

## Article

# Seeking Refuge, Resisting beyond Borders: On Security, Recognition and Rights in Dina Nayeri's *Refuge* and *The Ungrateful Refugee*

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**Abstract:** This article examines the nuanced discourse of hospitality in Dina Nayeri's works *Refuge* (2017) and *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019), attending to the ethics of interdependency that transcend beyond borders of different natures. By making the limits of hospitality evident, both texts bring forth the ethical implications beyond borders that are present in opposing, yet equally significant paradigms: security and danger—depending on whose interests prevail; recognition and non-recognition—attending to the precarious conditions that potential guests are requested to endure or fulfil to be acknowledged and hosted; and rights and duties—considering borders as exclusive and independent rather than as contact zones. Following Jacques Derrida (2000) Jeffrey Clapp and Emily Ridge (2016), and Judith Butler (2009, 2015, 2016), among others, I will consider the complexities of locating home after forced displacement and the (dis)connection between belonging and identity. In both of Nayeri's works, the direct experience of displacement becomes key to understanding the need for refuge in the recreation of a home-like experience beyond home and borders. This is particularly evident in the negotiated spaces of vulnerability and resistance that refugees inhabit.

**Keywords:** security; recognition; rights; Dina Nayeri; *Refuge*; *The Ungrateful Refugee*



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## 1. Introduction

In her study of Jacques Derrida's philosophy of hospitality, Judith Still contends that hospitality, a concept Derrida presents as an instance of deconstruction, is inherently connected to "crossing boundaries" (Still 2010, p. 4). Still's argument could also be applied to the logic of the border apparatus as a means to proclaim where the freedom of one group impinges on the freedom of another, to delimit where a country's perimeter enters into conflict with the interests of its neighbour, or to limit the space that one calls home and that inevitably turns hostile and foreign to the other that the very border creates. Borders shape our physical and psychological means of understanding and apprehending the world, yet they do not represent actual boundaries; they legitimise division and inequality while reflecting broader social paradigms that are constantly changing. Accordingly, Ana M<sup>a</sup> Manzanas-Calvo and Jesús Benito-Sánchez claim that hospitality "rewrites the discourse of the border as a line that intermittently either communicates or separates" (Manzanas Calvo and Benito Sánchez 2017, p. 9). That is, hospitality is a continuous attempt to negotiate boundaries and trespass borders, and yet, borders are what make hospitality necessary in the first place, because, as Sara Ahmed discusses in *Strange Encounters* (2000), the processes of recognition at work in an encounter with others are informed by the "ways of reading the bodies of others we come to face" (Ahmed 2000, p. 21). It is precisely for this reason that she identifies the recognition of the other as a threat to the boundary and integrity of the individual and, therefore, as the reason why "the proximity of the other's touch is felt as a negation" (Ahmed 2004, p. 51).

The political and ethical dimensions of hospitality revolve around the figure of the other and how far society is willing to accept relationality and its implications, especially

when the presence of a guest threatens the idea of home. In this sense, Judith Butler's theoretical resignification of vulnerability speaks to the bonds that, while constitutive of the subject, are also problematic: the violence of the encounter with the other triggers a response in the subject that reveals the sense of dispossession intrinsic to relationality, by which "one's boundary is at once a limit and a site of adjacency, a mode of spatial and temporal nearness and even boundedness" (Butler 2015, p. 108). This article examines the discourse of hospitality in Dina Nayeri's works *Refuge* (2017) and *The Ungrateful Refugee* (2019), attending to the ethics of relationality, and how that translates beyond borders of different natures. *Refuge* follows the life of Niloo Hamidi, who voices the complexities of refugee life. The narrative moves back and forth between the time she fled Iran, her asylum seeking and refugee processes, and the present, where the protagonist is a well-established academic with three different passports that account for her ambiguous sense of belonging. As Niloo grows closer to a community of exiled Persians living in Amsterdam, she delves deep into her "refugee feeling" (Nayeri 2017b, p. 222) from a present and distant perspective. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, the author shares her memories of before and after fleeing Iran as she intertwines testimonies from other refugees<sup>1</sup> she crosses paths with. Split into five sections following the processes of escape, camp, asylum, assimilation, and cultural repatriation, this work of non-fiction interweaves storytelling with an essay form to convey the intricacies of displacement at different points in the journey of a refugee. Specifically, I am interested in probing both works' contribution to the ongoing debate over the ethics of hospitality and the realities of refugees by looking at three main aspects: the significance of danger in addressing the securitisation of borders, through the idea of refuge; the processes of recognition and the conditions that potential guests are forced to endure to be acknowledged and hosted; and how the fact that the ethics and the politics of hospitality are considered separately influences rights and duties. I will argue that Nayeri's texts present a powerful narration of vulnerability as a means to resist beyond the boundaries of the law and rediscover modes of resistance in the process of being welcome.

