

Learning about Ireland through a Syrian Woman's Life Story
An autoethnographic research of education resources for Syrian refugees in Ireland

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Dedication

To Dr Sarah Sartori

You are an inspiration

**Thank you for being the adult educator that I needed to find my way to higher
education in Ireland**

'A seeker of silences am I, and what treasure have I found in silences that I may dispense with confidence'?

If this is my day of harvest, in what fields have I sowed the seed, and in what unremembered seasons?

If this indeed be the hour in which I lift up my lantern, it is not my flame that shall burn therein.

Empty and dark shall I raise my lantern, And the guardian of the night shall fill it with oil and he shall light it also.

(Gibran, 1923, p. 11)

Acknowledgements

As I write these lines, memories flood back of the first time I met Declan Markey during a tour for refugees and asylum seekers in Ireland. A year later, Declan introduced me to Dr Sarah Sartori, who changed my life by taking my hand when I was lost in my new home. She invited me to join a team of peer researchers focused on identifying barriers to higher education for refugees in Ireland. During this time, I presented Angela's Ashes from the perspective of a Syrian refugee. Since then, I have been passionate about increasing awareness about refugees and promoting education for integration. I would like to express my gratitude to the College Connect¹ team who connected me to the University of Sanctuary Scholarships and extend special thanks to Claudine and Rita Saker for their support. Being at Maynooth University is a dream come true, but joining the Department of Adult and Community Education was a huge shift in my life as a human being and as a woman trying to rebuild myself. I am forever grateful to Dr Rose Gallagher, Dr Angela McGinn and Michael Murray for the support they gave me as an adult learner in Maynooth.

My supervisor Dr Fergal, I am speechless; there are no words to describe how grateful I am to you for your patience in containing my fear, for encouraging me and for following me in every single step to overcome my problems and for making my voice clear in this thesis.

I want to thank my son, Nour, thank you for being the man I always found beside me since you were ten years old; thank you for encouraging me when I was fragile, and thank you for making me laugh when tears were the only language I spoke for years.

In my family, I am a lucky woman among five men, Nour, my twins Jade and Jude, my brothers Iyad and Ziyad. I love you all.

To my late mother, I miss you, and I hope you are proud of me.

To all the Syrians... there are no words to describe how sad I am, and how your success in the your new world inspired me to survive.

Abstract

In 2011 the humanitarian crisis in Syria caused the displacement of millions of Syrian people who relocated to Europe seeking international protection and became refugees, The Irish government agreed to accept up to 4000 refugees in 2016. These refugees were supposed to learn how to belong to their new home culture and integrate with the Irish community that speaks a different language by engaging in educational courses and events planned by adult tutors and educators.

My name is Kinda, and I am a Syrian woman who came to Ireland through a reunification programme. Since my arrival, I have been learning English, adapting to a new culture, attending meetings, and trying to understand the system. However, I feel like I have lost a part of my identity as I have been labelled as a refugee and told what I need to learn to integrate into my new home. It's been a struggle to reconcile who I was with who the new world expects me to be. There was a distance between me and the educators in Ireland, the space created a gap between me and the world I used to know, and I discovered that my beliefs, ideas and skills are not helping me anymore. My disconnection with the educators I met was not because of the language barrier or the new cultural barrier, it was because Irish educators did not see me as an experienced individual, they saw me as an object in the package they had just received. All they have to do is, read the label, open it gently, follow the criteria, tick the boxes, and mission completed. At least, this is how I experienced this process.

In this study, I am searching and analysing my personal experience as an adult learner refugee and as a facilitator working with Syrian adult refugee learners in Ireland. I will explore Mezirow's perspective on transformative learning theory and Illeris's contribution to the concept of identity in relation to this theory. I am critically and subjectively analysing how I was labelled as a refugee, overwhelmed with the knowledge I needed to learn while struggling to understand the stigma and shame of my new identity as a refugee. The changes happening in society and the effort to integrate into the Irish culture taught by the educators left me paralysed with cultural shock, and it was different from the Irish culture that I was struggling to learn about. I started my own learning process by observing my new world, writing my feelings, reading what I wrote, changing, losing and finding myself again, but still feeling fragile. The real change happened when I met adult educators in higher education who started a discourse with me based on respect for my culture and previous life experience. The emancipation from labels and assumptions enabled me to join higher education and be a Master's student at Maynooth University and finally find myself again.

My voice vanished when I first arrived in Ireland. Today in this thesis, I gained it back, and I want to add to the European outsider academic scholars an insider voice from the Syrian refugee community through evocative storytelling research about my learning journey to integrate into Ireland.

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Chapter One

“We reach a door and there the legend finds.
“To all the Pilgrims of the Human Mind:
Knock and pass on!” We knock and knock and knock;
But no one answers to save the moaning wind.
How like a door the knowledge we attain,
Which door is on the bourn of the Inane;
It opens and our nothingness is closed,—
It closes and in darkness, we remain.
Hither we come unknowing, hence we go;
Unknowing we are messaged to and for;
And yet we think we know all things of earth
And sky—the suns and stars we think we know.’

Rihani (1920, p.p. 42, 43, 44).

Starting a new life at the age of 47 in Ireland as a Syrian woman in a new country, culture, and language, without the support of a network of friends or family was challenging. Yet this had been my dream since 2015 when I was still in Syria, and when all I wanted was to be a refugee, safe, in a European country like Ireland, where my three boys could survive and live happily. A few weeks after my arrival, I discovered how empty and plain my life had become, and how my eyes filled with sadness, shame, and embarrassment. Even inside my house, I felt worthless and that my life meant nothing. I did my best to belong to my new home Ireland, I volunteered and attended all the workshops and activities that ‘they’ planned for ‘us’, it was always ‘us’ and ‘they’, day after day I discovered that ‘they’ do not know about ‘us’, ‘they’ do not even know that we used to have lives, families, culture, skills, and happy lives before the world packed us up in one package, labelled with one word, ‘refugee.’

The main definition for Refugee is:

A refugee is a person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership of a particular social group, is outside his or her country of nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection of that country, or stateless person, who is outside of the country of former habitual residence for the same reasons as mentioned above, is unable or, owing to such fear, unwilling to return to it. (Section 2 (1) IPA 2015)

In adult education centres in Ireland, the educational process for migrant individuals, particularly refugees, usually begins with English language classes, which is considered essential for starting a new life. As the first point of contact with refugees, educators play a crucial role in this process. The emphasis on English language proficiency is seen as a prerequisite for becoming a good migrant or citizen, operating under the belief that learning the national language is necessary for integration and belonging, and “if you want to belong – you have to learn the national language” (Heinemann, 2017, p. 1).

I took English classes to connect with my surroundings, but being labelled a refugee made me feel as though I was losing my identity.

I always searched for the truth about myself through writing in my diary, an old habit of mine that started when I was a child. When I became a refugee, and I lost my identity, I started writing again. Reading my words created a space for me to learn about the changes that

happened to me, leaving my home as a public figure and arriving in Ireland as an invisible, labelled object, a migrant woman. I lost my home, my dignity, my family, and my culture.

A shift happened to me when I became a peer researcher with Dr Sarah Sartori's project exploring barriers to education for refugees and people seeking asylum in Ireland (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021). Through sharing my stories and listening to participants' stories, I found meaning and value to my life again. When my dream finally came true, with the support of the University of Sanctuary Ireland (UoSI), which removed all the barriers for me as a forced migrant woman to be able to access higher education at Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education. I wanted to learn how scholars and academic people focused on the lived experiences of people like me as individuals, and how my need to learn as an adult in Ireland is underlined, especially in the area where I faced many barriers to rebuilding myself in the Irish community.

Syria is not a Death Boat.

Nizar Quabbani

“Within the boundaries of this green belt, I was born... I crawled... and I pronounced my first words. My encounter with beauty was my daily destiny... If I tripped, I would stumble over a dove's wing... and if I fell, I would fall in the lap of a rose. This beautiful Damascene home has taken control over all of my feelings and sensations and has made me lose any desire to go out to the alleyway just like all the children in every quarter do every day.”

(Qabbani, 2017, My Story, p.54)

When people ask me where I'm from and I say that I'm from Syria, they always say, “Oh Syria, I heard about it; the death boats and the horrible human crises there.” It breaks my heart to hear how my home is regarded because of the war. Ever since I left my country, I've been struggling to hold onto the beautiful image of the Syria I lived in before the war invaded my mind. As a resistance to succumbing to the horrible modern images from the war, I will introduce the readers to a part of the Syrian culture. Through evocative stories recognising the past and present as referred to in their work (Ellis & Bochner, 2014), this is how I remember Syria:

Once upon a time, I was living in my mother's family home in Aleppo, Syria, where she settled after leaving Antakya. My grandparent's house was fragrant with the sweet scent of white jasmine on the balcony. I had my first love story at the age of ten with the handsome

neighbour's boy. Syria became even more special to me during the summers, when we would take the train to Lattakia, the beautiful bride of the Mediterranean Sea. In the Autumn, we would dance to the music of the fallen leaves as we walked to school. During springtime, we would collect anemone flowers to embroider love letters and send them anonymously. And in Winter, we would burn our fingers on the warm stove while roasting chestnuts. A few years later, my home in Syria became the University of Aleppo, where I studied English Literature in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. I spent four beautiful years in the 1990s studying English Literature at the University of Aleppo's Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Every day, I walked through the public park of Aleppo, passing by the gardens and fountains inspired by the palace of Versailles in Paris, with my friends from different backgrounds, including Christians, Muslims, Druzis, Yazidis, Kurds, Sharkas, and Armenians. We laughed and sang loudly to the songs of Um Kalthum and Sabah Fakhri. Syria was my home and the citadel of Aleppo, the chilly red pepper of Armanaz, and the Madinah old Souq. It was the Mesopotamian civilization where Gods and Goddesses walked in the white gold fields of cotton, the yellow gold fields of wheat, and the green gold fields of olive trees. Syria was the blue eyes of the children from Edlib, staring at me as I interviewed Paolo Matthiae about the discovery of 1700 tablets in the mid-third millennium BC at the site of Ebla. It was also in the wrinkles on the face of Fateh Al Mudras, the world-famous painter, and the books of the legendary mythology writer Firas Al Sawah. Syria became my house in the Damascus countryside where I married and raised my son, where our Christmas tree grew shorter every year as my son grows taller. Syria was me having a barbeque party on my terrace on the first sunny day of summer, sitting with my mother, my two brothers, their wives and kids. My family.

When I left Syria for the last time, Syria was the last kiss on the walls of my house, the walls that connected me with my life, protected my dignity, and was faithful to my memories. It is not easy to read about your home or write about it knowing that this is what is left of it... a poem.

Ontology and Epistemology

After leaving my home because of the Syrian crisis that started in 2011, everything related to Syria became political; there was no privacy for the personal details of the victims of the forced migration of the Syrian people. Children's dead bodies in the media, thousands of people stuck on the European borders, and the personal became political.

My life had been full of rich experiences and meaningful moments long before I became a refugee in Ireland and a target for anger or frustration for some Irish people. Refugees became symbolic with all of their fears and frustration from housing problems and high tax payments.

After moving to Ireland, I found myself living in two different worlds with two distinct cultures and languages and struggling to maintain a sense of identity. According to Fryer, 2020, there are two fundamental ontological positions: realism and unrealism. For me, both worlds are true and real. The first real one is Syria, where I was born and became a proud woman, and the second one is Ireland, where I became an invisible and ashamed Syrian refugee. I needed to find where I belonged so I could then start finding my identity. I needed an ontological map for both worlds and an epistemological dictionary to know the new meanings of my life experiences.

Once upon a time, I visited a pharmacy in Ireland to buy makeup remover. The lady who was one of my neighbours, but who did not recognise me asked, "Where are you from?" "From Syria", I said, and she asked, "Are you allowed to wear makeup in Syria, or did you learn that here in Ireland?" I told her that women in Syria take good care of their beauty. She said, surprised, "I did not know that the Taliban allow women to wear makeup!" So, I quickly replied, "I am from Syria, not from Afghanistan." She said, "Oh, yes.... of course... Syria, the death boats, of course... you know, there is a war in Afghanistan, too, right?"

In my conversation with the lady, I was simply trying to focus on conformity rather than differences. But this process was not between two women discussing the latest make-up brand; it was between a powerful woman who has the right to make judgements and a vulnerable woman who has to clarify, explain, and accept the assumptions and go on. The Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Sadaawi explained in her book *The Hidden Face of Eve* (1980) how the small everyday happenings like what happened with me in the pharmacy reflect the things that constitute the society, the system of state, the material of politics, of higher

politics' (Sadaawi, 1980, P. 375). I compare this experience with another, in the pharmacy too as a refugee, but in Turkey.

Once upon a time, I lived in Turkey; I spent three and a half years not telling my mother that I was awaiting a reunification visa to come to Ireland. She never knew I was alone with three kids, and she never knew that hospitals there did not let me in to help my six-month-old sick baby because I am Syrian. I was even kicked out of a pharmacy once without getting the prescription when they recognised my sin of being Syrian. I never told my mother that men were sneaking to my door in the middle of the night because I am a Syrian woman and I have no one to protect me while I protect three children. When all this was finished, and I finally entered the haven of Europe from the Non-EU path to Ireland, I made the first call to my mother, and I spoke as if she knew what happened to me as I waited for this moment to come. I said, "Mom, I want to tell you that I am with the kids in Ireland, and we are ok." She asked me, "What do you mean? Kinda don't tell me you are a refugee now." I could not say it. She waited. The silence swallowed my tears and hers, and she hung up the phone.

