

## Lost in Nowhere: Examining Exile through Dina Nayeri's *Refuge*

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### ARTICLE DETAILS

#### Article History

Published Online: 10 December 2018

#### Keywords

Refuge, exile, expat, asylum, Islamic Revolution

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### ABSTRACT

The given paper brings forth the broader theme of exile, dealing specifically with the Iranian exiles living in foreign land. The idea of exile and various experiences that an exile or an expat goes through is presented through a novel titled *Refuge*, written by Dina Nayeri who herself happens to be an Iranian-American author. Being exiled from her home at the age of eight, Nayeri verbalizes the notion of being torn between two cultures. Over the years, especially after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, a huge exodus of Iranians migrated to diverse European nations in the search of an asylum. *Refuge* narrates the tale of a family torn apart due to the unexpected exile of certain members of the family. The novel abounds in exilic characters and trials and tribulations that an exile faces in the 'other' land which is not his/her home. This paper thus lays bare the complications that arise in the life of an exile as a result of being split between two cultures.

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"... what would you do  
if you had two tongues in your mouth,  
And lost the first one, the mother tongue,  
And could not really know the other,  
The foreign tongue.  
You could not use them both together  
Even if you thought that way.  
And if you lived in a place you had to  
Speak a foreign tongue,  
Your mother tongue would rot,  
Rot and die in your mouth  
Until you had to spit it out.  
I thought I spit it out  
It grows back, a stump of a shoot  
grows longer, grows moist, grows, strong veins,  
it ties the other tongue knots,  
the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,  
it pushes the other tongue aside...."

The given excerpt is taken from an Indian-American poet Sujata Bhatt's poem *Search for My Tongue*. It clearly echoes the sense of chaos and dilemma that an exile or an expat faces in a foreign land. The dictionary meaning of exile refers to "the state or a period of forced absence from one's country". The exile from one's homeland might be triggered by one of the many reasons such as religious, social, ethnic or political differences. But living the life of an exile in some 'other' land has its own complications. There is always a sense of loss and longing for the lost home. There is a perpetual urge of clinging to the roots of a lost home which keeps the exiled person in a state of a dilemma regarding his true identity. Lack of sense of stability abounds. Adherence to the customs and traditions of the home that is left behind is an indication of longing.

Dina Nayeri, an Iranian exile who is now an American citizen, narrates the tale of her uprooting from her home in Isfahan, a city in Iran, in a novel titled as *Refuge*. She narrates the story of her own life through the tale of a young girl Niloo, who even after spending years in Europe suffers from a sense of estrangement. It deals with the collective themes of the

identity crisis, senses of loss, longing for the lost home that Iranians face while seeking asylum in varied European nations.

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 imposed many strict rules and restrictions, especially on women which compelled a huge exodus of Iranians to abandon their homes for the fear execution based on religious, political or ethnic differences. Many of them went with the hope of returning when the conditions in Iran becomes better, while many other settled there for a better life and brighter future prospects.

Niloo recalls in retrospect the day when she, along with her mother and her younger brother Kian escapes stealthily in the dead of night. The reason for this was her mother's conversion into Christianity and subsequent threats of execution from the moral police of Iran. But her father Bahaman decides to stay back, clinging to his roots because it is home that provides one with the sense of belonging, security and being deeply rooted into one's cultural heritage. The novel narrates in alternate chapters the tale of Niloo who is settled in the Netherlands, and her father Bahaman who stays back in Isfahan. She tells how Iranian expats who return to Iran find even minute changes baffling, "Iranians often say that when they visit Tehran or Shiraz or Isfahan, they find even the smallest changes confusing and painful-a beloved corner shop gone to dust, the smell of bread that once filled a street, a rose garden neglected" (27).

