Griffith University

Hasti Abbasi Narinabad

Dislocation and the idea of happiness in *An Imaginary Life* and *Women Without Men*, and its embodiment in *The Borders*

Abstract:

Sense of place functions as a touchstone for individual and national identity reflected in cultural identity through the interrelationship between landscape, individual and society. This study aims at exploring how the idea of happiness is connected with sense of place in fiction. Happiness is understood here, as a path that leads to various emotional journeys and discoveries for the characters. The representation of happiness will be explored in the context of dislocation and exile in *An Imaginary Life* (1989) by David Malouf (1934-), and *Women Without Men* (1989) by Shahrnush Parsipur (1945-). In this paper, I will consider happiness as "a sense of being at home with your own skin, at home with the world, at one with ourselves" (Malouf 2011: 19). This idea is disrupted when individuals are dislocated – either physically and/or emotionally – from their culture of origin, sense of meaning, and personal identity. This paper explores characters' development towards their self-defining identity, through a critical study of the selected novels, in order to gain insight on how to demonstrate dislocation and the idea of happiness as an evolving process of self-definition in my creative project, *The Borders*. My novel-in-progress reflects upon Iranian immigrants' experience of settling home in Australia and celebrates the cultural hybridity and self-defining identity resulting from being dislocated and the interconnectedness of the modern world. It also intends to provide an insight into cultural identity, and the idea of happiness, in the light of the experience and insights of characters, mostly from Iranian background, and their position in Australia.

Biographical note:

Hasti Abbasi holds BA and MA qualifications in English Literature. She is a sessional academic and a Ph.D. student at the University of Griffith, where her research is focused on a comparative study of dislocation and the idea of happiness in the selected Australian and Persian contemporary fictions. She is also writing a novel with the same central themes.

Introduction

This paper investigates the idea of happiness as an evolving process of self-defining identity in relation to dislocation and exile as expressed in narrative fiction. Its premise is that the interrelationships between humans and their natural environment, and the influence that changes in surroundings play on their perspectives and experiences of being, are central to the idea of happiness. These happiness-generating relationships are disrupted when individuals are dislocated – physically, culturally and/or emotionally – from their culture of origin, sense of meaning, and personal identity. The present paper offers a combined analytical/creative study, approached through a literary analysis of dislocation, with its complex social and psychological manifestations, and individuals' ideas of happiness as an evolving process of self-definition in *An Imaginary Life* (1989) by David Malouf (1934-), and *Women Without Men* (1989) by Shahrnush Parsipur (1945-). This critical study serves as a methodological strategy and insight into how to demonstrate dislocation and the idea of happiness as an evolving process of self-definition in my creative project, *The Borders*. *An Imaginary Life* shares with *Women Without Men* the theme of a quest for an ideal state. These novels also bear a close resemblance to each other because both explore ideas about the sense of exile in characters. As I will argue, they were written in a period when Australia and Iran were both undergoing profound historical, political and social changes.

My approach in this paper adopts elements of practice-led research, a well-established methodological strategy in creative writing research, which I will use to connect my creative practice with literary analysis as an ethical intervention into knowledge production about dislocation, happiness, and personal development. As Arnold (2007: 3) states, PLR 'enables the academy to look at practice as a way of bringing forth the research both in itself and in an interaction with the ideas and debates that may be teased out from it'. In practice-led research, theory and practice are 'inextricably linked and mutually dependent' (Scrivener 2000: 1). Therefore, my recruitment of practice-led research, which places equal significance on 'the artist-practitioner, the creative product and the critical process' (Sullivan 2009: 47) is a relevant methodology for my research because it allows for both creative and critical outputs.

This approach covers a range of research activities including reflective practice, embodied experience, and discourse analysis. I undertake an investigation into self-defining identity and self-development through reflection on practice and review of critical research. Reflection, as mentioned earlier, is a crucial aspect of the practice-led research process (Arnold 2007). In my critical and creative project, I consider the term reflexivity rather than reflection. This is because as Rose (1997) argues, reflexivity covers the empirical characteristics of creative writing and information production and their intersection with the creative writers' position and relationships to practice, discourse and the socio-cultural milieu in which they create and research. The paper first examines the relationship between dislocation and happiness in *An Imaginary Life*, then *Women Without Men*, and concludes by showing how those novels relate to my work in my own creative project, *The Borders*.

