

Journey of Displacement: Dunya Mikhail's Poetic Exploration of Loss and Belonging in the Poem "I Was in a Hurry"

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Abstract

"I Was in a Hurry," a moving poem by Dunya Mikhail, offers a heartbreaking meditation on identity's intricately entwined themes of loss and belonging. In order to uncover the many layers of meaning contained in Mikhail's expressive rhymes, this study contextualizes them within the framework of social identity theory. The poem transforms into a canvas through which the reader observes the complex interaction between a person's sense of self and their sense of community as they struggle with their changing social positions and connections. Through an in-depth investigation of language devices, symbolism, and storytelling tactics, this study sheds light on how "I Was in a Hurry" transcends its lines to illustrate the enormous influence of social identity dynamics on the human psyche. In the end, this research deepens our comprehension of how poetic expressions may shed light on the complex fabric of human experiences by providing awareness of the delicate dance between loss and the never-ending search for a feeling of belonging in a changing world.

Keywords: displacement, identity, belonging, exile, loss, social identity, identification.

Introduction

In her poem "I Was in a Hurry," renowned Iraqi-American poet Dunya Mikhail crafts a moving story of relocation, loss, and the intense yearning for belonging. In her evocative rhymes, she addresses the complex emotional experiences of people who have been uprooted from their homes, navigating the perplexing landscape of identification and yearning for a feeling of home. In this investigation, we dive into the common themes that touch readers all across the world, revealing poetry's amazing capacity to cross cultural barriers and build a strong bond with the human experience of dislocation. The idea of social identity, which is crucial to understanding how people see themselves and interact with others, is at the center of this inquiry. We discover how people's social identities affect their sense of belonging and color their opinions of others as we explore the depths of Mikhail's poetic writing, highlighting the interconnectedness of individual identity and group memberships.

The position of Iraqi poets living in exile is an illustration of how life may become far more challenging than it should be when people feel obligated to leave their country because of political conflicts and upheaval. Their situation frequently receives little attention and acknowledgement, despite the importance of their viewpoints on Iraq's challenges. These poets, who represent a range of views, are able to offer insightful commentary on how political unrest affects both their own lives and the lives of their people.

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In this context, Dunya Mikhail stands out as a noteworthy voice. She discusses her own experiences as a foreign immigrant in a free society through her poems, drawing attention to the worries and difficulties she encountered in her native country as a result of political conditions. She finds that poetry is an effective medium for expressing these feelings and experiences, enabling her to communicate the complexity of her exile. Pierre Joris highlights Dunya Mikhail's poetry as an expression of urgency, combining the constraints of public life with the hard-won compassion of the intimate, and reaffirms her status as a key figure in contemporary Iraqi and Arab poetry as she states:

Here is the new Iraqi poetry: poetry of urgency that has no time for the traditional (in Arab poetry) flowers of rhetoric; terse, unadorned, stripped & ironic, Dunya Mikhail's lines move at the speed of events—be it war or love. Here the fierceness of the public life meshes with the hard-won tenderness of the private, in a passionate dialectic that makes her voice the inescapable voice of Arab poetry today. (Joris, n. d.)

The poetry of Dunya Mikhail breaks conventional Arab traditions with its succinct, sardonic approach and absence of pompous terminology. Intense love and battle scenes are instantly portrayed in her rhymes, capturing the ambiguities of life. Her powerful writing, which accurately captures contemporary Arab reality and concerns, sends throughout the literary community.

Dunya Mikhail was born in Baghdad in 1965 and earned her BA there. She worked as a translator and journalist for the Baghdad Observer before being added to the previous government's list of enemies. In the middle of the 1990s, Mikhail moved to the US. Although she may have achieved literary success and approval for her work, the fundamental reason for her exile still permeates all of her writing.

It's important to note that Mikhail's poetry discusses how censorship affects people in both her own country and the United States. According to Cathy Linh Che in an interview: "Here, in America, a word does not usually cost a poet her life. However, speech is sometimes limited to what is acceptable according to public norms. So, text precedes censorship in Iraq. In America, censorship precedes the text" (2010). Although censorship may not have fatal repercussions in the United States, there may still be constraints on speech because of cultural standards and public acceptance.

