

**Finding permanence in movement:
an interview with Dina Nayeri on migration,
fiction and home-building in exile**

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Iranian-born author Dina Nayeri is no stranger to migration. In 1988 she fled her home country with her brother and mother – a Christian convert whose faith put her at grave risk of execution at the hands of the moral police of Khomeini’s Islamic Republic – leaving her father behind in their family home in Isfahan (*The Ungrateful Refugee* 21-54). After two years living as asylum seekers in Dubai and Rome, the three settled in Oklahoma, where Nayeri would spend her teenage years, before studying in Princeton and Harvard (“Family History”). Since then, Nayeri has lived in multiple cities across the US and Europe (“The Ungrateful Refugee”) and become a multi-award-winning writer, whose evocative novels *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea* and *Refuge* tell the complex tales of Iranians before and after exile. When I met Nayeri at an event for Liverpool’s Writing on the Wall literary festival, she was on a tour of the UK and the US to promote her latest book, *The Ungrateful Refugee*: a non-fictional account of the testimonies she has gathered through her travels to refugee camps in recent years, intertwined with a detailed and emotional account of her own experiences as an asylum seeker and a refugee.

Jessica Small: Your books explore the notion of home and how it evolves and complexifies through displacement. How would you define home, and how can it be built in exile?

Dina Nayeri: I think as you get older and become more used to displacement, the definition of home becomes more and more vague. So for my three-year-old daughter, her concept of home is extremely concrete: it’s the physical place where we live, the

specific square metres of space that are hers, contained behind her front door.¹ In my case, it started off as a small village. It's very hard to let go of that initial concept of home and you always attach a certain permanence to that. I'm sure if I were to go back to Isfahan, I would feel overwhelmed by the homeness of it.² But as you migrate from one place to another, the idea of home becomes more and more conceptual and you shroud yourself with other people, and make your home in them. That's phase two. Then, if you've moved around as much as I have, and left as many people behind, home becomes even less concrete; it's no longer about specific people but it's more based in ideas and community: it's about having certain kinds of people around you. So for me, it's about being surrounded by people who are readers, who are thinkers and who have similar politics to me and a particular love of the things that I love. It's almost a cynical way of thinking but now, at the age of 40, I've come to realise that those people don't have to be the same, they can change. Now my concept of home has stabilised in that I know that home is not static: it can be rebuilt again and again and again.

JS: Has Niloo found home at the end of *Refuge*, as her father and mother join her in Amsterdam?³

DN: I think Niloo is in that second phase of homebuilding. In the early parts of the book, she is bitter about the loss of that first home and in her displacement she is unable to feel comfortable anywhere. Then towards the end, she starts to find her home in people and in the fellow Iranian exiles she befriends. When her parents come back to her, she starts to understand that home can be rebuilt anywhere. So she's in that middle phase of building her home in specific people. But maybe in ten years, perhaps when she reaches the inevitable parents-dying-phase, she'll realise that home has to be recreated again and again. I think she's also someone who needs an intellectual environment... She's not as extroverted as me, so perhaps for her, it'd be four or five people who are of a like mindset, maybe her friends from the Iranian community. I think home is very different for each person, once they've reached that third phase.

¹ Nayeri lives in London with her partner Sam and their young daughter, Elena.

² For safety reasons, Nayeri has not been able to return to Iran since her initial departure, aged 8.

³ Echoing much of Nayeri's own life story, the protagonist of her second novel is an Iranian refugee who grew up in Oklahoma, attended Ivy League universities and then eventually moved to Amsterdam, where her successful career in academia does not abate a deep longing for the landscapes and culture of the country she left as a child.

JS: Is food also essential to home-making? Both of your novels and even your non-fiction are characterized by regular, detailed and sumptuous depictions of Iranian food which seem deeply linked to a sense of cultural identity and belonging.

DN: Well of course! Food is home. But food is also essential to capturing a full sensory experience of a place. It's the only thing that people share that uses all five senses. It's also a vital part of every culture, so I think it would be very hard to try to write for an audience about another place without capturing the food.

JS: You've commented previously that you think men can particularly suffer from migration and can struggle to rebuild, especially in the Iranian context where you've said "women root men down". Returning to *Refuge*: in your mind, how does her father – an animated but aging character, deeply rooted to his village life and battling with opium addiction – adapt to life in Amsterdam?

DN: Sadly I think if I were to write a sequel focusing on her father, it would be a very sad story. Firstly because it would be a hard struggle to get him his paperwork, but more importantly because so much of what makes it difficult to assimilate is the loss of dignity, the loss of your place in the world. This is a man who is a professional, who is respected and rooted and had a sense of himself; he's joyful and full of magic. In Europe all of that magic would be lost because he wouldn't be appreciated for all of his glorious eccentricities. He's someone who is strange and misunderstood. And now he has to live out his old age in this place of misunderstanding, He's not beloved and he's not a part of the air of the place. So I think all that would be a huge shock for him after he gets over the initial elation of being around his daughter.

JS: It makes me think of the story of Mamad...⁴

DN: Exactly. The Dutch just don't open the doors for him.

⁴ The character of Mam'ad, who Niloo befriends amidst the Iranian community in Amsterdam, is a once esteemed academic who is living in poverty as an undocumented migrant after multiple rejected attempts to claim asylum. Driven to despair, he commits suicide by setting himself alight in the city centre. This plotline is based on the real-life story of Kambiz Roustayi, who died in the same way in April 2011. In Nayeri's words, "He had lived in Amsterdam for a decade, following their rules, filling out their papers, learning their culture, his head always down. He did all that was asked of him and, in the end, he was driven to erase his own face, his skin." Kambiz Rousayi's story is one of those featuring in *The Ungrateful Refugee*.

