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Ich, Sejla Softic, erkläre hiermit, dass ich die vorliegende Diplomarbeit eigenständig verfasst habe. Die für die Entstehung der Diplomarbeit verwendete Literatur wurde ausnahmslos im Literaturverzeichnis angegeben.

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural and national variety has become a natural part of our world. Literature as one of the predominant expressions of human thoughts, emotions, feelings, fantasies and memories reflects this development. Immigrant literature is therefore more present and essential than ever and needs to be acknowledged outside of its niche.

The following thesis analyzes the question of identity struggle in two works of contemporary immigrant fiction. Bosnian-American author Aleksandar Hemon and Burmese-American author Wendy Law-Yone have been chosen as representatives of the genre of immigrant fiction. Both authors have immigrated to the United States and chosen to compose their works in the English language. Hence they are considered part of the canon of immigrant literature. Hemon's *Nowhere Man* and Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree* will serve as primary texts in the analysis at hand.

The thesis consists of a theoretical part, which will introduce the topics of culture, identity and migration, and an analysis, which will focus on the representation of the struggle for identity in *Nowhere Man* and *The Coffin Tree*.

The theoretical section serves as a necessary foundation and introduction to concepts and definitions that are paramount for the subsequent analysis. First I will consider several conceptions of culture in connection to identity and ideology. The phenomenon of globalization and the notion of multiculturalism will necessarily be included.

The second concept that will be introduced is identity. Here I will focus on how identity is constructed, transformed, used and how it is connected to nation, culture and human relations in general.

This will be followed by an examination of the term migration, of reasons for migration and the connection to identity. Crucial to this thesis is how migration and the resulting displacement affects immigrants' mental state, well-being and identity. Therefore a discussion of acculturation strategies, including integration and assimilation will be conducted. Individual differences in these processes will be considered.

To conclude the theoretical discussion, I will present different views on the genre of immigrant fiction and argue that the primary texts can also be referred to as exile literature. The historical development of the genre will be outlined shortly in order to attempt an accurate placement of the novels at hand. Immigrant writers, their authenticity and their audience will be an integral part of this section and subsequent analysis.

Following the theoretical foundation, the analysis will focus on Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man*, and Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree*. Both novels describe the difficult life of a young protagonist who has been forced into exile and struggles to adjust to the new social and cultural environment in the United States. The focus will be on the struggle for identity that is necessarily the cause as well as the source of a

complicated life. This struggle manifests itself in various forms and causes different symptoms. It will be argued that the struggle for identity may be reinforced by migration, but is caused by the trauma of displacement and closely connected to the characters' upbringing, their relationships and the past and present ideologies imposed on them. An important focus will be the representation of identity reconstruction.

I. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The first part of the thesis at hand will serve as a basic introduction to the concepts of culture, identity and migration. Culture influences our identity and is reflected in it. Therefore I will consider several conceptions of culture and argue that there is no universal definition that is commonly accepted. To support the comprehension of the notion of identity, various concepts of identity, identity formation and its connection to culture, nation and migration will be reviewed. Furthermore, the term migration will be analyzed in connection to phenomena like globalization and multiculturalism. By examining different acculturation strategies I will draw a link to the concept of identity. Finally the genre of immigrant fiction will be introduced and critically reviewed.

1. Culture

The term *culture* is one of the most powerful and at the same time one of the most ambiguous and vaguest expressions in the English language. It describes physical things, theoretical concepts as well as human beings and their behavior. Its meanings vary across different fields of academic discourse and have been modified countless times over the course of history. While the term was the object of constant disagreement among scholars in earlier times, today most scholars agree that there cannot be a single universal definition of the concept of *culture*. In the following section different definitions of *culture* will be introduced.

1.1. Definitions of Culture

Raymond Williams claims that *culture* is “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” (1983: 87). Before the Industrial Revolution the basic meaning of the term was associated with agricultural cultivation. Thereafter Williams equates the term with the process of individual development and education, and later with “the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole” (1961: 16).

Sorder and Van Loon support an anthropologist view of culture as “social behavior” (4). When looking at the history of the term, they compare the US anthropologist Margret Mead (1901–1978), who defined culture as “learned behavior of a society or a subgroup” (qtd. in Sorder & Van: 5) to the British anthropologist Sir E.B. Tylor (1832 –1917), who defined culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (4).

Culture in the historic context of the 19th century mostly referred to high culture,

since music, theater and the other arts were reserved for the upper and the middle classes rather than for the working class members of society. High culture was strictly separated from low culture, because it carried national ideals mass culture could not adhere to.

Williams, however, sees things differently. He dismisses this distinction, having grown up in a working class environment himself, and argues that culture is in fact “ordinary”:

Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purpose, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning. The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressure of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land. (1989: 4).

Furthermore Williams emphasizes the productive and perpetual aspect of culture and the necessity of including long existing traditions in connection with new meanings and understandings:

These are the ordinary processes of human societies and human minds, and we see through them the nature of a culture: that is always both traditional and creative; that it is both the most ordinary common meanings and the finest individual meanings. (1989: 4).

Williams thus demands the acceptance of the notion that there are many different approaches to understanding the world and making sense of already existing meanings while exploring new ones.

MacGregor Wise generally supports Williams’ views but decidedly insists on distinguishing between common *cultures* using the plural (7). He lists a number of categories in order to be able to differentiate between individual cultures: “race and ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, geographical location, generation”. Although Williams’ findings are the basis of MacGregor Wise’s research, he criticizes him for mainly focusing on class differences, whereas MacGregor Wise himself recognizes an endless number of cultural markers that contribute to identity formation within a society (8). Alongside John Fiske he promotes the term “popular culture” in contrast to “mass culture” and defines popular culture as “culture that people themselves have made” while he sees mass culture as physical things belonging to a culture (Fiske: 25; MacGregor Wise: 8). Hence pop culture refers to the way people attach meaning to the cultural products they encounter or create.

Lewis upholds a similar view, defining culture as “[an] assemblage of meanings which are generated and consumed by a given social group” (396).

Ott & Mack refer to physical, social and attitudinal constituents of culture and their qualities being collective, rhetorical, historical and ideological (124–126). According to them culture in general is “constructed, multi-faceted, and uniquely human” and

“the material aspects of daily life” (124). These material aspects provide the physical constituent and are referred to as cultural artifacts, meaning cultural products that people encounter or create (124). They are proof for a society’s very existence and evidence of their way of life, which can later be decoded and respectively continued by future generations. Social constituents of culture are the next layer, namely a society’s traditional habits that can be deduced from their cultural artifacts (125). These habits in turn reflect on the attitudinal level of culture, pointing to “the overarching ways a particular culture makes sense of the world and itself, including values, tastes, concepts of right and wrong, religious systems, economic beliefs, or political philosophies” (125).

Ott & Mack identify the collective nature of culture as one of the most important features, arguing that culture is something that is necessarily shared by several individuals. Hence, a single person does not suffice in order to realize a culture. More than one individual is needed in order to maintain a culture and through the rhetorical nature of it, the sharing and communicating of common meanings through discourse is made possible (125).

Furthermore Ott & Mack state that culture is historical and “[i]t changes, evolves, mutates, fades, and even disappears over time” (126). Finally, and most importantly, culture is ideological: “The cultures we inhabit teach us to see the world in some ways and not in others” (126).

For the purpose at hand it is impossible and unwise to focus on only one of the many definitions provided above, since they all touch an important aspect of culture. The notion of culture as social behavior is omnipresent in the following discussion of identity formation in immigrant fiction. Popular Culture is included as a tool for expressing and recognizing identity. Williams’ concept of culture as a combination of existing traditions and newly created meanings is necessarily included when analyzing negotiations of identities that are being challenged due to constant changes through ongoing processes of migration and globalization.

1.2. Globalization

For a while now we have been actively experiencing these changes and seeing the world differently, due to the advances of communication technology and the resulting globalization. A long time ago, seeing different cultures and experiencing the thrill of visiting foreign countries, was primarily reserved for those who had the means to travel. The majority of the population, however, had only stories, pictures, cultural artifacts and maybe encounters with foreign visitors to go on. They were mainly moving within their own culture. This has drastically changed due to globalization. The Internet, as a tool of globalization, has provided us with an inexhaustible source of information,

serving as a window to the rest of the planet.

O'Brien and Szeman explain the term *globalization* as "the social, political, cultural, economic, and technological processes that together have created the changed conditions of contemporary existence" (264). What could not be accessed in earlier times, has now become immediately available and the new techniques of communication have allowed us to follow our desire to immediately talk to distant relatives, located on a different continent, at any time and any place. What seems like a natural and ordinary process for the people living in our world now, has actually been the result of considerable change, which has happened and is still happening so rapidly that we are hardly able to keep up with it. Therefore O'Brien and Szeman argue that explaining this process with a single definition "cannot help but reduce the complexity that discussions of it deserve" (264).

Generally speaking, the term *world* has been defined in a completely new way. While it used to be merely the place our countries and homes are located in, it has now become a new type of identity for all human beings as one. However, more detailed definitions have been provided by a vast number of scholars.

In the field of sociology and geography, the term *globalization* is explained with regard to relations (Giddens, Massey), defining it as "the intensification of world-wide relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away" (Giddens 64). Robertson, summarizes this concept in an interdisciplinary manner when he claims that globalization "the compression of the world and intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole" (8).

Tomlinson claims that the term globalization is always and essentially connected with our conception of culture (1). Indeed, this is something we experience every day, when we encounter products from different cultures everywhere we go consciously, and we are constantly being influenced by dominant cultures like the United States rather involuntarily. In fact, in earlier times, one of the many perspectives on globalization defined in terms of pure Americanization:

Here a global culture was seen as being formed through the economic and political domination of the United States which thrust its hegemonic culture into all parts of the world. (Featherstone: 87).

Globalization has influenced our world in an endless number of ways, however, the biggest impact being political, economical and, inevitably, social. The world's economy is interwoven to an extent that a global economical change can be traced back to the developments in the smallest of countries. The largest corporations do not merely operate on an international level anymore, they operate globally, with the advantages of being "able to relocate to whatever jurisdiction has the most favorable climate for business" (O'Brien & Szeman 267).

From the perspective of politics, a certain fear, or rather propaganda, has emerged

that globalization has the power to threaten people's national identity and feelings of pride for their motherland. However, O'Brien and Szeman claim that these traditional notions still carry immense power, since they are constantly "reinforced by schooling (through the playing of the national anthem and the teaching of national histories and cultures), revived during the Olympics and crystallized during times of tension and conflict" (273). As one of the clear benefits in political globalization, they name the emergence of "new political agents and institutions involved in shaping global politics", who exercise a great deal of power when it comes to human rights agreements for instance (274).

For the topic at hand, the notion of globalization is rather important in connection to culture and migration. O'Brien and Szeman claim that all definitions of culture, no matter how different the approach, share "the idea that culture comes from some *place*", meaning that it has "a definite and unambiguous point of origin" (277). Many critics of globalization now expect or rather fear that globalization will lead to the unification of all cultures of the world, arguing that there is not a single culture that has not been influenced by others and that we are at the onset of a shared global culture (279). They claim that the symptoms of such a culture are already visible in the form of constant migrations, global declarations that are already being made and "the establishment of a few major lingua franca: English, Mandarin, Spanish, Hindi-Urdu" for instance (279).

O'Brien and Szeman do not support this view by criticizing it for being fragmentary and disregarding important factors and facts. For one, traveling is still something that is reserved for wealthier social classes and secondly, people want and need "to experience difference", which would be impossible if a global culture were to assimilate all cultures and societies (280). People therefore want to experience "cultural diversity" and do not desire assimilation through globalization (280). If cultural diversity is so much desired, why is it so difficult for many people to accept cultural or ethnic difference among their midst? This will be further discussed in the chapter on migration, as it is an important aspect for the analysis at hand.

1.3. Multiculturalism

The term *multiculturalism* is almost self-explanatory and carries the important notion of belonging to two or more cultures.

Cuccioletta defines multiculturalism as "an objective fact produced by immigration, people moving and settling around the world, for whatever reason" (4). Like migration, multiculturalism is not a political invention, he argues, but a "social phenomenon [sic!], directly linked to worldwide immigration" (4).

Milner & Browitt explain the term in more detail as "the availability of different 'ethnic' foods, music, art and literature" (142).

Regarding the quality of the term, Brooker claims that multiculturalism is founded “[...] on ideas of tolerance and respect for DIFFERENCE” (169). Bennet, Grossberg, and Morris interpret this difference as the difference in ethnic origin among migrants, who, within the concept of multiculturalism, are met with tolerance and treated as equal members of society (226). They determine multiculturalism as a “positive alternative for policies of assimilation”, suggesting that it insinuates a “politics of recognition of the citizenship rights and cultural identities of ethnic minority groups” (227).

Of course, the conceptions discussed here only explicate the multicultural in the ethnic or national sense, leaving out the genres of various subcultures within these nations or ethnicities (for instance, gay and lesbian studies).

The upcoming analysis will focus on definitions provided in this subchapter, namely definitions of multiculturalism that emphasize cultural difference and ethnic diversity as enriching features of peoples’ identities.

1.4. Ideology

Scholars generally agree that the concept of *ideology* has always been the most crucial part of cultural studies in the past and in the present, conveying multiple meanings. John Storey has provided a small overview of those meanings, which will be introduced in this subchapter.

The most common and basic meaning of the term is “a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people” (2).

The second meaning refers to ideology as a sort of camouflage for the subconsciously performed acts of oppression by the dominant part of society towards the less powerful classes. *Unconscious* refers to dominant groups who do not recognize that their actions are being exploitative and the subordinate classes who do not realize they are the oppressed victims (3). This meaning can be identified whenever we willingly comply with and support ideas of certain political parties without even thinking about what we are doing.

The third definition of ideology is connected to Marx’s notion of “ideological forms” (1976: 5), expressing the representation of the world in cultural texts. It is closely related to the fourth meaning following Barthes, mainly saying that ideology is operating at “the level of connotations [...], often unconscious, meanings that texts and practices carry, or can be made to carry” (3–4). Any form of literature or movies represents a specific image of the world and the society we live in and thus convey a certain ideology. These worldviews are not necessarily stated directly, they can either be consciously hidden between the lines, or unintentionally added in the subtext of a piece of writing, or conveyed through certain images that are presented in a film.

The final meaning of ideology explicated by Storey follows Althusser and expands

the first definition mentioned in this section states that ideological ideas are found in our every day life, in form of “certain rituals and customs” that connect us to the society we live in (4). Storey provides a fitting example of this specific view:

Using this definition, we could describe the seaside holiday or the way in which they offer pleasure and release from the usual demands of the social order, but ultimately, returns us to our places in the social order, refreshed and ready to tolerate our exploitation and oppression until the next official break comes along. (4)

Many of the definitions mentioned have one thing in common: they all are grounded in the assumption that societies are based on social, political, religious and economical inequality. Minority groups like immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers form an integral part of the subordinate classes of most societies, especially in the United States. Therefore this section provides a rudimentary foundation for a discussion on the negotiation of identity for immigrants within new social and political environments.

1.5. Culture and Identity

As already mentioned, culture, being ideological, leaves room for many different interpretations and approaches. For the task at hand MacGregor Wise has provided a suitable basis with his approach to popular culture as a means to identity formation, in part based on John Fiske’s notion that “[p]opular culture is made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and every day life” (Fiske: 25). MacGregor Wise supports Fiske’s claim that popular culture is not only something that is made by individuals but also something that is used for resistance:

Often this resistance is not that of one who wishes to bring down the entire system, but the resistance of one who wishes to make it through a space controlled by others (school, work, the streets, home) in a way that makes life bearable and which maintains one’s identity as much as possible. (MacGregor Wise: 10).

Why is this resistance necessary, who benefits from it and what forms can it take?

1.5.1. Habitus

Resistance and rebellion against the ideals of a society are acts commonly associated with young adults, who, in the process of struggling for identity, aim to defend what they *want to be* against the concept of what they *ought to be* according to the controlling power MacGregor Wise tries to describe this type of social behavior using the term *habitus*, as coined by Bordieu:

The habitus as the feel for the game is the social game embodied and turned into a second nature. Nothing is simultaneously freer and more constrained than the action of the good player. He quite naturally materializes at just the place the ball is about to fall, as if the ball were in command of him- but by that very fact, he is in command of the ball. (Bordieu 1990: 63).

Using this metaphor, Bordieu explains the impact of ideals and ideas of a whole society on its individual members. Actions, behaviors and thoughts can be affected consciously and unconsciously, and personal identity of an individual cannot be isolated from collective identity of the society or group he belongs to:

To speak of habitus is to assert that the individual, and even the personal, the subjective, is social, collective. Habitus is a socialized subjectivity. (Bordieu & Wacquant 1992: 126).

Meisenhelder backs this notion claiming that “the mental structures of the habitus allow an actor to become an individual but only through how she uses the subjective presence of the collectivity” (64).

While these conceptions may at first appear as if they strip the individual within a society of any agency and individualism, it is not quite like that. MacGregor Wise compares the notion of *habitus* with personal “style” claiming that it is “the set of styles that we have developed to help us move in and out of groups of people, different spaces [...] and different life worlds.” (10). According to him, the *style* that we personally adopt, says a lot about who we are, how we act and how we identify with certain groups of people while being in close conjunction with the cultural implications of our society.

After having established the *how* of moving through a cultural space, the next subchapter will serve as an analysis of the *where*, the cultural space within society itself.

1.5.2. Territory

MacGregor Wise argues for the conception of cultural globalization through culture, territory and identity, and further for the notion of identity through the process of territorialization (11–12). Several definitions of culture have already been discussed previously, providing a basis for examining the notion of territory, which will be followed by the concept of identity in the subsequent chapter.

MacGregor Wise explains the term *cultural territory* as a space of influence of an individual or a group. This area is marked by its inhabitants through a certain layout and governed by their individual rules (11). To illustrate this further, MacGregor Wise offers the following example:

[...] a teacher in front of a class may mark their territory by dressing in a certain way, arranging the furniture in a certain way, and they behave in a certain way [...] that gives them control of that space. Within a classroom, specific social rules apply (raise your hand and be recognized before speaking, take notes of what is said, pay attention), and the particular teacher may add more rules (no cell phones in class, sit in straight lines). (11)

Consequently he refers to territory as our “expressive space”, a place where individuals and groups express their identity unconsciously and in their own habitual manner (12).

Thus, MacGregor Wise differentiates between two different types of habits:

Personal habits are the ways *I* do certain things without thinking; *cultural habits* are the ways *we* do certain things without thinking, with the “we” referring to others in the relevant culture. (emphasis added,¹²)

These habits, he claims, are not only done habitually, without thinking, but they are also in a way non-voluntary, since “one is always territorializing with the means at one’s disposal and these vary drastically by income, location, chance, class and so on” (12).

One way of summary can be to say that, according to MacGregor Wise, one’s personal identity is formed by the process of territorializing one’s personal habitual space of self-expression, and as a member of a group, the identity of the collective as well as the members’ individual identity is formed by the same process respectively. In this unconscious act of territorializing one’s space, individuals and groups use the means and the knowledge they have access to, which happens involuntarily. It can also be argued that within the means one is given there is also room for choices, questioning whether territorialization really happens involuntarily.

The concept of territory as a space of expression of one’s identity will serve as the basis for further analysis of struggle for identity in this thesis. Several other concepts of identity will be outlined in the following chapter in order to determine which aspects are essential to identity formation for different types of migrants and people living in or between two or more cultures.

2. Identity

This struggle for identity will be addressed in connection with the challenging process of identity formation for migrants. In order to do so, important concepts of identity and identity formation need to be explored in this chapter. It must be acknowledged that the notion of identity is very complex and always changing. Therefore the aim will not be to find a universal definition of identity, but rather to provide various conceptions that address different aspects of human life.

2.1. Conceptions of Identity

Stuart Hall distinguishes between three main concepts of identity, the “enlightenment subject”, the “sociological subject and the “post-modern subject”. The first term describes a

[...]fully centred, unified individual [...], whose “centre” consisted of an inner

core which first emerged when the subject was born, and unfolded with it, while remaining essentially the same continuous or “identical” with itself – throughout the individual’s existence. (275).

Here we are looking at the definition of an innate, fixed identity, which corresponds to McGregor Wise’s description of an essentialist view on identity: “groups have authentic, natural identities and characteristics, which trap them and leave them unable to change” (13). While Hall talks about personal identity and McGregor Wise talks about collective identity, both assume biological roots of identity, essential traits that each person is equipped with at birth and unable to change. These conceptions, however, have been disproved by several new theories, following a more anti-essentialist view, as proposed by Lipsitz:

To think of identities as interchangeable or infinitely open does violence to the historical and social constraints imposed on us by structures of exploitation and privilege. But to posit innate and immobile identities for ourselves or others confuses history with nature, and denies the possibility of change. (62).

Hall inserts another step on the way to a fully de-centralized identity concept, the “sociological subject”, which still assumes the innate origin of identity but argues that it is subject to change and development as it is “formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds outside” (276). The final anti-essentialist step is reached with the “post-modern subject”, a concept that leaves out the notion of the essential core and defines identity as “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (277). This view is widely accepted today, not only because the essentialist concepts have been disapproved by new theories, but also because globalization and worldwide migration have provided us with direct evidence of the impact societies, groups, others impose on our identities.

