

A Study of Language and Identity as Neocolonial Means in Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of migration, whether by choice or necessity, has shaped various spheres, giving rise to a corpus referred to as migrant literature. Many authors of this genre explore the sociopolitical contrasts between their current and native lands, sharing their experiences while sometimes allegedly concealing some aspects of the immigration process. This has sparked contentious debates that extend beyond the literary realm. Firoozeh Dumas' well-known memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, humorously portrays the Iranian-American family's journey through cultural disparities. In an attempt to reappraise this light-hearted approach to Dumas' work, this research utilizes Ngugi wa Thiong'o's language studies and Milton Gordon's analysis of identity in diaspora. This study concludes that the Englishness of Dumas' memoir and its narrative's normalization of assimilation in the host country, align with the neo-colonial politics of the West theorized by Kwame Nkrumah. These neo-colonial dynamics of power in turn can potentially disrupt the ongoing decolonization process.

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INTRODUCTION

Migrant literature encompasses a rich tapestry of stories, experiences, and perspectives from individuals who have migrated to new lands. This literature generally explores themes of identity, displacement, cultural clashes, and the quest for belonging. Through vivid narratives and diverse voices, migrant literature sheds light on the complexities of the migrant experience, capturing the challenges, resilience, and triumphs of those who navigate unfamiliar territories. By bridging cultural divides and fostering empathy, migrant literature offers a powerful lens through which we can understand the universal human longing for connection and a place to call home.

In his introduction to *Women Write Iran: Nostalgia and Human Rights from the Diaspora*, Naghibi (2016) is of the opinion that migrant literature, besides its vital role in facilitating an enhanced understanding of the contemporary personal chronicle, compels us to assume our responsibilities as conscientious global citizens and participants through embracement of other similar works with empathy and dedication to social issues (p. 1). Be that as it may, many authors of this literature, attempt to approach their native country's sociopolitical situation or its traditions while, whether intentional or unintentional, managing to reinforce stereotypical perspectives towards their homeland and contribute to the colonial interests of the west.

One of the renowned Iranian works of diaspora that this study believes to be suffering from this problem is Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* (2004). In a world increasingly defined by globalization and cultural exchange, this memoir stands as a poignant and humorous exploration of the complexities of cultural identity. Published in the early 21st century, this captivating literary work offers readers a unique glimpse into the life of an Iranian-American immigrant, blending heartwarming anecdotes, witty observations, and thought-provoking insights. *Funny in Farsi* takes us on a remarkable journey, tracing Dumas' experiences from her childhood in Iran to her eventual relocation to the United States. Through her heartfelt storytelling, Dumas navigates the challenges of adapting to a new culture, while shedding light on the universal human experiences that transcend borders. Dumas' memoir not only serves as a personal narrative but also as a microcosm of the larger immigrant experience. With her trademark wit and self-deprecating humor, she offers a nuanced exploration of cultural adaptation, shedding light on the idiosyncrasies, misconceptions, and triumphs that shape the immigrant's quest for belonging. Moore (2003) the reviewer of Library Journal believes that "[t]oday, as Middle Easterners in the United States are subject to racial profiling, stereotyping, and sometimes violence, this book provides a valuable glimpse into the immigrant experiences of one very entertaining family. Recommended for public libraries" (p. 108).

The present paper aims to approach Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*, doubtful of the general consensus about this memoir that revolves around its innocent as well as positive contribution to postcolonial literature. Accordingly, in an attempt this study will discuss if and how the language of this work as well as its approach to identity in diaspora is in line with the neocolonial objectives of the United States. To pursue this line of reasoning, this research will firstly delve into the renowned theories of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o about language of the literary works belonging to the marginalized/colonized people. In addition to wa Thiong'o, some other theories will be employed as well to discuss *Funny in Farsi*'s language. Next, Milton Gordon's theory of assimilation and its seven stages will be incorporated into this study to see how full assimilation is fulfilled and encouraged within the aforementioned memoir. Then, examples of binary opposition between Iran and the United States that have lurked their way into the narrative of the memoir will be discussed. Finally, the paper will discuss how particular usage of language and treatment of identity in a narrative that encompasses frequent binaries can relate to Kwame Nkrumah's notion of neocolonialism, labeling Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* as a neocolonial piece of work.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In an article published in *Middle East Research and Information Project* and entitled "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War", Mottahedeh (2004) finds fault with the way Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* celebrates the opportunities she has been provided with through residing in United States while overlooking the similar advantages she would have benefited from in her country of Origin, Iran. Giving an instance, while celebrating American hospitality Dumas fails to recognize and employ Iranian practice of *Nazri* in her narrative, a practice which involves giving free food to people. Borrowing Mottahedeh's phraseology, "For Dumas, it would seem, freedom in America is the endless possibility of self-indulgence understood without any self-reflection. This is freedom, yes, but at what cost? Total war? Occupation? Perhaps" (p. 2).

