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“Nar” ve “Babam ve İncir Ağacı”nda Kültürel Kimlik ve Toplumsal Aşağılanma

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ÖZET

Bu çalışmada, Persis M. Karim'in “Nar” şiirinde ve Naomi Shihab Nye'in ise ‘Babam ve İncir Ağacı’ şiirinde babalarının, A.B.D.’ye göç ettikten sonra yeni bir çevreye uyum sağlama sürecinin neden olduğu ruhsal sıkıntıları gidermek amacıyla doğaya duyulan ihtiyacı nasıl gösterdikleri tartışılmaktadır. Söz konusu şairler ve babalarının, nar, incir ve incir ağaçlarına yüklediği anlamları, bu şiirlerde yansıtıldığı gibi, kendi kültürleri hakkındaki duygularını ve göç ettikleri ülkedeki nasıl toplumsal aşağılanmayla yüzyüze kaldıklarının anlaşılmasında önemli rol oynamaktadır. İran kökenli Karim ile Filistin kökenli Nye, söz konusu şiirlerde babalarının, doğanın bu öğelerine olan duygusal bağları üzerine yoğunlaşmışlardır. Şairlerin bu meyvelere bağlanışları bunların ardındaki güdülerin göçmen psikolojisi ve yaşama ve canlılara duyulan sevgi açısından değerlendirilmektedir. Şairler ve babalarının yeni çevreye uyum sürecinde karşılaştıkları yeni durumla bağlantılı kuramlarının bazı özelliklerini içsel tatmin duygusunu yaşadıkları gözlenmektedir. Bu meyve ve ağaçlarla benliklerini ve kendi öz kültüründen bir süre beslenmiş ve şekillenmiş olan kimliklerinin yabancı bir ülkede yeniden yapılandırma açılarından incelenecektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Persis M. Karim; Naomi Shihab Nye; kültürel kimlik; biyofilili hipotezi.

Cultural Identity and Social Stigma in “Pomegranates” and “My Father and the Fig Tree”

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to explore how the fathers in Persis M. Karim’s poem “Pomegranates” and Naomi Shihab Nye’s poem “My Father and the Fig Tree” reveal their need nature to overcome the problems and to heal psychological disturbances caused by their acculturation process after they immigrated to the USA. As reflected in these poems, the meanings of pomegranates, figs and fig trees that the poets and their fathers attribute to play important roles in understanding their feelings on their cultural identity and experiencing social stigma when the members of the host culture reject them. Karim, who is of Iranian heritage, and Nye, who is of Palestinian origin, focus on their fathers’ emotional attachment to these components of nature. This paper discusses how their attachment to the fruits and their motives behind it in relation to their immigrant status are assumed to be better explored through two perspectives: some theories on the psychology of immigrants and the assumptions of the biophilia hypothesis. It is observed that the poets and their fathers go through some of the aspects explained in the theories of the psychological acculturation process and innate satisfaction as asserted by the biophilia hypothesis. Some of the psychological results of the immigration are explored in aspects of the self and reconstruction of the identities of their heritage culture in the new cultural context via these fruits and trees.

Key Words: Persis M. Karim; Naomi Shihab Nye; cultural identity; biophilia hypothesis.

INTRODUCTION

The United States is the country that accepts the highest numbers of immigrants, legal or illegal, of various cultures, races, religions, languages and ethnicities. There have been scholars on immigrants and immigration by anthropologists, economists and sociologists. Beside these, the study of the psychology of immigration has also contributed to a better understanding these social issues. Much of the psychological research on the immigrant identity has been made under the topic of ‘acculturation’ in cross-cultural psychology. The various psychological stages that an immigrant might experience are explored by the scholars with the term “psychological acculturation.” Psychological acculturation is a term that refers to the internal processes of change that immigrants experience when they come into direct contact with members of the host culture (Padilla and Perez 35). In his article, Berry quotes Graves’ proposition that individuals who are

