

40-Identity and fragility of human in a transnational age: Deborah Levy's *Black Vodka*

Kubilay GEÇİKLİ¹

APA: Geçikli, K. (2020). Identity and fragility of human in a transnational age: Deborah Levy's *Black Vodka*. *RumeliDE Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları Dergisi*, (21), 669-678. DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.835511.

Abstract

Deborah Levy's short story collection, *Black Vodka*, consists of ten stories all narrating the way people live in the 21st century in which lives know no borders, borders in any sense. National identity has turned into something fluid and people are all citizens of the world rather than being a citizen of a particular state and/or nation. Such concepts as belonging and attachment have also turned fragile like the characters themselves. The fragmented structure of the stories refers to fragmented structures of the characters and their lives. Love is a dominating theme but the way it is handled is a little bit disturbing. Relations are open to abrupt crises and breakups; people easily love and stop loving. Still, a kind of humaneness governs all relations, showing people's need to remain usual human beings instead of selfish virtual beings of contemporary age of high technology. In other words, Levy is ultimately optimistic and offers hope. Love and relations also cross the borders of nation and identity.

Keywords: Transnationalism, transnational, identity, Deborah Levy, Black Vodka

Ulusötesi bir çağda kimlik ve insanın kırılğanlığı: Deborah Levy'nin *Black Vodka*'sı

Öz

Deborah Levy'nin kısa öykü kitabı *Black Vodka* yaşamların her anlamda sınır tanımadığı yirmi birinci yüzyılda insanların yaşama biçimlerini anlatan on öyküden oluşur. Bu bağlamda ulusal kimlik kararsız ve değişken bir hal almıştır ve insanlar belli bir devletin vatandaşı ya da belli bir milletin mensubu olmaktan ziyade dünya vatandaşlarıdır. Karakterlerin kendileri gibi aidiyet ve bağlılık duyguları da kırılğan bir nitelik kazanmıştır. Öykülerin parçalanmış kurulum yapıları karakterlerin ve onların yaşamlarının parçalanmışlığına gönderme yapar. Öykülerde sevgi ve aşk baskın bir temadır ama ele alışı biçimleri biraz rahatsız edicidir. İnsan ilişkileri ani bunalım ve bozulmalara açıktır; insanlar kolayca âşık olur ve kolayca sevmekten vazgeçerler. Yine de bir tür insanilik bütün ilişkileri yönetir ve bu da insanların yüksek teknoloji çağının bencil sanal bireyleri olarak değil alışıldık insanlar olarak kalma isteklerini gösterir. Bir başka deyişle, nihayetinde Levy iyimserdir ve umut vaat eder. Aşk ve ilişkiler de ulus ve kimliğin sınırlarını aşar.

Anahtar kelimeler: Ulusötesicilik, ulusötesi, kimlik, Deborah Levy, Black Vodka

Going hand-in-hand with globalization and being a “manifestation of globalization” (Vertovec, p. 2), transnationalism defines and is a product of our present day world. Some people claim 1970s as a very

¹ Doç. Dr., Atatürk Üniversitesi, Edebiyat Fakültesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü (Erzurum, Türkiye), kgecikli@gmail.com, ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4154-1298 [Araştırma makalesi, Makale kayıt tarihi: 29.09.2020-kabul tarihi: 20.11.2020; DOI: 10.29000/rumelide.835511]

significant decade for the speed of the spread of transnationalism; however, some believe that it must be dated back to 1950s (Clavin, 429). In fact, it could be argued that transnationalism has existed since centuries and is not a new phenomenon and that trans-oceanic steamships and telegraph also facilitated transnationalism in the past; however, “what is new is the emergence of transnationalism on a mass scale” (Wong, p. 79). Technological progress, changing nature of economy and nation states, increasing mobility have all contributed to interconnectedness of seemingly separate nations and people and loosening of bonds. Distances have been shortened and nature of capital, commercial activities, meaning of citizenship, and significance of social and migrant mobility have begun to be of greater importance than ever. The term diaspora has also begun to be redefined in this process and it is argued that “the dispersed diasporas of old have become today’s ‘transnational communities’ sustained by a range of modes of social organization, mobility and communication” (Vertovec, p. 5). Transnationalism and what it includes may not always refer to innocent and ethical formations and networks; illegal formations also function at a transnational level. That is why terrorism, drug traffic and gunrunning have got involved in transnationalism and what it has brought. In other words, there is not only good but also evil face of transnationalism throughout globe.