Niloo happens to be very close to her father but this transition in her life is not just on the physical level. It is an emotional and mental transition as well. She meets her father four times over the four trips that his father undertakes in various cities in order to have a reunion with his family. They meet at Oklahoma, London, Madrid, and lastly in Istanbul. But each time Niloo meets his father, she feels a little more distanced from him and thus tries to avoid such uncomfortable encounters with her father. This reason behind such unease between a father and a daughter who used to be so close to each other at one point of the time is the cultural shift in their lives. Bahaman being an Iranian citizen speaks in Persian, dresses up in a typical manner and Niloo, on the other hand being grown up as a westerner has an altogether contrasting

lifestyle. This difference of culture and lifestyle buds in discomfort between the father and the daughter. Being split between two cultures, Niloo finds it problematic to harmonize such an entangled situation. In his work *Reflection of Exile*, Edward Said voices his opinion that "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exile are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that to borrow a phrase from music-is contrapuntal" (186).

The novel abounds in a handful of other characters who suffer the discomfort of being exiled from their homes and thus forced to seek asylum in a foreign country. Mam'mad, an elderly man, who happens to be a former professor is an asylum seeker who finally commits suicide when his pleas for being granted an asylum go unheeded. Time and again he threatens the security of killing himself in case they do not take notice of his pleas, but nobody cares and one day he burns himself and dies. This whole incident devastates Niloo who witnesses this gruesome incident with her eyes and this makes her question the credibility of one's life in a foreign land. Karim, another young man from Tehran has left his wife and kids behind and has come afar in search of better prospects. After ten years of illegal residence in Holland and several petitions for asylum, he is hitherto homeless.

In his famous book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Benedict Anderson talks about the concept of "Imagined Communities" which implies that a nation is a socially constructed entity. He calls nationalism as "cultural inheritance". The main idea was that since a nation is vast, it becomes impossible of all of its citizens to get acquainted with each other, as a result of which they must imagine others through their shared interests so as to identify themselves as a part of a particular community. There is always a sense of comradeship among the members of a nation, a sense of belonging which comes through common traditions, shared interests, and cultural inheritance. The Iranian culture also falls in the category of such imagined communities, with many of their cultural artifacts.

Every Iranian exile living in a foreign country tries to hold onto whatever remnants of their cultural heritage are available. "The cultural symbols associated with Iran and Iranianness such as the Persian language, religion, rituals and a common history, all of which Anderson calls "cultural artefacts" help to unite a community that is no longer fixed to an Iranian physical, geographic space" (The Question, 6). In the novel, Niloo also longs for comradeship, an inclusion into a community which is her own and she finds it in Zakhmeh, a Persian squat and an art space where she meets fellow Iranians, gets acquainted with the Iranian culture and gets to eat traditional Iranian food. She feels a sense of familiarity. It is the same place where she meets Mam'mad for the first time. He offers her a bowl of 'lentil soup' and Niloo "smiles, remembering that offering a child food from one's own bowl is a familiar, uninhibited gesture that her grandfather and every Ardestooni man used to make" (75-76). She feels the homeliness of Iranian culture and is intrigued by the thought of whether her husband "Gui and his colleagues are aware of what the Iranian exiles suffer here in the Netherlands, without homes, always under the threat of

deportation, some living in squats, other on the streets" (76-77). Said's remark in this respect is relevant, who asserts that there is "an exaggerated sense of group solidarity, and a passionate hostility to outsiders, even those who may in fact be in the same predicament as you" (Said, 178). Thus, according to Said the only way a migrant character can connect to the native land on a foreign land is by creating a familiar environment constituted of familiar people who share the same cultural history.