members of cultures in contact will experience various psychological changes, coining the term ‘psychological acculturation’ to refer to this individual experience (616). Padilla and Perez present their model of acculturation, which rests on four pillars: social cognition, cultural competence, social identity and social stigma. This study attempts to explore the meanings of some specific trees and fruits that the poets and their immigrant fathers find in relation to concepts of cultural identity and social stigma in two poems written by Persis M. Karim and Naomi Shihab Nye. The discussion will be conducted through two perspectives, one of which shows their relevance to psychological acculturation processes operating in the poets’ fathers as reflected in the poems “Pomegranates” and “My Father and the Fig Tree”. The other perspective is the biophilia hypothesis, a term first used by Eric Fromm and later introduced and popularized by Edward O. Wilson in his book entitled “Biophilia”. Wilson states that “biophilia is the innately emotional affiliation of human beings to other living organisms” (31). These two perspectives are assumed to offer a better understanding of the motives of the authors’ fathers’ intimate contact with these fruits and trees.

THE POEMS EXPLORED UNDER THE CONCEPT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ACCULTURATION

There have been several studies that explain acculturation related issues on immigration within the field of psychology and cross-cultural psychology. While it is observed that the researchers have studied topics like acculturative stress (Berry, 1998), cultural identity (Hall, 1991) and bicultural identity (Lafromboise, Gerton, Coleman, 1998), this study does not undertake a comprehensive review of the cross-cultural psychology literature. It is intended to engage in two selected discussions of only those concepts that are directly relevant to the goals of this paper as outlined above.

The notion of cultural identity, as Berry states, refers to a complex set of beliefs and attitudes that people have about themselves in relation to their cultural group membership; usually, these come to the fore when people are in contact with another culture, rather than when living entirely within a single culture (357). Acculturation can be defined as a mutual process that requires one’s cultural group to have contact with another, resulting in various changes in both cultures. Immigrants employ acculturation and identity strategies, according to Berry (629). The cognitive and behavioral changes associated with acculturation are observed in Padilla

and Perez: “individuals may seek different levels of attachment to and involvement in their host cultures or heritage cultures” (40). Social identifications, in this respect, “are guided by two core human motives: the need to be unique and the need to belong. Having a social identity (e.g., ethnic, religious, or national) satisfies individuals’ simultaneous needs for inclusion and differentiation (Padilla and Perez 43). Lewin asserted that individuals need a firm sense of group identification in order to maintain a sense of well-being. In other words, we need to simultaneously fill the need to belong to a social group while maintaining our distinctiveness from another group (43). These two motives of social identifications and the needs for involvement in host cultures and/or heritage cultures are clearly observed in the opening lines of Karim’s poem “Pomegranates”:

To root themselves in their new home
Mother and Baba planted native trees: madrone, oak
and the Manzanita at the end of the drive.
To remind them of their foreignness
they planted olive, almond, quince, pomegranate. (102)

Madrone, oak tree and the manzanita are trees generally found in western North America, whereas the pomegranate is not native to the Americas. Beatrice Trum Hunter gives a brief historical definition of pomegranates:

This seasonal fruit-literally “apple with many seeds”- has been eaten for as long as 5.000 to 6,000 years. It was among the first fruits to be cultivated, and its origins are thought to have been in the Middle East, in the area of present-day Syria and Iran. The fruit, being hardy, was transported by caravans and spread to Afghanistan, India, Egypt and China. The pomegranate was important in ancient Greek mythology and early literature. The Bible makes several references to the pomegranate. With its graceful shape, it was used as a motif on the skirts of high priests’ robes, as decoration for Solomon’s Temple, and carved in the capitals of stone pillars in Asian temples. The Crusaders brought the pomegranate back to medieval Europe, the conquistadors spread it to the New World....Because of the hundreds of seeds contained in a single fruit, the pomegranate has been a symbol of fertility. (Hunter 62)

