

(Co)Existing in the Finnish Landscape

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Biography

Sepideh Rahaa is a multidisciplinary artist, educator and researcher based in Helsinki. Through her practice, among other interests, she questions social norms and conventions while focusing on body, womanhood and everyday resistances, silenced histories and migration. Currently she is pursuing her doctoral studies in Contemporary Art at Aalto University with a critical and analytical view on representation and image production. Her works has been shown in Europe, East and Southwest Asia.

Abstract

This essay reflects on the urgency of retelling personal narratives and histories through contemporary art, critiquing the singular trauma narratives, victimization and exotification of the *Other* in the stories narrated in the West, specifically in art and its knowledge production. The text is based on postcolonial, feminist, indigenous and decolonial theories and it expands on narratives particularly in a Finnish context. I bring up example of personal narrative in my practice and research, and further critically address the dominant and imposed stereotypical narratives of women of colour in Finland, particularly women with Southwest Asian roots (politically known as Middle East). The

essay elaborates on alternative narratives of truth while building on interconnections in the globe.

Keywords

Intersectional feminism, representation and national identity, retelling stories, contemporary art, colonialism, Eurocentrism, Southwest Asia and North Africa politically known as Middle East

He who does the classifying classifies himself among the classified (the enunciated), but he is the only one who classifies among all those being classified. . . Those who are classified as less human do not have much say in the classification (except to dissent), while those who classify always place themselves at the top of the classification. (Mignolo, 2015, p. xv)

I hope this text will have meaning for those who have followed a similar path while trying to make sense of discussions surrounding the *Otherness* in the West and the necessity of retelling narratives. To those who simply want to know more. For I have seen first-hand how dislocation, relocation, and recontextualization often result in the loss of meaning. In this essay, the West refers to the white racial position, particularly to relations of Eurocentrism and whiteness to knowledge production and power structure.

What does it mean to be a member of a marginalized, displaced people, or to count oneself among those whose being is physically overlooked, intellectually disapproved, and overdetermined by stereotypical and symptomatic modes? It all starts with a sense of loss without the hope of being (re)united with that which one has been deprived of physically, mentally, or intellectually. This loss is compounded by the exhaustion of leaving and arriving, but rarely settling.



Figure 1. Memory of the Sea I (Performing in Caspian Sea where I grow up in Norther Iran, 2013) Diasec print, Exhibited at Current state, Cable Factory, Helsinki, 2015

Everything that surrounds a displaced person has impact on this sense of loss. However, reflecting on the feeling of loss of a place — its geography, its memories, and its people — may engender a new condition. This feeling of loss can become a generative condition; it can effectively produce new forms of meaning, particularly when one becomes actively involved in their new locality. By entering into situations, one may alter them, and this involvement may lead to changing perceptions.

In this essay, I aim to reflect on the urgency of retelling personal narratives and histories through contemporary art, critiquing the singular trauma narratives, victimization and exoticization of the *Other* in the stories narrated in the West. Whether in the art scene or in art and knowledge productions. The critique will particularly be in a Finnish context, creating alternative narratives of *truth* while building on interconnections in the globe. I will present an example of personal narrative in my own practice and research in contemporary art. My aim is to challenge the dominant and imposed stereotypical stories to and of women with roots from Southwest Asia and North Africa (politically known as the Middle East¹) in a Finnish context. Constructing narratives one may develop and critically challenge the dominant stories by forming new narratives in a global context.

Problematizing the Victim Oriented Narratives: Eurocentric ‘Authentic’ Narratives & Dehumanization

Racism becomes part of the structural based of the state, permeating the cultural life of the dominant society both by its exclusive narrative of dominant experience and mythology, and by its stereotypical rendering of the “Other” as peripheral and unidimensional. (Thobani, 2007, p. 274)

The question of the Other in this context and in knowledge production, artistic research and practices is the question of the West in relation to its past and present. In fact, it is related to the

Western epistemology and strategies of dealing with other peoples and geographies throughout hundreds of years of colonizing and holding power over them. Nevertheless, addressing the histories of this relation it is also a matter of reclaiming one's own histories and place while going beyond it. Therefore, the position of the Other cannot be thoroughly understood or decolonized without an in-depth investigation into its relations: its relation to the world's power structures, geographies, politics, and to the socio-cultural structures of the States in which peoples live. I would borrow from Simon Ceder's elaboration (2016) on relationality as a decentering concept in education, that relationality creates the "condition of decentering" (p. 18).

