



Shattered Identity of Immigrant Artist and Creation of Art in a Hybridized Space: The Case Study of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*

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Abstract

In this article, first the “paradox of assimilation and difference” and its consequences will be discussed and next the movie *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* by Ana Lily Amirpour who is an immigrant Iranian-American director will be analyzed. The aim is to show how her shattered identity as an immigrant is represented in her art. Her movie is an amalgamation of different signs from both cultures. These signs are not completely related to host culture (American) or local culture (Iranian). Although this impossible situation seems very painful at the first glance, it is beneficial for immigrant artist. In this hybridized space, she creates a kind of art which is very innovative and unique, because she is not forced to follow the cliché styles which those cultures are dictating her.

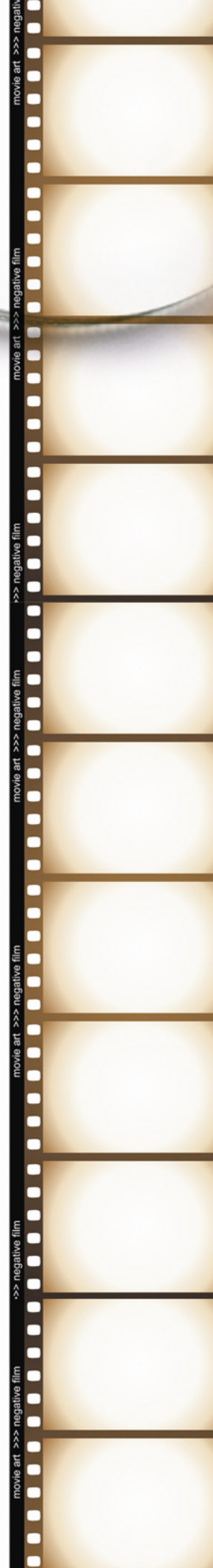
Keywords: immigration; identity; paradox of assimilation and difference; hybridized space.



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Shattered Identity of Immigrant Artist and Creation of Art in a Hybridized Space: The Case Study of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*

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Introduction

Nowadays immigration experience turns to one of the most controversial issues in the realm of cultural semiotic studies. This article first explores the “paradox of assimilation and difference” theory by Amir Ali Nojournian, then traces the consequences and the effects of this theory in the creation of immigrant artist which at first seems to put her in an impossible situation (*Cultural Semiotics* 120). In other words, this article by investigating the movie, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, by Ana Lily Amirpour who is an immigrant Iranian-American director, will scrutinize the process of art creation in hybridized atmosphere of host culture as well as of local culture. Although at first glance this impossible situation seems to be a heavy burden for the artist, she succeeds in creating a kind of art which is very innovative and unique because she is not forced to follow the cliché styles which each of those cultures dictates her.

In all sign systems, especially cultural sign system, there is a kind of tension or conflict between host culture and local culture for an immigrant. Most of cultural theorists believe that in this conflict the host culture will conquer upon local culture and eventually the immigrant artist will be forced to “assimilate” into the host culture. This article claims that the assimilation process is not the only working process which interferes with the creation of an immigrant artist. Immigrant artist is always under a double paradoxical command. The host asks the immigrant to assimilate with its culture yet simultaneously it orders him to keep a distance which results in “paradox of assimilation and difference”. For giving a better picture about immigrant artist and the hybridized atmosphere of creation, we will first need to focus on question of identity.

Identity and Cultural Sings

According to Nojournian, identity is always under construction and reconstruction, he defines it from semiotics perspective “as a signifier between and individual and his community” (*Cultural Semiotics* 122). On the one hand, in order to relate himself to his community an individual should construct an identity; on the other hand, each community should have a specific identity to accept individuals as its members.

The contemporary identity theories, credit identity with three specific characteristics: first they believe that debating about identity without considering the differences is pointless. That is to say, the identity which means “similar” or “the same” can only be definable as different with the others (Young 199). According to Nojournian, understanding the sign system is related to the identity and that like any other sign system is based on “differences” (*Cultural Semiotics* 122). He also believes that defining identity according to “similarities” is a natural interpretation while considering it according to “differences” is unnatural, conventional and related to sign system (Ibid). However, you should keep in mind that each “difference” is constructed out of the “similarities”. In cultural studies when we are talking about “The Other”, although he is similar to us he should be different. Julian Wolfreys said that “we recognize the similarities between us and The Others yet this happens outside of us” (173). Another crucial issue about identity is that it is a production of cultural sign system and it can be represented in a language system or a discourse and it does not have any natural or biological origin (*Cultural Semiotics* 123).