According to her research paper entitled "Iran, America and Iranian American Community in Firoozeh Jazayeri Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*", Ramin (2014) while working on Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* which she qualifies as having historical importance, claims that due to its descriptive account of Iranian American community, the book is significant when it comes to hybrid life style. In her research of "Iran, America and Iranian American Community in Firoozeh Jazayeri Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*" Ramin believes that in order to survive the only way is to become a hybrid and hybridity is what Ramin thinks as characteristic feature of the memoir. Due to this honesty of hers, Ramin claims that people who have questions regarding their identity in the host country can find reliable answers in Duma's book (pp. 101-102).

In their article entitled “Homi Bhabha and Iranian-American Literature of Diaspora: Is Firoozeh Dumas’s *Funny in Farsi* Postcolonially Funny?”, Ghandeharion and Sheikh Farshi (2017) believe that through an implicit comparison between her parents and herself, Dumas actually reveals the differences between the first-generation Iranian immigrants with those of the second generation. What distinguishes these two is that while the former shows reluctance in learning the language and the mores of the host country, the latter tries to embrace the host country’s culture. Accordingly, their paper suggests that Duma’s usage of humor, which is mostly directed towards her parents and not the Americans, help promulgating the idea of inferiority characteristic of the colonized and the superiority of those including Firoozeh herself as a hybrid American (pp. 489, 501-503).

According to one research named “Double Consciousness-Oriented Linguistics Practices among Diasporic Writers in Two Novels: *To See and to See Again* and *Funny in Farsi*” written by Karimzadeh and Samani (2022), the diasporic writings are characterized with a conflict that the authors of this research name double consciousness. This conflict, these researchers believe, in turn gives rise to a hybrid and accented text. This accented text features immigrants as they are in interaction with the culture of the host society, reshaping their identity in accordance to the natives. This reshaping, as well as double consciousness, is reflected in dumas’ *Funny in Farsi* when marriage rituals, name selection, and Thanksgiving are concerned. Accordingly, through combination of Iranian traditions with Christian rituals when it comes to marriage and also giving Thanksgiving an Iranian character, this text reveals the double consciousness of its author (pp. 203-217).

The foregoing studies have illuminated various perspectives, theories, and methodologies employed to approach Dumas’ memoir. Through an examination of the key findings and gaps identified in the literature, this review has highlighted the significance of further investigation in specific areas. Accordingly, unlike the majority of the previously conducted researches commending the book, this paper aims at criticizing Dumas’ contribution to the fulfillment of Western (neo)colonial interests. In doing so, this article will be the first to focus on employing the notions of language, assimilation, and neocolonialism to analyze Dumas’ narrative. In addition to theories of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Kwame Nkrumah which are particularly relevant to postcolonial studies, the assimilation theory of the renowned sociologist Milton Gordon will be utilized as well.

LANGUAGE

Language serves a fundamental role in diasporic literature as it enables the expression of cultural identity, preserves heritage, and fosters a sense of belonging. It serves as a powerful tool for conveying experiences and challenging dominant narratives, while also transmitting intergenerational knowledge. It also plays a crucial role in cultural resilience and the formation of a cohesive diasporic identity. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001), while stating what post-colonial theory is concerned with, firstly allude to the influence the imperial languages such as English exert over colonized societies (p. 15). This suggests how the medium of expression, that is to say, the language the authors of diaspora decide upon for their works, will be of the utmost importance for postcolonial studies. Utilizing *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* the significance of language to a study which aims to reveal the neo-coloniality of a text could be best summarized in one sentence: “The relationship between text and reader is something like the relationship of the colonizer and colonized” (Ashcroft et al., 2013, p. 24).

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the renowned Kenyan author and scholar, has made significant contributions to the field of language studies, particularly in the context of postcolonial literature. His work explores the intricate relationship between language and power, focusing on the socio-political implications of language choice and the decolonization of African literature. By advocating for the use of African languages in literature and challenging the dominance of colonial languages, Ngugi seeks to restore agency and cultural identity to

marginalized communities. Through his extensive writings, including novels, essays, and plays, Ngugi wa Thiong'o has emerged as a prominent voice in the discourse on language, enriching our understanding of linguistic diversity and its impact on society.