Niloo's story reflects the collective situation of refugees awaiting a permanent home, a place they could fit into. Exiles suffer from not just physical transition, being uprooted from their homes but also the mental dilemma of being forced into an alien culture. Being an Iranian exile, Niloo never fits wholeheartedly in a different culture. "Iran is not remembered just as a geographical region or as a place of birth, but as a community possessing particular cultural traits and with people reflecting those traits" (The Question, 10). Being detached from a happy home, Niloo is thrown into alien surroundings, where time and again she seeks familiarity, inclusion and a sense of comradeship which she finds in Zakhmeh. Yet the void in her inner self only widens every time she returns to her English husband. She suffocates in that physical and mental space and gets her breakthrough by leaving her house and her husband. Her longing for lost identity is more intense than the secure life she has carved for herself by toiling over the years. She stays alone and is later on joined by her mother as well as the father. With Gui, she had shared only a house but it was with her family in Iran that she had experienced the warmth of home. She tries to bring back that familiar feeling of home in a chaotic and a messed up place where she stays with her mother and her father. More than any other thing in the world, a person longs for a place he can call home. Not just a four-walled structure made up of sand and concrete but a little space that abounds in familial love and affection, which is filled with the colors of shared culture and familiar traditions witnessing which one grows up. Talking about the inexplicable pain and the continuous sense of loss that a person undergoes after being uprooted from home, Edward Said asserts "Exile is strangely compelling to think about possible to experience. It is the unreliable rift forced between being and a native place, between the self and its true home: sadness can never be surmounted" (Said, 173).

After spending quite a while with Mam'mad and Karim and devouring on Old Persian tales, "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" (207). There is a mention of Iranian Green movement which was also known as Persian Spring. The particular political movement started in Iran after the 2009 Iranian presidential election in which the local public demanded the removal of the then elected president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad because of his political strategies and disregard for human rights. Niloo comes to know about this movement through news channels and starts recognizing herself as a part of those local groups who are shown protesting on the streets. She herself joins the group of people protesting in Holland in the front of the Iranian embassy. It is because even after spending most of her life away from Iran,

she remains an Iranian at heart. It is so because an exiled person tends to be more patriotic from the want of clinging to something that is his own and therefore "more common is the pressure on the exile to join-parties, national movements, the state" (Said, 183).

The sense of not belonging starts to creep in and Niloo feels more like a stranger even in her house which she shares with her husband. Every time she leaves Mam'mad and Karim to go back to her place, she starts feeling awkward. She starts to question herself regarding her true home;

Is it her home, this place she's headed? 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. Over the years, she has learned to adapt, to start over in each new place and live as if she belongs there. It feels like lying, even more so now. (222)

Finally, Niloo comes to an understanding of the fact that why didn't her Baba join them when they had fled Iran. It is because "Home would be lost. Living in America or Europe would end him, his lofty, infectious personality, his wonderful sense of himself. Deep down, Baba must have known this" (284-85).

In an interview, Dina Nayeri said that it was the Iranian culture of story-telling which lighted in her the spark to share her story with the world, along with bringing forth the collective condition of exiled Iranians. Her grandfather was a famous storyteller in the village of Ardestoon and it is from her grandfather that she inherited the trait of story-telling, which motivated her to narrate her own tale of transition from one place to another. The title of the novel is also symbolic of having a two-layered meaning. The literal meaning of 'refuge'

refers to "shelter or protection from danger or distress". The Iranians had to leave their well-settled homes for the want for protection and shelter from troubled politics of the country. On the other level, the word 'refuge' refers to the notion of a mental refuge that Nayeri sought in the art of story-telling as a part of her cultural heritage. Thus, the title of the novel refers to a physical as well as mental escape from the troubles of the outside world.

"Hugo of St. Victor, a twelfth-century monk from Saxony makes it clear twice that the "strong" or "perfect" man achieves independence and detachment by working through attachments, not by rejecting them. Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place; what is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both." (Said, 187). Niloo finally recognizes her true home and her family, thus leaving behind everything that she has built over the years and when she sits with her Baba and her mother she feels the warmth of that lost home which she has missed all these years and a final thought that fills her with comfort was that "They were three and three was enough. They were a village" (320). She leaves behind everything for the want of clinging to those who constituted her family and gave her that sense of love and inclusion that she has missed all those years.

To conclude, living the life of an exile has its own pros and cons. Even though it provides a departure from the disturbed life, there is always a sense of longing for the culture that is left behind and a want to hold onto whatever is left of that culture and traditions. Even after spending years in Holland Niloo suffers from a sense of loss and longing for the home that has been left behind and this is true of every exiled person who is uprooted from his own land. Throughout their lives, these exiled people cling to whatever fragments of their native culture and traditions are accessible in the alien culture so as to develop a sense of camaraderie.

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