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Department of Postgraduate Studies

## **Self and Other in Firoozeh Dumas' Works**

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## Abstract

Literature of immigration is one of the literary fields that reflect events only after they have already appeared in society. In the last three decades this phenomenon has been becoming more and more palpable to middle class Iranians and it coincides with emerging many diasporic writings by the Iranians around the world. In her two collections, *Funny in Farsi*, consisted of 27 chapters, and *Laughing Without an Accent*, 28 chapters, Firoozeh Dumas portrays her family's life in the US. This research, focusing on the concept of self and other in different critical theories like postcolonial theory, psychoanalysis, feminism and social studies, tries to capture the moments and occasions in Dumas' memoir collections where interaction between the self and the other is noticeable. The current thesis is to find answer for the question if identity is a becoming process or a being state. This main question is followed in three topics of language, gender and everyday life. Using self and other concepts in psychoanalysis, postcolonial in the first chapter is leading in finding how the appropriated language can blur the distinctions between the self and other. Feminism and social studies working side by side facilitated the way to understand gender identity and women being treated as *the other* at home and in diaspora where female immigrants face "*other women*". The last chapter follows immigrant characters in their everyday life in the United States and studies some of the ordinary life events of the immigrants like eating and food, and also ceremonies like funeral.

Key Words: Self and other, appropriation, cultural studies, panopticon, binary oppositions, postcolonialism.

## Dedication

To those who still feel responsible for what they do.

## Acknowledgment

I would like to thank Dr. Nojournian, my thesis advisor who with his pastoral helps and insightful recommendations provided a big support for conducting this research. I also like to thank Dr. Azam Mirhadi, my thesis reader. She was more than a reader to me and in occasions I needed any kind of help, especially with the final revise and also in doing the related administrative processes, she treated me very friendly. Both of my professors were highly considerate and kindhearted and I hope with this research I could have succeeded in compensating some of their efforts. Last but not least, I do thank Dr. Sokhanvar who patiently advised me with the delicate considerations of a standard M. A. thesis.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

### *1 General Background*

Firoozeh Jazayeri, Dumas, was born in Abadan, Iran, in 1965. She moved to California when she was seven. After two-years, she and her family moved back to Iran and lived in Ahvaz and Tehran. Dumas returned to California two years later. It was there that she later attended the University of California at Berkeley where she met a Frenchman who finally married to. She currently lives with her husband and their three children in Northern California.

Firoozeh grew up listening to her father, a former Fulbright Scholar, who after graduation decided to live in America with his family. He used to recount his daily life in the US as colourful stories to any guest he received in his return to Iran. Firoozeh

owes her father to some extent in her story telling talent. In 2001, Firoozeh decided to write her stories as a gift for her two children. Random House published these stories in 2003.

*Funny in Farsi* is her first book. The book was on the San Francisco Chronicle and Los Angeles Times bestseller lists; it was a finalist for the PEN/USA award in 2004 and a finalist in 2005 for an Audio Award for best audio book. She was also a finalist for the prestigious Thurber Prize for American Humor, the first Middle Eastern woman ever to receive this honor. It has been adopted in junior high, high school and college curricula throughout America. It has been selected for common reading programs at several universities including: California State Bakersfield, California State University at Sacramento, Fairmont State University in West Virginia, Gallaudet University, Salisbury University, University of Wisconsin—La Crosse and the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

*Funny in Farsi* has 27 chapters each telling a story happened to Firoozeh and her family about their life in Iran or in the US. The writer deals with a wide range of topics, from different food tastes to various points of views toward the political issues in the two countries. She narrates what has happened to her in Disneyland or about the mixed marriages. In the “Teacher’s Guide”, provided by the Random House, Dumas’ look to the US is described exceptional, as no one has ever seen it this way before.