Dislocation, imagination, and unity with the child and nature in *An Imaginary Life*

David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* tells the story of the Roman poet Ovid during his exile in Tomis. This work is, in part, about an individual journey from a state of being dislocated from a known urban culture to one of cultural isolation, where Ovid begins to exist in close contact with untamed nature. The exilic imaginary brings up a question in Ovid's mind: whether and how he can accomplish the indispensable ability to feel at one with the environment rather than sustaining his state of dislocation. Malouf refers to the *Metamorphoses* as a two-way effort: the movement of Ovid as the well-known, complicated author away from the prestigious Roman life into 'the last reality' (Malouf 1989: 141) of a spiritual unity with the infinite nature of the Danube, and the Child's opposite drive into humanity through his linguistic acquisition. A significant emblematic element in the narrative is the transformation of the protagonist Ovid, author of the *Metamorphoses*. At the beginning of the novel, he is a symbol of 'the witty, sceptical, subversive ironist of the Augustan age' (McDonald 1988: 49), while the Ovid at the end of the story is a poet symbolizing emotion, unity, and wisdom, 'who asserts that by belief, the word can create the thing' (1988: 50).

Just as Patrick White revised the myths of the explorer and settler in books such as *The Tree of Man* (1955) and *Voss* (1957), so Malouf has re-examined several legendary moments in Australian history, beginning with Australia's experience in the two world wars, and probing backwards to frontier encounters with Indigenous Australians and the moral crises surrounding settlement (Lever 2009: 510). As the son of a Lebanese father and a Portuguese mother, and spending much time overseas, Malouf has an ambiguous relationship to Australia that can be traced through his distinctive representation of Australian culture in his work. As Randall declares:

> Malouf's belonging in Australia has been a matter of question, in the space of the author's own lifetime, and not only because he has resided in England and in Italy. He has been susceptible to construction as an other in the society of his birth. His attraction to otherness, and the high value he places on it, may well come out of his own historically ambiguous relationship with Australian identity (2007: 11).

This is the situation for his character Ovid, in *An Imaginary Life*. Completely dissociated from his native Latin and Augustan culture, Ovid struggles to circulate throughout quotidian life, the everydayness of things, to expose the myths underlying a familiar structure. As a procreative force, imagination offers Ovid the assurance of completeness and human reciprocity, moving him from his initial sense of disconnectedness and alienation to humanity beyond the borders of life and death where Ovid and the Child enter each other's existence and 'the desolateness' (Malouf 1989: 31) of the place turns into a fertile one. Malouf seems to be signifying the importance of breaking the ignorant and restricting circles of the individual, society, home, and language, while at the same time imaginatively and artistically restructuring them. This is demonstrated when Ovid dreams of himself as a pool of rainwater. Without any sense of hurt or fear, Ovid is 'filled with tenderness' for the

deer that drinks from him. He feels part of him moving away as he 'breaks in circles' (1989: 56).

An Imaginary Life addresses the possibility for individuals to experience spiritual comfort and redemption though Nature and Otherness as emblematic elements of a universal value. A shift occurs in Ovid's perception when he recognises the significance of landscape on its own terms rather than as a mere 'background to human drama' (Malouf in Spinks 2009: 10). Stanners & Stanners (2005: 69) declare that, in exile, Ovid's 'fears and insecurities begin to be replaced by developing intoxication for the restorative qualities of nature'. In his ongoing interrelations with otherness—the Child, the natural world, and the villagers—Ovid also communicates to himself, and experiences a new perception of life that takes him beyond the limits of his former self-identity. During this identity-forging process, he experiences an imaginary salvation where he no longer considers a distinction between himself and the Child, nature and culture, man and woman, body and soul, Roman and Getic language. The Child acts as Ovid's lost childhood companion and Ovid meets his death when nature/culture and the other/the self are bound together. The relationship between Ovid and the Child towards wholeness and fulfilment appears as a fundamental move towards experiencing unity with nature, even beyond the limits of sensuality. Ovid and the Child continue a:

> series of beginnings, of painful settings out into the unknown, pushing off from the edges of consciousness into the mystery of what we have not yet become (Stanners & Stanners 2005: 134).