2.1.1. Strategic Use of Identity

In the first chapter the concept of territory has been discussed and it has been established that McGregor Wise argues that an individual’s identity is fully dependent on this individual’s territory. He claims that our identity “is not only expressed by but constituted by these territories” (12). Using the process of territorialization, we are able to fight the once widespread notion that all men are alike and defy the concepts that seek to “limit the creativity and perceived abilities allowed to people” (14). In this sense, McGregor Wise argues that we can use the concept of essentialism itself for our own advantage. By using the essentialist view strategically, a minority group is able to arm itself against the dominant society by expressing their wrongly assumed essential identity “at a particular time and place [...] perhaps to connect with a larger group for political gain and a louder voice” (14).

The same strategic process can be applied to the concept of anti-essentialism. McGregor Wise argues that the strategic appliance of anti-essentialism is a way to underline the non-essentialist nature of identity, because it describes assuming someone else's identity in order to "express something about oneself which one cannot express in one's current identity" (14). McGregor Wise bases his findings on Lipsitz, who argued that anti-essentialism might be used strategically at a point where an individual needs the disguise "in order to express indirectly parts of their identity that might be too threatening to express directly" (62).

2.2. Identity and the Nation

Marx talks about human identity as an "ensemble of the social relations" (145). We are the sum of our relationships with the people and the world that surrounds us. This necessarily includes our past relationships as well as the ones we uphold in the present. Marx' famous quote serves as an explanation:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. (595).

Marx establishes that even though we are, to a certain degree, free to construct our identity, we are also dependent on the society and culture we live in, including the history that is attached to them.

Culture and its history in a larger sense are commonly represented in the concept of nation. Anderson has coined the term "imagined communities", describing nation as a social construct (1991: 2). Hall talks about it as "a way of constructing meanings, which influences and organizes both our actions and our conceptions of ourselves" (292–293).

Simon similarly defines nation as an "important institutional and cultural frame for social relationships and thus for identity" and emphasizes that nation cannot be equated with culture (19). Furthermore he argues that nations do not only consist of one unanimous society, but of various dominant (and subordinate) groups that are constantly struggling for the upper hand and "trying to 'sell' their own version of the nation and its culture and thus affect the identity of all members of the imagined national community" (15).

It is common knowledge that all types of relationships are subject to constant change. This challenges the identities connected to them in many different ways, making nations and cultures not unique but rather diverse and flexible. Nevertheless, Preston defines three large regions on the globe, which he claims do have unmistakable characteristics when it comes to identity. These areas are not necessarily within national borders: the European Union, Pacific Asia and the United States (13). Regarding the

United States, he argues that they have “a public commitment to an open market economy; a public commitment to republican democracy; and a strong preference for individualism, a tradition which celebrates the achievements of ordinary people and a cultural tradition of liberal individualism” (15). According to Preston this is what constitutes an American collective identity. In this thesis the term *collective identity* is used to refer to the common identity of social groups (for instance national identity) and also refers to the individual identity of an individual that is influenced and formed through these social groups. Especially in the case of the United States, however, collective identities are not pure. Simon argues that “due to globalization processes, we see the emergence of broader, transnational cultural zones as well as the emergence of cultural hybridity within nations” (19) The United States is well known to be a place that many different cultures and ethnicities are native to, it is the nation of immigrants, which will be discussed in more detail in chapter three.

2.3. Identity Functions

Feelings of national pride for a country, feelings of belonging to a distinct cultural group and the feeling of not belonging to specific groups in order to distance oneself from them, are essential functions of identity.

Simon identifies five functions when it comes to identity formation. In addition to the three already mentioned ones, he adds that for one’s identity it is crucial not only to feel self-respect, but also to experience the feeling of being respected by one’s peers (66). He claims that “similar people are likely to respect each other and what they have in common” (67). According to this view, the nation, as one of the sources for collective identity, disperses a feeling of respect among its citizens. However, we know this to be a highly challenged concept, since the oppression of subordinate groups is one of the biggest issues in current debates. Immigrants, as one of these subordinate groups, do not always experience this kind of respect, which affects their struggle for identity within a new nation.

Furthermore, Simon claims that identity “as a plan in the social world provides a perspective on the social world from which this world and one’s own place in it can be interpreted and understood meaningfully” (67–68). Thus, identity allows us to make sense of the world and ourselves as a part of it.

The final function identified by Simon refers to the agency of the individuals within a society, arguing that “identity serves as a marker that allows people to recognize themselves as the origin of their thoughts and actions and to experience themselves as influential social agents” (68). This view would then support Preston’s conceptions of US identity, which puts emphasis on liberal individualism and the ordinary people. Free will and the freedom to act on it within the society we live in are crucial constituents of

people's identity.

For the thesis at hand identity is considered flexible and constantly changing. On the one hand, a person's inherent psychological and (physical) features define an important part of their personal identity. On the other hand, people necessarily define themselves through their social, political and cultural environment. Identity is not something predetermined or constant, it is not a goal to be achieved by an individual in his development. It is a process of constant change and challenge, reinvention and adaptation. The analysis of the two primary texts will support that identity is a continuous struggle between *who we are*, *who we want to be* and *who we should be*.

3. Migration

Migration is the source of human existence and one of the main causes of our survival. This is clear when we look at several documented instances of migration throughout history, for instance, the exodus in the books of Moses, the phenomenon of the *Völkerwanderung* or the current wave of refugees from the Middle East to Europe. These examples point out that migration is not something extraordinary or anomalous, but that it has always been an integral part of our world and human history. Migration is not an exception it is the rule. Marsello and Ring go so far as to say that:

The impulse to migrate is inherent in human nature- an instinctual and inborn disposition and inclination to wonder and wander in search of new opportunities and new horizons. Indeed, the separation of the human species into its myriad ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and racial groups was – and remains – outcome of migration. (3)

Nevertheless, for centuries people have been biased against immigrants and are still holding on to hostile attitudes towards the topic of migration. This inevitably leads to conflict and tension between the host and the immigrant population of a country. This can also be observed on a political level, because many governments officially uphold an anti-immigrant policy even though there is probably not a single state in the world that has not, to some extent, obtained its population through migration:

Internationale Migration ist ein dynamisches Phänomen, das immer wichtiger wird. [...] Internationale Migration hat heute Auswirkungen auf Länder unabhängig ihrer wirtschaftlichen Entwicklung und ideologischen und kulturellen Überzeugung. Migranten kommen und gehen aus fast jedem Land der Welt. Dadurch wird es immer schwieriger, die traditionelle Unterscheidung in Herkunfts-, Transit- und Zielländer aufrecht zu erhalten. Viele Staaten fallen inzwischen unter alle drei Kategorien. (Weltkommission 2006: 5).

The United States of America serves as a very prominent example in this topic and

has been named *the* land of immigrants. This may be ascribed to the fact that in the second half of the 19th century a great number of people left behind Europe in order to emigrate to the United States hoping for better working and living conditions. Marsella and Ring also call the United States the “Nation of Immigrants”, arguing that the great number of immigrants living in the United States and the resulting ethnic plurality have contributed to its world wide economic and political power and influence (6). However, also the negative outcomes of migration have to be taken into account. In the case of the United States we must also keep in mind that negative and irreversible historic events such as slavery, and the oppression of the American indigenous population, have contributed to the United States’ economic wealth. Where multiple cultures cross paths, conflict seems inevitable. These conflicts are voiced in the works of American immigrant fiction and will be a crucial part of our discussion in the following analysis. Both primary texts chosen for this analysis are mainly set in the United States, as the host country for the immigrant protagonists of the stories. The subsequent sections will provide a short overview of specific terms that are essential for the comprehension of this thesis.

First we will define the term migration and establish a connection between identity and migration. In further chapters we will look into the field of immigrant fiction in order to provide an understanding and highlight the importance of this genre.

3.1. Definitions of Migration

Migration is generally described as movement from one place to another. Bailey speaks of internal migration, meaning movement within the borders of one’s homeland, and international migration, movement to other countries and states (3). For our purpose the latter concept will be of greater importance.

The term migration encompasses the notions of immigration and emigration. Bailey (3) defines immigration as “the movement of people from one country to another with the intent of becoming permanent residents of the country to which they are relocating”. Emigration then is “the act of leaving one’s homeland or becoming an emigrant” (Bailey: 3). Hence, according to this definition, migration can be summarized as the act of emigrating from one’s country of origin in order to immigrate to a new country, usually with the intent of remaining in this country either temporarily or permanently.

Anette Treiber criticizes this view by stating that the concept of mere movement is not enough to make a satisfactory definition of migration and claims that a movement can only be called migration if “Menschen ihren Lebensmittelpunkt verlagern oder zum alten Lebensmittelpunkt ein neuer hinzukommt” (295). For her the intention of spending one’s life at the new destination is a crucial factor for defining an act as migration and a person as migrant, immigrant or emigrant.

Treiber's definition of migration is the most useful one for the analysis at hand. Both primary texts are centered around protagonists who have experienced international migration, and have been involuntarily exiled from their home country. Their life now centers around the struggle for a new life and a new identity in the their host country, the United States of America.

3.2. Reasons for Migration

Treiber argues that people leave their native country for many different reasons, but mostly because they wish to improve their living conditions. They either choose to emigrate voluntarily or they are forced to abandon their homes (295).

The terms refugees and asylum seekers solely refer to people who have been forced to leave their country of origin without the possibility of return for reasons of "persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion" (Castle). The latter are specified as "people who cross international borders seeking protection from wars and other dangerous situations in their homeland, but who are waiting for their claims for refugee status to be determined by the host country" (Castle). Both terms thus refer to a certain status migrants are ascribed to the government of their recipient country.

People who are assigned the status of an asylum seeker might have great difficulties finding a job or a place to live and acquiring the means to provide for their families. They are often dependent on benefits from the government, or on donations and can therefore easily be forced into illegal work, which causes legal problems. All this contributes to nurturing a hostile attitude towards immigrants among the general population (Bailey: 6).

According to the Universal Human Rights Declaration "[e]veryone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution [sic]" (article 14). Nonetheless, approximately 90% of all asylum seekers across the globe are not granted the status of refugee because the dangers of persecution in their countries of origin are not acknowledged or cannot be proven. Very often the circumstances that force people to flee their home country are not considered dangerous or forceful enough by the governments of the host countries (Bailey: 6). Treiber supports this with the following argument:

Festzuhalten ist, dass sich Menschen durch ihre Lebensumstände gezwungen sehen können, ihre Herkunftsregion zu verlassen auch wenn niemand eine Waffe auf sie richtet. (295).

Are asylum seekers therefore stripped of their human rights because governments are not willing to recognize the threat a return to the home country would pose for them?

For the purpose of this analysis the concept of migration cannot be solely equated with mobility. Treiber claims that the reasons for migrating or fleeing a country and the receptions that these migrants or refugees encounter in host countries are often very similar and can therefore be compared and analyzed. Her most convincing argument is that the media mainly report the aspects of migration that make for great headlines, making it difficult to view migration as a normality (296).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights also clearly states that “Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the border of each State” and “Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country” (Article 13). Still most immigrants experience great difficulties in their host countries or are not granted asylum in the first place. These difficulties threaten and challenge people’s identities. They are confronted with new cultures, traditions and languages unknown to them. They are expected to adapt to their new environment, to integrate themselves into the new and unfamiliar society and even to assimilate to it completely.

The subsequent section will introduce important sociological and psychological concepts that describe these processes.

3.3. Acculturation

The field of cross-cultural psychology analyzes the impact that permanent exposure to a new and different cultural environment can have on human behavior and development. The process of adapting to a new cultural life is called acculturation and traditionally defined as follows:

[T]hose phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups. (Redfield, Linton, Herskovits: 149).

This concept implies that *acculturation* happens on different levels and therefore has to be looked at from several angles. First of all, acculturation is a process that immigrants go through on an individual level, when settling down in a new country and being confronted with a new dominant culture. Secondly, acculturation necessarily involves the citizens of the host country, who are confronted with new cultural minorities. Graves furthermore makes a distinction between psychological acculturation, meaning changes that happen on an individual level, and collective acculturation, namely changes that affect the whole culture group (306 ff.).

3.3.1 Acculturation Strategies

Berry has analyzed these processes systematically and identifies four strategies that

both groups pursue on a daily basis when trying to adapt to each other. He argues that each strategy depends on two crucial dimensions. One is identified as cultural maintenance, regarding the level of importance individuals or groups attach to their cultural identity. The second dimension deals with the willingness or reluctance of individuals or groups to maintain contact with other cultural groups (Berry 1997: 9). Based on these two dimensions and assuming that immigrant minorities are free to freely decide which one to pursue, Berry establishes four acculturation strategies: *assimilation*, *separation*, *integration* and *marginalization* (1997: 9–10).

Firstly, *assimilation* happens “when individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures” (1997: 9). It can be argued that assimilation is a process that is mostly welcomed and promoted by the cultural majority. Berry makes the distinction between society as a melting pot or a pressure cooker. If mutual interaction is freely chosen by both dominant and subordinate groups of a society, it can be referred to as a melting pot society. When minority groups are forced to assimilate to the dominant culture it can be referred to as a pressure cooker, implying conflicts between cultural groups (1997: 10).

Secondly, the strategy of *separation* is chosen when immigrants do not wish to interact with the culture of their host country and prefer to stick to their own roots. However, separation turns into segregation when it is imposed on minority groups by the dominant culture (Berry 1997: 9–10).

Berry believes that *marginalization* is a rather uncommon strategy. It arises from a combination of involuntary assimilation and segregation. He argues that in many cases it is either impossible or undesirable to come in contact with either one’s original culture or the host culture for reasons of traumatic experiences in the home country or unpleasant reception in the host country (1997: 10). As a consequence, this leads to marginalization (1997: 9).

Integration is defined as the most common strategy, and describes the approach of “maintaining one’s original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups” (Berry 1991; 1997). Integration requires what Berry calls “the widespread acceptance of the value of a society of cultural diversity” (1997: 11). This *multicultural ideology* is nurtured when all people living in a country value and identify with the society they live in regardless of their ethnic or cultural origins (Kalin & Berry; Berry 1997).

In Bailey’s works, integration appears as the most successful and desirable strategy of acculturation because it seems that minimal conflicts should result from it. The questions remains, however, if this is really true? Berry lays out an essential and groundbreaking framework for the analysis of acculturation, which will also serve as a foundation for the discussion at hand.

Additionally, human behavior needs to be defined in more detail in connection to acculturation so that it can be applied to the context of struggle for identity in

contemporary American immigrant fiction. Therefore the psychological consequences of acculturation processes will be explicated in the following section.

3.3.2 Psychological Acculturation and its Consequences

Berry argues that every individual handles their acculturation process differently, according to their individual background, their experiences and their psychological equipment. Even in the most harmless version of it, acculturation necessarily leads to *behavioral shifts* in individuals and in groups (Berry 1980; Berry 1997: 13).

These changes in behavior result from a phenomenon that happens in long-term cross-cultural interaction, called *culture learning* (Berry 1992; Brislin, Landis, Brandt 1983) or *social skills acquisition* (Furnham and Bochner 1986). In the immigration context this refers to the adaptation of the immigrant group towards the habitual social behavior of the dominant group in the host country. Berry describes this as “deliberate or accidental acquisition of novel ways to live in the new contact setting” (1992: 361).

In order to be able to adjust to their new living situation, immigrants need to adapt to the new cultural environment. To accomplish that they not only need to adjust their behavioral patterns to fit this new context, but they also have to “unlearn” those aspects of their previous behavior that do not fit into this new context any longer. This process is defined as *cultural shedding*, meaning “either the deliberate or accidental loss of existing cultural or behavioral features over time following contact” (Berry 1992: 360–361).

Berry argues that these behavioral shifts may cause problems, or rather cultural conflicts of different levels among the parties involved. They can become as severe as to result in a *culture shock* (Oberg 1960) or *acculturative stress* (Berry 1970; Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok 1987). He claims that minor conflicts are appropriate and accepted as a normal reaction to the social changes that individuals go through, while culture shock or acculturative stress can go as far as to cause physical and psychological illness in the individuals who are affected by them (1997: 13).

The level of psychological disturbances after and during the process of acculturation is dependent on numerous interrelated factors. Among the factors that are influential on a collective level are the political, economic, religious or social situations of the immigrant’s home country in comparison to the host country. On a personal level some of the essential factors are personality, education, previous experiences with acculturation, coping abilities, support on a social level and attitudes, to name only a few (Berry 1997: 15). These factors will be further addressed in the analysis of the primary texts. Berry’s theoretical framework will be applied in this context.

As a summary it can be said that Berry provides a theoretical groundwork for acculturation by arguing that the two important questions to be asked are: to what extent should the original culture and cultural identity be upheld and to what extent

should the host culture be adopted? He claims that the strategy of separation is accompanied by the lowest level of behavioral changes, while assimilation results in the most significant adaptation to the behavioral repertoire of the host country. While the process of integration is characterized by partial adaptation to the new cultural environment, marginalization means complete loss of any cultural identity and is usually accompanied by social and psychological disturbances (Berry 1992; Berry 1997). Among these strategies integration is claimed to have the greatest success, due to the general avoidance of negative attitudes towards cross-cultural interaction among both dominant and subordinate groups (1997: 24).

Berry supports this theory with several studies (Krishnan & Berry 1995; Schmitz 1992; Sam & Berry 1995) that have found that “integration seems to be the most effective strategy if we take long term health and well-being as indicators” (Schmitz 1992: 368). Hence, integration is seen as a perfect life balance that immigrants achieve when living successfully in two cultures, rather than being stuck between two cultures.

Other theories, however, argue that maintaining this balance is exactly what causes stress, which then leads to the question whether or not integration can really be defined as the most successful strategy regarding the well-being of immigrants (Bochner 1981; Bourtis et al. 1997; Schmid 2010). These theories are based on the fact that integration requires the individual to switch between different cultural identities, an exhausting and confusing process since a definite cultural and social belonging and identity are crucial for one’s well-being (Lazarus 1997; Tajtel & Turner 1986; Turner 1987).

It is to be assumed that individual differences among migrants and their migration experience make it impossible to arrive at a universally valid conclusion on the success of the acculturation strategies discussed above. Both these differences and their connections to possible generalizations regarding acculturation processes, are to be addressed in this thesis, in order to analyze the immanent struggle for identity that is conveyed in contemporary immigrant fiction.

3.3.3 Individual Differences

As already mentioned in previous sections, people migrate for different reasons and, therefore, have different attitudes and motivations during the whole process of migration. Lazarus believes that this diversity in motivations to migrate is reason enough to assume great differences in the social and cultural adaptation process in a new country. Hence, he argues that Berry’s theoretical framework must be expanded to analyze individual differences in more detail in order to be significant. He suggests that there are too many variables to be considered and that living between two cultures and having to acculturate to one or both is only part of a bigger puzzle (1997: 39). The basic assumption in his critique is that people cannot be lumped together even if they appear to have a similar cultural background:

However, if the process of relocation is to include stress and coping, then to understand what is happening we must also look to *individual differences* in coping skills, goals, beliefs, expectations, and how these relate to the environmental conditions being faced in daily adaptational transactions. The bottom line always consists of individuals struggling to survive and flourish in a social context. (1997: 40)

Lazarus points out that studies on this matter must consider unique psychological and emotional characteristics of people, combined with their individual experience, circumstances and developments. In his opinion, studies on migration should analyze the different coping mechanisms that people resort to, due to their unique emotions, values and beliefs and the psychological stress that can be caused by relocation (41). Looking only at acculturation poses a problem because of the embedded concept of culture, which Lazarus considers as problematic:

Cultural psychologists have an unfortunate tendency to treat culture as a monolithic concept, as if everyone growing up and living in that culture subscribes to the same values and beliefs, or shares a common pattern of coping. (42).

While Berry provides an important theoretical framework on the topic of adaptation in the form of general acculturation strategies, Lazarus demands that we also look at the individual differences that are not covered in Berry's concept.

For this thesis both approaches will be of importance, since the combination of the two serves as a more accurate theoretical basis for the analysis at hand. The two novels will be analyzed in detail and their individual features will be identified in order to arrive at a significant conclusion on the negotiation of identity within the context of immigrant fiction. These findings will then be compared in order to find out whether some affinities and features they have in common can be identified, which are omnipresent in immigrant fiction.

4. Immigrant Fiction

The terms *immigrant fiction* or *migrant fiction* are rather controversial concepts. American immigrant fiction refers to literature that is written in English by immigrants whose first language is not English. Immigrant writers have often been considered as exotic and different from writers who have not experienced migration or displacement. As much as immigrant writers have been criticized and censored over the course of history, they have also received a lot of praise in recent years. Shukla and Shukla describe the genre of migrant fiction as “a most visible global literary discourse” that “has obscured writings of even those great ones who have stayed back at home” (preface).

