees. They were forced to leave their homes, abandon their family nests, and search for a new fate somewhere else. They brought with them not only personal tragedies, ruined lives, and disrupted careers, but have also become a reminder to the world of how unstable and unsafe it is, how difficult the struggle of a nation-state against an empire is. They became victims of geopolitical games and the redistribution of resources, capital, and technology. Their suffering and deaths were necessary to achieve imperial ambitions. This barbaric twenty-first-century war devalues and makes irrelevant all declarations and grand narratives about tolerance, democracy, and peace that were produced in the Western world. Moreover, this Russian war against Ukraine, which happens to be the biggest war in Europe since 1945, has disclosed the problem of forced migration. Ukrainian refugees have provoked the necessity to reconsider a long-standing attitude toward migrants as dispossessed beggars and to think critically about the West's antagonistic dichotomies. Today's transcultural encounter within the war realities embraces the process of working out a new vocabulary of migration based on interconnectedness and interdependence. Although the present article deals with the refugee experience of an Iranian woman, the structures of feelings as well as the narrative strategies of their verbalization embody the existential situation of forced migration per se and are relevant to the new migration crises in the world.

Refugees are changing the flow of life in their host countries, contributing their talents, skills, and experience to their host communities. Moreover, today when the world witnesses such massive movements of people, the whole idea of centralized nation-states, with divisions between 'us and them', becomes shattered. Michel Agier in *On the Margins of the World: The Refugee Experience Today* observes: "The world of the displaced and refugees has been created before our eyes, or at least in our time: the result of dirty wars, terror, and the brutal stripping bare of individual life, flight, and the formation of new refugee camps, illegality and the spectacle of nameless victims" (2008: 2–3). People who were forced to leave their countries bear with them existential tragedies which are unreadable and inaccessible for those who host them in new places. As the stigmatized Other, refugees evoke sympathy or alertness, bringing unpredictability and sometimes despair to the organized life of host countries.

Experiencing the feelings of loss and exile, the displaced are longing for a new identity as a secure anchor of their new existence. They are ready to follow the rules of the new life and forget the past. Hannah Arendt in her essay *We Refugees* wrote the following about forgetting:

We were told to forget, and we forgot quicker than anybody ever could imagine. In a friendly way we were reminded that the new country would become a new home; and after four

weeks in France or six weeks in America, we pretended to be Frenchmen or Americans. The more optimistic among us would even add that their whole former life had been passed in a kind of unconscious exile and only their new country now taught them what a home really looks like. (2008: 265)

Nevertheless, during this act of attempting to forget, immigrants realize that the past is already a part of their selves, and it always will be. Collective or individual amnesia is not the way toward healing for those who were injured during massive tragedies. Dominick LaCapra in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* emphasizes: “Working through trauma involves the effort to articulate or rearticulate affect and representation in a manner that may never transcend, but may to some viable extent counteract, a reenactment, or acting out, of that disabling dissociation” (2001: 42). Traumatic events need to be worked out through the verbal acts of reflection or confession. Such verbal acts become the instruments for building refugees’ coherent present identity. The dispossessed construct their identities on memories, as they constantly re-examine the past to find in it those crucial moments on which to build their present selves. The homodiegetic narrative act has the capacity to give coherence and meaning to a narrator’s fragmented memory. Significant in these processes is not just remembering, but the re-evaluation of the past as the re-evaluation shows the dynamics of self-formation, the changes in an individual’s feelings about the past. In its turn, the narrative construction of self is based on reconsidering past experiences.

The object of this article is to study the retrospective interpretation of personal experience in Dina Nayeri’s novel *Refuge* as a function of refugees’ identity formation. Narratives are both models of the world and models of the self because through them we construct ourselves as part of the universe. The connections between narrative practice and the self, whether individual or collective, have been discussed extensively.¹ On the whole, Donald Polkinghorne summarizes: “We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of the narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story” (1988: 150). Peter Brooks in *Reading for the Plot* (1984) adds that we need narrative and plot as the systems of understanding and negotiations with reality, as the principal ordering force. As far as narratives structure collective as well as individual histories and experience, their analysis provides the framework for understanding the dynamics of becoming a self or a collectivity.

¹ See Elizabeth Bruss (1976); Charles Taylor (1989); Paul Ricoeur (1984–1988); Paul John Eakin (1992; 1999; 2003); Jerome Bruner (1991; 2003); Rom Harré (2001); Michael Bamberg (2005); Jens Brockmeier (2001); Monika Fludernik (2003); Jens Brockmeier and Donald Carbaugh (2001).