I read these lines and feel that I am squeezed in the funnel of the political agenda of the powerful world, as Zoryana Pshyk explained in her research (2019); "From analysing my experience of how I was squeezed and how people around me shaped my position in this world, an ontological position for me as a vulnerable, ashamed woman who wanted to be a refugee and was in denial of being labelled as a refugee" (p.80).

What does it mean to be a refugee?

Labelled Woman

I came from a world where people are forced to take the risk of drowning in water thinking it to be safer than living on the land, and where the desperation is such to make you cross dangerous international borders walking barefoot with children, climbing into the death boats with pregnant women and babies in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea seeking a place of sanctuary, and facing the fear of death hand in hand with the pain of leaving their beloved dangerous home to the land of peace and human rights. Syrian people, who arrived in Ireland as refugees are about to start another resettlement journey to belong to their new home.

One of the definitions of the meaning of ‘refugee’ that Barbara Harrell explained in detail is that a refugee is a “particular category of people who, because they have lost the protection of their own state, must rely on the willingness of others to observe humanitarian norms.’ (Harrell & Associates, 1992, p.1). There is a long list of those ‘others,’ from government institutions to community organisations and volunteers, charity and other funded projects paid for their attention to helping refugees. “Organizations and academics raising money for relief and distributing it to refugees is dominant by the norms of charity or gift-giving” (Harrell & Associates, 1992, p.4).

I used to know what refugee meant; in Syrian, we welcomed refugees from Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, and many other countries, but knowing what refugee means is different from living with it, being controlled and judged by it. Roger Zetter said, “Within the repertoire of humanitarian concern, a refugee now constitutes one of the most powerful labels.” (Zetter, 1991, p.39).

Syrian refugees who resettle in Europe face critical learning barriers to integration. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHRC), Syria remains the world’s largest refugee crisis; more than 6.6 million Syrians have been forced to flee their homes since 2011, approximately 5.5 million refugees live in neighbouring countries within the region, and over one million have been resettled in European countries, (UNHRC-2021). According to the Irish Refugee Protection Programme, Ireland received 4000 displaced people through a process of relocation and resettlement (Reference).

The first time I recognised that I was labelled a refugee was with my mother, but it did not end there; I discovered that employment opportunities are different, access to education is different, the respect from society is different. And I learned the phrases that come with refugees. Phrases like. ‘starting from zero’ and ‘shame.’ Goffman (1968, p. 18) describes shame as ‘... arising from the individual’s perception of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess.’

Zero point

Once upon a time, my friend came with good news as he said, he had found a job for me, "kitchen assistant in a restaurant; I will arrange an interview, do not worry, Kinda." Politely, I said, "do you think I can find a different job? I have twenty years of work experience as a TV presenter in Syria. Don't you think I can find a relevant career?" To that, he said, "Dear Kinda, I want to give you a tip, please forget who you were in Syria and accept whom you've become in Ireland; these twenty years mean nothing here; you are now just a refugee, no one cares if you have a bachelor's degree or if you worked in TV, you must start over from zero." He continued, "I was seventeen years old when I arrived in Ireland, I started cleaning toilets in bars, that is where I met my wife, and we built our life together, it was not easy, but we made it, today we own three houses in Ireland. So, my advice to you is to take off the face of the important skilled person from your past and wear the face of the present, the refugee, here in Ireland."

I started working as a kitchen assistant, wearing my mask, my cap, and a very large apron, standing for eight hours with a one-hour lunch break, with no chairs in the kitchen. Even if there is nothing to do, there is no place to sit and rest.

I am about to sleep. I feel proud of myself for adapting to my new position, the only one I was welcome to; now I have one day's work experience in Ireland, plus twenty years making TV documentary films and programmes.

"Be proud," I kept telling myself, wiping my tears on my pillow.

Paolo Freire talked about the oppressed, "who have been shaped by the death-affirming climate of oppression, must find through their struggle the way to life-affirming humanisation; the oppressed have been destroyed precisely because their situation has reduced them to things" (Freire, 1970, p.50). The power of the socio-cultural distortion puts refugees in the position of learning and learning and learning...or else...they will be kept in the 'lazy' subgroup of people, apart from those who deserve the better work and life opportunities. I am different now from the Kinda I used to be, admit it, I have a label, a stigma, and these "undesired differences" (Goffman, 1968, p. 15) made me accept anything offered to me. I even feel guilty to complain about it. I should be lucky that someone agreed to hire me with this ...shameful stigma. I could not even enjoy the denial of being stigmatised, I could not even name the world. As Freire contends, "to name the world to change it" (1970, p. 61). Now I understand why I could not dare to change anything before naming my new world, in fact, the world named me first and gave me no option to accept or to deny, and when I denied being stereotyped with a label, I was hanging in between the

stigma and this now invalid identity as a ‘proud Syrian woman’. This is reflected in Goffman’s (1968, p. 9) description of the individual from full social acceptance. Even if I was a very successful socially accepted woman in my country, but a new social identity is born as a forced migrant woman with a stigma, and “the person with a stigma is not quite human.” (Goffman, 1968, p.15). So, according to Freire (1970, p.61) we can, “by naming the world, transform it.” And, without calling, or admitting that I became a refugee, I can start an honest dialogue with myself (Ferrier, 1970, 64).

Learning how other individuals survived, I kept reading Niall Dempsey's autoethnographic research stories, “*With all your power, you can’t imagine what it means to be powerless. Me as a man, I find it shameful.*” (Dempsey, 2022, p. 54). Me as a woman, I found it shameful too, and disabled by the incredible sociocultural distortion of where refugees are condemned, even when I go to learn and improve myself, I still struggle with the self and societal perceptions of my ‘disabled self.’ It presages a shamed identity, reflected by Goffman (1968, p.9). So, I have to learn and learn and learn, or else, be treated as lazy.

That was tough; that honest advice from my noble, hard-working friend made me wonder what my zero point was. Is it the same zero point as my friend when he was seventeen? I am forty-seven years old now. How many zero points do I still have to start from in my life? Must I be proud to do any job and any work starting from cleaning the toilets regardless of my skills and experience?

In one of the events, I attended to support the Syrian refugees, TDs and politicians were there, taking pictures with them to share on social media with titles like, “Welcoming refugees’ event” or “Integration with Syrian refugees.” One of the politicians focused on refugees finding jobs and “not getting stuck on social welfare payments.” There was no chance for participants to talk, few knew English anyway. I wanted to tell the politician that while it is true that I have a work permit, I don’t have a work opportunity, I can’t get a job. I got my work permit but even with twenty years of work experience outside of Ireland, and feel that I am running and panting to keep up with the transformation that has happened to me, by contrast the world around me is transforming its services and systems at a very slow speed. Illeris explained that regressive transformation happens when “he or she has come into a situation in which a change is necessary or unavoidable but cannot manage to experience it as an advancement or an innovation” (2014, p. 94). Resettlement was supposed to provide

refugees with new opportunities in life, including the opportunity to contribute to the economy and society of the country to which they have been admitted, “this focuses on the phenomena rather than on the personal needs and challenges, the rights of the refugees themselves” (Hathaway, 2007). At the event, the politicians did not bring job opportunities for me; they brought cameras to take photos and publish them on social media with titles like, ‘Supporting Syrian refugees to integrate in Ireland.’ they also brought with them charity gifts, small boxes of chocolate for kids, and some of them may bring clothes, they still think that supporting vulnerable people is charity, and not a responsibility to help them be productive and collaborative people who want to be independent and not stuck in jobs against their will in a civilised form of slavery

Ethical issues

In autoethnographic research, Bochner and Ellis (2016, p. 138) suggested that, “all approaches to study human behaviour present ethical dilemmas for investigators.” There were a few ethical considerations that I thought about for using my personal narrative writing in this autoethnographic research. First, how to be ethically honest and subjective without the fear of the consequences of sharing my stories as a Syrian refugee, migrant, public figure in my original home, mother of three kids living in Ireland, and sister to two brothers still living in Syria with their own families. The consequences I thought about might be really serious. Bochner and Ellis said: “Ethical issues in autoethnography can have greater consequences for one’s personal life” (2016, p. 141), so I mention only a few people by name, just to share how one individual can positively change one’s world into a better world.

So, I tried to focus in my day-to-day stories on myself as the main character in my subjective research. My goal is to bring my experience to the readers, to connect emotionally with them without steering their rational critical thinking with my tears. I have a friend who always seems to be around whenever I get emotional about something. Whether I'm doing a presentation about my life experiences, listening to a song that really moves me, or even just reflecting on something in my own head, he always seems to be there, watching me cry. It's starting to get really frustrating, especially since he keeps telling me to ‘grow up’ and that it's ‘disgusting’ to expose my emotions like this. It's really starting to hurt my feelings. I hope I can bring what Bochner and Ellis called balance, “a balance that we owe our readers and academic colleges in terms of true stories” (2016, p. 140). I get deeper into writing my stories

and become more emotional. I keep focusing on “my goal of inviting readers to understand and not to judge” (Rennels, 2015, p. 141).

The tutors I met in Ireland were trying to help me but maybe did not know how; that is why I am sharing my critical reflection, the “common ground” of transformative learning for Mezirow (1990, p. 363), to learn what happened to me and emancipate myself from all the barriers of fear, anxiety, inequality and about how to access your entitlements, that I learned in integration lectures but could not access in the praxis, so that as Mezirow explained. “we can fully exploit the immanent potential of the knowledge and information at our disposal in an empowering and even emancipatory way.” (Finnegan, 2019, p. 45).

And finally, there is the responsibility towards myself. I am not scared at all now while writing this study to expose myself and share my personal life experience as a Syrian learner in Ireland. This is what I gained from joining the adult and community education in Maynooth university, the power and agency to believe in myself again. I want to do my research and write accessibly for readers who are interested in getting a new truth about the Syrian refugees, an alternative truth instead of “the dominant taken-for-granted and harmful cultural scripts, stories, and stereotypes.” (Adams & Associates, 2017, p.3). I want to improve others' lives through these lived experiences and personal stories, which became political in the hands of new researchers, because “reflection on an experience ...is a type of ethical action.” (Grummel, 2022p.200).

‘Your hearts know in silence the secrets of the days and the nights.

But your ears thirst for the sound of your heart's knowledge.

You would know in words that which you have always know in thought.

For self is a sea boundless and measureless.

Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth."

Say not, "I have found the path of the soul." Say rather, "I have met the soul walking upon
my path.’

(Gibran, 1925, p.63)

Chapter Two

Methodology

Autoethnography

Initially, I wanted to conduct this research with a group of Syrian women. However, I considered how often these women were interviewed by researchers, including myself, answering questions but never receiving any answers. Some academic people saw us as one homogenous sample with an attractive label, 'Syrian refugee women.' For example, one researcher believed all Syrian women wear the hijab, so she came to the research with her already made assumptions about my answers and asked me 'why do you not wear the hijab?' I explained that the hijab is an Islamic identity and not a nationality. Syrian people can belong to a diverse range of religions, including Islam and Christianity, a fact that is often overlooked. There were times when academics were interviewing me, and I was worried about telling the whole truth. That my answer would land me in trouble with the Department of Justice, Social Welfare, or a listener in the room. On one occasion, an Irish academic woman asked me if I think Irish people are racist. Before saying a word, I recalled feeling scared when one of the Irish women approached a man in the housing office in Ireland, who didn't seem Irish, and started shouting at him, blaming him for her not getting a house yet. I didn't share my thoughts at that moment with the academic researcher because I didn't want to cause any trouble. So, when asked if Irish women are racist, I answered her "I don't believe that to be true."

When I joined Maynooth University's Department of Adult and Community Education, as a researcher myself, I was particularly interested in how scholars and academic professionals focus on the lived experiences of individuals like myself, a forced migrant woman. I found over a hundred articles related to migrant and refugee learning in three key adult education journals: *Adult Education Quarterly*, *Studies in Education* and the *International Journal of Life Education*. I went through a few, Morrice (2007), Thunborg, Osman, & Bron, (2021), Gallo, M. L. (2001), Morrice, L. Shan, H. & Sprung, A. (2017). Many types of research have been undertaken about Syrian refugee people following what is considered the biggest refugee humanitarian crisis Europe faced in 2015. In Ireland, I found one research that I will share more details about later: Language learning needs to support adult Syrian refugees (Karazi, 2021) and the study I participated in as a peer researcher (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021).

I researched various articles and studies to understand the challenges faced by Syrian refugees integrating into Ireland. Although a few were done by European and Irish scholars, such as Bhopal and Maylor (2014) and Finnegan, Merrill, and Thunborg (2014), I found gaps in these studies. They lacked an internal perspective from the community itself, which could provide more in-depth insights into the experiences of Syrian refugees.

I noticed the huge effort to understand the Syrian refugee needs. Still, they were an outsider's analysis, who use different methodologies, like the interviews I used to do with the Irish academic researchers, that “involve efforts and builds on the ability to see more clearly and to discover what we know but seem to have forgotten” (Hegarty, 2022, 178). But, the outsider efforts do not know. They cannot discover things when they do not know if they exist or not, and they cannot ask questions about realities they cannot see.

As I pondered my research methodology for this study once more, I realised that the methodology I need must enable me to bring my ideas, beliefs, and epistemologies valued as an adult education participant into a democratic type of research. “Researchers in autoethnographic are always real people in real context.” (Mc Cormack, 2022, p.74).

