

Exile and Identity
The San Diego Seminar and the Question of Iranian Identity
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Ladies and Gentlemen: On behalf of the Mehregan Foundation, and the panel of speakers, I would like to welcome you all to this, third Annual Mehregan Foundation Seminar. I wish to also offer a special note of gratitude to the organizers of the seminar in general, and to Mr. And Mrs. Firouzi in particular. The Mehregan Foundation is, in my experience, a truly impressive collection of self-less and dedicated Iranians, devoted to the lofty task of promoting Persian culture and helping cement a new solid sense of community not just here in San Diego, but in that vast, cross-continental expanse of diverse communities we call Persian Diaspora. They do their always efficient, invariably congenial, work with dogged determination, and in spite of the occasional poisoned arrows that are flung their way. These arrows range from the tragically banal to the comically undemocratic. It is a measure of the anachronistic despotism of these attacks that they think talking about the religious affiliation of some members of Mehregan is, *ipso facto*, sufficient to disqualify the Foundation. Indeed, a main goal, and I think a cherished outcome of this, and other similar seminars is to create in us, all, a more democratic notion of what it means to be an Iranian. Much to their credit—and even more, to the credit of the Iranian community—volunteers of Mehregan Foundation ignore these malevolent attacks and concentrate instead on accomplishing their noble task. And like the now famous Energizer battery, they keep on going, and going, and going, and going. Even in the midst of this impressive army of volunteers, Mr. and Mrs. Firouzi stand out for their boundless energy, their endearing humility and hospitality, and their truly

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contagious love of Iran and the Iranian Diaspora. So I hope I can speak for everyone when I say to them, and to Mehregan Foundation, Thank you, and “May Your Hand be Without Pain,” or as we say in the old country, “May I be your Sacrificial Lamb.”

My task here tonight is at once simple and daunting. I have been asked to talk about the reasons for holding this seminar, and also try to explain why we decided to make the question of Iranian identity the subject of our meetings. The two questions are, as I will try to explain, inseparably intertwined.

The past is a strange country, they say. “They do things differently there.” Exile means, more than anything else, a painful reversal of one of our most common cognitive and emotional orders of familiarity. Exiles, they say, are bifurcated or dual beings, torn between memory and attachment to the past, a past that is paradoxically often reconstructed in our memories as a paradise lost, and the sobering, sometimes strange reality of the present. In other words, the streets of our exilic imagination are invariably more grand and glorious than the real dirt roads we left behind. Exile, in other words, is when you live in one land, and dream in another; it begets a discomfiting disconnect between the constructs of our memory, or our fundamental sense of who we are and the reality of a new identity we have to construct as members of Diaspora. The hope and aspiration of our seminar is to help us individually, and communally, navigate our way through this labyrinthine road.

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Adorno, one of the gloomier poets and philosophers of exile, considers an emotional and cognitive bifurcation, a suspension of attachment to a permanent home, the essential component of exile. For exiles, he writes, “homeland is the state of having escaped.”ⁱ Exile is synonymous with awaiting and transience,ⁱⁱ with the solitude of the stranger, with a neurotic dependence on news from “home.” Exiles refuse to recognize the permanence of the status quo, or what one poet calls the “past-ness of the past.” The hope and purpose of these three days of talks and discussions is to help us bring these two discordant parts of our identity into a new coherent unity. We hope to begin thinking about answers not only to the question posed by Montesquieu some three hundred years ago, namely, How can one be a Persian in modern times, but even to the more daunting problem of what does it mean to be an Iranian in exile today, at the cusp of tectonic changes that define the 21 century, and in a midst of a frenzied attack, at home by the Islamic Republic. and here in the West, by racists and jingoists, on the very concept of Iran and Irani.

