

A Language of Hope

Non-traumatic Narrative of Transnational Memory in Khodadad Mohammadi's 'The Translator's Tale'

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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the memory of refugees, asylum seekers, and detainees, this article categorizes their diasporic memory under transnational memory and questions the seemingly natural linkage between trauma theory and memories of exile. By examining the significance of the action of translation in Khodadad Mohammadi's short story 'The Translator's Tale', this article uncovers agency and hope in non-traumatic narrative and draws attention to the potential of such a narrative to promote solidarity among different communities and collective memories, contributing to the nexus of memory, literature, and activism.

KEYWORDS

diasporic memory, positivity, literary activism, refugee, translator

INTRODUCTION: TRANSNATIONAL MEMORY OF REFUGEES

As a field that concerns human experiences related to the past, memory studies has been framed into different scales to capture the unique characteristics of certain subjects and their memories. However, when it comes to the memory of refugees, asylum seekers, and detainees, the prevailing structure of national memory fails to deal with the border-crossing trait of the diasporic horde, which calls for a new perspective beyond the nation-state framework. Proposed by Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney, transnational memory is an attempt to tackle the limitations of the framework of national memory and draw attention to mobility with an emphasis on 'the issue of borders' (2014, 4). As they articulate, '[t]ransnationalism recognizes the significance of national frameworks alongside the potential of cultural production both to reinforce and to transcend them' (4), which questions the function and formation of national boundaries along with the nationalist ideology and recognizes the power of cultural practices in destabilizing such boundaries in academic studies and through the arts. In contrast to the self-legitimized national boundaries and the frameworks based on them, the geographical fragmentation and ambiguity of diasporic memory can only be examined through an approach that is not limited to national borders, leaving transnational memory to be the ideal method with great potential. Although the memory related

to refugees and asylum seekers is described as a ‘blind-spot or constitutive outside of transnational memory’ (11) by De Cesari and Rigney because of the marginalized identity and deterritorialized position of the community, this essay considers their flexible framework to be capable of offering analytical insights into the mnemonic issues of diasporic experience and its relationship with cultural practices.

Under such a framework, this essay participates in the task of understanding the experiences of refugees, asylum seekers, and detainees by reflecting on the boundary-crossing aspects in their memories. Furthermore, it investigates how to break the analytical paradigms that confine our understanding to a limited perspective. Khodadad Mohammadi’s short story ‘The Translator’s Tale’ (2021), which portrays his own experiences as a refugee from Afghanistan, serves as a case study to disclose the transformative power of agency and hope in diasporic communities that can be obscured by, for example, the mere focus on trauma theory and its narratives.

APPROACHING MEMORY BEYOND TRAUMA THEORY

Apart from the approach emphasizing the geographic space in the physical world, it is also necessary to reflect on the memory of refugees from a psychological perspective that addresses the affective aspect of their experiences. Trauma theory is a mainstream method in understanding and articulating the experiences of people in exile, mostly recognizing the deterioration in their mental and physical conditions due to the tragic events of injustice and violence. However, Stef Craps criticizes ‘hegemonic definitions of trauma which are not scientifically neutral but culturally specific’ (2013, 21) for failing to fully acknowledge and account for the sufferings of the marginalized and minor groups. Despite this contestation, the theory has been widely recognized as an established method to approach tragic experiences both through the ‘medical category’ (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 6) and ‘moral norms’ (6). Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman capture the phenomenon that the growth of the psychiatric and ethical importance of trauma contributes to the recognition of trauma as a universal concept that can be applied to various cultural contexts (7). They investigate the shifting process of this recognition with case studies concerning diverse spaces and subjects, among which is an analysis of the ‘psychotraumatology of exile’ (223). The terminology focuses on the mental health of asylum seekers and torture victims, as ‘[e]vidence of trauma is now sought as conclusive proof’ (226) in the acknowledgment of their sufferings and victimhood. Such an acknowledgment and its material form of a clinical certificate is the premise of getting institutionalized medical care as well as asylum, as noted by Fassin and Rechtman (243), which renders the concept of trauma an instrument in the regulation of refugees. Nevertheless, trauma offers validation of the violence