The theme of language symbolically discloses the general strategy of the politics of peripheral identity at play in Ovid's imaginary world. Whether based on past reality or entirely fictional, in terms of the discourse on cultural identity, exile in Ovid's poetry is not so much a matter of cross-cultural displacement 'from one culture into another as one of discursive marginalisation, from prominence at the centre of the hegemonic discourse to its margins' (Matzner 2011: 320). However, the lack of a shared language in exile forces Ovid to express his experience of existence in an internalized monologue through a lyrical language. Ovid helps the Child step into the world, while he himself strives to learn the reality behind his poetic language. *An Imaginary Life* deals with the multi-level purpose of language, allowing Ovid to re-evaluate Imperialist culture and its definition of self, perceive history differently, and question the importance of knowledge assigned by the Emperors. Ovid writes:

> I too have created an age. It is coterminous with his, and has its existence in the lives and loves of his subjects. It is gay, anarchic, ephemeral and it is fun (Malouf 1989: 26).

To provide visual imagery and graphic details of the natural world and animals, Malouf utilizes descriptive language; for example: 'ropes of dark blood hanging from it and the fur at its throat matted with blood' (1989: 2). Malouf also utilizes visual imagery for describing Ovid's dream where he walks on the river 'which swirled like smoke under me, and I was moonlight' (1989:16).

According to Hansson (1991: 34), *An Imaginary Life* deals 'with the multi-level function of language as an instrument, identity, conflict and contact, development and destruction, life and death', and it would be impossible 'to single out one of them to define as symbol, grammar, motif or anything else'. Ovid helps 'the Child "push out" into the world, while at the same time, the Child leads Ovid out into the 'reality' behind the words of his poems' (Hanson 1991: 115). Ovid transcends rules and limitations of his liberty, through 'breaking out of these laws without doing violence to our essential being' (1991: 62). In conclusion, *An Imaginary Life* reflects upon exile as a prerequisite for transcendence and demonstrates the significance of a sense of inner exile in individuals before they embark upon an outer exile.

Dislocation, the garden, and female empowerment in *Women Without Men*

Reflecting upon recent Iranian history, Sharhnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men* (1989/2001) chronicles the intertwining lives of five Iranian women belonging to different periods and social classes during a summer in the 1950s. They are united against the political and social conditions of the period, an era of self-doubt, pressure, and uncertainty. In favour of independence, these women congregate in 'The garden' on the outskirts of Tehran, a shelter against the constraints of patriarchal society. These women include Zarrinkolah, a prostitute, who feels an urge to 'prostrate herself, naked as she was, in prayer and plead for God's grace' (Parsipur 1989/2001: 65-66), and so she goes to the garden; Farrokhlaqa, an affluent, middle-aged housewife who buys the garden after inadvertently causing the death of her husband; Munis and the traditionally-minded Faezeh, two seemingly hopeless spinsters who are both raped by two violent men on their way to the garden; and last, but not least, Mahdokht, who, while visiting her brother's garden in Karaj, witnesses an illegal sexual encounter and decides that she cannot abide the burden of her virginity anymore, and therefore proclaims herself a tree, planting her feet in the ground.

The time in which the novel is set was a particularly disastrous moment in the history of Iran: the Iranian Prime Minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, nationalized the Iranian oil facilities to rebel against the reigning Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The 1979 revolution in Iran resulted in the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty, to be replaced by the Islamic republic. The Shah left Iran on January 16, 1979 as the last Persian monarch and Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Tehran as the new leader of Iran. According to Benard (1984), the West-oriented autocratic monarchy was replaced by a theocracy based on Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists. Ulama started separating the sexes and forced women to wear the hijab. As Milani (1992: 5) explains:

> The veil, in its traditional sense, not only polarizes but delineates boundaries. It consigns 'power,' 'control,' 'visibility,' and 'mobility' to one social category at the expense of the other.