As for the relation between identity and transnationalism and its impact upon identity, one can easily detect the rise of decenteredness and multiplication of the possible referents of the word “home”, which is commonly associated with privacy, domesticity, family, comfort, safety, as well as being a location of gendered work, oppression and violence (Blunt&Varley, pp. 3-6). “Transnational migration has transformed the home-making practices of millions of people worldwide over the last few decades” (Walsh&Nare, p. 1). Those away from ‘home’ can find other ‘homes’ and adapt themselves to newly-obtained homes although transnationalism “can also make it difficult for migrants ever to feel completely ‘at home’” (Lee, p. 14). This could result in the emergence of identity crises and the transnational individual may feel at a loss even among the members of his own transnational community. Present day world seems to support the strengthening and decline of nationalism at the same time paradoxically. Nevertheless, it is the decline of feeling attachment to one determining national identity that seems to come to the fore more. People can have several identities at the same time in an age of transformation of identity. Similarly, sense of belonging remains to be a feeling less and less felt. One of the characters of the story collection, Magret, the female character of “Vienna” in the collection, says when asked about her mother tongue: “There are so many languages” (Levy, p. 37), which indicates the lessening importance of national roots. As suggested by Clare Bradford, “transnational identities are formed when individuals and groups negotiate between and across cultures and languages” (Bradford, p. 23).

Because transnationalism has to do with migration and mobility, the identity of the migrant and that of the newcomer is shaped in accordance with the attitudes of the country they have migrated to. “The way in which a host society accepts transnational communities has a major influence on how these communities shape their identity” (Nakhid, p. 220). If the attitudes of the host country are hostile, then this very hostility reinforces ethnic identity of the migrant and creates a kind of solidarity among the members of similar ethnic roots. However, as mentioned above, national identity does not have a great significance and emphasis in *Black Vodka*. Characters are rather citizens of the world and problems arise not from national roots but from personal misunderstandings and betrayals. Still, it is a world of insecurity; insecurity is not related to losing lives or being subject to terrorist attacks; it has to do with lack of trust more. Characters cannot feel sure about the reliability of those they love or of people with whom they maintain a relationship. An age of transnationalism inevitably requires negotiation among different cultures; nevertheless, this needed negotiation is frequently under threat.

The pains of modern life are relatively simple: “the silences and evasions between people scared of not seeming cool, not being in control” (Roberts, p. vii). Lives are also simple in Levy's stories. These stories do not lead the reader to deep and existentialist analyses of lives; still, in this very simplicity, Levy manages to make the reader question the fragility of lives, people's need to belong as well as lack of belongingness. In Michele Roberts' terms, the stories in the collection will help us “catch glimpses of other, potential, different selves in the sparkling mirror of Levy's prose” (Roberts, p. viii). One of the most important issues raised by these stories is the fact that people may not know at all those who they believe know well and there could be walls in front of lovers who have had a relationship for years. This unknowability and the difficulty of identifying with transnational people of the world sometimes prove to be a very important obstacle for the characters in these stories while they could paradoxically provide them with new chances of communication and changing one's self.

“Black Vodka”, the story that also gave its name to the book's title, is about the life of a deformed man, a man with a hump on his back who writes copies for an advertising agency. This man is at the same time the narrator of the story. Levy tries to draw attention to tragic conditions of all those with some sort of deformity on their bodies. Our unnamed narrator is well aware of the way people look at his hump for a long time and of how they make a comparison between themselves and him although he cannot understand why they find it so interesting. This deformity inevitably leads to his marginalisation, starting with the earliest school years in the playground of the school: “The boys called me ‘Ali’ at school because that's what they thought camels were called...The word ‘playground’ does not really provide an accurate sense of the sort of ethnic cleansing that went on behind the gates that were supposed to keep us safe” (Levy, p. 3), which shows that in a world where there are supposedly no borders between cultures, there still are borders and that prejudice still reigns. In other words, people may find the existence of different cultures normal; however, it does not mean that they will welcome all those different cultures and accept them as they are. The narrator believes that he “was instructed in the art of Not Belonging from a very tender age. Deformed. Different. Strange. Go Ho-me Ali, Go Ho-me. In fact, I was born in Southend-on-Sea, and so were those boys, but I was exiled to the Arabian Desert and not allowed to smoke with them behind the cockle sheds” (Levy, p. 4). In our age, “there is considerable confusion about how we ought to live with our differences” (Gaede, p. 14), and our narrator has had to deal with it from very early ages. His job status and the fact that he earns a lot of money do not open the way for being better respected; his friends show him respect unwillingly simply because of the fact that they feel he must be less happy than themselves. The narrator of the story has learned to accept the bodily difference between himself and the others; that is why he does not believe in the use of attempts to seem like his ‘normal’ friends. He even feels angry from time to time because of having such a burden on his back. And he frequently associates himself with other people suffering from similar physical defects on their bodies. He complains about being disturbingly gazed at; however, he also is interested in other people's bodily defects. The woman who joins his presentation of black vodka, Lisa, draws his interest; however, he soon finds a picture of his own body on her notebook under which it reads Homo Sapiens.