Attempts to answer the question *Who is unseen, particularly in the West?* reveal that *invisibility* is a condition imposed on marginalized peoples by normalized colonial structures and institutions. One *is* not invisible but *becomes* invisible by force, as so-called invisibility is a distinctive position that is imposed through the highlighting of differences. According to several postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, the Western hegemonic epistemology is constructed by and deeply invested in associations based on difference rather than similarity (Mignolo, 2009, 2015; Dabashi, 2015; Grosfoguel, 2011, 2013; Smith, 2012; Mohanty, 2003). Western ideology and thinking are built upon differentiating oneself, one's culture, and one's nation against monolithic Others — the so-called Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, and so on. This *epistemic racism*— which bleeds into social, intellectual, and institutional spheres, hidden beneath the normalization of certain ways of being and thinking — produces *Eurocentric knowledge*. Racism is not only the devaluing and dehumanizing of certain people by forcibly stripping away their humanity, but is also the *naturalization* of Western ways of thinking and being. It is the glory and joy of classifying without being classified.

Accordingly, position of the Other is deeply rooted in rebelling against or conforming to the process of classification and categorization. So that categories related to race, socioeconomic status, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ability, among others, reinforce the binaries of

privileged and underprivileged, insider and outsider, visible and invisible. The West enjoys (and economically benefits from) imposing its hegemony and normalized modes of being and thinking on others. In critiquing the Eurocentric epistemology, Ramón Grosfoguel (2011) argues that “they still continue to produce knowledge from the Western man point zero god-eye view” (p. 6). Furthermore, by “hiding the location of the subject of enunciation, European/Euro-American colonial expansion and domination was able to construct a hierarchy of superior and inferior knowledge and, thus, of superior and inferior people around the world” (p. 7). Eurocentric epistemology and knowledge production endeavours to produce the *universal* single story. In doing so it ignores, dismisses or strips away the subjectivity and agency of Others in any form of production or expression. Consequently, in representations of the non-European subjects whether in arts or mass-media productions, often ethnographic or victim-oriented narratives become the centre, the prevailing *authentic narratives*. Authenticity is at the centre of Eurocentric evaluation for acceptable visual representation of other peoples in masses. It seems these subjectivities cannot be understood — by the majority of white people — without being reduced, dehumanised or objectified as victims/subjects. The dehumanization in this context is a process of years of colonization of their cultures and subjectivities. Therefore, their ways of being and their cultures have been actively dismissed. These narratives are often over simplified or lack complexities in representing the Other. In their scholarship, decolonial thinkers such as Walter Mignolo (2009), Hamid Dabashi (2015), Ramón Grosfoguel (2011, 2013), feminists of colour Chandra Tapade Mohanty (2003) and Sara Ahmed (2017) among others together with indigenous thinkers such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Emma LaRocque (2010) have been addressing how deep the problem of colonialism is so that we still live with its consequences today. Today imperialism and colonialism is continued and has taken different forms, therefore it is wrong to assume that colonial times are over.

Colonial binaries are centre to the Eurocentric thinking and productions. Such as the re-

peated argument of civilization confronting savagery and barbarism, which has brutalized many peoples and their sociocultural lives to the present day. Eurocentric thinking produces inhuman and reductionist victims. Decolonial scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) highlights the connection between being human and being capable of creating indigenous history, knowledge and society and notes that indigenous societies “had their own systems of order which was dismissed through what Albert Memmi referred to as a series of negations: they were not fully human, not civilized enough to have systems [...] their languages and modes of thought were inadequate” (p. 29). Currently similar arguments are employed in portraying Middle-Eastern peoples, particularly Muslims. In Western narratives, they are often depicted as less-human, barbaric and fragmented submissive-powerless victims who lack subjectivities. According to Smith (2012) fragmentation in narratives “is not a phenomenon of postmodernism as many might claim, but a consequence of imperialism” (p. 29).

Whiteness & Colonial structures within the Nordic and Finnish Art Scene

In the introduction of *Scandinavian Studies journal volume 91 on Nordic Colonialisms*, Höglund and Andersson Burnett (2019) state while some European “studies have long discussed colonial pasts and postcolonial presents, historical research on the European North has not until recently begun to consider the ways in which this region contributed to, benefitted from, and now inhabit colonial histories” (p.1). They continue, “this is arguably because the nations of the region have often been imagined, internally and externally, as champions of global equality and minority rights” (p. 1). Reluctance in addressing and engaging with the Nordic colonialism and its historical and present impacts in the Nordic societies has been evidential. More specifically, “in Finland, the general climate seems to be one that refuses to problematize the power of whiteness to produce both white and non-white subjectivities” (Kallio-Tavin & Tavin, 2018, p. 69). Helena Oikarinen-Jabai (as Cited in Kallio-Tavin & Tavin, 2018) gives an example of the

denial of the production of whiteness, where the word race is hardly ever used in Finland. She argues that

Many Finns believe there cannot be racism in Finland because there is very little use of the term race. Even in the academic context, the concept of racism is often bypassed by acknowledging the ideologies of the democratic society; recognition of difference is not needed since everybody should have the same rights. (pp. 69-70)