JS: How did the experience of writing this story as fiction compare with that of your recent re-telling of this event in non-fiction form for *The Ungrateful Refugee*?

DN: I think there's a lot more catharsis any time you can fictionalise something... There was something self-indulgent in the way that I wrote this because I was so hurt by what happened to Kambiz Roustayi. I didn't know how to make sense of it. It took me a long time to process my feelings, feelings which I sometimes felt I didn't have a right to have because he was in such a worse position than I was. I felt very out of place in the Iranian community in Amsterdam because I was one of the highly privileged ones having come from America. To be able to put myself – or the fictional version of myself – in that moment and just watch it and describe it and attach pretty prose to it, was a very different experience than when I actually wrote the story for this book, where I went and found his best friend, the one who identified his body, and I sat and talked with him for hours. The story had to be written in a certain way. It had to be written in a way that remained close to the voice of the man who told it to me, because he's the keeper of that story now. So I couldn't be indulgent with some of the ways that I wrote it, I couldn't put any kind of romantic sheen on it, I was facing something that was really brutal and not mine. It felt very different.

JS: On that note, can you speak about the ethical issues at stake when representing refugees and immigrants in fiction?

DN: I don't think so much about ethical issues of writing refugees and immigrants in particular because I think that it can feel a bit restrictive. I think of it more as a general issue of artistic integrity and the ethics of representing people. As a writer, you owe something to the truth: that is, to the complexity and fullness of a human being. So for example, people who appropriate from other cultures are those who are eager to write about someone else but they don't bother to get deep into the lived experience of a person so that they can represent them as they would represent themselves. But that is an issue that is not restricted to representing immigrants or refugees, that's the entire ethical dilemma of writing fiction: you want to represent someone as a fully realised character. That means including both good and bad; you don't whitewash people and try to make them perfect for someone else's gaze, either.

JS: How about your narrative strategy? There is a fascinating hybridity to the language used in these two novels: written in English, but with (romanized) Persian proper nouns throughout and plenty of Persian idioms and expressions with translations and explanations for readers. You take a different approach to Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, for example, who in *Americanah* chose to keep passages of dialogue in Igbo, for her readers to research for themselves.⁵ How did you go about deciding how to blend Persian and English in your narrative strategy?

DN: It wasn't a choice to blend English and Persian in the way that I did, in fact it was more in service of what I just described: creating fully realised human beings. In *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*, I wanted to capture Iranian grandmothers and it was impossible to do so without all of their Persian idioms and the funny Farsi things that they say, so my challenge was to capture the hilarity of it in a way that is understandable in English whilst keeping as close as possible to the Farsi. That's why I didn't take the Adichie approach: I didn't want to take readers out of the moment at the cost of the humour. These colloquial expressions are funny to us too as Iranians because they come from a different generation, so when we hear one of our grandmothers say things like this it's slightly foreign to us, too. So it needs to be brought into enough English to be understandable to a Western reader, and the charms of human communication do the rest.

JS: From comments that you have made previously about the process of writing your novels, it is tempting to read them as a pair: you have said of *A Teaspoon of Earth and Sea*, a Bildungsroman that follows the life of a girl growing up in a small fishing village in post-revolutionary Iran and dreaming of emigrating to America, that it came from your own imaginings of what your life could have been had you

⁵ She has said on the topic: "I've always had Igbo [in my writing]. And I've always had well-meaning advice, often about how American readers will be confused, or they won't get something. I don't set out to confuse, but I also think about myself as a reader. I grew up reading books from everywhere and I didn't necessarily understand every single thing—and I didn't need to. So, I think for me, what was more important, for the integrity of the novel, was that I capture the world I wanted to capture, rather than to try to mold that world into the idea of what the imagined reader would think." Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on her Award-Winning *Americanah*", *Ebony.com*. March 11 2014. www.ebony.com/entertainment/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-on-her-award-winning-americanah-981/. Accessed July 9th 2019.

stayed in Iran; whilst *Refuge*, the story of an Iranian exile's attempt to recapture her homeland, seems to have a lot of autobiographical elements in it. Do you see those two books as two parts of a whole, two sides of the same coin?

DN: I think they're a single complicating story. I don't mean one story is more complex than the other, I mean in terms of layers of understanding on my part. In between these two novels I was not only developing as a writer but I was also developing in my understanding of what it can do to a person to go through those key moments of exile, return, and becoming acquainted with your other self. There were things that I still had to go through after *Teaspoon* that I was not very aware of while writing it, so I think in that way *Refuge* is a next step. There's something very movie-like and almost cartoonish about *Teaspoon* that I love because I was so taken up with the magic of writing fiction and it was the first opening up of my imagination: I got to delve into my memories of the old ladies in Isfahan and the way they told me stories, and the way we made up things about America, so there's this underlying theme of the imagined space and how very whimsical and beautiful it can be. *Refuge* is more sober: I felt much more confident as a writer, I felt I had certain responsibilities and I had much more understanding of my subject. It had less of the unwitting magic, but I think it had more life experience and wisdom in it. So I think it's the next step of the same story, sort of like if you repeat the same story again and again and again and tell it differently each time. In her book *My name is Lucy Barton*, the writer Elizabeth Strout said that we are always telling the same story again and again in different ways, so that all of us tell one story in a hundred ways throughout our entire life. That's true. Storytelling is like the way an oyster goes over a piece of dust: in order to make it a pearl, the oyster goes over that piece of dust again and again and again, so that if you open it too early there are different versions of it. That's what I feel a writing career is, telling that same story until you reach perfection at some point. And it might not be the last version you tell, it might be the fifth or sixth or any number, but you continue to do it again and again.

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