While narrating the story of a physically defected person, “Black Vodka” also makes references to Second World War and Poland, which is a recurring theme of the narrator's dreams. An interesting point here is that there are tears on the cheeks of the narrator whenever he wakes up from these dreams. The reader feels that Poland remains as a frightening image occupying the mind of the reader because even in his meeting with Lisa he is visited by the bats of a terrifying and cold forest of Poland from the times of Second World War again. Levy tries to demonstrate the fact that history, especially the history of the twentieth century is also crooked like the body of the narrator and that it is a burden

on the people of the whole world. The transnational world was once a deeply segregated one in which lives of some races and/or nations were at hazard. Similarly, contemporary times do not symbolise a world of total peace and equality. In this sense, Walter Benjamin, as an intellectual who painfully experienced Nazi brutality, seems right to assert that history is not a chain of events but one single catastrophe (Benjamin, p. 257). And the narrator rightfully calls the early twentieth century “murderous” (Levy, p. 15).

“Black Vodka” ends with a promising future of love for the narrator as Lisa seems willing to have a relation with him. Nevertheless, the word “promising” must be used cautiously because the narrator also fears an approaching probability of love. It is a world where there should be a new language for naming and classifying so many people, things and concepts. Perhaps it is the reason why the narrator is unnamed. Naming as an indicator of national, cultural and historical roots seems to have lost its significance in a transnational world or it has already been labelled as discriminating. It is not the languages but the real life experiences that count in such a world and our unnamed homo sapiens prefers to yield to this world of experience although he feels sure that others will continue to otherise him because of his hump and is sceptical about the continuation of a relation with Lisa, who seems to enjoy not the love but the physical joy with a physically different body.

“Shining A Light”, the second story in the collection, is about Alice, whose visit to Prague starts with the loss of her luggage. She has nothing but her clothes on but after she dances at an open air with people totally unfamiliar to her on the same day, “she realises that arriving in a country with nothing but the clothes she is wearing has made her reckless, but more introspective too” (Levy, p. 23). In other words, Alice seems to have a new beginning leaving her belongings, her friends, her identity behind; however, she paradoxically feels not quite at home still. Perhaps that is the reason why she very carefully folds her clothes when she gets undressed to wear her swimsuit during her next-day visit to a lake with her new friends she met at the concert. The clothes on her are the only things that connect her to her past life she really belongs to. Nevertheless, the reader can't help asking why she goes on her life in such an unplanned manner and whether there was a specific reason for her visit to Prague.

The story makes implicit references to the painful history of former Yugoslavia. Alex, another new friend to Alice, talks about memories of segregation and war times. Alice's new friends are all Serbian but they say that they did not know each other in their own country and that they met in Prague, which could be read as a sign of transnationalism of contemporary times. These people are outside home but yet at home in Prague. Their identities could be labelled with the concept of “hybrid national identity” as coined by Behnken and Wendt; nation in their case seems to refer to the “one among multiple attachments by which people define their identity and their membership in communities” as referring to “multiple, interrelated belongings and their transnational or transcultural dimensions” (Behnken&Wendt, p. 5). The reason why Alice cannot feel at ease when she is together with these newly-met friends is that she has not had to suffer from what they once suffered from: the probability of losing one's home: “They have been hurt in ways she has not been hurt. They have left all the seasons in their country behind them” (Levy, p. 30). As for Alice, she cannot leave all the seasons of her country behind. This is a totally alien experience for her and until meeting these transnational citizens, she has never had to think about it as she has never had to think about all those people who could have hidden themselves in dark forests at different hard times of world history in order not to be seen by the enemy. The sense of loss therefore gains new dimensions; for Alice, it is just her luggage but for others it could be fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. After thinking about these, Alice for the first time decides to change her offish stance towards these people, especially towards Alex, whose

real name is Alexander and who likes not his country but the Italian-made coffee-maker that stands in the kitchen of his house.