Santiago Mostyn (2019) in his article in *Nordic Art Review* (the leading Nordic journal of contemporary art) criticizes the whiteness and privileges within the Swedish art scene. His article addresses his experience of co-curating the *Moderna Exhibition*, Moderna Museet's quadrennial survey of contemporary art². The article is titled "Explaining *the Blind Spot of Swedish Art World Exceptionalism*; A small and comfortable cultural elite, convinced of their own progressive values, retains authorship over Sweden's consensus-driven identity." He extensively reminds Swedish art critics of Sweden's colonial past and its present impact which seems to be entirely dismissed. While emphasising the lack of inclusivity and diversity within the scene he articulates privileges of the white man and reductionist understanding of the non-white artists' works within the art field:

As an active participant in the Swedish art scene, I work from a place of privilege, but also within a void. 'Culture' is still accorded an intrinsic value in civic life here, a positive legacy of the welfare state ideal ... The concession is having to operate within what sometimes feels like an echo chamber of a bygone age, constantly needing to explain my background or clarify my role, and being forced to push forward through a society with a relatively comfortable self-regard... it is part of a cycle, both within the art world and in Western society at large, that in

subtle ways keeps giving preferential treatment to white men. When an [Swedish male] art critic can only see a 'multicultural agenda' in the fact that artists of colour, or simply artists with non-Swedish sounding names, are active in Sweden, it says more about his own blindness to a cultural reality than anything else. (Mostyn, 2019)

In the article *Intra-Nordic Differences, Colonial/Racial Histories, and National Narratives: Rewriting Finnish History* Suvi Keskinen (2019) explains the Finnish colonial history and its complicity. Explaining that the imperial and colonial world order of these periods shaped the context in which people living in Finland, and later in the newly established nation-state, operated. Many of the policies and practices were already developed during Swedish and Russian rule, but the projection of the Indigenous Sámi and the Roma minority as the Others of the modernizing Finnish nation-state intensified the governing and racialization of these groups in the post-independence era. Further, Mira Kallio-Tavin (2018) notes the pervasive colour-blindness throughout Nordic discourse, and the resulting refusal to problematize the power of whiteness to produce both white and non-white subjectivities. She points out that Nordic countries have a particular relationship to whiteness and to the ignorance of racism, “the image of the idealized democratic Nordic nations needs to be scrutinized in the context of indigenous Sámi people. Some families even wanted to hide their Sámi background” (p. 1). This “kind of colonization of mind rooted in the racist behavior of the nation had long affect for the future generation” (p. 2). Oikarinen-Jabai (2011) in her research with a focus on life of Somalian youngsters as second generation migrant children and youth states that “all of participants has experienced verbal or physical assault because of their race or ethnic background. Harassment seems to be part of their everyday lives”. (p. 156)

Considering the existing Nordic exceptionalism and general refusal to acknowledge the power of whiteness, contemporary art and institutional practices in Finland is no better than

Sweden. In fact, the argument of not being complicit in colonial history (Keskinen, 2019) has been used in Finland to ignore any current-day criticism towards the colonial structures and practices. Whiteness has in general been refused to be critically addressed in art institutions both in contextualization and realisation of the programs and in representations. Regarding whiteness and colonial history, Kallio-Tavin (2018) explains that Finland like other Nordic countries has been able to take an outsider position which has given the possibility to take an innocent position as a bystander and as a pure Nordic reviewer of the rest of the world. In fact, lack of critical self-reflection within the Finnish art and cultural institutions has resulted in maintaining the prevailing homogenous and exclusive whiteness and art productions by mainly white artists. As a result, the system creates the structural discriminatory treatments towards the non-white and non-Finnish born artists in the scene leading to their exclusion and marginalisation both in society and in the field. In best cases these artists' work is showcased in other categories known as *ethnic art or multicultural art* and so on.

Colonial structure within the Finnish art and cultural institutions happens both in contextualization of the annual programs and exhibitions, in representations and collections. Exclusion occurs when people in leading and decision-making positions within the institutions do not recognise or consider foreign born artists and cultural workers as equally professional and competent as white Finnish artists. We rarely see (or in some cases do not see at all) a person of colour ³ in leading or decision making positions in highly ranked institutions, funding institutions, and particularly not in Finnish higher education. Eurocentrism seems to be the core of educational structure, decision making at all levels from the public to the private sector. In advancing inclusivity within the art scene, it seems that private sector has been more progressive than the public sector. Here I would like to bring an example of recent research done on attitudes within the art institutions in Finland and conditions of foreign born workers in the art field.