Her poignant descriptions of what it feels like to be a stranger in a strange land will resonate with anyone who has ever experienced social alienation at any stage of life. In her unflinching examination into the essence of the Iranian immigrant experience, Dumas exposes America as it has never before been seen. (From the Random House attachment to *Funny in Farsi*, 1)



Dumas is also the author of *Laughing Without an Accent*, a collection of autobiographical essays published in May 2008. She decided to write her new book to tell more stories about her hilarious, warm, and loving family, the experiences that show she is not simply an American or Iranian, but a citizen of the world. While describing her Iranian family's wonder about her French husband's Christmas traditions and comparing questionable delicacies in international cuisines, or what it was like to live in an American college dorm when she was finally entered Berkley University. Firoozeh is able to show in her stories how it is possible that differences turn to be people's bond in diasporic life.

## ***2 The Argument***

Almost always events emerge in literature only after they have already appeared in society before. Literature of immigration is no exception. In the last three decades this phenomenon has been becoming more and more palpable to middle class Iranians. According to the documented statistics and in charge officials' statements who work in the National Organization for Civil Registration, out of 2930,000 Iranian immigrants in different countries, America ranks the first with 1,400,000 Iranian citizens. "The highest number of the Iranian immigrants is for the United States with. 1,400,000 Iranian living there" (Karami qtd. in ILNA).

Literature, on the other hand, has a remarkably vast influence on concerns of the society in which it is read. This need is felt, if not as an emergency, but at least a necessity to conduct vast researches on the effects of this phenomenon on different social and personal aspect of both the immigrants and the host country citizens. Identity

formation and different attitudes toward its process during an immigration experience is one of the aspects which require having a place in such surveys. Side by side with the immigration fever among the middle class Iranians, there is a wide range of memoirs and novels written by those who have chosen another country to study or to live. These literary works provide a rich source to study different experiences of the immigrants.

One of the basic reasons of flourishing the literature of migration in the world is the increasing fever of migration in third world countries like Iran which consequently leads to writing the experience of living in a new place by many diasporic writers in different genres from poetry to novels and memoir collections. They let their readers follow the phases and moods lived by the immigrants; phases that theorists name as appropriation, assimilation, resistance or so many other concepts in different schools of thought.

Facing such a widespread phenomenon and considering literary critics working on the field of literature of immigration, Iranian diaspora writings should not be ignored among the students and professors study scope in Iran.

Being an Iranian, travelling to a foreign country, marrying a man from a third country, all provide Firoozeh Jazayeri, now Dumas, with rich experiences to record in her books *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing without Accent*. She has written two collections of memoirs based on her experiences in travelling and living in different places; consequently, two different cultures with various traces of interactions among them are depicted in her works. The Iranian writer of *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing Without an Accent* has been widely recognized in the field of literature of migration. Her books have been published, prized, and are now discussed in different countries regarding the

global concepts they provide; concepts like family, education, job, politics, gender, etc. are discussed in a humorous language.

What Dumas has written provides us a variety of events and memories ready to be put beside each other, being looked and “gazed” in different angles. The focus then would be on the characters’ actions that are shaped through their constant relation with their new environment, the new society they are now living and the new people to whom these characters are nothing but some anonymous “others”. The immigrants characters of Dumas’ works who are basically her family members start to differently act and react to what happens to them after living in the US for a while.

This process of change or even on the contrary, sticking to the previous values or way of thinking, need to be clarified and studied closely by using postcolonial theory or other related theoretical notions. The way the immigrants shape a new identity and the way they manipulated their surroundings via this change are to be studied in this thesis as the interactions between self and other in three categories of language, gender and everyday life.

Exploring these notions would reach nowhere without particular and detailed leading questions. Following are six questions revealing the paths through which the thesis is going to step into the text.

1. How does the writer’s choice of language and genre reflect the issue of self and other in her diasporic writing?
2. In what ways do the immigrant characters’ names push them into the host country communities as a self or away from them as the other?

3. Do the family relations change as a function of gender identity which traditionally defines woman as the other after immigration?
4. Can women bypass the limitations of their previous history by living in another country as an immigrant?
5. Is it possible for “the other” to move and change in the minds of the immigrants in Dumas’ works?
6. How can the act of immigrant characters in reconstructing their “self”s be traced in their everyday lives?
7. Where in the stories do abnormalities turn to be normal in the characters’ everyday life?