Emphasizing the narrative construction of the self, it is important to consider the role of retrospection and confession in this process. Retrospective narratives organize the fragments of memory into a cohesive life version and, what is more important, exemplify the changes that the present self acknowledges about the interpretation of past events. The issues of memory and narrative, the interweaving of memory and identity, and the forms of literary memories have been broadly discussed in literary studies.² As the starting theoretical premise for this article, we can use Brigit Neumann's statement about the literary representation of memory:

Events that took place in the past are recollected only later, i.e., in the present, and are represented as the memories experienced by a narrator or a figure. The constitutive characteristic of all fictions of memory is therefore their operating with co-present time perspectives: the multi-temporal levels of the past and the present intermingle in manifold and complex ways. This kind of organization does not merely establish a consecutive order, not merely a chain of elements along the arrow of time, but a reference frame in which each event is related to others in both a forward and backward direction: each event is both marked by all preceding events and evokes expectations about events to come. (2010: 335–336)

If the continuity of experience is achieved through overcoming the dichotomy between then and now and through the interaction between an 'experiencer' and a narrator, then confession and re-evaluation in their turn provide the evidence of identity fluidity and development. The erosion of a time split, possible in retrospective narrative, matters for a narrating self as the possibility of integrating the past into the present self. Confessional narrative becomes, then, a psychological activity during which identity is created. Thomas Docherty underlines that a fictional act of confession is a way of expressing identity (2014: 28). Besides recounting facts about the past self, retrospection implies the logic of building the self from the revised fragments of the past and rendering the difference between the past self and the present self. As Müller-Funk suggests, "all forms of memory are explicitly or implicitly based on retrospective narratives that seek to cross the unbridgeable gap between the time of narrating and the time of the events that will be narrated" (2003: 207). In retrospective narrative, the past self is reconsidered by the present self, and narrative identity is expressed through the difference between the past and the past perceived by the present.

The retrospective interpretation of individual or collective experience which dominates migratory fiction deepens the dynamic of identity as it consists not

² See David Carr (1986); James Olney (1998); Mike Petry (1999); Dominick LaCapra (2001); Brigit Neumann (2010); Martin Löschnigg (2010); Astrid Erll (2009); Ansgar Nünning (2003); Mark Currie (2007); Wolfgang Müller-Funk (2003).

only of description of past events burdened by trauma and humiliation but also of constant negotiations with them, driven by the necessity to achieve integrity between then and now through overcoming negativity and hostility towards the past. Extrapolating Martin Löschnigg's thoughts about the autobiographical act not as the one which emphasizes "the duality of narrator and experiencer" but as "an attempt by a detached subject to interpret itself as object" (2010: 259), we can argue that a homodiegetic confessional narrative has the same logic of recounting events.

This order of retrospective narrative plays a significant role for refugees' personal identity. After years spent in host countries, immigrants revise their attitudes to the native lands and heritage they left behind. It is not only nostalgia that saturates their narratives and existence, but the desire to embrace the layers of the previously rejected self. Torn between cultural assimilation and diasporic isolation, they achieve their narrative and individual integrity only through acknowledging the past and verbalizing it. The dispossessed need their confessions as "revelation of an obscured interiority" (Docherty 2014: 29). Through their narrative act they express their subjectivity: "The I recognizes itself as a name, as an identity, if and only if it constructs a narrative scene in which recognition (and misrecognition of itself) is possible" (Docherty 2014: 29). Moreover, narrative identities of refugees described in contemporary migratory novels signal a shift from postmodern subjectivity as fragmented to one which is whole and coherent. This mapping out of a new sense of self goes through sincere self-discovery rather than postmodern self-irony.

The identity crisis and identity formation of a refugee construct this kind of narrative scene in Dina Nayeri's novel *Refuge*, which is a constituent part of the Iranian American literary tradition. The literature of Iranian Americans has been deeply connected with the history of Iranian American collectivity as well as with the Iranian national identity. The Iranian revolution of 1979 and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) became the dominant factors that forced countless Iranians to leave their country. Many of them settled in the United States although there were tensions between Iran and the United States since 1953 and especially since 1984, when "the United States, through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), funded and staged a coup to remove from power the popular and democratically-elected prime minister, Mohammed Mosaddegh" (Karim and Rahimieh 2008: 8). Years later, in 2002, President George W. Bush called Iran part of the "Axis of Evil" (Rahimieh 2007). The same year the US accused Iran of a clandestine nuclear weapons program. As a result, sanctions were imposed by the UN, the US, and the EU against ultra-conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's government. Relations between the two countries worsened in May 2019, when the US tightened the sanctions targeting Iran's oil exports and Iran began a counter-pressure campaign.