## 2. The Limits of Security

In her discussion of "The Affective Politics of Fear," Ahmed argues that "vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action" (Ahmed 2004, p. 69). In *Refuge*, Nayeri explores the ambiguity of vulnerability through the idea of refuge: a sheltered space that provides protection while being also symbolic of the dangers it tries to keep at bay. Niloo tries to find refuge from the uncertainty and exposure of her former years as a refugee and asylum seeker: her narrative and coping mechanisms reflect the problems behind the demarcation of boundaries and borders on a personal and societal level, especially after losing the safe space of home. Caroline Fischer, Christin Achermann, and Janine Dahinden affirm that "boundaries/boundary work and borders/bordering" are intrinsically connected and should be tackled as part of the same process. They further contend that "[b]oundaries produce similarities and differences that affect the enforcement, performance and materialisation of borders, which themselves contribute to the reproduction of boundaries" (Fischer et al. 2020, p. 477). For Niloo, the performance of borders materialises in the boundary that "the Perimeter" creates: a small space only for herself, which she transplants anywhere she goes, where she can evade the pressure of fitting in and belonging in place<sup>2</sup>. The Perimeter functions as a representative space where the protagonist keeps the evidence that attests to her progress and her current state of belonging as a rightful citizen; a total of "nine documents that entitle her to her life" (Nayeri 2017a, pp. 47–48). By secluding herself in the Perimeter, the protagonist simultaneously reproduces and exposes the intrinsic paradox of hos(t)ipitality<sup>3</sup> that Jacques Derrida's influential work investigates.

Nayeri has acknowledged the idea of refuge as a creative strategy to feel at home, "a mental place" where the "feeling of asylum" collides with the need to escape from danger but also to survive (Nayeri 2018a, 01:07–02:12). In this sense, the Perimeter materialises a

space of safety and resistance: the protagonist questions the uncertain sense of belonging that the nation-state provides. She metaphorically retreats herself from the actual space of the nation in this particular space that does not have a fixed and unique location. In this way, she also challenges the idea that hospitality is confined to a particular national border, and, more specifically, within the limits of a nation, highlighting the necessity of addressing the idea of mobility that is intrinsic to hospitality. Indeed, the fact that she needs to place the Perimeter inside any new space she visits (Nayeri 2017a, pp. 38–39) only demonstrates the hostility she experiences within the nation's space: the paradox of hos(ti)pitality. To a certain extent, the protagonist still identifies as a refugee despite her naturalisation into American society, which means that every time she resorts to the Perimeter, she aligns herself with a position of resistance and counteracting from within—included, yet excluded. From this place of contestation, the protagonist performs her vulnerable position and makes evident the limits of hospitality, the nation, and nationhood itself. The need for security that this space represents is a consequence of her direct experience of exposure and precarity, proving securitisation as a form of “exclusionary violence” (Clapp and Ridge 2016, p. 7).

Nayeri has admitted that Niloo's coping strategy is based on her own real-life experience as a refugee and the necessity of “being able to escape” (Nayeri 2017a). Indeed, like her protagonist in *Refuge*, she fled Isfahan as a child, undergoing similar processes of asylum and assimilation. In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, the author talks explicitly about that literal and metaphorical backpack in which she symbolically carries her “obsessive habits” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 93), which is also a reminder of the refugee's “diminished identity, the pieces of [their] life” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 139). Adding to their complex sense of belonging, refugees often find themselves targeted, dictated by the host's perception of them as being symbolically distanced from the “abstract potentiality of the individual” (Ahmed 2010, p. 156). It is in this sense that they are regarded as “melancholic” because, instead of becoming one more within the narrative that the host nation imposes, they embrace the “narrative of injury” that makes them stand out for their difference instead (Ahmed 2010, pp. 142–43). On the one hand, the refugee cannot identify with those pieces of their life that the host would target as melancholic, and, therefore, as a threat; on the other, and simultaneously, because the loss of cultural identity cannot be grieved in the space of the nation, it can only become a haunting memory. This haunting memory is what Nayeri performs through her obsessive habits, which also become apparent in Niloo.

In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, the idea of refuge is further explored through stories that portray the “narrative of injury” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 143). In the opening chapter of “Escape,” the reader learns how, in camp, stories transcend the confines of exile, functioning as conduits of collective memory and as a vital means of crafting, performing, and preserving the multifaceted refugee experience (Nayeri 2019b, pp. 6–7). Through stories, refugees can reclaim their identities; however, as they must perform their stories according to the expectations of the host, these also become a form of currency. In the host nation, narratives respond to the imperative of safeguarding the host community against external influences.