The second identity theory believes in “identity theme” rather than one single identity. Each individual by the help of his identity theme represents different aspects of his identity in different situations. In other words, individuals create numerous identities for themselves and the others and each aspect of this identity theme represents itself in different relationships or situations. Subject-

formation for each cultural sign is needed (e.g. family, race, gender, class) to make that sign recognizable in that cultural context.

The third identity theory is “the identity process”. According to Nojournian, identities are always in never-ending process of change and evolution. Identities also have a kind of signifier/signified relationship in each sign system; however, the signs are constantly shaped and reshaped. The relationship between different signs are also perpetually changing and this is the cause of flexible and stream like structure of each sign system. From cultural semiotic perspective due to the reasons which are mentioned above identity is diachronically and synchronically under the ever-lasting construction. (*Cultural Semiotics* 124).

Nojournian also claims that the cultural host context asks the immigrant to assimilate into its culture yet simultaneously orders him to keep a distance which results in the “paradox of assimilation and difference”. On the one hand the host culture dictates that “you should be like me” and on the other hand it asserts “Do not be like me and stay different” (*Cultural Semiotics* 124-125). Of course you should not forget that the host culture needs the obedience of the other culture in order to keep its superiority; nevertheless, exactly because of this double confusing command, the immigrant assimilation will never be completed and he will always remain *The Other* in the host culture. Nojournian considers the immigrant identity as an “imaginative” and “hyper-real” identity (Ibid 125). Radhakrishnan believes that the identity of immigrant is related to both cultures yet at the same time it is neither this nor that one exactly; in other words, immigrant identity is related to everywhere and nowhere” (322).

Gina Wisker in her book, *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Literature*, explains that immigrant authors not only try to show their different experiences as well as other experiences in both atmospheres/places but also try to cope with these differences and focus on similarities and

integrate them inside their systems (97). Therefore, the immigrant art creation is similar yet different at the same time. This double/ambivalent command from host culture puts the artist in an impossible situation (Nojournian, 2010: 127). An immigrant artist should render new definition for his art creation, this art should be originated in his local discourse and should be readable in the host culture. He will be in a special “mimicry” process, which turns him to the other modified person, the person who is almost like the host but not completely (Bhabha 86).

In this way the art creation of an immigrant artist and his shattered identity are closely interact with each other in the process of creation. Each artist creation is based on the identities which he considers for himself; and represents some signs which come from identity sign system of the artist. The artist creation is in accordance with his identity structure, which is a kind of sign structure, and by the help of this structure he shapes his understanding of his world, his relationships and interactions. Hence, he finds his place in this world and he represents and repeats it in his art. An immigrant artist has a spectral identity (he is neither this nor that completely) but by the help of “paradox of assimilation and difference” and also his shattered identity, he will find a way to benefit from different sign systems and create unique and innovative art. In other words, in a hybridized space, he creates a kind of art which is very innovative and unique because he can get rid of the cliché styles which those cultures are imposing upon him. His artistic creation is also incredible because it is the amalgamation of different signs which are not belonged to just one cultural sign system, this leads the reader or the audience to refer to different sign systems, so his reading becomes trans-textual reading.

Introducing Ana Lily Amirpour and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*

Ana Lily Amirpour was born in 1980 from Iranian Parents in England, and moved to Miami, Florida with her family when she was young. She attended San Francisco State University

as an art major for her undergraduate degree, and then graduated from UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egwLenvNG0E>). Although she has experienced a few short movies, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) is her first long movie (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YGmTdo3vuY). This movie was first shown in Sundance Festival and then later in Sixty Forth Berlin Festival which brought Amirpour lots of awards. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* happens in an imaginative city named Bad City. A lawless city which its location is not specified, but surrounded with industrial ugly oil companies. The time and place of this movie is not recognizable and although it has both Iranian and American signs you cannot certainly say whether it is Iran or America. This movie was filming in California, and structurally it is similar to Frank Miller's *Sin City*. The language of the movie is Persian, and the movie producers are mostly well-known American producers such as Elijah Wood, Daniel Nova and Joush Velez who are all famous for producing horror movies. Amirpour's movie is black and white and is actually a mixture of noir and western genres. This movie is about a vampire girl (by starring Shila Vand) who falls in love with a poor but handsome guy (Arash Marandy). The boy appearance resembles James Dean who was once a very famous actor of Hollywood. Bad City is very dark and has apocalyptic atmosphere with lots of chimneys and petroleum factories which makes it appropriate for the vampire to wonder around and haunt; however, this darkness is in contrast with other scenes such as night club parties or luxurious life style of rich people of the city (Jahed 2014). (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2E_QRP496gU)