In fighting these formidable foes, we take heart in the fact that identity is ultimately a construct, an idea formed at the juncture of the personal and the historical, the social and the psychological. It is not a passive or static product, but rather a changing and dynamic process. To believe, with Shakespeare, that not just our fate and fortune, but our identity is not in our stars, but in ourselves is to accept one of the most cardinal elements of being modern. Indeed, it is often said that Descartes’ famous dictum, *Cogito Ergo Sum*, or I think therefore I am, is the pivotal point of view that defines and shapes a modern sensibility. Implicit in that famous phrase is the notion that we are the architects of our own identity and that refashioning our person, and persona, is in our own hands. Identity

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is thus a social construct, a changeable idea not a state of being, a social construct in constant struggle of becoming. In its formation, a few allow themselves to remain passive, albeit angry and disillusioned recipients of received opinions and stereotypes. But there can be in the politics of identity as much individual agency and assertiveness as there is the inevitable, and formidable force of history, tradition, and the ever-whimsical winds of politics. For us, as Iranians in exile, it is hard to imagine a time with more promise and peril than now for attempting to come to terms with these vexing problems. In fashioning for ourselves an identity befitting our past and our present, this moment, is, for reasons I will try to explain, as challenging and as promising as any in our history as exiles. We need to bring to the fore, and make public, the questions we have been facing on an almost daily basis in our more private lives. We need to ask ourselves, who are we, and how did we become who we are? What role did we have in not just creating the rich legacy of our own culture, but in creating the common heritage of humanity. Not only we ourselves are in desperate need of albeit tentative answers to these questions, but our children, too, will learn and benefit from what will surely be our contingent and changing answers to these serious questions.

Pondering these existential problems is the goal of our meetings, but it is also by nature a difficult, often soul-wrenching process. Self-knowledge is a first step in shaping our own identities, and self-knowledge, as Freud and Nietzsche have shown us, are not for the faint of heart. It is, in Nietzsche's words, like looking into the abyss. There is surely light beyond the "darkness palpable" we might first encounter, but it takes courage to venture into the tunnel. The process of this search is made more difficult for exiles, since, they are, according to Elias Canetti, "custodians of dead treasure." Often times,

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our individual intellectual and artistic capital has been suddenly, and cruelly annulled in our adapted homes. The powerful general or the esteemed poet of yesterday are suddenly the anonymous cab drivers of today. Nevertheless, most of us have accepted this loss and have begun to amass, for ourselves, a new capital, and with it a new hybrid identity that combines elements of our individual and collective past with aspects of our present.

Finding the right balance between these two, sometimes contending realities is surely the single most serious dilemma we each face as members of the Diaspora. As a community, we have had singular success in replacing the economic losses we incurred. As the Iranian Studies Group at MIT has shown in one of their studies, the dimensions of this accumulated wealth is nothing short of staggering. We have, however, lagged behind in replenishing, and refashioning, our social, symbolic, emotional capital; in short, in defining for ourselves, and for those around us, our cultural identity as a community. The San Diego Seminars have been, in my opinion, historic steps in bringing our economic success on par with our cultural cohesion. But the work that lies ahead is not easy.

We live in the age of globalism, when a child born in Tabriz or Tehran is as likely to know Rambo as Rostam, and probably more likely to know Bonjovi than Barbad. Is it then foolish and futile to focus on our national identity when the homogenizing winds of globalism are upon us? What purpose is there in fashioning our unique national identity when the genome project has shown that not only humans as far away as Africa and Australia share nearly identical genes, but that about ninety seven percent of our genes are also shared with chimps. What use is there in trying to pinpoint our national identity if psychoanalysts like Carl Gustav Jung are right that national cultures and mythologies