These political events have provoked Iranian Americans to write about their exile experience and their cultural heritage. Their writings are “complicated by the fact that since the 1979 revolution, Iran has often been singularly vilified in US political discourse and media” (Amirrezvani and Karim 2013: ix). Writers concentrated on forced migration and correspondingly on the problems of past, memory, nostalgia, and the desire to return. At the same time, as Persis Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh observe, “[f]or the generation of Iranian-Americans coming of age in the post-exile, post-revolution period, literature became a vehicle by which to wrestle with their origins and the landscape of their American identity. This new group of writers is conscious of its hyphenated existence” (2008: 11). For this new generation, issues of identity emerge from the realities of trans-culturalism and are reformulated in terms of hybridity. Iranian American writers such as Gina Nahai, Dena Afrasiabi, Nahid Rachlin, Taha Abrahimi, Omid Fallahzad, and Laleh Khadivi propose a new sense of the self that is not burdened with the past. Instead, the past is considered a part of their new becoming. Aware of their personal and collective histories of displacement, they experiment with fluid forms of identities.

As part of their analysis of the recent Iranian-American anthologies *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories and Essays by Iranian-Americans* (Karim and Khorrami 1999) and *Let Me Tell You Where I've Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (Karim 2006), Persis Karim and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami identify a new shift in Iranian-American fictional writings that are “questioning the rigidities of identity itself” (Karim and Rahimieh 2008: 12). Nevertheless, immigrants always find themselves torn between nostalgia and new expectations, between the process of loss and desire to integrate. This ‘inbetweenness’ constitutes the dominant theme of migration fiction. Writing about the dialectics of exile, Sophia A. McClennen emphasizes that exiled authors “depict cultural identity as caught between abstract theories of boundary-free identity, the politics and problematics of representation, and the painful realities of exile, authoritarianism, and social marginalization” (2004: 2).

In the context of exile fiction, Dina Nayeri's writings are important as they are deeply rooted in these ideas. She has published two novels, *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* (2014) and *Refuge* (2017), and a book of creative nonfiction, *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019), winner of the *Geschwister-Scholl-Preis*. Nayeri describes refugee identity and life through the prism of her own experience. She was born in Iran (Isfahan) in 1979 and spent her early childhood there. In the essay “The Ungrateful Refugee”, first published in *The Guardian*, she recollects that the first eight years of her life she lived in the belly of wartime Iran. When her mother converted to Christianity, they were forced to leave the country.

After two years of refugee shelters in Dubai and Rome, the family was finally accepted by the United States and sent to Oklahoma. First, they were perceived as

frightening strangers from a war-torn country, but later, after long years of struggle for recognition, they assimilated. Nayeri writes about the painful process of denying the former self needed for an acceptance in a new country:

But there were unspoken conditions to our acceptance, and that was the secret we were meant to glean on our own: we had to be grateful. The hate wasn't about being darker, or from elsewhere. It was about being those things and daring to be unaware of it. As refugees, we owed them our previous identity. We had to lay it at their door like an offering, and gleefully deny it to earn our place in this new country. There would be no straddling. No third culture here. (2017a: n. pag.)

People were not interested in the Nayeris' former personal experience if that experience was not traumatic or negative. They wanted to hear stories that confirmed how lucky the refugees were to escape their country and how grateful they must be to the receiving country. Eventually, Nayeri transformed from an asylum seeker into an American girl. When she was 30 years old, she married a French citizen and became a Frenchwoman. All these identity shifts and people's reactions to them caused her to acknowledge: "Sometimes all that's left of value in an exile's life is his identity. Please stop asking people to rub out their face as tribute" (Nayeri 2017a: n. pag.). Her writings, based on her personal refugee experience, question today's wide-spread theories of fluid and unfixed identities. She argues for our desire to connect with the collective past, the shared memories, and encourages not to scarify our former selves just to become grateful refugees.

The novel *Refuge* evolves through the processes of self-definition of Niloo, Dr. Hamidi's daughter, who left Iran when she was a child and grew up in Oklahoma City. Years later she graduated from Yale and settled in Amsterdam, where she lives with her husband Gui and teaches Anthropology at the university. The main plot is concentrated on her retrospective interpretations of meetings between Dr. Hamidi, who lives in Iran, and his family, which was forced to leave the country because of their mother's religious beliefs, and which resides in the US. The retrospective re-evaluation of the past helps Niloo find the pathway to her present identity and allows her to grasp the grounds of her psychological discomfort. Her retrospection goes from the state of her early negation of Iranian identity to complete acceptance of it in the end. Only through retrospective interpretation of her experience can she verbalize the dynamics of her becoming and explain her negativity toward her father as well as Iran in general. As Brigit Neumann concludes: "The remembering I constitutes his or her own identity in the dialogue with his or her past self, a process within which the differential aspects of identity are, ideally, integrated into a temporal continuum in the narrative modus, and are displayed as a relative unity" (2010: 336).