Answering the mentioned questions illustrates the fact that the issue of self and other relation can be followed up in different range of topics. The characters’ different reactions to the everyday life events after reflect their constantly changing attitude toward their supposedly shaped identity at their mother land. These alternations in the ceremonies, rites and behaviors are to be leading in studying diasporic life reflected in diasporic writings of Firoozeh Dumas. Dumas’ experiences, as rich and witty samples of diasporic literature are considered as experiences of a citizen of the world as Julie Cooper, the teacher of fiction writing at the University of Washington, describes her.

### ***3 Literature Review***

Reading Firoozeh Dumas under with the approaches of postcolonial, psychoanalysis, feminism, or social studies, did not entail the researcher to many major sources. Due to the new emergence of Iranian diaspora writing comparing to its African or Indian models,

there are still few sources which are exclusively focused on studying the Iranian writing in diaspora. However, given the fact that Iranian women diaspora novels and memoirs started to be a highly widespread genre among the Iranian postcolonial writings, these works have not paid enough attention in regard of the literary criticism they really deserve. But, the researcher's attempts led to the following articles and theses.

In his essay, *Deconstructing the Diasporic Identity: Translation and Transformation in Firoozeh Dumas' Funny in Farsi*, Amir Ali Nojournian, studies Dumas' first collection of memoirs. As he describes, his paper is an attempt to examine the notion of diasporic/immigrant identity from a cultural studies perspective utilizing deconstructive strategies with references to Dumas' work. Nojournian discusses the notion of American Dream and the reality of this about Dumas, the writer who coming from a faraway land where no one out there in the world might have never heard about its name started to become a successful and well-known writer whose book is on the readers list of the US's libraries. Nojournian's later expand his idea about the paradoxical situation of the immigrants who are asked by the host country to be simultaneously in a position of "sameness" and "otherness". This contradiction puts the seemingly everlasting relation of the self and other in a dynamic interaction. Nojournian's ideas in this paper which are rooted in Hall's points of views about the concept of identity are widely used in the fourth chapter of this essay.

Considering the chosen approach of studying self and other in a literary work, the researcher's choice is so close to that of Haleh Rafi in her Ph.D thesis, *J. M. Coetzee's "The Other": A Cultural Study* (2009). She focuses on studying the notion of "otherness" in marginal parts of the society regarding three categories of race, gender

and class. To reach this goal, Rafi utilizes the cultural studies concepts which encompass the literary, social and political realms. It also provides an opportunity to find a formidable relationship between Race, Gender, and Class issues with their concentration on “the Other,” that has been avoided so far in the critical studies of J. M. Coetzee.

In *Writing Iranian Americans into the American Literature Canon* (2008), Persis M. Karim and Nasrin Rahimieh studied the process of formation today's vibrant Iranian American community in the United States. The history of contemporary Iran and events like the Islamic revolution which was preceded by Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) urged many Iranians to flee Iran. It made migrant Iranians settled across the world, and today Iranian communities of all sizes can be found in many nations. The US, however, has become host to the largest Iranian diaspora community. This article then goes through different Iranian diasporic writers specially women writers like Saffron Sky, by Gelareh Asayesh (1999); To See and See Again, by Tara Bahrapour (1999); Wedding Song, by Farideh Goldin (2003); Funny in Farsi, by Firoozeh Dumas (2003); Journey from the Land of No, by Roya Hakakian (2004); Lipstick Jihad, by Azadeh Moaveni (2005); and Persian Girls, by Nahid Rachlin (2006).