As a result, Dunya Mikhail was forced to use metaphors and several levels of meaning to communicate her ideas without being directly censored. This statement draws attention to the varied difficulties that artists have while trying to express themselves in diverse cultural and political circumstances. Nevertheless, in "War in Iraqi Feminist Writings" Boumaaza's states that: "The irony is that: She had to leave because of [her] poetry, but it was like poetry paid [her] back" (2016, p.34). Poetry may have contributed to Mikhail's decision to leave Iraq, but she recognizes that it also rewarded her by giving her a voice and a community.

Dunya Mikhail's poetry, like that of her diverse American colleagues, intertwines the past and the present, channeling the resonance of her homeland's loss into fresh artistic freedom. Her poetry captures Arab identity with literary components such as "myths," "setting," "characterization," and "dialogue." These elements work in harmony with advanced narrative methods such as "stream of consciousness," "flashback," and "climax," maintaining the Arab legacy while expanding her creative expression. (Nasif, 2015). She adopts the free Arabic poetry style pioneered by al-Sayyab and al-Malaika, embodying innovation within the literary tradition, claiming that this style of poetry was "realist and free: realist so that it could face the numerous difficulties; free so that it could deal with them in a fresh creative way" (Al-Zubbaidi, 2019, p.97).

Mikhail's poetry transcends cultural borders by uniting personal and universal experiences. She explores complex emotions in her metaphors and symbols, forcing readers to face uncomfortable truths. Her ability to blend contrasts captures the attention

and sparks discussion. In Mikhail's instance, she expertly makes use of this imaginative strategy to convey the ordinary in a peculiar and emotional way, leaving her readers with a lasting impression. In the poem "The Bag of Bones" from the same collection *The War Works Hard* (2004), Fortunately, a woman discovers her lover's sack of bones as if she found his regular belongings:

What good luck!

She has found his bones.

The skull is also in the bag

The bag in her hand

Like all other bags

In all other trembling hands.

The full bag finally in her hand,

Unlike her disappointed neighbor

Who has not yet found her own. (Mikhail, 2004,p.15-16)

The reader's interest is captured by the way in which commonplace items are combined with deeper emotional connotations to provide a sense of strangeness.

Dunya Mikhail explores themes of war, exile, and loss in a variety of formats, including reportage, fable, and lyric. Her poetry characterized as a controversy aims to do what she says poetry does: "poetry is not medicine—it's an x-ray" (Che, 2010). Mikhail's art offers a thorough examination of the human condition in these situations by reflecting the traumas encountered during times of conflict and displacement.

The poem "War Works Hard," ends with the stirring line, "The war works with unparalleled diligence!"(2004,p.19), Mikhail personifies battle saying that it works tirelessly and persistently. The exclamation mark highlights the strength and intensity with which battle is performed. This portrayal contests the idea that war is a passive or unintentional phenomenon and instead presents it as an intentional and purposeful being. Lieberman (2008) writes:

There are no winners. There are no true heroes, true martyrs. only losers. She virtually never takes sides except against the wars. Hence the remarkable power and effortless fluency of her new book's riveting title poem, "The War Works Hard." The poem's constant deft irony builds upon a litany of winners. War's lucky beneficiaries. They all ring hollow, of course. But her tone is hyponic unswerving. With amazing comic ebullience, she sets forth the series of victors, the war's chain of blest heirs." (p.41)

Mikhail's writing evokes the emotional challenges of war, and her Iraqi background adds authenticity to her grasp of the human effects of war. Through her writing, she amplifies silenced voices, shedding light on human suffering often overshadowed by politics and media. She becomes a potent advocate for the marginalized, offering insight into trauma and displacement. According to Henri Tajfel:

People generally prefer to maintain a positive image of the groups to which they belong. As a result of social identity processes, people are inclined to seek out positively valued traits, attitudes, and behaviors that can be seen as characteristic of their in-groups.(1981, p.6)

Her work challenges the status quo and stands as a testament to the power of poetry to transcend political limitations and provide a voice to the silenced and marginalized.

Belonging in the Lenses of Social Identity Theory in Dunya Mikhail's Poetry

Above the branches fly careless birds.

One lags behind the flock, but don't worry.