When it comes to Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*, the language does not play a role in fulfilling some of the aforesaid goals that scholars consider for each diasporic work. In *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, wa Thiong'o (1986) believes that while "[t]he bullet was the means of the physical subjugation, language was the means of the spiritual subjugation" (p. 9). Regarding the relationship between language and culture, wa Thiong'o is of the opinion that:

Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other. Communication creates culture: culture is a means of communication. Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature; the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. (pp. 15-16)

Thus, wa Thiong'o (1986) concludes, "values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race" (p. 15) links the idea of language to the problem of identity in migrant literature. Accordingly, the assimilation process that is tied to identity in diaspora and which will be applied to Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* in the following pages is in line with the language of the aforesaid memoir, that is to say English. To pursue this line of reasoning, through her choice of English as the medium of expression in *Funny in Farsi*, Dumas on the one hand, cannot fully incorporate Iranian values, mores, and in one word culture into her memoir and on the other hand, her usage of English perpetuates the dominance of English and the subjugation of Farsi. To communicate the migrant experience of her Iranian family, Dumas utilizes and perhaps aims at appropriating the English language. According to *Post-colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*, Ashcroft et al. (2013) write that appropriation can refer to the act of "usurpation" in different cultural fields, but its most powerful manifestations occur in language and text. In these realms, the prevailing language and its expressive forms are used to convey diverse cultural experiences and integrate them into the dominant methods of portrayal, aiming to reach a broad and inclusive audience (p. 19). Be that as it may, as stated before the values, the societal mores and norms as well as other cultural elements according to wa Thiong'o will not be communicated through the language of the colonizer or the host land which in Dumas' case is English. In opposition to many authors such as Dumas and their act of employing a standard version of English, a technical term which may fall in line with wa Thiong'o's stance is abrogation. According to Ashcroft et al. (2013), "abrogation has been used to describe the rejection of a standard language in the writing of postcolonial literatures" (p. 4) previously neglected by the authors trying to appropriate the English Language. However, the affinity between abrogation and wa Thiong'o ends here since "[a]brogation offers a counter to the theory that use of the colonialist's language inescapably imprisons the colonized within the colonizer's conceptual paradigms – the view that 'you can't dismantle the master's house with the master's tools' (p. 4). Despite all the effort Dumas has put into writing her experiences of immigration and living in the United States, she will ultimately fail to appropriately capture and subsequently convey the Iranian culture through composing her work in English. Furthermore, Dumas' usage of English as her medium of expression is difficult to be justified since she fails to abrogate the Englishness of her text in *Funny in Farsi*. Accordingly, the Englishness of *Funny in Farsi* not only impedes the Iranian societal mores, values, norms, and in one word culture to be communicated, it also fails to resist the neo-colonial linguistic dynamics of power which advocate for the usage of a Standard English.

"It is language which speaks, not the author"; Roland Barthes (2016) in his *The Death of the Author* famously holds the view that "to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality . . . to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me' [the author]" (p. 143). Accordingly, it is not *Funny in Farsi*'s author who is the

agent in walking the reader through experiences of living in diaspora, the differences between the homeland and the host land, and so forth. It is hence the language and its structure that comes before the author. In other words, English gives form to Dumas' authorship and therefore whatever purposes she has for writing a memoir. In *Orientalism*, Said (2003) claims that literary texts are tools used by the colonizer and those texts misrepresent the image of the Orient. For an author who is originally Iranian, writing in English also becomes a tool to talk about speakers of Farsi. In this sense, Iranian subjects of the text become the other/orient.

IDENTITY IN DIASPORA

In their handbook entitled *Acculturation and Adaptation*, Berry and Sam (1997) theorize that regarding migrants' reaction to the immigration process and what it entails, there is a proposed categorization that encompasses four different approaches: separation, marginalization, integration, and assimilation. Separation strategy is pursued by individuals from the non-dominant group who place importance on maintaining their original cultural elements and avoid much contact with the members of the dominant group (p. 297). "When there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance ... and little interest in having relations with others ... then marginalization is defined" (p. 297) or as Kazarian and Evan (1998) put it in *Cultural Clinical Psychology: Theory, Research, and Practice*, "Marginalization occurs when someone does not hold values of either the original or the new culture" (p. 220). Integration strategy, as defined, involves individuals expressing a desire to maintain strong connections both with their ethnic group and the dominant group in their everyday lives (p. 297). Lastly, Berry and Sam (1997) also propose that assimilation occurs when an individual chooses not to insist on preserving his/her sociocultural norms and mores but instead actively engages in having interaction with the members of the dominant community, that is to say the natives that live in the host land (p. 297).

Published in 1964, Milton Gordon's book entitled *Assimilation in American life: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins* is a comprehensive and insightful exploration of a complex topic. It offers valuable perspectives and contributes to our understanding of cultural integration. The author's research and analysis are meticulous, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the assimilation process. The book presents a balanced approach, considering different stages and outcomes, which adds depth to the discussion. Gordon's work is a significant contribution to the field, making it a valuable resource for understanding the dynamics of assimilation in American society.