What at first appears to be a compliment can easily be interpreted as marginalization and degradation, especially by immigrant authors themselves. What Shukla and Shukla mean by “even those great ones”? This statement reflects the predicament the literary canon encounters when trying to define immigrant fiction. Does it imply that immigrant authors struggle with greater disadvantages when producing their writings? Does it mean that the literary world expects less quality in their work? What even qualifies immigrant writing as such? Is their success based on the fact that they are immigrants? These questions will be addressed in this chapter among other aspects of immigrant writing.

Firstly, a brief overview of the history and development of immigrant fiction will be provided. Secondly, the reception of immigrant writing among the literary community and its audience will be discussed. Furthermore, immigrant authors themselves will be examined, especially in regard to authenticity.

4.1. History and Development

What in this thesis is referred to by *immigrant fiction* has had several different names over the course of time. Ferraro provides an overview of the development of these terms. What started out as the *immigration novel* in the beginning of the 20th century became *ethnic literature* after WWII. Both names obviously acknowledged the “presence of certain voices”, namely those of the immigrant writers representing their minority ethnic groups (Ferraro: 1). Simultaneously this term restrains these voices to their specific subgenre by denying them access to the literary canon of the dominant society and therefore denying them the same access to power that national authors receive (Ferraro 1).

The continuing innovation of allegedly improved terms was aimed at correcting mistakes of previous approaches and resulted in names such as *multicultural literature*, emphasizing the diversity of the views and representations of the immigrant authors (2). Nevertheless Ferraro argues that the categorization of immigrant writers’ work is still strongly misinterpreted and pushed into a minority corner while their literary artistry is often overlooked and their work excluded from the national literary canon (2). Spoerri calls this exclusion “einen liebevollen, aber sanften Ausschluss”, implying that the immigrant authors’ nations of residency do not necessarily marginalize their works on purpose. It merely seems to be the result of their society’s general attitude towards immigrants and multiculturalism (167).

In the second half of the 20th century, however, immigrant authors fought for more recognition by speaking up against this artistic suppression and resisting the exclusion by the dominant literary society. This period marks the beginning of an increasing awareness and examination of works by immigrant authors (Sievers 213).

Cowart points out that the first writings of American literature were actually composed by immigrants from Europe. He explains that the “various sets of European eyes and various European pens” shaped the world’s perception of the “new world” (1).

During the past decade more and more immigrant literature has emerged in the United States of America. This may be attributed to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the “Hart-Celler Act”, a new law that liberalized the conditions for immigrating to the United States. The majority of immigrants who had come to the United States before 1965 had emigrated from Europe. After the new immigration law had taken effect, a considerably larger number of new immigrants were arriving from the Latin American or Asian continents. This did not only transform US-American culture by making it the “highly diverse, multinational, multiethnic, multicultural American nation of immigrants that it is today” (Sands Orchowski: 40). It naturally also changed the country’s literature, one of the most prominent cultural legacies of a society. The result of this wave of new immigrants was that writers from multiple ethnicities “peopled the American literary scene with multi-faced versions of the immigrant” (Paul: 11).

In 1973 MELUS, the Society for the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, was founded with the intention to “expand the definition of new, more broadly conceived US literature through the study and teaching of Latino, Native American, African American, Asian and Pacific American, and ethnically specific Euro-American literary works, their authors, and their cultural contexts” (Melus 17.02.16. 19: 16). MELUS members have done groundbreaking work regarding comparison and analysis of literary pieces by authors of immigrant ethnicities. By compiling bibliographies for ethnic literatures, creating biographies and re-printing often overlooked but essential publications, MELUS has always sought to emphasize the artistic and social significance of immigrant writers (Ferraro 4). Especially in the early 1980s movements like this supported the battle for recognition and the fight against intolerance and suppression that immigrant authors were confronted with (4). Ferraro describes the approach that literary criticism of ethnic literature had adopted at the time:

On one hand, they characteristically failed to address the conventionality of ethnic writing, including its dependence on stereotypes (instructive or otherwise); on the other hand, they neglected to pursue the departures ethnic writing made from conventionality, its subversion of convention and its determined creativity. Titles stressing separate hyphenated spheres (*Irish-American Fiction*, *The Italian-American Novel*, *Jewish-American Literature*, *Asian American Literature*, and *Chicano Authors*) suggested that ethnic authors operated in artistic ghettos apart from mainstream letters, both uninfluenced and without influence. (Ferraro: 4)

While the cultural and sociological value of immigrant fiction started gaining recognition among the US readership, the literary world still underestimated the artistic quality

of this genre and denied its writers the membership in the national literary canon. Although only a small number of writers, like Anzia Yeziarska or Henry Roth, achieved recognition as professional English-language authors, the difficult circumstances did not prevent numerous less renowned immigrant authors from continuing their work and eventually occupying a niche in the literary marketplace (Ferraro 10; Cowart 12;).

4.2. Reception

Paul White considers immigrant writings to be important and authentic cultural products, which can provide most accurate individual or collective representations of the life and culture of different ethnicities (1). He further argues that in the past few decades we have entered into a growing “Age of Migration”, meaning that these literary contributions have become more relevant than ever. Therefore the development in the literary world has started to move away from generalization and ghettoization of immigrant fiction towards the acknowledgment and appreciation of a multicultural literature within and beyond national borders. Migrant writers have not won the fight against separatist categorizations and prejudiced judgments yet and it is doubtful if they ever will. Immigrant literature has, however, made its way to the national literary canons of modern countries, especially in the United States. Immigrant writers are steadily moving away from constricted labeling and proving their literary abilities (Bhaba 2004: 321; Siever: 219).

Cowart believes that this development is due to a general change of attitude towards multiculturalism and ethnicity, which has led “from a quality needing to be burned away in some refiner’s fin of cultural homogenization” to the acquisition of “distinction, cachet, and a quite literal marketability” (12).

What he refers to as “change of perception”, Paul calls a process of “re-orientation” (1). She sees the reason for the growing positive reception of immigrant writing in its “catering to a contemporary Zeitgeist characterized by feelings of alienation and displacement” (8). Works by immigrant authors are no longer marginalized or undervalued. Overlooked literary contributions from the past are being re-published and given new recognition. Not only are they gaining a broader national and international readership, they are being studied and analyzed in national and international curricula and they are paving the way for new authors (Paul: 11). Paul describes the current position of immigrant author as follows:

Thus, the reception of immigrant writing and its prominence and accessibility seem to have come a long way from the marginal immigrant writers and literary figures of the turn-of-the-century to the celebrated authors and university professors of the present day. (13).

The national literary canon has moved away from discriminating and marginalizing

views on immigrant fiction towards embracing them into a common literary culture. Without ghettoization and narrow judgment we can now compare, analyze and criticize works by immigrant authors by using the immigration factor as a theoretical starting point and by continuing to identify commonalities that make their various branches of writing especially attractive and meaningful. These distinctive characteristics will be discussed in the following subchapter and will serve as a starting point for the following analysis.

4.3. Themes, Motifs, Characteristics

Immigrant writings are often influenced by real life experiences. In many cases the narratives are autobiographically inspired, which often leads to a conflation of fiction and reality and hence, to confusion among readers and critics (Paul 4).

Ian Chambers (1994: 82) sees immigrant literature as the “making of identities in movement”. Through incorporating the migration experience into their work authors negotiate the immigrant’s constantly transforming identities.

Homi K. Bhaba calls the platform for this negotiation the *3rd space*, a space which opens up when different cultures come into contact with each other (1994: 39). This *3rd space* is the most popular setting of contemporary immigrant fiction. Stories about lived experiences of migration, flight or exile, of living between two cultures and the generation conflicts among immigrant families are being told in it (Lögschnigg: 9).

Ferraro asserts that regardless whether the narrative is autobiographically inspired or not, immigrant fiction generally contains one important key element: the immigration experience and its various consequences for the people involved (7). The struggle for identity has already been identified above as one of these consequences.

Sievers explains that these consequences induce immigrant authors to deal with topics like home, displacement, negotiation of identity, discrimination and alienation, assimilation and acculturation, to name only a few (224). The issues arising from these topics can, for instance, be loss of home resulting in homesickness and nostalgia or loss of identity and language in connection with suppression and exploitation (224).

While issues like social, cultural, economical and political alienation are emphasized in many immigrant narratives, the issue of conflict within the lines of the family is also often broached (Cowart: 3). Children of immigrant parents often grow up in the new homeland while the old country stays behind and is only experienced indirectly, leaving them to “construct pre-diasporic settings through the myth-making memories of their immigrant parents” (Cowart: 2). Therefore the generation conflict among immigrant families is another prominent theme in many immigrant writings.

David Cowart provides us with an analysis of a number of significant works of contemporary immigrant fiction in his book *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in*

Contemporary America. He has established a list of features, which he claims are common to most contemporary immigrant narratives in the United States:

- » Narration often fragmented
- » Old-country folktales or other material interpolated
- » travail in school, especially in connection with learning English
- » Narrators make wry, quasi-anthropological observations regarding immigrant
- » diffidence vis-à-vis the self-assurance of native-born Americans
- » Views of what makes the homeland unliveable
- » Immigrants struggle with a sense of psychological and cultural doubleness (point of view often shifts: the same character can be both narrator and object of third-person narration, teller and told)
- » In fictions written by women: eating disorders
- » Immigrants exploit immigrants
- » Immigrant must deal with prejudice and homesickness but eventually becomes empowered by a new American identity
- » Cultural contrast often represented as generational conflict (older immigrants at odd with their more easily Americanized children)
 - Old world sex prohibitions versus new world freedom, virginity as trope for ethnic integrity [...]
 - One parent missing, sometimes associated symbolically with the homeland
 - The mature immigrant re-enters childhood (7–8).

Cowart furthermore identifies a set of shared characteristics within the works of immigrant fiction he analyzes. The stories are written in English and set in the United States, the host country or “new homeland”, whereby the focus on American culture is higher among younger writers. The main characters are modeled on the authors themselves, some arrive in the United States accompanied by their families, while others, as in *The Coffin Tree* and *Nowhere Man*, arrive on their own. The protagonists experience the process of acculturation, while for the sake of the narrative, aspects of nostalgia and desire for the old-country are often included (Cowart 207–208).

Concluding, it can be said that different scholars have come to similar conclusions concerning common characteristics of contemporary immigrant literature in the United States (cf. Sievers, Cowart, Löschnigg, Chambers, Bhaba). Every piece of contemporary immigrant fiction uses these characteristics on different levels and to different degrees. While studying the commonalities of contemporary immigrant fiction, these differences should always be considered, valued and positively embraced. What has been observed is that in most cases one essential theme is hardly ever missing: the consequences of being an immigrant and their influence on the negotiation of one’s identity.

White argues that in extreme cases migration can be equated with the experience of being reborn or of dying. Old identities are left behind or are transformed when the homeland and cultural environment are left behind, while new identities emerge when the host country is entered. The consequences that result from this struggle for identity and the various forms they take are the main issues of contemporary immigrant fiction (7).

The following subchapter will examine the immigrant author, his audience and his

contribution to the genre and its authenticity.

4.4. Authors and Authenticity

Writers of contemporary immigrant fiction can be motivated by various factors. Some write out of mere interest in the topic and indulge in meticulous research, while a considerably large number of immigrant authors base their work on their own personal experiences (White: 9).

One very common motive for producing an immigrant novel has already been mentioned above: therapy. Immigrant writers refer to stories about their traumatic experiences during migration out of personal need. They use writing as a coping mechanism (Löschnigg 10; Sievers: 224).

While some immigrant authors are motivated by personal therapeutic needs, others prefer that their work only be recognized for its artistic value regardless of the immigrant factor. Some of course have primarily commercial interests with publishing immigrant literature since it has clearly occupied a market niche in literature (White: 9).

Additionally, contemporary immigrant fiction often meets the political interests of authors and their minority groups or organizations, which attempt to use the loud voice of literature to call attention to their political and societal situation (9). While this power can be of great advantage, it often also forces the immigrant author into a dilemma, which will be further elaborated in the following section.

4.4.1 Dilemma

Immigrant authors often carry the burden of speaking as a representative of the minority group they belong to. Amy Ling asks whether immigrant authors need to “be totally and exclusively answerable to his or her ethnic community” or whether they may “claim the right to express an individual vision and personal concerns?” (195).

Sievers calls this one of the most difficult conflicts immigrant writers are faced with. On the one hand, they have to carry the burden of being the voice of a whole minority group while adhering to the secret rules of not revealing the issues this group has to deal with to the dominant groups (Mercer: 238; Sievers 229).

By writing about these exact issues, however, immigrant authors are faced with feelings of guilt and accusations of betrayal:

An aspiring writer from an immigrant background feels damned on the one side for having become too American and damned on the other side for not being able to become American enough. (Ferraro: 10).

On the other hand, if an author wishes to become a viable member of American literary society, he needs to pass through what Ferraro calls the *ethnic passage* (9). He has to

face his community, master the English language, familiarize himself with not only the American literary conventions but also the specific conventions of the genre of immigrant fiction and most importantly, he has to overcome the fear of putting his experiences in writing and publishing it on the American market (9). Only then is he “no longer the *conscious* ‘representative’ of a national or racial group – but a writer, a disaffiliate, whose race or religion or ethnic origin are merely so many colors for his writer’s palette” (Aaron qtd. in Ferraro: 3).

The dominant society also has its demands to contemporary immigrant writing. Expectations of the American audience are to gain authentic insight into the life and issues of the minority groups living in their midst, whereupon critics decide what qualifies as authentic and what does not. The highest recognition has usually been given to the most stereotypical works, which describe the foreign, the strange, the different, while authors who decide to deal with non-stereotypical issues have often been disregarded (Sievers 228).

The key to successful contemporary immigrant writing today might be to find a balance between the demands of the minority and the dominant society and the author’s individual artistic intentions and motivations. Nevertheless, many authors enter into what Ferraro calls a “Faustian bargain”, meaning “entrance into the republic of letters in exchange for ethnic consciousness” (3). They use their personal migrant background as a tool to foster their literary career.

4.4.2 Advantages and Disadvantages

Immigrant authors have undoubtedly more to offer than a simple sociological representation of the life of one ethnic minority and its struggles. They have the advantage of a *double perspective* on American life (Shirley Gech-Lin Lim: 2). By giving insight into their struggle as foreigners in the United States, they provide a unique outside view of US society.

While some authors embrace the American Dream and emphasize the value of this nation in their writing, others criticize it as a myth by pointing out the psychological and cultural alienation that immigrants experience in the United States (Muller: 2; Cowart: 12). Cowart supports the latter in his analysis of contemporary American immigrant writings:

Whatever America’s shortcomings in the past or present, immigrants nearly always have an acute awareness (and often personal, firsthand experience) of social, political, and historical horrors on a much larger scale. This knowledge and the perspective it fosters lend any criticism they do level a good deal of authority. (207).

Tim Finch warns that immigrant fiction should not be reduced to a representation of politics. He emphasizes the importance of literature as a medium “through which we

best experience that our own experience of the human condition has much in common with the experience of others” (paragraph 2). Finch argues that through the writings of immigrant authors, their readership is given an incomparable insight into their minds:

These other people may be quite unlike us, they may even act in ways that we deplore – but through literature’s prism we are able to view their actions from their perspective. The nameless “other” becomes the identifiable “I”; the unimaginably different becomes remarkably familiar. (paragraph 3).

In his article Finch criticizes writers of immigrant fiction for using their work to nurture political agendas and claims that fiction “loses its special power if it seeks to instruct or clarify, rather than losing itself in ambiguity or [...] contingency and irony” (paragraph 5). In this context he mentions Nabokov who has designated this kind of political agenda within a fiction narrative “topical trash” (paragraph 6). Nabokov, a Russian immigrant to the United States, is the author of the acclaimed English-language novel *Lolita*, which tells the very provocative and daring story about the affair of a man with an under-age girl (“Lolita and its critics.”). The courage and audacity to “fearlessly” capture the negative or ugly aspects of human experience in immigrant fiction is what is lacking, according to Finch (paragraph 7).

Sasa Stanic, a German writer who emigrated from Bosnia, offers a refreshing view on several prejudices migrant writers encounter among the literary society and their readership. For one he argues “my ‘migrant colleagues’ and I don’t appear to have as much in common as some critics and philologists wish we did, making it difficult for them to place us neatly next to one another on a bookshelf” (paragraph 3). Apparently, being labeled as an immigrant author seems to be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, immigrant fiction is defined as something special, something that positively distinguishes immigrant authors’ works from the rest of the literary canon. On the other hand, as already mentioned above, the literary world is having difficulties with finding a balance between marginalizing and discriminating against immigrant writers and disregarding their artistic value. If we emphasize general characteristics of immigrant fiction too much, it can be interpreted as a way of trying to marginalize the genre. For some others this might be a good thing, since they see their artistic quality in writing about that particular topic. For others, however, it might seem like an act of discrimination since their value as authors has nothing to do with their migration background.

Stanic clearly promotes the individuality of immigrant fiction and disregards any attempt to categorize it overly. He argues that *migrant literature* is no adequate term for the genre and points out that immigrant authors’ individual experiences as well as their unique social and cultural backgrounds forbid generalizations of any kind (paragraph: 5). Stanic does not completely abandon categorization but simply argues

that the plural, *migrant literatures*, has to be used instead and within this mosaic-like genre further distinctions need to be made (paragraph 9).

[...] I believe that migrant literature can only be effectively discussed by subject and in relation to the literary premise of genre, style, tradition, etc. Discourse about the aesthetic approach to a theme or a point of view, particularly in the context of national literatures, are much more crucial to the quality of the work and its understanding than the private life of the author can ever be [sic]'. (paragraph 10).

Aleksandar Hemon embraces his immigrant background in his writing and claims that he has benefited from being forced to master the English language. He believes that his experiences have helped him to excel as an author and that he has become better through writing in English (Borger). He does not specify this statement, but one can assume that the struggles he had to face throughout his exile have formed his identity in a way that never would have been possible otherwise. This will be further elaborated in the subsequent analysis.

Although Hemon clearly conveys several classical characteristics mentioned by Cowart, his writing also meets the fearlessness that Finch demands from immigrant authors. His individuality and the characteristics of immigrant fiction he includes have led to the choice of his book *Nowhere Man* for the analysis at hand.

4.5. Audience

Apart from the general readership, this section discusses the audience of immigrant fiction in academia.

In contemporary immigrant fiction, as in any other literary genre, different readers have different expectations and demands. Cowart describes the reader of immigrant fiction as wanting to be "pleasantly oriented and disoriented at the same time", meaning that some familiar aspects are important in order to be able to identify with the protagonists while the topics of the foreign and the strange certainly make this genre attractive (6).

Literature studies need to analyze immigrant writings as impartially as possible and only interpret the literary artwork itself. Sociology, on the other hand, tends to overlook the artistic quality of the immigrant novel, since the interest here lies in the authentic representation of life as an immigrant. What becomes important then is examining the authenticity, autobiography and accuracy of the immigrant writer and comparing his narrative to the current reality of American society (White: 9).

Hamm argues that immigration literature can serve as a social document that allows us to comprehend the general living conditions of immigrants amongst our midst (9). Nevertheless, according to social scientists, immigrant fiction alone can hardly serve as a valuable document for this sort of matter, since it only depicts these situations

through the narrative of one individual's experiences (White: 13). It can, however, foster better understanding of immigrants' conditions to compare literary depictions of immigrant lives to scientific evidence:

Creative or imaginative literature has a power to reflect complex and ambiguous realities that make it a far more plausible representation of human feelings and understandings than many of the artifacts used by academic researchers. (White: 15).

White argues that even though the dominant US society often criticizes individual immigrant authors for their artistic or thematic content, the whole body of contemporary immigrant writing serves as a powerful "cultural force" that represents current realities of society by making use of similar "metanarratives" (White: 15).

Therefore it can be concluded that literature can exert the same amount of power on its audience as academic and scientific research. Immigrant literature in particular can influence the way we think about important topics like migration, multiculturalism and identity.

II. LITERARY ANALYSIS

5. Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man*

The first primary text selected for the analysis at hand is Aleksandar Hemon's novel *Nowhere Man*. The book provides unique insight into the trauma of displacement and the associated conflict of redefining and reconstructing identity that immigrants are burdened with. The five chapters illustrate this matter from several angles and views and thus provide a fruitful basis for the analysis of the struggle for identity in contemporary American immigrant fiction.

In this chapter the representations of this struggle in Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* will be analyzed. Firstly, a short biographical introduction to the author will be given. Secondly, the plot of *Nowhere Man* will briefly be outlined. Thirdly, the analysis will be conducted and later compared to the second primary text in order to arrive at a final conclusion. This analysis will focus on the representations of identity and struggle for identity in Hemon's novel, especially in the context of the protagonist's life as an immigrant.

5.1. Premise

Before an analysis can be conducted on how identity is negotiated in this particular work of immigrant fiction, a closer look needs to be taken at the author and the setting and plot of the novel. The following subchapter will provide insight into Aleksandar Hemon's personal experiences with immigration and identity, as well as zoom in on certain experiences that might have contributed to the content of his novel *Nowhere Man*. For this purpose several interviews with Aleksandar Hemon will serve as a basis for information about his personal views and experiences.

