

Panel 19: **The Real and Imagined Female Exilic Self in Persian Narratives**

Thursday 17, 16.30-18.45, Aula A9

Convenors: **Manijeh Mannani** (Athabasca University), **Khatereh Sheibani** (York University)

Discussant: **Manijeh Mannani** (Athabasca University)

This panel investigates the common threads that run through Persian exilic narratives. The primary focus of the panel is Iranian women in exile and the way their identities are represented in life narratives and movies. The socio-political elements that have led to mass migration of many individuals from Persian speaking countries to the West in the past 40 years have resulted in exilic and interstitial artistic responses. The selected autobiographies will be discussed based on identity formation and the way individuals respond to cultural stimuli and new values that are at times in sharp contrast to the cultural elements of their countries of origin. The films that are going to be studied belong to different cinematic genres (in documentary, and fictional modes). They are self-reflexive, bilingual, biographical or autobiographical accounts of loss, love, belonging, and national and cross-national identities that reimagine and negotiate the spatial boundaries between the home and the host cultures. This panel explores the representation of women as exiled, migrants or refugees in new settings and the way they picture masculinity and femininity in new frontiers and remember and reconstruct memories from the past. The six papers in the panel explore gender, class and racial boundaries as represented in the artistic productions. Their frameworks and methodology are informed by theories of nationalism and space/location (formulated by scholars such as Gaston Bachelard, Homi Bhabha, Henri Lefebvre), theories of life-writing (formulated by such scholars as Philippe Lejeune and Michael Benton), transnational feminism, neo-orientalism, and close textual and comparative analysis. The potential list of texts and movies to be studied includes, but is not limited to, autobiographies by Azar Nafisi, , Azadeh Moaveni, and films directed by Sepideh Farsi, Bahman Ghobadi and Shirin Neshat.

Paper givers:

- 1) **Maryam Aras** (University of Cologne), *Chimaeras of Happiness: Inner and Outer Exile of the Female Self in the Works of Fariba Vafi and Granaz Moussavi*

“When I go, you have come with me. You will kiss my hand later for making you leave this place.” In Fariba Vafi’s novel, *My Bird*, the narrator struggles with her husband’s desire to emigrate. Meanwhile, she fights to find her(-)self within a society she feels alienated from. Although living and writing in Iran, Vafi is a representative of an interstitial culture deeply influenced by notions of exile: first, by outer exile, its phenomena of loss and contrapuntally. Secondly, under a restrictive symbolic order, inner exile becomes the refuge of the self and origin of a quest for a third space. In my presentation, I will explore different concepts of exile in Granaz Moussavi’s feature film, *My Tehran for Sale*, Fariba Vafi’s novels, *My Bird* and *After the End*, and their intrinsic portrayal of masculine imaginations of exilic life.

- 2) **Rassa Ghaffari** (University of Pavia), *Homeland, Diaspora, Language, and Belonging: Moaveni's "Homecoming" within the Return Narratives*

The purpose of this paper is to analyze some of the main themes dealt with in the genre of the memoir by exiled Iranian women writers, particularly Azadeh Moaveni's biography and works. Being a second generation immigrant and journalist, Moaveni represents an original voice within what has been defined "return narratives." The two analyzed works, *Lipstick Jihad* and *Honeymoon in Tehran*, are suitable to deal with such themes as, for instance, the idea of "homeland", culture shock and the role of language in the search and development of personal identity. Referring to scholars like Bhabha, Fishman and Said, and recalling sociological and anthropological concepts such as liminality and hybridity, I wish to offer an overview of the journey to discover one's own identity by a daughter of the Iranian diaspora to California in comparison with other works of the same kind (in particular by Satrapi and Bahrapour).

