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Exile and Memory in Khaksar's *Last Letter*¹

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It has been twenty-five years since the 1979 Revolution in Iran, the collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy, and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. It has been a quarter of a century during which many Iranians have left Iran to escape political and religious persecution, flee the consequences of the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, and find a home in another land. During these years the political and cultural situation in Iran has evolved in new and complex directions. The conflict between the conservative and the liberal factions in the government of the Islamic Republic has created a rift in state authority and produced hope and anxiety with regard to potential change in Iran. In the meantime, Iranians in diaspora have created communities all over the world. These communities exhibit different degrees of assimilation into the host culture at the same time as they uphold a heritage identity whose referent is the homeland. The latter is expressed in publishing Persian and bilingual periodicals and broadcasting radio and television programs.² Developments during the past quarter-century, both in Iran and among Iranian diaspora communities, have generated new prospects for evaluating the question of home and exile for these communities.³ The majority of Iranians in diaspora now face questions that are quite distinct from those of the 1980s.

Twenty-five years is a long time, but not long enough to efface from memory the plight of those exiles who fled Iran without a clear prospect of what they would face in another land and how they would deal with the memories and anxieties that accompanied them in exile. The present study will revisit such questions through an evaluation of

exilic memory in Nasim Khaksar's one-act play, *Akharin Namih* (The Last Letter).⁴ This study will demonstrate that memory in the life of the play's exile is not so much a nostalgic preoccupation with the homeland but amnesia about the past that induces anxiety and articulates loss in his life.

Akharin Namih was written in the late 1980s. In this play, the trials and tribulations of exile are perceived from the perspective of a middle-aged political refugee who left Iran shortly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic. Since then, he has been residing in a provincial town somewhere in Europe. The protagonist escaped Iran because his former political activities as an intellectual and a sympathizer of the left had placed him on the wanted list of the new regime. In Iran he had belonged to a political group that was identified; some of its members, including his female partner, were arrested and served prison terms. The protagonist's biography is similar to the background of the playwright. Khaksar too was involved with the left and had served two prison terms during the Pahlavi regime and one after the Islamic Republic came to power. He escaped Iran illegally in 1983 and after a short stay in Turkey he traveled to the Netherlands on a forged passport. Since then he has been living in a small town in the Netherlands.⁵ He wrote *Akharin Namih* in 1988.

Like Khaksar and many others, the play's protagonist, called Man, is a victim of post-revolutionary Iran's Cultural Revolution campaign which was aimed at crushing the opposition, the intellectuals, and other forces that could pose a threat to the regime. Man is not an immigrant; he is a political exile. His exilic existence is the very proof of his exclusion from the dominant political discourse in his homeland. At the same time, he is recognized as an outcast in his unwanted new home. He suffers double exile or double

marginality: accepted neither at home nor in exile, he is a man without a country. The main characters who appear on the stage of his unfolding drama/trauma are Man in exile and his female partner in Iran, referred to as Woman. Khaksar's choice of the generic names Man and Woman to identify these characters is a comment on the anonymous identity of the exile (at home and away from it) as the lost, the forgotten. The play's protagonists could be any exiles in a similar situation. Moreover, the anonymity of these names introduces Man and Woman as any man and any woman who are trying to define themselves and their relationship. The dynamics of the relationship between Man and Woman as a couple is the subject of a separate study.

