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## From Alienation to Hybridity: A Critical Study of Identity-negotiation in Firoozeh Dumas' Memoir, *Funny in Farsi*

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### Abstract

A diasporic community is caught in an awkward relation with the host society if the political relation between their home country and host country turns hostile. After the Gulf war, Iranian hostage crisis and the events of 9/11, Muslim people of Middle Eastern origin were often held guilty by association and considered potential terrorists by the mainstream American society. Because of the antagonistic treatment from their host society, diasporic Arab and Iranian Muslims naturally could not reconcile the Arab or Iranian part of their identity with their American identity. With reference to the aforementioned issues, this paper has studied the memoir of the Iranian writer, Firoozeh Dumas, an immigrant in the USA. It had been investigated how her struggle for acquiring an American identity clashed with the violent racism targeted at the Iranians in the USA after the hostage-crisis in Iran transpired. The resultant identity-conflict triggered an acute sense of liminality in the consciousness of the memoirist. Finally, the paper has concluded that, forging an empowered hybridized identity in the diaspora, instead of opting for racial passing as the memoirist attempted earlier, she became a woman with active agency who has been able to transcend her identity-crisis.

**Keywords:** Diaspora, hybridity, identity, Iranian, Muslims, racism

### Introduction

Etymologically the term 'diaspora' is derived from the composite Greek word 'diaspeirein' where 'dia' means 'across' and 'speirein' means 'to sow' or 'scatter'. The term 'diaspora', therefore, signifies scattering or dispersion. The term generally refers to the dispersion of a group of people from their country of origin and their relocation to a host country. Diasporic people are often caught in an awkward relation with the host society. This occurs especially when relation between the home country and the host country of an immigrant community becomes embittered due to hostile political developments. In times like these, that specific diasporic community's allegiance to the host country is suspected and its members are often regarded as 'internal enemy'. This fact can be well understood when one contemplates the fact that in the post-Gulf War <sup>[1]</sup>, Iranian hostage-crisis <sup>[2]</sup> and post-September 11 era, hundreds of Muslim people of Middle-Eastern origin were harassed, persecuted, even arrested in the Western countries, especially in the United States on the ground of their being Muslims and Middle-Easterners. Dabashi argues that in this era 'Islam is the new Judaism, Muslims the new Jews, Islamophobia the new anti-Semitism' <sup>[3]</sup> (p 137). Simply because they shared ethnic and cultural ties with the fanatic aggressors, they were held as potential terrorists and guilty by association. With reference to the aforementioned issues, this paper will study Iranian-American writer, Firoozeh Dumas' memoir, *Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America* (2003) which is centered upon her experiences as a diasporic Iranian in the United States. Homi Bhaba's theories of 'in-betweenness', 'Third Space' and 'hybridity' will serve as the theoretical framework to examine the memoir. The research-questions I have asked and attempted to answer in this paper are: how does the memoirist deal with the social stigmatization of being an Iranian Muslim in America specifically when the cultures of her home country and host country are hostile to each other? And, how does she deal with the issues that impede her struggle for attaining agency in the diaspora, as revealed in her text? In 1972, at the age of seven, Dumas emigrated to the U.S with her family after her father, who was an engineer with the national oil-industry of Iran, was

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transferred to America by the National Iranian Oil Company as a company-representative. Dumas' memoir is primarily concerned with foregrounding the experiences of those who are viewed as the 'other' by the mainstream society. The community of the expatriate Iranians in America and more specifically, the extended family of Dumas and their life in the United States are what she focused upon in her memoir. A significant feature of the memoir is that it is steeped in humour which enlivens all her discussion in the text. Kierkegaard remarked: 'The more one suffers, the more I believe, has one a sense for the comic. It is only by the deepest suffering that one acquires true authority in the use of the comic' <sup>[4]</sup> (qtd in p 152). The memoir of Dumas confirms the observation of Kierkegaard.