According to Avas/opening ⁴(2019) a recent survey done by Emmi Lahtinen from Finnish Centre for Cultural Policy Research (Cupore), the working condition of non-Finnish born artists and cultural workers is crucial. Here I would like to briefly explain some results from the survey presented in the Nordic Seminar (2019) by Lahtinen. The result confirms the problematic structural (discriminatory) attitudes within the Finnish art scene. For instance, answering the question: have you faced hardship in your professional career in Finland? From 95 respondents, 86 percent answered yes, and only 15 percent said no. The most reoccurring challenges mentioned by participants among other issues are: economic challenges such as lack of work opportunities, feeling of being an outsider, lack of networks, language problems, lack of possibilities to take part in decision-making and harassment. And from 98 respondents to the question, do you consider yourself treated as equal with Finnish born artists? 58 percent said no. Similarly, in the Barometer reports ⁵ (2017–2018), from 1168 respondent to the question in the survey, is equality realized in the arts sector? 42 percent disagreed and only 3 percent completely agreed. This may help us to have a better understating of the current non-inclusive and general practice in the art and cultural scene in Finland. In relation to the number of employees with non-Finnish background, the amount of discrimination based on language is considerable. Other common reasons for discrimination were “nationality, (ethnic) origin” (presented by Lahtinen, Statistics Finland/työolotutkimus ⁶ , 2013).

After nearly eight years of observation and actively working in the art scene, it is evidential to me that voices of minorities as authors and artists of diaspora, and particularly of non-European immigrant women artist are one of the most excluded ones. In exercising inclusion and exclusion within the institutions among other factors gender, geography, religion, background and nationality seem to play an important role. Although in the last few years it seems that there have been some changes in strategies within the art institutions, yet still more concrete structural reforms are needed in order to have any significant and sustainable change, towards

more inclusivity.

Lacking norm critical leadership can be a reason why Finnish art institutions systematically continue ignoring the existing capacity of the international professional art workers in Finland. So much space is given to Finnish (white) artists to create their *universal single story of others* by co-option and consumption of difference. Appropriating and representation of something/about others and their cultures in exotic, orientalist and problematic ways is a result of such conditions. The structure continues functioning in ways to underrepresent foreign born professionals in Finland. Even though the institutions' international programs are relevant to these artists and cultural workers' practices – yet opportunities are offered to white Finns to advance their profession. Practice of racism in the art scene is mostly exercised and validated under the guise of freedom of expression, which thus guarantees artistic freedom and the art's role of being provocative for Finnish (white) artists in the scene. Simply put; most institutions care for *their own* by ignoring the Others. In the long term, exclusion of artists and cultural workers of colour has been normalised. In the visible absence of people of colour in the structure – we see how Finnish scholars, artists and curators write papers on the orient, curate shows and programs, conferences and seminars *about* or *of* the Others and their cultures. So that they can claim their knowledge rather than taking any major action in dismantling the existing discriminative and structural barriers for the racialized Others. In doing so they fail in combating inequalities, racism and the whiteness. Here I would like to elaborate on an example from several instances.

In a series of writings in a blog *Inside-an-airport* ⁷, Hami Bahadori a Helsinki-based artist, addresses the problematic matters in the Finnish art scene. He elaborates on the general lack of criticality within the art institutions and artistic practices. He criticises Finnish art education particularly in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts. He elaborates on two examples of recent racist and oriental narratives of the *Middle East and its sociocultural and political conditions*

by Finnish artists: 1) A Middle-Eastern perspective on the recent wave of Orientalist exhibitions in Helsinki: Pekka Niskanen's exhibition *Tehran Dark Metal* (2019) and its opening event 'Ajankohtainen Iran' at Gallery Hippolyte. 2) the exhibition *Oriental Spa* at Kuvataideakatemia (Finnish Academy of Fine Arts). In the first case, Hippolyte Gallery organised an event *discussing the current political and social conditions of Iranian society*. The gallery included all-white-Finnish experts in the panel discussion and did not include any expert from the existing Iranian community of artists and scholars. Consequently, Elham Rahmati, an Iranian artist and curator based in Helsinki, made a call on Facebook asking Hippolyte Gallery to stop the exclusive Finnish (all white) event on Iran. The request was not made to ask them to only include English as the event's language or simply tokenise an Iranian expert in the event, but to actually pay attention though to the dynamics which create an ongoing pattern of wrong practices. In this case, the problem surely was the exotification of Iranian people and their culture. Many of us as members of the art community both Iranian and a number of artists of colour responded to the online debate. The majority who commented requested that the gallery's staff cancel the event. The discussion under the Facebook post unravelled debates on the unjust practices within this particular gallery and the Finnish art scene in general. Where it continues to lack education, and understanding in postcolonialism and decolonisation. The space given to such colonial and missionary approaches to other cultures was widely questioned. The claim of the political expertise of the Finnish (white male) artist after his short visit to Iran, to become an expert on politics of Iran and its contemporary society was questioned. Who can in short period of time become an expert on politics of a complex society? We collectively asked for the accountability of the institutions in carrying out such practices. Hippolyte Gallery was asked for an explanation on that. However, we did not receive any constructive explanation, although shortly afterwards, the gallery shared a public notice notifying *due to the artist's sickness the event was cancelled*. Bahadori, in his text "*Pekka Niskanen is the Best Example of White-Privilege 'Profiting' From*

Pain of Others”, elaborates:

Niskanen identifies himself as a researcher who helps the Finnish society “understand Iran”. He is an artist who not only doesn’t see his white privilege which allows him to freely travel the world and represent minorities but he is also ‘profiting’ from this cultural violence. However, what is shocking is that art venues such as Hippolyte gallery, and Bioart Society is giving space to such artists . . . We usually don’t hear about these topics [about the ongoing colonial forces towards indigenous Sámi people by Finnish government] yet so many artists and researchers including Niskanen are quick in changing the subject to somewhere else in the world and ultimately bringing a nationalist argument on how Finland will be effected by migration and refugees ⁸. (Bahadori, 2019b)

In a second case, after visiting the exhibition titled *Oriental Spa* in the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, Bahadory explains his observation as following:

Oriental Spa used all the racist stereotypes of the orient. Visiting the exhibition felt like reading the most contemporary orientalist book that has ever been written. There was no significant collective complaint or institutional attention paid to the matter, as there are less than five students from Aisa and North Africa in the whole institution. Not to mention, there isn’t any brown and black faculty and staff at the whole academy. There isn’t even any data on diversity in the Finnish art scene since the culture sector doesn’t monitor anything aside from nationality. (Bahadori, 2019a)

To change the current condition, we need an emphasis on ethics as the most important principle within art, education and institutional practices. It is the principal and global responsibility

which can create a caring system and solidarity in creating equity for everyone. Regarding the “Finnishness beliefs and attitudes the ideas of democratic and equal societies are so inherently valued that there has been little room for critical self-reflection, especially around the notions of traditional, Nordic, and Finnishness, and their relationship to white culture” (MacEchrane as cited in Kallio-Tavin & Tavin, 2018, p. 73). By challenging the whiteness, surviving it and voicing the problematic and systematic exclusionary structures, one might become the problem themselves. As Ahmed (2017) explains the walls of institutions often feel like they are made of the most resistant materials. The brick walls of institutions create practices of exclusion; they consolidate through the erasure of the fundamental relational asymmetries on which they are premised, until the latter become invisible. They have become so commonplace that we do not



Figure 2. In Transition, Poster, Two channel video installation at Virka Gallery, Helsinki city Hall, 2017-18, Sepideh Rahaa

see them anymore. By confronting people behind the institutions and holding them accountable for their actions, one might become concerned as if the confrontation is the best strategy in the Finnish context. It is evidential that the most and first reaction to such criticism is defensive mode. In defence of the structural problems many Finnish actors transform the critic of the problem to the main problem. The criticism in most cases is considered as a personal problem rather than a constructive one, therefore it is systematically dismissed, ignored or silenced. However, in difficult times we live, it is mandatory to respond to our local issues and problematic structures which is interlinked to the wider problematics on a global level. We must acknowledge that our actions have impacts as we live interdependently on the planet.

Of National Narratives: Discomforting and Existing in the Finnish Landscape. *'In Transition' a Response to the Centenary Finnish Independence*

Undoing ingrained racial and sexual mythologies within feminist communities requires ... [becoming] fluent in each other's histories, it also requires unlikely coalitions ... and clarifying the meaning of its dialogue. What are the conditions, the knowledges, and the attitudes that make a noncolonised dialogue possible? How can we craft a dialogue anchored in equality, respect, and dignity for all peoples? In other words, I want to suggest that one of the most crucial challenges for a critical multicultural feminism is working out how to engage in ethical and caring dialogues. (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 2003, p. 125)

To understand the dynamics of narratives one must ask which narratives are acceptable and which are not? For whom the narratives are produced and by whom? Most of current practices within the contemporary art, even on a small scale, do suggest that the discursive and embodied tendencies have historically and contextually favored a particular aesthetic, the Western aesthetic (gaze). To change it, we need to listen and include multiple voices in our

practices. It enables us to understand the world from a more inclusive, constantly shifting, non-hegemonic point of view. Moreover, we need to shift the geography of reason which is part and parcel of the decolonial turn (Maldonado-Torres, 2011, p. 10). Paula Moya (2011) suggests to take seriously the political and epistemic significance of different kinds of identities in order to investigate *who we are and from where we speak*. It's important with regards to the kind of knowledge we produce. Indeed, *who we are and from where we speak* is highly relevant for the intellectual projects which we are likely to pursue. Under this conception, identities are “socially significant and context-specific ideological constructs that refer in non-arbitrary (if partial) ways to verifiable aspects of the social world” (p. 80). On the other hand:

When “hegemonic narratives tend to divide us, producing and reproducing cultures of narration, visibility, and accessibility our locations must be challenged for another kind of freedom that empowers our differences to emerge. By shifting our locations, we inhabit spheres of interconnected existences that are in constant motion. (Elena Agudio et al. 2019, p. 3)

The representation of women with Southwest Asian and North African (Middle Eastern) roots is one of the most complicated and problematic matters specifically in the West. Hazel Carby notes that Western narrative “is trundling Third World women onto the stage only to perform as victims of barbarous, primitive practices in barbarous, primitive societies” (Carby, 2009, p. 451). In such representations, one cannot dismiss the colonial perception which has massively contributed to the current stereotypical perceptions of Southwest Asian women among others in the West — the exotic other which Western feminism strongly has defined or theorized itself against. The so called hopeless, helpless, submissive, passive and oppressed women of non-Western cultures. As argued earlier, the postcolonial histories and colonial structures in relation to today's conditions of Middle East and Western perceptions of it, is evidential.

