

Seeing the Self in the Mirror: Shifting Identity in Bouraoui's *Tomboy*

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When children express sadness about feeling different from their peers, parents are quick to emphasize the importance of being an individual. After a while, being different can become a burden. In Nina Bouraoui's novel *Tomboy*, a young girl named Nina endures a tormented childhood because she is of mixed race, with an Algerian father and a French mother. Her differences cause people from both societies to judge her. Mirrors and photographs are two objects that Bouraoui employs in the novel to accentuate the fact that Nina feels like a foreigner in both cultures. Her life is cast through both mediums, giving the reader a clear view of her unhappiness regarding her place in life. When she sees herself reflected against another person, a mirror, or a photograph, Nina becomes fixated on the judgments she hears.

Bouraoui uses Nina's narrative voice to convey her character's dismayed mindset caused by her lack of identity. Nina is never convinced that she really belongs anywhere. To highlight this, Bouraoui employs the reflective space of mirrors throughout the novel to emphasize the ways that Nina is seen. Nina often uses mirrors by framing herself against other people. Early in the story, she utilizes the concept of mirroring in a descriptive sense. She says, "This life is brutal. It is voiceless and faceless. Agitated, I sleep badly and eat little. Amine mirrors my insanity" (Bouraoui 4). She sees her own actions reflected in Amine, who also has both French and Algerian parents. In admitting that Amine mirrors her, she acknowledges her opinions about growing up as a child with dual cultural backgrounds. She needs Amine in order to frame herself for comparison. When Amine leaves Algeria later in the novel, Nina believes that "with his absence, I lose my other name, my mirror" (Bouraoui 99). She no longer has her mirror or her

friend. In her book *The Foreign Legion: Stories and Chronicles*, Clarice Lispector declares, “The mirror is the deepest space which exists” (Lispector 107). This seems true, because when a person looks into a mirror, the reflection he sees will go as far as the unimpeded view allows. For Nina, though, Amine reflects what she thinks other people will see, making the mirror a shallow space impeded by the judgments of others. When a person looks into a mirror, he should be able to see himself and his surroundings. Nina is too focused on what society thinks to see anything besides just her.

Nina makes another statement about the mirroring qualities of others when she sees several Algerian boys playing. She says, “I watch the boys in the street after school, playing with the new-found sun . . . How they mirror my rage” (Bouraoui 9). This is a different situation than when she saw herself reflected in Amine. When she sees Amine, the reflection there is one of similarity and kinship. Here, the boys are allowed to act however they want to, as Nina wishes she could. Therefore, they mirror the masculine traits that Nina cannot act on.

Mirrors in *Tomboy* are often used to prove that people are necessary to reflect both the actions and the hidden desires of others. Nina says, “Each person is someone else’s mirror as well as his defeat” (Bouraoui 22). Amine fulfills the role of her mirror more than her defeat, because she sees her own actions in his actions. Her true thoughts and feelings are reflected in her friend. Amine also ends up being her defeat, because she realizes that neither of them has a sense of self. As long as she uses him as a mirror, she will be held back from finding her own place in the world. In opposition, the Algerian schoolboys may mirror Nina’s rage, but they also serve as her defeat, for she will never be one of them. The boys reflect how she wishes she could act, but since she is a girl, and of mixed descent, she can only watch them.

She again finds herself getting close to someone through mirroring when she goes to France. She says, “I am in my mother’s house . . . and all of a sudden my life reflects hers like a mirror. In one night I replace my mother’s features” (Bouraoui 68). At this moment, Nina feels definable; she associates herself with her French bloodline. She erases her mixed race identity, but this cannot be her reality. Finding similarities helps her feel closer to her French roots, but she will never physically mirror her mother. Vernon Shetley and Alissa Ferguson comment on mirrors in narration in their article, “Reflections in a Silver Eye: Lens and Mirror in Blade Runner.” The article states, “The mirror's presence, in our view, responds to the needs not of narrative plausibility but of symbolic resonance and allusion” (Shetley and Ferguson 67). It is implausible for Nina to assume she will ever be able to physically mirror her mother, but she is emotionally similar because of their shared insecurities and self-doubts.

Mirrors do play a role in Nina’s physical definition of self. When she walks across her apartment in Algeria one evening, she describes, “I go all the way to the mirror . . . I see an old man with black teeth wearing a red fez” (Bouraoui 49). This connects her to Algeria through her grandparents, giving her a brief glimmer of identity association. But it also disconnects her from her life; she is supposedly looking at herself and yet she sees an old man. This mirror reflects her crisis in multiple ways. Firstly, she sees herself as male, which is what she would prefer to be. Secondly, she sees herself at a different age. In association with this scene, Marina van Zuylen makes an interesting comment in her essay “Maghreb and Melancholy: A Reading of Nina Bouraoui.” She remarks, “The only tolerable mirrors are those that bypass the present, reflecting another dimension, a reality that emerges from the void” (van Zuylen 95). This happens to Nina in the apartment. This mirror shows her a more desirable life. At this point in her childhood, Nina needs to see something that can make her happier. Being a man appeals to her inner desires,

while being older would mean she would likely be more content with her sense of self. This mirror shows how Nina wishes her life could be. The vision that appears is tolerable for its lack of reality, so she does not question what is reflected.