Triggered by the consequences for women of the 1979 revolution, *Women Without Men* explores the psychic and social dislocation of women and their idea of happiness within their home country. Home in *Women Without Men* is represented as a place of

imprisonment, silence, and monotony as opposed to the ideal notion of home as a place for love, discussion, and a source of positivity. As a depressing representation of women and their place in a patriarchal society, the four walls of the houses described in *Women Without Men* act as veils that obscure the means of achieving women's dreams and the possibility of their interaction with others. Discontent with home's real living conditions, Parsipur's women have a tendency towards fantasy and imagination of a more utopian life. All of these women suffer from the lack of a steady, respected subjectivity, and 'are in quest of something or somewhere, implying a matter of will' (Israel 2000: 1).

Parsipur's *Women Without Men* exemplifies female literary expression. Parsipur represents 'women's ontological desire, women's structural need to posit themselves as female subjects, that is to say, not as disembodied entities but rather as corporeal and consequently sexed beings' (Braidotti 2014: 43-44). This work can be usefully read in reference to Hélène Cixous's *Écriture Féminine*, a model that follows feminine desire and the language of the body, which Cixous proposed in *The laugh of Medusa*. Cixous calls for an exploration of feminine drives that subverts the dominate discourse through writing characterized by open-endedness, difference, disruptive wordplay, revisionary re-readings—particularly, by a closer relation with the body as a site where the unconscious finds expression in creative/procreative desires (Santoro 1999: 174). Indeed, Parsipur's female characters gain happiness and experience *jouissance* through embodied self-experience. Parsipur writes about women who do not go mad, commit suicide, or become depressed because of the responsibilities they are supposed to fulfil. Instead, she writes of women who pass the constraints that gender imposes upon them and explore their sexual identity and gain greater sexual satisfaction. Parsipur tries to express her sense of dissatisfaction with common norms of womanhood by ridiculing society's prevailing ideas about virginity and sexual relationships. Munis, considered a spinster despite her mere thirty-eight years, realizes that virginity is not a veil but rather a hole during a conversation with Faezeh (Parsipur 1989/2001: 23).

In this novel, female sexuality is represented by the symbolically utopian garden, a place of fertility and a new experience of being. Foucault argues that: 'The garden is the smallest parcel of the world and then it is the totality of the world' (1997: 26). Individuals can create their own garden and achieve reconciliation through listening to the language of nature: One 'symbolic importance of the garden image is the domestication of nature' (Askeland 2008: 71). To have a beautiful garden, the Kind Gardener, Munis and Zarrinkolah 'fertilize the tree' (Parsipur 1989/2001: 88), learn 'bricklaying, tree planting, landscaping' (89), and collect dewdrops to irrigate the tree (91). All the women get involved in renovating the house in the garden: 'Zrrinkolah would prepare the mortar; Munis would take it to the building; Faezeh would carry bricks in a wheelbarrow' (87). Therefore, the garden and the house are not shaped without human effort; the underlying message is that nature and humans need to be united for a new beginning in these women's lives.

It is significant, however, to mention that although the garden in this story provides the means to some positive transformations, such as Zarrinkolah giving birth to a morning glory before dawn, it does not function as a permanent utopian place. Rather,

it serves as a 'heterotopia'. Referring to Shirin Neshat's film of the novel, Holman (2013) suggests that while the garden 'certainly represents an alternate sphere to the repressive socio-political world of 1953 Tehran in the film, it does not function as a classical utopia in terms of offering its inhabitants a singularly safe and paradisiacal space of retreat'. This accords with Foucault's idea of heterotopias, which he describes as 'localisable' utopias or 'actually realised' utopias, which contrast with that of utopias. Foucault (1997: 357) suggests that heterotopias, which are generally associated with marginality, conflict, disobedience, and hybridity, are other spaces: a sort of counter-arrangement. Foucault mentions the garden, and the Persian garden more specifically, as the oldest instances of heterotopias that take the shape of incongruous sites:

> One should not forget that the garden, an astonishing creation now thousands of years old, had in the Orient very deep and seemingly superimposed meanings. The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that was supposed to bring together inside its rectangle four parts representing the four parts of the world, with a center space still more sacred than the others, that was like an umbilicus, the navel of the world (it is there that the water basin and fountain were). All the vegetation of the garden was supposed to be distributed in that space, within this sort of microcosm (1994: 181-182).