He will catch up in a little while; he is only distracted

By the shadow of a tear broken on the branches.(Mikhail, 2004, p.74)

"The Shadow of Tear" a poem from a book *The War Works Hard*. Dunya Mikhail's examination of identity highlights the complexity of both individual and group experiences. The poem delves into the delicate balance between belonging and individualism, revealing the complexities of finding one's position in a wider identity. Mikhail's sympathetic lyrics provide insight into the complexities of human identification.

Belonging is about creating a culture where people can be themselves, have psychological safety, appreciate each other, and feel part of something bigger (Clark, 2020, p.32). This fosters not only an adequate awareness of oneself but also a group mentality that values individuality and commonalities. Mikhail uses this concept in her poem "The Shadow." She expresses herself in a straightforward and sincere manner, while at the same time conveying real care for the people who are listening to her.

She recommends to the recipient that it is only a matter of time before she "will catch up" with the glory that she thinks about. Mikhail spreads the power of hope to her readers, assuring them that the current circumstances are temporary and that her journey, which is full of pain, will end one day and she will success in finding her lost self again in the new society.

In his *Rutledge Social Identity* (2014), Jenkins asserts that Individuals need to coexist, whether in their community to which they belong or where they are exiled. An individual needs to coexist with those around him wherever he is, as he needs to prove himself as an independent being with his thoughts, feelings, affiliation, and beliefs, regardless of the circumstance he passes through (p.102). Given what has been said, Mikhail explain her situation as a new arrival in America as the following:

When I said this was a 'space,' the challenge was how to turn this 'space' into a 'place,' a place that is my place. I discovered that writing made that happen. Without writing, it is very hard for me to live somewhere outside my homeland. I felt at the end that if I am writing and if I can write the way I want to write, then that is my home. My home is the place where I write. So, it took time, of course, to try to find myself in this new big ocean. Being a small fish in a big ocean is not easy, but gradually, as I improved my language and was able to write and publish, I felt a connection with the readers—not only people you know but everyone. (R. Ibrahim, personal communication, July, 3, 2023)

The new sensation develops into an unstable psychological condition as a result of the constant movement between one country and another in search of a new homeland in which one can prove his existence and success despite the difficult situation he is exposed to. Accordingly, Mikhail begins to use poetry as a method of ensuring her own survival. Because of this, her poetry has a healing effect. As expressed by Bihuti (2020), in her opinion, poetry is not medicine if it cannot heal a broken bone (p.7).

In The personal communication, the researcher asked Dunya Mikhail, how could she use self-assertion in her personal experiences to prove her identity to the other, she states that:

It doesn't matter where I am, in Iraq, America, or anywhere else in the world. My Identity as a writer, is my writing, my poetry, and my literature. So, I feel that is my feature; my poetry is my feature. It is who I am. It's not that I spent effort to make an identity; It's there already. I was born and live in Iraq, and that is my identity; without it, I don't feel complete. Also, without my art, I am not who I am. So, it is not a matter of doing

something to be successful here and get a career; .. just being who I am, being myself. If you take any tree, it has seeds, which are the essence of the tree. The apples have the seed of apples, not oranges. So, I have my seeds, which I can plant everywhere. My seeds are my art; that is who I am. That is what I identify with in the world, whether in America, Iraq, or anywhere else. (R. Ibrahim, July,3,2023)

Dunya Mikhail's words convey a resounding message of resilience and determination, emphasizing the refusal to surrender to circumstances that may force one to abandon dreams and aspirations. Mikhail's perspective champions the idea that a person's success is not tied to a specific location, but rather to their ability to flourish and thrive no matter where they are planted. Just as a seed can sprout and flourish in any soil.

Mikhail stresses that her identity as a writer is innate to her existence and not something she intentionally works to build or construct. She considers her poetry to be an inherent reflection of who she is, and it is a fundamental element of who she is. In "America" is an example of how Mikhail's poetry uses symbolism and imagery. She says: "People are grass/ They grow everywhere" (2004), Mikhail's metaphor of grass suggests human flexibility, yet her Iraqi ancestry remains central to her identity, stressing the importance of cultural roots.

In the article titled *Acculturation and Enculturation: Ethnic Identity Socialisation Processes Shaping* (2015), Hakim-Larson and Menna assert that:

Ethnic identity comes from a great consideration of subjective importance of the ethnic or cultural group. So, a person's ethnic identity is multifaceted and includes multiple components as the person develops over time. A person's national identity, based on where they reside, and ethnic identity, based on ethno cultural family heritage, together comprise a person's overall cultural identity (p.37).