When the memoirist moved to the U.S, she found herself in-between two widely differing cultures. The culture-gap manifested itself in her day-to-day life. For instance, at the junior school, she was asked stereotypical questions by her classmates like whether they travelled by camels back home or how many camels her family owned when, in reality, people in Iran traveled by automobiles just like people in every other country in the 1970s. That she and her family were faced with questions from the Americans regarding if Iranians lived in the tents or if they had electricity, revealed that they encountered quintessential First World ignorance and prejudices about the Third World countries in the 1970s. While acclimatizing to a different culture is an arduous process, Dumas, however, wrote that she witnessed the kind face of her host country for the first seven years she spent in America:

Almost every person who asked us a question asked with kindness. Questions were often followed by suggestions of places to visit in California. At school, the same children who inquired about camels invited me to their houses...On Halloween, one family brought over a costume, knowing that I would surely be the only kid in the Halloween parade without one. If someone had been able to encapsulate the kindness of these second graders in pill form, the pills would undoubtedly put many war correspondents out of business' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 34-35).

But from 1979 onwards, things changed for the Iranian community in America in the aftermath of the hostage-crisis in Iran; a group of Iranian students held American diplomats hostages at the U.S embassy in Iran with the demand that in return for the release of the hostages, the U.S government had to deliver to the Islamic Republic the former Shah of Iran, who was provided shelter by the American government after he was overthrown by the revolutionaries. In addition to deteriorating the political relationship between Iran and the United States, this incident triggered a backlash against the diasporic Iranians from the American society. Ignorant of the role of the U.S imperialist actions that contributed to the instigation of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent hostage-crisis, average Americans demonized Iranians in general and perceived the Iranian Muslims in America as potential terrorists. In this predicament, the crisis that acculturation entailed, intensified to a great extent for the young Dumas who noticed the radical transformation in the American attitude towards the Iranians. As an Iranian Muslim, her former struggle to reconcile her mother culture and the culture of her host country turned all the more difficult as the Americans became outright hostile towards the Iranian populace in the diaspora. Total ostracization from her host society enhanced her sense of liminality. The

Third Space between two now-antagonistic cultures, where she was positioned, grew to be acutely crisis-ridden for her. From this conflict-torn intermediate space, she critiqued all those issues including her own insecurities that engendered and exacerbated her identity-crisis.

One of the major issues that the memoirist addressed in her text was the racial tension between Americans and the diasporic Iranians in the 1980s. She often used comedic sarcasm in her critique of the racialized American social discourse about the Iranians. Describing the social conditions for the Iranians in the wake of the hostage-taking incident, the author wrote:

With each passing day, palpable hatred grew among many Americans, hatred not just of the hostage-takers but of all Iranians. The media didn't help. We opened our local paper one day to the screaming headline "Iranians Rob Grocery Store". Iran has as many fruits and nuts as the next country, but it seemed as if every lowlife who happened to be Iranian was now getting his fifteen minutes of fame. Vendors started selling T-shirts and bumper stickers that said "Iranians go home" and "Wanted: Iranians, for Target Practice". Crimes against Iranians increased...Many Iranians suddenly became Turkish, Russian or French' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 117).

The years from 1979 to 1981, when the hostage-crisis was an ongoing occurrence, was, indeed, a critical time for Dumas and the other Iranians in the U.S. To evade American hostility that resulted from the actions of a few fanatics some Iranians went to the point of denying their national origin and passing for other ethnicities. Americans' monolithic views of the Iranians criminalized their entire diasporic community who were regarded as the internal enemy. The memoirist stated with a mocking tone:

Nobody asked our opinion of whether the hostages should be taken, and yet every single Iranian in America was paying the price (p 118). Many Americans began to think that all Iranians, despite outward appearances to the contrary, could at any given moment get angry and take prisoners...We were asked our opinion on the hostages so often that I started reminding people that they weren't in our garage<sup>5</sup> (p 39).