Amy Motlagh, in *Towards a Theory of Iranian American Life Writing* (2008), presents for and against ideas on choosing the memoir genre especially those in humorous terms like Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* and criticizes the “clumsy attempt to translate Iranian culture into humorous terms comprehensible to Americans”. And, on the other hand, she writes that there are also critics who celebrate these memoirs as "unique forms of exil[ic] cultural production," seeing in their publication

and popularity a positive development in articulating the vision of Iranian Americans who have embraced the term "diaspora" to describe their relationship to Iran. After all, this question is asked in this essay if we should assemble our understanding of the truth from the testimony of many, or is truth best expressed by the experience of the individual. This question finds its answer in debates put forward by the critics on the political and historical motivations of the developing body of the memoirs written by the Iranian abroad.

#### ***4 Thesis Outline***

The study of self and other in Firoozeh Dumas' works consists of five chapters. The current chapter, introduction, concerns the general background that provides some information about the author Firoozeh Dumas and her works. Then it will discuss reasons why the researcher found this topic important in the significance of the problem. Statements of the problem and the methodology and concepts which are utilized in conducting this research are also discussed in this chapter. Furthermore, questions which are expected to find related answers are listed here and in the key term section, jargons which have been used are defined.

The second chapter, titled as "Self and Other Interactions in Language," discusses the concept of otherness in psychoanalysis theory and focuses on the issue of language in general and Dumas' narrative style in specific. Besides, the postcolonial concept of appropriation and how it works in toward the immigrants' language are studied. This chapter will continue with the issue of "name". The fact that the characters in Dumas' works are dealing with their first names and family names is noticeable in many of her memoirs. Different ways that Firoozeh tries in reacting to her name in

different occasions are focused and studied. At the end, this chapter highlights how this sliver unit of language plays an important role in the life of immigrants.

In the third chapter, “Self and Other in Forming Gender Identity,” the focus will shift from the language to the women’s gender identity in diaspora. Studying women as the “other” gender within their native country in one hand, and to figure out women’s changing behavior after immigrating to another country and getting familiar with a new set of women-defining characteristics on the other, are two topics of this chapter. To cover both sides of the discussion, this chapter has two parts. General questions about “femininity” and how it is constructed will be discussed first. In the second part, the process will be studied during which an already “constructed” woman in the first country should acquire a new set of behaviors in the new country after immigration.

The fourth chapter, “Self and Other in Diasporic Everyday Life”, deals with the concept of self and other in the immigrants’ daily life style. The broad and ambiguous concept of everyday life is tried to be read through the lens of social studies. The question that how popular art is replaced by the everyday life in social studies is answered and then “food” and “funeral ceremony” as two examples of basic elements of everyday life are discussed in Duma’ works. It provides the opportunity to study how her characters define and redefine their identities in a process of give and take among other Iranian or with their American fellows at home or in diaspora.

The fifth chapter offers the conclusion. It consists of three parts. The first part presents a summary of the main chapters. The second part, “Findings and Implications” focuses on the goals and findings of the research. The last part cites suggestions for



further studies for those who are interested in Iranian diaspora writing in general and those who are interested in Dumas' works in specific.

### ***5 Methodology and Approach***

This thesis is to study the dynamic interaction of self and other in Firoozeh Dumas' works *Funny in Farsi* and *Laughing Without an Accent* in three respects of language, gender and everyday life. This purpose is to be gained by using different, but related, theories and attitude to these interactions; from psychoanalysis and feminism to cultural studies each in its related field. The library and electronic sources are used for this study of Firoozeh Dumas' works in the light of the mentioned approaches.

To study the concept of identity in diaspora one inevitably needs to deal with the concept of self and other in subgroups that make different aspects of the self. How this self is constructed and reconstructed and if, prior to this question, this reconstruction of identity is possible at all are the topics that will be discussed in the chapters of this thesis. Classifications like gender, race, education, etc. are of the common factors that help the researchers in defining specific aspects of one's identity. These concepts then provide a ground to study Dumas' memoirs.

To study the first chapter, which is "Language, Genre and Othering", Iranian immigrant characters, the researcher utilizes some concepts of the psychoanalysis approach. Lacan's explanations about three orders of real, imaginary and symbolic will be used to step into the language discussion. Lacan as a psychoanalyst figure took the basic steps in defining this self and how it initially comes to existence in relation with the other. To him, people need *others'* responses in order to make an image out of what

they think is their identity. In another word, according to this point of view, one is defined by the others and based on their perspectives.

