

Introduction

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If we conduct a quick search within Persian classical literature, we will find specimens of the experience of exile as a leitmotiv from the outset of Persian poetry in the ninth century. Exile is a central theme in Persian mystical poetry, in which the expulsion of the human soul from its original abode and longing to return is depicted in spellbinding metaphors and allegories. A famous example is the monumental epic *Mathnavi-yi ma'navi* by Jalal al-Din Rumi (1207–73), in which he depicts how the reed is torn from its bed to form a flute, complaining of the pain of separation. Such strong metaphors are used by Iranians to describe the emotions and experiences of exile. However, the focus on exile does not end with classical Persian literature; concepts such as exile and diaspora abound in the writings of Iranian diasporic authors post-revolution.¹

After the 1979 Revolution and the invasion of Saddam Hussein's army, which created the longest conventional war of the twentieth century (1980–88), many writers, poets, and intellectuals fled the country. Iranian poets settled in the West and wrote about the feelings of severance from “home” and how they could find solace for their homesickness by writing poetry. Some Iranians even chose voluntary exile and wrote about the themes of estrangement, exclusion, and embracing the norms and values of a new “homeland.” A good part

¹We use both *exile* and *diaspora* in this special issue, often interchangeably; however, for the most part, *exile* is used in reference to forced displacement and *diaspora* to voluntary migration.

of modern Iranian diasporic literature depicts anxiety and the fear of being torn apart, of not belonging to any community and being unable to communicate feelings and thoughts. Connected to this theme are moving descriptions of the new environment, as well as the nightmare and memories of the offences and failures of the homeland, and worries about the uncertain future. What is the place of the diaspora subject in the new environment? Can they be accepted as an integral part of the new “homeland,” or are they destined to always play on only one part of the playing field and not the entire field?

The guest editors of this special issue dedicate it to exploring how Iranian diaspora authors have reflected on the community’s attempts at carving out forms of belonging to their host nation over the past forty-something years. Contributors analyze specific modes of power and representation that the Iranian diaspora community has developed to rehabilitate their position as members of a minority population with ambivalent feelings of belonging. Intertwined with these feelings of belonging and the desire to be part of a national landscape is the importance of the concept of national identity which is situated on the boundaries and parameters of a certain community or nation. For this national identity, the past is of paramount significance because it provides cultural images and markers through which identities can be shaped. We witness examples of such nostalgia for the homeland or a moment in history in the works of Iranian diaspora authors.

However, nations are dynamic constructs, and national identity is constantly in flux. From generation to generation, this sense of belonging and national identity changes. In today’s global world, hybridity becomes significant as we no longer have the capacity to draw the line between us and them, the different and the same, here and there. In writings by Iranian diaspora authors, we frequently observe how hybridity allows for heterogeneity; claiming their difference and turning it into symbolic capital enables these authors to move beyond their marginalized ethnic position. The power of these diaspora authors lies in the force of exile as a symbolic declaration of liberation from

the abject position of “ethnic minority” in “an oppressive national hegemony.”² In this way, they reach a transnational position. For them, the borders are defined in their imagination; they are deterritorialized. With the authors’ constant exchanges and entanglements in the host nation, boundaries between “us” and “them” are softened. While not always harmonious, these exchanges force the authors to negotiate their differences with the mainstream society via their writings. The result is a hybridized world, with porous boundaries and transnational identities.

Living in diaspora with a “double consciousness,” borrowing from W. E. B. Du Bois,³ or even with multiple consciousnesses, Iranian diasporic writers reflect their inner struggles and the oppressive experiences of a “colonized” or “Otherized” subject—an ethnic minority.

In their works, Iranian writers endeavor to reconcile the two parts of their identity and to merge their various consciousnesses—and not leave any parts behind—in order to attain a better understanding of their self. In this sense, hybridity becomes an important concept that confronts and problematizes boundaries, although it does not erase them, because it unsettles the fixity of identities. Hybridity and in-betweenness can never be a question of harmonious merger and fusion. In-betweenness becomes a source of cultural permeability and vulnerability for Iranian diasporic authors, one that is a necessary condition for living together in difference, for decolonization, for destabilizing cultural power relations, for transnationalism. The articles in this special issue reflect exactly this.

Asghar Seyed-Gohrab’s article, “Poetry as Salve for Persian Exiles,” examines the poetry of exile composed by a number of Persian poets. Seyed-Gohrab focuses on the poet’s experiences, depicting how their experiences, observations, and reflections have changed in the last forty years and how feelings of uprootedness are gradually partly replaced by a sense of belonging to a new homeland. The article concentrates

²James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 255.

³W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903. (Columbia, SC: Digireads.com Publishing, 2019).

on personal emotions depicted in these poems and how hard it is to bid farewell to one's homeland, the unwillingness to accept life in a foreign country, and the long process of mourning. Can this mourning ever be completed? How do the first generation of Iranian refugees and exiles, who experienced imprisonment and torture, process their traumatic experiences by writing poetry on exile? Is writing poetry a salve for this generation of Iranian refugees?