However, presenting the concept of refuge through the voices and real experiences of refugees on their journey serves a dual function: firstly, as a counternarrative to the reductive stereotype of refugees as passive victims in need of protection, an idea that Butler also contends with through her reconceptualisation of vulnerability (Butler 2016, pp. 25–26). Secondly, these stories demystify the idea that refugees seek refuge from harsh conditions, conditions that only the host nation can improve. Indeed, Nayeri suggests that the not-so-bountiful West tends to create those conditions instead (Nayeri 2019b, p. 280). Narrating the experience of displacement in all it encompasses becomes part of the idea(l) of refuge that the author challenges. Over time, Nayeri learned that “the powers of refuge . . . can't transform you, at least not in the exactly way you'd like” (Nayeri 2019b, pp. 184–85). The author places emphasis on the fact that Western nation-states prioritise their security over that of others; far from providing that refuge they promise, they focus on their protection against whoever puts at risk their interests and their philosophy of hospitableness. She makes a point of showing how being a threat to their home nations makes refugees in

host nations, for “being a threat” is mandatory in order to be welcome as a refugee; this is how the “logic of a democratic nation” is applied “to brutal dictatorships” to make its case believable and legitimate (Nayeri 2019b, pp. 248–49).

Securing status as a refugee is part of the dimension of refuge in both texts (and indeed of the concept of *refuge(e)* itself), yet precisely in being labelled as one refugee’s agency is undermined: they become exceptions to the norm of self-determination and the ability to autonomously make decisions regarding their own circumstances. Moreover, the fact that refugees expose the limits of national forms of belonging and integration, which the search for refuge materialises, further questions the securitisation of borders: refugees live across borders, but they also partake in the nations they live in, which so often fail to respond to the diversity existing outside their framed sovereignty. As Giorgio Agamben puts it, refugees represent a destabilising force to the nation-state construct (Agamben 2000, pp. 21–23).

It follows that the figure of the refugee exists beyond the ontology of a subject that belongs to a certain group and is recognisable for sharing certain values and beliefs that are embodied in social norms. Through this perspective, and following Butler’s theories, the idea of embodiment is crucial to understanding how identities are shaped by expectations and, in turn, how bodies become sites of resistance and subversion as they expose such expectations and the power structures that put them into place: the body is not simply a passive object or container for identity but it is actively involved in its construction and expression (Butler 2016, pp. 14–15). To better understand the problematics of embodiment, the next section will explore how institutionalised (lack of) recognition allocates *precarious life* as a cultural/identity marker rather than as a common condition shared by any individual.

### 3. The Implications of (Non-)Recognition

*Refuge* undoubtedly tells the story of Niloo, but her own experience as a refugee also gives voice to a multifarious assemblage of refugee stories: Nayeri delves deep into the complexities of contemporary refugee mobilities and their implications for host communities. Indeed, the novel was motivated by the death of the Iranian asylum seeker Kambiz Roustayi, who “had lived in Amsterdam for a decade, following their rules, filling out their papers, learning their culture, his head always down [...] and, in the end, he was driven to erase his own face, his skin” (Nayeri 2019a, p. 111). The impact of his death in 2011 remained with the author for years and she decided to explore it through the fictional character of Mam’mad, inspired by Roustayi’s life and tragic death. Indeed, one could posit that *Refuge* came into being in response to Roustayi’s death and the institutional reluctance to grant him due recognition and status. Through his figure, the author critically tackles the politics of hospitality that led to Roustayi’s situation and how institutions mediated the matter.

The novel’s perspective on the problematics of hospitality is aimed at narrating hospitality from the inside. Although fictionalised, the first-hand testimonies from refugees and those surrounding them convey the humane side of the conflict, not just the political one. The author’s fictionalisation of Roustayi’s experience as a refugee through the character of Mam’mad is an attempt to do justice to “the ethics of representing people,” and their intricate nature (Nayeri 2019a, p. 112); this is most noticeable in the aftermath of his death. There is a significant difference in how various sections of society narrate Mam’mad’s death and what led to it. Where a report from the BBC echoes the opinion of the authorities on the matter, assuring its audience that “the man had an argument with a group before setting himself alight” for no further reason, Iranian news addresses the root cause of the event, focusing on the perspective of the affected party: “[h]is reported motive for the self-immolation was the Dutch government’s denial of his pleas for asylum” (Nayeri 2017b, p. 221). These responses reveal how private individuals and public authorities alike can influence the prevailing narrative, shaping its trajectory based on their unique yet limited interpretation of events. However, there is a discrepancy in power between these influences.