Another mirror that affects Nina is present when she is in Algeria and desires to act like the aforementioned Algerian boys. Nina describes, “I don’t understand all their words. ‘Yahya Algeria’ is . . . repeated. I repeat it in front of the mirror . . . I’m as one with those children” (Bouraoui 9). She thinks that by practicing their words, she will be able to see herself as one of the boys. The mirror becomes the equivalent of a friend. Even without her dual cultural identity, she would never completely fit in with them because she is biologically female. But, by looking in the mirror, she fits into a place that her society does not allow her to be a part of.

Photographs are also used to highlight the way that she is seen, and the way she sees herself. Thus far, Nina has only dealt with the dynamism of the mirror, and the flexibility of that image. A photograph is far more fixed. As one article dealing with photography describes, “The photograph offers an illusory promise of permanence and stability” (Shetley and Ferguson 74). Nina has been consumed with the idea of seeing herself in other people and in mirrors that she comes in contact with. A mirror shows a specific reflection at one moment in time. Nina will not remember the exact facial expression she wore while looking into the mirror. A photograph works the opposite way. A picture is taken and each time she looks at it, she will be able to remember the moment, while still being able to see her exact expression.

Photographs are intriguing because it is always possible that falsehoods are hidden within them. When a camera captures a person’s face, the expression does not always correspond to the emotion the person is feeling at the time, even if it looks like it does. When Nina is in France, she describes, “Every picture tells the same story. I look embarrassed, but I always smile at the

camera, at my grandmother who is aiming” (Bouraoui 94). The camera does not lie about what the subject looks like, but the subject can lie about how she feels. Nina smiles to cover her embarrassment, but she remembers awkwardness when she looks at the picture. This humiliation carries over into another picture, where she admits, “I refuse to show my passport photo, hiding my true identity” (Bouraoui 104). She is uncomfortable showing her identity in a photo, even though anyone asking to see it would already see her face. In considering photography, one article asks, “Is the camera's eye a lens or a mirror? Does film open a portal onto reality . . . or does film reflect back the apparatus of its own production, offering us the image of an artificial, constructed world?” (Shetley and Ferguson 66). For Nina, a camera seems to be more like a mirror. A photo reflects Nina in an unchanging form, which causes her to see artificiality in photographs; she smiles because she should, not because she wants to.

Photographs of other people in Nina’s life also give her reasons to feel displaced. When she is young, she recalls Amine’s mother using photography to lie to her family. Nina remembers, “His mother takes a photo of us. She will send the image of her son in disguise to her family, her French family. She’ll spread our lie” (Bouraoui 5). Amine’s mother uses a picture to try and convince her family that Amine fits in with his French side. At another point, Nina talks about a picture of her uncle who died in the Algerian War, when she says, “I bear the conflict. I bear the absence of the eldest son of the family” (Bouraoui 17). She believes that keeping the photograph means having to live up to Amar’s loss. She carries the picture with her, a constant reminder. Her father substitutes Nina with Amar to deal with his loss; he gives her boyish nicknames to replace Amar. This action contributes to Nina’s identity confusion, because one of the most important people in her life treats her like a boy. If Amar had survived, and if Nina’s father had dealt with his grief another way, Nina might feel less confused.

Photographs and mirrors are essential markers throughout the novel to show how Nina is affected by her broken identity. It is not until she finds a place that she feels like she belongs that these mediums lose their significance. Once Nina makes it to Rome, things become simpler. When she goes into her room, she does not mention seeing a mirror at all (Bouraoui 111). The mirror was one of the first things she noticed in her room in France. In Italy, it is no longer as important that she see herself, because she is comfortable. Her contentedness is also evident in photography, where she describes, "I remained immobile in front of the camera lens. Like an eye, it focused on me as the center of everything" (Bouraoui 112). Now she accepts being in the camera's focus. She is not embarrassed about her appearance anymore. She is finally satisfied with her life and accepting of her differences, because they no longer consume her.

Ultimately, as Nina discovers, a person can never look upon his or her own face without a reflective surface. Our eyes do not permit us to view our faces the way we see others. Once Nina finds happiness in being comfortable with her own image, mirrors and photographs lose their importance. They become everyday objects once more, unnecessary for self-definition. Happiness is Nina's key to forgetting about the way other people perceive her and even how she sees herself. When she is completely happy, she does not worry about gender, skin color, or cultural identity. She becomes herself by letting go of herself; she finally becomes Nina.

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