“Autoethnography as a term contains three core elements: *auto* meaning self, *ethno* meaning culture and *graphy* meaning writing.” (Grummel, 2022, P.75). I first encountered autoethnography when I read my friend Zoryana's autoethnographic research about her transformative life experience seeking freedom from the oppression she struggled with while she was stuck in the system of direct provision centres in Ireland, (Pshyk, 2019). I knew

Zoryana personally. I worked with her as a per researcher in the research project analysing the needs of asylum seekers and refugees to access higher education in Ireland (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021), but meeting Zoryana was different from reading her stories...reading her letters to her Mom. "I know it seems impossible, but even being in Direct Provision, I was privileged in many ways...I was still a very lucky person. I had an education" (Pshyk, 2019, p. 26). Reading her stories, she became a daughter who missed her Mom and her home, and just like me, a misunderstood educated woman. Just like me, a vulnerable woman. And, just like me, and if she made her way out of that black hole (Direct Provision) and became an academic, an adult educator, then I can do it too. I understood how stories could "put authors into conversations with themselves and their readers...to expose values and choices and connect emotionally to reader's lives." (Bochner, and Ellis, 2016, P.36). I wanted to listen to more autoethnography, to learn how I can find myself and find a friend to build a relationship with and to learn from. I found Niall Dempsey (2021) who wrote an autoethnographic review of disability in the context of reorienting his identity. That struggle with disability and shamed identity helped me to face my vulnerability from a different perspective. His stories were always on the screen while I was thinking, getting desperate, and feeling that I am not good enough to fit the position that fit my skills as Kinda and not as a labelled migrant woman with no identity. "I know that relationships with others requires sometimes revealing vulnerabilities. But I cannot do this. Revealing the 'terrible secret' of my condition means admitting to literal weakness" (Dempsey, 2021, p.14).

I decided to do autoethnographic research, bringing my life stories as a "fundamental way of experiencing the world" (Mc Cormack, 2022, p.74), putting myself into the centre of this study, talking to the reader and also talking to myself, and to do that, I need to draw on my facts in my stories artistically because I am dealing with "messy and ambiguous but real dimensions of human experience" (Bochner, and Ellis, 2016, P.38). I want to do "a craft of research as a practical, ethical and theoretical endeavour that happens in specific contexts" (Grummel and Finnegan, 2022, p. 1). I wrote this thesis while I was in the middle of the confusion to find myself, but as David Mc Cormack said, "to sit with the mess of experience, trusting that something will emerge" (Grummell and Finnegan, 2022, p.78). Something must emerge through writing autoethnographic research, something indeed emerged, the power of writing, sharing what I wrote and thinking about whom I was and who I am now. I am happy with the position I built for myself in this thesis, even with all the mistakes and gaps that you will discover, at least I tried to find myself and to help you find learners who are struggling in

their transformative learning journey. “Autoethnography can allow us to catch those subtle processes of human growth and transformation in a way that honours the richness and passion with which adults embrace their own growth and development” (reference).

Finally, as Illeris (2014) referred to as the relationship between biographical identity and biographical learning, “both are about the individual’s relationship to her or his story” (p. 6). So, I decided to “humanise the human sciences” (Bochner, and Riggs, 2014, p.179) and draw the attention of the scholars to the centre of my struggle in resettling in Ireland (Mc Cormack, 2022, p.74)

Evocative Autoethnography

Four years passed in Ireland, with no one to talk with about my hopes, my fears, and everything in between. There were moments of sadness, but also moments of pure joy. I want this evocative study to be like as if me and the reader were two old friends catching up after years apart, and my heart swells with emotion as we share our deepest thoughts and feelings. And, at the end of it all, I we both feel grateful for the connection we made. It will help us in this changing unfair world, and we can find the moments that made me ‘turn’ from being a well-respected public figure in my home Syria, into becoming an ashamed forced migrant woman who, was labelled as a refugee in Ireland. I want to “open up emotional conversations with readers” (Bochner, and Ellis, 2016, p.40), an evocative, emotional conversation, so my readers can “feel their lives deeply touched by my stories” (Jones, Adams, and Ellis, 2013, p.111).

Once upon a time, in the streets of Ireland, chasing my neighbour’s faces, the smell of the coffee with cardamom I used to drink in Damascus, I find myself chasing my identity in second-hand shops as if I am searching among the used clothes and furniture for my own clothes that I left back home. I am touching the used clothes to imagine the owner's life stories. Some clothes in the charity shops still have the smell of that body, a hair is still there, even a drop of some drink, another trace of life. Many questions in my head, what happened to these people? Where are they now?

I close my eyes wondering who wears my clothes now, are they taking good care of my hand-embroidered bed cover, the one my grandmother weaved for me? My eyes are full of tears,

but I don't want to open them, I want to keep them closed, to dream of being with my beloved family and friends. That's why I keep visiting the charity shops in Ireland, where I can join the happy and sad memories of the Irish families by touching the cushions, drinking in their teacups, and imagining the moments that gathered them together around the wooden dining table, that I can touch now. In the charity shops, I can smell the books, see one brown hair in the wool jumper and the drinking spot on another. Another trace of a previous life came to resettle in my hand. Did you ever think about what stories hide in charity shops? Why did these people leave their clothes and unlighted candles and leave? I remember my house, my carpet, my bed sheets, all the candles I lit, and my photo albums. Who has them, and who is using the colourful ceramic plates I bought from Tunisia? Who is drinking tea in my small transparent teacups? My mother-in-law's favourite in which to have her tea. In the secondhand shops, I am searching for myself, my furniture, the clothes I left behind without saying goodbye, my life story, my lifestyle, and my Christmas tree, which became shorter and shorter each year as my eldest son became taller and taller.

The smell of charity shops became my smell, a used secondhand person who is labelled by one brand 'refugee' without referring to the original factory or country. The charity shop is the only place I can enter in full confidence without that unwelcoming look I see on the faces of women who buy the better brands.

I believe that there is immense value in exploring memories and emotions to gain a deeper understanding of myself and my place in the world. By embracing subjectivity and self-reflexivity, I want to shed light on aspects of my experience as a forced migrant woman that might seem not relevant for the topic of some researchers. I want them to know that as a Syrian woman, I did have a home, with lovely green curtains, and a carpet with a melted red candle on it. I could not remove it and I always wanted to have a new one, but today, I wish I could have it again. It would remind me of the happy family moments of that night. I wish the readers can feel what it means to leave a home. It's more than leaving a dangerous place, it's leaving an identity and losing oneself. I want to remind the reader or a force them to deal with "the concrete- particular people in particular places facing particular, often traumatic, circumstances of lived experience" (Conquergood, 1990, cited in Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p.51) I want the readers to embrace the small details around them and ask "serious questions about existence as a living being, and prompting social justice as a social imperative" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 51).

From my experience as an adult learner, examining Irish life was not sufficiently explored through attending a PowerPoint lecture or Zoom meeting, but by living and feeling what was happening, I am doing the same for readers who want to feel and live the moments with me in this study. This is how I learned about Ireland when I read Angela's Ashes, the biography of the Irish American migrant writer Frank McCourt (1999). His story became mine. It was an unbelievable learning experience for me. I was in the position of the reader learning the hidden truth of the miserable life condition of the Irish people. I learned about Angela, an Irish mother who struggled to survive and raise her children. For a moment, I thought, 'I am the only mother in the world who understands what she has been through'. Me and her connected. The Irish culture was not strange anymore for me.

When I discovered Frank McCourt, his biography *Angela's Ashes* (Mccourt, 1999) told a story that lightened my heart and made me understand more about Irish life and to appreciate the gift of prosperity and flourishing. I gained an understanding of how the Irish suffered to regain these gifts after eight centuries of occupation and dark times. Frank (1999) wrote about the sorrows, the humiliation, and the dream of immigration, in words that could describe the current situation for millions of Syrians during the war. Frank's version of poor miserable Limerick in the 1940's looks like a recent image of modern Damascus in 2020. In the 1940s Damascus was the capital of literature, culture, and beauty. The woman who most inspired and influenced Frank's life was his mother Angela, who lost three of her children. The wife of a drunk, a catholic, a stranger among her family, and yet a woman of dignity who sacrificed her soul to keep a roof over her children's heads. She simply became the Irish heroic female, who would never know that her secrets were revealed, and she had become the most famous woman in America and Europe in 1996.

"We stand in a queue with women wearing black shawls. They ask our names and smile when we talk. They say, Lord above, would you listen to the little Yankees, and they wonder why my Mam in her American coat would be looking for charity since there is hardly enough for the poor people of Limerick without Yanks coming over and taking the bread out of their mouths [...] He turns to Mam; he wants to know where she got the fine red coat." (Mccourt, 1999, p. 63-65).

Frank was brave and honest to reveal the intimate details of his mother's life, to tell the truth and to blame the church fathers and the social welfare officers of Limerick. This was a powerful learning opportunity to explore how "each individual is positioned in much wider

range of worlds and their experience is a way into exploring all sorts of nuanced realities and possibilities and layers of culture” (Mc Cormack, 2022, p. 76).

It is clear for me how Angela and I were marginalised. Our life stories merged together to share the same experience as each other, and autoethnography helped me to explore and analyse the dynamics of power and marginalisation. I want to tell my story to help people understand how society affects my life, how society greatly impacts me as a migrant woman, and how things can be fairer for everyone. By sharing our experiences and listening to others, we can learn more about these issues and create positive change. This is how I relate “adult education and autoethnography are both dialogic forms of practice; both emerge from critical engagements with what Jerry refers to in our conversation as ‘biographic reflexivity’” (Mc Cormack, 2022, p. 77).

Once upon a time before arriving in Ireland, when I left my home with three kids, newborn twins, and a teenage boy, I did not know where to start, what to pack in three suitcases, how I could measure my forty-three years in kilos. Fifty kilos to get ready to leave my dangerous sweet home and go to the safe unknown.

I used the space to make sure I had enough powdered milk, diapers, and winter clothes for the babies. The only thing I needed to bring with me was my white coat, the coat I used to wear on special occasions, like weddings and Christmas parties, as if I needed proof, a witness to the happy days I lived before I left forever. The white coat waited in the dark suitcase in Turkey for three and a half years until I finally arrived in Ireland. I could not wait to wear it, to be myself again.

To settle in Ireland, I had to go to social welfare to get my PPS number. I could not have been happier and more optimistic to go there wearing my makeup and my white coat. When my friend came to pick me up, she was shocked to see me dressed like that. She kindly asked me to change my clothes and dress like a vulnerable refugee woman. She believed this would make more sense for the employee ‘especially if she is a woman,’ otherwise, if you looked well dressed, confident, and rich then, ‘you might face delays and obstacles in completing the paperwork’.

I am looking at the employee and she is not smiling at me. She asked me if I have any savings or valuable things, looking at my wedding ring, maybe I should take it off too? When she looked at my passport photo, she said: “Kinda, you look different. I must check the photo with my colleague and come back to you.” Of course, I look different. When I took that photo,

I was Kinda Nassli, a public figure, a confident woman. Now, I am a refugee Syrian woman, doubting whether I should wear my white coat or not. That day, by taking off my white coat, I realised that being a refugee is not just escaping a war and living in a safe place, it's a label on my front, a dress code to follow, and a new identity to live with.

The story of my white good coat has been shared with a few Irish audiences, particularly those who attended the presentations about the *We Are Here Hear* exhibition. This exhibition showcased photo voices that told stories from the perspective of refugees and asylum seekers. These individuals shared the barriers they faced when trying to access higher education in Ireland. It was an eye-opening experience for many who attended and helped shed light on the challenges faced by those seeking a better future in a new country. (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021).

I did my presentation which I called *Angela's Ashes through a Syrian Refugee's Eyes* many times. Every time I did it I cried as if I was saying it for the first time. I saw other Irish attendees crying too, I am not sure if they are crying about what I have been through or about what their own families have been through in the Irish history that is pictured in the biography of Frank McCourt, but we both lived the same emotional moment through one biography. We are not Irish and Syrian, we are not refugees and citizens, we are just human beings at this moment, and we are equal. And this is the power of biographical methods that “offer rich insights into the dynamic interplay of individuals and history, inner and outer worlds, self and other” (Merrill & West, 2009, p. 1).

The creative narrative and stories of Frank McCourt created a space for my story to evoke feeling and to live it from a micro-perspective. To make sense of it for the Irish reader. Bringing this learning experience into the research, is me trying to “display multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural...exposing a vulnerable self that ... resists cultural interpretations” (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 65). I am drawn to storytelling approaches when it comes to adult education, I have experienced it and witnessed its power to enhance learning for me and for the Irish people who listen to them. “Adult education has a strong history of using participatory arts, narrative inquiry, and storytelling to foster inclusive spaces...and foster community and solidarity across different communities” (Wilbur & Associates, 2022, p. 164).

My diary...

Once upon a time

Once upon a time in Ireland, I decided to write. And when I write, I become different, I become a Goddess who can create, defend, survive, love, and give birth to ideas, When I write, I set myself free from fear, and then when the fear vanishes inside me I see no distance between me and you.

I am referring to the stories from my diary in this research with the “once upon a time.” It makes me feel immersed in my storytelling role in this research. It also reminds me of my childhood, the stories I heard from my grandmother, who never skipped this introduction to her lovely stories. I need this emotion to calm me down in this study's mission.

I grew up in my grandparent's house; there was a very big library. My grandfather even classified the books on shelves that had a kind of handwritten index according to the topic of the book. I was about ten years old when I started climbing the shelves to pick books from the ‘adult’s’ shelves and when he saw me, he said, “as you grow taller, you will be able to access books that are appropriate for your age.” I didn't wait to grow taller before diving into the books. Rather, I climbed the shelves to read romantic novels, specifically May Ziyadeh and Khalil Gibran, who shared a unique love affair that had lasted till the end of their lives, despite never meeting each other. They wrote love letters to each other for twenty years. This is how I first learned about the power of writing when I was a child.