The narrative constructed around Mam'ad's death portrays an undesirable guest who is consequently turned into the "exposure to loss, injury or damage" inflicted on the other, the kind of antagonism that Zeynep Gambetti situates within the politics of precarity and dispossession (Gambetti 2016, p. 36).

As "a presupposition for the life that matters" and that is worthy of being sustained, grievability accounts for the lives and losses that are important enough to be mourned; "[o]nly under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of life appear" (Butler 2009, p. 14). The host society and nation do not recognise Mam'ad's loss as grievable, revealing their failure to recognise their responsibility for his circumstances and, eventually, his death. As a result, he is not recorded as part of the official narrative or acknowledged by the host society accordingly. Not even the fact that he died within the premises of the host country ensures their responsibility, even that which is grounded in interdependency. On the contrary, "the Dutch immigration authorities will respond that all procedures were followed without error. They will offer up the word *tragic* and drop the matter" (Nayeri 2017b, p. 222). This response exhibits the limits of belonging and recognition, both as a subjective feeling and as the tangible acceptance that formalises one's place in society. Even if Mam'ad's closest circle feels his loss and he is grieved in the refugee community that he, with others, had gradually built, the loss is not acknowledged by the host country accordingly. Refugees may be granted a temporary stay but never in the sense of belonging, not even in the public space of the street, as Mam'ad's loss proves. Because pain has cultural, political, and social dimensions, not recognising it as such implies an infrastructural problem as well as a social one. The novel reflects on the different versions of loss within the social but also political structure of refugeehood, and how the possibilities of representation and recognition fall from the control of the represented in official contexts.

As Mam'ad's long-awaited and never-realised promise of hospitality proves, in the act of welcome, the host, who remains at home, oversees and manages the conditions that are imposed on potential guests. In her analysis of the novel, Sinéad Murphy (2017) affirms that *Refuge* "actively rails against unequal dynamics of 'gratitude politics'<sup>4</sup>, and the idea that the right to a personal and interior life is contingent or negotiable in any way." A clear example of these unequal dynamics is evident in Niloo: her experience of hospitality and feeling at home hinges upon her capacity to fulfil the conditions of the host (nation). Niloo is aware that proving her gratefulness and validity is a never-ending process. As a matter of fact, every time she leaves the United States, she fears being rejected by the nation that is supposedly home to her: "[t]hough we were American citizens now, I wallowed in the nightmare of being rejected at the border" (Nayeri 2017b, p. 186). Her fear is triggered by "the potential loss of the object" (Ahmed 2004, p. 69) that, in her case, is being recognised as a citizen. What makes Niloo feel this way comes from an outside—though unstated—demand: she manages every detail in her illusively well-organised universe to fulfil what is expected of her as a successful and deserving refugee who has managed to do well thanks to the gift of American hospitality. Indeed, going back to the example of the Perimeter, although the protagonist is identified through the documentation she keeps in that space—passports, marriage license, deed to her apartment (Nayeri 2017b, pp. 47–48)—those documents make evident her precarious life. They substantiate the shortcomings of this form of validation within society, primarily because it leaves out the ethical and psychological aspects that are concerned with recognition as a part of actually belonging in society.

At this point, I would like to turn once more to the event that marks both *Refuge* and *The Ungrateful Refugee*. In the latter work, we can read Kambiz's story from a more nuanced perspective. Although partly fictionalised (since it was written after his death and Nayeri never met him), Kambiz's narrative is constructed from the testimonies of those who met him: Nayeri portrays his aspirations and spirit through the techniques of storytelling and contextualising the complexities that lay behind the decision to escape and the process of seeking asylum. In doing so, the author reflects on the strategies that refugees must



follow to be recognised as such. An example of this can be found in the implications of employing Kambiz's name: it bridges the distance of fiction for the reader by recuperating from anonymity the voice and name of the real-life story. The author reclaims the identity of the refugee, using his actual name to counteract "the laws"<sup>5</sup> of hospitality and the way they dehumanise, simplify, and assimilate refugees. Another example of this dimension of the laws can be found in the name that Kaweh has to adopt in order to be recognised by the host, or at least, assimilate to a certain standard that the host can recognise. His story is presented in juxtaposition to Kambiz's, highlighting the profound disparities that may unfold over the trajectory of ostensibly similar journeys. Although Kaweh is an Iranian Kurd he is obliged to pass by Iraqi Kurd and abide by the corresponding naming conventions, in turn rejecting the cultural norm and background that articulate his representation. As a result, his name is cut in half and so is his identity, "[a]lone, it is unrooted, having been shorn of a birthplace, a poetic reminder of home" (Nayeri 2019b, p. 207).