The novel begins in two places simultaneously: Isfahan (Iran) and Amsterdam (Netherlands) in 2009. It has two narrative voices: third and first person. The daughter's story is rendered in both the first and the third person, while the father's story is told in the third person. Therefore, there is a constant shift from homodiegetic to heterodiegetic narration. Moreover, there is a division in the homodiegetic narration between the experiencing self and the narrating self, who is the vantage point of narration. Niloo's retrospection begins during a moment of existential crisis. She is suffering from depression despite the fact that her life is going smoothly: she is teaching at the university and expecting to move with her husband into a brand-new apartment in Amsterdam. The narrator remembers her feelings during the time when she believed her life was successful:

Lately Gui was spending much more time at work. I didn't mind; I had my own work and we had long agreed to prioritize our careers. Besides, Gui's job made our lives comfortable in ways I had never experienced before. What else could I want? A part of me delighted in showing Baba all that I now had. See? I've made a good life. Who would imagine that I was once a refugee kid in Oklahoma? That I had ever stood in a breakfast line in a hostel outside Rome, or worn ill-fitting clothes from the Salvation Army, or spent a night in Jesus House? This is happiness. (Nayeri 2017b: 272)

Despite her happy marriage, social position, good career, and rich life, Niloo feels dissatisfaction and lives with a constant urge to prove that she is not the Other in Western society. Her existence is filled with anxiety, caused by fear of doing something wrong or inappropriate. Describing the first years of her marriage, the third-person narrator observes, "[e]arly in their courtship, Niloo adopted a habit of asking Gui after every party or meal, 'Did I behave well?'" (Nayeri 2017b: 47). Being socially read as racially different, Niloo experiences symbolic violence inflicted through coded expressions in everyday-life situations. The more she tries to be a Westerner, the more bitter are her reactions to the indirect expression of racism. Niloo has learned the rules of white society, but in following them, she has lost some part of herself, of her core identity. With the passage of years, she realizes this incompleteness of her life: "She might tell him secrets from her night walks. That nothing feels finished enough, ever. That she left something crucial back in Isfahan and can't remember what it is" (Nayeri 2017b: 87). Step by step, she realizes the lost connection with her past, which leads her to joining the Iranians in Amsterdam. On the level of narrative transmission, this realization is marked by a shift from third-person to first-person narration.

The moment Niloo meets the Iranian community is the point where her retrospective first-person narrative starts aiming at the re-vision of her identity. Jens Brockmeier explains about the initial thirst to narrate one's life:

Something extraordinary has occurred, a turning point in life, success or crisis, an unexpected revelation, self-doubt or catharsis. Now, perhaps in a moment of recovering one's breath, the question arises, triggering the narrative event: How could it all happen, how was it all possible? In so far as the story then tries to give an answer to this question, the narrative event (and the extraordinary situation it is embedded in) usually appears as a sort of result or even consequence of the narrated event. (2001: 253)

For Niloo, the moment of acute awareness that she is lacking something urges her to revise the past. The retrospective interpretation of her experience leads her to understanding that she needs to embrace and come to terms with the past not just to resist it or forget.

The family meetings in different places (Oklahoma City, London, Madrid, and Istanbul) are described through Niloo's perspective and play an important role for her, as an internal focalizer. Her detailed accounts of them signal their significance and emotional power for her. The first-person retrospective narrative establishes two timelines: the narrative past and the narrative present. The homodiegetic part of the story, told by Niloo, provides a personal experience of a former refugee who is trying to construct a new identity. It is the homodiegetic narrator who provides the continuity between experience and narrative; that is what Gérard Genette (1983) has termed 'homodiegesis': a rootedness of the narrative voice in the world of the narrative.

Although the narrative situation switches from a homodiegetic to a heterodiegetic narrator, meetings between the father and daughter are presented mostly through her retrospection. If the present, as Mark Currie suggests, is "nothing in itself, but is actually constituted by its relations to past and future" (2007: 75), then for Niloo the present is only about the past. The absence of future or proleptic elements signals that she has not yet come to terms with her past. An individual needs to think over the past to have a future. In migration fiction, the past is always a path to travel to build a future. Accordingly, the experience of the past dominates narratives of exodus. In the novel's diegesis, retrospection is important as it signifies that Niloo is revising and reconsidering her attitude toward her Iranian self, her belonging to an Iranian collectivity.

Retrospection gives a character the possibility to re-examine the past and, through this re-examination, to disclose those moments that were consciously or unconsciously omitted before. What is more important, retrospection indicates moments that are difficult for a character to narrate. Nevertheless, they need to be verbalized and re-lived to build a coherent personal identity. A retrospective narrator is looking back with a reason: to find out more about the lived past and localize it in a broader present perspective. Retrospection gives form and meaning to a narrator's identity.