On the one hand, *A Girl Walks home Alone at Night*, looks like Persian Films which were very popular before the Islamic Revolution (Persian Film also known as Film Farsi is the genre of movies produced normally in the cinema of Iran before the Iranian revolution of 1979. The major focus for Iranian films were thrillers, melodrama, music, and introducing unrealistic heroes. Many

people refer to it as the Iranian version of Bollywood); on the other hand, it is very similar to American Western movies of 1950s. In this movie Amirpour integrates the cultural signs of both countries (America as a host and Iran as an immigrant). This amalgamation is so tight that most of the time the signs substitute each other or take each other place. In an interview when they ask Amirpour about the setting of her movie she answered, “Mulholland Drive takes place in Los Angeles yet the one that exists only in David Leach’s mind” (Salem 2015). From the answer, it can be inferred that an immigrant artist is always under a double command which asks him to actively assimilate into the host culture yet keeps his distance from it. In the case of Amirpour’s movie, the “paradox of assimilation and difference” is traceable. In this movie all the characters have shattered and dual identities, they are neither completely Iranian nor American and they dangle between these two cultures.

Some critics called Amirpour movie the first Iranian Vampire Western movie (Aftab 2015). She uses some aspects of vampire genre like serial killing while she ignores the other essential factors like the need and urge of sucking blood which is an inevitable characteristics of vampires. Although the vampire is killing the bad men of the city, it seems like a ritual rather than longing for blood. Instead of dealing with specific aspects of vampires like perpetual life or blood thirst, Amirpour brings Film Farsi’s aspects like the love of a rich girl and a poor boy, a pimp, a prostitute, etc. The indifferent perspective of Amirpour toward her vampire also differentiates her movie, from popular movies of this genre like *Twilight Saga* which has sympathetic feelings toward vampires. Some critics even mentioned that her movie is very similar to Jim Jarmush’s *Only Lovers Left Alive*, since that movie is a modern narration of Adan and Eve story.

Analyzing Contradictory Cultural Signs in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*

Though the movie has lots of aspects which makes it an eminent one, the most amazing contrast which makes the “paradox of assimilation and difference” very tangible for the audiences is the character of vampire who does not have any name. Almost all vampire stories originated from Lord Dracula Stories but the appearance of this one is different since she camouflages herself with a long black veil which makes her similar to eastern women. Under that double command when Amirpour wants to create her major character, even though this character is a vampire she is not allowed to make her the same as western ones, so she uses eastern signs at least in her appearance in order to follow that command. When the vampire takes off her veil she completely looks like American teenagers: she wears jeans and a t-shirt and her hair is very short and boyish not like eastern women who have long thick hair. When for the first time we want to enter to the vampire’s mansion, from outside, her house is completely like an old historical Iranian building even the house number is written in Persian and the stairs lead to the dark basement; however, when we step to her chamber the signs which were all eastern before turn to western ones. All walls are covered in famous American celebrities’ pictures like Madonna and Michael Jackson. Then the girl plays a music which is half Iranian and half American.

In one scene when she prepares herself to go for haunting, she starts to makeup very heavily and specially her eyes makeup is completely eastern makeup. In the gloomy streets, she who hides herself with a long black veil encounters with a little boy who is running a skateboard (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kr1aAarOoBw>); she takes his skateboard (which is a western sign) and in her first encounterance with Arash, she puts her on that skateboard and pushes him up to her house; as if no eastern girl takes a boy to her home unless the western signs help and elevate her path. This scene is completely in contrast with another scene which Arash is working in a very

luxurious mansion as a gardener and when the girl asks him to do something, he wants her to leave the room since in his culture it is not right for a young girl and a boy to stay alone in one room and this is really what we see a lot in Farsi Films.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=flrpSlGfm5M>)