Legal constraints contribute to the refugee's sense of dislocation and displacement. For this reason, the idea of *illegality* that persistently haunts the refugee proves key to the process of recognition. The author's note in the opening pages of the book situates the use of *illegal* in the context of her refugee experience, which she keeps "true to particular times and places" (Nayeri 2019b, p. ix). Nevertheless, illegality has to do with the documents that (in)validate a person's status accordingly, hence the use of undocumented to refer to those who migrate irregularly. The term undocumented draws attention to the conditions, in this case, documents (the laws, in Derrida's words) that qualify certain lives over others. Failure to abide by the rules of the host places the responsibility for the potentially inhospitable encounter on the guest. The predisposition to this hostility can be seen when Kambiz, upon arrival in Holland, immediately says "*I am a refugee*" (Nayeri 2019b, p. 71), meaning he acknowledges his position as a guest subject to the host, to be accepted or turned away. This embodiment of the promise of hospitality actually reveals what is at stake for him: his recognition as a refugee relies on articulating his need for protection rather than asserting his identity as Kambiz, which threatens the integrity of the host, that is, the host nation. Accordingly, even when invited into a host space, he must identify himself to some extent to start any kind of exchange with the host. The welcome of the guest is conditional in this case, and the guest's vulnerability must be "given" as a condition for participating. However, he also presents himself as a hostile outsider to the host nation; he is construed as an other who is also exposed by way of his ethnic vulnerability and his racial difference based on the Westernised gaze of the host. Kambiz is encouraged to claim apostasy and lie about being Muslim when this could "endanger his mother and sisters," (Nayeri 2019b, p. 218), a risk that does not seem so obvious to Western observers, for example. In addition, Kambiz's abilities to provide for the host are diminished to his capacity as a refugee, and his racialised body is part of that equation, as Nayeri puts it: "[i]f whiteness is to be linked to education, culture, the creation of great cities, the brightest people of colour cannot have their attention on home" (Nayeri 2019b, p. 356). In the end, Kambiz's dreams that "[o]ne day, maybe he'd be an electrical engineer" (Nayeri 2019b, p. 66) linger at the border, unfulfilled and yearning for someone who can bring them into reality.

The body of the refugee signifies the precarity of the boundaries that borders and laws create. And, at the same time, they are also the embodiment of the contestation of said boundaries too. Yet, part of this dynamic is circumscribed by the "problematic of agency" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, p. 14). According to Butler, in the "idea of bodily exposure" there is potential for recognition, which she expresses in the form of "the occasion of subjugation or acknowledgement" (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, p. 13). In this respect, Nayeri describes the constant questioning that crossing borders involves as individuals are forced to prove their legitimacy to an audience who "is listening for contradiction, any contradiction, and life is full of those. A moving detail can get you rejected." (Nayeri 2019b, pp. 255–56). In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, the fragility of "success" in the process of recognition is most clearly present in the contrast between Kambiz's and Kaweh's stories and how thriving in the asylum process is entirely arbitrary. Their stories are first shared in the first

part of the book, “Escape.” The overlapping and fragmentation of the two stories as the chapters develop and other narratives get in the way is a testament to how their identities are reconstructed through escape. Nayeri’s argument is clear in this respect: even if asylum is granted, the refugee is required to distinguish themselves from an opportunist or an economic migrant (Nayeri 2019b, p. 8). The devastating course of escape towards asylum takes a toll on refugees who are compelled to rebuild themselves for the benefit of the host (and in their image) to earn the gift of hospitality. In this way, as Nayeri explains through her own experience,

[a]s recipients of magnanimity, they can be pitied. I was a palatable immigrant because I programmed myself with chants: *I am rescued cargo. I will prove, repay, transform.* But if you are born in the Third World and you dare to make a move before you are shattered, your dreams are suspicious. You are a carpetbagger, an opportunist, a thief. You are reaching above your station (Nayeri 2019b, p. 9).