Karim’s father, Alexander Karim is an Iranian who saw dramatic changes in Iran as a result of the discovery of oil and the politics of the Cold War and immigrated to the United States. Persis M. Karim says that “her parents’ intentions to stay and become Americans were deliberate... Around

the time of the U.S. hostage crisis and the eruption of the Iranian revolution in 1979, I began my own exploration into my father's heritage and, increasingly, felt a need to understand and explore this part of my heritage."¹ Read under the light of these statements about her childhood, her poem seems to reflect her attempts to explore her heritage. She reveals that pomegranates hold a special place and importance in the Iranian context. The symbolic meaning of pomegranates in the Iranian culture has changed a bit in the poet's inner world, and thus it now carries a personal symbolic meaning. The tree itself becomes a living connection to Iran and the poet's Iranian heritage in the United States. Besides the personal meaning attributed to the pomegranate, the parents' needs to belong to the dominant culture in order to avoid segregation from society is manifest in the planting of native trees. The poet uses the verb 'to root', which deals with plants and trees. The connotative meaning makes clear their need to become settled or established and stable in their new home, the United States. Planting native trees, then, is an indirect and silent expression of their motives of social identification. The other motive is their need to be unique, which is observed in their planting of trees native to the coastal areas of the eastern Mediterranean Basin and the Middle East: olive, almond, quince and pomegranate.

Naomi Shihab Nye's poem, "My Father and the Fig Tree", also has a good deal of the need to be unique, which is a concept discussed in the process of acculturation. As an immigrant, the internal process of change that her father, Aziz Shihab, experiences is embodied in the father's yearning for the perfect fig tree. Born in 1927 in Jerusalem, Palestine, Aziz Shihab and his family were dispossessed of their home in 1948. Immigrating to the United States in 1950, he worked as a journalist. He was author of two memoirs, "A Taste of Palestine" and "Does the Land Remember me, a Memoir of Palestine?" Even long after he settled in the United States, he could not help but desire a fig tree in his garden wherever he moved. It takes a very long time for him to achieve his dream. After many years of moving to and fro, he at last finds a fig tree, as he idealizes, in the back yard of the latest home. The fig tree for her father is a metaphor substituting for Palestine, his homeland, with which he is closely associated. These Mediterranean trees are cultural symbols in building up both Iranian and Palestinian collective memory. For the construction of such memory, Bardenstein states that:

¹ On Karim's childhood see "Writing from a Complex Ethnic Perspective" in <http://www.america.gov/st/peopleplace-english/2009/February/20090213151329mlenuhret0.9030573.html>

In the Palestinian/Israeli context, individual and collective acts of memory “aimed” at trees and forests take many forms: conjuring up recollections of trees of the lost homeland, planting trees in marking the “return” to the old/new homeland, making pilgrimages to the sites of trees, and many more. (149)

Like the pomegranate, the fig tree is native to the Mediterranean area, and it appears in some images of the Garden of Eden. The fig tree, in general, is a very common symbol in almost every culture. In the *Myth Encyclopedia-Fruit in Mythology*, a brief explanation is given about the symbolic meanings of the fig tree:

“After eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve covered their nakedness with leaves that are usually said to be from the fig tree, and Islamic tradition mentions two forbidden trees in Eden—a fig tree and an olive tree. In Greek and Roman mythology, figs are sometimes associated with Dionysus (Bacchus to the Romans), god of wine and drunkenness, and with Priapus, a satyr who symbolized sexual desire.

The fig tree has a sacred meaning for Buddhists. According to Buddhist legend, the founder of the religion, Siddhartha Gautama or the Buddha, achieved enlightenment one day in 528 B.C. while sitting under a bo tree, a kind of fig tree. The bo or bodhi tree remains a symbol of enlightenment.”²

THE CONCEPT OF THE BIOPHILIA HYPOTHESIS

Besides the common symbolic meanings of these trees, it is observed that they have other connotations for the fathers. The interpretation of the meanings can be done through the biophilia hypothesis and psychological acculturation theory. Karim uses the metaphor “the ruby jewels” for pomegranate seeds. The connotation reveals their red color and value. She compares the seeds and the ruby jewels in order to indicate the great emotional importance both for her and her father. The holy meaning is added to the fruit with these expressions: ‘an act of worship’ and “with hands stained/ by this baptism, he offers them to me/ like the remnants of an untold story/inherited in the womb” (102). She describes the eating of a pomegranate as “a slow and exacting endeavor, / an act of worship.” Generally speaking, one has a tendency to use religious terms in describing something to show its value. Karim’s father says “Baba would not tolerate