Her critique of the issue of racialization took another turn when she compared herself with Francois, the Frenchman she eventually married. Racial politics have always come to privilege certain races above the others. That the narrator was mindful of this fact could be seen when she sarcastically pointed out how average Americans demonized Iranians in general on account of the hostage-crisis but idealized the French people even though France was not devoid of all flaws either; it had a brutal colonial past:

Being French in America is like having your hand stamped with one of those passes that allows you to get into everything. All Francois has to do is mention his obviously French name and people find him intriguing. It is assumed that he is a sensitive, well-read intellectual, someone who, when not reciting Baudelaire, spends his days creating Impressionist paintings...people see me and think of hostages. Sometimes, mentioning that I was from Iran completely ended the conversation. I assume some feared that I might really be yet another female terrorist masquerading as history of art major at UC-Berkeley <sup>[5]</sup>. (p 40-41)

In highlighting her educational affiliation with a prestigious university, the intention of the memoirist seems to point at

the absurdity of the American misperception that a UC Berkeley student who was majoring in as innocuous a subject as art history, can be a female terrorist. The narrator further commented: 'my favourite category of question, however, assumed that all Iranians were really just one big family: "Do you know Ali Akbari in Cincinnati?" people would ask' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 40). Since her remark on the question of the female terrorist was immediately followed by her observation of the American assumption that all Iranians were 'one big family', it can be argued that she parodied the generalized American view of all Iranians as members belonging to a big terrorist family. Perhaps to distance her community from any association with terrorism, the narrator recounted a series of amusing anecdotes all through the memoir about her family members and herself. In doing so, she often made fun of her family and herself. Her humour was, indeed, self-deprecating at times. It can be said that by depicting their funny side, she wished to convey the message that just like every other people, Iranians were also individuals with their little follies and foibles, that they could be absolutely harmless and non-threatening. Each of the anecdotes was designed to elucidate humouristically what it felt like to be an Iranian in America. Besides, by writing about the high educational qualifications of the members in her immediate and extended family, the memoirist seemed to endeavour to undermine the American notion that Iranians are uncivilized and menacing. Possibly as part of her attempt to humanize her family further, she also narrated several incidents that exhibited the profound bonding in her large, extended family. To underscore her love for her family that she often poked fun at, the memoirist wrote: 'without my relatives, I am but a thread; together, we form a colourful and elaborate Persian carpet' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 103). By portraying the deep love that ran in her extended family, her aim is to show that, contrary to the American assumption, her people are not full of hatred but loving, compassionate human beings. The narrator, thus, humanized those who are demonized by the American society. Dumas' critique of American racism against the Iranians in the 1980s is equally relevant today in the post 9/11 era when there is a resurgence in American animosity towards the people of Middle-Eastern origin.

For the Muslim migrant from the Middle East like the memoirist, Islamophobia is another issue to be confronted in the diaspora. In the United States, bigotry against Muslims is, indeed, commensurate to the rise in Islamophobia. Haddad and Ricks contend, after 'the collapse of the Soviet empire' and the dwindling of the influence of Communism, the U.S was in search of 'another evil to be vanquished'. They eventually found one in the 'terrorist Islam' which is represented as 'the enemy of freedom, godliness, civilization and all that is good' <sup>[6]</sup> (p 23). Fundamentalist Islam, like any other religious fundamentalism is, indeed, despicable and utterly detrimental to the advancement of humanity but popular Western media bolsters the notion that extremist Islam, as preached by the religious zealots, is the one and only face of Islam and, thus, creates an environment of Islamophobia. Mainstream Western representation ignore the variation of Islamic interpretations as well as the diversity among Muslims. Saeed Rahnema states:

Not everyone in the Islamic world is religious. Islamic countries and communities of Muslim origin, like other communities, comprise practicing individuals and non-practicing sceptics, along with secular, laic and even atheist

members. Among practicing Muslims, also, there are radical Islamists (who constitute a very small minority) and a vast majority of peaceful and moderate adherents <sup>[7]</sup> (p 32). The author of *Funny in Farsi* called herself a secular Muslim in her memoir. There is an anecdote in the text which related how Dumas as a child opposed her father's occasional ham-eating when she learnt that consuming ham was forbidden in the religious texts. The adult Dumas recalled how her father explained to her that the proscription on eating ham was valid only for the historical moment when it was issued; the prohibition resulted, the memoir reasoned, from the prophet's observation that sixth-century Arabian people often fell sick after consuming ham due to their lack of skill to cook it properly but the prohibition was not eternally binding. In her limited discussion of religion in the memoir, Dumas betrayed the understanding that Quranic revelations were context-specific for the most part, and the religious prescriptions, which were useful for the ancient Arabian society, could not always be applicable to the modern world. But the existence of these Muslims like Dumas who demonstrate a logical and rationalist approach to religion, are generally overlooked both by the mainstream West and the Islamic fundamentalists because the acknowledgement of diversity in the Muslim community and Islam would dilute the West's and the fundamentalists' power to speak authoritatively for the whole group. It should be noted, however, that while the memoirist was a non-observant and secular Muslim, she did not validate Islamophobia; rather, in response to it, she affirmed that, contrary to the popular notion that Islam is a violent religion, the Islamic education she received taught her to be respectful and tolerant of other people with different beliefs. The memoirist held her ancestral land in fondness but in the diaspora she could not be at ease with her indigenous identity in the early stages of her life; rather, she negotiated and renegotiated her Iranian identity. The author is critical of the ills of the American society but at one point in her diasporic life, she decided to pose as an American by denying her Iranian identity and, thus, she validated for a time the demand from the host society for total assimilation. In any society, there is always the pressure on the minority to adopt the ways of the majority. Majoritarianism is often represented by the dominant community as nationalism. In a given country, relinquishing one's minority-culture in favour of the dominant culture, is reckoned as a sign of allegiance to the nation-state. In the United States, the pressure for assimilation on the Arab and the Iranian community is all the more acute since those communities are perceived as the enemy within. Dumas in her young age acquiesced to this pressure when she opted for racial passing by changing her name. She replaced her Persian first name, Firoozeh with the anglicized name of 'Julie' when she started her sixth grade in a new school. Changing her manifestly Islamic name can be said to be an act, on her part, not to draw attention to herself as a potentially threatening Middle-Eastern Muslim. In the memoir, her stated reason for taking on a new name, however, was that, she wanted to simplify her name so that she can avoid being called 'Fritzzy' or any other ridiculous variation of 'Firoozeh'. After adopting the name, 'Julie', the memoirist with her darker complexion than that of the white Americans, could pass for a Latina specifically because there was a vast number of Mexicans in Southern California where she migrated to with her family: 'When we moved to

California, we no longer looked foreign. With its large Mexican population, Whittier could have passed as our hometown...we looked as if we belonged' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 37). Her aim, therefore, was to pass for people of any racial origin other than Iranians, enmity against whom was widespread in the U.S during the 1980s. The author, however, problematized the question of racial passing:

Thus, I started sixth grade with my new, easy name [Julie]. All was well until the Iranian Revolution, when I found myself with a new set of problems. Because I spoke English without an accent and was known as Julie, people assumed I was American. This meant that I was often privy to their real feelings about those damn "I-raynians". It was like having those x-ray glasses that let you see people naked, except that what I was seeing was far uglier than people's underwear <sup>[5]</sup> (p 65).