The subsequent subchapter will give a brief overview on the plot and structure of the novel.

The final section of this chapter will then consist of a detailed analysis of the representation of identity struggle within the novel.

5.1.1. Aleksandar Hemon

Aleksandar Hemon is a critically acclaimed American writer of Bosnian origin, who moved to the United States when the Yugoslavian war began in 1992. At that time he was merely visiting the United States and Canada but could not go back to Sarajevo because the date of his return flight, May 1st 1992, also marked the beginning of the city's siege. He was therefore forced to stay in Chicago and has been living there ever since. Being exiled like this, he was left with no other choice than to work in several low

paid jobs until he realized that he eventually would have to go back to writing, the only thing that could keep him sane (Skrbic: 1).

Hemon started learning English and helped himself by writing journals in English and looking up words he did not know. He describes this rather frustrating state of his exile as a “tongue –tied limbo”: (Borger)

I was between languages for three years. I couldn't write in Bosnian or English. Whatever I said in English, I was lying, cheating. I was misrepresenting myself. (Brave New Words: Borger)

Eventually Hemon distanced himself from his mother tongue in order to master the English language. This also meant that he stopped writing in Bosnian and quit his column for the Sarajevan paper *Dani*, claiming that he “couldn't write in Bosnian any more” (Borger). When Hemon finally started to think, remember and dream in English he was finally confident enough to take on writing in English. After overcoming this obstacle he realized that his secret wish of going back home was only an illusion and not a possibility. He decided that he was ready to spend his life in the United States after all (Borger).

Today Hemon believes that his English writings are even better than his Bosnian work. After his long struggle for a new identity, he explains that he is finally “comfortable” with having several different identities. He claims that although many refer to him as an immigrant writer in exile, he is not exiled, but displaced. For him being exiled equals being isolated and alone, not being able to contact the people you love or live within your familiar culture. Although this was the case during the Yugoslavian war, Hemon does not see himself as someone who was exiled because “everyone was”. Eventually, however, he regained contact with his family and started writing for *Dani* again. He was in touch with his home, his country and his culture. He was displaced but connected (Skrbic: 5–6).

Hemon explains that he has many identities, and all of them are an essential part of him. Which identity is the most dominant one is a matter of personal choice for him. As soon as someone tries to force you to choose a single identity, he argues, war and ethnic cleansing begin (Skrbic: 7).

In the past he had several traumatic experiences, which had a powerful influence on his identity formation and his growth as an author. One of these experiences was witnessing the betrayal of a man who introduced him to literature and inspired his passion for writing. His former mentor, the English professor and expert on Shakespeare, Nikola Koljevic had become an instrument of Radovan Karadzic during the Yugoslavian war. Hemon not only felt betrayed on a personal level, but also began second-guessing everything that his former mentor, Koljevic, had taught him about literature and writing. This experience caused Hemon to re-evaluate his whole identity

as an author, as a Bosnian and as a man (Borger).

This necessity to reconstruct his identity was further reinforced through Hemon's traumatic experience of displacement and a sense of guilt and obligation towards his compatriots and his family. He feels that Bosnian people all over the world need to keep the Bosnian collective identity alive by upholding a connection with each other despite of the Bosnian Diaspora. His contribution to this duty is his work as an author, in both the Bosnian and the English language (Skrbic: 3).

Hemon's most controversial statement is probably the following: "I keep my political views for nonfictional or journalistic work....Literature is a stage for [the] people who live on the pages, not for my views" (Skrbic:2).

He claims that his contributions to contemporary immigrant fiction do not reflect his personal political views. In the following analysis of his book *Nowhere Man* we will analyze if this is really the case. The main focus will be an examination of the negotiation of the struggle for identity in the two chosen novels. However, identity cannot be discussed without comparing personal views to the ideologies of the dominant society represented in the book. One claim will be that Hemon's *Nowhere Man* clearly contains autobiographical aspects concerning both, the narration and the general portrayal of identities. The autobiographical aspects can be interpreted as to convey personal views of the other. Therefore it will be discussed whether or not the above statement is entirely faithful.

The following section will give a short introduction to the content of the novel in order to complete the preliminaries for the subsequent analysis of *Nowhere Man*.

5.1.2. *Nowhere Man – The Pronek Fantasies*

Aleksandar Hemon's novel follows the life of young Jozef Pronek from Sarajevo, a Bosnian national, with a Ukranian father.

The subtitle *The Pronek Fantasies* indicates the structure of the book: a number of excerpts, in the form of short narratives, that tell the life story of Jozef Pronek from birth to his struggle as a refugee living in Chicago after the Yugoslavian war.

The first chapter introduces the reader to an unknown narrator who gives insight into a day in his life as an immigrant in the United States. This narrator constantly switches between reminiscence and nostalgia while completing his tedious routine of looking for a job in order to survive in an unfamiliar environment. When he applies for a position as an EFL teacher, he is offered a glimpse into an ongoing English class. There he discovers Jozef Pronek, his compatriot from Sarajevo, and the protagonist of the novel. At that point the narrator reveals what he knows about Pronek from a childhood memory they share.

After the hero is introduced to the narrative in the first chapter, the second chapter offers a closer look into Pronek's life in Sarajevo from his birth in 1967 until the

outbreak of the war in 1992. The third person narrative illustrates what has coined Jozef Pronek's identity up to '92.

The chapter entitled *Fatherland* takes place in August 1991. Viktor Plavchuk, a young American meets Jozef Pronek when they both visit the Ukraine, both their fathers' homeland. Although the previous chapter had a third person narrator, it nonetheless appears to portray Pronek's own thoughts and feelings. The third chapter, however, reveals Viktor Plavchuk's thoughts. It is through his narration in form of an interior monologue that the reader gets more intimately acquainted with the protagonist. Pronek is characterized from an outsider's perspective.

Translated by Jozef Pronek is a short interlude that serves as a window to the wartime in Sarajevo conveyed by Pronek's best friend Mirza. He sends a letter to Pronek, who translates it in order for the reader to understand. The letter arrives in 1995 and depicts the Sarajevans' life during the siege and Mirza's experiences during the war. Although Mirza urges Pronek to reply to his letter, we are never provided with Jozef's response.

The penultimate chapter finally deals with Jozef Pronek's life as an immigrant in Chicago during the period of 1997 to 1998. Again, this part of the novel is narrated by an anonymous narrator, who in the end reveals a mysterious connection to Pronek by offering his personal view, thus, leaving the reader curious about his identity.

The final chapter reflects the novel's subtitle *The Pronek Fantasies*, and tells the tale of a Russian immigrant and his adventurous journey from Russia to Shanghai. He experiences dangerously fantastic things and meets numerous characters along the way, who are named after characters we have already encountered in previous chapters.

5.2. The Struggle for Identity in Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man*

In the analysis at hand the struggle for identity in Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* will be examined by looking at several different aspects. First the identity construction during childhood and upbringing of the protagonist will be described. How did he become the person he is, what is his personal habitus and what constitutes his personal territory (cf. McGregor Wise)? The first difficult challenge for identity construction is the process of coming of age, which will be the following aspect. Another interesting part of a character's identity is his sense of national identity (cf. O'Brien and Szeman). How is it portrayed and how does it change during the process of immigration and acculturation. Nostalgia is the fourth category that will be analyzed, something that is present throughout the book in various forms. The fifth category regards relationships, which will be shown to be a play a crucial part in identity construction as well as the challenges it comes with. Finally the reconstruction of identity will be discussed, especially as regards the traumas of displacement that the protagonist of *Nowhere*

Man experiences.

Concluding remarks will then summarize how all these categories play a role in the struggle the protagonist faces in his identity construction.

5.2.1. Childhood and Upbringing

For the analysis at hand the premise needs to include a description of the main character's initial identity construction, meaning the birth of one's identity that happens during one's childhood. Before investigating the struggle for identity in a new cultural and social context, which according to Cowart is one of the major themes of immigrant fiction (cf. Cowart: 7–8). We need to analyze the origins of an identity. What has formed Jozef Pronek's identity? What has influenced his self-construction and how?

In the first chapter Pronek is briefly described as an angry child, who had endured the bullying of other children and never answered with violence but always explicitly displayed his anger and rage. How he came to be this angry child is illustrated in the second chapter, which tells the story of Jozef's childhood and his coming of age and is hence an important part of his early identity formation. From birth Jozef has been the subject of a stereotypical Yugoslav ideology of upbringing. He has experienced strictness with subtle hints of affection mixed with absurd mistrust. While his parents were working, Jozef was looked after by his grandmother Natalyka, a warden of these strict Yugoslav ideals that were imposed on him on a daily basis. Her idea of upbringing is described as follows:

She kissed his parents without submitting to an urge to smile, then looked at Jozef with a serious face, as if assessing the amount of work necessary to mold his chunk of raw humanity into a decent person. (Hemon: 33)

Pronek was constantly protected from any possible dangers, which meant anything that was unfamiliar or unknown to his family, from unacquainted children at the playground to the influences of the Western world in the form of English song lyrics.

Although Pronek loved his family very much, he felt the need to rebel against their ideologies and this strict upbringing. He thought of his parents as ignorant beings, because of this fear of the unknown, this skepticism towards the ideals and ideas of the Western world and because of their stubbornness and their inability to keep an open mind to Western influences (Hemon: 39). Nevertheless, he practiced a subtle rebellion, without them always noticing, while he built his personal territory including his own beliefs, values and priorities. This is exemplified in his refusal to translate the correct meaning of English songs he enjoyed although it made his parents angry. Soon he used his knowledge of the English language as a tool to exert power over his parents and to nurture his personal revolt not only at home, but also at school. There the teachers were similarly uncomfortable with the performance of his English songs

(Hemon: 45).

He would sing at the top of his lungs at home, to the dismay of his parents, too tired to tolerate Pronek's roaming up and down the scales. Besides, they did not understand English, which was why they were suspicious regarding the real content of those foreign songs: drugs? Prostitution? Masturbation? Those songs were so much unlike the songs the elder Proneks liked to sing [...]. They demanded to know what in the world was Jozef singing about [...].” (Hemon: 38-39).

As a teenager and a young adult only three things matter to Pronek: girls, music and friendship (Hemon: 48; 51). He leads a comfortable life, not putting too much effort into his school education, housework or anything else that required action on his side (Hemon: 72; 49). The only thing he strives for is a Rockstar life with his best friend Mirza (Hemon: 51). “*Blind Jozef Pronek and the Dead Souls*” is the name of their band, which for Jozef is much more than a simple pastime activity. The band was “born out of pain and confusion” (Hemon: 65) and represents the primary outlet for Jozef's expression of felt emotions, especially love, anger and pain.

He creates a territory for himself, which represents his personality, his fantasies, his wildest dreams, and allows him to live out some of these fantasies by writing lyrics and performing his own songs and preferably the Beatles' songs in front of an audience, among other things (Hemon: 43):

The Beatles, after all, worked on the Liverpool docks, they would excitedly (and wrongly) recall. They imagined a future in which they played on huge stages, a firmament of stage lights above them, and the drummer twirling his sticks. They traveled around the world – London, Amsterdam, Chicago – on a bus with a fridge. They had millions of dollars [...]. (Hemon: 51-52).

He decides to write his lyrics in English because he feels the need to speak to more people than only his fellow countrymen (Hemon: 52). Jozef and Mirza strongly identify with John Lennon and Paul McCartney, two rock stars from the Western world, rather than idealizing celebrities from their Eastern home. They are ambitious and strive for their music, the representation of their personal feelings, emotions and experiences to transcend national borders.

Although Mirza and Jozef strongly express the wish to escape the limitations of Yugoslav ideals they are subjects to, they eventually “expanded their repertoire to include domestic songs”. Jozef adds the Bosnian *sevdah* to his personal musical territory (Hemon: 48).

Besides his musical journey with his best friend Mirza, the anonymous narrator of the second chapter describes Jozef as a young man who falls in and out of love, who gets his heart broken, who makes his first natural experiences with sexuality. Jozef struggles with nothing more or less than the typical obstacles a teenage boy faces on his way to self-realization and becoming a “real man”.

5.2.2. The Struggle of Coming of Age

This narrator reveals his own thoughts and memories of Sarajevo as a home for young adults:

Sarajevo in the eighties was a beautiful place to be young – I know because I was young then. I remember linden trees blooming as if they were neer to bloom again, producing a smell I can feel in my nostrils now. They boys were handsome, the girls beautiful, the sports teams successful, the bands good, the streets felt as soft as a Persian carpet, and the Winter Olympics made everyone feel that we were at the center of the world. I remember the smell of apartment- building basements where I was making out with my date, the eye of the light switch glaring at us from the darkness. (Hemon: 49-50).

Although this description leads us to believe that Jozef's youth is a beautiful, innocent and safe time in his life, he is also portrayed as a rather confused and almost slightly depressed young man, who does not quite know who he wants to be and what his purpose in life is yet. Again we can argue that this is not an unusual struggle for a young adult. He is easily distracted and seduced by his own fantasies. This ability to fully immerse in those fantasies represents weakness and strength at the same time. It is a weakness when Jozef contemplates about what to expect when he joins the army:

He fantasized about the tough army life, about doing thousands of pushups, crawling under barbed wire, astonishing his commanding officer ad the shooting range with his precise eye. He imagined coming back from the army strong – his shoulders wide, his face hardened and hairy, with a scar across his cheek (barbed wire). (Hemon: 59)

However, his time in the army ended up being very different from what he imagined and did not bring about the “pledged masculinity” that he was expecting and that he believes his family is expecting (Hemon: 62). Jozef comes back from the army as insecure and as lost as he had been before and decided to lie to his parents by “presenting his army experience as one of bonding with other young men from all across Yugoslavia” (Hemon: 61). Mirza, however, who, unlike his parents, understands him and abstains from judgment and concern, is rewarded with the truth. Hence, the expected fantasy that the Yugoslav army would finally form his masculinity and transform him into a tough Yugoslav brother does not come true and leave the seemingly depressed and Jozef still in search of masculine identity.

The identity construction of Hemon's young and confused protagonist in his early years of life is characterized partly by a fantasized and subtle rebellion and partly by a desire for the Western world values. He has created a fantasy world for himself, which is inspired by the music and the life of the Beatles, who lived the free and adventurous rock star life that Jozef dreams of living. He takes all his experiences, emotions, feelings, desires and puts them into English songs, longing for the chance to perform them and express himself. He has stored up a mass of angry feelings that stem from his strict

upbringing and the lack of individuality he was allowed to develop in the context of his family and Yugoslavia. He longs for a life that enables him to do all the things he fantasizes about without being judged by his parents and society. He flees from the strict Yugoslav ideologies by immersing into his virtually outlawed fantasies.

In several instances Jozef, however, still seemingly manages to adopt this identity by enjoying the power of the English language, which makes him superior to his family and his teachers. Singing English songs that nobody understands and trusts makes him the notorious rebel he wants to be and grants him a sense of power over his own identity and personality. By being a rebel and adhering to the values of the Western world, Jozef creates himself and differentiates himself from the rest of the population.

Nevertheless, he does not seem prepared to actually put any work into achieving these fantasy goals in the real world:

Pronek had professed his desire to be a music teacher, a toy idea thrown to his worried parents while he was attending to his real plans, which mainly consisted of not being separated from Mirza. (Hemon: 48)

It appears that he lives for the moment but occasionally sleeps away the day because he does not care enough to get up and accomplish anything in life.

By zooming in on seemingly insignificant events of Jozef's young adult life, Hemon highlights the ordinariness of his protagonist's character (Hemon: 47):

The hard part in writing a narrative of someone's life is choosing from the abundance of details and microevents, all of them equally significant, or equally insignificant. If one elects only to include the important events: the births, the deaths, the loves, the humiliations, the uprisings, the ends and the beginnings, one denies the real substance of life: the ephemera, the nethermoments, much too small to be recorded [...]. But you cannot simply list all the moments when the world tickles your senses, only to seep away between your fingers and eyelashes, leaving you alone to tell the story of your life to an audience interested only in the fireworks of universal experiences, the roller coaster rides of sympathy and judgment. (Hemon: 41).

We read about Jozef's birth, the death of his grandmother, the relationships and breakups, the humiliating techniques of the Yugoslav army, his imagined rebellion against his parents and the world that surrounds him, and so forth. Those events are used as checkpoints in the story in order to portray Jozef's identity construction from birth to coming of age: "out of the molten lava of his experiences, a few awkward rocks formed" (Hemon: 32).

Through these experiences a foundation is laid out for the comprehension of his experiences as an immigrant in the United States in the subsequent chapters. While narrating the main events of Jozef's childhood, the narrator also tells the stories between the lines: how Jozef feels about his upbringing and his grandmother's influence, how he experiences himself as an outsider and rebel, how he feels guilty for not caring about

his nation and Tito's death. He tells the story of a young Bosnian man with Ukrainian ancestors struggling to discover his identity in a sea of insecurity, pressure, expectations and fear.

All the accounts of Jozef's responses to his environment, the people that surround him, and his fantasies that give the reader insights into his deepest desires and fears, depict the construction of his identity from birth to coming of age. Only based on the foundation of this initial identity construction does it become possible for the reader to understand Jozef's struggle for identity as an immigrant. Knowing who he was before he was exiled to the United States and how he came to be that person, allows us to comprehend what he is going through as an immigrant and why he copes the way he does in the book. To complete this basis we will have a further look at cultural and national identity in regards to the protagonist.

5.2.3. National Identity

As already established in the first part of this thesis, identities are dynamic and cannot be pinned down and described in a universal matter. They are inevitably challenged, changed, re-constructed, de-constructed and questioned throughout a person's life, also due to the culture and the nation this person lives in (Hall: 277). This is also portrayed in Aleksandar Hemon's novel. On the one hand, the protagonist's life is narrated to the reader in regard to his struggle for identity during his earlier years of childhood and coming of age, which has been laid out in the previous chapter. This struggle is a natural challenge which most people have to go through, a natural path in life.

On the other hand, this novel qualifies as immigrant fiction because it describes quite a specific challenge of identity formation: the trauma of displacement. Although the early life of Jozef Pronek is already marked by immigration since his father had immigrated to Bosnia from the Ukraine, this is not more to him than an annoying sob story that he has to live through from time to time. It does not concern or bother him at all. Although he is an immigrant in Bosnia, Jozef does not care about his Ukrainian roots and shows no effort to learn about them. He simply endures his father's stories when he is forced to and rolls his eyes in his mind (Hemon: 58).

Jozef and his friend Mirza star in their personal rebellion against their parents and the society. Jozef's personal rebellion starts with admitting to having no interest in his roots (Hemon: 69). Before the war it becomes clear that Jozef does not really care much for his national or political roots. This is emphasized when his band is scheduled to play at a school event and the concert is cancelled due to the sudden death of former Yugoslav leader Tito:

The show was scheduled for May 4, 1980. But May 4, of course, was the day Comrade Tito died: the news showed wailing soccer players and hysterical mothers and people standing frozen on the street as if their batteries had abruptly drained. [...] Pronek was afraid that they might be conspicuous in their eagerness to perform,

so they furtively left the gym and stood in an empty entrance hall, mad at Tito and his selfish mortality. Recollecting, in whispers, this moment several days later, they all agreed they should have produced some tears, and they unpatriotically hadn't. (Hemon: 45)

This paragraph describes Jozef and Mirza's relationship to their nation perfectly. They are aware of their country's beliefs, values and ideologies and they know that if they wanted to adhere to those values, they should be sad about their leader's death and they should express it through grief and tears like everybody else was doing. Instead their personal loss, namely their cancelled show at the school gym, is their primary concern in that situation. They denounce themselves as unpatriotic and simply continue with their lives, not remembering that day as the day Tito died but as the day their first concert was cancelled, which happened "to the relief of the principal, who was uncomfortable with their English songs, clearly inappropriate at the time of the great loss" (Hemon: 45).

Jozef's indifference to his nation is a catalyst for his silent resistance against authority and his desire to live in a different world. Although the Sarajevan school had taught him "that the most important thing in our society was preserving brotherhood and unity", he claimed to feel no patriotism whatsoever towards Yugoslavia (Hemon: 38).

Nevertheless we cannot completely trust that Jozef did not care for his nation at all. When reading carefully between the lines we realize that he *wanted* to shed a tear for the great loss of president Tito, he *wanted* the Army to make him a proper Yugoslav soldier "bonding with other young men from all across Yugoslavia, strengthening the brotherhood and unity that kept the country strong and united" (Hemon: 61). He *expected* the army to make a real man out of him and felt disappointment and the need to lie when it did not. He *wanted* to keep up the illusion that he had become one of the Yugoslav brothers, "one of them" (Hemon: 61–62).

The army and hence his nation fails him and he fails his nation by experiencing the army as a waste of time and a source of humiliation. What is supposed to bring him closer to his nation ends up distancing him from it even further. At this point of his life, he neither identifies as a Ukrainian nor as a Bosnian.