“Vienna”, the third story in the collection, tells transnational cheating and sex between an unnamed man and Magret, who is an Austrian woman with cold attitudes. That coldness in attitudes is the very reason why the reader cannot understand how a relation with such a cold woman takes the form of sex suddenly. As for the man, he is worried about his betrayal and cheating and is obviously disturbed by his abandonment of his family and small children, which seems to have been sealed on his body in the forms of rash as a metaphorical sign of shame like the A letter on the dress of Hester in *The Scarlet Letter*. The relationship between these two people therefore carries an atmosphere of tension. It is clear that “he has brought his agitation and turbulence into the white walls of her apartment” (Levy, p. 34). Transnationalism makes itself felt not only in the identity of the woman but also in the langoustines from Norway and in the accent of the woman which interestingly, and mockingly perhaps, reminds the man of wolves. In addition, Magret’s new husband is an Italian.

The unnamed man fears a probability of sex; that is why he closes his eyes while Magret takes off her clothes and gets ready for sex. He sees images of his ex-wife and his two children, one a small daughter and the other an infant boy. His past is like a past of crime that should never be mentioned; therefore, Magret’s lack of an interest in chat after sex makes him feel comfortable because he does not want to talk about his secrets, his ex-wife, his children and his unpacked suitcase in his bedsit. The bedsit is defined with the adjective “temporary” as the life itself has turned temporary for this man. No permanency is allowed for this transnational man. He knows well that Magret has no need of him as she can find another man easily if she wants to do. What is more, he has almost no information about the woman except her lack of children, her possession of a new microwave and her marital status as a married woman. He can only make some predictions about her based on his observations: “She is middle Europe, he thinks. She is Vienna. She is Austria” (Levy, p. 36), which is followed by a number of images relating Austria such as silver teaspoon, cream, schnapps, strudel, chandelier, velvet curtain, deer, snow, burnt sugar, fur, leather, gold; however, the most effective one comes in the final sentence of her ongoing description: “She is someone else’s property” (Levy, p. 36), which sounds rather sexist. The man, however, wants to be the new owner of this woman, the owner of middle Europe. He wants to take his share of middle Europe’s richness; however, it will not be possible for him. When he asks her what her native tongue is, she simply answers “There are so many languages” (Levy, p. 36). What is implied in this answer is that although languages have become so many in number, people of transnational world can understand each other if they sincerely want to do so.

The man feels he “has been dismissed by middle Europe, who has plans that do not include him in the structure of her day” (Levy, p. 37). Language still matters as a categorizing as well as separating fact because when they are about to say farewell to each other, Magret says “Gute Nacht” while the man has to utter his Russian “Spokojnoj nochi” (Levy p. 38). There still are invisible boundaries between middle Europe and Russia and the man finds the barriers between his own life and that of Magret. The man had a very painful memory filled with snow, wars and famine and like many characters of *Black Vodka* he is a typical exile as we learn the fact that his ex-wife and children live in Zurich. He suddenly remembers his real place of belonging: “He can live without champagne but he cannot live without his children; that is a grief he knows he cannot endure but he must endure and he knows that his hands will itch for ever” (Levy, p. 39). He also realises that he has been “used, teased, abused and mocked by middle Europe” (Levy, p. 39) and that twentieth century has ended as the same time when his

marriage ended. That is to say, his sense of time has also been lost like himself or time has stopped when he decided to leave his family.

“Stardust Nation” is another story in the collection that makes references to such transnational spaces and images as Dutch milk pudding and the salt hills or sand dunes in Spain. The narrator is named as Tom who misses past manners with a nostalgic sense while trying to make sense of changing attitudes and manners. However, his childhood has no place for a nostalgic missing because of his father’s beatings, during which he tries to imagine himself at a different faraway places. Nick, the accountant under Tom, has a similar story of beatings by father. Both characters inevitably contrast their mothers with beating fathers. Unlike the cruel fathers, mothers provide a therapeutic safety although neither Tom nor Nick lives with their mothers now. The shocking point relating Tom’s life is his killing of his father with a knife during a tantrum. Nick’s Greek origin is emphasized in his speech with his mother. Nick’s sister Elena reveals an interesting aspect of Nick’s life to Tom: “If Dad has a earache, Nikos gets bronchitis. If my mother cries, Nikos cries” (Levy, p. 53). This sentence includes implications of a troubled psychology and Levy wants to suggest throughout her book that almost all people of the transnational contemporary world suffer from similar troubled psychologies. Similarly, Tom defines himself as “a thin wreck of a man” (Levy, p. 50). The title of the story “Stardust Nation” refers to the fact that all people in the world carry traces from each other’s lives in their own lives: “We are all of us breathing in atoms that were once forged in the furnace of a star. There are tiny shards of your life inside them and their life is inside you too” (Levy, p. 63). It is a world of shared and collective sorrows and the world deserves and is made up of one nation only.