Postcolonial concepts, which basically deal with cultural differences and social discriminations and minorities resistance before them, are also leading in reading Dumas' memoirs. Besides psychoanalysis in studying what happens to the characters after immigration concerning their language, "appropriation" in its postcolonial meaning will be explained and exploited. As postcolonial theorists explain, the dominant language and its discursive forms of the host country or of the colonizer are appropriated by the colonized, or immigrants, to express widely different cultural experiences and also to interpolate these experiences into the dominant modes of representation to reach the widest possible audience.

In the third chapter, which is "Self and Other in Forming Gender Identity," two other approaches are taken, feminism and cultural studies. From feminism theory, which discusses women's position in the society, in their private lives, in the political scenes, or in their basic special biological experiences, the concept of binary oppositions is utilized in describing the process of gender identity formation in the first part of this chapter.

Cultural studies is applied in the second part of the chapter which is on identity formation in general and in women's identity formation in diaspora in specific using Hall's ideas about the dynamic meaning of identity. "We should think, instead, of identity as a "production" which is never complete, always in process and always constituted within, not outside, representation" (qtd in Nojournian 6). Cultural studies tries to show how societies define artificial characteristics for genders and then it will be

by naturalizing these definitions that these attributes seem not only acceptable but even undeniable.

In order to closely focus on what happens in immigrants' everyday life and the interaction between self and other in that field, cultural studies provides the best concepts and investigation tools to plow this field which seems like a land which is truly worth exploring. Haleh Rafi explains that cultural studies analyses the process of identity formation and believes that founding identity is a cultural process. This cultural process is what cultural theorists trace in different fields of people's everyday life. Everyday life events like food, clothing, hobbies and entertainments find an important value in this field of study. Therefore, "identity" is something individuals choose to always have in hand in everlasting their process of give and take with their environment, with the *others*.

In order to validate his notion that the everyday should not be taken for granted or ignored, Lefebvre stresses that the everyday represents the site where we enter into a dialectical relationship with the external natural and social worlds in the most immediate and profound sense, and it is here where essential human desires, powers and potentialities are initially formulated, developed and realized concretely. (Gardiner 75)

## ***6 Definition of Terms***

Jargons, professional, and technical words that would be utilized in this study come in an alphabetic order for a brief explanation.

### **Appropriation**

"A term to describe the ways in which postcolonial societies take over those aspects of the imperial culture, language, forms of writing, film, theatre, even modes of thought and arguments such as rationalism, logic and analysis- that may be of use to them in articulating their own social and cultural identities" (Ashcroft, et al 19).

## Binary Opposition

This term is used for the couple of the words usually used as each other's opposite or antonym in quality or meaning. Couples like day/night, sun/moon, positive/negative, and man/woman are examples of the binary opposition. It is an important concept in the structuralism and poststructuralism. Feminists has used this binaries to explain how the male dominant discourse has imposed an inferior situation to the women during the history by associating the positive adjective or quality of the binaries to men and the negative ones to the women. However deconstruction takes a different approach to this concept. Deconstruction opposes this hierarchal system. It "seeks to undo both a given order of priorities and the very system of conceptual opposition that makes that order possible," (Norris 31).

## Cultural Studies

Abrams describes this term as "a recent and rapidly growing cross-disciplinary enterprise for analyzing the conditions that affect the production, reception, and cultural significance of all types of institutions, practices and products" (65). He then explains that literature is also treated as one of many forms of "signifying practices" in cultural studies. Comparing social studies with sociology in *the Post-colonial Question*, Angela McRobbie writes: "Cultural studies has been characterized as excessively concerned with texts and meanings... Cultural studies flaunts its wild style while sociology prides itself on its materialist steadfastness" (30).

## Feminism

The term can be used to describe a political, cultural or economic movement aimed at establishing more rights and legal protections for women. It involves political