Foucault's reading of the garden can also be extended to Iran's post-revolutionary period represented through its literature. It offers a kind of a real or virtual space that is outside all social, political, and cultural places of Iran, and that has been thrown into complete confusion after the coup d'état. Parsipur's garden functions as a site of self-reflection for women in which they learn a new joint experience of self-belonging and a different reality free from traditional cultural and historical narratives. These women all find refuge from the patriarchal system that controls their every decisions and actions. However, after they congregate in the garden, where they make their own happiness, their unity and original bond does not survive and they begin to argue and separate along class boundaries. For example, Faizeh is usually left alone at the other end of the garden, Farrokhlaqa is desperately trying to compose a poem in her music room in isolation, Munis is moved to the gardener's lodge and rarely stays in the garden. Muni asks the gardener to let her help him find dewdrops to irrigate Mahdokht. One day the gardener tells her that it is time for her to become human. She moans: 'How can I turn into light?' (Parsipur 1989/2001: 100-101). He says:

> Now I tell you to go in the search of darkness anew. Descend to the depths, to the depths of depths. There you will see the light aglow in your hands, by your side. That is being human. Now, go become human (1989/2001: 110).

And Munis turns into a tiny whirlwind and rises to sky and after spending seven years in the desert, comes to city and bathes, puts on fresh clothes, and becomes a teacher.

Mahdokht is the only woman who completely separates from herself and can welcome the spring and let her heart be 'filled with joy, a joy that she passed on the buds as they grew into green leaves' (Parsipur 1989/2001: 104). In a magic realist scene her seeds travel with the water to all corners of the world and she no longer needs to worry about her virginity and womanhood.

As Holman (2013: n.p.) declares, the garden is 'not, as the women may have first imagined, a permanent space of renewal, but an in-between, liminal, temporary shelter. There is to be no lasting asylum even in the mythical space of the Orchard...' Yet, this garden allows the women to re-evaluate their past ideologies and make an attempt to transform them into a constructive force before returning to society.

Thus, Parsipur's women assert their own sense of selfhood and rejoice in their physicality: first, through their own scepticism about gender difference, and second, through reconciliation with their body and their desires. Experiencing a new flux of their selves, they represent their femininity in their own terms, disregarding their social constructivism defined by men. Through Zarrinkolah's uniting with the Kind Gardener, Faezeh's marriage to Amir Khan, and Farrokhlaqa's marriage to Merrikhi, they decide to 'coexist in the positive expression of their respective differences' (Braidotti 2002: 172). As Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 293) argue, '[becoming] constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points, carrying one into the proximity of the other'. This becoming brings about transformation in characters' identities.

The Borders

Informed by the feeling that there is no authentic and definite self to be realized, *The Borders* emerges from my struggle with the self: self-defining identity, self-exploration, and self-transformation. During my first months of immigration to Australia as an international student, I experienced the challenge of exile, the uncomfortable sense of alienation, and the knowledge of and longing for my lost identity. Through my relationships with different Iranians, I found that although most of them experience the same feelings of dislocation and alienation in Australia, they each have different perspectives and ways of adjusting to the new culture and language, preserving and/or constructing or reconstructing their previous identity, and ambitions and desires of an ideal and/or happy life. As I struggled to locate and stabilize my identity in Australia, I realized that I was unconsciously moving beyond conventional Iranian culture/identity and I was creating my identity as transnational. Therefore, I decided to write a story with a central focus on Iranian characters who are living in an 'in between' space, straddling their Iranian and Australian identity, and struggling to make their identity transnational. I have a number of worlds, both fictional and physical to explore and reconcile with one another. By physical world, I also mean the geographical Australia I find myself in, and the inner worlds of emotion and imagination I have experienced since immigration. As MacRobert (2013: 73) suggests, 'The inner world(s), both past and present, of an individual might find echoes in wider issues in the individual's society and in existing literature, which can be synthesises into unique writing goals of content and style'.