The main characters of “Pillow Talk”, Pavel and Ella represent transnationalism and hybrid identities with their backgrounds. The story starts with their description in bed, following a sexual relation. The first transnational image is the Spanish cigarette Ducados, which takes the reader to one of the settings of the story, Spain. Pavel, of Czech origin, draws an analogy between the Czech and the Chinese in terms of eating habits, claiming the Czech eat everything that moves like the Chinese people. Spain is represented as a transnational country as well. Pavel has two passports. His girlfriend Ella was born in Jamaica but has lived in Britain since she was three. The identity crisis is reflected upon the tension experienced by these two characters when they encounter the airport officer checking passports: “What if he asks them to explain where they are from? What would they say?” (Levy, p. 69). The answer is totally transnational: “A bit from here, a bit from there” (Levy, p. 69). Although the relation between these two lovers is of a passionate nature, transnational world might put a barrier in front of it as Pavel could be employed in Dublin soon, which means there will be a remarkable distance between Pavel and her. Airports in Levy’s collection of stories play an important role for human relations and this role is separative rather than connective. And airports are described as places of panic and not belonging, which is compatible with transnationalism, in “Pillow Talk”: “Have you ever had that weird feeling in an airport when you panic and don’t know what to do? One screen says Departures and another screen says Arrivals and for a moment you don’t know which one you are” (Levy, p. 77). This image of airports leads to problematic understanding of identity and belonging. However, casual meetings with other and stranger people in strange lands unexpectedly prove to be a start for new relations. Pavel’s meeting with such a stranger, a woman he has just met following his interview in Dublin, will result in a sex in her own house. Similarly, Ella might have had a relation with a man she has casually met in another strange city. What is more, Ella feels certain that Pavel has cheated on her with a woman he has seen in Dublin. To punish Pavel, she wants him to leave the house where they live together. Her reaction to Pavel’s sexual adventure stems from her past as well. Personal histories haunt the characters in Levy’s stories and Ella’s father betrayal of her mother frequently haunts her.

Therefore, she does not want to be betrayed by Pavel as her father once did. Ella's father has frequently changed his homes; however, he has not been able to find *the* home in these different homes: "Her father had many homes but no home" (Levy, p. 75). Ella is worried about her relation with Pavel in that she fears finding another father image in his personality. That is why she continually asks him whether he is going to be the leaving person or the staying one. The end of the story suggests that Pavel will be the staying one; however, the reader is also well aware of the fact that this relation is subject to possible fragilities. Like almost all relations in *Black Vodka*, the relation between Pavel and Ella is a slippery one.

"Simon Tegala's Heart in 12 Parts", referring implicitly to books dividing the issues they handle into parts such as Barnes' *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters*, and more openly to Simon Tegala, the artist in London famous for his heartbeat-themed artistic works, a fact referred to in the initial sentences of the story, makes its transnationalism felt with the beginning sentences as it describes its main characters, Simon Tegala and his girlfriend Naomi, in the visa application, which is an implication of a wish to leave the country they live in despite the fact that the only country Simon wanted to be in is Naomi's lips (Levy, p. 99). Other implications of transnational and global world in the narration are *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese divination text from which Naomi tires to learn whether Simon really loves her or not, and chechia, the national hat of Tunisia, found in Simon's kitchen. Simon's father has Parkinson disease and it seems he is against Simon's decision to leave in faraway places. Simon also seems not so sure about leaving his father with his disease alone. The narration sometimes refers to Simon with his name and sometimes with his surname; Simon Tegala sometimes becomes Mr Tegala, which shows Simon has at least two personalities that are in conflict with each other. The paradoxical side of the romantic relation between the two lovers is Simon's doubts about Naomi; he thinks he does not know her very well and therefore, wants Naomi to talk about her past and family; however, Naomi seems to be determined to leave her past behind, which is what Simon cannot do so easily. In the following quotation Simon Tegala is again Simon Tegala, not Mr Tegala: "Look, Simon Tegala, the past is a place I have left behind. I want to arrive somewhere else. How am I going to get there if I hang out with a cyclist who has no car to run his girlfriend or his ageing father around town?" (Levy, p. 102). This comment is a proof that Naomi runs a relation with Simon but has her doubts like Simon. This once again is related to the fragile nature of relations in contemporary times. Simon finds himself in the bed of another woman named Caroline Joseph after he sees her by chance at the cinema. Ironically, Carolina tells Simon about her family while Simon tells Carolina about his love, Naomi. Although this sexual relation leads to the end of his relation with Naomi, Simon Tegala's relations with not only with his father but with Naomi are mended following the accident he has later on with his bicycle.