for which people had no language before, confirming that traumatic experiences ‘leave traces of the past in the present, and [...] may even require immediate treatment in order to ensure they do not burden the future’ (277). Therefore, trauma theory implies a therapeutic logic of diagnosis—treatment—recovery/reparation, which centers on violence and anticipates a fresh future in contrast to the entanglement of a traumatic past and its traces in the present. Regarding the recent developments in trauma theory, Irene Visser overviews how the field has shifted from the dominant Eurocentric, event-based perspective to a postcolonial trauma theory that acknowledges ‘this full complexity of trauma in its specific cultural, political, and historical contexts’ (2015, 263) by highlighting its ‘collective and chronic’ (263) aspects as well as its potential to ‘lead to a stronger sense of identity and a renewed social cohesion’ (263). By reviewing various efforts to decolonize trauma theory, Visser emphasizes the therapeutic function of spiritual and religious traditions and ceremonies in non-Western cultures to deal with traumatic experiences and their aftermath (263), which expands the field yet still follows the therapeutic logic in Fassin and Rechtman’s definition.

While the efforts to investigate the transnational memory of refugees from the perspective of trauma theory have been fruitful in elucidating the systematic injustice and violence which traumatize the refugees as well as the urgency for the international society to intervene, this also bears the risk of narrowing the scope of memory studies concerning refugees and asylum seekers to their tragic events and painful experiences and essentially confining the identity of people in exile to victimhood, which in fact denies them subjectivity and agency. The decolonization of trauma theory shows a similar tendency to separate traumatic experiences and the aftermath of resilience through therapeutic logic and focus more on the indigenization of trauma theory in local contexts. However, such a method may not fully address the problems faced in refugee experiences. One example is the uncertain duration of the diaspora, which makes it difficult to set clear boundaries between traumatic experiences and resilience when they can happen simultaneously. Similarly, the complex relationship between refugees’ (im)mobility and the lands that they escape, travel through, and voluntarily or involuntarily dwell in challenges current methods of indigenization in postcolonial trauma theory. Moreover, the prevailing therapeutic logic puts the refugees arbitrarily in the patient’s position, which indicates an asymmetry of power that can impair their autonomy. Although the perspective equating refugees with victims and the transnational memory of refugees with traumatic memory has been popularized by the mainstream media, new alternative perspectives can still be sought to understand the multiplicity inside the refugee identity, and to envisage a future not by looking backward to merely avoid more sufferings but with a logic of hope. Elaborated upon in Ann Rigney’s article on the necessity to move beyond the ‘traumatic paradigm’ (2018, 369) in memory studies, the conceptualization

of hope marks an effort to break the dominant framework where ‘violence is the primary subject of collective memory and grievance the core of identity’ (370), which shifts the focus to positivity and desirable values in memories and commemorations. Referring to Eagleton’s distinction between ‘optimism’ and ‘hope’, Rigney summarizes that hope ‘indicates an enduring attachment to something of value in face of its present absence and past denial’ (370) with ‘an anticipatory logic [...] based [...] on mere possibility’ (370), which points out the potential of hope as an analytical tool to reinvigorate memory studies paralyzed by the gloom of tragedies through the positive desire for increase, improvement, and integration in the future.