Nevertheless, Pronek chooses to pay his father's homeland a visit, since he quite frankly thinks it is better than to do nothing at all. The chapter entitled *FATHERLAND, Kiev 1991* is told by an American narrator with Ukrainian roots, similar to Jozef. While Jozef's story from birth to coming of age is told by an anonymous third person narrator, it still reflects his self conception while the story in Kiev focuses on how the narrator, Viktor Plavchuk, perceives Jozef's character. What both men, Viktor and Jozef, have in common is their common Ukrainian ancestry and their absolute indifference to it, even though they both decided to visit Kiev. While Jozef has shown that he longs to be part of the Western World, he nevertheless constantly makes cheeky comments to his

American peers in Kiev, which are purely based on prejudice towards the United States and its people (Hemon: 79). These comments by Jozef reflect the Eastern World's opinion towards the Western World, which becomes a prominent theme already in the beginning of the chapter, when the narrator enters the Ukraine on a flight from America:

They flipped through my American passport, determinedly not impressed with the plentiful freedoms it implied, let alone the rich collection of visas collected on my existentialist peregrinations. They still let me in, albeit with a humbling frown, conveying that they could stop me, indeed vanish me, had they only wished to. But they wished other, more profitable things, so they practically threw my passport at me. (Hemon: 76).

After getting to know Jozef, who is also a foreigner in the Ukraine but nevertheless closer to its Eastern culture than Viktor as an American is, the narrator suffers the pain of unrequited love for the young protagonist (Hemon: 106). Although he emerges to have romantic feelings for Jozef, he still engages in a relationship with a woman, seemingly to draw attention from the fact that he was deeply in love with his roommate. They connected on a deep level because they seemed similar in so many ways and because Viktor realized that he wanted to be like Jozef himself and that he “had never had – and then lost it again – what Jozef had: the ability to respond and speak to the world” (Hemon: 87). What he means by this is that Jozef, although his English is not very proficient or maybe because of that, tells exactly what is on his mind. This is the Jozef that we encounter in Kiev, and he differs in many ways from the Jozef we knew in Sarajevo. He seems to have discovered a new type of freedom being with people from different countries in a different country than Yugoslavia.

I wanted to be alone, but you couldn't be alone with Jozef – he brought buckets of cold world into your life and poured it over your head and you gasped for air. (Hemon: 97).

Jozef is described as a cheerful, naïve and slightly ignorant person who speaks his mind without thinking about the consequences. Both men share stories of their strict upbringing and the punishments they received from their fathers (Hemon: 89). While Jozef's childhood horror stories have the connotation of humor and irony, because it does not seem to bother him even a little bit that his father “would sentence him to twenty-five belt lashes for a transgression”, the narrator admits that he is traumatized by his father's actions (Hemon: 89).

Viktor's father urged him to express patriotism towards America while at the same time dwelling on his belonging to the real fatherland. Viktor responds to this seesaw with the following: “I hated my father for being a fucking foreigner: displaced, cheap, and always angry” (Hemon: 89). Unlike Jozef, Viktor has experienced the *in-*

between-ness of immigrants' children, who have trouble coping with the challenge of acculturation:

My father refused to stand up for the national anthem, because he was still Ukrainian, as if "The Star-Spangled Banner" wounded his Ukrainianness. He made me stand up, he wanted me to appreciate America, for I was born here. (Hemon: 89)

Jozef only had to endure his father's sob stories about the fatherland, and was never forced into this in-between-ness of nations. For him that has never even constituted an issue. Viktor on the other hand, is still deeply worried and troubled with his national but also with his personal identity. The encounter with Jozef, therefore, serves as a kind of salvation for him. To meet somebody who has experienced similar personal traumas, someone who is a role model in free and reckless behavior and speech, gives him hope and scares him at the same time.

I loved Jozef because I thought that he was the simple me, the person I would have been had I known how to live a life, how to be accommodated in this world. (Hemon: 124)

Viktor and Jozef share similar life stories and face similar challenges during their identity construction. Both were subjects of the ideologies of Eastern countries imposed on them by society and especially by their families. Both men also share a similar antipathy for those ideologies and a desire for resisting them. Their national identity is therefore a rather controversial, complex and instable concept. It is a challenging part for their overall identities, which becomes even more complicated for Jozef Pronek when he is exiled. Further elaboration on this aspect can be found below.

5.2.4. Nostalgia

The book is subtitled *The Pronek Fantasies*, which already indicates that several instances of *fantasies* will be used in the narrative technique. Hemon uses these fantasies in every chapter in the form of either flashbacks or daydreaming. This technique allows the different narrators to convey the feelings of nostalgia or desire in various ways and create a sentimental atmosphere.

The first powerful instance of nostalgia can be found in the form of a childhood memory in the first chapter. Throughout the whole novel the protagonist, Jozef Pronek, is described from several different perspectives. In this first chapter he is introduced as a figure from the narrator's memory of the past in Sarajevo. The men meet again in an ELT classroom in the Chicago after having immigrated to the United States, where the narrator notices Jozef but is not recognized by him. This brief encounter brings up a nostalgic childhood memory in the narrator. Through this memory we learn that Jozef has spent his childhood in Sarajevo, where he had already experienced what it

is like to be a foreigner in your own home, within a naive territorial war game among children in a Sarajevan housing complex. Back then the narrator considered himself to be a “real” Sarajevan while he saw Pronek as an outsider, who could be identified by his non-Sarajevan accent. This small and seemingly meaningless encounter indicates that Jozef might already have experienced the struggle for identity during his childhood, because he is the son of a Ukrainian immigrant. The narrator describes the resolution of their childish wars as follows:

Eventually, [...] we ended up playing with those kids. They were not our enemies any longer, but they were not our friends either. They were still newcomers, some of them spoke with strange non-Sarajevan accents, and we were the natives. We let them settle, but they were still in our land, and we never failed to let them know that. (Hemon: 24).

After this nostalgic flashback the narrator arrives at the harsh reality that both of them are now strangers in a new land, facing the same obstacles. Being in these shows gives the narrator a different view on his childhood experiences and the chance to critically reflect on the events from the past. He feels guilty for bullying Jozef as a foreigner in the past, he feels the need to apologize to him and he feels the desire to reconnect with him, as Jozef, who once was a foreigner to him, now represents a close connection to home (Hemon: 27). His personal identity as a native Sarajevan child and Jozef's identity as a non-Sarajevan child are not relevant anymore. However, we get the impression that Jozef, because he is making the effort of taking English lessons, might be coping better with the situation than the narrator, who seems to be very alone and struggling with the challenges of immigrant life. He feels a strong desire to reconnect with Jozef, but does not dare to talk to him and rather sinks back into his nostalgic depression.

Another instance of nostalgia is used when Jozef briefly works for a private investigator and is asked to deliver a legal document to a Serbian man, a runaway father who owes child support. He is not in a position to turn the job down although he does not feel comfortable doing it (Hemon: 146). He is asked to speak to this Serbian man in his “monkey language” and if he was successful he would receive sixty dollars (Hemon: 150). This encounter, however, puts Jozef in a dangerous and terrifying situation. The man turns out to be a Serbian fanatic, who promotes the killings in Sarajevo and Srebrenica as mere propaganda spread by the Bosnian Muslims:

You know when bomb fall on market in Sarajevo? [...] They say hundred people die. They all dolls, *lutke*. Muslims throw bomb on market. Propaganda! Then they put dolls for television, it look bad, like many people killed. (Hemon: 155).

Jozef a Bosnian but not a Muslim has a bad feeling about revealing his real identity to this man, who is clearly not able to stop dwelling in the past. Hence, he decides to tell the man that he is from Ukraine, which wins him sympathy and keeps the situation under

control (Hemon: 152). The Serbian man, Brdjanin, displays his gun openly and rants on about Muslims while Jozef subtly tries to advocate for the reality of the genocides, which his own family is experiencing up close:

“I have a friend,” Pronek said, trying to appear disinterested, his heart throttling in his chest, “from Sarajevo. He says the people really died. His parents are in Sarajevo. They saw it.”
“What is he?”
“He is the Bosnian.”
“No, what is he? He is Muslim? He is Muslim. He lie.”
“No, he’s not Muslim. He is from Sarajevo.”
“He is from Sarajevo, he is Muslim. They want Islamic Republic, many *mudjahedini*.”
(Hemon: 156).

Pronek successfully conceals his real identity and sells his own experiences and stories as stories of a friend from back home. He does not stand up for his country and his family the way he wants to and he does not defend the truth. On the one hand, he fears for his life and on the other hand, we get the feeling that Jozef is not one to be affected by nostalgia. This situation, however, is the closest he comes to experiencing what his fellow citizens are probably experiencing in the war. He, the survivor, the exile, leaves the house and is overwhelmed by anger:

Pronek stood on the corner, letting his eyelids slide down like blinds, gathering strength before walking home. He looked at the Shoney’s being razed, and imagined himself destroying it with a huge hammer, slamming the walls, ripping out pipes, until there was just a pile of rubble. And then he would go on, until there was nothing left. (Hemon: 159).

In this instance, nostalgic feelings of one of his self-proclaimed enemies have put him as a Bosnian in grave danger.

As an immigrant Jozef does not allow himself to dwell in sentimental thoughts about the past. He rather displays his subtle fear of the new situation and environment through horrid fantasies that occupy his mind from time to time. While in the second chapter, Pronek fantasizes about being part of The Beatles, as an immigrant he remembers these times as silly. It seems to the reader, however, that Jozef does not dare to remember these innocent and happy times in his life, because his desire for the Western World makes him feel embarrassed and somewhat guilty. Now that he is living in the Western World and is exposed to its values, it is nothing like he imagined.

When asked to recite some Bosnian songs, he sings the *sevdalinke*, for his American girlfriend. These songs serve as a reminder of the beauty of his motherland and its culture and, therefore, as a positive example for nostalgia: “It is sad, but it is so sad that it makes you free. It is like the Bosnian blues” (Hemon: 210-211). They represent his desire for the safety of his childhood and youth and the nostalgia he feels when thinking about what he was forced to leave behind. A unique moment is created, in

which Jozef feels safe enough for the first time in the novel, to allow himself to dwell in the memories of the past and again use music to express what he feels. For the first time in the story, he meets somebody, namely his girlfriend's mother Rebecca, who had been to Bosnia and recognizes the beauty of the country and its culture. For the first time we get the feeling that Jozef might actually be able to be healed one day and lead a happy life after all.

A slightly different instance of nostalgia is provided in the chapter *Translated by Jozef Pronek, Sarajevo Dec. 1995*. The whole chapter consists of a letter from Jozef's friend Mirza, which is an authentic description of the terrible situation in Bosnia. Rather soberly he describes war and death and expresses his wish to talk to somebody. Throughout the book Jozef never even once comments on the letter, we never learn how reading it affects his state of mind. He only mentions it once when he finds someone who might be interested in it in Rebecca. The reader is free to interpret his silence about the letter as indifference or maybe as too painful to think about it. Hemon strategically places the letter and creates room for shock, wonder and empathy. This empathy can be directed to Mirza, who endures the horrors of war, as well as to Jozef, who is exiled and helpless when learning about the atrocities committed in his motherland.

As we can see the role of nostalgia in Hemon's novel takes on several different forms influencing identity in various ways. It can take the form of a letter, a song or a childhood memory that reminds the narrator who he was and reminds him of who he has become. He was once a powerful native Sarajevan fighting on the winning side of an innocent childhood playground war and has become the victim of a real war and, therefore, a lone stranger in a new world that is indifferent to his sufferings.

Nostalgia can furthermore represent danger. Brjadin, the Serb has failed to adapt to the values of his new host country. Although the war is over and its atrocities have been well documented, he still holds on to the propaganda that was spread by certain Serbian war criminals and denies that events like Srebrenica have really taken place. He longs for the good old times and demonstrates his attitudes toward the war by displaying his gun openly and advertising Serbian propaganda. Jozef feels he would jeopardize his life if he revealed his true national identity. But through these nostalgic outbursts he realizes the struggle even this horrible man must go through and tries to comfort him after all.

While somebody else's nostalgia represents a danger for Jozef in this instance, his own nostalgia seems dangerous to him too. It might endanger his sanity, his healthy state of mind and therefore he does not allow himself to dwell in the past too much. However, when he finds a safe haven with his girlfriend Rachel, he lets his guard down and allows nostalgic Bosnian songs to consume him for one moment. In this instance it appears as if nostalgia comforts him and helps him to start an inevitable healing process.

What all nostalgic instances that appear in the book have in common is that they are mostly triggered by the smallest and the most insignificant things rather than by dramatic events. This is due to the fragile state of mind that the characters involved find themselves in. In the case of Jozef Pronek this fragile state of mind is caused by the trauma of displacement, which will be the topic of the following subchapter.

5.2.5. The Trauma of Displacement and Exile

The protagonist Jozef Pronek never actually experiences the Yugoslav war directly, nor is he forced to actively flee his country. When the war breaks out he finds himself in Chicago, unable to return to his home in Sarajevo. While his family and friends back home are caught in a horrible war, Jozef's exile also causes a trauma. It is the trauma of displacement, exile and the loss of home.

The novel portrays this trauma in the first chapter, using a narrator who is also displaced in Chicago. This narrator is depressed, poor and desperate. His depression is caused by his loneliness and his desperate financial and social situation. He feels ashamed of himself and ashamed of having to work in degrading and low paid jobs:

I preferred being a vague, pleasant memory to having to explain who I was or telling her that I had no job, and when I had one I was smashing boxes.(Hemon: 6)

His depressed state of mind is expressed by frequent nostalgic flashbacks and fantasies that are triggered by seemingly insignificant things like encounters on the street or advertisement posters (Hemon: 9-12; 24-25). Having to search for a job frightens him because he seems to have little qualifications to work in decent jobs (Hemon: 9). It appears that he has already slightly adapted to his life in Chicago, at least regarding his English skills, since he is applying for an ESL teaching position (Hemon: 4). However, judging from his thoughts and the volume of nostalgic feelings, one can assume that socially and mentally his acculturation has not been very successful yet. This becomes clear at the end of the first chapter, when he encounters Jozef Pronek in an ESL class and expresses a deep desire to connect with him, because he was exceptionally lonely and had finally found someone who might know him: "I should have told Pronek who I was, I needed him to know" (Hemon: 27).

Like this narrator from the first chapter, Jozef is alone and we have no account of any social relations he might have, no friends, no family, no acquaintances other than the people he meets on his job hunts. He is alone in a foreign country, among people who are completely oblivious or ignorant of the situation in Yugoslavia. The only real connection to home he experiences in this chapter is a headline in the newspaper that says: "Thousands killed in Srebrenica" (Hemon: 155).

At this point we cannot tell which acculturation strategy Jozef is using or going to use in the future. He does not reveal whether he expects to go back to Bosnia one day

but he has not accepted that his life will take place in the United States. Although he had never been inclined to feel patriotism towards Bosnia, and clearly fancied the Western World when rebelling against Yugoslav ideologies, he still suffers because of his exile in the United States and because he is not able to return to Sarajevo. After all home is home, regardless of his feelings towards the nation it is in. He refers to himself as “the Bosnian” in the United States (Hemon: 149). He seems to have difficulties integrating himself in the new society. This is further illustrated in the subsequent chapter of the book, when Jozef had already been living in Chicago for five years.

Jozef applies for a job with Green Peace and is still having serious doubts: “Was he sure he could do it? Was he comfortable speaking English?” (Hemon: 164). He would have to go from door to door and try to raise money for Green Peace by talking to people. This way he would experience the American people in close proximity, which clearly frightened him:

He imagined good Americans opening their doors, hating him for his foreign stupidity, for his silly accent, for his childish grammar errors. He imagined them swinging baseball bats at his elbows and smashing them, bone splinters flying around. (Hemon: 167)

Although Jozef is able to communicate in English, he still has a strong accent and great shortcomings regarding his language ability, which makes him very self-conscious in daily interactions:

He imagined explaining the situation to paramedics who wouldn’t understand him because of his accent. (Hemon: 172)

He is strongly inhibited in his communications and has now taken up a job which really challenged him and which he did not want to but had to do.

However, it can be considered as a step towards successful integration. He talks openly about where he is from with his colleagues and even falls in love and enters into a relationship with his American co-worker Rachel. Although the communication with different Americans and his colleagues helps him to develop better language and communication skills, it does not come easily. He is constantly being made fun of, corrected and insulted because of his accent and his Balkan heritage (Hemon: 170; 178; 218-219;).

As a refuge from this displacement he therefore frequently chooses to impersonate somebody else:

To a young couple in Evanston who sat on their sofa holding hands, Pronek introduced himself as Mirza from Bosnia. To a college girl in La Grange with DE PAW stretching across her bosom he introduced himself as Sergei Katastrofenko from Ukraine. To a man in Oak Park [...] he introduced himself as Jukka Smrdiprdiuskas from Estonia. To an old couple from Romania in Homewood, who could speak no English and sat with their hands gently touching their knees, he was John from Liverpool. To a tired construction worker in Forest Park who opened the door angrily and asked,

“Who the fuck are you?” he was Nobody. To a Catholic priest in Blue Island, with eczema and a handsome, blue-eyed boyfriend, he was Phillip from Luxembourg. [...] To a woman in Hyde Park who opened the door with a gorgeous grin, which then transmogrified into a suspicious smirk as she said, “I thought you were someone else,” he was Someone Else. (Hemon: 180).

Impersonating somebody else when he talks to people at their doorsteps serves as a temporary refuge and comfort for Jozef. In these moments he does not have to feel alienated, he does not have to feel like a foreigner, he does not have to feel displaced, lonely or desperate. He feels no shame and no guilt. He can escape from his current identity to his fantasy world and imagine himself being somebody else. He feels comfortable introducing himself as an English man to a couple who do not speak English at all. For once the roles are reversed and he can be the person in a superior position, and the English language is once again his power, which he had already used before with his parents back home.

Rachel, Jozef’s girlfriend proves how powerful language can be when she offers the anxious Jozef a different view on his situation:

“It is hard. My English is bad.”

“Just be relaxed. If you speak English with an accent, you speak at least two languages and that is twice as many as the people in this godforsaken place. People who like you will give you money, and people who don’t won’t.” (Hemon: 177)

Rachel is one of the first people to see him as a person and not as a foreigner. She constantly corrects him, which Jozef does not always appreciate, and shows that she cares for him and accepts and loves him as a man. She does not see him as a “Balkan boy” (Hemon: 170), she sees him as somebody worthy of her love. She feels bad for him and she cares about the situation in Yugoslavia, claiming that it makes her experience “numb helplessness” because she can do nothing but to sit back, watch the news on the war (Hemon: 173). Jozef’s relationship with Rachel helps him to begin a healing process regarding his trauma of displacement. She seems to be the first true friend he wins in the United States and being with her at least partly relieves an essential component of his trauma: the feeling of loneliness. “The thought of being separated from her had become unbearable “, and finally Jozef moves in with her and begins to let his guard down:

He hung up the map of the world in the kitchen and scattered other things that belonged to him around the apartment, marking his territory, like a dog pissing on trees- wherever he looked there was a trace of him. And when he was brushing his teeth while Rachel waited in bed, it exhilarated him that he was in the bathroom while she was in the bedroom. (Hemon: 213).

The healing process that is initiated by the safety of a new and close relationship to a woman, the new sense of belonging that arises in Jozef, does not come without a price. He is comfortable around her and not as self-conscious about every word he says as

he is with other people. He feels safe with her and they make a home for themselves in their apartment. However, this safety and this comfort also allow Jozef to confront his trauma and start reconstructing a stable identity. Relationships as a crucial support for the struggle of identity will be the topic of the next section.

5.2.6 Relationships

Marx talks about human identity as an “ensemble of the social relations” (Hemon: 145). He argues that our identity is necessarily connected to society, culture, nation and our relationships with other people. If we analyze the representation of Jozef’s identity concerning his relationships, we clearly recognize his loneliness because he is cut off from his family and friends and does not appear to have any significant relationship until he meets Rachel.

Jozef’s relationship with Rachel helps him to begin a healing process. She seems to be the first true friend he wins in the United States and being with her at least partly heals an essential symptom of his trauma: loneliness. “The thought of being separated from her had become unbearable “, and, finally, Jozef moves in with her and begins to let his guard down:

He hung up the map of the world in the kitchen and scattered other things that belonged to him around the apartment, marking his territory, like a dog pissing on trees – wherever he looked there was a trace of him. And when he was brushing his teeth while Rachel waited in bed, it exhilarated him that he was in the bathroom while she was in the bedroom. (Hemon: 213).

The healing process that is initiated by the safety of a new and close relationship to a woman, the new sense of belonging that arises in Jozef, does not come without a price. This safety and this comfort of a relationship allow Jozef to confront his trauma and the feelings that accompany it. Eventually a seemingly insignificant incident with a mouse in the apartment makes Jozef furious and leads him to strongly let out his anger and all the feelings of trauma he had accumulated and never dealt with (Hemon: 217-221). They were fighting over killing a mouse and over Rachel constantly correcting his flawed English when Jozef realized “there was nowhere he wanted to be” (Hemon: 219).

Jozef remembers who he was back home but knows that he cannot be that same person any longer. Displacement confuses him and puts him in a state of uncertainty and loss regarding his identity. Only through Rachel does he discover that he might become somebody again, when he becomes her boyfriend. This is not portrayed as a happy ending but as the start of a difficult and long process of identity reconstruction.