"Roma", the story remarkable for its dream-like narration, is also a story of betrayal. The unnamed woman and her unnamed husband go to Portugal just before Christmas. Before and during the short holiday, in which rain keeps falling making the holiday unpleasant, the woman has a dream in which she sees her husband betray her. There is a woman who seems to admire the woman's husband and the two are in a city called Roma. The choice with respect to the name of the city is interesting in that it is not so clear whether it refers to Rome or a different place. There are implications of the real Rome, the capital city of Italy, such as beaches, hot weather, love fountain reminiscent of the famous one in Rome; however, it must be emphasized that the word 'roma' also refers to the gypsies and their nomadic life. Thus, Levy's choice could be intentional as she wants to suggest that everyone is a gypsy in this transnational world throughout her book. In her dream the woman tries to speak to her husband over a wall but cannot make her voice heard; the implication is she has already been excluded

from the life of her husband, whom the story defines as the person “who is going to betray her” (Levy, p. 109). She is not invited in. she has been defeated to her simply because “desire has made her strong” (Levy, p. 111).

The transnational aspects of the world make themselves apparent not only in the implied references to Rome but in the holiday in Portugal with glocal tones as well as the radio news stressing the dominance of USA on the world markets and economies. The world is small again; it is easy for people to reach different and authentic places; however, they are never like ‘home’: “Their hotel room is not a place that invites intimacy” (Levy, p. 110). Although the word ‘intimacy’ refers to the possible lack of sexual desire and relation in the marriage of the two characters, it, from a broader perspective, refers to a negative image of all places and spaces of displacement and leaving like the airports, stations etc.

The ending of the story draws an image of the wife as a woman who has accepted the fact that her husband has fallen in love with a different woman. She just wants to spend that Christmas, just another Christmas, one final Christmas with the man. The man cannot deny his relation with another woman; he cannot find what to say or how to explain the situation. “Roma” ends with uncertainty like many stories in the collection and uncertainty remains to be a typical aspect of contemporary lives in a transnational world.

“A Better Way to Live”, the final story in the collection, ironically deciphers the message in Levy’s book. We all must find a better way to live, an alternative way of living. The narrator named Joe reveals his longing for his dead mother, a historian who wished better ways of living for all people and thus represented a transnational woman of her times: “My mother wanted a better life for Russian women selling their slippers in the Moscow snow and she wanted a better life for me, her London boy with bright eyes just like hers” (Levy, p. 117). The narrator believes that what she knew about the 20th century also died with her death and comments great historical events could be linked with very simple developments. In other words, he describes the world in which we live, the world where seemingly irrelevant events in faraway places come to affect our lives deeply.

The narrator and his mother were abandoned by his father and Joe does not feel any sympathy towards his father although in his mind his father always remains a very handsome man. That is, he cannot hide his longing for his betrayer father. Broken relations and their continuing effects, the sense of loss and lost family members continue to dominate the plot in the final story of the book. Joe’s later life is a tragedy spent within the walls of an orphanage and this tragedy includes rotten cakes and repeated beatings.