CASE STUDY: HOPE IN NON-TRAUMATIC NARRATIVE

In order to examine the potential of the concept of hope to function as an alternative method to attend to the transnational memory of refugees and asylum seekers, this essay takes Khodadad Mohammadi’s short story ‘The Translator’s Tale’ in *Refugee Tales IV* as an example to investigate how cultural remembrance in the form of non-traumatic narrative shifts the paradigm of the discourse of refugees’ diasporic memory. As the latest outcome of *The Refugee Tales* project initiated by Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group, *Refugee Tales IV* consists of stories concerning the inhuman process of detention of refugees and asylum seekers as an international issue. As the editor of the collection, David Herd states, ‘the explicit aim of the project is to call for an end to indefinite immigration detention’ (2017, 73), which suggests an integral connection between the cultural practice of remembrance and an agentic struggle for change at the core of their efforts to bring the transnational memory of refugees, asylum seekers and detainees to a broader readership and audience, where their memories can be transmitted from the marginalized community to international society. Rigney (2018)’s notion that ‘[r]emembering the past, shaping the future remembrance of the present, and struggles for a better future feed into each other’ (2018, 372) reflects the importance of the activist aspect of this mnemonic project, which reveals the logic of hope that underpins the linkage between memory and activism in their future-oriented aim. Therefore, Mohammadi’s short story can be considered an effort to participate in literary activism through the method of memory.

As both an oral and written practice, the stories in *Refugee Tales IV* are a form of narrative representing the memory of diasporic experiences, and a large number of the stories are imbued with violence, injustice, and suffering, which shares the expression of physical and psychological pain in relation to these tragic experiences and can be framed as trauma narrative. For instance, ‘The Advocate’s Tale’ underscores the haunting fear and torturing depression suffered by the storyteller JB during and after their experiences in detention, which shapes JB’s life choices.

However, ‘The Translator’s Tale’ distinguishes itself from the other stories with the bright tone of its narration and a positive attitude toward life despite the experiences of exile and detention. An omnipresent feeling of hope is rooted in the language of this story, which contrasts with the heart-wrenching atmosphere of traumatic narrative in other tales in *Refugee Tales IV*. Meanwhile, it is necessary to consider ‘The Translator’s Tale’ in the broader context of refugee studies. While the dynamics of trauma and hope in narratives by refugee communities have been studied through the lens of psychology and linguistics (Umer and Elliot, 2019; Brough et al., 2021; Lau et al., 2021), Mohammadi’s story offers a literary account of how to memorize and commemorate the diasporic experiences without presupposing the dominance of trauma and sufferings, which thus invites introspection from the perspectives of literary and memory studies. To understand how the text demonstrates the way in which hope is integrated into the non-traumatic narrative, this article focuses on the figure of the translator and the relationship between hope and translation in the story using Walter Benjamin’s writings on the subject.

Writing about his own experience, Mohammadi depicts his life as a refugee from Afghanistan to Greece, his failed attempt to leave Greece for Italy, and the experience of detention in the refugee camp. ‘You may have heard of Moria Camp; the poor conditions, the long queues everywhere, the nervous people—but I had my own world there’ (2021, 65). Mohammadi’s narration contrasts two narratives. One is familiar to the reader’s ears and consists of objective descriptions of harsh life inside the camp, which is in line with the media’s defining description of the camp as ‘the worst on the planet’ (BBC 2018, 0:10–0:12). The other speaks from a subjective perspective, focusing on personal reflections without denying the objective conditions. The gesture of claiming full ownership of his own narration over his experience related to Moria Camp indicates Mohammadi’s position as an unimpaired subject, which suggests that his agency in the narrative does not come from a privileged status over other refugees, nor is it a self-deceiving fantasy which glorifies the austere conditions. Rather, it is an agency with full self-awareness of his difficult reality. This agency gains its strength from a positive attitude toward a better future, because the action of creating a world is a continuous work involving setting boundaries and maintaining orders, which would be meaningless if there is no future ahead of it. With a quick enumeration of the basic characteristics of Moria Camp, Mohammadi’s narration moves away from a descriptive representation of the traumatizing environment and replaces the traumatic narrative with one of hope.