5.2.7. The Struggle of Reconstructing Identity

Throughout his life Jozef was taught that he had to know who he was, what his identity

was, what his national allegiance was and that he should appreciate and defend it. He was never inclined to have one fixed identity, he always wanted to be able to adopt more than one, which was not welcomed in his social, cultural and political environment. He wants to play English songs and write English lyrics in order to appeal to a more international audience and at the same time he loved the Bosnian Blues, the *sevdalinke*, which connected him to his home country. Now he finds himself in a position where this national identity he was raised with was being torn apart. There were no Yugoslavs anymore, there were only Bosnians, Serbs, Muslims and Non-Muslims and they were all fighting each other because of their identities while Jozef was stranded in that Western World he always had admired so much. He feels lonely, desperate and lost and his English music, which had been an integral part of his former identity, seems like a distant silly memory to him now:

He remembered when he used to sing this song and was suddenly retroactively ashamed – he recalled himself with a guitar, strumming, trying to express the deep emotions contained in the song, and his skin crawled at the horror of his own stupidity, at the times when he thought that “Yesterday” was anything but a sappy song, at the times when he was someone else. (Hemon: 196).

Jozef never wanted to be just one person and have just one identity because he never really knew who he would want to be if he had to have a fixed identity. He had always felt that it was parochial of his parents to insist on mistrusting every foreign influence just because it was unfamiliar to them.

Why couldn't he be more than one person? Why was he stuck in the middle of himself, hungry and tired? (Hemon: 198)

Now he was a foreigner in the United States and all of his parents' ranting about patriotism and all of his teachers' lectures on the Yugoslav brotherhood had done nothing to help him in his current situation. He was alone, displaced and traumatized, living with an American woman who eased his pain but could not heal his wounds. He was now somebody's boyfriend, somebody's partner in life. But for some reason, he still felt a sense of loneliness and fragility.

Jozef does not feel any sort of belonging. He is struggling with who he was and who he should be when he comes to the painful realization that he is nobody, he wants to be nowhere, he is a *Nowhere Man*. In an emotional outbreak he eventually expresses his anger and desperation about that by destroying everything in the apartment he can get his hands on and by tearing off every single piece of clothes he is wearing until he is standing naked in front of Rachel, who is capturing that strong and horrifying moment on camera:

“You want to see me? You want to see the real me?”
He banged his chest with his fists, as if trying to break it open.

“Here! Here!” he screamed, until he lost his voice. (Hemon: 221)

Up until this moment he is simply an unemotional and seemingly unhappy immigrant who struggles with a new life. Finally we realize that his struggle is much more than a simple challenge to reconstruct his life in a new environment. It is a struggle within himself and with himself. It is a painful struggle for identity that started in his early childhood and met new and almost insurmountable obstacles when he was exiled from his home country. He was thrown into a new cultural and social environment that rejected him in many ways, because he was foreign. By remembering and confronting his past, a healing process begins and Jozef can start to acculturate to this new environment and come to terms with the fact that he might not be returning home any time soon. Not because he could not go back to Yugoslavia, or rather Bosnia, but because he did not know where, what or who home even was.

He now faces the challenge to build a home for himself. His teenage fantasy had become true, he was finally able to act on his own free will and create his life the way he wanted to in the Western World. Unfortunately, similar to his army experience, this process was far from what he had imagined it to be and he was facing the most difficult time of his life: being an immigrant in the United States.

5.2.8. Conclusion

MacGregor Wise has argued that popular culture is often used as a form of resistance against the cultural and social ideologies that are imposed on us, something that “makes life bearable and [...] maintains one’s identity as much as possible” (Hemon: 10). When we look at Jozef Pronek during his childhood and youth, we recognize this very resistance in his passion for English music. He uses the music of the Beatles to define his personal territory and writes his own songs with English lyrics to express what he *wants* to be rather than what he is expected to be according to the Yugoslav ideology.

We also recognize his national identity in his affinity for music when he decides to expand his repertoire to include domestic songs, the *sevdalinke*. This happens partly to increase their audience but also represents a connection to and affiliation with his nation.

During his exile Jozef does not seem to let himself dwell in the past too much. Music is one of the few things that set in motion nostalgic feelings at some point, reminding him of a beautiful past but also of a lonely and painful present. Nostalgia, however, also leads to guilt.

This guilt is subtly infused throughout the novel. Jozef feels guilty for not being patriotic enough, for not crying when his grandmother dies, for not caring about anything else but his music, friends and girls. When he finds himself unable to return to Sarajevo while all of his family and friends are exposed to the war, this guilt

accompanies him between the lines. He does not express that he feels guilty, nor is it implied directly by any of the narrators. Nevertheless, as a reader one feels the subtle presence of it because of seemingly insignificant details. A headline reads *Thousands killed in Srebrenica* while Jozef Pronek is alone and struggling to find a job and make a living. There is no need to elaborate on these feelings further, they are subtly conveyed. While this is a very subjective view I believe that many readers would agree with it.

As Stuart Hall argues, identities are prone to constant change and challenges (Hemon: 62). They are “formed and modified in a continuous dialogue with the cultural worlds outside” and “formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (Hemon: 276–277). We construct values and meanings and thereby form our self-conception, the identity of ourselves (Hemon: 292–293). Jozef Pronek faces his first struggle with identity during coming of age and starts to resist cultural, political and social ideologies with the weapons of a teenager, namely music, mood swings, secrecy and silent rebellion.

He further struggles with becoming the man he imagines himself to be when joining the Yugoslav Peoples’ Army. He is obviously disappointed with himself and the outcome of this endeavor.

When he visits his father’s homeland, on the other hand, he does not seem to struggle at all. He rather enjoys being the forward and cheeky Bosnian, who entertains and bewitches everyone else. This effortlessness might be due to the fact that he is only visiting the country, and not exiled in it. He still has the opportunity to go home. More importantly, this change in characters is a result of the narrative technique. Jozef’s identity is now described by a third person limited narrator. Viktor, the narrator of this specific chapter set in Kiev, only portrays Jozef as he observes him. It is a subjective characterization of a young man who is additionally in love with Jozef Pronek and includes vivid romantic fantasies in his narration.

Jozef’s most difficult struggle for identity, begins when he is unexpectedly exiled from his homecountry. His exile is a very specific one, because he is not driven into it by being forced to physically leave his motherland. Rather he is on a visit to the United States and finds himself unable to return home. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the impact of his trauma in any way.

His identity faces the biggest obstacle hitherto: displacement. This displacement presents itself in various ways. Firstly, it is presented through loneliness. Jozef is cut off from contact to his family, his friends and has no acquaintances or allies during his first time in the States. Secondly, he is forced back into a sort of childhood all over again. Not only Jozef, but also the narrator of the first chapter, is desperate for a job, a decent place to live, and a new purpose in life. Thirdly, they both are severely limited in their communication skills, due to their lack of English competences. Additionally,

Jozef's accent marks him as a foreigner and drives him into the role of an outsider. He expresses a deep fear of failing in life because of his bad English.

As a result of his displacement and the resultant fears that arise in him, Jozef needs to reconstruct his identity in order to achieve successful acculturation. This painful and weary process is described in rigorous details. While Jozef is not one to reveal his feelings to his acquaintances, he reveals them to the reader in the form of fantasies, dreams and fears.

At this point I would like to emphasize that Aleksandar Hemon's biography can be clearly recognized in the novel, especially in the in the fears, the fantasies and the nostalgic memories that the characters relive. Although Pronek's fantasies are written from a third person omniscient perspective, their tone resembles an inner monologue by the author. Several parallels can be drawn between Jozef Pronek and Aleksandar Hemon: both are victims of the same type of exile, both are from Sarajevo, both are displaced at a similar age. Hence it seems legitimate to assume that Hemon's identity is also represented in his novel and the feelings that Jozef Pronek expresses in his fantasies might be based on Hemon's personal experiences as an immigrant.

6. Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree*

The second primary text that will be analyzed is Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree*. With her story of a young Burmese woman who is struggling to cope with the threats a new cultural and social environment poses on her identity, Law-Yone gives insight into the deeply moving journey of an immigrant in the United States in the 1960s.

After a short introduction that includes the author's biography and a short summary of the book's plot, this thesis will analyze how the difficulties of constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing identity are conveyed within the narrative. Furthermore the aim will be to analyze how this struggle for identity is a central theme that classifies the novel as immigrant fiction and as exile literature.

6.1. Premise

In order to analyze the immigrant fiction at hand, a connection needs to be drawn to the author of the book, as well as the setting in which it is embedded. In the following chapters of the introduction a closer look will be taken at Wendy Law-Yone's history as an immigrant from Burma. We will find that although her personal experiences are close to those narrated in *The Coffin Tree*, they also differ in several important aspects. Through the examination of interviews with Law-Yone and her work a conclusion will

be drawn as regards the autobiographical aspect of her novel and her views on national and personal identity. The subsequent chapters will then consist of a detailed analysis of the theme of the struggle for identity in the novel.

6.1.1 Wendy Law-Yone

Wendy Law-Yone is one of the first renowned American authors who was born and raised in Burma and sees herself as “half Burmese, a quarter Chinese, and a quarter English” (Duarte). Her father was Edward Michael Law-Yone, a Burmese nonconformist journalist, publisher and writer (Bow: 184).

Law-Yone grew up in the city of Rangoon in the early 1950s. Her older siblings and her father travelled Europe and the United States and introduced her to stories and wonders of the Western World when she was a young girl. Since then her fascination with this world and its cultures has grown into a “fairytale” and nurtured her desire to leave home in order to see the world. She was scheduled to receive a scholarship to study music in the state of California when the political situation in Burma changed for the worse and prevented her from leaving the country (Law-Yone: Guardian).

In March 1963 Edward Law-Yone was imprisoned by the new Burmese government and not to be released for several years. Because of the prohibition to leave the country, Wendy Law-Yone tried to enroll in the university of Rangoon but was banned due to her father’s political imprisonment. She then married an American journalist from San Francisco and plotted her escape from Burma. After being imprisoned for trying to leave the country illegally, she was finally allowed to depart and went to Thailand from where she moved to the United States in 1973 (Law-Yone: Guardian).

Law-Yone is known to be “the first Burmese diasporic author to write in English” and to have introduced “into the Anglophone literary frame Burmese immigrant characters who neogitate language as a tool of oppression *and* as a means of restistance” (Ho: 666). *The Coffin Tree* is her first published novel and will be the subject of investigation in the thesis at hand.

English was not the first language Law-Yone chose for her literary aspirations. Being fascinated with German literary figures like Goethe and Hölderlin as a young girl she had taken German classes and composed poetry in the German language. Regarding fiction, however, English has become her main choice of language. It is difficult to assess whether English is a first or second language to her. Burma was still a British Colony when Law-Yone’s siblings attended school and, therefore, they were educated in English. Law-Yone, however, attended school at a time when English was considered a foreign language and school education was conducted in Burmese (Duarte). This is one of the reasons why she claims to have had it very easy as an immigrant in the United States as compared to other immigrants:

First, I had the language. Secondly, we already had friends here, family connections.

Then again I had *wanted* to be here, to explore things that had always appealed to my imagination growing up: books, movies, wonderful inventions – everything. [...]. In that sense, I immediately felt at home in the States. (Bow: 189)

Like Aleksandar Hemon, Wendy Law-Yone lives in exile in the United States with the small difference that Hemon was forced to stay away from Bosnia while Law-Yone was glad to leave Burma. She has a different approach to exile than she used to have. What used to mean “punishment through banishment” now is recognized as “a form of salvation” (Duarte). She believes that migration and exile are global phenomena and need to be viewed from two perspectives. On the one hand, it can be a traumatic and troublesome experience, but on the other hand, it brings with it certain chances, especially for authors: “the wider experiences, the opportunities for self-expression, the possibilities of reaching larger audiences” (Duarte).

Law-Yone’s work is generally found within Asian American literature studies and can be identified as exile literature or immigrant fiction, genres that do not have as clear cut boundaries as other literary classifications, and include works that are often difficult to categorize. The author claims that being located within a certain literary genre is of no importance for her. She embraces the “otherness” and the nonconformist status her writing has been assigned to: “When I came to this country, it really wasn’t important for me to fit in the way it might be for certain immigrants. It’s the same with my writing too” (Ho: 196).

Alongside Aleksandar Hemon, Wendy Law-Yone is also more concerned with the human condition rather than with political agendas. Though she admits that her personal experiences and views cannot be completely separated from her fictional writing. She argues that one’s “personal reality” and one’s “subjective truth” are inevitably part of one’s writing (Bow: 190).

The following analysis will support this last point and include the identity of the author as a necessary category in the negotiation of identity in the two primary texts at hand.

6.1.2. *The Coffin Tree* – Content and Summary

Wendy Law-Yone’s *The Coffin Tree* follows the life of a young woman who is exiled from her home in Burma because of the dangerous political situation in her country. Along with her half-brother Shan, she moves to the United States in hope for a better life and a new beginning. However, both siblings severely struggle to adjust to their new living conditions in different ways.

Law-Yone opens and closes the book with the same phrase “Living things prefer to go on living” (Law-Yone: 3; 195). The story is narrated by the young female protagonist whose name is never revealed. Through the limited view of her experiences, thoughts and feelings the whole story of her and Shan’s lives unfolds. While the story is told

rather chronologically, Law-Yone uses flashbacks in the form of memories and dreams in order to connect the ongoing motion to past events. This narrative technique allows the reader to gain deeper insight into the background of specific experiences and characters, whose influence is crucial for the understanding of the protagonist's struggle for identity.

In the first third of the novel the protagonist recounts her early life in Burma. We learn that she and her half-brother Shan spend their life in the care of their aunts and uncles in the city of Rangoon. Her mother died at childbirth and her father is hardly present in her life due to an important role he plays in the Burmese revolution, as the founder of the People's Army. Due to increasing political tensions and their father's involvement, the siblings are sent to the United States to ensure their safety.

The second part of the book describes their first years in the new host country and the difficulties they face when suddenly having to fend for themselves in a completely foreign cultural environment. The protagonist is forced to assume the role of a mother rather than a sister for Shan, who experiences serious difficulties in adapting to the new circumstances. A story of a tormenting process of acculturation unfolds in which the protagonist offers an intriguing insight into the hardship of immigrants in the United States.

Eventually the obstacles the siblings face, become insurmountable and end in the death of Shan. How Shan dies is never specifically stated, but it is implied that his death was a suicide. After her own attempt at suicide his sister is then committed to a mental hospital, where she finds a safe surrounding to finally confront her past, her present and her future.

6.2. The Struggle for Identity in *The Coffin Tree*

Similar to the previous analysis of Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* an analysis of the struggle for identity in Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree* will be the next step in this thesis. The aspect, that will be focused on will be approximately the same, childhood and upbringing, nostalgia, the trauma of displacement, relationships and reconstruction of identity. For Law-Yone's protagonist the process of coming of age is characterized by difficulties with self-perception. Therefore the focus will be on the obstacles the young female protagonist has to face when trying to create her identity.

Furthermore, instead of focusing on the sense of national identity in the process of identity construction, here the focus will be on the influence and perception of religion and cultural ideologies that affect identity construction similarly.

In the final chapter a conclusion will be drawn on the representations of the struggle for identity in Wendy Law-Yone's work of immigrant fiction.

6.2.1. Childhood and Upbringing

The novel opens with the death of the protagonist's grandmother, who had been a harsh ruler over the family, consisting of the female protagonist, her older half-brother Shan and several aunts and uncles. The grandmother's death happens when the young protagonist is only fourteen years old and her brother Shan is twenty-four. The family handles the situation in a traditional and sober manner, exposing the young girl to death as a natural part of life (Law-Yone: 5). The protagonist struggles to touch the corpse but actually feels relief and wonder over the event. Relief because the grandmother's regime had finally come to an end, and she could breathe easily again not having to fear her wrath any longer. She thought that "a tyrant had died, setting us free" and felt betrayed that her half-brother was actually sad because of her death (Law-Yone: 11). She also felt wonder because she was stunned how long the old woman had held on to her life despite of being in so much pain. She asked herself "what was there to keep her hanging on except that blind purpose of all living organisms: to go on living?" (Law-Yone: 3).

After her grandmother passes away, her aunts raise her in her father's household. Her mother had died giving birth to her and her father prioritized his work over his family and was therefore hardly ever at home. When he did show up from time to time, everyone would obey his orders and bow their heads:

He would come home without warning at irregular hours, and at the sound of his limousine rolling up the gravel driveway, the household snapped to attention. (Law-Yone: 19)

Because of her father's absence she relied on her brother to teach her about all the little pieces of every-day wisdom a young girl needed. Her aunts' best talent was to prepare meals for their family, a skill she inherited and later on as a grown up used as a tool to express affection towards her brother and to survive a difficult time in her life (Law-Yone: 80).

Shan claimed to be her half-brother, although later in the novel she begins to doubt whether the stories of his mentally ill mother, who had run away to the hills when he was a toddler, were true or simply a strategy to cope with their mother's death (Law-Yone: 78). His alleged birthmother had given birth to twins, but only Shan survived, which the village deemed a blessing rather than a tragedy, considering that twins are traditionally seen as a bad omen (Law-Yone: 20). During their childhood he was telling all kinds of horror stories about his lunatic mother and she believed his stories, because she envied him for having memories of a mother, whereas she had none of hers. All she had left from her mother were pictures and very vivid dreams that haunted her (Law-Yone: 23).

Shan's stories were part of her upbringing, because he cared for her and taught her "to swim, climb trees, build a fire, and shoot a catapult" (Law-Yone: 117). She is

aware that she owes him gratitude for enabling her to have an adventurous, innocent childhood. While her father fails to make her feel like she is a daughter of his, Shan succeeds in making her feel like a beloved and protected sister.

Several years after the Coup D'Etat the economical and political situation in Burma had become unbearable:

People were disappearing in unexplained arrests. Banks, shops, offices were closing one by one. Schools were being run by uniformed men. Caught in a downtown riot, one of our neighbors was burned to death in a bonfire. (Law-Yone: 31).

In 1969 it was decided that the siblings would leave the country and fly to the United States, where the promise of safety, freedom and education was to be fulfilled (Law-Yone: 43).

Upon arriving in New York the protagonist, by now a young woman, describes the life she left behind as having “run along a groove cut by tradition, familiarity, and habit” (Law-Yone: 44).

The protagonist's personal identity clearly faces several obstacles and challenges during her upbringing. Death is an integral part of her identity construction. Firstly her birth causes her mother's death, something that her unsympathetic grandmother reminds her of on a daily basis:

Happy you killed your mother? Happy she died giving birth to you? Happy now, little mother killer? (Law-Yone: 6)

The woman implants a sense of guilt in her granddaughter that would stay with her for the whole course of her life. After the grandmother has died, the young protagonist clearly feels as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders and she can finally breathe again and develop as a person without having to fear the grandmother's wrath.

The feeling of inadequacy also tortures her regarding the relationship with her father. She worships him, on the one hand, but on the other hand she feels a deep pain and sadness because her father chooses his political and national identity over his identity as the father of two children. She cannot help but feel that her inadequacy is to blame for her father's absence, same as her mere existence is to be blamed for her mother's death. How these childhood experiences affect the young woman's self-perception will be a crucial part of the subsequent subchapter.

6.2.2. Coming of Age and Self-Perception

Constant criticism and denunciation by her grandmother and her aunts has distorted the young protagonist's self-perception deeply.

As mentioned above her grandmother blames her for the death of her only daughter, the protagonist's mother. She does so very explicitly and bluntly by accusing her of

being an inadequate substitute for the mother's loss. She romanticizes the mother's beauty and, in doing so, diminishes the appearance and character of her granddaughter (Law-Yone: 8). Eventually the protagonist adopts this opinion and sees herself as plain and inadequate while idealizing her late mother. A portrait of the mother hanging in her bedroom, symbolizes this idealization and glorification. It is further represented in her desperate wish to resemble the mother's image (Law-Yone: 14).

Even the servants of the household played their part in undermining the protagonist's self-esteem. This is exemplified when the protagonist dares to question why the servants fan her during every meal. The answer is to make her feel better but she claims that it only makes her feel cold. Instead of being sympathetic the servants feel insulted and attack the young girl by making jokes about her weight and claiming she would never find a lover because of her physical appearances. Helplessly she responds as follows:

I joined in the laughter that came from the kitchen. But back in my room I locked the door and leaned into the mirror, pressing my hot forehead against the cool glass. Nose to nose with myself, the familiar self-loathing began. (Law-Yone: 13).

All these seemingly innocent attacks on her self-confidence and her helplessness against the traditional upbringing she endures inhibit the emotional development of her identity:

In the uneven, precarious rhythm of my heart, I felt that the only safe refuge was reason. So clinging to reason and manners, I could join the laughter at my expense, keeping the stings and burns under wraps. But I was never innocent. I knew it was unnatural to deny the adults my anger and tears, that it made them wonder and at heart uneasy. (Law-Yone: 14)

Instead of facing the feelings that the adults' words and behavior evoke in her, she buries them deep inside and becomes a master of pretense, knowing that this is no healthy way of coping with this conflict.