May Ziyadeh wrote-

‘I am alone in the woods for two hours. Alone with Byron, poet of violence and sweetness... While I write, his Childe Harold lies at my feet. Did Byron ever dream that a Lebanese girl would spend with him or with some of his works, long lonely hours in the woods of Lebanon?’ (Ghorayeb, 1979).

I discovered the profound impact of narrative writing on human relationships. It has become a tradition for me to give diaries as Christmas gifts to my family and close friends, where I write sentences on each page to remind them of my love and care throughout the year.

When I started writing my diary in Ireland, my relationship with it became deeper, my diary became the voice I didn’t have, the friend I could not find, and the space where I can exist in without shame. I become myself in my diary.

My (I) exist, In the Arabic world, they do not feel comfortable referring to the self directly as (I) while speaking to other people, it is more polite to say (we) even if the speaker means (I). I noticed how many times I wrote (I) in my diary, and in this research, as if I want to confirm my identity, my voice, my existence, and my truth. Based on a psychological displacement paradigm in diary- writing (PDPD) and its psychological benefits, the way that people use different pronouns in their writing might indicate their ability to switch perspectives and their ability to create connections that benefit the social integration process, ”using the first-person pronoun creates a self-centring state in which the participants concentrate on their feelings and take an active role in their behaviour” (Chang, Huang, & Lin, 2012, p.157). On the whole, the procedures of PDPD require both self-involvement and self-observation. These two aspects of PDPD correspond to the core element of mindfulness, which requires people to get in touch with their present experience while avoiding excessive engagement by taking a detached perspective, and then finally achieve to self-cultivation (Chang, Huang, & Lin, 2012, p.164).

To come back to myself and my diary, writing my stories using the first person pronoun empowered me, but sharing them in this autoethnographic research make me feel a higher level of power. To be honestly reflecting on myself, “ethnographically speaking: to add to our canonical qualitative texts an evocative and vulnerable heart” (Jones, Adams & Ellis ,2013, 10). I organised my data for the research based on my intimate autobiographical experiences, evocative short stories, poetry, prose, vignettes, and narrative fiction, due to the ethical responsibility I take in this research.

In research context vignettes are “descriptive episodes of specific situations that stimulate real events or problems that are usually presented in written or visual formats.” In my research where I was struggling with how to bring some true events to this research and relate it to my goal to evoke a critical dialogue about a few sensitive judgements, attitudes and values towards forced migrant Syrian people, I used vignettes as an effective incomplete short story that I wrote to encourage the discussion about the dilemma I am bringing to the reader. (Skilling & Stylianides, 2019, p.3). I have used poetry as well. To summarize my connection with reading poetry, I quote:” The Arabians created or developed no great art of their own. Their artistic nature found expression through one medium: speech...poetry.” (Hitti, 1970), cited from (Loya, 1975, p.1).

I want to admit now the challenges that I faced as an auto ethnographer. I spent a lot of time thinking about how to bring my life experience to adult education to make a positive change. Sometimes I'd change things, tweaking how I write about a particular theory or family experience. The writing process was not about creating something perfect but rather embracing the journey and the challenges that come with it. How do I bring my stories to life? It's a process, and I'm always striving to find new and creative ways to snap the pieces together. Even the handbook chapter about autoethnography (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p. 56) did not cover the problems I faced. My language, as an example. I thought I spoke good English. But when I write the kind of sensitive stories, that you will read in this study, I was always afraid to lose the context. I want to say, as if there were two Kindas writing, the storyteller, and the academic researcher. I worried about this, because I wanted to be as transparent as I could in this study.

Reflexivity expresses the “researcher’s awareness of their necessary connection with the research situation and their effects upon it” (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p.106). Through this awareness I am creating a new cultural meaning of being a forced migrant adult learner as I experienced it, understanding that the world around me changed, and I have to gain a deeper understanding of my core identity in this new world. Doing this in the field of adult education I want to grow as an individual but also to contribute to the greater body of knowledge in the field. “Strong reflexivity represents a deeper and more self-conscious informative reciprocity between the researcher and other group members.” (Jones, Adams & Ellis, 2013, p.107).

The writing was my healing methodology, it gave me existence, hope, and knowledge about who I am. “I believe that stories have the power to both break and repair the dignity of a people” (Holman, 2016, p.2). My secret diary about my life experience as an adult learner in Ireland is in the hands of academic and scholarly readers. I am not trying to convince you of anything; I am just sharing my experience and hopefully “provoking a response” Grummell and Finnegan, 2022, p.81). I also do this for readers struggling to build themselves and find meaning in their lives away from stereotypes and labels.

Do you speak English- Hair salon

Once upon a time in Ireland, I finally decided to spend some of the family money on a luxurious thing, having my hair cut in the salon, I'd been cutting my hair with my scissors for a long time, and I needed to treat myself. To feel just like the old days when doing my hair and makeup was part of my job in TV. Here in Ireland, I needed to empower myself to go to the salon and sit among Irish women. Checking on Google what words I should use for the haircut I wanted. I must choose what salon I would like to go to, and I should know how much I would have to pay. I have 50 Euros, my monthly pocket money. It is a lot of money since I am not working yet. I booked online based on the reviews and photos on Google, and on my way, I was smiling at the images in my mind from Syria. How the hairdresser will celebrate the moment I enter their place preparing the sugar-free and the head massage I used to have there.

I arrived at the salon and there were so many doors and signs as if you were entering a huge company. There is a woman to let me in, another one to confirm my name and email address, and of course, another woman who wants to be sure that I don't have Covid.

I am wearing my mask, the hairdresser is wearing hers, and I barely understand what she is saying, My English was not enough there. There is a different language for the haircut name, and she is struggling to know what I want, so I showed her a photo of the haircut I want. She started cutting while I was looking through the mirrors at the other women, how they are asked kindly to be photographed and their pictures published on the salon's social media pages. How they are greeted with smiles, and shown kindness while leaving. My haircut was so bad when it was finished, I asked the lady if it looked like the photo, I showed her, but she said, "the photo you showed me suits a different type of hair, and I told you that from the beginning, but you did not understand." Before she touched my hair, she gave me a questionnaire to sign, there were questions about my age, nationality, and job title. I am hiding my anxiety behind the mask I am wearing. I want to leave, I want to breathe, I feel shame in writing in the questionnaire that I am not employed, I am a non-EU citizen, and I am Syrian, I am sure she will know I am a refugee now. I felt humiliated to answer the questionnaire. All I wanted was a haircut to feel better and now I am thinking how stupid I was. Nobody noticed how my hair looked, and nobody cared. I was sad when the payment moment came. The woman with no smile asked for forty-five euros instead of forty. I didn't know why and could not ask or refuse to pay. I finished. I waited for someone to take a picture of me for the social media page, but no one did. Women whispered, avoiding any eye

contact with me. I am trembling and the salon seemed huge. Suddenly I couldn't find my way out, and I couldn't find the door to leave, by mistake, I went through the doors to the wax room. The women inside were terribly upset, but how could I not know that this is not the exit? No one gave me my jacket, and no one said "thank you for coming" or "looking forward to seeing you again." I left the salon with a silent cry in my throat, I should have stayed at home.

This is one of the most difficult experiences I've been through in Ireland, It is not in a class room or a cultural event, it is in a place where women go to and come back from without noticing, but that day changed me passively, it broke me. I was just trying to start to live a normal life, but it seemed that I was not normal woman. I was different, so I did not fit in the normal world. According to Paulo Freire (2000), we name the world and by naming the world we can transform it. I could not transform it, because I couldn't name it.

"Human sciences should be relevant to real people leading actual lives, deal with social, ethical, and moral issues, and work on behalf of social justice" (Bochner and Ellis, 2016, p.8). Social justice does not start with the high courts, it starts by understand that people are different, and if my English language or job title did not match the criteria of a hair salon, what kind of motivation will make me attend the 'integration activity for Syrian refugee women'. That day I discovered that the English language in Ireland is different from the English language I can speak. Even my children who were about 6 years old started noticing that my English was not that good. People speak in very different local accents, I could not understand people easily, and this embarrassed me, especially in public quiet places where employees are in a hurry and not patient to speak slowly. In the GP, the lady asked me something. "What is your DOB?" I did not understand what she said but I answered, "3 boys." She asked again, then I said, "Kinda". She asked again and I said "N A S S L I." Then I was so embarrassed, but I said, "my address?" Then I learned that it was my Date of Birth. How am I supposed to know what D O B means!!!

There are some funny stories too to share, I remember one of the Syrian women whom I met in the English session at the family resources centre told me "they keep teaching us, A, B, C... we know that now, and they do not teach us what to say in stores when we want to buy clothes or things like paying phone bills with ...that mobile company... you know..." She

blushed, and we both laughed. She was referring to Eir mobile which in Arabic means “penis”, but she could not say it.

“Creativity in this sense is linked to trying to tap into the imaginative resources that allow us to communicate to each other social worlds” (Finnegan and Grummell, 2020, p. 3). This biographical inquiry enabled me as a researcher to study myself as one of the marginalised voices to understand how we can improve the integration system in Ireland. The goal of adult education is to help adult learners become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action, and advance developmentally by moving toward meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience (Mezirow’s, 1991, p.14). I will come back to Mezirow’s transformative learning later in more details.

Chapter Three

A Powerful woman with a little (p)

That woman's face is still exuberant.
Her appearance still beautiful
Her pride still flourishing
Her clothes are torn and her body smells like the other distressed people there
Smelling like the sea
Smelling pungent
Smelling bitter
But our Golshifteh remains proud
She remains captivating
Our Golshifteh laughs at all this distress
Laughs at all this misery
Laughing with those dark, alluring eyes
Those eyes flaming like small suns

(Boochani, 2018, p.66-67)

Arabic is not a religion.

Once upon a time in Ireland, I started an Arabic language freelancer interpreting role. I am so happy to finally start a new job in Ireland. The company will pay me fifteen euros for each interpreting hour and the first mission is in Mullingar Hospital, I will take the train, and on the train, I don't have to chat with the driver and feel like my English language is bad because of the accent they have. I will arrive a couple of hours earlier (I will not be paid for that) will finish the job, wait another few hours to catch the train and go back home. It is my first time out of the house alone. I am excited and scared at the same time. People who know me said the payment is too low, and it is not worth it to be so selfish to leave my responsibilities as a mother and spend the entire day travelling to another county to get fifteen euros. I wanted to do it, and I needed to do it. It was not the fifteen euros, it was me being visible again, I arrived at the train station feeling like a child, a child who needs a hand to lead the way, to help me understand how to get into the train to Mullingar. I never thought about how I learned to get into the train in Syria, I just knew how to do it, but here in Ireland, I need to learn everything from the very beginning starting from the language, the ticket machine, the payment method, and then I have to explore the ticket itself and analyse the symbols and numbers, platform number, and other things... no one in Ireland will ever imagine that a woman in my age, forty-seven years old, does not know how to get into the train, it will be the first time today, in fact, every day is the first time for something in Ireland, I am learning a whole life in my middle age in different language and culture.

I am on the train, and I feel free to look at the Irish people without any pressure for an hour and a half, I want to know their hair and eye colours, do mothers pack sandwiches and extra clothes in their small bags like Syrian Moms? Do women put on their makeup before leaving for work? Do Irish men read magazines or books on the train? I cannot recognize the counties and cities' names. I can see that they are doing and not doing the things I expected them to do. I am staring now at the green view from my window. I am thinking how green and beautiful Ireland is. This is not what they taught us in schools when I was a child. They taught us that Europe is cold, gloomy, and old, that is why the Europeans occupied our countries. The English took Egypt, the French took Syria, and the entire world took Palestine to steal our sunny days and fortunes. I have an image in my mind of Europe only in two colours, black and white.

On the train the voice recordings in Irish and English interrupt my thoughts, announcing the arrival to towns I've never heard of before, but I can recognise Mullingar's name. The voice recording keeps repeating three words, "mind the gap." I started counting the gaps I must mind each time I step out of my house. The language gap, the social gap, the financial gap,

the cultural gap, and the awareness gap. I also started counting the new gaps I have inside my home. My identity gap, emotional gap, confidence gap, spiritual gap, and belonging gap. Following Google map's instructions, I arrived at Mullingar Hospital, where I met Joury, a pregnant Syrian lady. We spent more than three hours together, she was staring at me, and suddenly she said, "are you Kinda Nassli the TV presenter?" I felt so proud and said "yes, I am." Joury said "Wahoo I cannot believe it, did you become a refugee too? Did you take the risk and threw yourself in the death boat?" I said "No, I am not a refugee, I came here in a reunification programme, I came by plane." This lady recognised my old identity and my new one, she digested that transformation very simply, why can't I digest it?

Joury is expecting a girl. She asked me "Do you know how can we change the children's names in Ireland?" I said, "No, why?" She said, "I have three children; Muhannad, whom I want to name David, my daughter Fatimah, I will give her Mary as my name, and Faysal, who will call him Frank.", I said, "What will you call the little girl?" and she said "Maybe Sarah." I asked her why she's changing their names. She said, "They are bullied in school because of their Islamic names, and this is better for them in the airports if they want to travel in the future" I could see her tears while she continued saying, "Fatimah is my mother's name, and Ahmed is my father in law's name, I feel so sad that I have to change them." On the way back home, when the voice on the train said, "Mind the gap" I was thinking of this huge gap. How can a child's name become a tear of fear in a mother's eye, in a fragile mother's eye? How powerful is that name?

Many people find it difficult to believe stories like this. I am listening to Joury and thinking how me and her are struggling and sacrificing our Arabic culture to fit in and to live in peace.