The language of hope is the core of the non-traumatic narrative; similarly, there is a core to Mohammadi’s agency that enables the formation of the autonomous world, which he describes as ‘I was ... [h]elping the volunteers and refugees as a translator’ (2021, 65), connecting himself

to a specific profession. To understand the uniqueness of this job and its implications, this article employs Walter Benjamin's theoretical insights as articulated in his seminal article 'The Task of the Translator' (1923). The application of the German Jewish philosopher's theory to Mohammadi's story inevitably faces a possibly problematic transformation from one historical and cultural context to another. However, what underlies Benjamin's theory includes concerns about diasporic history and injustices that are embodied in languages as well as linguistic practices. Such themes can thus offer a common ground through which to understand Mohammadi's enthusiasm and practices as a translator in his diaspora. In the article Benjamin discusses the purpose of artistic works, especially literary works, as self-expression and locates the significance of the work of translation in linguistic expression, which renders the concerns of readership and communicative information of the work 'inessential' (1923, 16). Following such a premise, Benjamin defines the purpose of translation as 'expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages' (17), thus assigning the translator the task of bringing languages together so that they can interact with each other and give birth to a language of 'a higher and purer' (19) order. In other words, the goal of translation is to bring languages to work together toward the proximity of the 'inaccessible realm of reconciliation and fulfillment of languages' (19), a linguistic harmony that paves the way for the integration and solidarity among all of its subjects, namely, human beings.

Although Benjamin focuses primarily on the translation of artistic works, his statements can be used to help reflect on the significance of 'translator' in Mohammadi's non-traumatic narrative and uncover the logic of hope within it. One example can be found in the narration of Mohammadi's interaction with students to whom he taught English. The practice of teaching can be considered as translation in a broader sense as it involves the process of linguistic exchanges between two languages, while Mohammadi's choice to 'teach English to anybody who wanted it' (2021, 65) signals the mutual willingness to interact from both speakers and, by extension, the English and Afghan languages. The agency in both learners and teachers verifies a positive attitude in taking actions to change the current situation of their lives, and such change gains its possibilities in an ideal collaboration between two languages. As Benjamin notes, '[l]anguages are [...] interrelated in what they want to express' (1923, 17), yet, being mutually exclusive, they 'supplement one another in their intentions' (18), which indicates the commonality in the thoughts and feelings of human beings as well as the necessity of integrating languages in order to achieve unimpeded communication. Therefore, as a translator, Mohammadi not only bridges languages in his students' minds but also brings them the possibilities of a future of communication and change. In doing so, his profession as a translator also has affective importance in Mohammadi's narration. The kindness of the students motivates Mohammadi to 'do the best [he] could' (2021,

65), and his teaching of two children helps him to forge a relationship of responsibility and intimacy with them. As a consequence, the act of translation enables the closeness between Mohammadi and others, creating a sense of harmony despite the difficult conditions. It is also worth noticing that Mohammadi's work of translation is not confined to a homogeneous group. As he describes, 'I also speak a little Greek and so I could communicate with the policemen who didn't speak English' (70), which proves that Mohammadi's practice operates across and reshapes the border of identity between refugees and non-refugees and renders people equal in their desire for communication through his translation.

This analysis shows that both hope and translation in Mohammadi's narrative share the quality of positivity in terms of activism and affect, which differentiates the story from the trauma narrative. While hope for communication and change leads to the demand for translation, translation as an action conversely generates connection and new possibilities which in turn build the subject's hope. The entanglement of hope and translation which frames Mohammadi's non-traumatic narrative is also exemplified by his experiences in detention, where he lost his mobility and was restrained to an environment of shortage and stress. Instead of employing the method of the trauma narrative, Mohammadi organizes his representation of the experience around literal and figurative translation. For him, the translator is not only a profession with its external purpose and responsibility but also an identity: 'My name in there was "Tarjoman", this means translator' (2021, 70). By identifying himself and being identified as a translator, Mohammadi integrates the purpose and responsibility to break boundaries as well as foster hope and possibilities into his life, which guides his choices and action. Translation as an ideology is not merely a linguistic practice but can be understood as a mode of change, too. After introducing his practices of translation and English teaching, Mohammadi associates it with other people's practices, noting that '[e]veryone offered their skills to each other; it was a good way of being creative and changing our situation into something better' (71). All of the skills, including translation, are essentially demonstrations of a method to break personal limits and move toward improvement and integration in the hope of a more desirable life. Moreover, by considering his ability of linguistic translation as one part of the totality of skills that create change, Mohammadi makes the translator not only a profession and an identity but also a relational position that is interconnected with the positions of other people. The recognition of such a positional structure forms a space of solidarity, which balances out the danger of isolation with the concept of identity. Together, the reconciliation of a profession, an identity, and a position in the name of the translator mark the logic of hope behind Mohammadi's non-traumatic narrative of his diasporic memory.