Figure 1: eastern style make up and veil vs. western short hair and boyish look



The first signs which attracts the audience's attention from the very beginning are the poster and opening title sequence of the movie since all of them are in English and while the audience prepares himself to watch an English movie, surprisingly the movie language is thoroughly Persian. The "paradox of assimilation and difference" is visible even from the way in which Amirpour amalgamates the language sign systems of both American and Iranian. She was smart enough to act under the double command and to create something which is neither completely American nor Iranian yet the perfect amalgamation of both at the same time. Playing with different language signs is not limited to just the opening sequence, because although the characters are speaking in Persian, their sentences are not correct grammatically and structurally, it is as if they are translated from English to Persian; this reminds Iranian audiences about the shattered identity of Amirpour as an immigrant artist. Although she has Iranian Parents, she is speaking Persian with English Structure; for example, in the scene that the prostitute asks for her money, or the note which Arash leaves for the girl. Actually the Persian language is so poor that it seems Amirpour takes it from google translation instantly. Although playing with different languages is a difficult

task, it emphasizes on the fragmented identity of Amirpour, she seems to be a complex of contradictions and she is neither completely Iranian nor American anymore.



Figure 2: English film posters and opening title sequence vs. Persian language of the movie

The main male character of this movie is Arash who is introduced to us in the first movie plan. He bears a resemblance to James Dean, a Hollywoodian actor. He is wearing a white t-shirt and jeans and he is standing near a ruin house. Therefore, all the signs are western at the beginning but suddenly he goes to the house and brings back a Persian cat. While holding a cat he started to walk and at the beginning all the streets are like American countryside streets, yet after a while the setting changes and he passes from a very dirty noisome river with the background of petroleum factories and slums. The Petroleum Factories and slums look like Abandan City before the

revolution. At the end of his walk, Arash who is completely like American young man while is holding a Persian cat reaches to his car, a 1950 Ford, but the car number is Persian.



Figure 3: James Dean dressing (Hollywoodian) style vs. carrying Persian (identity) cat

Another interesting thing which makes the Persian cat a Persian sign is at the end of movie when Arash and his father quarrel and the father breaks all the Iranian staff of the house; at this moment Arash who is tired of his Iranian identity asks his father to leave the house and wants him to take the cat with him since he does not want to have any Persian sign in his house anymore. Then After murdering Arash's father, the vampire girl takes the cat with her. At the end of the story when Arash and the vampire decide to leave Bad City, the girl puts the stolen money (western sign) in to an Iranian carpet bag and hugs the cat. This scene is related to Derrida's trace theory. Nojoumian explains trace theory as "the dependency that one sign has to its opposite pair, almost always there is a trace of one sign in the other sign. As if they have trace effect and no matter how different and in contrast the signs are you can find the trace of them in another" (*Us from the Other's Sight* 219). In Amirpour's movie the two American and Iranian cultures are integrated into each other and you cannot completely differentiate the signs since they have the trace of each other within themselves.



Figure 4: Persian cat is a sign of Persian identity and the cat is presented everywhere in the movie. Characters try to escape and deny their identities but it seems impossible. The cat is in the car when the vampire and her lover try to break free from the Bad City in the last scene.

Money and gold can be considered as American signs due to the capitalistic society of America. The vampire puts it in Iranian carpet bag and hugs the Persian cat and while she is insisting that she should change her cloths and wears her jeans and t-shirt, she also wears her long black veil and escapes from that city with Arash. The road that they take is like Iranian road, dangerous to drive and without any guardrail. They drive in American Ford car with Persian number. Therefore, the audience can constantly see the trace of one culture to another, and this playing with signs and using from the sign systems of both cultures continues up to the end of the movie.

One of the best scenes which represents the conflict between two cultures or identities is when for the first time Arash and the Vampire girl meet each other. In one side we have a vampire who wears a veil like eastern women yet she is running the skateboard, on the other side we have Arash who is coming back from a night club and he wears Dracula costumes and even has Dracula's teeth. Arash first words are "I am lost. Where is here?" and he later continues that "why we are here? Why both of us?" In this scene, although we have Arash who has totally western signs and the vampire who has eastern signs, their identities are not integrated but fragmented and

shattered. This question triggers in audiences' minds that who is the real vampire? The girl who sucks the blood of only bad men of the city? Arash who is a drug dealer and sucks the blood of young people? Or even the petroleum factories which take the oil or metaphorically the blood of this land? Actually playing and tracing of signs in Amirpour's movie which all comes from her shattered identity as an immigrant makes her movie unique for the audiences. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZP5ENnWh51I>)