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all emanate from the same universal unconscious, that eternal river of archetypes and symbols from which each culture draws their own national myths, stories and rituals. If every culture, for example, has, as Jung says, its own iteration of the archetypal father/son relationship, what utility is there in trying to parse out the cultural meaning to the story of Sohrab and his relationship with his father Rustam? But anyone who has taken an even cursory look into this part of the *Shahnameh* and compared it to the story of Oedipus and his bloody relationship with his father, will, I think, concur that there is a world of meaningful differences between the two tales. A comparison between the image of God in the New Testament with that of the Qur'an and other sacred texts will, I think, underscore, our meaningful differences in the midst of our genetic, global or archetypal similarities. The acceptance of these differences become problematic only when one group tries to forcefully pass off difference as superiority. With cultural humility, and with appreciation of difference as a source of enrichment, instead of hegemony, the same cultural differences that are tools of racism can become points of celebration of diversity. We are different than Arabs, but not their superior or inferior. The greatest Arab historian of all time, Ebne Khaldun, confirmed this difference. He talked of different *asabiya*; yet there was not even a whiff of racism in his narrative. The West, too, began to first recognize and celebrate this difference. Vico was the first champion of cultural diversity. But as commerce and hegemony grew, this once celebrated difference became gradually the source of racist theories and policies. In fact, in spite of the many unifying, homogenizing patterns we witness in the world, it is becoming more and more clear to social and cultural theorists—from the famous Clifford Geertz to the Argentinean scholar, Walter Mignolo-- that to be comfortably global, we have to have to first be local;

to be truly international, we need to begin as genuinely, unashamedly, Iranian. Finding this global and local nexus, accepting difference as a reminder of diversity and not tool of superiority, is ultimately an individual act, but the community at large can provide the nourishing, nurturing, and most important of all, critically informed context to this choice, and helping create that context is why we are gathered here in the Mehregan Seminar on Identity.

There are surely serious perils on our path of finding this happy local/global point. Who among us did not find a piece of themselves in the dark comedy of *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Who among us has not heard, or said, at least once in our lives, *Irouniha hame pedar soukhteand*—Iranians all have burnt fathers. Surely this pernicious form of self-loathing is fed and inspired by different hues of racism and Western anti-Iranian jingoism. In reading some of the documents of the British Foreign Office about Iran, I could not but shudder at the arrogance and injustice of some of their disparaging dispatches. It is even more disturbing when you hear, a century later and in another country, the same injustice, the same racism, but this time uttered by compatriots. But as a Native American proverb wisely suggests, we are the name we respond to. If we accept, internalize and repeat the demeaning jingoist nonsense, then we become what the racists tell us we are.

The reverse side of this pernicious self-loathing is an equally dangerous form of self-deluding nationalism, and Iranian exceptionalism. We are, after all, from a culture whose national poets have long ago declared, “*Honar Nazd Iranian ast-o bas.*” In other words, art, and the multitude of other fine sensibilities that the word *honar* conjures, are the

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monopoly of Iranians. In twentieth century, some of our artists and historians have revived this exaggerated sense of cultural superiority for Iran. Sadeq Hedayat accompanied his embarrassing anti-Semitism with a Romantic rendition of a paradisaical pre-Islamic Persia. Others, like Zabih Behrouz and Moghadam have claimed, much like the father of the bride in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, that all that is noble and rational has come from Persia, and all that is less than perfect in our history is the poisoned relics of Barbarians. Even if we successfully navigate our path clear of these two temptations, there are a number of other obstacles on our way of understanding, clearly and critically, the urgent, but indispensable problem of our national identity. There are also an equal number of novel opportunities. The fact that our community now has the maturity and sophistication, the mutual trust and economic welfare to organize a seminar we are now part of is, in my view, a promising sign that we are indeed up to the task of confronting these dilemmas and problems. Concurrent with this expansive concept, there is also a problem that has empowered, or plagued, depending on your point of view, Iran for as long as the country has existed. A hint of the problem can be even found even in the historic Montesquei book on how to be a Persian. There he has chose a Turkic speaking person to personify Persians. In *Shahnameh*, the other seminal work of Iranian identity, we read about the genesis of the Kurds as the most pure-blooded Persians of all. As you know, in the dread demonic days of Zahak, the Arab who was invited by Iranians to rule over them, each day the brains of two Iranian youth had to be used to feed the snakes that had flourished on the shoulders of Zakhak. After a while, the royal cook decided to spare, each day, one of the youths, and dispatched them to the safety of mountains. The saved children, Ferdowsi tells us, became the Kurds. And aside from Kurds and Turks, there are

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other linguistic, or religious minorities that have long lived under the big tent we call Iran. But today, more and more multi-ethnic cultures around the world are breaking asunder from genuine, or concocted nationalist passions. Experience has shown that only a democratic society, and identity, respectful of the cultural sensibilities of these minorities can survive the age of rising centrifugal forces. In thinking and talking about our politics of identity, ignoring this problem, or refusing to tackle it honestly and directly, is a sure for disaster.