It was living in peace that forced me to become a forced migrant. Is this peace? I also wondered what the goal of all these workshops and Zoom is really? These sessions that Irish people keep doing for Syrian refugees, with titles like ‘work together towards fostering inclusivity for all.’ Who are these ‘all’ and why do they not join the sessions with ‘us’, so Journey might keep the Islamic names of her children? These sessions are supposed to help Syrian women like me or Journey to belong, without changing our identity, names, or the lifestyle we feel comfortable living, with the hijab or without the hijab. This is not integration. This is oppression. I can identify with Mezirow’s (1997) response that “often learners are unaware of being oppressed; they internalise the values of the oppressor.” I can say that I knew I was oppressed, and I could not talk about it because I was afraid, and I was not sure if my beliefs or ideas were right.

We do not need to fake ourselves to live without fear. More details about the Syrian community's needs explained how the “fear of becoming involved in Irish society as a result of Islamophobia, and a lack of awareness at all levels of Irish society about Arabic culture” (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021, p.78), can be imposed. A fear that without even knowing about its influence, is what I am suffering from as a forced migrant woman with no power to refer to it or discuss it even as an adult learner. “Microaggressions can range from seemingly innocent, yet highly loaded questions, to aggressive comments and demands, that over time can chip away at the person on the receiving end of what can feel like a continuous onslaught of commentary, othering, and vocalised prejudices” (Sartori & Nwanze, 2021, p.79).

According to Jack Mezirow, transformative learning is defined as the transformation of the learners’ meaning perspectives, frames of reference, and habits of mind (2006) through a combination of education and raising consciousness (Mezirow, 1978) with psychological emphasis on the cognitive processes of understanding the hidden power structure behind the reasons of oppression that will lead to actions of empowerment and liberation. While Knud Illeris studied the relationship between transformative learning and identity (Illeris, 2014), claiming that transformative learning must cover all dimensions of human mental capacity and learning; the cognitive, the emotional, and the social dimensions- as well as suitedness and societal and environmental embeddedness’ (Illeris, 2014, p. 151). But as Robert Kegan (2000) formulated the crucial question about what form transforms?’ and Illeris identified that ‘the concept of identity is the ‘keyword’ (Illeris, 2014, p.154), and he claimed that transformative learning should be defined as the term of identity’ (Illeris, 2014, p.148). Illeris

also explained that “identity today is not only an academic concept but a term in general use in everyday day language that everybody understands immediately and fairly precisely” (Illeris, 2014, p.154).

As a migrant Syrian woman in Ireland, I did not know how to connect with my community when I first arrived, the system and the simple daily things were very difficult and complicated for me, and this affected the way I identified myself as an experienced adult, a mother whose accent was bad and did not know how to name things in English when my kids come back from school, who is supposed to know what to do because I am 46 years old now and I used to know these simple things. I thought about how it would look when a woman my age asked the very busy people in line how to book a train ticket. How I need to use it later to unlock the small gates to get out of the station, with my broken English language and a strange local accent. I was shy to do that, but when I was a tourist in Malaysia, I was not shy to ask, it was fun to ask, but I am not a tourist in Ireland; I am a migrant woman with a label ‘refugee,’ and I don’t want them to discover that. Illeris said, “It is tough to obtain so much contact with one’s identity that it can function as a yardstick for making the right choices.” (2014, p.155). Even internal choices like feeling proud that a woman recognised me as a public figure, or ashamed that she knew I was a refugee in Ireland. This was very complicated for me because it was not only the link between me and the society in Ireland, it was me, the Syrian society (Joury) and the Irish society (the people in the train). I was confused about who I am with Joury, my ontological position to my mind was the proud person, who speaks English and is working. At the same time, I was feeling ashamed to be labelled as a refugee, who does not know how to speak English with the local people and accepting a work that is using me, just because it’s my only job opportunity at that time at the age of 46 years of age. I engaged in a critical dialogue with myself, where I identified my psychological centre as the core of my consciousness. This process of self-reflection led to a transformation in how I organise my thoughts and actions. As Rogers (1951) noted, this type of introspection is essential for personal growth.

Note: (this story might be too sensitive to read for some people)

Once upon a time in Ireland, I received a call to interpret for a Syrian woman with a therapist, I am not sure how bad the case will be, but it came to my mind the moment when I decided to put an end to my life because I was controlled by sadness, and I could not make people around me happy. I was a worthless mother, and my kids deserved to live in a safe country without such a loser mother, a safe refugee with no future. I locked my door and swallowed all the medical tablets I could find. I was telling myself I don't want my kids to live with a loser, desperate ashamed mom, and I want my kids to be happy and proud...my kids...my kids... I ran to the toilet to vomit them all. My kids still need me to hug them before they go to bed, my kids are so fragile to live in such a trauma, they will miss me. After that day, I started psychotherapy sessions with a specialist working with traumatised refugee people I told her how lonely, worthless, and desperate I was, and now I just needed a hug. She asked me to bring a shawl and wrap myself with it to get the feeling of being hugged. But this made me feel lonelier by replacing the real hug of my beloved family with a piece of fabric. That night I picked the shawl my mom weaved for me feeling her fingers touching it, her cigarette smoking mixed with her breath. All were stored in this piece of love she weaved for me. I wrapped myself with it. I felt loved, and I slept.

While writing these lines, I am trying to breathe, thinking about the thousands of Syrian women's stories that no one heard about. Syrian women who want to escape the shame of being vulnerable and sinning when their bodies were tortured or raped. These women want to live in peace, women just like the ones you will meet in the English classes or integration events where they sit on their chairs, tired from ticking the boxes and following the instructions to adapt to their new life, do their duties as a refugee and migrant should do, to integrate and learn all the time how to fit into this new home. I was tired of my duties and tired of running to make myself the respectful position that I thought I deserved. Losing this position made me lose the meaning of my life.

As an adult person, I have to come to an agreement with myself about how to “cope with mature adulthood” (Illeris, 2014, p.91), and how to find solidarity if I cannot show my kids the smile of confidence I used to see on my mother's face when I was a child. What example am I going to be for them to learn from? It is important for everyone to have a strong source for their core identity to remember. This source can be anything that helps them stay grounded and true to who they are, whether it is their religion, their family values, or their personal beliefs. By having this source, people can navigate through life's challenges with

confidence and clarity, knowing that they are staying true to themselves. It is never too late to find and embrace your source for core identity, and doing so can bring a sense of peace and purpose to your life. A strong source for their core identity to remember Illeris (2014) said.

This special day was my 'Aha' moment. I am valuable, and my life is still meaningful. Remembering my mother, added another value and meaning to my life. She did great things for me, but she was a successful fighter woman herself. I wanted to find myself, learn how to help my kids, socialise with other parents at the school gate without feeling less than them, and to be visible as a well-respected migrant woman.

Women's rights in a booklet

My phone rang, and a lady asked if I could take this call conference, as a freelancer interpreter. I started the call. The therapist on the phone is encouraging the woman to be brave and talk. The woman started crying and after a few minutes she said "while I was in Lebanon in the refugee camp, I was raped and sexually assaulted by one of the men, I arrived at the police station bleeding to make a claim, I told them whom he was. The police immediately asked two policemen to take me to the hospital in their car..." The woman started crying again, the therapist asks her if she wants to stop, the woman said, "On the way to the hospital, both policemen raped me again, and left me in the street." The call was so hard to engage with; the session is finished, the therapist hung up, and that woman stayed in my mind...at night I wished my mother's shawl could be big enough to wrap all the lonely Syrian women crying alone in their beds.

I talked today to Anna. Anna was supposed to train me about being a community champion to raise awareness about women's rights to stop domestic violence in Ireland. I told Anna that these lectures about reporting the husbands to the police and dialling the hotline numbers to ask for help may not always work. In Syria, when a woman is in such a situation, she may not go to the police either. Women's relationship with the police is not good in Syria. After the Syrian war, this relationship became worse. Any man in a powerful position is a danger, more dangerous than the domestic violence abuser. One of my Syrian friends who attended one of these sessions with me once whispered to me "Our men were arrested, tortured, and humiliated in the Syrian prisons, and when they arrived here, they are isolated and humiliated, this made them angry, so it's normal that they will be violent with us, we

understand.” Another woman said, “Tell the workshop people that this is the fourth time I hear the same things, can they do these sessions to our husbands, they are the abusers, and they should learn about this too.” Another Syrian lady said, “They think because we are refugees and poor, we are abused by our men, we feel abused and bullied in the streets sometimes because we wear a hijab, why don’t they make these sessions with the people who bully us?” I told Anna these stories, and I shared a secret with her about why we as Syrian women do not report the abuser. It is not only because of our traditional and cultural beliefs that wives should be good to their husbands, it is because in real life if women did report their husbands, they will be isolated and lose respect from rest the Syrian community, which means she is now without a man, and without the community. I told Anna that during the pandemic, I was in a very bad emotional situation, and I needed to go away for a short time. I Googled the homeless hostel number. A lady on the phone asked me, “how can I help you?” I begged her to give me a space for one night, but the lady said “You can only come if you went to the police, they will bring you here.” I said please I need this, the woman apologised and hung up the phone.

That day Anna said, I cannot go on with this training, I want to meet with you to learn how we can help Syrian women based on what you just explained.

Dear Mother, you will forever be etched in my memory.

I remember the day you received the first copy of this study. I was there, and now you're here with me in my own study.



On the way of women's emancipation: Traditions, norms:

Adjusting the age of custody

A study by: Shafika Dozom

Plate1: The cover of a study On the Way of Women's Emancipation: traditions, norms.

Source of image: Kinda Nassli (2023)

I struggled to decide whether it's fair to ask adult educators to read and live with these stories, It's something that's been on my mind as I conduct my evocative autoethnographic

research. I truly believe that it's important for readers to understand the complexity, difficulty, and pain that people have experienced in their lives. It's not an easy thing to confront, but it's necessary if we want to truly understand and empathise with others. These stories can be difficult to read, but they offer a valuable perspective on the human experience. I also thought that bringing this story to my research is part of this research process to nudge towards research on identity and learning, that education which I will return to at the end of the thesis with Mezirow's transformative learning theory.

However, I wanted to refer to the people I encounter in the classes or events I attend as a practitioner and as a learner myself, whom adult educators don't know much about aside from the fact that they were once migrants in camps before arriving here, I want this story to be what Bochner and Ellis (2016, p.61) describe as “performative autoethnography to move audiences emotionally in order to engage questions of identity, diversity, racism, sexism, injustice, and human suffering.”

I was raised by a divorced mother who was a feminist advocate for mother's rights to raise their children after divorce. She studied in law school and submitted a study requesting to change the law related to this topic. I used to read what she was reading. The Egyptian feminist Nawal El-Sadaawi was at the top of her list. El-Sedawaai was a doctor serving women in rural Egypt who received death threats for her writing and her lectures about her lived experience with women who were abused by the State law, the social system, and the legislation that created barriers in the face of Arabic women to achieve the emancipation and liberty they are looking for. Her book *The Hidden Face of Eve* is still a guide for me to understand what it means to be a woman in the Arabic world.

When I was on the call with a victim of sexual and human abuse, I was angry. It was shameful what she was feeling. She was worried if someone learned about what happened to her because it would be a scandal. “The victim is considered despicable by society because rape and sexual harassment victims are considered a disgrace in Arab society” (Ahmadi, 2021, p.38). In a study done by Anas Ahmadi from a legal context on El-Sedaawi novel *Woman at Zero Point* (El- Saadawi, 2007), Ahmadi said, “The law becomes scary and unfair in the eyes of women.” “Arab women feel frightened when they bring their problems to the law” (Ahmadi, 2021, p.38). The problem is that when I facilitate domestic violence workshops with Syrian women, I can see the doubt in their eyes about asking for help. I

understand that because I was in their position when I was in Turkey. I never went to the police to report the sexual harassment of the two of my neighbours who knocked on my door at night, at noon, or any time they wished. I did not trust the police there. In Ireland, I do trust the police and the law that supports women, but in the workshops, women know about the law in Ireland, but the educators do not know about another law in the Arabic-Syrian community, that locates the woman under the shadow of what is called the ‘common law’ (Saadawi, 1980, p.370). In Ireland I am not scared of the law when I started a dialogue with Anna. She knew that the PowerPoint presentation would not work here. What I needed to learn was how to trust the law, the same law that gives me rights as a refugee woman on one hand and builds barriers in my face to access higher education and find a respectful job opportunity, to be able to pay my monthly bills if I want to escape domestic violence in the other. So, for educators to be really able to help these women, they must learn the cultural background of these women so they can maintain the empowerment and emancipation of these women by adding an extended role of the adult educator “in the direction of that of a social worker” (Illeris, 2004, p.10). As Nawal El Saadawi said, “refugee women are struggling from the pressure of the male-dominated society inside their houses and from the cultural differences between the Western capitalist societies and Arabic Islamic countries” (El Saadawi, 1980, p.35).

These experiences added to my interest surrounding questions of change and questions of identity and made me wonder about the parts of my identity that have been affected by the transition between place and culture, and later in the thesis, I am coming back to this with Mezirow’s transformative learning theory. In fact, women’s experiences that I read about with El- Saadawi and the women’s experiences I learned about, made me think about my own experience and reflect on it in by asking more questions about identity. There are many ways to think about learning, but I am particularly interested in this thesis on transformative learning and identity as defined by Mezirow.