The other minor character who is also an amalgamation of American and Iranian signs is the pimp of Bad City. He wears adidas brand shirt and has lots of necklaces which makes him very similar to colored American people, yet when he turns back we see a big loincloth which is a previous sign in Iranian flag at his back. His body is covered also with lots of tattoos; however, they are half American and half Iranian. His hair looks like hippies yet he has a mustache. His house is also full of American signs like the western furniture, fireplace, and a drum. He plays rock music but dances Iranian with it. His house is in complete contrast with Arash's house since in his house all the signs are Persian (Persian carpet, traditional Isfahan tablecloths, Iranian engraved frames, hubble-bubble...). The other aspects that grab audiences' attention is the contrast between Arash's father who is always sitting on the ground and the pimp who is always sitting on the sofa and constantly counting money. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3W8ugj7GleE>)

In Bad City even its prostitute has shattered and fragmented identity although at first glance she is very similar to the prostitutes of Film Farsi before the revolution. In one scene, Arash's father asks her to dance for him and the very sad nostalgic Iranian song of "My Eye" by Dariush is playing, but suddenly the woman starts to pull dance which is an American dance (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RS7NOMxMepU>). The other sign which is very interesting in the prostitute's house is the world map, which she always is staring and wishing to leave the Bad City and flee somewhere. At the bottom of the world map it is written in Persian "The Big

Map of the World”, and it seems to remind us that although the world is a vast place we as individuals are dealing with our shattered identities and there is no way out of it for us.

Another interesting scene which is in accordance with the “paradox of assimilation and difference” is a dance of a transsexual in the middle of the city. This scene starts from a wall that has lots of Persian and English written words. The transsexual is wearing a male cowboy dress but instead of a cowboy hat he wears a scarf and makeup. In this city even the sexual identities of its inhabitants are fragmented and shattered they are neither woman nor man.



Figure 5: western cowboy dressing vs. eastern scarf and heavy make up

The other issue which Nojournian poses in his book, *The Sign at the Threshold*, is the plurality of signifiers. He states that “signifiers play the role of signifieds. In other words, each sign is constantly replace by the other and reaching to the signified or the concept of that sign will always be postponed (38). In *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, persistently all signs are changing and whenever an audience decides to find a meaning for one sign it turns to another sign with another meaning. In this case, the audience remains wondering uncertainly about the meaning of the signs. This is very similar to what Derrida said that there is no anchor for maintaining and concentrating on the meaning of signs (xxxvi). Ahmadzadeh believes that the immigrant artist creates a kind of third identity which she names it diasporic identity (8). She also states that the collapse of fixed identity patterns creates some inter-cultural spaces (Ibid). In other words, the

immigrant artist creates a kind of place-culture stream which can produce different identity patterns or add new definitions to the old ones.

Conclusion

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night portrays the impossible situation of an immigrant artist, since she is always under a double command of the host culture (American). This double command asks Amirpour to assimilate with American culture yet warns her at the same time to keep her distance from the host culture. So she should create in this hybridized space and under the “paradox of assimilation and difference”. On the one hand, as an immigrant artist she is not allowed to create a movie which is completely according to Western-Vampire genre. On the other hand, she is not also allowed to produce something which is in complete accordance with her native Iranian culture since in that case it is not understandable and attractive for American audiences.

An immigrant artist is not authorized to create a kind of art which is completely like host culture because this place is reserved for the native artists of each host culture. Alex Rosta in an article “Is Refuge Art Possible?” speaks about his experience when he wants to conduct an exhibition in London, he said if an immigrant artist wants to use from governmental support or receive mortgage he has to render a kind of art which is culturally different (57). In this case, Amirpour should find a way so that her art will be appreciated even with the criteria of the host culture. For assimilation, she uses from western movie signs like Arash who is the resemblance of James Dean but she mingles them with Iranian Film Farsi aspects like the characters of pimp and prostitute. Although all movie stars are the amalgamation of both cultural signs, the most effective

factor of this movie is its Persian language. By mingling American and Iranian signs; on the one hand, the audiences with both backgrounds can communicate with the movie; on the other hand, they have to refer to different sign systems to understand and experience the aesthetic aspects of her art.

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