Hence, it can be said that, while as 'Firoozeh' she would have been a target for American racism in the 1980s, as 'Julie' she was perceived as belonging to the American society and, thus, she became privy to the racist feeling of the Americans towards the Iranians. This was equally problematic for her because under the guise of her adopted anglicized name, she herself was the intended target of the racist jokes and slanders. The memoir, thus, illustrated how immigrant Iranians struggled to claim an American identity especially when popular American views considered them un-American 'other' because of their association with Islam and the Middle East. Upon reaching adulthood, the memoirist, however, decided 'going back to my real name' so that she could rid herself of the many complications and confusions that followed her endeavour at racial passing <sup>[5]</sup> (p 66). So, when racial passing had been deemed a solution for Dumas as a child and teenager to thwart anti-Iranian racism, as an adult she eventually realized that it was a problematic solution: 'this decision [adoption of an Anglicized name] serves as proof that sometimes simplifying one's life in the short run only complicates it in the long run' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 63). Later in her memoir, she critiqued herself for naively considering passing as a potential solution to overcome the racial issues that led to her identity-crisis; she understood that venture into passing could only bring internal conflicts. Dumas' attempt at denying her indigenous identity and passing for some other racial identity might be condemned by many but one should consider the causes that drove her for undertaking the strenuous effort of passing which naturally involved enormous emotional and psychological cost. The issue of racial passing in the text underscored the complexity of forging an American identity for many expatriate Iranians in the politically turbulent times of the 1980s when their home country and host country were caught in an antagonistic relationship. However, the fact that the memoirist went back to using her real name demonstrated that she no longer felt inhibited to use her Persian name and to announce publicly in her memoir her Iranian identity. So, it can be said that she reclaimed the Iranian part of her identity by writing her memoir. Her act of reconciling the Iranian part of her identity with her American identity showed that she finally defied total assimilation into the American society and decided to retain her ethnic difference and, thus, cultivated a hybrid identity which celebrated difference over 'authenticity' or 'purity' of identity.

The Third Space for Dumas was no longer crisis-ridden; rather, this middle ground between her originary culture and

her culture of adaptation proved to be enriching because in this space she could eventually develop a hybrid identity which enabled her to be part of both cultures and, thus, to move beyond the cultural binary divide of 'us' and 'them' or 'Eastern' and 'Western'. Bhabha says: 'by exploring this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity' <sup>[8]</sup> (p 38). Situated in the Third Space, the memoirist also rises above polarization and emphasizes upon the shared humanity of all human beings. Her aim is to 'remind that our commonalities far outweigh our differences' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 207). Additionally, her hybrid identity signals that she has multiple identities. Her identity as an Iranian, a Muslim and an American constitutes her hybridity. Being an Iranian Muslim did not stop her from forming an American identity although she went through much difficulty in the process and being an American did not ultimately stand in her way of asserting her Iranian identity as she did in her text. She herself said towards the end of her memoir: 'There are parts of me that are Iranian and parts of me that are American' <sup>[5]</sup> (p 207). According to Bhabha, one's identity is a composite of the traces of the various cultures within the subject. Dumas' hybrid identity is also the result of her contact with her mother-culture and the culture of her host country. As a hybridized individual, she translates, negotiates and mediates affinities and differences between these two cultures and, thereby, becomes an active agent in the Third Space taking control over her life.

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2. In 1979 after the mass revolution in Iran, a group of Iranian college students who were part of the association, 'Muslim Student Followers of the Imam's Line' occupied the American Embassy in Tehran, the capital city of Iran and took 52 American diplomats hostages for 444 days in a row, starting from 4<sup>th</sup> November that year to 20<sup>th</sup> January, 1981. The students demanded the return of the former Iranian monarch, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi who was overthrown in the Iranian revolution and who finally managed to escape to the United States which backed him all through his reigning period in Iran. U.S declined to comply with the students' demand and froze Iran's assets of 11 billion U.S dollar in retaliation. The hostage-taking incident was met by international condemnation but supported by the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini. In the aftermath of the hostage crisis, America imposed economic sanction upon Iran. The hostages were finally released after the newly elected American president, Ronald Reagan signed the 'Algiers Accords', an agreement between the United States and Iran. Owing to the hostage crisis, the existing tenuous relationship between U.S and Iran further worsened.
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