According to Gordon (1964), there are seven stages to the fulfillment of full assimilation. The first of which is Cultural or behavioral assimilation. In this initial stage, members of the migrated community start to alter societal norms and behaviors related to their culture. Then comes structural assimilation which involves the integration of minority group members into various social institutions of the dominant society. The third stage is marital assimilation that is fulfilled through intermarriage between members of the minority group and the dominant group. The fourth stage, namely identification assimilation, occurs when individuals from the minority group develop a sense of belonging and identification with the dominant culture. Attitude receptional assimilation is the next phase during which the dominant group's receptiveness to the minority group and their unprejudiced acceptance of them as equals are crucial for further assimilation. In line with the last stage, behavior receptional assimilation requires the members of the dominant culture to put aside any form of discrimination against the minority group. The final stage to be passed is civic assimilation which refers to the participation of the minority group in the civic life of the dominant society. This includes involvement in adherence to the laws, politics, and values of the society (pp. 70-71).

To see whether full assimilation process is fulfilled in Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* the rest of this section will be dedicated to tracking the aforesaid stages in the memoir. In order to see if and how Dumas' Family in

her memoir successfully pass the first stage the examples where elements of cultural assimilation are present should be traced. Some of the major cultural elements according to one author are “language, ideas, beliefs, customs, [and] codes” (White, 2022). Throughout the memoir, Dumas highlights several instances of cultural or behavioral assimilation that she and her family undergo, the first of which is language acquisition. The word “English” has been used fifty-one times in the book indicating the importance of English language to the family. Accordingly, Dumas and her family are determined to learn English to better integrate into American society. Dumas becomes fluent in English and uses it as her primary language, effectively assimilating linguistically (2004, pp. 10-11, 65). In order to fit in with their American classmates, Dumas and her brothers decide to change their names (2004, pp. 63-64). By adopting more American-sounding names, they make it easier for others to pronounce their names and avoid standing out. Dumas also discusses her family’s adaptation to American food culture. Initially, they struggled to find ingredients for their traditional Persian dishes but eventually began incorporating American ingredients into their cooking and consuming American foods (2004, pp. 25-28).

Structural assimilation in *Funny in Farsi* reveals itself in at least three forms: education, employment, and community involvement. Dumas emphasizes the importance of education in her family. Her parents encourage her and her siblings to pursue higher education and achieve academic success. Dumas herself attends college and later works as an engineer. This demonstrates their integration into the educational system, which is a vital aspect of structural assimilation (2004, pp. 5, 90, 95). Additionally, Dumas highlights the professional achievements of her family members. Her father, for instance, works as a civil engineer, and her brother Farshid finds employment as an executive in a technology-focused company. By securing jobs and contributing to the workforce, they become integrated into the economic structure of the United States. Furthermore, Dumas describes how her family actively engages with their local community in California. They participate in community events, join clubs, and interact with neighbors and friends. To name a few of such clubs and events one can refer to the local bowling league, Price Club, Christmas Club, and local clubhouse (2004, pp. 14, 76, 108, 180).

Over the course of the memoir we learn that Firoozeh marries a French (French-American) man named François. Farid, one of Firoozeh’s siblings, marries an American girl (2004, p. 3). These instances reveal how the family could benefit from marrying someone who is American or half-American in the United States and it also indicates that Dumas’ family is potential of fulfilling this stage of assimilation as well.

Examples of identification assimilation can be seen in Firoozeh’s family’s adapting to American customs. For example, she shares how she and her family gather for Thanksgiving each year (p. 74). These efforts reflect the family’s attempt to identify with American cultural practices and be accepted as part of the community. Another instance is when Dumas engages in extracurricular activities at school, such as joining the Girl Scouts and participating in school plays (2004, p. 105). These activities provide opportunities for her to interact with her American peers and be part of the social fabric of her school, contributing to her identification with American culture.

In the text Dumas recounts several instances where she successfully passes the attitude receptional assimilation and therefore does not face prejudices and instead experiences positive interactions and acceptance. For instance, Dumas describes her family’s interactions with their American neighbors. The neighbors are receptive to the Iranian family’s traditions and invite them to participate in various neighborhood activities and have casual conversations with them (2004, pp. 34, 64). Despite initially feeling self-conscious about her cultural differences, Dumas also finds acceptance and friendship among her classmates and teachers (2004, p. 105). In one instance, her second-grade teacher, Mrs. Sandberg, takes a genuine interest in incorporating Iran

into a lesson (p. 6). This positive reception indicates a lack of prejudice and a genuine interest in understanding and embracing different cultures and demonstrates a lack of prejudice.

Once some of the above-mentioned stages such as structural/behavioral and receptional assimilation are passed one can conclude that Dumas' family will not encounter problems with the sixth stage, namely behavior receptional assimilation. According to what stated before, one cannot pass this phase if s/he faces different forms of discriminations. However, Dumas and her family participate in different events and attend a variety of clubs and ceremonies without being discriminated against. Firoozeh even manages to become a judge for a beauty pageant competition (2004, p. 174).