Hamidi's family first meets in 1993 in Oklahoma City. After six years of separation, Dr. Hamidi has a chance to see his children and his ex-wife. It is his idea to visit the children, who have started forgetting him. From the very beginning, Niloo feels tension and aloofness toward her father. Years of separation define the nature of their relationships. Dr. Hamidi expects to see the same little girl he parted from six years ago, and Niloo admits the feelings of deep alienation which saturate her life: "Why muddly up Baba's dreams? Besides, he's not Baba anymore. He's just another sad Iranian addict, a population in the tens of thousands" (Nayeri 2017b: 144–145). This attitude toward her father as well as toward Iran changes later when she meets the Iranians in Amsterdam. Niloo is transformed by people who were not as lucky as she was and who, being dispossessed, experience humiliation every day. This transformation, which signifies the desire to reconnect with the past, is read through the complex narrative act of interpreting the past.

At thirty, Niloo revises the moment in Oklahoma City when she was fourteen and divulges her coldness and aloofness: "I know now that Baba wanted to pick me up and wave me around like he used to do, to squeeze my face and check my teeth. I barely said hello, arms crossed over my T-shirt. All I wanted at that age was to disappear, but this stocky red-mustachioed man had showed up ready to experience America loudly" (Nayeri 2017b: 104). This interpretation of the fragment from the past discloses the narrator's identity reconfiguration, her present yearning for a lost connection with a father. The "mimesis of memory" (Neumann 2010: 334) is burdened with Niloo's regret about her past behavior. It can be argued that she has registered this moment in her memory because it is laden with high emotional intensity, and now she wants to confess about it. By narrating not only the event, but also her emotional response to it fourteen years later, Niloo integrates the previously rejected past into her present. She builds a coherent identity that is not lacking a past. Although in her younger years she imagined her self without the past, "[s]oon I decided that to find safety here and to re-create the sense of home, I needed two things: money and the air of being a real American (an elusive formula that brought me daily shame)" (Nayeri 2017b: 97).

This desire to "be a real American" was the reaction to her experience of exclusion. For example, her classmates did not invite her "into their narrow universe" (Nayeri 2017b: 96). An overt statement of her aspiration to belong to the dominant group is present in the description of her family's journey to a theme-park, initiated by a father. Niloo does not support Dr. Hamidi's zeal for life, as she suffers from the inferiority complex of an immigrant. The daughter is embarrassed by her father's behavior, his naïve amusement:

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 2017b: 115)

The retrospective interpretation of Niloo’s initial emotional response to this first meeting with her father, when she is re-experiencing and re-living this moment during her staying in Amsterdam, demonstrates the changes in her perception of herself. In *Memory, History, and Forgetting*, Paul Ricoeur writes:

The fragmentary representations of memory follow the lines of dispersion of memories. Reflection, on the other hand, leads back to the center of the memory of self, which is the place of the affection constitutive of the feeling of fault. The path from the act to the agent retraces the path from the memory-object to reflecting memory. (2004: 462)

In other words, reflection relates to the feeling of guilt. In the novel’s diegesis, Niloo returns to the moments with her father as she needs to re-consider her previous attitude toward him, which was determined by her desire to forget Iran, to distance herself from it. During her stay in Amsterdam, she re-evaluates the first meeting in Oklahoma City and acknowledges: “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 2017b: 120). What is significant here is her realization that she has changed her attitude toward the lived past. Recalling the event provokes a different emotional response from the one she had felt during the actual event. Narrated time and the time of narrating differ in terms of their emotional involvement. The present experienced as the object of the lived past explicates the moral distance between the narrator and the narrated. Niloo’s moral transformation becomes visible through her re-vision of the past. Confessional moments of her retrospective narrative signal her regrets about the past.

The second family meeting was in London in 2001, when the twenty-two-year-old Niloo has just graduated from Yale University. Almost ten years have passed from Niloo’s last meeting with her dad, but she still remembers his addiction to opium and the moment she found him slumped in the Red Carpet Motel. Her feelings during their stay in London are a mixture of pity and regret. Niloo’s first-person confession about the encounter in London shows her distancing herself from her former self: “At twenty-two and nineteen, we [that is, Niloo and her brother Kian] judged our Baba with the eyes we had” (Nayeri 2017b: 170). Recollecting the meeting, she remembers being ashamed of her father’s explicit Iranian Otherness. This moment echoes the period in Oklahoma: “My head and neck ached and I wished this trip would end – it was a feeling so much like those days