Dunya Mikhail uses a contemplative manner to convey her idea of "Arab identity". She says:

I wander among the ruins
like a word in the dictionary
roaming in search for its meanings
in a language without verbs.

I am a verb of the past,

trying vainly to change to the present tense. (Mikhail, 2009, p.11)

As an Iraqi poet, Mikhail begins a lyrical journey through other cultures in an effort to discover the "meanings" of her own identity. She compares herself to an undefined "word" that is written on an entry in a cultural "dictionary" in order to describe her uncertainty. It is clear from the poet's use of the phrase "a language without verbs" that it is depressed by the plight of the Arab nations, which are in conflict and lacking in all purposes (Nasif, 2015, p. 190). Although she is a product of the past, Mikhail is trying to adapt the present despite the entire difficult situation.

Mikhail used poetry as a fitting medium to depict the large anxieties that are looming over her mind and the mind of her own people. Her obligatory exile was also a core motive behind writing some of her war poems. In her imagination, she carries the picture of her hometown in the form of aesthetic qualities, childhood love stories, and beautiful and terrible experiences that refuse to be forgotten.

Lost Homeland: A Medley of Identity and Loss in Dunya Mikhail's "I Was in a Hurry"

Renowned Iraqi poet and writer, Dunya Mikhail, details her journey into the exile through her poem "I Was in a Hurry" (2004). Through vivid images and a careful choice of language, she tells a story about rushing into an endless tangle, and how a person is

forced to leave his country for political, social or religious reasons, leaving behind a long history. Mikhail's use of distinctive imagery gives her readers a realistic picture of how she felt as if she left her land, perhaps for eternity.

The word "Yesterday," used in the past tense, suggests that this loss has already happened and may be related to a particular historical or personal period. The poet may have been caught off guard by the loss because of her hurriedness and lack of awareness, which suggests that it may have happened suddenly or unexpectedly.

The line "a broken branch from a forgetful tree" are used to describe the lost nation, which heightens the lines' emotional effect. The idea of a broken branch evokes up feelings of fragility and weakness, suggesting that the nation was suddenly and tragically lost. The reference to a "forgetful tree" raises the idea that the loss happened accidentally, as if it vanished without being recognized. Alternatively, it's possible that the tree represents a communal or historical memory that has become foggy with time.

The first few lines of the poem, "Please, if anyone passes by / and stumbles across it," (Mikhail, 2004, p.31) imply an appeal or plea, as if the poet is pleading for assistance or attention in order to locate something significant, this reference occurs by mentioning the pronoun "it."

Then, the poem goes on to describe the various places where this precious item might be found; "in a suitcase" that is open. So, this image evokes a sense of vulnerability and exposure, as if the lost item is waiting to be found by chance or fate. The description of the lost item as "engraved on a rock like a gaping wound" conveys a deeper emotional connection to it. While the line "Wrapped in the blankets of emigrants" gives the feelings of those who have been obliged to leave their homes and go to another country or go into exile, wrapping their country by the hearts as a sentimental attachment to their own country.

Words like "smoke," "war," and "helmet" introduce an atmosphere associated with war and conflict. They conjure a powerful visual of the chaos and destruction that war raises, suggesting that the lost item might have been "rolling" away or hidden amidst the turmoil of conflict. This image refers to immigrants as victims of war who were forced to leave their country and waste into the unknown without any desire or even planning. After that, Mikhail compared the transfer of the homeland to the war as a "losing lottery ticket," meaning that the homeland has become such a worthless item because of the war and the destruction it left behind.

The addition of the phrase "or stolen in Ali Baba's jar" deepens the imagery used by Dunya Mikhail to explore loss and seeking for something valuable. The allusion to Ali Baba's jar is a reference to the well-known Middle Eastern folktale "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves." In this situation, the jar could stand in for a secret or covert place where priceless objects are stored. This gives the idea of loss a new level by implying that the object in issue was purposefully taken away rather than just lost or misplaced. This line represents, as in Hornsey (2008), how aspects of one's cultural history or identity may be taken over or used against them from the standpoint of social identity theory (p. 208). Examining a number of elements of Dunya Mikhail's poetry and her strategy for expressing her Arab identity, we find that she uses the historical reflection of things to prove her existence and her position as an expatriate poet in a new homeland, looking for a new smile that brings joy to her heart.