Alan Williams's "Exile and Absence from the True Homeland: The Topos of Exile in Religious Literature" traces the virtually universal topos of exile and separation from the physical or spiritual homeland, which runs deep in the religious imagination. Exile may recall a historical, geographical diaspora, or an existential, spiritual separation, or both, as the one is typically a metaphor of the other. Williams explores texts from three religious traditions with distinctively different salvation histories but which have in common the theme of exile and separation from a spiritual homeland far from the writer. The texts, from Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Islamic cultures, each achieve resolution of actual and poetic tension by characteristically different means. The Zoroastrian text is an example that focuses on the collective experience of exile and a heroic outcome of perseverance; the Jewish text is a vision of the oceanic being of God enveloping and saving the stricken soul; the Sufi Islamic text affords a realization of the illusion of separateness in the ultimate unity of humanity and divinity. Williams argues that the affinity and likely correspondence between the form of the respective texts and the soteriological consolation they each afford are not coincidental but deliberate: their form and content are mutually supportive in order to convey the real possibility of resolution.

"*The Complete Persepolis: Visualizing Exile in a Transnational Narrative*" by Leila Sadegh Beigi explores the ways that contemporary Iranian women writers create a voice of resistance in fiction by questioning and redefining gender roles. Gender roles are defined not only by culture, tradition, and state laws in Iran, but also in a state of exile, a condition rooted in marginalization and independent of geographical location. Sadegh Beigi examines Marjane

Satrapi's *The Complete Persepolis* as a transnational narrative written in exile. While her narrative challenges the binary division between the Eurocentric "First World/Third World" framework of the modern global feminist analyses, her avatar, Marji, offers a gendered and discursive manifestation of women, culture, and identity in exile. Sadegh Beigi argues that the graphic novel expands the notion of exile through the visual representation of the author's concerns about the status of women in exile at home and abroad. The portrayal of internal exile, or exile at home, relies on the images of women struggling with gender discrimination, sexism, and censorship, which limit and marginalize them as female citizens. In the portrayal of external exile, or exile abroad, Satrapi offers images of women experiencing racism, stereotyping, and marginalization in the West.

Ehsan Sheikholharam's contribution, "Between Tehran and Paris: *Terre de mirages* and Shayegan's Exilic Ambivalence," draws on the novel *Terre de mirages* to discuss Daryush Shayegan's (1935–2018) ambivalent relationship with exile. The book is the story of two imaginary lovers: an Iranian man, Kaveh, and a French woman, Marianne. While apart, one in Tehran and one in Paris, the lovers communicate through poignant and emotive letters. Living in each other's worlds while being apart, Kaveh and Marianne are in exile in their own homes. The novel, which is written with contributions from Maryam Askari and in the form of an epistle, carries through a melancholic sense of loss. The lovers inhabit, if not two irreconcilable worlds, then two adrift temporalities. The novel simultaneously confirms and contradicts Shayegan's life experience and intellectual productions. Shayegan is the champion of cultural hybridity and civilizational exchange. A common thread throughout his oeuvre is the examination of cultural and civilizational encounters. If Shayegan believes in the universality of certain values and sees cultures as deeply intertwined, why then does his single novel put the prospect of cultural assimilation into question? Furthermore, it was Shayegan who in 1977 reintroduced the notion of dialogue between civilizations. It is rather curious that after almost three decades, the idea of harmonious synthesis of cultures is represented as a mirage, as a false promise of sorts. This article attends to the subtleties of the

story in *Terre de mirages* not merely to understand why Shayegan is not optimistic about the prospect of cross-cultural love, but also to tease out the elements that preclude such a possibility.

Leila Pazargadi's "Iranian American Comedic Memoirs: Interrogating Race and Humor in Diasporic Life Writing" uses humor as a medium to explore identity politics in life writing. She argues that Iranian American memoirists are able to interrogate themes concerning identity fragmentation, hybridity, and cultural belonging, particularly where the concern is liminality in the diaspora via the diaspora. Authors like Firoozeh Dumas, Maz Jobrani, and Negin Farsad inject comedy into their life narratives to great effect, using humor and affect to recall difficult life moments ranging from witnessing the 1979 Revolution and Iran–Iraq War, to immigrating to the United States, to withstanding a post-9/11 resurgence demonizing Iranians. More specifically, however, each explores their racial identity as it relates to their sense of belonging in America, particularly around the flashpoint of 9/11. Pazargadi explores the way in which each author reflects on the process of becoming white or rejecting whiteness, particularly in their attempt to reconcile the legal paradoxes of government categorization of Middle Easterners as white compared with their own perceptions of themselves as Other. In doing so, she argues that each writer confronts their liminality and acknowledges their double consciousness in America, while also offering varying resolutions to identity fragmentation in their respective autobiographical narratives.