For the West to define itself and for its pursuits, it will never recognize the East fully, but only on the periphery. However, I agree with Mohanty (2003) that we are “no longer in the same relationship with the Western states, so that the contemporary definitions of the Third World can no longer have the same geographical contours and boundaries they had for industrial societies” (p. 44).

In the last eight years of my experience in Finland, it has become clear that race, gender, nationality and religion among other factors are inextricably interrelated. I have learned to live in relation to gendered, racial and national structures embedded in Finnish societal structures. In most of these professional years, making art, educating and investigating through art has been the main site of my learnings and (in some cases) unlearning. In my personal life, living three decades in Iran and almost one decade in Finland, borders have become visible in many ways, although I have repeatedly failed to accept them and continue a refusal to ignore them, but currently I try to live with them; outside and within me. If I find enough strength, I would try to eliminate some. The presence of these physical and mental borders in my life and work is like what Talpade Mohanty (2003) explains in her case: “It has been both exclusionary and enabling . . . to envision a critically transnational (internationalist) feminist praxis moving through these borders” (p. 2). For me, learning, researching, educating and resisting through art has structured my days, weeks and years, significantly as an inseparable part of me. It is where I can be myself; a site for provocation in questioning the power dynamics in society and in knowledge productions within and outside artistic practice.

As an (immigrant) women artist being situated in migratory context I agree with Olivier Marboeuf (2013) “by staying outside, one literally understands nothing. It is thinking through experience⁹” (as it is cited in Void Network) which enables us to make a profound understanding of such conditions. It is important “to be in the position of an inspective which starts out from positioning us in the middle of the world, in its events, in which we have sometimes a

greater, but often a smaller role” while “humans cannot freely position themselves outside anything, because they are anyhow immersed in everything” (Varto, 2009, p. 36). In this article, I would like to bring one example of my current practice. The work is from my long-term project titled *A Dream that Came True?* (since 2016). The project questions migration as a dream from migratory women’s perspective, with an aim to reflect on lived experiences, different ways of being, socio-cultural adaptations and resistances. It brings together personal narrations of everyday life, home, hybrid identity of women including myself who live in Finland and have Southwest Asian and North African roots. The project aims is to challenge preconceived stereotypical perceptions of women and their roles in Finland. Going beyond this by resisting against the accepted norms and conventions of privileging their perspectives over the other ones, avoiding them from becoming/being only a side-track in the narratives. As Smith (2012) powerfully states “the need to tell our stories remains the powerful imperative of a powerful form of resistance” (p. 36).

Year 2017, I was invited to produce a series of artworks to engage with the theme of national identity in the Finnish centenary independence year. The first question was that in the national narratives who is included and who is not? And what forms of womanhood and Finnishness have existed in those narratives? As a response, I produced a series of artworks to state *our active presence* in this landscape. Following Moya’s question *who we are and from where we speak*, my aim was to give a human face to our everyday struggles and resistances while positioning oneself within this narrative. I already had investigated the concept for over a year and decided to tell a multiform story, I invited two performers-narrators who had roots both in Middle East and in Finland, and employed certain visual and contextual strategies in the production. One of the strategies was to have strong combinations of words and poetry in several languages which are spoken by Middle Eastern people in Finland. The text was intertwined with the symbolic imagery in a nonlinear narrative. Furthermore, Finnish landscape has been widely used



Figure 3. *In Transition*, Installation at Virka Gallery, Helsinki city Hall, 2017-18, Sepideh Rahaa

by Finnish artists to establish the national identity. To establish our (diverse) existence in this narrative, I used Finnish elements and local spaces both indoor and outdoor, particularly the natural landscape. The aim was to bridge from personal perception to the social perception. By drawing the line between the various points in this investigation I attempted to create a counter-narrative. As Smith (2012) states, “developing counter-discourse may best be understood as a resistance to gross misrepresentation” (P. 4). The project was established to combine a holistic reflection of some lived experiences together with imagination in the production. Because “it is through reflective practice that theoretical knowledges and lived experiences can be embodied, made meaningful, and thus contribute to the generation of new understandings” (Barbour, 2006, p. 1). *In Transition* was a two-channel video work where women were symbolically set in similar locations yet separated from each other. They did not meet each other therefore they

had an indirect dialogue in the video.