The main difference has to do with choice and, therefore, with agency. It is at the expense of the vulnerability of the guest that the host reasserts their position as “the master of the house”, to use Derrida’s own terms (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 15). As a refugee, the guest assumes a precarious position (less able, in need, weak) that is essential to grant them protection and must be recognised by the host. It is a limbo state in which they do not belong in either their home country or that of the host, since they are held “[w]aiting for Godot” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 228). Nayeri makes a strong case about how the uncertainty that waiting in camp, for status, for meaning, and in order to move forwards, takes a toll on refugees, eventually robbing them of their lives. On the opposite side of the spectrum lies the economic migrant, who is regarded as taking advantage of the host and whose needs are not recognised because they presumably have a choice in leaving their countries of origin. However, the decision on who the guest becomes is never within their control: the host has the power to shape and present the guest’s identity according to the standards of hospitality they must fulfil to be considered guests and, therefore, refugees. In that process, hospitality fails because it is premised upon reciprocity and opposition. Thus, the lack of recognition of the guest’s circumstances and their otherness determines the hostility of the encounter, proving that for “some, help must always come with a slap on the wrist” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 149).

In line with the principles of reciprocal hospitality, the author examines assimilation in the fourth section of *The Ungrateful Refugee*. She writes: “assimilation isn’t policy to be advocated on road signs and measured by statisticians” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 339). In other words, assimilation cannot qualify or quantify the hospitable potential of the guest because, in doing so, it calls upon the recognition of refugees according to pre-established forms of validation that ignore and simultaneously demarcate cultural frameworks of difference. Nayeri explains how, throughout time, “the Western palate” has determined the worthiness of the customs it might find acceptable and, more importantly, how everything outside such category is lost as a result (Nayeri 2019b, p. 342). Extending hospitality through assimilation overlooks the recognition of difference and establishes a threshold, a boundary that, according to Clapp and Ridge, breaks with the relative openness that hospitality must keep in order to work (Clapp and Ridge 2016, p. 9). Because conditional hospitality is based on reciprocity upon recognition, the moment the refugee gains status as an other and different from the host they become unrecognisable. In this sense, Ahmed explains that “strange bodies” become so in the very encounter that establishes a border between the familiar and the stranger (Ahmed 2000, p. 54). And, indeed, Nayeri further describes assimilation as the ability to perform as part of society since “[h]ow society sees you makes your personality” (Nayeri 2019b, pp. 339–40). The author thus problematises the permeability of identity in terms of social recognition: when the refugee subject is assimilated as an other, they commit to performing to certain standards, thus losing themselves (their culture, their history, their language) in the process. Following Derrida, the underlying issue of assimilation involves conceiving hospitality as a right, especially one that has to be earned. Thus, in the following section I will turn to the ethics and politics of hospitality,

attending to whose rights and whose duties are protected in this process.<sup>4</sup> Whose Rights? Whose Duties?

Derrida observes that, when it is conceived as a right, a law or a duty instead of an unconditional gift to give to others, hospitality is no longer hospitable in its most ethical form (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, p. 55). This is so because the host's desires and actions (be that those of a nation or individual) do not come before their duties to others: their capacity to act is submitted to, and, therefore, passively affected by, their interconnection with others. Hospitality does not escape this reality either, and to conceive of it as a gift is to fail its utmost basic principle, one that occurs between agency and passivity.

Therefore, the expectations that the promise of hospitality places upon refugees to be recognised as such prove the failure of hospitality. Specifically, Seyla Benhabib argues, hospitality "occupies that space between human rights and civil rights, between the right of humanity in our person and the rights that accrue to us insofar as we are members of specific republics" (Benhabib 2004, p. 27). Thus, hospitality can be considered as existing in a space between law and morality. This means that the kind of hospitality that prioritises the rights and necessities of the human being is situated between two perspectives of the stranger: one as a potential citizen and the other as a fellow human being, and still, the former is the only one that the politics of hospitality (as it is currently conceived) aim at regulating. What happens is that, at the level of sovereignty, the generosity of hospitality comes in the form of a right, one to be earned: only performing certain duties towards the state will translate it into a right or privilege emanating from the power of the nation-state, and only then will a subject be deserving of its protection.

There is an underlying expectation implicit in hospitality that points directly to the duties of the guest to escape a presumable danger, to have a specific dramatic journey, to perform their stories a certain way, to transform a certain way, that does not allow room for any inconsistency, be it from fact or fiction. Nevertheless, the simplest form of recognition, that of the duty that derives from common ground responsibility to others, is often neglected, coming last on the list of priorities to consider. Nayeri proves such a fact in both *Refuge* and *The Ungrateful Refugee*, particularly in light of her article "The Ungrateful Refugee,". Released during the publication of both books, this article identifies the relationship between hospitality and generosity in connection with stranger fetishism (Ahmed 2000, p. 3), problematising the formulation (rights and duties) of hospitality in the first place. Nayeri's articulation of "the ungrateful refugee" presents the double entendre that drives the perception of the outsider, one which demands gratitude for the gift of the hospitality they receive. Such an expectation implies that their welcome is granted on the basis that they do not prove too needy or more "capable than the native" because "[o]nce he escapes control, he confirms his identity as the devil" (Nayeri 2018b, pp. 149–50).