During her upbringing in Burma the only person she confides in to some extent is Shan. He provides her with the necessary reassurance that she, as an intelligent and strong woman, is worthy of her brother's protection and alliance (Law-Yone: 16).

Unfortunately the big brother's role as protector and comforter changes drastically in the future. The older she gets, the less she trusts his words and the less she believes his fantastic stories. A distance between them grows, which is a sign of the rational path her identity construction has taken. There is no room for dreaming, no room for fantasies and no room for nostalgia.

When the political situation in Burma grows more and more dangerous, her identity is deeply threatened:

I had seen that fear could stimulate courage, but it didn't work that way for me. Instead it made me shrink. I shrank from the endless family discussions about the damages done by the coup: nationalization; demonetization; surveillance;

censorship; curfews; confiscations; rations; midnight arrests. I shrank from puzzling out my father's disappearance, and simply accepted the secret, sovereign nature of his mission. I shrank from the contemplation of any protest: That was my father's business. I shrank from my own womanhood, binding my breasts with rolls of elastic bandage as cruelly and senselessly as the Chinese used to bind their baby girl's feet. (Law-Yone: 30).

While her father was out fighting for a revolution, she was stuck in their home feeling too insignificant and too scared to muster anything other than silent compliance with everything that happened around her (Law-Yone: 30-31). Until they were sent away to the United States, the siblings were forced to live in simple survival mode. Shan's stories grew more fantastic and the protagonist kept losing the will of wanting to be somebody and instead her every day routine, Shan the emotional and fragile dreamer slowly falls apart because of his inability to deal with their new situation. This aspect of the novel will be further discussed in the following chapters.

Concluding, it can be said that the protagonist suffers from low self-esteem and has a distorted self-perception because of her upbringing and the Burmese cultural and social ideologies that were imposed on her during her childhood and youth. This difficult self-perception is what complicates and almost impedes her adjustment when she is sent to exile in the United States. Initially, her rationality helps her to cope with the new living situation while her brother drowns in his nostalgic dreams of a past life and is unable to arrive in reality. Nevertheless, the trauma of the past, the trauma of the present displacement and the inability to imagine a brighter future eventually cause her to attempt suicide. The novel's negotiation of the trauma of displacement and the damage it does to identity will be further discussed below.

6.2.3. Religion and Nationality

The protagonist was educated by Irish nuns in a Catholic school and raised in the Buddhist faith like the majority of her family and friends. Her mother had been a believer in the Catholic faith and she was raised in same faith in honor of her memory. However, the faith in the God of Catholicism was imposed on her and she cannot find it in her heart to believe in him. For her "faith was all mystery" and the Catholic beliefs were "savagery" that scared and disgusted her:

[...] I seldom left the Communion rail without a surge of nausea. It was part of the odious duty of having to devour the flesh and blood of a brutalized God whose suffering I was somehow responsible for. (Law-Yone: 27)

God was yet another figure that made her feel scared, guilty and self-conscious. Although she was disgusted by Catholic rituals and stories and had her doubts about God's existence or intentions, He held an inexplicable power over her. It made her believe and fear mortal sin (Law-Yone: 27). Maybe the power God holds over her is the

fear of failing life and death as a consequence.

She recognizes a similar power in her father. During her whole life in Burma she and her entire family were at the mercy of her father's power. Nobody questioned him, everyone worshipped him and everyone feared him (Law-Yone: 28).

From her perspective her father resembles God in various ways. First of all, both are absent. One cannot see or hear God, one can only believe in his ways and that he has his reasons for not showing himself. The same goes for the protagonist's father: He chooses to be away from his family and the only thing his daughter knows about his reasons is that they must be that it serves a greater good. He is an important figure in the People's Army and his job demands him to let somebody else take care of his children while he takes care of more important things. The young protagonist has her doubts about such reasons but she knows better than to voice them. She merely thinks to herself: If God is watching, if He sees and lets such things happen, there is no telling what He might do next (Law-Yone: 25). Similarly, she secretly believes that her father should be a father instead of getting involved in other people's issues.

Secondly, similar to God's secrets, her father keeps secrets as well and she would never demand to know what they are (Law-Yone: 28). Religion requires people to believe what holy books dictate them without questioning while they worship a God and beg for His mercy and affection. This is exactly the kind of relationship the protagonist has with her father. She fears and worships him at the same time.

Thirdly her father, same as God, is invincible: "Father was good at impersonating God that he seemed almost incapable of getting hurt or bleeding" (Law-Yone: 141). She believes that nothing can affect her father, especially not her love. This sense of being non-relevant to her father is exemplified when she is sick and her father comes home to take care of her. The mere act of sitting beside her bed makes her wish that she stayed sick so that he does not leave her side (Law-Yone: 146).

Interestingly, she does not feel the same desire for God's affection. While she longs for her father's love and affection, she does not want the same from God. It can be concluded that in the protagonist's eyes her father holds a similar omnipotence to God. This omnipotence comes with the feelings of fear and respect. While the human part of the young woman's identity fears her father's wrath and God's punishment for mortal sin, the part of it that is still an innocent child desires her father's affection and feels unworthy of it. This feeling affects her identity construction deeply by shattering her self-esteem and making her feel like she does not deserve love. Hence, she also seems unable to express love and affection towards her brother during their hardest times. Her fragile identity and her poorly nurtured self-esteem make it nearly impossible to cope with her later state of displacement and the trauma of loss. She was only used to pure obedience. She lived by Burmese ideologies and obeyed her father's wishes. Having to fend for herself is new and nearly unconquerable terrain for her. While her

brother has his nostalgic dreams of the past to hold on to during difficult times, the protagonist has no such thing. She does not believe in nostalgia, she does not believe in religion, she only believes in reality. But when the reality becomes unbearable, she loses herself and needs to discover a new identity all over.

6.2.4. Nostalgia

For the protagonist Nostalgia is a dangerous and disturbing thing. Growing up with her brother teaches her how nostalgia can influence one's character. It has already been established above that the protagonist prefers to hide her true feelings and emotions and wear a mask of pretence in front of her family. She believes it serves her as a mechanism for self-protection, while it in fact only helps her to come to terms with reality temporarily. Her brother always handles things differently:

He cried easily – from anger, nostalgia, sometimes over a song. This unsettled me always: I envied his sensitivity but disapproved of it. (Law-Yone: 11).

Regarding emotionality the siblings could not be more different. The protagonist admits that her caginess is not a healthy behavior. The quote above underlines that. She is not capable of expressing emotions like her brother is, because she observes how vulnerable he is due to his sensitivity. Out of fear of her father's and God's wrath she does not dare to do anything that will be punished. She stays on the safe side of every day life and considers her inability to reveal true feelings and emotions as a lack of courage. Her power is her rationality.

Equipped with extreme sensitivity on the one hand, and with extreme rationality on the other hand both siblings are placed in exile together. The right mixture of sensitivity and rationality would probably have equipped both of them better for the obstacles they face in exile. However, their identities dictate otherwise. When the siblings arrive in New York they are thrown into a completely alien social and cultural environment. Their conflicting identities make it difficult for them to adjust to the challenges of the new host environment. The Burmese upbringing and the ideologies and traditions that come with it are a big part of the trauma they suffer. This will be discussed in subsequent subchapters. However, handling this trauma is closely connected to their personal identities, not only to the part that has been formed by their Burmese environment.

While the protagonist handles the new challenges of every day life in New York rationally, her brother slowly but surely fails to do so. He cannot keep a job, he does not trust Americans and he makes up excuses and stories for not being able to adjust to the new life (Law-Yone: 44; 70-73). She on the other hand takes care of their basic survival while he more and more retreats into nostalgia. It is his way of refusing to deal with reality. He prefers to hold on to the idealized past that he left behind:

I hated his nostalgia for a past that never was, his view of the world wed left behind

as an idyll destroyed by the present. I hated his language of sentiment and triviality—a language of empty catchwords. (Law-Yone: 76).

The reason the protagonist detests her brother's proclivity for nostalgia is because she knows that it stems from a mental illness that everyone pretends is not real. His nostalgia is more than just a desire for the past. It is a serious sickness that is aggravated by the trauma of displacement and the absence of professional help. Nostalgia is merely a symptom of this sickness. His sister realizes that but due to her upbringing and her rational nature she is incapable of asking anyone for help (Law-Yone: 75). This incapability of allowing herself to feel nostalgic emotions, or to express them in some way is explained in the following thought:

When I allowed myself to dredge up memories of our previous life, I felt irreparably cut off from all that had gone before: from the names and faces and happenings of my childhood. (Law-Yone: 149)

Allowing nostalgia would mean allowing exile and loneliness to become real and, therefore, painful and dangerous. She is proven right when Shan presumably commits suicide because he is not able to deal with reality and his illness got the better of him (Law-Yone: 81).

After her brother's death the protagonist's rational world equally falls apart and she is committed to a mental hospital after having attempted suicide (Law-Yone: 85). She has the opportunity to work through all her issues in a safe environment. However, she has great difficulties to open up because it feels like betrayal. (This will be further discussed in the following discussion on displacement.) What is important here is that nostalgia plays an important part in her healing process. This is indicated by numerous flashbacks that she allows herself to indulge in and that fill whole chapters, telling us more about her past and her family relations. One flashback is triggered by a nurse's resemblance to one of the Irish nuns that educated her (Law-Yone: 95). She remembers being punished by the nuns for expressing romantic feelings in love letters, which she composed without addressees (95). It taught her "revenge is not always sweet" (95). She remembers the tense relationship between her older brother Shan and her father. Explicitly she describes a memory of telling on Shan and causing her father to punish him severely although he was innocent and had been framed (Law-Yone: 108-112). By remembering the past, she analyzes and works through issues that have caused their destruction:

Shan was eighteen then – long since a man in my eyes. Weren't grown men supposed to defend themselves from attack? Right or wrong, as a man or as a boy, father himself would never have taken such abuse. Of that I was certain. And yet his son could take it. Why? (Law-Yone: 112)

She eventually realizes that she only enjoyed a more or less happy childhood although she was denied the possibility to dream, because her Shan did it for her (Law-Yone:

191).

After a complicated process of remembering, reliving, contemplating and analyzing essential events from the past she arrives at the conclusion that she might have misjudged her brother's fantasies:

And believing his fantasies to be simple-minded, I had never probed too deeply. It was all part of that old collusion. Something about the way we pitted ourselves against *The Others* – first as children, and later as wary immigrants [...]. (Law-Yone: 191)

After she leaves the hospital she takes the book of the coffin tree, which had belonged to her brother and reads it again with a different attitude. The book was given to her brother by an opium addict, who believed that he would find focused on her the “small physical ailments” that burdened her soul (Law-Yone: 37).

During their exile in the United States the distance between the siblings grow and alongside the ideologies they were brought up with they become so predominant that they endanger both siblings' lives gravely. While the rational protagonist initially survives the trauma of displacement in exile by clinging to

the coffin tree one day and become a rich man. Shan adopted this dream as his own and held on to the dream of finding the tree as a symbol of hope for a better future (Law-Yone: 192). While she did not understand his obsession with the fable of the coffin tree back then, she had a different perspective now:

I had pitied Shan for being a cripple, but on his own he had found a crutch – while I, once able-bodied but now disabled, had nothing as yet to lean on. If I accepted the world, it was his rootless, chaotic world I inhabited and knew; no other. If I believed in life, it was not life after death, but this life; nothing less, nothing more. (Law-Yone: 192).

In the end nostalgia is omnipresent and lets the reader believe that a healing process might be imminent. The protagonist realizes that although nostalgia had damaged her brother's life during their exile, it might save hers. She acknowledges that she needs her “own version of the coffin tree” to serve as a light to guide her way to a brighter future, “some dream to lighten the days” (Law-Yone: 192).

Rather than closing with a happy ending, the book closes with the possibility of hope for a better future:

[...] I was, devastated by a dream which was more than a dream; lonely and unhappy, yet unable to hide from myself; but still stubbornly among the living. (Law-Yone: 195).

The protagonist has accepted nostalgia as an important part of her life, a part necessary to survive the trauma of displacement and to enable her to start grieving for her family and home.

6.2.5. Relationships

The protagonist upholds an emotionally distant relationship to everybody in her life except her brother. At an early age she is already confronted with the concept of death. Her mother dies at childbirth, her grandmother dies when she is only a young girl, her brother dies when she is in her twenties and her father dies a short time after that. Still the emotion of grief does not concern her much.

She does not mourn her grandmother because she considers her death as a liberation from a “tyrant” (Law-Yone: 11). Instead of mourning her mother she idealizes her. Her mother does not only represent death and loss but also guilt and self-loathing. She feels guilty for having been the cause of her mother’s death in childbed. At the same time she compares herself to the mother and is compared to her and found inadequate (Law-Yone: 14).

Instead of mourning her brother she goes on with her rational way of life, which eventually drives her to attempt suicide as a way of regaining control over her own life (Law-Yone: 155). When her father dies she is incapable of feeling grief or sadness. The past had already been lost, including everyone in it. Her father’s death was no surprise and her indifference continued (Law-Yone: 154).

Her suicide attempt is a result of the sense of loss and trauma:

One by one my family had died; and I, the survivor, uncovered an identity I had never known. I could see now that I’d been born with the imprint: I had come into the world with a death (my mother’s) on my hands, and it seemed increasingly a duty – a family obligation almost to leave the world in the same way [...]. (Law-Yone: 155).

After her brother’s death she begins to plan her own suicide and tells herself that on the one hand it is a way of asserting power over her own life, and on the other hand it is a sign of respect towards her family tradition. After having attempted suicide she changes her mind and realizes that she wants to live and considers the suicide attempt as a desperate cry for help and attention directed at her parents, who could no longer hear her (Law-Yone: 157). She is instantly reminded of an old children’s story that fits her situation:

Once upon a time I died. My mother came in and cried. Then my father came in and cried. Everyone was sad, even the birds. (Law-Yone: 157)

It becomes clear that the protagonist’s whole existence, her whole identity and character is strongly influenced by suppressed and unresolved issues regarding the relationship with her mother, father and brother.

Henceforth these issues hauntingly accompany her during her exile in the United States. The older she grows the less she can trust her brother’s words. Once in exile, she abandons her role as a little sister who enjoys the protection and reassurance of

her big brother. Due to her superiority with handling their displacement, she is quickly forced into the role of the mother. She feels obligated to take care of her brother but eventually realizes that as long as he was alive, they were both prisoners (Law-Yone: 75). She was a prisoner of the guilt and obligation towards him, while he was “serving a death sentence of the mind” (75). A relationship of trust and partnership turned into imprisonment and worse: “I was not only afraid for my brother; I was afraid of him (Law-Yone: 74).

Her brother being the only ally she had left turns into a slave of his own mind and she catches herself wishing for his death to relieve her from her imprisonment (Law-Yone: 80). After this death happens and she gets word of her father’s death as well, she is left alone and devastated:

Under the blows of the past several years I had burrowed into the worst sort of complacency – worst because it was entirely fictitious. There was nothing satisfying about the slavishness of the days, the emptiness of the nights, yet I believe myself satisfied. There were no sustaining friendships to offer comfort, because all my losses had deadened me to the possibilities of friendship. (Law-Yone: 154).

She continues her every day routine secretly plotting her own death when she becomes acquainted with her elderly neighbor. She believes him to live in solitude and loneliness as well, and sees a chance of a new companion in life. When this neighbor rejects any sort of companionship, she is pushed over the edge and attempts suicide (Law-Yone: 158–165).

Thereafter she ends up in a mental hospital where she seemingly encounters people who share a similar fate. She bonds with Paddy, who thinks he is unable to speak and therefore corresponds with her through letters, commenting on her relationship with her father from time to time and including her into dreams. Paddy in many ways represents somebody she is able to take care of again, by helping him sleep and taking his side (Law-Yone: 130).

Although she is in a safe environment and the fellow patients quickly recognize a friend in her, because they have experienced similar losses and sympathize, she still is not able to open up in any group sessions. However, Doctor Friday accomplishes several successful private therapy sessions with her and her desire for a human relationship leads her to express romantic feelings for him. They establish that she has a severe fear of loss and that it is with good cause (Law-Yone: 170–175).

Although the mental hospital is the only place that ever offers her anything close to friendship or relationship, she is eager to leave after three months and restart her life in the real world. She realizes that this means that she has to abandon denial and rationality in order to work on the most important and most complex relationships of all: the relationship with herself. Leaving the mental hospital is an attempt at reconstructing her identity.

6.2.6. The Trauma of Displacement

Wendy Law-Yone uses graphic language to describe the trauma of displacement, which the siblings experience from the day they arrive in the United States:

Even when times were hard, the life we left behind had run along a groove cut by tradition, familiarity, and habit. But arriving in New York, my brother and I fell out of that groove, and finding our footing was nearly as awkward as the astronauts' first steps in the atmosphere of the moon. We landed in America three months after they landed on the moon [...]. (Law-Yone: 44).

The siblings had been sent to the United States assuming that they were safe there and would enjoy freedom and education. Instead, the protagonist claims to have left one prison in exchange for life in another prison (Law-Yone: 43; 149). They are thrown into a foreign world that represents a “colossal obstacle course” (Law-Yone: 46). The protagonist, as the narrator, describes the overwhelming sensations and challenges of a metropolitan city with meticulous detail:

All around us, hordes of people were breezing through those same obstacles without a second thought: waiting for the right buses, running down the right entrances to the subways, dropping the right change into the right slots, not even needing to look up from their papers to get off at the right stops, pushing the right buttons on elevator, giving their orders at restaurants and cafeterias in the right voices, the right words. (Law-Yone: 46).

Armed with a small amount of money that they received upon their departure in Burma, they are left to fend for themselves. Overburdened with surviving in a completely alien social and cultural environment, they overextend themselves with the task of pretending everything was alright (Law-Yone: 52).

They hope to find light at the end of the tunnel by tracking down Morrison, a friend of their father's. He is supposed to have received money for the siblings in order to help them with their life in the United States. However, contrary to their expectations they do not find the kind of help they were hoping for.

They receive a dinner invitation along with several other guests, which puts them in a difficult situation. Because of their natural pride they do not dare to admit the severity of their situation. This is exemplified when they pretend to have left their winter coats at home instead of admitting to the shame of not owning any. When they later call to ask for money, Mrs. Morrison seems clueless and hits a sore spot when revealing that they are in desperate need of help but too proud to ask. (Law-Yone: 46-50).

This is only one of many examples of how their past identities, which are governed by an unreasonable sense of pride, and fear of humiliation inhibit their acculturation in the new host country. One could argue that their past identities do not fulfill the requirements that are necessary for successful adaptation of the American cultural and social environment. Therefore an involuntary segregation takes place, meaning that the

siblings detach themselves from any social or emotional involvement with their new surroundings. While the protagonist manages to accomplish basic tasks necessary for survival, like finding a job and place to live, washing clothes, buying groceries, keeping the budget, her brother struggles distinctly. He is hardly able to find a job let alone have an appropriate conversation with people. His mental state is aggravated by his displacement, and eventually becomes a burden for his sister, causing her to lose an employment (Law-Yone: 51-57).

At a very low point the siblings decide on pursuing help and are thereupon taken in by the journalist Benjamin Lane, another friend of the family. They live in a private room in the basement of his house and are invited to share meals with him and his family. Instead of embracing their help, the siblings soon start to feel like a disturbance and a burden to the family. There is no indication that this feeling is justified because of the family's behavior. On the contrary: it is fairly obvious that the mental and emotional state of the siblings leads to this misconception. Shan is generally paranoid and skeptical about everything and everybody (Law-Yone: 58-61).

His sister, on the other hand, is dispirited by the involuntary inactivity and the resulting numbness. She believes that she can only repay the Lanes' favor by being helpful in the household. Having grown up with servants and aunts who took care of the household, she had never really learnt how to make herself useful in that way (Law-Yone: 59). Therefore she is thrown into a state of deep desperation and helplessness:

Months passed. Aimless, rootless, full of inadmissible fears, we withdrew into our self-made limbo, convinced that the Lanes were counting the hours until our departure. We imagined them gossiping among their friends and complaining about the burden we posed. (Law-Yone: 60).

Their situation of being dependent on someone else's help and mercy takes on absurd and unreasonable levels when they decide to ignore the dinner invitations and instead sneak out at night to eat leftovers. The reason for this is again pride and shame. Although they had been invited for dinner several times and were told that this invitation was valid for the duration of their stay, they decided to decline the invitation regularly for reasons of pride:

But that stolen meal bought us a few days of bogus pride; it allowed us the illusion of fending for ourselves. (Law-Yone: 61)

After being able to leave the Lanes, the only hint that the narrator might be settling in and achieve some sort of acculturation is given when she separates from her brother:

It was at the point when I was beginning to feel some mastery of life in America, when I had learned to drive a car and file a tax return, when I had found steady work and made acquaintances, when I could look around me and consider all the possibilities the new world had to offer [...]. (Law-Yone: 70).

She describes in a very clear and rational manner what makes her life livable and: having a job, owning a driver's license, having acquaintances, filing tax returns. These are things that are completely normal in most American citizens' lives and allow her to become a part of this community.