In Transition was centered on positionality of immigrant women rooting in Finland yet resisting against any conformity and imposed roles. A poetic response of *being present* in this locality, in its hundred-year's celebration, addressing the complexity and hybridity and multiplicity of beings and identities. Elaborating on our womanhood and existence, women like myself who have roots elsewhere - particularly in the Middle East – yet their beings are not confined only to that. But rooting meaningfully in Finland appearing actively in its landscape offering flexible understanding of Finnishness. In this context when I write us it refers to and includes both first and second generations of women, who live in Finland and may or may not share the identity of an *immigrant woman*, we who are not the same. In such presentation, still one needs to be careful with naturalizing the structure of presence, of ways of thinking and being. My attempt was aligned with both Stuart Hall (1995) where he defines *national culture as imagined communities* while understanding how nationalism and national identity plays a key role in individual's life and its perpetual relation to space as territory, its impact on construction of identity, self-definition and self- positioning in the society. I agree with Haraway (1998) when she emphasizes on “commitment on mobile positioning” for seeing “from the standpoints of the subjugated in order to see well” (p.585).

The video work was a manifestation of an act of resistance by performativity of bodies which resist against stereotypical perceptions or notions which recognize and categorise women as the *monolithic Other*. Therefore they (the women) are not included within the national narratives. I aimed to construct a narrative to critically challenge the dominant stories while forming new narrative which could be best interpreted with less Euro-centric but more with situated understanding. In creating the story, the aim was to intersect the spaces with the bodily experiences in form of sound combined with dance performances by the two performers (Razan Abou Askar and Ramina Habibollah. Visual strategy was combined with my own poetry and two other poets.

By retelling intertwined stories, I endeavoured to create possibilities for recognition, claiming and beyond. The narrative begins on a Finnish island called Suomenlinna. The island itself has a long history for resistance, in May 1918, the fortress was renamed Suomenlinna (Castle of Finland) to reflect Finland's independence, and it was annexed to the state of Finland. In the beginning of the video in a dreamlike vision, a woman (one of the performers) receives the unspoken knowledge of eternal life from the pomegranate tree located on a hill on the island. Receiving such a knowledge is a metaphor in Persian literature. It is where, the pomegranates in the video are rotating around. And the narration starts with the ringing of bells, sound and poetry (figure 4):

I, the passenger of life

In this place

I, the dreamer

Floating in time and space

Pomegranate tree passed its life to me

To spread and to flourish

...

I am a dreamer

But not the only one

I live to become a story

I live to become a dream

The Pomegranate has a strong allegoric meaning of rooting, prosperity and life. I transplanted the pomegranate, originating from Persia, (with an invisible string) to the Finnish in-



Figure 4. In Transition, Beginning of the video work, Installed at Virka Gallery, Helsinki city Hall, 2017-18, Sepideh Rahaa

digenous tree which grows all over Finland, metaphorically offering abundance to it. Plants have migrated for millions of years on the planet, and so have humans. In one part, when the woman looks through the window of the Finnish wooden house, she witnesses the growth of the Finnish rowan tree within herself. It symphonizes the co-existence and mutual growth of becoming. It was to explore how beings are interconnected. Additionally, the sea is present as a psychological element, being limitless, in motion, and connected to everything and every land. Being present in Finnish landscape, dancing in nature, running and sitting whether in an industrial site or in a Finnish household knitting or unknitting, the video work offers the nuanced Finnishness. It is for us to claim our place and to be the way we are or want to be. To resist, offer and to carry on. In the video one of the women is knitting a flag where some words appear in it. Words are in four of the common languages (among other ones) spoken by Middle East-

ern people in Finland: Arabic, Farsi, Finnish and English. The words nationalism, Kulttuuri (in Finnish culture), Identity & hybridity, Kieli (in Finnish language), زبان (in Farsi language), Home, وطن (in Arabic homeland) are related to question of identity (figure 2). When the first woman is knitting, the other woman (in other screen) takes the thread and undoes the knitted flag. When one of the women testifies on her status in the video, she starts running in a symbolic gesture in the forest with the thread (from the knitted flag) in her hand (figure 3). She runs to free herself from existing boundaries of terminologies and definitions in the knitted flag, yet in the end, she is captured in a web made by herself in the forest. Don't we sometimes trap ourselves deeper while trying to escape from the boundaries? Being caught she stands and gazes upon the sunlight's reflection from the top of the trees. There is no single solution to any struggle. In another part of the video, in an industrial setting, both women sit in front of each other (in two separated screen) while one is knitting and the other one is unknitting, they start an indirect dialogue (the first part is in Farsi and second part in English):

First performer (briefed as FP):

Reclaim your place in this word

What makes you

Who you are

Who you become

This echoes in my mind

Here, now and then

FP: The responsibility to live

SP: As we believe (they continue in this order)

FP: As you gaze upon me

SP: Imagine an island

FP: Imagine the sea

World is ours to make

SP: It is an enormous burden

FP: Loud, proud and free

I will not be statistics

I will not be silenced

And in the end both performers/narrators repeat: But I will be a dreamer

In the last scene of video when the first performer releases the pomegranate to the sea to continue its path, the second performer narrates the open-ended journey. This scene is accompanied with a strong sound track (by sound artist Ana Gutiezsca):

It's a journey

I am not afraid

Equality

Be considered equal to those around me

I am not afraid

You have me and I have you

...