- 3) **Safaneh Mohaghegh Neyshabouri** (University of Alberta), *The Dually Exiled Self in Azadeh Moaveni's Memoirs*

Following the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iran saw its first major wave of outward immigration to North America. Almost 35 years after this exodus, the second generation Iranian-Americans are narrating their tales of growing up Persian in America, and later travelling back to Iran to rediscover their roots. One of these writers is Azadeh Moaveni, an Iranian-American journalist who wrote *Lipstick Jihad* (2005) and *Honeymoon in Tehran* (2009). She was born and raised in America, but lived and worked in Iran in the early 2000s. In this paper, I look at her memoirs to see how she comes to define her identity in both countries. I argue that because of her exilic roots, writing memoirs about her visits to Iran in the English language puts her in the role of native informant in relation to her Western audience, yet also inevitably makes her see Iran through an American lens. Hence, despite her emphasis on her Iranian-ness, she maintains a degree of exilic status in both countries. More specifically, her sociocultural status and language barriers lead to certain predispositions in her narration of Iran.

- 4) **Khatereh Sheibani** (York University), *Kurdistan as an In-Between Space in Bahman Ghobadi's Niwemong*

In recent years, Iranian filmmakers, such as Bahman Ghobadi, have trained their cameras on the marginalized and exilic selves more than ever. Ghobadi's *Niwemong* (*Half-Moon*, 2006) reimagines the female exilic self in the context of Kurdistan. The film narrates the story a group of men who are going to perform in a music event in Iraqi Kurdistan. The viewers never see the performance; instead, they get to listen to a female singer throughout the film. Hence, sound editing is as important as cinematography as it depicts Kurdish passion for music, regardless of gender, as a signifier of national identity. In this film, the notions of borders, nation-ness, as well as ethnic, linguistic and sexual marginality are interrogated. Mamo (the male protagonist) and Hesho (the female protagonist) are the spirits of Kurdistan, whose personalities are intertwined with music. Borders are represented as "vile

obstacles, to be crossed, disregarded and obliterated” (Naficy Vol IV 236). Bahman Ghobadi’s films are located within the interstitial, in-between spaces. This paper examines *Niwemong* as an example of “Cinema without a border,” “ethnic cinema,” Kurdish cinema, and exilic cinema.

- 5) **Giulia Valsecchi** (University of Bergamo), *Memories Write Back: Imaginative Knowledge, Journal Report, and Comedy Speech as Narrative Strategies in Azar Nafisi, Azadeh Moaveni, and Firoozeh Duma’s interstitial Portraits of a Native Self*

Azar Nafisi, Azadeh Moaveni and Firoozeh Dumas represent three crucial examples of Iranian-American memoirists who have enjoyed wide critical attention. Marked by ambivalent searches for the self, they all show a diasporic outlook connected with the attempt to write their own hyphenated depictions of their homeland. Focusing on the best-sellers *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, *Lipstick Jihad* and *Funny in Farsi*, as well as on their follow-up narratives, *The Republic of Imagination*, *Honeymoon in Tehran* and *Laughing without an Accent*, the paper will analyse the cultural perspective of the three female generations represented by the authors, comparing their self-reflections and different inclinations on changing national boundaries before and after the Iranian Revolution. The rewriting of memories in these public-private accounts will be read as a tool for dramatization or empathy in response to a dispossessed native self: Nafisi, Moaveni and Dumas’ specific narrative strategies, alternatingly based on literary critique, chronicle and humor, become ways to articulate interstitial selves, negotiating between belonging as female writers and diverging as exilic witnesses.

- 6) **Farshad Zahedi Naderi** (University Carlos III de Madrid), *Diasporic Space and the Weight of Memory in Films Made by Exilic Iranian Female Directors*

Drawing upon Naficy’s ideas of “accented cinema” and the theories of “representation of invisibles” and “subaltern voices,” this paper attempts to analyze three films made by exilic Iranian female directors: *Women without Men* (Shirin Neshat, 2009), *Red Rose* (Sepideh Farsi, 2014) and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Ana Lili Amirpour, 2014). These movies share a particular reading of Iranian history and present a coming-back-to-the-trauma narrative from a female point of view. They also share the diasporic space from which the filmmakers reflect on the memory of their homeland. In this sense, the plots of *Women without Men* and *Red Rose* reconstruct the traumatic episodes of Iranian history to give voice to their female characters, who not only object to male repression, but also narrate and revise their personal contact with history. Amirpour’s film, nevertheless, goes a step further from this practice of historical materialism and constructs an ahistorical narrative, in which the density of memory provides powerful metaphors within a certain abstract space.