or disguised in the uniform of a policeman

who stirred up the prisoners

and fled,

or squatting in the mind of a woman

who tries to smile, (Mikhail,2004,p.31)

In the context of Iraq, the images "of a policeman" and "the women" offer a comprehensive and multi-layered investigation of the realities of those affected by war and violence. In one hand, the representation of a police officer in uniform relates to the presence of power and authority during armed warfare. This image may reflect the repressive forces causing unrest and violence in a war-torn area. The idea that the policeman stirred the prisoners before running away emphasizes how violent conflict is unpredictable and unexpected and has a lasting effect on individuals who are involved. Additionally, it stands for the absence of responsibility and the perpetuation of injustice that might result from such circumstances.

On the other hand, being in the thoughts of a "squatting woman" who attempts to smile provides a unique and intensely private viewpoint. In this work, Mikhail examines the inner battles of a person, particularly a woman, who is attempting to keep some kind of normality amid the terrible reality of war and relocation. The act of smiling, which is frequently connected to feelings of pleasure, is characterized as a coping strategy, or even a way of showing rejection in the face of difficulty.

"Scattered," "dream," "new immigrants," and "America" together create a feeling of fragmentation, loss, and detachment, which represents the psychological and physical costs of war. The scattering symbolizes the broken lives and crushed hopes of individuals who were compelled to flee their homes because of conflict and upheaval. Mikhail makes a moving analogy between migration and the dispersed dream that relates to the struggles and hopes of people who have left their own country in search of a new life in America. In addition, the hopes and ambitions of recent immigrants to America indicate their desire for a brighter future in which a person will succeed in finding his lost dream. This emphasizing how challenging it is to maintain a strong sense of self and identity in exile. The dreams of recent immigrants may encounter difficulties with integration, cultural adaptability, and the desire to keep roots-related ties. A round this poem, Mikhail expresses that:

"I Was in a Hurry" is the first poem I wrote when I came to America. So, the first year I came here, I was trying to find my space and see how I could alternate to my place. Poetry helped me do this. Concerning this poem, as it is the first poem I wrote here, of course, I was thinking of my background, of my homeland, 'Iraq'. As I say, "I was in a Hurry" when I left my country, so the poem tells it all: somebody comes from the war. The poem has irony; most of my poems have irony in them; this poem is not exceptional. So, this poem also has an irony that uses those images. At the end of the creation, a piece of art, a poem as an art. (R. Ibrahim, personal communication, July, 3, 2023)

Dunya Mikhail's emotional request for the restoration of her exiled nation in poem's last words, "I Was in a Hurry," arouses a strong sense of desire, despair, and a strong connection to her own place. She underlines the urgency and significance of getting back what has been lost by repeating the words "Please return it." Then the expression politeness represents the poet's vulnerability by saying: "sir," and "madam." Further, Mikhail establishes a circular framework in her poem by beginning and ending it with the word "yesterday," which condenses the entire story into the limits of one day. This recurrence serves as a metaphor for the passage of time, representing how fast life can alter and how suddenly loss may happen.

The poet's identity and sense of belonging are summed up in the phrase, "It is my country." The nation is more than simply a location on a map; it is an integral component of her identity and cultural background. The phrase "Please return it" is repeated several times, underscoring the depth of her emotional attachment to her own country. She seems to be pleading with the reader to comprehend the gravity of her loss.

Deeply exploring grief, identity, and the idea of home, "I Was in a Hurry" is an effective piece of poetry. The poem is haunting and compelling, and its use of symbolically rich language and intense emotion furthers this effect, making it a profoundly resonant work of literature. By using symbolism, Mikhail brings the concept of a lost nation to life, enabling readers to empathize with the terrible feeling of loss felt by the Iraqi people as a result of war, misery, and relocation. The poem develops into a reflection on the difficulties of defining one's identity and the never-ending search for a place to call home, underlining the fundamental human need to identify with one's racial and ethnic origins. Dunya Mikhail's examination of Arab identity in her poems is better understood when Henri Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory is taken into consideration. The focus of the theory on searching out good characteristics of one's in-group provides insight on the issues of belonging and cultural heritage that run throughout her work.

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