I will remain

Equality

It's a journey

Hamid Dabashi (2015) asks *can Europeans read?* My agreement with him is not only on geopolitics of knowledge and its productions, but also on ability of (responsible attempts) in

understandings of the currents in the world which is applicable in the arts as well. The title of the work, *In Transition* refers to being truly present in this moment (the hundred-year-of-independency), to the present time in a current passage which one must take to transform from passiveness to the pro-activeness. In the present moment where our perceptions increase and we may see on the horizon possibilities for change. I also agree with Haraway (2016):

[in] urgent times, many of us are tempted to address trouble in terms of making an imagined future safe. . . . staying with trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future; it requires learning to be truly present ...as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters and



Figure 5. In Transition,Ending part of the video, Merging figure of the woman with Finnish rowan tree in the Suomenlinna island, 2017-18, Sepideh Rahaa

meanings. (p.1)

Conclusion

To be the Other is not an end, but an opportunity to practice new modes of being, thinking and narrating. To be “Other” is to transform the everyday through a resistance against conformity, and all the contrived identities and conditions that conformity imposes. According to Stuart Hall (1996), “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not who we are or where we came from, so much as what we might become” (p.4). The identity based on becoming creates the possibility to monitor and contemplate life on both sides of the border separating inside from outside. It also allows us to complicate concepts instead of being limited to simplified definitions, to defy narrow assumptions about identity, race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, to embrace the interdependency and relationality of the world and to continue to exist in non-Western contexts while living in the West and outside of its borders.

For us as one who sees from both within and outside, the Other must *delink* from the *disciplinarity* of imposed positions, the *geopolitics of knowledge*, and normativity, delinking implies disobedience (Mignolo, Dabashi, 2015); by delinking, one breaks free from structures that have negatively impacted generations of people, structures whose effects continue to be felt into the present. Delinking demands self-awareness, persistence, and determination in consciously seeking for new alliances. Delinking requires acceptance of oneself as a point of departure; it is certainly not easy to move beyond the state of life-long limbo that has become the normal mode of living for many Othered peoples. Delinking enables us to come up with alternative visions of reality more rooted in the lived experiences of people around the globe, an approach which allows meaning to be generated from within.

And through art and its mediation and educational power, we should reach out to other

people by first looking into ourselves and into the depth of our condition. By doing so, we can facilitate more compassionate forms of interaction by remaining open to contingency. This creates a space for more direct and non-hierarchical connections to take place between people. In imagining different futures, we must create alternative physical and mental spaces and make room for greater closeness and proximity to the (non-Western) world and to each other.

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Notes

¹The usage of the political term Middle East in this text is only a matter of clearance, and I prefer using term Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) to avoid the former colonial term.

²Read more here https://kunstkritikk.com/the-blind-spot-of-swedish-art-world-exceptionalism/?fbclid=IwAR0eR7_BonyagTRuo2-6pBPrReigteDYjooQu0jJ3QjMrZpmpRhFkOZqHJA

³Person of colour refers to describe any person who is not considered white, The term emphasizes common experiences of systemic racism.

⁴The survey is done by Cupore in collaboration with Culture for All Service, Globe Art Point year 2019.

⁵The annual survey that maps the current values and attitudes in the arts and culture sector in Finland. Collaboration between Cupore and Arts Promotion Center Finland.

⁶Read more here <https://yhdenvertaisuus.fi/en>

⁷inside-an-airport is a study-group consisting of artists and scholars mainly from Middle Eastern backgrounds who are gathering regularly in Helsinki International Airport. The group is interested in topics related to migration, colonialization/decolonization, subjectivity, violence, surveillance and paranoia.

⁸Bahadori, H. (2019). Pekka Niskanen is the Best Example of White-Privilege ‘Profiting’ From Pain of Others, Retrieved from https://insideanairport.com/post/188196207319/pekka-niskanen-is-the-best-example-of?fbclid=IwAR26RaTikMMIqQjnHO4_mnU3dvKkmEIEisIJO19IVoyr2u0Ksp-ZTm66veE also read Is Finnish Art Scene Inhumane? Retrieved from <https://insideanairport.com/post/186835452059/is-finnish-art-scene-inhumane>

⁹Marboeuf, O. (2013, October 4), The Rioter and the Witch”, Published on Void Network. Retrieved from <http://voidnetwork.gr/2013/10/04/the-rioter-and-the-witch-by-olivier-marboeuf/>