Claudia Yaghoobi's "Racial Profiling of Iranian Armenians in the United States: Omid Fallahazad's 'Citizen Vartgez'" examines the (hi)story of Vartgez, the protagonist. Yaghoobi briefly charts the various waves of Armenian migration to the United States regardless of the migrants' original home state. In doing so, she points out the ways that Armenians have been exposed to discrimination in the United States and delineates the ways that Iranian Armenians, along with other Middle Easterners, have been subjected to racism and Islamophobia in the United States post-9/11. Then, examining Fallahazad's "Citizen Vartgez," she maps out the ways that Iranian Armenians attempt to hold

on to their heritage in the United States while simultaneously maintain their ties with both Armenian and Iranian cultures. The article argues that regardless of whether they live in Iran or in the United States, Armenians have had to negotiate their minoritized status within a codified legal hierarchy: in Iran, with an ethno-religious hierarchy and in the United States, with a racial one. As Christians in a Muslim-majority Iran, Armenians have their identity defined via its ethno-religious minoritized status in Iranian official narratives. However, after their migration to the United States, ironically enough, Iranian Armenians enter a national context defined by race; now, they are considered a white ethnic minoritized group, but are lumped together with Muslim Middle Easterners and subjected to America's racism and Islamophobia. Hence, Yaghoobi also addresses questions of racial profiling against Iranian Armenians along with other Middle Easterners in the United States, concluding with a discussion of Iranian Armenians' transnationalism as a result of their precarious minoritized position within the United States.

“A Reflection of Our Lives over the Four Decades after the Revolution in Literature and a Study of Exilic Literature” by Nasim Khaksar, examines the ways that literature, poetry, and fiction reflect narratives about human beings. In these narratives, with allegorical, metaphorical, symbolic, ironic language and in multilayered structures, a description is given of how human beings are and how they appear in the historical, social, political, and emotional situations and events that happen to them. In these narrations, it becomes clear what forms this (human) being has taken and what has happened to this person. Each of these poetic and literary narratives has its own ways of expressing itself, to help reveal and give birth to the truth or reality of humans in the world. Based on these narratives, the reality of the present is recreated and the future is predicted. In this sense, literature, poetry, and fiction stand alongside history and philosophy and accompany them in narrating humans and their time. Over the past forty years of exile, Iranians have been forced to think about leaving their homeland and being thrown out. Iranians have often asked themselves, What is the homeland? Is it a piece of land in the world that is far away from us

and that we have many memories of, or is it a part of our existence? What part of the homeland does not leave us in sleep and wakefulness? Thinking about these and other questions is a theme in world literature. Iranians have thought about these concepts and their identity in exile from various angles since 1979 and even before that with the emergence of Bozorg Alavi's story *Mirza* in 1969. Khaksar provides a brief account of the narrative of Iranians' lives and views of the revolution and its results over the past forty years, results such as the Iran–Iraq War, subsequent repression in society, imprisonment and exile, and the revolution's reflection in poetry and fiction.

Parvaneh Hosseini's "The Blurring of the Boundaries between Reality and Fantasy, Body and Soul, and Home and (Non) Home during the Creative Process of Writing Diaspora" focuses on the space between sleep and death in which a person's soul takes the form of a bird and flies to the grave of a loved one in the homeland. The intermediate nature of this space indicates the uncertainty and fluidity of the immigrant's identity. Another central concept of the novel studied, *Blue Touka*, that has an important place in immigration literature is the concept of home. Hosseini uses Homi Bhabha's "home" theory—which relates homelessness to a sense of displacement (or eradication) and confusion of the boundary between home and the world—to examine the location of different characters in the story. One of the most important features of *Blue Touka* is that it introduces a non-Iranian immigrant character and ties their fate to the fate of the Iranian Bahman. Hosseini highlights the deep connection between these characters to show how in this novel, "the shared past"—which Stuart Hall considers important in redefining social identity—is not between several Iranian immigrants. Instead, it is between an Iranian immigrant and a Chinese immigrant because under the layers of their differences, they reach common roots in terms of experience and perception that connect their diaspora identity and thus create a kind of transnational diaspora identity.

Mahdi Tourage's "Desire, Power and Agency: Iranian Female Poets Reading Their Poems before the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic" is an examination of desire staged during annual

poetry readings by selected Iranian female poets in the presence of the supreme leader of the country. Using desire as a conceptual tool in its psychoanalytical formulation, Tourage argues that these poems, especially the highly eroticized ones, open up discursive pathways toward pleasure, creativity, and agency. He also discusses Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*. Comparison between these two types of writing demonstrates two different models of agency that emerge under structures of subordination. The first is Nafisi's "emancipatory model," which emphasizes acts of resistance that challenge social norms. The annual events of poetry readings by female poets in the presence of the supreme leader, however, are not transgressive. The poetics of desire (including desire for conformity) make these events the locus of creative agency and erotic indulgences that surpass the regime's designs for domination and control.

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Lily Ayman (Ahy), 1929-2018