in Oklahoma that for a moment I was ashamed of myself" (Nayeri 2017b: 171). Niloo had already understood then that the most irritating thing for her is her father's Otherness, and more so his willingness to demonstrate it. Remembering that movement, she repents about it: "At that age, Kian and I were the worst humans ever to roam this earth, and our loathsomeness had crystallized in universities filled with equally vile classmates" (Nayeri 2017b: 172). This narrative fragment is not just a description, but an evaluation of the past from the perspective of the present. It is not a simple reconstruction of the situation from the past, but a new emotional response to it. The narrator's intention to achieve wholeness in her identity requires reconfiguration of the past. Analeptic moments explicate the dynamic of a character's attitude to her own past, her move from judgments and accusations to pity and empathy. These narrative accounts disclose the changes in Niloo's perception of herself. Moreover, she considers these fragments worth re-telling and re-visioning.

The re-evaluation of meetings with the father gives drama to the identity transformation of a former refugee. Present feelings of guilt become constructive actions for her interpersonal relationships with the father. The emotion of guilt because of her past disrespect toward her father causes self-criticism in the narrator. Niloo's ability to take the other perspective on her past paves the way to constructive identity actions. While differentiating between shame and guilt, J. P. Tangney and R. Dearing underline the positive effect of feelings of guilt compared with feelings of shame: "The tension, remorse, and regret of guilt causes us to stop and rethink — and it offers a way out, pressing us to confess, apologize, and make amends. We become better people, and the world becomes a better place" (2002: 180). Extrapolating this idea on the novel's diegesis, we can argue that the internal confessional dialogue helps Niloo to know herself better and overcome her hostility toward her father.

The third visit takes place in Madrid in 2006. This time, Dr. Hamidi's ex-wife, Pari, travels with the children. They stay together in a rented apartment, enjoy the Iranian food prepared by Kian, and discuss Saddam Hussein's hanging. The family reunion goes smoothly until the moment when Dr. Hamidi takes Adderall to mask the effect of opium and is forced to spend two days in a hospital. After this incident, his family refuses to speak to him, and he spends days in isolation in the apartment.

There is one significant moment in Niloo's retrospective interpretation of the meeting in Madrid. She is remembering a moment of the family dinner when her father was eating food with his fingers. She became irritated by his greasy hands and the manner in which he was eating. At that time, she could not explain the reason for her anger. Only later, when remembering this, the homodiegetic narrator acknowledges:

What Baba knew, and what I have come to know, is that I was embarrassed in front of myself – the new Niloo, the Niloo I was trying to build. He was tainting me with every flick of his yellowing fingers, as Maman was doing with her yellow hair. They were stained, the two of them, and I didn't want to get too close. (Nayeri 2017b: 200)

Through the retrospective interpretation of this fragment of memory, Niloo understands her initial desire to negate her Iranian self, to distance herself from the country she was forced to leave behind years ago. She was building her new self through rejecting her native culture, which she considered inferior to the Western one. In Madrid, she prioritized her new American identity, and her uncontrolled anger toward relatives was caused by their distinct Iranianness. Meanwhile, her father understood his daughter's reaction immediately and muttered: "Next time, what if I stop in Dubai and have all traces of Iran professionally cleansed from my body? Like a car wash for the poor fools who aren't as refined as yourselves – would that satisfy you?" (Nayeri 2017b: 200). Niloo remembers his words, but at the moment when they were pronounced, she was not ready to get their meaning. Only later in Amsterdam, when living through her identity crisis, she realizes her father's acuteness. During the later moment of confession, she feels guilty about her behavior.

As the narration proceeds, there is a clear shift from Niloo's Americanness toward her Iranian self. On the level of narrative transmission, this transformation is done through her self-distanced interpretation of the past. Writing about self-distance and time, Mark Currie maintains: "There is always an element of self-distance in first-person narration in the sense that it creates a schism between the narrator and the narrated, though they are the same person, and in this schism, there is often a cooperation between temporal and moral self-distance which allows for the self-judgement of retrospect" (2007: 100). In the context of the novel, this schism is distinct during the flow of Niloo's retrospections, which ends when she meets with her parents in Amsterdam.