² See for details: <http://www.mythencyclopedia.com/Fi-Go/Fruit-in-Mythology.html>

such sacrilege” when her brother treats the fruit unpleasantly (103). The value given by the fathers to the trees is also observed in other lines. Although the fathers in both poems are aware of the fact that these trees “remind them of their foreignness”, they still plant and have them (102). Here we see nature’s importance for people within the meanings they attribute to it. The need to be unique as an immigrant is satisfied with natural elements. All of these expressions reflect the nostalgic longing for the homeland, which they have been away from for a long while and which can even be considered a lost world. They also reveal their cultural values and their innately emotional affiliation to the trees, which is what the biophilia hypothesis suggests. Regarding the hypothesis, Stephen R. Kellert says in the chapter entitled “The Biological Basis for Human Values of Nature” “the proposition suggests that human identity and personal fulfillment somehow depend on our relationship to nature. The human need for nature is linked not just to the material exploitation of the environment but also to the influence of the natural world on our emotional, cognitive, aesthetic, and even spiritual development” (42). He later adds “the biophilia notion powerfully asserts that much of the human search for a coherent and fulfilling existence is intimately dependent on of our relationship to nature” (43). Levi-Strauss and Shepard argues that “the symbolic experience of nature reflects the human use of nature as a means of facilitating communication and thought” (qtd. in Kellert 51). Another study by Craik (1970) demonstrates that the deepest and strongest attachments between people and natural environments may give birth to spiritual experiences in which people feel a sense of connection with a larger reality that gives meaning to their lives (Chapman, 52). In the fathers’ case, the trees and the fruits provide meaning related to their cultural identity while living in the host culture. Their intimate contact with these natural components lets them feel better and at peace with themselves despite their restlessness from being away from their homeland and being others in the States.

The fathers’ sentimental relationship with these trees seems a meager substitute for bringing their homelands to the new land, proving their own identities. Because they live in exile hundreds of miles away from the motherland, the easiest solution to fulfill their deep emotional need to feel their Iranian or Palestinian identities seems to be to plant or have these trees. The therapeutic effects of nature can also affect them. It may help immigrants’ psychological health. “Not all individuals experience through which they modify their lifestyle to adjust to the host culture. For others, it is a stressful process that may result in unhealthy behaviors. Berry (2002) argued that “acculturation stress is commonly associated with those who face

major heritage cultural loss” (Al-Omari and Pallikkathayil 131). Al-Omari goes on to explain the outcomes of acculturation and states that they may include “a positive attitude toward an individual’s self identity, an increased level of self-confidence and ease and comfort in social contacts with members of the heritage and host cultures. An individual with a successful psychological acculturation experience may or may not adopt the negative health behavior of the host culture. On the other hand, some individuals are unable to deal with the stressors of the acculturation process. These individuals find themselves isolated from members of their new culture or their culture of origin. Some of them may become depressed because of their failure to modify their lifestyle; others may seek unhealthy behaviors like smoking, drinking alcohol, or abusing drugs” (131). In Karim’s poem, one can clearly observe that the parents prefer to maintain their ethnic identity based on the fact, as stated by Al-Omari, that they seek healthy behavior to deal with acculturation stress. Planting native trees seems to help this process.

Related to the ideas of the biophilia hypothesis, it can be asserted that Karim is herself aware of the concept of the appreciation of nature in her observation of people around her. She sees that some people are not integrated with nature, while others, like her and her family, value aspects of nature. Karim describes two types of people in relation to the value of the fruit:

There are two kinds of people in the world:
those who pluck the seeds from the waxy yellow
membrane, tossing them into their mouths--
And those who hoard the ruby jewels,
jealousy guarding the pile until the last
crimson kernel is extracted. (103)