In *Refuge*, Niloo's expectations, and, therefore, her duties, align with the standards of the host nation; prone to list-making and colour-coding, she meticulously organises every aspect of her life to become a valuable member of society and worthy of her right to hospitality. The protagonist's fixation with making the best of her "gift" makes it clear that she still feels like a guest in a country where she has been living as a rightful citizen for years. Niloo remains alert and aware: "she can't waste time. She can't even waste used lime juice" (Nayeri 2017b, p. 73). And such a state of uncertainty "returns every time she wastes an hour, a dollar, an opportunity. It returns when life offers a break from the striving" in a way that makes her feel "she can never be too vigilant" (Nayeri 2017b, p. 37). She cannot take for granted her role within the host nation, for her duties or rights are contingent upon the conditions of hospitality. Refugee lives are accompanied by a pervasive sense of loss and vulnerability that is not properly validated by society. Thus, through the voice of Niloo, who has earned her spot but still feels the pressures of her former (yet ever-present) refugee condition, the novel reevaluates the perspective on refugeehood in terms of the responsibility of nation-states over the actual implications of whose rights and whose duties prevail when extending hospitality.



As the protagonist explores her connection with a group of Iranian exiles, she becomes more acquainted with Iranian culture and the state of affairs in her homeland. This group of Iranians that the novel follows closely, who have been waiting for asylum and status for years, are representative of the limits of hospitality as a right, a law, or a duty. Because asylum will gradually evolve into a citizenship concern within the jurisdiction of the nation-state, the right to hospitality will rely on its sovereignty, overlooking international law and, therefore, human rights. By becoming involved with the refugees she encounters, Niloo engages in a “form of dispossession constituted as a form of responsiveness that gives rise to action and resistance, to appearing together with others” (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, p. xi). Through her actions, Niloo takes responsibility and symbolically welcomes the Iranian nation onto American and European soil, which she occupies: firstly, as an American, an identity that prevails even when she moves to Europe, and also afterwards, by becoming more involved with Iran’s state of affairs while living in Amsterdam—as she also holds a French, and, therefore, European passport. Additionally, the presence of these national conflicts on a global scale, from the perspective of those who have been displaced as a result, points to the global actors involved in these crises. In this regard, Nayeri portrays a cosmopolitan view of global issues, reconciling relationality beyond borders through hospitality. Through fictionalised events that nonetheless remain true to reality, *Refuge* opens a hospitable space across the United States, Iran, and the Netherlands (among others) through the voice of the protagonist and her encounters with others; an example of the dialogical feature of the border that is mobilised through hospitality and that urges us to consider the rights and duties that concern an interdependency with others beyond notions of proximity and distance (Butler 2015, p. 103). Even if Niloo is in a different but also vital moment of her life, she still feels like the refugee she used to be at different moments in her life.

In *The Ungrateful Refugee*, Nayeri illustrates the profound and harmful effects of statelessness on individuals who are stripped of their fundamental rights and left in a vulnerable position in which “everyone has power over you” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 325). Asylum policy determines the right to a space of representation, much like how birthright determines one’s place in society and access to privileges. After all, the refugee, the author claims, is “the most abject creature of all” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 124), and the state of waiting they find themselves in becomes one more sign of it. Following Roland Barthes, Nayeri concurs that making someone wait is “the constant prerogative of all power” (qtd. in Nayeri 2019b, p. 183). Waiting passively for the host to decide turns refugees into hostages; their rights are violated from the very beginning, as they have to wait for others to act on their behalf. Reading Derrida’s interpretation of “Before the Law,” Butler explains that the anticipation of the law creates its force and promise and, with it, its unattainability (Butler and Athanasiou 2013, p. 129). Thus, the presumed right of the host to secure sovereignty demonstrates their failure to attend to their duties towards the guest and, by extension, the failure of hospitality. Moreover, as long as the promise of hospitality lingers on the horizon, so does the “ongoing expectation,” as Nayeri puts it, that refugees must abandon their identities and show gratefulness for a better chance in life (Nayeri 2018b, p. 142).