The advent of the computers, and the radical implications of what is called the information revolution, a revolution historically comparable in its scope and consequences with to the advent of the printing press during the Renaissance, and even to the domestication of nature at the dawn of civilization itself, the transnational capacities of the internet, and of satellites, the fortunate inability of despots to crawl to safety in the autarky of their benighted land, the insurmountable global reach of modernity, and finally the intellectual vigor and financial prowess of the Iranian Diaspora, and its continued commitment to the realities of Iran, have together turned the exiled Iranians into a veritable part of the Iranian civil society. A hundred years ago, when we talked of Iran, we referred to a finite, limited location in geography. Today, Iran lives in the hearts and minds, in the memory and language of every one of the millions of people who have been forced into exile, eating what Shakespeare called “the bitter bread of banishment.”

Traditional concepts of geography-based sovereignty are no longer tenable. If civil society is that set of autonomous institutions that mitigate the power of the state, shelter as well as socialize individuals and transform them from a hapless, right-less *ra'yat* or

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subject into self-assertive citizens cognizant of their natural rights, then the Iranian Diaspora, with its educational power, with its ability to sustain artists and activists facing the wrath of the regime, can certainly be a formidable part of the Iranian civil society.

Civil society, as a crucial measure of democracy, is more than anything else a sign of the citizens' growing sense of reasoned self-reliance and measured self-importance.

Despotism, on the other hand, begets, indeed breeds dependent citizens who are, for their life and limb, their livelihood and freedom, dependent, or ward of the state. Despotism deplores individuals, or autonomous organized initiatives of citizens. In countries like Iran, the curse of oil has turned the state into the society's monstrous master—a machine for collecting the oil rent, and doling it out to citizens according to their docility.

Democracy on the other hand, breeds and begets autonomous and self-reliant individuals and institutions. The state is at the mercy of the people, because it survives on taxes.

Foundations like Mehregan, meetings like this seminar are, I think, one of the most telling measures of our community's maturity. If in the past, we relied on the state, or some Other—a political party, a powerful general, a vali-faghi—to solve our problems, and for example help us navigate our way around the thorny issue of identity, today, thanks to groups like Mehregan, we have taken our fate in our own hands.

Powerful as these collective hands are, we face formidable problems in parsing out our sense of identity. In that greater Iran, the advent of the Islamic revolution has brought to the fore one of the oldest problems of Iranian identity. Historians and poets, from Pourdavoud and Moin in their seminal works, *Farhange Irane Bastan* and *Mazde Yasna*

va Adab Parsito, to Henri Corban and Houshang Golshiri, have emphasized the fact that the history of Iranian identity is the history of a long, lingering struggle between the Pre-Islamic, Zoroastrian soul of Iran, and the aspects of that identity that were added with the advent of Islam. In fact the history of that advent itself has now become an integral part of the identity politics. Did Iranians readily embrace the invading Arab armies—much like Chalabi had promised the Americans in Iraq—since they were fed up with their own religion and rulers, or did they fight and only begrudgingly accept the new religion, and even then, once out of expedience and fear, they accepted the new faith, they set upon refashioning the Arab religion of the deserts into ancient Mithraic, Zoroastrian, even Manichean molds. The monumental work of scholarship published by Professor Mohammad Mohammadi, has in four densely annotated and deeply researched volumes, laid to rest, once and for all, the myth of “jubilant submission” to Islam by Persians. Iranians, he shows, using mostly Arab sources, only reluctantly, and after much blood, accepted the new faith. Moreover, once they became Muslims, then they refashioned Islam and imbued it, particularly in its Shiite incarnation with, Iranian ideas and rituals. Much has been written by poets and scholars about the bifurcated nature of Iranian identity, and about the onset of a cosmic and continuous battle between the Persian and the Islamic spirit, or *geist*, for shaping the Iranian identity and nation. In the last century, the battle between these two poles of “Persian-ness” have been particularly sharp and open. While the Shah and his father, Reza Shah, made every effort to underscore and emphasize the Pre-Islamic aspects of Persia—from the architecture of buildings during Reza Shah like the bank Meli and Sharbani, to Mohammad Reza Shah’s attempt to change the calendar away from Islamic sources and celebrating twenty-five hundred