A similar situation is observed in Nye’s poem “My Father and the Fig Tree”. Read in the light of the biophilia hypothesis, her poem reveals that her father is in search of personal fulfillment with regards to his Palestinian identity via a fig tree in the middle of Texas. What he has experienced in his early childhood is encoded in his mind, and the figs he first ate in his homeland have now become an icon that he cannot forget. Her father longs for the memory of the fig’s taste and this fact manifests Nye’s concern with his displacement and her own sense of inadequacy as a Palestinian. It is obvious that she does not share her father’s memories. She fails to understand her Palestinian father's appreciation for the fruit, even if the taste of figs functions to bring back the past. The external environment

he was exposed to in his childhood has affected his internal environment. This once established world in him is only substituted by the figs in the United States, where he is known as an immigrant. The fig tree, a component of the natural landscape, plays an important role in his life. In a way, he subconsciously chooses this tree for his identity, for fulfilling his existence and eventually for his personal happiness in exile. He adapts to the natural setting in a way that reveals his own culture. The relationship between nature and an immigrant like him is depicted in the poem. Eating such a fig has more meaning in the States than in Palestine, because now it represents the longing for his own world that he has been away from.

Nye's poem recalls nostalgic and idealized recollections of the homeland afar. Palestine, in the eyes of the father, carries beauties and charms, and the fig tree stands as a part of his homeland. Until he moves into a house with fig trees, he firmly holds memories of the figs and fig trees of his homeland as sacred objects, and he tells folk tales that include them. As a heritage, he passes his culture to his daughter. This is his way of bringing his Palestine alive for his American children. Nye relates:

In the evening he sat by my beds
weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
They always involved a fig tree.
Even when it didn't fit, he'd stick it in. (891)

Like Nye, Persis M. Karim, toward the end of her poem, similarly talks about the cultural heritage that is now passing to her two-year-old son. She relates the pomegranate juice to the water used for baptizing. It is more than simply a fruit; it contains holy meanings for them. The juice is regarded as the water used for the ritual act of being admitted to membership in the Iranian culture and to her roots afar. It is a kind of introducing their culture to her son for the first time. She sees the pomegranate as "the remnants of an untold story inherited in the womb" of her body. She takes the heritage from her father and passes it to her son now. She says:

This fall, my two-year-old son,
undaunted, eats his first pomegranate.
His tiny, probing fingers, harvest the seeds
one by one. With hands stained
by this baptism, he offers them to me
like the remnants of an untold story
inherited in the womb. (891)

Having never experienced the original figs of Palestine, one day Naomi Shihab Nye eats a dried fig, but his father cries out that “That’s not what I’m talking about!” (891). The holy fruit, according to the father, is described as “the gift of Allah!” (891). For him, the figs of the homeland are “the largest, fattest, sweetest figs in the world” (891). They are so valuable that cannot be compared to any other fruit in the world. Bardenstein points out that Palestine hovers behind every incarnation of the fig-tree memory fragment (151). After many years of moving to different houses in the states, the father eventually reunites with his roots through a fig tree in the garden of the latest house he has moved into. This is indeed a reincarnation for him, because the fig tree, within which his Palestinian heritage is embodied, is standing in front of him now and is reminding him his own roots.

After a long while in exile, he rejoins his homeland through the figs and becomes so happy and satisfied. Thus, he sings a song, not in English but in Arabic, which the poet has never heard before. The father lives at the juncture between two cultures where social, cultural and environmental forces shape that he is. Although he becomes a citizen of the United States, he is still a Palestinian on the inside. Other fruits have not made him happy, but this fig tree, especially with its ripe fruits, is meant for him. Nir Yehudai writes about the fig trees invoked in this poem and adds:

“...she examines the web of longing which links her father to the fig tree that once stood in the yard of his house, and stands for all those things which he could not take with him when he was exiled from his homeland.” (197)

They carry very valuable meanings for him. She uses the terms “ripe tokens” (891). Ripe figs stand for his father’s eventual happiness in achieving satisfaction with his own Palestinian identity. In fact, a ripe fig biologically says farewell to its roots and comes on the threshold of being a new creature with its seeds. Like plucked ripe figs, the father is now a new creature. He is, after many years in exile, a whole Palestinian; he completes his identity. Another term that Nye uses is “assurance”. Every fruit one plucks from the tree is indeed an assurance of a new beginning in life as her father begins a new life at last. With the help of the fig tree, he brings his homeland to Texas.