Apart from promoting solidarity among people, the translator's task can also be understood in the story's transnational context. As writer Édouard Glissant notes, 'Western nations were established on the basis of linguistic intransigence, and the exile readily admits that he suffers most from the impossibility of communicating in his language' (1997, 15), which shows how the linkage between monolingualism and nationalism creates the language barrier that leads to the suffering of people in exile. Yet being a translator means that Mohammadi can not only transgress the border of languages but also has the ability and responsibility to assist others to cross linguistic boundaries. The act of translation then offers a way to negotiate the power imbalance embodied in the hierarchical language barrier upheld often by a monolingual national identity. Through this act of translation, a new space for communication with less suffering is opened for people who used to be bound to the seemingly natural connection between dominating languages and nation-states. When the act of linguistic translation is practiced in the detention center, which is a 'de-territorialized national frontier, and a key site in a broader accretion of borders that is itself deeply entwined with memory processes' (De Cesari and Rigney 2014, 11), the linkage between specific languages and nation-states is questioned, as the ambiguous reality of the complicated relationship among people, language, and territory is destabilized in the new space created by the convergence of languages. As the literary practice of transnational memory, the story shows how the role of the translator supports a non-traumatic narrative to transmit agency, hope, and solidarity in refugee communities to a broader public. Figuratively speaking, one can even consider the role of the non-traumatic narrative itself in bridging the distance between the world of the refugee and the Anglophonic readership as a form of translation, which strives to question the boundary of identities and foster understanding.

The absence of a traumatic narrative does not equal the absence of trauma itself. Instead, by building a world of his own in the narrative, Mohammadi invites the reader/listener to imagine the other world outside of his agency, while both worlds exist in the same reality. For instance, the solidarity created through sharing and translation is also a strategy to alleviate the stress of noise ('[i]t was always very loud and noisy' [2021, 69]), overcrowding ('[i]n A1 there were fifteen people' [68]), shortage of supplies ('long food line' [74]), lack of medical care ('without a doctor or medicine' [69]) and despair ('most of the people there had some mental health issues' [69]). Even Mohammadi himself can sometimes lose his temper and turn to verbal threats ("We will hit you if you don't stop now!" [70]). Moreover, these experiences of sufferings in detention haunt Mohammadi after his release and manifest their traumatizing impact in the form of his 'strange new habits' (73) which he developed in Moria Camp. Nevertheless, Mohammadi centers his representation of his diasporic memory on his agentic reaction and interaction with others and the surroundings, which is fueled by hope. The choice of this non-traumatic narrative

is the manifestation of Mohammadi's affirmative faith in life and hope—'We have the right to be free, to have a normal life, to be happy. If they take this life from us, we have to care for it ourselves, no matter where we are' (71). With the plural subject Mohammadi also recognizes such quality and potential in the whole community of refugees, asylum seekers and detainees, who are not mere victims with tragic pasts but rightful subjects with agencies to thrive.

