

A NARRATIVE STUDY OF EXILE: WRITERS' REFLECTIONS

by Mario L. Starc, 2009

This qualitative study explores the subjective experience of refugees through an examination of published memoirs for the purpose of better understanding how the refugee experience is integrated into one's life over time and how this shapes one's identity, sense of self, and view of the world. The literature is primarily focused on the early stages of exile, with little exploration of the later stages of the refugee experience. Much of the extant literature regarding early stage refugees suggests limited potential for adjustment, although there are exceptions to this perspective, which found potential for recovery.

Informed by a Grounded Theory approach, a narrative analysis was applied to the memoirs of five notable refugee authors: Salman Rushdie, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Andrew Lam, Vladimir Nabokov, and Isabel Allende. Interpretation of the meanings implied within each memoir led to the development of explanatory narratives regarding each source narrative (the memoir). Out of this process both unique and common thematic categories of experience emerged.

The symbolic meaning of "home" or sense of home, encompassed each writer's relation to memory, to family, to language (of origin and adopted). While longing for the lost home was a common experience, the development of identity within a new context appears to have been accomplished precisely because the meaning of home was not perceived in literal terms.

Though the experience of shame and guilt aroused by a sense of having abandoned the "home" was common, a significant experience of long-term exile was the development of a broad perspective on life explicitly beyond the boundaries of country and national origin. There was a notable absence of nationalism or the need for political recovery and a strong identification with more universal values. As writers, each found language itself to be an arena of expansion. The importance of the passage of time in the process of adjustment was noted.

The findings mirrored the perspective of those writers who suggest that recovery is possible for the refugee and that "pathology" as a lens may not be appropriate for understanding the experience of exile. This study suggests that for the long-term refugee, recovery as well as creativity and emotional growth are realistic outcomes.

This exploratory study was limited by its size and the narrowness of the social class involved. There is need for future research to expand the scope and avoid the limitation of a pathology-based perspective.