As the name suggests, civic assimilation involves the acquisition of political and legal rights, participation in civic activities, and adopting the values, norms, and behaviors necessary for active citizenship in the host country. It goes beyond mere economic or cultural assimilation and emphasizes the engagement of individuals and groups in the political life of the society they reside in. Kazem, Firoozeh' father, during Thanksgiving meal, "thanks for living in a free country where he can vote" (p. 74) and believes that "any immigrant who comes to this country and becomes a citizen and doesn't vote, according to him, should just go back" (Dumas, 2004, p. 118). This reveals how much Firoozeh's family has devoted themselves to have a civic life in the United States, fulfilling the last stage of assimilation.

NARRATIVE

In addition to her usage of a language that has its own Western dynamics of power and that cannot communicate the Iranian culture, values, societal mores, and therefore migrant experience properly and also the way assimilation is fulfilled or in a sense encouraged within the host land, the narrative includes other instances where it helps the orientalist view of Iran to hold sway. Furthermore, the narrative also provides some incorrect information about both the host land and homeland which becomes problematic since it could lead readers into believing what is not right about these two places.

Conducted by Egeland (2012), *The Process of Identity in Three Immigrant Memoirs* regards Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* as a memoir that challenges the stereotypes of "The fundamentalist", "The oppressed female", "The group member", and "The alien immigrant" which have been frequently attributed to Iranians (p. 49). This paper however, finds fault with making generalization with regard to Dumas' text in challenging stereotypes. Accordingly, this section aims at explaining how Dumas' probable intention of eradicating stereotypes fails to capture the greater picture and how her text ends up reinforcing some stereotypical views of Iranians. To challenge the stereotype of alien immigrant, Dumas, according to Egeland, "positions herself away from the stereotype ... through stories that ridicules her relatives" (p. 49). A family whose traits are ridiculed for English-speaking readers is in fact a larger unit than individual and therefore a larger representative of Iranians. Accordingly, ridiculing her relatives is equal to ridiculing a series of stereotypes attributed to Iranians.

While Firoozeh Dumas' memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, offers a personal narrative of her experiences as an Iranian immigrant, it can still be subjected to critique through Edward Said's Orientalism framework. According to Said, orientalism is an "apparatus of representation through which Europe saw the East, and posited this East as the radical racial-cultural Other. Said argued that fiction and fantasies, travelogues and scientific reports all generated a desire for the Orient" (Nayar, 2015, p. 118). Therefore, the terms "fiction" and "travelogue" which could be used to describe Dumas' book, would suggest that her memoir is similarly capable of disseminating the orientalist view of the Middle East. Having this concise definition of orientalism in mind what follows are some potential points of criticism as long as Dumas' memoir is concerned.

Reinforcement of Stereotypes

Despite Dumas' attempt to present a nuanced portrayal of Iranian culture, there may still be instances in the memoir where Orientalist stereotypes are inadvertently reinforced. Orientalism often reduces non-Western cultures to exotic and backward entities, and even unintentional representations can perpetuate these stereotypes. It is crucial to examine whether Dumas inadvertently falls into the trap of reinforcing Orientalist notions, even if her intention is to challenge them. Postcolonial studies regard exoticization "as the stereotyping of the non-European for consumption by the English back home. Hence exoticization was a form of colonial control" (Nayar, 2015, p. 77). The very term "exotic" has been employed 11 times throughout the memoir. This is suggestive of how instances of exoticization in *Funny in Farsi* abound. "I loved all of François's stories and never had to impress him with any exotic tales, since as far as he was concerned, being Iranian and having a name like Firoozeh far outweighed any of his adventures" (Dumas, 2004, 58). Not only Dumas exoticizes tales and stories concerned with Iran, she exoticizes Iranian names exaggeratedly. In chapter 22 of the memoir entitled "The Wedding" we read that "Iranians in America have had to tweak this tradition a bit. Slaughtering a lamb on one's front porch in Los Angeles ..." (Dumas, 2004, p. 152). Perhaps Dumas is right when she says Iranians have to avoid the aforesaid tradition in America. Be that as it may, highlighting this tradition in the book could make its practitioners seem exotic.

Limited Counter-Narratives and Absence of Historical Context

While Dumas according to many researchers of her book and her own interviews does offer a counter-narrative to orientalist representations of Iranians, it is important to question whether her perspective adequately challenges the broader Orientalist discourse. As the above-stated definition suggests, orientalism is not merely about individual stories or personal experiences but encompasses broader systems of knowledge and power. Additionally, Orientalism operates within a historical and political framework, influenced by colonialism, imperialism, and power dynamics. Accordingly, *Funny in Farsi* falls short in dismantling the structural aspects and ascertaining the historical context that shapes Orientalist representations.