The final retrospection of being in Turkey is also the last act of Niloo's self-narration. If we consider Thomas Docherty's statement that identity is the temporal *I* and "the 'I' in history, and the 'I' as a material 'somewhat' enters a realm of self-differing" (2014: 19–20), then it can be argued that Niloo's identity is constituted through the critical re-integration of the past into her present. Such a process of incorporating the past into the present presupposes the consideration of difference. This idea recalls Thomas Docherty when he writes:

[T]he expression of an identity – our making it available as a public and social entity – depends upon a fundamental act of confession. In this, identity becomes something constituted by change. The identity of the self is necessarily predicated not just on self-criticism but upon a form of confession that is intrinsically tied to a conversion. (2014: 21)

As the narrative evolves, Niloo's significantly different past self and the present one become united through the act of re-vision. Her identity is not grounded on self-sameness or self-coincidence but on difference and change. What is important to consider here is the role difference plays in understanding identity formation. In the context of Nayeri's novel, the difference between Niloo's past and present is verbalized through the modes of confession and re-vision. The concept of identity as sameness and self-sameness is problematized through the reality of difference. Niloo is self-differing herself in the self-narrative, and this difference constitutes the cornerstone of her identity.

When the family meets in Istanbul in 2008, Niloo, burdened by her memories of the previous family encounters, is even more nervous as it is the first meeting between her father and her husband, Guillaume. In her reflection she is remembering the fear of mixing two cultures: "The notion of melding my two worlds had given me nightmares for nearly a decade, and after the disaster in Madrid a year and a half before, I promised myself that I wouldn't" (Nayeri 2017b: 250). This passage explicates that Niloo is not ready to unite two cultural traditions and worldviews. It is not only about her father and her husband, but on a deeper level it is about her unresolved conflict of belonging to two countries, between here and there. Niloo is still trying to reject her Iranian self even though unconsciously she is already operating within the spheres of different cultures. The problem for her was to acknowledge this hybridity. Work on her identity requires the willingness to readjust what Wolfgang Welsch calls "our inner compass" (1999: 201) and to avoid polarizing cultures as well as to rejecting them. For Niloo, as a refugee, it is difficult not to deal with the host culture, which she eagerly accepts as her way to the world of new opportunities, but with her own tradition, which she initially tries to abandon as inferior, or her parents as 'barbarians'.

Thinking about the meeting in Istanbul later in Amsterdam, Niloo acknowledges her complete distancing from her Iranian identity:

After several visits with Baba, we didn't see our own strangeness, the way we had transformed a little each year, drifting into disparity and becoming so foreign to one another that together we made no sense, like the mismatched elements of a face after too much plastic surgery. In our three years as Amsterdammers, Gui had begun to dress like the upper-class urban Dutch, and for the trip, I made an effort too. (Nayeri 2017b: 272)

Niloo realizes this strangeness between her and her father only from the passage of time. At that moment in Turkey, her identity is partially based on silencing her Iranian experience, a silencing that is caused by what Thomas Docherty calls 'identity regulation', or a 'law of identity'. He writes:

The demand for identity is a demand for one's papers, and these formal and official papers have both enormous power and an authority that is abstract and determining. One's papers become more important than the historical individual carrying them, at least in terms of the verification and authentication of identity; and entitlement to an identity is always something to be authenticated rather than something to be understood. (Docherty 2014: 21)

Niloo's official identity requires rejection of her past and her being not "an individual but the sign of an individual" (Docherty 2014: 23). At first, she eagerly sticks to a "law of identity" (Docherty 2014: 23), which is described as her Perimeter:

She goes to the bedroom, to the corner of the walk-in-closet, and sits in the Perimeter. She flips through the file folder with her passport and naturalization certificates, her marriage license, her Yale degree, the deed to the new apartment in the Pijp, and the construction contracts. She counts them again: nine documents that entitle her to her life. (Nayeri 2017b: 47)

For years, Niloo has been 'branding' her identity according to the Western standards. She has accomplished every step in her life bearing in mind a law of identity: she married Gui because "his sheltered upbringing in New York and Provence promised respite from her own story, her ripped-up roots" (Nayeri 2017b: 33); she toiled and toiled, "she had devoted her life to study and work" (Nayeri 2017b: 296). She did all this just to prove that she belongs to Western society and is a real American. At the same time, it was her way to distance herself from her Iranian past and identity. As Thomas Docherty says, "our formal identity is what removes us from the possibilities of reality or of experience" (2014: 32).

Nevertheless, Niloo's revolt against a comfortable life, when she leaves her fancy apartment and moves to an unfinished renovated one, ultimately signifies her call for an oppositional identity, not the one branded according to the disciplinary power of identity. In the end, her refugee's experience, her meetings with her father, and her reflections about her existence have led her to revolt against her long removal from reality, from the actual experience of life and, what is most important, from her roots. If in the beginning of her marriage she did not care that they shared only American cultural capital, then during the moment of crisis she acknowledges, "[i]t's not enough just to laugh at the same twisted jokes and to say we love each other enough to live under a bridge. We have no roots" (Nayeri 2017b: 303).