Hot Waves in Rain

Once upon a time in Ireland, I am sitting in front of my window looking at the rain, the rain keeps crawling on the reflection of my face making my tears look like a sweating body just like the body of Ireland. I love the rain here, I can hide my hot flushes in it, and I can hide

my tears too. Yesterday I was kissing my son when he wiped his face and looked at me saying. " You are wet Mami, are you sick?" I don't know if I am sick, I know that I am transforming now into something to become a non-perfect woman, or maybe to be more perfect now. I never expected to feel ashamed because of my body. I thought I am wiser and stronger. I just did not know how I became 50 years old. Time was passing while I was waiting to start over a new safe life, to love and be loved, to be touched or kissed, I forgot that I have a body of a woman. Refugee bodies need safety and food, not love and kisses, or stupid things like looking attractive or wearing makeup. Oh, I love make-up. I have liked lipstick since I was a child. My Mom never had one, she was a divorced woman, and she said to me, men look at the lipstick of women as an invitation for a kiss. I did not agree. I wear my lipstick at home even after I became single woman because I love my body. I do this for me not for anyone else. But when I was in Turkey, I did not wear make-up, because I was scared that men there were already thinking about Syrian refugee women as free objects. My Mom died in September and I miss her now but she is not here, no one is here to share my weakness.

The rain stopped, I wore my lipstick and went for a walk, September is wet and silent in Ireland. When I was young in Syria, September was hot and noisy, the fallen leaves cracked under my steps, all gone now, the fallen leaves in Ireland are wise and keep the secrets of mine.

On my 18th birthday, my gift from my mother was attached to a card she wrote "to my beloved daughter, your body is yours, you are not the other half of any man, love, enjoy and be safe, welcome to the real world of women." The gift was a book *Al-Wajh al Ari Lil Mara'a al Arabiyya* translated literally as 'The Naked Face of the Arab Woman' by the feminist Egyptian writer Nawal El Sadaawi, who was a doctor treating female patients in rural Egypt, who witnessed and brought lived stories of the women she met through her experience. This was my resource to learn about being a proud woman. But when I became a refugee, I lost my gender identity. I do not feel like a woman in Ireland, I feel like a refugee. Something related between shame and menopause. Losing my home and losing my pride. In the Arabic world, the woman's body metaphorically is compared to the land, the homeland is a mother, and the local language is a mother, the beautiful natural places are versions, even weather is referred to through women, spring on the cheeks of the woman, cold in bed like winter, hot and sexy, and forgotten like the fallen autumn leaves. In her book, Al Sadaawi referred to the connection between a personal issue such as 'female virginity' and critically

salient political events such as the migration of large groups of Arab refugees (Sadaawi, 1980, p.7) I came from the Arab militants who insisted that the word a'ard (honour) be replaced in the Arab dictionary by the word ard (meaning land) (Sadaawi, 1980, p.5). I heard many inconvenient comments on my new situation. Every time I opened the window, every time I turned off the heat. I needed to change this meaning in my mind to separate the value of my body from being protected or invaded by men, this personal change in my body is exposed to everyone through the hot flushes, and I am judged again by the men and young women around me. I needed to read Nawal again. I found the book interpreted into the English language with a different title, Nawal El Sadaawi's book in the Arabic language is *Al Wajh al Ari Lil Mara'a al Arabiyya* translated literally as 'The Naked Face of the Arab Woman.' The translated version's title became: 'The Hidden Face of Eve.' I wonder why the title has changed. When I got this book from my mother, she wanted me to break the fear of reading the word (naked) to feel its power, to read and see the word 'naked' without feeling embarrassed, to love my body, and learn about its value, this was a feminist, powerful message. So, I decided to bring my personal problem (the hot flushes) into public, and I started introducing myself in webinars, at work, in Zoom meetings; "Kinda Nassli, I am a mother of three, I am 50 years old, and I have hot flashes)." Nawal said "We expose our weakness rather than attempting to cover them up. This is necessary if we are to overcome them" (Sadaawi, 1980, p.5). When I shared my thoughts I empowered even Irish women to comment on menopause and refer to their embarrassing unexplained situation, especially in front of men. Women are expected to be always perfect, perfect moms, perfect wives, have perfect bodies, and they will be perfect if they did all the previous things. As Saadawi said, "Few know that they are no longer women, but have allowed themselves to be transformed into mere objects or even parts of an object" (El Saadawi, 1980, p. 155). I did not transfer into objects. Even when I wear my make-up, I do it because I enjoy it, I do it for me, not to invite men into a sexual relationship.

According to Mezirow, the transformative learning process within awareness involves a recognition that an alternative way of understanding may provide new insights into a problem (2006, p.124). For me I needed to think again about the meaning of my body as I learned about it, I *added* value to my body, not the men around me nor the women. This thinking about the value of my body goes back to my family identity (Illeris, 2014, p.85).

Chapter Four

Learning in Ireland

Family Resources

Once upon a time in Ireland, in the family resources centre, I was interviewed by one of the ladies Mary, to complete a form to join the English conversation classes in the centre. The form was full of boxes that I have to tick with 'yes' or 'no.' There were so many questions in detail about my skills, my education, my family, my hobbies, and even my dreams and ambitions in Ireland. I even brought with me some of my handmade crafts, and I made it clear that I need help organising an exhibition called WAITING, so I can share my stories with the Irish community. Mary told me that they are lucky to have me in the centre, that I am talented and overqualified, and that she will call me back about the work, the study, and the exhibition. I came back home feeling happy and holding the light at the end of the tunnel in my hand, I am not invisible anymore, and Mary will call me back, I spent over an hour with her filling in the form, they are not wasting their time with me for nothing. I made sure my mobile phone is not on silent mode, I am waiting for Mary's call, week after week, month after month, but Mary never called. Finally, I met her in the English conversation sessions, but she did not remember me, Kinda the overqualified talented woman, preparing the handmade pieces that will tell my WAITING stories in Turkey,

Illeris explained how the concept of identity was developed by Erik Erikson, who defined it as “a combination of the personal experience of being the same in all different situations of life and how we wish to present ourselves to others.” Erikson claimed that identity is developed during the life age of youth and maintained as a core of understanding for the rest of our lives... identity has two concepts, an internal psychological aspect, and an external aspect when we present ourselves to others (1950; 1986), this understanding of identity is important and because it includes self-perception integrated both in relation to the individual and externally about the individual’s interaction with the surrounding world. So, identity is the most balanced term to cover and include the learning dimensions as a “coherent whole” (Illeris, 2014, p.153). As the world changes, and so too the psychological concept of identity and how it relates to our interactions between the individual and the social environment. When examining identity through the lens of transformative learning, it becomes clear that identity only includes matters of certain importance in relation to the mental totality of the individual.

In my conversation with Mary, I have a moment of possibility, which is either a fake or forgotten promise. In both cases, that experience was very harsh and heavy, and I got all that to the extent to which it fractured a part of my identity...or melted...or shrivelled...

According to Illeris (2014), there are four main stages of life: childhood, youth, adulthood, and mature adulthood. We experience transformative learning and develop our identity during adult and mature adulthood. Adulthood is considered the "golden age", where our identity is ‘stable and coherent.’ Mature adulthood typically occurs between the ages of 45 and 65, and at this stage, we realise that “the remaining lifetime is not unlimited” (Illeris, 2014, p. 90). Illeris explains that during this phase, learning becomes very selective, and “transformative learning is rare” (2014, p. 91).

But from my learning experience as an amateur adult, who went through a life turn and experienced external events like leaving my home suddenly and starting a new life in Ireland, it was not that learning was not selective for me, but that transformative learning, unlike what Illeris suggested, was “an aura of necessity.” Learning was a very necessary decision to take. I did not have a choice but to study and understand how to live in my new world. My age just made it sometimes harder in the context of being independent and needing help like the help I was waiting from Mary. If I come back to Illeris here, I agree that the role of Mary for people

like me who are in vulnerable situations ...such activities may very well add to one's identity and in this includes transformative learning" (Illeris, 2014, p. 90). I wanted Mary to help me grow this motivation, to create a qualitative good opportunity to be recognised and regain my identity, by learning and engaging in cultural activities. As a migrant woman, who is struggling with shame identity, cultural barriers and hidden trauma, I walked towards a transformative learning process because I needed it. "In general, the life turn is certainly something that in a radical way affects both the identity as such and not least the core identity" (Illeris, 2014, p. 91).

Illeris raised several questions about the nature of transformations (progressive or regressive), barriers to transformative learning, and the characteristics of transformative learning in connection to personal development and educational activities. And other times my age was a motivation to learn how to do something to prove to myself and others that I am a qualified person.

Waiting for things to change in Ireland seemed longer to me compared to Turkey. I wait for Mary to remember her promises or help me with job opportunities. It takes three years of doing nothing to receive financial support for higher education. I wish those who plan and strategise for integration would see me as an individual instead of an object in their events. Time has become a new meaning for me as I grow older, and I feel like a vulnerable child needing assistance. I want to be acknowledged for my talents and skills, not just seen as a refugee. Mary tells me I am "overqualified", but I'm unsure what she means. Is it because I am a refugee or a migrant woman?

According to Illeris, "adults do not transform elements of their identity if they do not have serious reasons for doing so" (Illeris, 2014, p. 159). I wanted to find meaning and value for myself (the internal concept of identity) and share this value with Mary and the local people (the external concept of identity) and this transformative learning experience was going to make a real change for the meaning of my life. My motivation was a desire to participate in cultural activities and transform my experience as a refugee woman into a sense of pride. This motivation was powerful enough for me to have a positive transformative learning experience. However, Mary's motivation was to keep the English conversations running and to help migrants to speak better English.

Learning English in Ireland

I often enjoy my coffee and socialise in the English conversation classroom. The only place I could socialise when I first arrived in Ireland. During the question exercise, I enjoyed sharing my ideas and thoughts while attempting to speak English to the best of my abilities, but I didn't provide honest answers to the questions. I felt apprehensive about sharing my genuine opinions in front of Irish people, which seemed peculiar. I often experienced severe panic attacks whenever I spoke, resulting in an increased heart rate, a dry mouth, and difficulty breathing. I constantly lived in fear of saying something controversial or incorrect about topics such as social welfare or the Department of Justice.

Once upon a time in Ireland, the tutors in the classroom placed twelve photographs on the table and instructed the students to choose one that meant something to them. As I contemplated which picture to choose, a retired English physics teacher, who was one of the tutors, picked up a photograph depicting a camel in the desert and handed it to me. He casually remarked, 'Here you go, Kinda. I'm sure this will remind you of your home, Syria.' In response, I chose a picture portraying a city by the beach, full of beautiful houses and lush green trees, emphasising that it reminded me of my home. I couldn't comprehend why he gave himself the right to choose on my behalf and from where he concluded that my home resembled that picture.

The next exercise is usually enjoyable; we pick a card and read the question written on it, then proceed to answer in whichever way we like. However, as I began to read the question on the card, a wave of dizziness came over me, causing my hands to tremble uncontrollably and the card itself to shake. The question on the card was: What are the best and worst aspects of Ireland you have seen? To give my mind some rest and a chance to formulate an answer regarding the worst aspect without causing harm to anyone, including myself, I decided to start by discussing the positive aspects of Ireland.

I said the best aspect was the strong family connections I witnessed from my window every Saturday and Sunday. In the markets, it was a common sight to see three generations walking together, showing a profound respect for family values. As for the worst aspect...an overwhelming panic attack suddenly took me, leaving me with two conflicting answers. In my thoughts, the response formed was: 'The worst thing is when Irish people ask about my religion. During my time Volunteering on Mary's Meals, as I stood in the street for two hours

collecting donations, two women approached me and whispered; Are you Christian? Catholic...or? At that moment, I found myself at a loss for words, struggling to breathe. This question held grave implications, particularly if one had experienced the horrors of war in Syria. Disturbing images of ISIS abducting and killing people, both Christian and Muslim, in my home country, flooded my mind, rendering me speechless. I longed to tell those women that my presence in Ireland was an escape from the confines of religious divisions and that the only god I believe in now is justice. However, I couldn't express my true thoughts to either the woman or my fellow volunteers. What I actually said was, 'The worst thing I observed upon arriving in Ireland is the prevalence of thick, closed curtains in Irish houses. It contributes to the already gloomy, rainy, and cold weather, creating a sombre and desolate atmosphere. When I walk around at five o'clock in the afternoon during winter, I find myself wondering where the people are. In my hometown of Damascus, people keep their curtains and windows open to welcome the morning sun and enjoy the view from their balconies and engage with neighbours and passers-by. I see the Irish as both curious and conservative. As I finished my sentence, tears began streaming down my face. No one in the class understood what had just happened. Flooded with memories of my city, I experienced a mix of relief for successfully completing the psychological test and a longing to return home or remain in the classroom simultaneously. The tutor, a kind-hearted woman, approached me and suggested we move to another room. She handed me a tissue and offered to connect me with a counsellor. At that moment, I believed what some friends around me keep saying: I have mental health issues and am not stable. I returned home with swollen eyes, only to be told by my family that I should stop attending the class, as my emotional state was adversely affecting others. This left me feeling guilty and sad, yet I still desired to interact with people and strive not to cry or experience panic in the future.

Considerations of power dynamics, diversity, and migration have a significant impact on adult education in various contexts. Brigitte Kukovetz and Annette Sprung delve into the relationship between solidarity, power, and adult learning in a recent book chapter. They highlight the importance of volunteering as a valuable learning process that addresses crises faced by humans. However, they warn about the potential for volunteering to be misused to evade responsibility in a neoliberal environment and perpetuate inequality, particularly concerning race, ethnicity, and citizenship rights. Thus, it is crucial to engage in critical thinking when participating in adult education and strive towards establishing fair and

impartial learning environments. To deal with the doubleness of power they argue we need to be able to link everyday solidarity to a wider analysis of power structures.