In addition to the aforesaid points, in *Funny in Farsi*, Firoozeh Dumas explores various binary oppositions between Iran and the United States, highlighting the cultural, social, and personal contrasts between the two countries. What follows are some examples of binary oppositions depicted in the memoir:

Tradition vs. Modernity

Dumas portrays Iran as a country steeped in rich traditions and history, where customs, rituals, and family ties hold significant importance. In contrast, the United States is depicted as a modern and progressive society, embracing individualism, innovation, and technological advancements (Dumas, 2004, pp. 60, 149-150). The clash between tradition and modernity creates moments of cultural adjustment and humor for Dumas as she navigates her way through the two contrasting worlds.

Collectivism vs. Individualism

Dumas explores the contrast between the collective-oriented culture of Iran and the individualistic culture of the United States. In Iran, strong family ties and communal support are emphasized, and decisions are often made in consideration of the group's welfare and this is a recurring theme throughout the book. In the United States, individual autonomy and personal achievements are highly valued. Dumas encounters situations where the cultural emphasis on individualism conflicts with her upbringing in a collectivist society, leading to humorous and sometimes challenging experiences. One example is when marriage is concerned. Unlike the

individualistic and therefore romantic approach to marriage in the United States in Iran according to Dumas' logic and accordingly parents' decision come first (Dumas, 2004, p. 24).

Language and Communication

The memoir highlights the binary opposition between the Persian language spoken in Iran and the English language spoken in the United States. Dumas navigates the challenges of learning and communicating in a new language, leading to misunderstandings, humorous moments, and cultural clashes. The contrast between the two languages serves as a symbol of the broader differences between the two cultures.

Cultural Values and Norms

Dumas contrasts the cultural values and norms of Iran and the United States throughout the memoir. She portrays Iran as a society with a strong sense of hospitality, a slower pace of life, and respect for elders. One example is Nowruz, the Persian New Year, during which the ritual of visiting friends and relatives holds significance. Dumas narrates “[o]nce all the elders have been visited, they in turn visit the younger members of the family” (Dumas, 2004, p. 106). In contrast, the entire memoir portrays the United States as a society that values efficiency, individual freedoms, and a fast-paced lifestyle. The clash of cultural values leads to humorous anecdotes and reflections on the differences between the two countries.

By presenting these binary oppositions, Dumas offers readers an insight into the contrasting aspects of Iranian and American cultures. While the binary oppositions between Iran and the United States abound in the Memoir the sense of humanity that people of the two nations share and other similarities are mostly neglected leading to perpetuate the particular Western view of Iran as the other.

Additionally, Dumas through her subjective interpretations and therefore incorrect information she shares fulfills some colonial interests of the west. The following binary opposition between the educational system in Iran as opposed to its counterpart in the United States is one instance:

When we moved to America, I discovered that school was much more fun here. There was less homework, no endless math drills, and no memorization of famous poems. I loved my teacher, Mrs. Sandberg. I loved Girl Scouts, the Whittier Public Library, and Butterfinger candy bars. (Dumas, 2004, p. 105)

In her scholarly investigation entitled “Cross-cultural Adaptation and Learning: Iranians and Americans at School”, Hoffman (1988) examines the experiences of Iranian American students enrolled in a secondary school located in Los Angeles. Her research highlights the difficulties encountered by these students as they actively resisted the prevailing cultural conventions of their host nation, while concurrently facing a lack of recognition for their national identity from the school. This predicament was further compounded by the historical conflicts between Iran and the United States, notably stemming from the 1979 revolution. Consequently, the native language spoken by these students and the observance of holidays associated with their country of origin were disregarded within the school environment. These students exhibited resistance towards educational programs that sought to instill American cultural norms, thereby reflecting their steadfastness in preserving their own cultural heritage (pp. 163-180). This research suggests how Dumas' experience of educational system in America is in line with the previously-stated limitation of her counter narrative since most Iranian students in America and in the 20th century as Hoffman suggests were discriminated against. In line with Hoffman assessment of Iranian students in the United States and the assimilation process which was discussed earlier, Dumas' pleasant experience of school in America could be another evidence of how she has successfully assimilated to American culture, values, and therefore acquired American identity. Accordingly, through depicting a subjective, dreamlike, and almost incorrect educational

environment for Iranians in America and also portraying a negative image of Iranian educational system Dumas not only provides a binary opposition which makes American educational system look superior as opposed to its Iranian counterpart, she once again contributes to Said's notion of Othering. Accordingly, for American readers, Iran's pedagogical system becomes the inferior other and for Iranian readers, American academic setup becomes superior.