Part of the narrative that contributes to this ongoing expectation can be explained through how refugees’ (hi)stories become instrumentalised to fulfil some form of “utilitarian happiness<sup>6</sup>” (Ahmed). Nayeri points out the change to the “right of asylum” in recent times and how “this simple, foundational belief is in question . . . [w]hen they do internalise the obligation to make room, [because] they do so grudgingly, or with arguments about the supplication and usefulness of immigrants” (Nayeri 2019b, p. 276). In this process, the desires of the host act upon the guest, shaping their (hi)stories and how they are performed for the gatekeepers. Having no control or right over their stories makes refugees’ histories vulnerable to erasure and manipulation, ultimately denying them agency and self-determination. The stories that are accepted as valid perpetuate stereotypes that determine society’s perception of refugees and the conditions by which they are considered deserving of protection. Papers, accents, translators, beliefs, success, religion, and sexual orientation

are among the many variables that play into questioning refugees' rights and the host nation's duties. Nayeri gives a very detailed account of the process of interviews and the many bureaucratic barriers that refugees encounter through her relationship with Ahmed Pouri "an activist, a translator of cultures" who helps refugees (re)present themselves before authorities (Nayeri 2019b, p. 221).

In the fourth part of the book, the author examines how shame and dignity are intertwined with agency; these three aspects are intrinsic to the discourse of hospitality. As Clapp and Ridge explain, "shame disturbs one's sense of belonging, of being at home, of being secure" (Clapp and Ridge 2016, p. 131); this is because shame inevitably connects the self to the other. This bond speaks to the responsibility and duty towards the other that cannot be denied or foreclosed. It is in this sense that Ahmed contends that "[i]n showing my shame in my failure to live up to a social ideal, I come closer to that which I have been exposed as failing" (Ahmed 2004, p. 113). Nayeri herself confirms how her own "inferiority complex" and shame has evolved over time into being proud of the "Iranian excellence" she is representative of (Nayeri 2019b, p. 331). All in all, the author points out the failure of assimilation and the American social ideal as she embraces her Iranian-ness, "that which [she] has been exposed as failing" (Ahmed 2004, p. 113). Interestingly enough, this change in perspective also bridges the gap between fiction and fact, as much as there is between Niloo's voice and the author's: claiming her agency back through her Iranian-ness, Nayeri, as much as Niloo, releases herself from the burden of shame, and more importantly, she proves the failure of the "ideal" or the promise of hospitality that the host nation offers.

In conclusion, both texts challenge the idea of hospitality as a boundary that is reproduced by borders in terms of (lack of) security, (non-)recognition, and rights and duties. Nayeri's works also show how being welcome into society through the rights of hospitality does not secure belonging. Even if refugees may abide by the rules of hospitality, they are still considered guests, and yet their presence challenges the threshold that separates them from the host: they symbolise another culture and another place, which puts into question the sovereignty of the nation-state and its home culture. In both works and through different voices, Nayeri explores the intricacies of hospitality as she questions its limits by emphasising both the persistence of the other within the nation and the refugee other as the foundational element of hospitality. Thus, the idea of relationality through hospitality that the author develops contributes to the recognition of refugees for their own diversity and beyond mere assimilation, as border crossers who give name to the practice of hospitality beyond borders. All in all, the encounters that take place across borders of different natures depict vulnerable situations that reflect the ethical implications of social and personal relations and the negotiated spaces of vulnerability and resistance that refugees inhabit.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this article, the term 'refugees' encompasses those who have and have not (yet) claimed or obtained refugee status (according to the Geneva Convention). This way, the term acknowledges every person who is fleeing or trying to relocate in pursuit of a better life.
- <sup>2</sup> In her reading of Nayeri's *Refuge* and "The Ungrateful Refugee," Shima Shahbazi studies "the intersections of homeland, identity and politics, using life writing as an epistemology which sheds light on the questions of belonging" (Shahbazi 2023, p. 1).
- <sup>3</sup> In "Hostipitality," Derrida addresses the paradox of hospitality, departing from the twofold nature of the term: 'hospitality' materialises the contradiction and the "trouble and troubling origin" that it carries within, which is also represented from the outside by the "hostility" brought about by "the undesirable guest" (Derrida 2000, p. 3).

- 4 In “Worthy: Neoliberalism and Narratives of (Im)migration,” Ahoo Tabatabai argues that the migrant narratives of gratitude function as spaces in which “native-born individuals can construct themselves into narratives of salvation” (Tabatabai 2021, p. 21).
- 5 Derrida further elaborates on the twofold nature of hospitality: on the one hand, through “the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely the conditions, the norm, the rights, and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses . . . that are always conditioned and conditional”; on the other hand, “the law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000, pp. 75–77).
- 6 I use the concept of “utilitarian happiness”, drawing on Sara Ahmed’s discussion of utilitarianism and its (un)ethical pretensions, to pursue what might be best for a presumed majority and its universalised values, morality, ideals, etc. (Ahmed 2010, p. 123).

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