Mezirow believes that “as educators, our goal in communicative learning is to assist learners to negotiate their own meanings and values, rather than to passively accept social reality as defined by others” (Mezirow, 2007, p. 14). Illeris explained that transformative learning could be progressive when ‘something that in some way has to do in the identity, a mode of experience is changed into something better. ‘This is what transformative learning aims to do, ‘to overcome personal limitations ‘but if the experience is so demanding and challenging, ‘the outcome rather become withdrawal or regressive’ and finally, there is the restoring transformative learning, and that is when the learner sets new and more realistic goals (Illeris, 2014, p.160).

I think when educators made assumptions about me, they showed their power by concentrating on my vulnerability rather than assessing me to discover a vital layer in my personality, but instead of learning how to overcome my fear and develop the qualitative opportunity to change and engage in a progressive, transformative learning “transformations towards something better” but the power of the tutor who decided how I should remember my home, and the second tutor who meant to help me but made me feel unstable, unsure if I was good enough to be among these people or not. This regressive transformative learning experience changed me and had consequences on my every day identity and family identity; they confirmed my vulnerability with their power instead of using this power to help me get out of it.

I recently found myself in a situation where I had the opportunity to engage in transformative learning and share my ideas and thoughts. However, I faced some challenges that required me to integrate with the community in order to make a progressive change in my relationship with myself. Specifically, I needed to recover my identity from the shame and fear that had been holding me back. Unfortunately, the tutors in charge of the program ended up making me miss this opportunity. It was incredibly frustrating and disheartening. As Illeris identified this situation “regressive transformation has taken place, before a new transformative process has started” (Illeris, 2014, p. 97).

The educators need to learn how to help us step out of this fear and make us engage in communicative learning to negotiate our meanings and values in a welcoming equal

environment. I searched in this area to learn how the Irish tutors prepared to engage with the migrants and the Syrian refugees to teach them the English language. I found a paper that focused on twenty- six adult Syrian refugees who were in their acquisition to learn the English language in Ireland to integrate with their new community in a period of one to two years since their arrival who are resettling in towns across Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP). The teachers interviewed in the study were experienced and qualified ESOL tutors (Karazi, 2019, p.6-7).

ESOL3: We had like a day where people came in and talked about them [...] but just generally [...] about trauma [...] but teaching strategies and dealing with people who have been through trauma[...] not really.

There were no official guidelines available: SP10: The Department [of Justice and Equality] doesn't publish anything or hasn't done much research, or hasn't made anything available, so we were a bit surprised that there wasn't more [...]

Peo Interviewer: Does the Department [of Justice] look for an evaluation or anything like that?

ESOL4: Nothing yet, and that's why my line manager is saying about trying to get all this experience on paper.

ESOL1: And we gave a talk in [...] about our experiences, and we tried to speak you know, openly, and some of the tutors came up afterwards and they said, 'oh we're having the same problems [...] I think to be honest we were preaching to the wrong people [...] they were all tutors on the ground, and they all said the same thing; the people who should have been at that were the ALOs [Adult Literacy Organizers] the CEOs [Chief Executive Officers], the government ministers etc., you know the people sitting up in [the Department of] Justice who are making all these plans.

English conversation classes could be a progressive experience, but they did not in these two cases, the problem is the transformation that was intended and that that would meet the challenge no longer seems attractive' (Illeris, 2014, 94).

Mazirow said' critical reflection is a process of testing the justification or validity of taken-for-granted premises, the role of dialogue becomes salient' (Mezirow, 1991, p. 354) the conditions for collaborative discourse

The Macrame Woman

Once upon a time in Ireland, I was invited to International Women's Day as a Syrian migrant woman to speak and to do a workshop teaching migrant women how to weave macrame, I arrived at the place for my little speech. A lady showed me the way to a room on the second floor where there was a poster of the event. On the poster of the event, there were the speaker's names. I did not find mine, there was only the Irish woman's name and her picture, and the words 'other speakers'. I was asked to stay there and start weaving macrame in case any woman arrived and wanted to learn, and she confirmed that when it is time for me to speak, she will call me to come down. I was alone in the room for more than half an hour, staring at the poster and feeling angry. I went downstairs. Women were from multiple cultures and did not speak English, but they were sitting there listening to the CEO of the NGO that organised the meeting with the Irish woman whose picture is on the poster. I did not see any interpreters.

Then it was my turn to speak. I did not read my little speech, but I said "we need your help to stop making migrant and refugee women as decoration in some events". I asked these influential Irish women to stop being our voice and give us the chance to earn back our voices. The event ended with the same Irish women taking pictures for social media, even without any decorations. The event ended, and I had plenty of time since I had taken the day off from my work. I approached one of the women and asked, "who is going to pay me for my work today?" She said, "Kinda there are biscuits, coffee and tea, also some sandwiches for lunch too; we are all volunteering here today, this event for migrant international women I believe you can volunteer too, we expect you to support the migrant women like us."

Learning is a complex process that involves both external and internal factors. According to the learning theory, individuals interact with their environment, including other people and their culture, in order to acquire new knowledge and skills. For me, being around powerful women provided many opportunities for learning. However, learning is not just about external factors; it also involves individual acquisition, which is influenced by prior learning experiences. The key to this process is connecting new information with what has already

been learned. Illeris (2004, p.81) explained that” the core of this process is that the new impressions are connected with the results of prior learning in a way that influences both.” To explain more about the learning experience I’ve been through that day, and based on Mezirow’s transformative learning theory, we learn in one of three ways: by extending our existing frames of reference, learning new ones, or transforming our existing frames of reference. That day I needed to learn other terms of knowledge or the information society (Illeris, 2004, p. 80). There was an external interaction process between me and my social environment; there was also an internal psychological process of elaborating my prior learning and experience in visiting the hair salon connected with the new acquisition, a fundamental learning theory created in this experience no doubt, (Illeris, 2004). Where I created my “personal structure of value system” (Illeris, 2004, p. 81), but this learning process did not go well, I came back with a bad experience; I found myself learning cognitively content that I did not want to know. I was grasped to fill a document about my personal data to dye my hair, and I was also emotionally learning in defence mechanisms experiencing repression of impulses. It is a defence against the “overwhelming number and complexity of impulses” (Illeris, 2004, p.87). In my new world here in Ireland I will need to develop not only my English language but my capacity to make new meanings, critically reflect and act in a flexible open way (Mezirow, 2007). It might be surprising to many educators how complex it is to start a learning journey from the dominating society, where emancipation from judgement and stereotypes is an obstacle to learn, and it is a doubled problem for labelled people like me. I wish I could learn how to engage with the Irish daily praxis activities, things we don’t know in classes. “We need to develop forms of adult education which can adequately respond...to the volume of knowledge” (Finnegan, 2019, p.45). Today when I remember that day, I don’t feel upset by the ladies in the salon, I feel upset that I accepted to be that vulnerable to be emotionally oppressed and abused; I could refuse to write my personal data, I could negotiate the payment, and I could do many things. But I can do this self-examination of the disorienting dilemma because I can make a “collaborative dialogue to a major thinking of one’s assumptions” (Mezirow, 1991, p.155).

The first step to finding myself

Once upon a time in Ireland, I was in the car; I was thinking about joining level two or three in further education, even if I am level seven, as one of the Pakistani migrant women told me since I have a bachelor's in English literature, it will be better than doing nothing. My phone

rang, and she introduced herself as Sarah, and she got my number from Declan in Maynooth. The only Declan I knew was Declan Markey from College Connect¹, whom I met when the family resources centre organised a trip to Maynooth University for asylum seekers and refugees. That day I walked into Maynooth University with Declan, who explained to us the roles and conditions to join higher education in Ireland, I took a selfie picture there and sent it to my mother; I told her “This is where I am going to study.” The following year my mother died, I didn’t join the college, but that photo made my mother proud of me, and made me believe the dream.

Illeris claimed that individual experience, critical reflection, and authentic relationships are some of the factors that should be involved to promote a progressive transformation.’ In order to make the learning process advanced, there are many principles; one of them is that ‘teachers and other people supporting the process should be aware that they function as models.’

Sarah is starting a new project and looking for refugees and asylum seekers to join a peer researchers’ team. That day I was reborn; the seed of my fresh root in my new home in Ireland was planted by these two wonderful people, Declan and Sarah, I brought my own experience to this research and got the life experience of other women who shared their , our stories about accessing higher education in Ireland. For the first time in Ireland, I feel that I am valuable, just like in the old days.

Declan, who really connected me to College Connect, and Sarah who joined me with my identity again through the research *A Community Needs Analysis with Refugees and People Seeking Asylum* (Meaney Sartori & Nwanze, 2021). During the research I learned about myself through Sarah’s eyes. My voice has value because it can change, and can help other people too. I have a title now, ‘a peer researcher.’ No need to pay a former TV presenter, a former respectful woman, a former woman of dignity, now I can express myself in terms of human value, not with numbers, PPS number or date of birth. Sarah, I was profoundly feeling respected, and what I learned with her was ‘characterised by a personal motivation without the aura of necessity or external incentive that often forms the bases of learning in earlier adulthood’ (Illeris, 2014, p. 90)

I feel like I am a real mature adult woman. Illeris, explained the connection between identity and transformative learning that is happening through a process involved with helpers like Sarah ‘who engaged herself not only professionally but also personally. ‘Listening to my stories, crying with me on others, and encouraging me to feel strong and proud, (Illeris, 2014,

p. 99). This learning process included training on new methodologies to collect data from the participants. I found myself in the true realisation of myself, my new self; there is a need to take an understanding of human emancipation away from notions of pre-existing, essential self toward a more realistic structuralist understanding of power. Through this research, I gained a deeper understanding of how power dynamics in Ireland have impacted my life as a refugee woman, with a power struggle between the political system and oppressed individuals like myself. Mezirow argues that ‘involvement in a social movement can be detrimental to critical self-reflection.’ So this individual critical self-reflection in this research, we were not a group of oppressed people, we were separate individuals who were empowered by the educator, Sarah, when she trained us and trusted our skills, we succeeded in working on the data analysis. I have now “self-confidence, self-expression, and an interest in learning.” And I became empowered when I expressed myself and said what I felt, liked and thought (Inglis, 2007, p.6).

Chapter Five

Transformative learning

Jack Mezirow

Cork- Finding myself- culture as language

Once upon a time in Ireland, I am in Cork, I love being in Cork; I feel I've been here before. The smell of the ocean gives me wings, and the smiling faces of the people make me breathe. The ocean in this city is another haven. Cities that are found on the seaside are open-minded to multi-cultures; they understand that their port is not a destination or a starting one only, it is the skill to understand the language of the waves, the flow and ebb of the moon, the anger and peace of the ocean. Walking in the English market, I was able to smell the scent of my home, the laurel soap. I picked one and saw the picture of the citadel of Aleppo wrapping it. I could not believe that I found my city in Cork, a piece of me was in that soap.

In Aleppo you will find the oldest laurel soap manufactories in the world where people keep using it; the laurel soap became Aleppo's distinctive smell. The traditional method of making it is using laurel oil, al-Marfa oil (the second press of olives) and caustic soda (sodium hydroxide) they cook it, keep it for a few days and then spread it out on a spatula and when it cools down, they cut it by hand. Weather is a significant factor here, hot and dry weather is important for this industry; the drying of the soap takes nine months, the exact time most pregnant women carry their infants, with passion and love the soap becomes usable. One piece of soap in Cork made me happy, touched the hands that cut it, and felt the olives from my home where that tree was shadowing the people gathered underneath it. That piece of soap did not take me to Syria, but it brought Syria to Cork, this is how I felt this time; I did not feel sad or lonely, I thought that this piece of soap succeeded in making a cultural connection with the natural values it has.

When I came back to the hotel I started writing an email about the new ideas that were growing in my mind to share in the Cruthu cultural festival preparation meeting. I changed the themes like migrant women in Longford to "A Scent from Aleppo the Laurel city." That piece of soap I found in Cork brought hope that culture, skills, industry, and trade the ones our ancestors started thousands of years ago survived the barriers the boundaries and the hate speeches. This piece of soap tells a story about the weather, the olive trees, the talent of the men who cut them, and the mission to spread the scent of a city in the world. The next day

I went on a quick cruise in the ocean, where the Titanic ship started its final journey, I do not imagine the ship itself, I am back to 1999 when I received a VHS Titanic film from my fiancé; I closed my eyes remembering those innocent moments of childish love, doing my best to avoid thinking about thousands of Syrians who are drowned in the sea. The tears are mixed with the salt drops of the ocean, I could not keep the 1999 images in my memory; the images from 2011-12-13-14-15-16-17-18-19-20-21-22 are much more powerful. A few hours before getting into the train, I am browsing at a charity shop in Cork, people in the shop can't help but listen to the loud radio program asking people for their support of Ukrainian refugees, on the phone, a woman is angry because she has worked so hard in her life and now the government is taking her tax money and paying for refugees who have no job, no language, and who pay no tax, they also take the houses for free while there are homeless Irish people everywhere. People in the shop, noticing multinational ties are already in the shop commenting politely, "what can they do if there is war in their country, what can they do?" I felt shocked, again, to hear the educated media people asking questions that led to another wave of hatred towards the refugees. I wish I could tell that woman on the phone that, as a refugee, I could not find a job quickly or up to my qualifications. I am paying my tax and not on the housing list.

Finding a piece of my culture in one of the Irish markets made me think again about how to introduce my Syrian identity to the Irish community in new ways, out of the lectures and meetings where I found myself talking and talking, tired of bringing the image in my mind about my Syria to the Irish people. For me, what Mezirow explained as one of the transformative learning phases is 'building competence and self-confidence' (Mezirow, 2007, p.23) in new roles and relationships.