Man escaped his homeland five years earlier in order to avoid arrest and persecution. In exile, he has been entangled with memories of the homeland, his female companion, and situations that led him into exile in the first place.⁶ His entanglement with these memories derives from his fear of losing this past to oblivion. In this context, he is visited by phantoms from his elusive past, by his female partner who has come to challenge him out of his bewilderment. The dramatic action of *Akharin Namih* grows out of an imagined meeting between Man and Woman. Man's insomniac self mounts the theatrical stage to hold a conversation with a simulated woman from whom he is now separated. Their encounter takes place at his home, in the liminal space of his mind:

He picks up a letter from the desk. He opens it. He bends and looks at the framed picture of Woman that is next to a small flowerpot. The wind howls loudly. The window bangs open. The white lace curtain billows. Man starts towards the window. He switches on the light. As the lights come up, Woman is seen standing next to the bed, in front of the mirror. She is about thirty-five. Man closes the window. When he turns, he sees Woman in the room. In disbelief, he looks at Woman, whose back is to

him; then he looks at the letter in his hand. He puts the letter in his pocket. He looks at the picture. Quietly he moves towards Woman. Before he has taken two steps, Woman—still standing with her back to him—speaks to him.⁷

Man fancies the encounter with Woman, whispers their potential dialogue to himself and at the same time listens to it. He creates an image of Woman on the basis of their correspondence as well as their memories together. In the same vein, the altercations between them occur in his mind. The letters, similar to the framed picture of Woman on his desk, are fetishized texts in the life of the play's exile. At one point, Man explains in a humorous tone that he needs the photograph on his desk in order to remember who he is writing letters to.⁸ Man is overwhelmed by this simulacrum before whom he divulges his own metamorphosis. In exile he finds himself grappling with dilemmas about himself, his actions and inaction, as well as his obligations towards his comrades and loved ones who are still in his homeland. As a result of his self-scrutiny, he has begun to question his former image to the extent that, paradoxically, he remembers the homeland in realizing that he is forgetting it. The political convictions that constituted his life and his outlook on the future are now a source of anxiety for him: he feels guilty that he is unable or unwilling to take any action about the political situation in Iran. In this manner, *Akharin Namih* reflects the uncertainties and ambivalences that preoccupy the exile and propel him to re-evaluate himself. The plot of *Akharin Namih*, however, does not reduce his situation of ambivalence to the dichotomies between exile and the homeland.⁹ Consider, for instance, the following lines from an unmailed letter the protagonist has written:

The sad world of being in exile does not leave me for a second. I don't know why I came here or why I have stayed. Have I come to pace the streets from morning 'til night, or to stay at home and suffer constantly with the thought of being away from my homeland? Have I come to write slogans on the walls or to scream about what is going on in my homeland? And to tire out the world with my screams. Have I come to write that history? The history of blood, of crime and violence. Many before me have said these things. Have I come to say that this is like the fulfillment of a curse, that a man, with all his longings, should be bashed about. My heart is swollen with torment. If only these thoughts would leave me alone. Days, every day, I would sit at the window and watch a heavy fog settle on the pine trees. I have gazed so much at these thick veils of fog that, like the moments that passed me by, I have sunk into the vastness of the fog. I have dissolved, I have ceased to exist; I am nothing.¹⁰

These kinds of questions define a stance that is neither here nor there, neither at home nor in exile, but the result of the incoherent coming together of the two in the life of a man who is looking at himself. The exile sees that his recollections of his life in the homeland are fading into oblivion. He mourns the dying away of this past by trying to remember it. He is thus in a slip-zone between here of exile and there of the homeland. In *Akharin Namih*, exilic discourse brings to the foreground dis-location and spatiality, not for nostalgic reasons, but in order to not forget.

The dynamics of this liminal stance are represented through the relationship of Man and a simulated other, Woman. In *Akharin Namih*, exile, with semiotic ambivalence, or levels of representation, supersedes the rhetoric of binary oppositions that have traditionally evaluated exile in opposition to the homeland. This theme is expressed in the protagonist's devotion to writing letters concerning his exile; he often

does not mail these letters but keeps them in piles in his room. He writes the letters in order not to forget where he has come from and in order to understand where he is. The following is from his conversation with Woman on the subject of letter-writing:

When I came here, I realized that I was empty, as if I had destroyed something back there. My distance from all that increased every passing day. I mean the reality of life over there. Or maybe that's how I imagined it. I was scared that even my memories would abandon me. That's why I was continuously writing, and I keep on writing. Even writing letters to you was for me a way of connecting myself to what I had left behind. Many of them I didn't even mail to you. Because I didn't want to lose them.¹¹