Joe is well aware that the world is now transnational and that there are so many lives all around the world. The rug his mother bought from Iran, the rosewater coming from Istanbul with which he combs his hair, the calendula ointments which Joe puts on his shins when he falls over, the chamomile tea he sometimes sips and associates with ancient Egypt are just some examples of the transnational world. He imagines himself living in different parts of the world, especially different parts of the States. However, he is deeply in love with London, which has an image that could be associated with the image of a strange paradise in his mind. He has a sympathy towards the difficult girls of London. It is Elisa, the girl he met and decided to marry the moment he saw her in the orphanage. It is the relation of two outcasts as a matter of fact. The couple organize a wedding in the garden of their house and say yes to the registrar; however, this “yes” includes uncertainty as life itself is uncertain: “We said yes , yes to vague but powerful things, we said yes to hope which has to be vague, we said yes to love which is

always blind” (Levy, p. 123). Besides, Joe describes himself and Elisa as “...orphans groping for things we are connected to, vague and blind things like the cold bright wedding rings on our fingers” (Levy, p. 124).

“A Better Way to Live” ends with an overview of the tragic history of the 20th century, making a reference to historian mother of Joe and to such significant facts and events from Mussolini threat and Great Depression to atomic bombings of Hiroshima, from racist treatments of the black in the States to independence movements and the end of the Cold War with the fall of the Berlin Wall. What Levy tries to say is that all human history was a struggle for finding a better way to live; however, this struggle has proved to be the greatest irony of the world. Joe is also determined to find an alternative way to live: “Yes, while men and women argue on the moon, I will go for the exuberant and baroque. I will swank around my Victorian house with its boarded-up fireplaces and nineteenth-century plumbing in a suit made from tartan and silk. I will comb my hair already threaded with silver and scent it with rose water from the orchards of Istanbul” (Levy, p. 122). Yet, this attempt to swim against the current of history is also subjected to vagueness. The future is also vague and uncertain and the robot children of the future will be unluckier orphans compared to Joe and Elisa.

The stories compiled in *Black Vodka* depict a transnational world where lives are as fragile as relationships and where such concepts as identity, belonging, home etc. seem to have lost their references. People of transnational world are well aware of other countries all around the world, local characteristics of which can be seen inside homes, as well as other lives and can easily decide to become a nomad. Therefore, homelessness can sometimes turn into a positive aspect of their lives. Love and passion also seem to have lost their true meaning in the lives of these people; break-up of relationships is a frequently-encountered aspect of these lives. Exhausted relations are not only between couples; they are visible in father-son/mother-daughter relations and between sisters and/or brothers. It is demonstrated by Levy that lives of transnational age are prone to doubts and uncertainties; people prefer to become nomads of transnational world; however, they soon realize that identity, belonging and personal roots are still of great importance. Perhaps, we should all look for a better, alternative life, better than the present one as indicated by the title of the final story in the collection.

Works cited

- Behnken, Brian D. & Wendt, Simon, *Crossing Boundaries: Ethnicity, Race, and National Belonging in a Transnational World*, Brian D. Behnken & Simon Wendt (eds.), Lexington Books, Maryland, 2013.
- Benjamin, Walter, “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 2007, pp. 253-264.
- Blunt, A. & Varley, A., “Geographies of Home: An Introduction”, *Cultural Geographies*, Volume 11, 2004, pp. 3-6.
- Bradford, Clare, “Children’s Literature in a Global Age: Transnational and Local Identities”, *Nordic Journal of ChildLit Aesthetics*, Vol. 2, 2011, pp. 20-34.
- Clavin, Patricia, “Defining Transnationalism”, *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2005, pp. 421-439.
- Gaede, S. D., *When Tolerance is No Virtue: Political Correctness, Multiculturalism & the Future of Truth and Justice*, Intervarsity Press, Illinois, 1994.
- Lee, Helen, “Pacific Migration and Transnationalism: Historical Perspectives”, *Migration and Transnationalism*, ANU Press, 2009, pp. 7-41.

Levy, Deborah, *Black Vodka, And Other Stories, And Other Stories*, 2013.

Nakhid, Camille, "The Concept and Circumstances of Pacific Migration and Transnationalism", *Migration and Transnationalism*, ANU Press, 2009, pp. 215-230.

Roberts, Michele, "Introduction" to *Black Vodka, And Other Stories*, 2013, pp. vii, viii.

Vertovec, Steven, *Transnationalism*, Routledge, 2009.

Walsh, Katie & Nare, Lena, "Transnational Migration and Home in Older Age", *Transnational Migration and Home in Older Age*, Katie Walsh & Lena Nare (ed.), Routledge, 2016, pp. 1-23.

Wong, Lloyd L., "Transnationalism, Active Citizenship, and Belonging in Canada", *International Journal*, Vol. 63, No. 1, 2007-2008, pp. 79-99.