Transformative Learning

I have been trying to come to terms with the cycles of social, economic, and cultural transformation that have taken place in the world I live in, Ireland. I have also been trying to understand the development of new powers of my new world, including my ability to envision the social world as a whole. I have a strong desire to effect a conscious and progressive transformation of society, but I am also aware of the gains and failures to do that through bringing my past experience too, facing political restrictions from the new world. All of these experiences have profoundly shaped my understanding of what it means to learn how to live in Ireland. "Learning is understood as the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p.162). When I arrived in Ireland, I brought with me my values, beliefs, stories, and self-reflection. All of these things make up my identity, including my past experiences, perspectives, and habits of mind. My cultural background and my work as a TV presenter have also shaped who I am. However, since coming to Ireland, I have also become a labelled migrant woman. These experiences have all contributed to making me the person I am today.

But the problem for me as a forced labelled Syrian migrant woman is that my past experience is not recognised in the cultural activities and educational courses I joined when I first arrived. It was not socially constructed, and my experience did not help me to a start point for dialogue with tutors or even hairdressers in Ireland, my experience did not work as a medium through which a transformation can happen positively to be myself in my new world. These three constructs are central to transformative learning theory, "critical reflection, dialogue, and experience" (Mezirow, 1991). I believe my relationship with the English language tutor and the ladies in the International Women's Day event was not open-minded enough to listen to what I knew, to strive to find common ground with me and my cultural background. They did not show empathy, which is considered a fourth construct in the transformative learning referred to by Mezirow (2003, p.60). when he said: "having an open mind, learning to listen empathically, bracketing prejudgement, and seeking common ground."

My world changed, and I want to change too. But the identity that I needed to develop or transfer was vulnerable and shamed. It was interesting for me to read that "the assumption is generally made that individuals cannot be forced to transform, but rather the people need to

be willing and able to engage in activities that have the potential to lead them to shift in perspectives” (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p.40). I can admit that learning in Ireland was a challenging experience for me. At first, I joined the classes and events in Ireland as a proud Syrian woman, I was confident in my ability to learn and grow based on my previous experience. Still, unfortunately, my relationship with certain tutors left me feeling traumatised and powerless. They did not just strip me of my own agency and replace it with unfair judgments and stereotypes. I felt forced to accept their assumptions and labels. The transformative learning process was painful and caused shame (Taylor & Cranton, 2013, p.40).

I wanted to know more about the relationship between transformative learning and identity. I became interested in Jack Mezirow’s transformative learning theory when I read about how he was inspired by his wife’s decision to pursue higher education in her middle age. And how she led him to investigate twelve re-entry college programs with eighty-three women back in 1975. As a follow-up to the study, there was a nationwide telephone survey and mail enquiry. Based on their findings, Mezirow concluded that there are ten phases of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000; Mezirow, 1996; Mezirow, 2003), and added a step later (Mezirow, 1994, p.224) so they became 11 phases. These phases are:

- 1- A disorientation dilemma.
- 2- A self-examination with a feeling of fear, anger, guilt or shame.
- 3- A critical assessment of assumptions.
- 4- Recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change.
- 5- Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and action.
- 6- I am planning a course of action.
- 7- Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan.
- 8- Provision trying of a new role.
- 9- Renegotiating relationships and negotiating new relationships.
- 10- Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships;
- 11- Reintegration into one’s life on the bases of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective.

Mezirow suggested that the disorientation dilemma could arise from “anything that opposes current thinking resulting in a major change that challenges our deep-rooted values or threatens us” (Mezirow, 1991, p.168). In my case the disorientation dilemma arises from almost everything that has happened to me since I arrived in Ireland, I can count a series or a bundle of dilemmas; each one had a series of relevant dilemmas that happened at once, but all of them caused me pain and shame. Am I overreacting and so emotional or is there something really wrong? As an adult learner I have to live with panic attacks, sadness, shame and vulnerability in what are supposed to be ‘opportunities to rebuild myself.’ For the adult educators, I was a vulnerable learner, who just need to learn few English language grammar classes and appreciate the safe life I got as a forced migrant woman.

I understand that Jack Mezirow’s focused on the rational and cognitive aspects of learning while understanding its emotional and social aspects, but I feel that “cognition and emotion are intertwined in the process of reflection” (Mälkki & Green, 2018, p. 26). It is the function of emotions that pushed me to try to end my life when I became an ashamed, labelled woman, a sad mother, and a “thing” without value in my new world. It is also the function of emotions that motivated me and produced reactions to survive, emotions of love to my kids, I met educators who listened to me and have empathy with me, they felt what I felt, crying when I shared my stories, we connected emotionally, and they helped me as a learner and not as a task of their work calendar. The emotion, with its negative or positive experimental tones, prepares us for requisite action and directs our cognitive functions accordingly” (Damasio,1999). Neurological research was done by Therefore Damasio (1999), who claimed that “the basic function of emotions is to motivate and produce the reactions necessary to survival.

In order to find my place in the world, I had to learn how to live in Ireland. However, the people who offered to help me there presented me with a difficult choice: I could either stay in a small, cramped space where I would be safe but limited by assumptions and judgments, or I could venture out on my own to find a new position without any real power or agency. In a subjective critical reflection, I examined myself, focusing on finding answers to my questions, Mezirow asked “why we have acquired distorted or dysfunctional frames of reference” (2007, p.13). I keep asking myself, why did I take off my good coat and listen to my friend's advice? Why did I work the whole day for 15 Euros? (p.35). As Mezirow said,

“we discover as adults the urgent need to adapt the world changes by applying new perspectives to gain control over their lives” (1991, p.3). I was trying to adapt but I was unhappy in that safe box, or the comfort zone as Maliki described it, “the experience of comfort when nothing questions our meaning perspectives” (Mälkki & Green, 2018, p. 29). According to Mezirow, “only through critical reflection can we fully exploit the immanent potential of the knowledge and information at our disposal in an empowering and even emancipatory way” (Finnegan, 2019, p.47). But reflection is not only a “tool for developing the meaning perspective, but also a threat to those basic functions that meaning perspective takes care of” (Mälkki & Green, 2018, p. 29).

Mezirow explained that critical reflection is based on three types: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. These types of reflections are designed to critically assess all aspects of the situation (Mezirow, 1991). By taking the time to examine my actions and thought patterns, I identified areas where I may have fallen short and made positive changes moving forward. As Mezirow said: “It is not so much what happens to people but how they interpret and explain what happens to them that determines their actions, their hopes, their emotional well-being, and their performance” (Mezirow, 1990, p.105).

I learned that educators and helpers who stereotyped me didn't really know who I am, and I am not sure if they genuinely wanted or needed to know, they have their truth about me, and they did not need to know more, I was just another migrant woman. They were powerful and I was vulnerable, I wanted to start a dialogue with them, but there was no opportunity for me to engage in a collaborative dialogue. I didn't feel confident in the information or my ability to participate, so I could not understand their or my truth. “We don't always agree, but through collaborative discourse, we can better understand” (Mezirow, 2007, p. 14).

As I continued to observe and learn, I began to notice similarities and differences. Through this process, I gained a greater understanding and was able to recognize new meanings. As I applied this information to my own life experiences, it transformed into knowledge. “The analysis cannot be derived from the facts themselves; it must come from the input of the learner” (Mezirow, 1991, p. 25). When I decided what to learn and how I found my path to reconnect with my identity and with the world around me, knowledge gave me power, there were ‘others’ who wanted to listen to me. They did not want to give me a voice, they trusted the voice I had and learned new truths about me, as I see it. Foucault (1980) sees the production of power only through certain discourses of truth, “We are subjected to the

production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except the reproduction of truth” (Foucault, 1980, p.94). Now I can have a collaborative dialogue with my educators and the Irish people I meet in daily life activities, and maybe this will work in the hair salon too.

Freire, (1970, p. 77) says “when people lack a critical understanding of their reality, apprehending it in fragments which they do not perceive as interacting constituent elements of the whole, they cannot truly know their starting reality.” I used to know the start of my reality when I arrived in Ireland, an educated confident powerful woman. I left it at the gate of the Non-EU entrance in the airport. I was given another reality since then, a ‘refugee’, an invisible prepacked vulnerable uneducated woman. This woman was not me for 46 years. Being traumatised and labelled will not change that truth, but it might make me lose it. Mezirow (1990, p.1) explores this by saying “critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built.” This is how he sees the process of transformative learning theory, “a rational process of learning within awareness is a metacognitive application of critical thinking that transforms an acquired *frame of reference* – a mindset or worldview of orienting assumptions and expectations involving values, beliefs, and concepts- by assessing its epistemic assumptions” (Dirkx& Mezirow, 2006, p. 124).

As a Syrian migrant woman, my experiences have been shaped by both my past and my present. Living in Ireland has taught me valuable lessons and helped me develop a new life perspective. Through critical reflection and a willingness to change my habits of mind and point of view, I have grown and evolved as a person. My frames of reference constantly shift and adapt to the world around me.

Adult education can be the freedom Syrian refugee and forced migrant people as I prefer to be referred to myself. Social and economic rights will stay in the powerful decision makers’ drawers without education, fair employment, integration with host community, learning the language as a tool to be empowered not as a final target, and building bridges of trust and respect in the relationship between the tutors and adult learners.

As an Irish resident refugee, I have witnessed a genuine interest in protecting the rights of refugees, however, it's important to ensure that refugees have practical access to their rights, For example, while Syrian refugees are welcome to access education starting with English language conversation, there is often a cultural shock that can cause regressive transformative learning. Tutors are not always trained to handle the traumatised adult learners without

imposing them to squeeze them in that vulnerable situation, which can build a gap between learners and educational opportunities.

Despite being a qualified TV presenter and documentary filmmaker with 20 years of experience, my only job opportunity upon arrival was as a low-paid kitchen assistant. While the law protects my right to work, it does not guarantee equity and equality in job opportunities based on skills and life experience.

There are also hidden obstacles for refugees seeking citizenship in Ireland, such as delays in the process. Some individuals have had to wait three years before even applying for citizenship and then had to push for the process to move forward without any apparent reason for the delay. We need to discuss the power of the state in providing access to refugee rights and protecting the time frame for obtaining those rights.

Looking back on my life since arriving in Ireland, I often felt alone in the world. Everyone seemed to be part of some big, connected group, while I was just one individual struggling to find my place. No one seemed to understand what I was going through. Being a refugee made me feel like a woman without value. As a mother, I feel a great responsibility towards my kids in this harsh world. I often think about my mother too, who was a source of power, love, and motivation for me. Though I lost her and felt alone again, what she taught me is still in my consciousness. I want to learn to love my kids more to empower them. I am reminded of my core and family identities before all else. This sense of connection and belonging keeps me strong and gives me the solidarity to face life's challenges. Now, as an adult learner, I must be strong to be a good role model for my children and for other migrant women who are struggling with the labels, the system, and the new culture. Many of my friends wonder why I'm studying at my age and taking all these courses and pieces of training. The reason might seem personal, but because the personal is political, I feel it is important to empower myself and other migrant women through education and knowledge.

Thank You

I am grateful for the opportunities that Ireland has provided me, and I am excited to continue learning and growing as I navigate this new chapter of my life. 'an inherent function of perception and cognition, an active process of cognition again and reinterpreting a previously learned experience in a new context.'

As a student in adult and community education, Dr Angela McGinn, Dr Michael Murray, it was an extraordinary experience to learn with you, attending your lectures was a healing educational time to learn how to continue my life journey in solidarity and self-confidence. I am also grateful to Dr Rose Gallagher, who believed in me in the interview when I applied to study in Maynooth, Dr Rose and Dr Angela did not have to tick boxes in the interview, they listened to me and genuinely believed I have a voice. To my colleagues in the class, thank you for answering my annoying questions that never stopped every time we attended the lectures.

To my supervisor Dr Fergal Finnegan, I wanted to thank you by pointing out an excerpt from the Divine Comedy, specifically the part when Dante must continue the journey without Virgil, who guided him the whole way from the gate of hell to the gates of heaven. This did not stop Virgil from going above and beyond for Dante. Upon climbing Mount Purgatory and approaching the outskirts of Heaven, there is one final test a soul must pass to earn its place in Heaven; a river of fire that is said to burn a soul's sins away so that it enters Heaven pure. Virgil did not shy away from this test, even knowing he cannot continue on with Dante, and Dante, oblivious to this detail, follows Virgil and fords this river and upon reaching the other side, turns to Virgil to ask him questions, as he'd done tens of times throughout their journey, to find that Virgil had left, for he has completed his mission. Dante, now without his guide and teacher, must not grieve for he has other journeys and trials in his future, and his mentor, Virgil, equipped him with the wisdom and fortitude to face his future. In the Arabic language we pronounce Virgil the same way we pronounce Fergal, and we write both names the same way” فيرغل“.

*As soon as on my vision smote the power
Sublime, that had already pierced me through
Ere from my boyhood I had yet come forth,*

*To the left hand I turned with that reliance
With which the little child runs to his mother,
When he has fear, or when he is afflicted,*

*To say unto Virgilius: “Not a drachm
Of blood remains in me, that does not tremble;
I know the traces of the ancient flame.”*

*But us Virgilius of himself deprived
Had left, Virgilius, sweetest of all fathers,*

Virgilius, to whom I for safety gave me:

*Nor whatsoever lost the ancient mother
Availed my cheeks now purified from dew,
That weeping they should not again be darkened.*

*“Dante, because Virgilius has departed
Do not weep yet, do not weep yet a while;
For by another sword thou need’st must weep.”*

Dante Alighieri, “Purgatorio” Canto 30.

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¹College connect is a joint initiative of four higher education institutes in the Midlands and North Dublin Region(MEND). Athlone institute of technology (AIT), Dundalk institute Technology (DkIT), Dublin City University (DCU), and Maynooth University (MU).