years of monarchy--the Islamic Republic has tried to simply reverse the process and has made no less a concentrated effort to efface all that is pre-Islamic. It is something of a strange coincidence, or British conspiracy that as we speak here today, there is an immanent chance that the area said to be the birthplace of Kourosh, where some of the most important relics of Archimedean culture and history can be found, will be washed away in the guise of a new dam on the Sivand River.

Aside from these historic forces, and adding a new layer of complexity to our task, is the fact that we are trying to forge our new identity in exile, and our culture, in contrast to Jews, for example, for whom exile was a permanent fixture of their imagination, has had a troubled relationship with that experience.

The etymology, and the variegated connotations and denotations of *Ghorbat*, the common Persian word for exile, suggests the culture's troubled relationship with the exilic experience. In English, as well as French, German and French languages, a touch of romance, of affirmation, is attached to the very word exile. Its dual meanings and genealogy—"creating and coming forth" and "banishment"ⁱⁱⁱ—afford it an air of heroism. *Ghorbat*, on the other hand, itself an exile from the Arabic language, has the same root as dusk; it shares its genealogy with *Maghreb*, Persian for the West, and for the land where the sun eternally sets.^{iv} Nasser Khosrow, the acclaimed eleventh century Persian poet, writes of exile as "a tarantula," and the poet Sa'di thought that a quick death at home was surely preferable to a long life in exile.

Mohajerat, the other word commonly used for exile in Persian, is no less unequivocal in betraying the culture's attitude toward the affliction of exile. *Hejrat*, or

the act of leaving home, not only refers to the prophet's forced departure from his birthplace, but can also be used to refer to death.^v In the unconscious of the Persian language, then, death and exile are part of the same continuum of rupture and departure.

And yet today, at least two million Iranians, from all walks of life, live in *Ghorbat*. Close to a million of them are in America and a few hundred of this two million have gathered here from around the world to think and talk about what it means to be an Iranian.

Nader Naderpour, the deceased and embittered Persian poet who had for many years lived in Los Angeles, was a perfect example of our culture's tormented disposition towards exile. His anguished voice captures the fate of some in the first generation of Iranians who stubbornly refuses to accept the dictates of the exilic experience. They prefer the comforts of the intellectual ghetto—real, or imaginary—where they can rest on their past laurels. Here in America, “a landscape without a history,”^{vi} cities are, for him, “full of noise, empty of words.”^{vii} All that is left of him, he laments, is the “joyless ruin” of his soul.^{viii} Everywhere he turns, he meets only the “black shadow “ of his own loneliness.^{ix} Indeed, in the desolate landscape of his exilic poetry—a “land as vast as grief and waiting”^x—everything is bereft of magic and affect. “In the night of this exile,” he writes, “there are no stars.”^{xi} Even the moon, the eternal muse of all poets, is dead and lifeless in America, appearing as only “food for vultures.” His new abode in Los Angeles, “this city of angels,” is “an inferno as beautiful as paradise itself”^{xii} and its soulless, and greedy, inhabitants are only in search of a new forbidden fruit. Here, houses,

opulent or modest, streets, busy or quiet, harbors and seas, serene or stormy, all conjure no memory, arouse no emotion. Here, he says, with no memory, and no trace of his accomplishments, he rides time towards the ultimate destination.^{xiii}