My investigations relating to place, in this case Australia, involve its culture, regulations, traditions, and social spectrum. This accords with the physical environment in *An Imaginary Life* and *Women Without Men* that serves as a centrally

important function of self-definition for the characters, who find it challenging to maintain a desired sense of self in a purely social context.

As previously mentioned, I employ reflective practice, knowledge gathering, and the research informed by ethnography to construct characters from different cultural and family backgrounds that are each having new experience of being. In this light, I have taken some steps which include my travel around Queensland, Sydney, and Melbourne; the friendships I have made with Iranian and Australian people from different educational, family, and cultural backgrounds, and my reflection on their insights, lifestyle, idea of a happy life, and their self-defining identity. Moreover, to emphasise the significance of dislocation, whether chosen or imposed, on creative transformation, my approach draws on Bolton's (2009: 6) argument that practice-led research offers 'practical and theorised methods for understanding and grasping authority over actions, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and professional identity in professional, cultural and political contexts.'

The Borders shares with *An Imaginary Life* and *Women Without Men* the theme of a quest for an ideal state. It also bears a close resemblance to the sense of exile in the characters within the selected novels, who attempt to integrate their past, present and future, and realise meaningful belonging. *The Borders interweaves* the stories of three females and two males: Marjan, described above; Sepideh, a 36-year-old Iranian woman who is an accountant; Sara, a 25-year-old Iranian girl who is a writer; Arsalan, a 40-year-old Iranian man who is a singer; and Rob, a 17-year-old Iraqi boy who is a student. The latter four characters have all migrated to Australia while Marjan is still in Tehran. All of these characters are in a journey towards self-defining identity and the idea of happiness in a place where they are culturally, emotionally, and/or physically dislocated.

This novel-in-progress provides diverse prototypes of life among individuals of different cultures and worldviews. This novel provides me with an inspirational quality to explore life and possibilities for insight. The interrelation between space and state of mind, and identity process of characters of different cultures, all placed in Australia, are influenced by my own experience of feeling dislocated, isolated, and marginalized. In this context, MacRobert (2013: 65) argues that, 'there is a tangle of correlation between the world of the writer and the world she is creating in the text that is difficult to unravel and explain.' Therefore, my creative writing expresses only a part of the characters' challenges as well as me, as a writer, in the new country, due to loss of supportive community, feeling of alienation, feeling of concern and guilt for leaving the ones with whom one shares mutual love, and all other cultural dilemmas with regard to self-defining identity.

The Borders is in part about the way characters associate happiness with some life choices and not others. It is also about the cultural and identity negotiation processes that take place in the complexity of borders. It reflects upon Iranian immigrants' experiences of settling in Australia and celebrates the interconnectedness of the modern world and cultural hybridity and self-defining identity that can result from being dislocated. It also represents the dilemmas and concerns of a 32-year-old

Iranian single mother in Tehran, Marjan, who feels emotionally and physically dislocated.

In this light, Malouf's Ovid's perception of exile, the journey of self-discovery, the powers of imagination, unity with the natural world, and relation with others provide a *fundamental* basis to *the themes and techniques* of *The Borders*. This novel-in-progress is also influenced by Parsipur's representation of feminine desire and the experience of happiness through female empowerment and *L'ecriture Feminine* (Cixous 1975). Like Parsipur's novel, *The Borders* explores feminine drives through a writing characterized by open-endedness, difference, disruptive wordplay, revisionary re-readings, and especially, by a closer relation with the body as a site where the unconscious finds expression in creative/procreative desires (Santoro 1999: 174). Emphasizing the significance of happiness, *The Borders*, like *An Imaginary Life* and *Women Without Men,* portrays the characters as rethinking their ideals and questioning their lives before taking their next step. In these works, individual experiences of transition and transformation allow the characters to become other than what they are or have been.

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