Another binary Dumas includes in her memoir is that of clothing. Therefore, the Iranian clothing style is put forward as something against American clothing style. In line with Dumas' so-called purpose of challenging stereotypes it is perhaps Dumas' intention for the eradication of the potential exoticness of the traditional Iranian clothing of women, namely chador that Dumas writes "[w]hen I lived in Iran [1965-72] . . . [t]he only women who chose to cover themselves head to toe with a *chador* were either older women or villagers. In the cities, Iranian woman preferred to dress like Jackie Kennedy or Elizabeth Taylor (2004, p. 105). This is so while studies reject such generalizations regarding Iranian women unveiling themselves. According to one study most modern institutions and departments in Iran in 60s and 70s were replete with educated women who chose to wear *chador*. Additionally, *chador* became a weapon for resistance against the regime and revealing oneself as being revolutionary (Sheikholeslam, & Varijkazemi, 2022, P. 186). As a matter of fact, in Pahlavi era, "The very rejection [hijab] experienced, loaded it with liberating concepts and changed it from a "traditional" dress to an "original" one during the 1960s and 1970s" (2022, P. 153). Accordingly, due to the incorrect information she shares with readers, not only she fails in removing exoticness of Iranian clothing style of the 60s and 70s, she does exoticize the identities whose one of symbolic representations is *chador*. Furthermore, to remove the presupposed exotic features of Iranian clothing style, Dumas claims that Iranian women prefer to look like American celebrities. It is as though to remove ones' exoticness and inferiority when clothing is concerned one must follow the assumed superior American fashion.

NEOCOLONIALISM

Despite being coined by Jean-Paul Sartre, the French philosopher, in 1956, neocolonialism gained more significance in the writings of Kwame Nkrumah, the first president of Ghana and one of the major figures in postcolonial studies. In *Neocolonial Fictions of the Global Cold War* and on the affinity between literature and neo-colonialism, Belletto and Keith (2019) believe:

What, indeed, does neocolonialism have to do with literature, and conversely, what might literature have to do, or say, about neocolonialism? We believe that literature is a crucial media for the formation of oppositional narratives and for the recovery and rearticulation of histories and ways of knowing that have been unrepresented or disavowed by the existing political and social order. (p. 6)

For Nkrumah (1965), as the title of his book, that is to say *Neo-colonialism: The Last Stage of Imperialism* suggests, neo-colonialism is the last and the most lethal resort of the Western powers. What neocolonialism is concerned with is that the country which is exposed to it is independent on the surface while in reality its different fields are exposed to foreign influence (p. ix). For Nkrumah, the neocolonial procedures operate within a variety of spheres including economics, religion, ideology, and culture (p. 239).

The ways by which colonial influence finds its way through different aspects of a society are facilitated by cultural imperialism. Accordingly, this part reveals how different aspects of Dumas' *Funny in Farsi*, that is to say its approach towards identity in diaspora, language, and binaries between her country of origin and host land contribute to the neocolonial interests of the west and in particular the United States and how it does perpetuate the dominance of the west and its elements over the features related to the east.

Concerning Western powers and their interest in the culture of the third-world and developing countries, through citing some eminent figures of postcolonial studies, Golding and Harris (1996) in their book, namely *Beyond Cultural Imperialism: Globalization, Communication and the New International Order* make a generalization about the impact of language. Accordingly, “the most profound and long-lasting cultural impact of imperialism was and is language practice” (p. 61). Thusly, through her writing in English Dumas not only perpetuates the dominance of English over Farsi, but Englishness of her text also prevents proper communication of Iranian culture and migrant experience to English speaking readers. Therefore, her medium of expression for *Funny in Farsi* is imperialist in a sense that it gives significance to English language as opposed to her native language, Farsi and due to the language being representative of cultural norms as discussed earlier, *Funny in Farsi* ironically tries to share an Iranian family's experience through a language that cannot fully capture the Iranianness of her navigation of immigration and life in America. In the context of English writing, as discussed before, the utilization of the English language by Firoozeh Dumas extends to encompass discussions concerning individuals who speak Farsi. Consequently, Iranian individuals featured within the text assume Said's above-mentioned position of “other” or “orient” in the eyes of readers whose native language is English. Therefore, this paper suggests that Dumas' employing English language contributes to neo-coloniality of her text.

From the assessments of most postcolonial critics including wa Thiong'o whom we discussed earlier, we learn that identity besides language align with the notion of culture. Accordingly, cultural imperialism has a lot to do with identity of individuals living in the non-Western countries. Once settled in the United States Firoozeh's identity is exposed to American mores, social norms, values, and other cultural elements belonging to this imperialist Western power. As supported in the section dedicated to identity in diaspora, the author's family has fulfilled full assimilation in American society. In *Unruly Women: Race, Neocolonialism, and the Hijab*, Sheth (2022) equals cultural assimilation with “reproduction of the standards of dominant or neocolonial population” (p. 21). According to Betts (1961) and his *Assimilation and Association in French Colonial Theory 1890–1914*, assimilation is deemed to be one aspect of cultural imperialism (p. 174). Hence, Dumas' approach towards assimilation in *Funny in Farsi* becomes problematic as it aligns with the Western neo-colonial policies regarding the identity of the Easterners. Dumas' attitude regarding assimilating to American culture is sometimes neutral, sometimes encouraging but she never approaches this phenomenon with skepticism or disdain. This neutralization of assimilation makes this process to seem normal for particularly Iranian readers whose identity, once they internalize this attitude, will be subject to the aforesaid policy legislated through Western dynamics of power.