The heterodiegetic narrator remarks about this shift to roots: "She comes to think of herself as an Iranian immigrant again, a child refugee, not an American expat – the difference having to do with options, purpose, and personal control" (Nayeri 2017b: 207). It is worth mentioning that these first changes in Niloo's identity are noticed not by herself, but by the third-person narrator. Overall, Niloo's becoming an American is conveyed from the perspective of the homodiegetic nar-

rator, while her return to an Iranian self is verbalized through the prism of the heterodiegetic narrator. The mixture of homodiegetic and heterodiegetic narrative modes presupposes two final convergences as described by Gérard Genette. In the heterodiegetic narrative, the power of the convergences “results from their unexpected disclosure of a temporal isotopy (which, being temporal, is also to a certain extent diegetic) between the story and its narrator, an isotopy which until then was hidden”, Genette writes (1983: 221). “In ‘first-person’ narrative, on the other hand, this isotopy is evident from the beginning, where the narrator is presented right away as a character in the story, and where the final convergence is the rule” (Genette 1983: 220–221).

The meeting in Turkey becomes one of the crucial moments for Niloo's revision of her life and self, although the meaning and significance of it as her returning to her roots is narrativized through her later transformation. Encountering Dr. Hamidi in Istanbul, Niloo realizes that he has aged a decade in just a year and a half. This understanding of his aging saturates their encounter with melancholy and apology. If before the trip Niloo was nervous about her father's manners and appearance as she did not want Gui to view her parents as primitive villagers, in the end, the daughter admits:

I decide that I had been foolish to be ashamed of Baba, to let my need for security conquer every other instinct. I had spent years nursing the wrong fears. Baba's Iranianness, his village ways, weren't the problem. Just the opposite: if Baba were to uproot, every special thing about him – the Anderstoon he carried in his easy gait and his yellow fingers and his lion cane – all of that would be lost. (Nayeri 2017b: 295)

Thanks to her husband Gui, Niloo is not ashamed of her parents for the first time since leaving Iran. Her husband's eagerness to join what she calls “her broken family” (Nayeri 2017b: 284) the tension Niloo feels toward her relatives. Moreover, her husband becomes the significant Other so important for identity formation who legitimizes her Iranianness and does not assign it an inferior status.

Niloo overcomes her shame after the meeting in Turkey. The shame she felt as a refugee has put her into an incredibly vulnerable and precarious position and provoked her social isolation, especially from other Iranians. Moreover, it was shame that caused her aggression toward her father. In the confessional narrative, Niloo regrets her behavior toward her father, and her guilty emotional experience frames a confessional mode of narrative that includes apology and regret. The isotopy between the past and the present results in the final convergence of her former and present identities. It is the moment in the novel's diegesis when, according to Currie,

the self of the past coincides with the self of the present, and as narrated time threatens to coincide with the time of the narrative, a crisis beckons. In the case of memory, this crisis would happen regardless of the conspiracy of moral and temporal distance of confession. When narrated time catches up with the time of the narrative, there is nothing left to remember but memory itself, and nothing left to write about but the act of writing. (2007: 64)

Niloo ultimately realizes that her identity is conditioned by her refugee experience. She solidifies and integrates this identity through the retrospective interpretation of her Iranian past in the present. Her return to her roots is preceded by her desire to keep a distance from her past and her living experience as a refugee. Later, after the meetings with her father, Niloo realizes that she is lacking something essential, that she needs to intertwine her story with the story of her village, her people, and her nation. Only this rootedness gives grounds to which she can add new experiences and new dimensions of identity. This dynamic of becoming is realized through the narrative strategy of confession and reflection. The difference between her past and her present, her critical distancing from the past and her interpretation of it, is embodied in the self-reflective mode of representation. Her ontology of becoming is possible through her re-living of the past, interpreting it, and integrating it into the present. The possibility of reflection over the experience is the very condition for her becoming.

Recognizing her experience as a refugee and not ignoring or abandoning it opens Niloo up to a new understanding of her identity, based on multiple perspectives. In the end of the novel, she doesn't deny her individual particularity as a refugee. The difference the homodiegetic narrator experiences between the past and present, which is narrated through her reflective narrative, constitutes the terms of her identity. Her confession is the essence of her identity. As the result of interpreting her past, she becomes different not simply through retrieving a fragment from the past but by verbalizing a transformed identity. The narrative rendering of her past individual experience is realized through the mode of confession, which in its turn allows the homodiegetic narrator to incorporate the previously rejected past. Niloo's self-narration thus involves not just remembering her former self; instead, it is an act of identity-construction. The interaction between then and now as well as their final convergence results in the continuity of experience and the coherence of identity. The privilege of Niloo's position is confirmed by the difference between her past self and her present self. The difference lies in time as well as in identity as the narrator was a different person then than she is now.

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