However, any possibility she might have considered to finally escape her displacement becomes obsolete when her brother returns to her doorstep and takes her "captive for the next two years" (Law-Yone: 70). Shan is unable to keep a job, unable to adjust to the new societal requirements, unable to maintain healthy relations and eventually becomes the victim of his mental instability. Unable to face reality, he spins various explanations for his failure to cope. His sister, however, had turned into a grown, clever and rational woman who did not believe his stories any longer:

I knew that things did not necessarily happen the way he interpreted them. His distortions could turn the harmless word or look of a stranger into a dagger aimed straight at his heart. (Law-Yone: 73).

Nevertheless she sticks to denial and remains more helpless than ever. Knowing she could not help her brother overcome his illness, she is still incapable of turning him over to professionals:

Some sense of loyalty – narrow and simple-minded – imparted the idea that to turn my brother over to someone else would mean betrayal and abandonment. (Law-Yone: 80).

Instead she does the only thing she knew how to: she escapes into rationality. This presents itself in her cooking for Shan, cleaning the apartment, and engaging in mindless activities to keep herself busy and distract herself from a reality too horrible to confront: that her brother is falling apart in the new social and cultural environment.

After her brother's tragic death a similar fate awaits her. She falls into a state of deep desperation:

Exiled from the past, I faced a future without welcome and knew no aspirations beyond the sheer effort it took to propel me through the weight of each heavy day. (Law-Yone: 149).

How she attempts to recover from the trauma of displacement and loss will be the topic of discussion in the following subchapter. Concluding, it can be said that being forced into exile has initiated the destruction of the identities the siblings had constructed in their home country. They are unable to return to that country or to maintain contact to the people they left behind. Yet they are incapable of adapting to the new social and cultural environment and, therefore, withdraw more and more from it. While the brother withdraws into the confinement of his own mind, the sister finds refuge

in rationality and routine. Berry describes this type of segregation from the cultural environment as a form of marginalization (1997: 9).

While this development can be attributed to the trauma of displacement itself, I argue that coping with such trauma also depends largely on the identities people are equipped with when the trauma happens. This will be further discussed in the conclusion of the analysis on *The Coffin Tree*.

The final aspect to be discussed regarding this analysis is the reconstruction of identity. For the purpose at hand reconstruction of identity is closely linked to acculturation and easing the trauma of displacement, which represents one of the biggest obstacles for the protagonist of the novel.

6.2.7. Reconstruction of Identity

As already established above, migration and the resulting displacement can be compared to death and rebirth (cf. White: 7). In extreme cases past identities are abandoned for the sake of more adequate identities that are adjusted to the new social and cultural environment. In other cases former identities are only transformed, reconstructed or merged with newly discovered identities to fit the new context.¹

In the case of Law-Yone's narrator many of the above developments apply. During her coming of age the narrator has secretly questions different ideologies that were imposed on her during an essential process of identity construction. She questions religious, traditional, familial and patriarchal authorities without ever openly voicing her doubts. She accepts, absorbs and replicates habitual cultural behavior and adopts the gender roles pressed on her. She turns into a clever, highly rational but also highly compliant young woman, who suffers from low self-confidence. Her brother, on the other hand, is unable to fulfill the traditional male gender role that is expected of him. This traditional gender role is embodied in their omnipotent father, who is often equated with God. The brother fails to live up to the father's potential and seeks refuge in dreams that have the central theme of violence and "the resolution was in his emergence as hero" (Law-Yone: 37). In these fantasies he lives the reality that he is incapable of reconstructing in the real world.

Hence, it is not surprising that the siblings approach their exile in distinctly different ways. Shan's past identity is neither lost nor transformed. He holds on to it the only way he knows how to: fantasizing. He uses deep nostalgic dreams to return to this identity. What changes is his environment and the external factors that influence his well-being. Reality becomes harder to bear while his dreams become more and more essential to his survival. Those parts of identity that live in his nostalgia dominate in

¹ Although identity is often used in the singular form, the thesis at hand argues for an anti-essentialist and de-centralized view on identity (cf. Lipsitz; Hall; Cowart). The singular is merely used to refer to the concept of identity, while assuming that a person may possess more than one identity, and that every part of these identities are highly flexible and necessarily transformable.

him completely, while those parts that belong to the real world are slowly subject to destruction. Hence, it can be argued that Shan never reconstructs his identity, but that displacement and mental illness destroy it completely.

The narrator, on the other hand, takes a different path. Arriving in the United States her rationality and discipline serve as tools of daily survival. However, she is so strongly influenced by feelings of guilt and obligation towards her brother that his destruction eventually becomes her greatest burden:

I prided myself that while he was losing touch with the real things of the earth, I was confronting them solidly. His lack of courage led me into foolhardy displays of brazenness that I mistook for bravery. [...] I began to see his sickness as an outgrowth of both weakness and stupidity. It was weak and stupid of him not to be able to find a way out of his predicament. (Law-Yone: 78).

His illness weakens her mental and emotional stability and his death robs her of it completely. When her brother dies she hides in the other room, as if not seeing his corpse meant that he was not dead:

Now I wanted to flee from death as I had fled from birth, to escape from those terrors beyond my control. (Law-Yone: 82)

While death had presented itself to her as a phenomenon that she had no power over, like the death of her mother at childbirth, and furthermore the death of her grandmother and brother, she decides to deny this phenomenon any power over her own life. As a means of taking control of her life, she decides on a very dark path, namely plotting her own death (Law-Yone: 154). By facing death and deciding to die on her own terms, she regains power over herself and experiences an epiphany that changes her identity drastically:

It was this that kept me going: this option of taking the law into my own hands. It was this that filled me with energy: to know that I could number my own days, and not simply wait for them to be claimed by some untimely disease or accident or fate. *Myself unto myself*². (Law-Yone: 155).

Ironically, the prospect of a death that would happen by her own terms and would mean the end of her pain is what ultimately keeps her going. For her migration and displacement do not mean a rebirth, but a second death. However, the moment she slits her wrist, she is overwhelmed by a strong desire not to die, which does not necessarily mean that she finds the will to live (Law-Yone: 167).

She does, however, make an important first step towards reconstructing her identity. One might even argue that due to that fictitious sense of security, this complacency and obedience that has defined her throughout her life, she might get the first real opportunity to form a true identity. By this I mean that she is allowed to discover who

² This quote originates from an Old Irish incantation. *I Bind unto Myself Today* – Attr. St. Patrick (5th century); Translated by Cecil Frances Alexander (1889).

she really is and who she wants to be without the restrictions of Burmese ideology, outside the confinement of her brother's illness, and without the fear of godlike figures that exert power over her mind. Of course this newly found freedom comes with unimaginable loss and pain.

Hence, her committal to a mental hospital offers a safe space to experiment with this reconstruction. While she realizes that, she is still very cautious with her new environment and her new acquaintances:

These group sessions brought out a confusion caused by both a lack of freedom and an excess of it. Within the locked entrances at either end of the hall, we were free to pry open the trapdoors to memory and feeling, to descend into the unknowns of ourselves. We were no longer in the actual world, where life has to be consumed in safe doses and where what cannot be digested must not be bitten off. We were free to test out a new kind of freedom – we did so in startlingly similar ways. (Law-Yone: 97).

In the beginning she mainly acts as a silent observer who witnesses stories of loss and trauma similar to her own. This is still not enough to strengthen her confidence and open up about her own tragedies because her past identity still has a hold over her and makes her incapable of “bad-mouthing” her father or her family (Law-Yone: 133). The comfort of company in form of the other patients still serves an important purpose in her recovery.

The only setting that leads her to open up is the weekly private therapy session with Doctor Friday. He resembles both a father figure that differs from her father by showing concern and care instead of indifference, and a romantic figure that deserves her feelings of affection (Law-Yone: 170–173).

During her time in the mental institution she confronts her demons from the past, the present and the future, realizing that she is stuck somewhere in between:

Those last few years of Shan's life turned me into a creature caught in the amber of the present. The past provided neither comfort nor sustenance; and what meaning could a future have that held no promise? (Law-Yone: 149).

Law-Yone does not reward the reader with a happy ending, but rather creates a realistic one. The young woman eventually chooses that knowing she did not want to die had to be enough to leave the hospital in order to restart her life and discover something worth living for. She is actively aware of her mental and emotional state and has realized that confronting the past was the only way to imagine the future. She also knows that she has not completed the process yet:

At twenty-five, despite all that had happened to me, I was aware of my meagerness, of how much there was to me that was unused and unlived. (Law-Yone: 184)

The novel does not reveal any events beyond the protagonist's release from the hospital. What the reader is left with is her changed attitude and her intention of reconstructing

identity. How she does it and whether she succeeds or not is left to the reader's imagination. What we do learn is that she does not consider her suicide attempt as a "breakdown of courage" but rather as a "breakdown of intelligence" which she is not always proud of (Law-Yone: 184–185). Nevertheless she does not resume her old habit of denial. Instead she faces the incident as having "defied death, life's greatest fear" (Law-Yone: 185).

This demonstrates a drastic change in attitude. The woman who believed that she had "failed to live" and then "failed to die" now realizes that surviving the past including all the traumas it caused, has made her courageous (Law-Yone: 184). As already mentioned above, the symbol for this newly found strength is her brother's book of *The Coffin Tree*.

Many more years were to pass before I could sit at my table for an hour or two each night and labor over these pages. But when I was ready, it was this truth that offered itself as a beginning: *Living things prefer to go on living*. (Law-Yone: 195).

After this conclusion it can be assumed that she is on a promising albeit long path to discovering and also re-discovering her identity.

6.2.8. Conclusion

Wendy Law-Yone writes a fictional story about a narrator whose identity faces painful challenges during the course of her life. The first and longest challenge being the death of her mother, who does not survive childbirth. This symbolizes a burden and a guilt that the narrator always carries with her.

The second challenge regards her identity construction, which takes place in the cultural and political environment of Burma under the care of her family, whose ideologies are imposed on the young girl who lacks the courage and is denied the freedom of questioning them.

Growing up in what she refers to as illusive complacency the third challenge is presented when she is forced into exile due to dangerous political tensions in Burma. This involuntary displacement and its results cause a deep trauma for the narrator and her companion, her brother Shan. Shan's mental state prevents him from any sort of acculturation and denies him successful integration into the host community. Instead of rebirth his life ends in an early death.

The narrator, on the other hand, is left to face the struggle alone. The final and most difficult challenge is portrayed as the challenge against oneself. What is meant by that is the struggle of facing one's past in order to enable identity reconstruction within the new social, cultural and emotional settings.

The protagonist attempts this transformation or rebirth of identity by reflecting critically and emotionally on specific issues of her past: her relationship with her father,

her brother's mental illness that was long mistaken for nostalgia, her relationship to adopted ideologies of tradition and religion.

As a result she finds the courage and the justification to challenge the past and attempt to embrace the present. What she misses in the end of the book is the ability to envision the future. However, in her only struggle to reconstruct identity, she finds some hope and comfort in the form of nostalgia.

Although Wendy Law-Yone's exile was experienced as a liberation from an oppressive regime, she still manages to create a unique environment of empathy for the young immigrant in her novel. Additionally, certain aspects of the fictional story resemble Law-Yone's personal history. Therefore as a final remark, assuming that Law-Yone shares a similar opinion, I want to argue that the history of the author's personal struggle for identity plays a crucial role in the negotiation of her protagonist's struggle for identity.

7. Comparison

The two primary texts offer many parallels that make a meaningful analysis of the struggle for identity possible. The analysis at hand has been divided into several categories: childhood and upbringing, coming of age and self-perception, national identity and religion, relationships, displacement, reconstruction of identity. These categories do not overlap entirely in both novels, because there are several distinctions to be pointed out as well. The categories merely serve as guidelines for the structure and should, in fact, not be looked at separately when analyzing the struggle for identity in these novels.

Although both novels are set in different historical periods of the 20th century³, and the protagonists come from different countries⁴, the implications for the struggle of identity are similar. The history of Burmese conflicts is different from the history of the Yugoslavian war, of course. Nevertheless, what is important in this context is the general implications of national identity and national ideologies that are imposed on the characters, as well as the consequences they cause in a young person's identity construction.

The fact that the protagonist in *The Coffin Tree* is female and the protagonist in *Nowhere Man* is male is interestingly not a disturbing factor for the analysis. The important point is that both protagonists struggle with the gender roles that are imposed on them by society, family, nation and in the case of *The Coffin Tree* also religion. These gender roles differ from each other of course, however, they both cause

³ *The Coffin Tree* is mainly set in the 1960s. *Nowhere Man*: is mainly set in the 1990s.

⁴ *The Coffin Tree*: Burma. *Nowhere Man*: Bosnia.

a struggle for identity that is emotionally, mentally and also physically exhausting.

The lives of both protagonists are described from birth to maturity. Hemon and Law-Yone both offer a fundament for the understanding the subsequent trauma of displacement by elaborating on the identity construction during childhood in the motherland.

The characters' paths to exile and displacement differ distinctively. While Law-Yone's protagonist is sent away with a farewell and the expectations of a better life, Jozef Pronek is entrapped by fate because he is not able to return home from a visit and never even gets the chance to say goodbye to his family and friends back home. Once they are exiled though, both protagonists face similar obstacles. They both live in a big city⁵, work in degrading and low-paid jobs, live in shabby apartments, struggle with language, and struggle with hostility, or rather, a lack of hospitality.

Most importantly both protagonists find themselves in a completely alien social and cultural environment. While Jozef Pronek has not had a particularly difficult or traumatic childhood, he still does not seem to know who he really wants to be. He experiences loss⁶, heartbreak and never has a particularly close emotional connection to his family. Similarly, Law-Yone's protagonist also experiences loss⁷ and has a similar relationship to her family. She, on the other hand, never has any sort of romantic involvement with a man. As a partial result of their upbringing, both of them are prone to caginess and denial.

Hence, none of them is particularly keen on dwelling in nostalgia once they are forced into exile. To the outside world, they pretend that everything is fine and they do not wish to be pitied by anyone. Both choose rationality and routine as a tool of survival. Both are tortured by frightening fantasies caused by their displacement and struggle. Eventually both suffer a mental breakdown after several years and realize that their approach needs to change if they want to successfully arrive in their new life and reconstruct their identity.

While Law-Yone's protagonist attempts suicide, Jozef Pronek merely has aggressive emotional outbursts. What distinguishes them is the fact that Jozef has found a companion in his girlfriend Rachel. He has a relationship to support him and his struggle to discover who he wants and needs to become. Law-Yone's protagonist, on the other hand, is continuously confronted with loss and never experiences the safety and comfort of a relationship. She is left to fend for herself, not only in the struggle against displacement, but also in her struggle against her own identity.

Finally, both novels share an overwhelming sense of honesty that allows the reader insight into the innermost processes of identity construction and the struggle that arises from displacement, loss, tragedy and fear.

⁵ *The Coffin Tree*: First New York City, then Chicago. *Nowhere Man*: Chicago.

⁶ The death of his grandmother when he was a child.

⁷ The death of her grandmother, mother and later brother and father.

CONCLUSION

The thesis at hand identifies and analyzes how the struggle for identity is portrayed in Aleksandar Hemon's *Nowhere Man* and Wendy Law-Yone's *The Coffin Tree*. Furthermore it discusses how this topic is integrated and considered in the genre of immigrant fiction and exile literature respectively.

The theoretical part serves as a foundation for the subsequent analysis of the two primary texts. Different concepts of culture have been introduced when considering globalization, multiculturalism, ideology and identity. While it would be unwise to focus on a single concept of culture, MacGregor Wise's theory on territory and habitus as well as William's conception of culture as a necessary mixture of tradition and constantly reinvented meanings are emphasized. Furthermore MacGregor Wise's theory that popular culture is a tool for resisting ideologies is strongly supported. The concept of identity is necessarily conceived as rather flexible and open and has been underlined and discussed in connection with nation, migration and displacement. Different acculturation strategies are introduced in order to identify how the protagonists of the two novels at hand cope with obstacles that challenge their identity.

Regarding genre, the two primary texts are clearly both part of immigrant literature as well as exile literature. The meaning of the term *exile* has changed over time and it seems fitting to use it in a sense that denotes *exile* as something people are forced into. Both authors and their protagonists have been driven into exile in the United States, even though they used different paths. Hemon and Law-Yone were unable to return to their homelands and have put their experiences, thoughts, emotions and a great part of their identity into these novels.

Sievers argues that among the central motifs of immigrant fiction are home, displacement, struggle for identity, alienation and acculturation. After analyzing *The Coffin Tree* and *Nowhere Man*, I argue that the struggle for identity is present in every single one of these motifs. Cowart has identified certain features that contemporary immigrant fiction contains. However, in the case of the two novels at hand, many of these features are not clearly identified. What can be identified is that the narrative technique is rather fragmented. However, this approach is used to carefully reveal the construction of identity in the protagonists and is intended to slowly convey a fairly honest atmosphere that enables the reader to identify with the struggle the protagonists face.

The importance of these stories is not necessarily a double vision on American life, as Shirley Gech-Lin Lim proposes. Their achievement is that they offer an insight into the immigrant's painful struggle for identity. Regardless of origin, ethnicity, culture or nation, which are often the focus of immigrant literature, the struggle for identity is a natural challenge of human life. Focusing on it makes a literary piece attractive

and comprehensible to a broader audience and enforces the understanding of traumas caused by exile and immigration.

Aleksandar Hemon has replicated his own history of immigration in *Nowhere Man* and concludes that the struggle for identity stems from the simple feeling of wanting to be nobody and nowhere. The young protagonist realizes that his past is gone and he will not be returning to Bosnia, because it is not his home any longer. At the same time he is traumatized by displacement and finds himself unable to accept the United States as his new home. The struggle that results from it is not only a struggle for recreating this safe environment called home but a struggle for recreating oneself.

Wendy Law-Yone, who has always thought of immigration to the United States as a great freedom, paints an even darker picture. Her young protagonist suffers an even deeper trauma when she is sent to exile. This trauma is enhanced by the fact that the past is a prison she does not want to return to, the present is a prison that she cannot escape from and the future is something she is not capable of imagining. Her desperation is caused by a strong denial and an even stronger confusion. The ideals that she was raised in and always wanted to withstand are behind her. But having constructed an identity based on these ideals and pretense, she has never known who she really is. Her struggle is the challenge of overcoming loss, letting go of the past in order to embrace the future and reconstruct her identity.

While I argue that *The Coffin Tree* and *Nowhere Man* belong to the genre of immigrant fiction and exile literature, I think that they necessarily also transcend these genres. Hence the immigrant literature deserves a fair consideration in the general literary canon.

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ABSTRACT

English Abstract

The main focus of this thesis is the analysis of representations of the struggle for identity in relation to migration in the novels *Nowhere Man* by Aleksandar Hemon and *The Coffin Tree* by Wendy Law-Yone. The former revolves around the life of a young man from Bosnia, who immigrated to the United States, while the latter narrates the story of a young female immigrant from Burma. They both struggle to find new homes in the cities of Chicago and New York City while attempting to adapt to a new cultural and social environment. Although the protagonists are from entirely different origins and cultures, of different genders and age, many parallels can be drawn between the conflicts they have faced during their process of identity formation. The first part of the thesis establishes a theoretical foundation on the topic of migration, multiculturalism, identity formation and the genre of immigrant fiction as an essential part of American literature. The second part compares the two primary texts in order to identify common and distinctive characteristics of contemporary American immigrant fiction. It will finally provide some statements on the negotiation of identity influenced by migration in the works of the two immigrant authors to the United States.

Deutsches Abstract

Die vorliegende Arbeit behandelt die Repräsentation von Identität in Verbindung mit Migration in den Romanen *Nowhere Man* von Aleksandar Hemon und *The Coffin Tree* von Wendy Law-Yone. Der erste Roman erzählt vom Leben eines jungen gebürtigen Bosniers, der gezwungen ist, als Immigrant in den Vereinigten Staaten zu leben. Der zweite Roman handelt von einer jungen Immigrantin aus Burma, die ebenfalls in die Vereinigten Staaten auswandert. Beide Immigranten haben aufgrund des neuen kulturellen und sozialen Umfelds Schwierigkeiten, sich in Chicago und New York City ein neues Zuhause aufzubauen. Obwohl die Hauptfiguren der beiden Romane über verschiedene kulturelle und nationale Wurzeln, unterschiedliches Alter und unterschiedliche Geschlechter verfügen, kann man viele Parallelen zwischen ihren persönlichen Konflikten ziehen, die sich während des Prozesses einer neuen Identitätsentwicklung auftun. Der erste Teil dieser Arbeit stellt eine theoretische Abhandlung und Basis zu den Themen Migration, Multikulturalismus, Identitätsformation und dem Genre der amerikanischen MigrantInnenliteratur dar. Im zweiten Teil der vorliegenden Arbeit werden die beiden Primärtexte verglichen um Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschiede bezüglich der Merkmale von amerikanischer MigrantInnenliteratur zu identifizieren und hervorzuheben. Abschließend wird das Thema der von Migration beeinflussten Identitätsentwicklung in den beiden Primärtexten bearbeitet.