The next problem which was considered above was that of narrative's focus on different sets of binaries between Iranian way of life and American life style. The binary oppositions provided earlier are in line with the binary logic established by the west. According to Ashcroft et al. (2013), “The binary logic of imperialism is a development of that tendency of Western thought in general to see the world in terms of binary oppositions that establish a relation of dominance” (p. 26). Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* and its particular usage of binaries such as traditional Iran as opposed to modern America, Iranian collectivism against American individualism, exotic features of Iranian culture as contrasted with normality of American culture, and Iranian clothing style as it appears in contrast with American fashion make Iranianness sounds inferior once compared to the superior Americanness. According to Nayar (2015) and his *The Postcolonial Studies Dictionary*, to define cultural imperialism one can refer to one of its aspects which is to be the “overwhelming power of Western consumer products, ways of thinking about beauty or fashion” (p. 41). Therefore, the neo-coloniality of the memoir is endorsed through the binaries whose ultimate target is to dignify the culture of Americans at the cost of degrading that of the author.

The previous arguments have aimed at validating the neo-coloniality of Dumas' memoir. Be that as it may, in addition to the structure of English language this neo-colonial text would have not emerged without owing much to the colonial mind of its author. In other words:

Neocolonialism is furthered in the former colonies through the role of the elite. Whether in economics or academia, Westernized intellectuals, specialists and cultural intermediaries determine the debates, policies and actions of governments and institutions, and control the flow of ideas. The elite, who might be seen, not without reason, as supportive of globalization, also occupy the places vacated by the former European masters. (2015, p. 115)

One of the processes which have been of the utmost importance to postcolonial studies is decolonization. The term involves the gradual reduction of colonial and imperial control exerted by the Western powers over their settlements and colonies. Decolonization, when it comes to culture, encompasses a broader process in which former colonies, particularly in Asia and South America, strive to achieve intellectual, philosophical, and political independence from European influences and the enduring legacies of colonization. According to Nayar (2015), Prominent figures such as Kwame Nkrumah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o have in their works spoken of the intellectual colonization in form of neocolonialism or language as discussed before and advocated for the necessity of decolonization (p. 45). Once combined together, the neo-coloniality of *Funny in Farsi* and its author's undertaking the role of the elite lead to the disruption of decolonization process. Accordingly, Firoozeh Dumas' *Funny in Farsi* from the perspective of this paper could be labeled as a neocolonial literary work whose narrative, thematic, and linguistic structure fulfills the colonial interests of the west, delays the decolonization process, and unlike the author's presupposed intention of eradicating Western stereotypes when approaching Iran, at the end perpetuates the aforesaid stereotypical stance.

CONCLUSION

With regard to Firoozeh Dumas' memoir, *Funny in Farsi*, this study offers a thought-provoking exploration of the neo-coloniality embedded within its narrative. To attain this objective, the present paper, through the lens of language, identity, and a set of binary oppositions between Dumas' homeland and host land, provides insights into the complex postcolonial dynamics of cultural power and influence. One aspect that contributes to the neo-colonial undertones of the memoir is the Englishness of the language employed throughout the narrative. By predominantly using English and in line with Ngugi wa Thiong'o's theoretical framework, Dumas aligns herself with the dominant Western culture, reinforcing the notion that acquiring the language and therefore conformity to Western norms are desirable. This linguistic choice perpetuates the power dynamics inherent in neo-colonial relationships, where the Western culture and language are seen as superior and impose themselves on other cultures. Furthermore, the memoir's emphasis on encouraging and fulfilling full assimilation further supports its neo-colonial nature. Dumas portrays the process of assimilation as a pathway to success and acceptance, highlighting the pressure to conform to Western ideals and norms. This reinforces the idea that the dominant culture sets the standards, leading to the erasure or marginalization of non-Western cultural practices and identities. The binary oppositions between Iran and the United States that permeate the narrative also contribute to the neo-colonial framework of the memoir. By presenting stark contrasts between the two cultures, Dumas reinforces the idea of the United States as a superior and progressive society, while Iran is depicted as backwards or othered. This strengthens the notion of Western cultural imperialism, where the West is positioned as the benchmark against which all other cultures are measured, leading to the internalization of Western superiority. In examining these elements of *Funny in Farsi*, it becomes evident that the memoir operates within a neo-colonial framework. The Englishness of the language, the encouragement of assimilation, and the binary oppositions between Iran and the United States all contribute to the subtle power dynamics that perpetuate the dominance of Western culture while at the same time slowing

down the ongoing decolonization process in the world. It is through acknowledging and critically analyzing these aspects that we can gain a deeper understanding of the neo-coloniality present in memoirs like *Funny in Farsi* and the broader implications they have on cultural representation and identity.

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