The last time he moved, I got a phone call,
My father, in Arabic, chanting a song
I'd never heard. "What's that?"
He took me out back to the new yard.

There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,
a tree with the largest, fattest,
sweetest fig in the world.
"It's a fig tree song!" he said,
plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,
emblems, assurance
of a world that was always his own. (891)

The emotional motive behind Karim's parents' planting the trees beside those native to North America, and Nye's father's having the fig tree "in the middle of Dallas, Texas" seem also to prove what Lewin, Tajfel and Turner and Berry suggest in their theories. According to the social theory of Tajfel and Turner, simply being a member of a group provides individuals with a sense of belonging that contributes to a positive self-concept (40). The notion of cultural identity, as Berry states ("Cross Cultural Psychology" 357), refers to a complex set of beliefs and attitudes that people have about themselves in relation to their cultural group membership; usually these come to the fore when people are in contact with another culture, rather than when living entirely within a single culture. Karim, while talking about her experiences with eating pomegranates in her childhood, provides vivid details about the fruit. These details indicate a part of her cultural identity and the emotional importance dedicated to the fruit within her Iranian heritage. While she is in contact with the American culture, she seems to need to give details about how to eat a pomegranate. Nye, too, reflects this fact metaphorically by saying "plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,/emblems, assurance/of a world that was always his own" (891). Belonging to the concept of Palestine-ness is realized by the tree. On the other hand, Karim says "in his world, men sold them on the streets for a few toumans, shouting, "Anar-e Khoshmazeh!" / "delicious pomegranates!" ..." (102). In these lines Karim emphasizes her father's Iranian-ness with "in his world" and her American-ness with the English translation of Anar-e Khoshmazeh. She reflects her bicultural identities neither of which she cannot take away from her life. It can be asserted that is what has made her.

THE CONCEPT OF SOCIAL STIGMA

While there are points in the poems that reflect the notion of positive self-concept in interpreting the fathers' relationship with the trees, there are other points that can be examined through the concept of social stigma that deal with negative considerations of the fruits by others. In "Pomegranates",

we see traces of the stigma that the poet feels in relation to the fruit. The strong rationale for this statement is also based on Karim's expressions that she made last year on an interview. She talks about her childhood memories as an immigrant and says: "I was raised in northern California in a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon suburb with a complicated sense of my own identity...I felt ethnically marked." Amado M. Padilla quotes Goffman's (1963) statement in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* about other people's reactions and their effects on our behavior and identity. He reasoned that if other people's reactions influence our behavior and identity, then reasonable people try to control the reactions of others by manipulating what they reveal about themselves. He further stated that in their interactions with others, people often expose or hide certain beliefs, ideas or behaviors to manipulate the perceptions these people hold of them (44). Social stigma is a new terminology that Padilla and Perez use for a new vision of acculturation research. They explain the concept by stating that possession of a particular attribute might lead individuals to be stigmatized in one context but not in another. According to Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998), social stigma is a function of having an attribute that conveys a devalued social identity in a particular context. Attributes that may cause negative stigmatization include skin color, accented speech, gender, certain religious apparel, and so forth (45). In Karim's case, the attribute that causes the negative stigmatization is the pomegranate itself. It can be asserted that the fruit makes her ethnically marked as seen in the following lines:

The first time my mother packed one in my lunch
I shrank in embarrassment, quickly returning
the leathery bulb to the brown bag.
How to eat a pomegranate without being conspicuous? (102)

As seen in the above lines, a single fruit can cause stigmatization, possibly because it is not an American fruit but a Middle Eastern fruit. It may be a cliché, indicating something originally not American. Thus, the pomegranate, in the others' eyes, becomes a visible stigma and a symbol of a heritage culture and identity. The poet, when she was a child, could not know how to cope with the stigmatization and manipulate it; thus, she asks 'how to eat a pomegranate without being conspicuous.' However, we see later that they find a way to protect their self esteem and avoid feeling vulnerable in the American society. While she explains the Iranian way of eating the fruit, she says that they prefer to avoid not being humiliated and disapproved:

Customers at the corner of a cart,
kneaded, coaxed the last of the blood-red juice
from a hole, allowing it to touch only their lips.
Our American sensibility refused this technique. (102)

Their “American sensibility” in not eating the fruit in the Iranian way possibly emerges from their previously unpleasant experiences with the others they are in contact with. They avoid provoking judgmental attentions from others who are not of their origin because of the fear of which their Iranian way of eating the fruit would probably reveal their Iranian identity. The same avoidance can be observed in her “secret pride” when she discovers that pomegranates, rather than apples, are uttered in the Sephardic version of the fall. She prefers not to share her feelings of being proud of the fruit, which is splendidly treated by the other cultures. She says:

When I learned a Sephardic version of the fall--
that it was a pomegranate and not an apple
I felt a kind of secret pride.
It's too cold for apples in the Garden of Eden,
I told a friend, knowing with certainty
they wouldn't be wearing fig leaves. (103-104)

The symbolic, cultural and emotional meanings of the pomegranate Karim has learned from her father before entering her twenties are reinforced by an article in an American magazine. She reads the article when she goes to a chiropractor's office. The rediscovery of the benefits of pomegranates to health is expressed in it. It is a ‘rediscovery’ because the pomegranate is already held sacred by many of the world's major religions, and it generally has a special role as a fertility symbol, especially in the gardens of paradise, as stated in the Koran, Q 55 The Mercy-giving: 68th sura. This article gives advice to women wanting a baby to “eat estrogen-rich foods: shrimp, scallops, pomegranates.” Karim says “in my twenties, I finally understood the fecund symbol”. Abundant seeds ensure that couples who eat it will have many children. Apart from the information about it in her Iranian heritage, she gives medical explanations for the fruit and says “like the larvae of some magical butterfly/ the red ovules offered a cure for barren women”. Larvae are known to be rich in juvenile hormones, which are important for the production of eggs in female insects. This time, the medical importance of the fruit is stressed outside the emotional importance to the father expressed before. Eventually, it can be asserted that pomegranates provide a chance to live, both for immigrants and barren women.

CONCLUSION

In the course of examining the poems, I found that some parts of the theories of psychological acculturation, the biophilia hypothesis and the concept of social stigma help a great deal in exploring the motives of the emotional attachment to pomegranates and figs observed in the immigrant fathers and their daughters. It is observed that they all went through the acculturation process which involves some behavioral and emotional shift with experiences associated with ‘living in between’ cultures. Similarly, the fathers’ longing for their homeland culture within the dominant American culture is embodied in these natural elements which are seen exotic by the others in the US context. Their need to reconstruct the identities of their heritage culture within the host culture is also accomplished with these fruits. Their emotional attachment to these natural elements is best examined under the light of the biophilia hypothesis. In addition to this need, a dimension of social stigma in the intercultural contact is observed in the poems, and this is explored through the concept of the social stigma as a part of the discussion of the acculturation. Both Karim and Nye mirror their own experiences and their fathers’ feelings as immigrants. As Azade Seyhan (186) indicates that “modern immigrant writing is almost exclusively autobiographical in nature,” these poems seem to draw a universal picture of the psychological acculturation process that every immigrant goes through.

This paper attempts to expand readers’ understanding of what it means to be ethnically marked while living with the others in the USA through pomegranates and figs as reflected in these poems. It also helps in understanding the poets’ and their fathers’ subjective experiences with fruits and trees native to the Mediterranean region in the host culture that they are in contact with. It is also an attempt to understand what it means to have a heritage and to come from a place so deeply ingrained in the mind that pomegranates and figs savored in childhood retain their taste forever like one’s own identity which will never be lost. Thus, it can again be asserted people cannot be regarded separate from their environment to fulfill both their physical and emotional needs.

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