One question that might be raised about the non-traumatic narrative of the life experience in the notorious detention system is whether the shift of focus from tragic events to utopian comradeship undermines, if not invalidates, the authenticity of the sufferings as well as the urgency of political help. To answer this, it is necessary to recall the limits of the concept of trauma. As Fassin and Rechtman note, 'psychic trauma speaks only that truth about the victim that society is prepared to hear' (2009, 274), which elucidates the fact that trauma as a social product does not have absolute authority over the authenticity of traumatic sufferings, especially when the subjects are the marginalized and minorities. As a consequence, the trauma narrative guarantees neither social recognition of the suffering nor humanitarian aid. Rather, it renders the autonomy and agency of refugees at stake when they are placed in the process of diagnosis—treatment—recovery as mere objects. However, the tendency to shift away from the trauma narrative can be recognized in recent refugee literature. Hadji Bakara explores the development of modern refugee literature and points out that '[n]o longer bound to representing the traumatic events that legitimate claims to asylum, the new refugee literature works instead to participate in the creation of diverse political futures, for refugees and citizens alike' (2020, 291), which confirms the potential of non-traumatic narrative to move beyond the logic of objectification behind trauma narrative. By allowing the diasporic subjects to exercise their agency in pursuit of a better future through cultural representation, the non-traumatic narrative also brings into light the interwoven political and global history behind the forced exile, wherein the asylum-granting nations are hardly innocent or disinterested. Therefore, Mohammadi's non-traumatic narrative is neither a denial of the sufferings in refugee life nor the criticism of other writers who stick with traumatic expressions, but an activist practice of remembrance with the hope for change.

Figuratively, Mohammadi translates his diasporic experience into hope and activism through his literary practice. In terms of the text itself, a language of hope is forged through his choice and arrangement of vocabulary, which creates a positive tone and evokes a sense of solidarity and hope. For instance, in his narration about his contacts with the smugglers, Mohammadi describes the process not as dangerous or risky but as '[involving] a lot of trust' (2021, 66). The choice of word echoes with the smuggler's phrase 'who can help you? Me!' (66), as both 'help' and 'trust' are generated from a positive attitude toward a satisfying result of their chancy illegal attempt, an

attitude rooted in a hope for a better future. From the perspective of the smuggler who charges large amounts of money, it is a natural move to employ an intimate and optimistic tone, while a stateless refugee needs more courage and faith in others to embrace the vocabulary of closeness. By responding to the suspicious closeness with the voluntary choice of the word ‘trust’, Mohammadi’s language indicates his subjectivity in making decisions and forming relationships. Examining the significance of mobility in narratives of the refugee experience, Eleni Coundouriotis claims that ‘[h]ope is kept alive even in the most desperate situations by holding on to an idea of a refugee’s autonomy through the construction of her as a figure who can walk out from her circumstances and toward a restored normalcy’ (2016, 79). Her statement highlights a strong interconnection between hope and subjectivity, which undergirds Mohammadi’s actions as well as his language. Consequently, the resonance between ‘help’ and ‘trust’ demonstrates Mohammadi’s strategic use of positive vocabulary, which forms a language of hope that contributes to the non-traumatic narrative.

CONCLUSION

Mohammadi’s language of hope shows the ability of the non-traumatic narrative to represent the transnational memory of refugees, asylum seekers, and detainees, as well as bring their agency and potential into light, conveying a sense of positivity that encourages action in not only people in exile but also its readers. Moreover, Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory, which is ‘marked by transcultural borrowing, exchange, and adaptation’ (2011, 524), may offer a new perspective through which to understand the potential of Mohammadi’s non-traumatic narrative of diasporic experience. From this perspective, one can argue that the non-traumatic narrative might provide a way for other collective memories of distinctive histories to reflect on their frameworks and practices, making the transmission of transnational memory in the form of non-traumatic narrative an action to pass on hope. What might lie in the non-traumatic narration of transnational memory of refugees is a possibility to promote coexistence and solidarity of collective memories, as well as to envisage an open space where political practices which question the status of refugees, citizenship, and sovereignty of nation-states will emerge.

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