In contrast to these laments, there are other artists and scholars who have tackled the exilic experience, and the question of identity, from an entirely different perspective. The nature of exile, problems of language, the battle of the assimilated youth with their stubbornly unchanged parents, and comedies of manners, are dominant *leitmotif* of their work. At the same time, the revival of Samad—a character created by Parviz Sayyad—has met with enthusiastic support all across Europe and America. Samad was on the surface a foolish peasant, ill at ease with the solemnities of urban life, and rules. But beneath the simplicity of his comic vernacular, he was an exile in a world he little understood; beyond the simple comedic persona there lived the clever and critical vista of a sensibility that is equally critical of the false promises of modernity and the false pretentious of the “noble folk” uncorrupted by the urban ways. Samad is more than anything a metaphor of our troubled identity and of the urgent need to think critically and creatively about finding a happy combination of the past and the present, of the actual, and the potential.

Even a cursory look at the collective portrait of Persian exiles in the West will reveal that in their ranks, there is now a new breed of women and men who have opted to tackle that problem. Some have opted for a measure of assimilation, and immersion in the host culture. They have mastered the English or French language, and often publish their

works in both Persian and English. They are as comfortable with Shakespeare and Baudelaire as with Sa'di and Beyhagi; in contrast to Taghizadeh's generation, they are neither awed nor overly impressed with the West; nor are they oblivious to Iran's rich, and troubled cultural legacy. The poet Ali Zarin speaks for this generation when he writes, "America/ in the Poems of Walt Whitman/ Langston Hughes/ Allen Ginsberg/ the songs of Woody Guthrie/ and Joan Baez/ I made you mine."^{xiv}

Surely one of the most startling aspects of this dynamic landscape has been the forceful emergence of women as icons and iconoclasts in a veritable cultural Renaissance. They have been relentless in their fight for their rights, and something of a cottage industry now exists chronicling different aspects of this struggle for identity. Few genres and forms of art have not been used by women to tell their story. In cinema, the range is no less impressive, and includes everything from artful, albeit painful documentaries about prostitutes of Tehran to the art of Shirin Neshat. In films and installation pieces that are unique in the poignancy of their images, the parsimony of their narrative, the searing honesty and simplicity of their points of view, and the quiet but ultimately volcanic power of their stories, Neshat has transcended the realm of simple, static identities, and has become that perfect combination of a global champion of art as humanity that is at the same time uniquely Iranian to the core. For her, liberation and salvation, and ultimately identity and come not from escaping or repeating her past. Every piece of her work is imbued with poems, ideas, calligraphies, songs, that are unmistakably Iranian, but also inclusively global. Iranian women, in exile, as well as home, have been

harbingers of a new paradigm that answers creatively, the age-old problem posed by Montesque in his Persian letters: How can you be a Persian in the modern world?

ⁱ Theodor Adorno, quoted in Anthony Heilbut, Exiled in Paradise, 162

ⁱⁱ Mary McCarthy, "Exiles, Expatriates, and Internal Émigrés," The Listener, No. 25, 1971
705-708

ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of the meanings of the word exile, see Christine Brooke-Rose, "Exsul," in *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, ed. By Susan Rubin Suleiman, (Durham, 1996), 10-24

^{iv} Nader Naderpour writes of this shared genealogy in the introduction to his last collection of poems. The piece is called, "The exile of poetry, and the poetry of exile." See Nader Naderpour, *Zamin-o Zaman [Time and the Earth]* (Los Angeles, 1996), 7-28.

^v All points about the roots and uses of the Persian words for exile are from *Dehkhoda*, the grand encyclopedia of Persian language.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 81

^{vii} Nader Naderpour, Time and the Earth, 74.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 93

^{ix} Nader Naderpour, "Blood and Ashes," tr. by Michael Hillman, in The Literary Review, Vol. 40, No. 1 Fall 1996 (special Issue: Iranian Diaspora Literature Since 1980), 186

^x *Ibid.*, 86

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 127

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 127

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 125

^{xiv} Ali Zarrin, "Made You Mine, America," The Literary Review, Vol. 40, No. 1, Fall 1996, 216.