In this context, exile regenerates itself on the grounds not only of territorial transformation but also of individual transcendence that signify origin, the homeland, as a sign in crisis. Khaksar further develops this theme in the protagonist's ambivalence toward the past and his simultaneous preoccupation with the horror of forgetting this past. Here, exile is depicted as the enormity of a personal loss.¹² The play's protagonist experiences his own gradual sinking, not so much into the host culture, but into oblivion. The stage design serves as the outward expression of this mood. Man's moderately large room is furnished with a bed and a mirror on the left and a small table on the right. The bed and the mirror together depict the dreamy aspect of the play; they shed light on Man's broodings on a fragmented self-image that appears in the mirror of his mind. The individual and his personal dilemmas that were formerly, within the context of Iranian opposition politics, considered trivial and subordinate to the revolutionary cause, are now brought to the foreground as the play's locus of action.

The protagonist, an intellectual, a writer and a former leftist, has become disillusioned with his past political and ideological views—views that he had previously deemed fixed and certain. His life is now organized around questions and dilemmas that he cannot resolve. A former revolutionary, he now views himself in the context of his inability to take any action:

Every morning you wake up with the hope of action. You know something has to be done—but what? The historic situation you find yourself in does not help very much. You turn and you look to the past. We had brought together everything we could get our hands on to build a house, with our naive understanding of justice. And the foundation, with the mortar and stone of feeling, was set upon a sandy shore; that's why it kept going askew. We hammered it this way, then that, so it wouldn't rise crooked in the air, but it seemed to continue—now what could we do. And with this myth-free life we have built for ourselves we say, 'Let's go again and build.' We go. With that handicapped and dubious existence. But it seems simultaneously as if we haven't gone and as if we have gone. And we blame exile for this historic debacle. Now the number of bugbears has increased. Now we perceive that this dislocation, this state of being abroad, turns what was meant to be a continuation of the struggle into a nightmare which overwhelms the soul. And gradually we come to understand that it seems as if silence is more of an articulation of ourselves.¹³

Enacted this way, silence and pause join the cast of characters and advance the plot. For the protagonist, silence, like exile, is open to interpretation. Silence is the element that is too personal, grand, and evasive to fit into words. In *Akharin Namih*, silence is a participant in the speech-acts that incorporate what has been said within an actual context, along with what remains inarticulate. Consider, for instance, the following lines

from a dialogue between the protagonist (M) and his female partner (W) who suddenly appears on the stage, like a phantom, to interrogate him about his idleness in exile:

M: Who said we've come here just to prove these things?

W: That's what I wanted to hear from you. If you haven't come here to prove these things, why have you come? Tell me.

M: You know.

W: Don't get me involved. I don't know anything at all. Why are you concerned with my opinion? I want you to talk.

M: I said you know. What is resolved by saying it again?

W: A lot of things. I want to hear it from your lips. Suppose I'm an ordinary person who has come here to see what you intellectuals in exile are doing. I sit here quiet so you can tell me about the situation in your homeland. Yes, I am enthusiastically awaiting your words.

(Silence.)

M:

W: Well! Why are you silent? Say something. Speak up. Do you mean you can't convey your words even to the person closest to you?

M: What do you want to hear?¹⁴

According to Man, silence is among the voices that create the prosody of exile: "And gradually we come to understand that it seems as if silence is more of an articulation of ourselves." It conveys the ambivalence that has brought the protagonist in-action. In *Akharin Namih*, the words "silence" and "pause" orthographically characterize the inarticulate in the written text. These halts pose a demand on the reader/audience to pause and reflect on what has been said as well as on the action that may follow.

Through the rhetorical projection of silence and pause, the play invites the reader and the

audience into the domain of the exile. The alternations between silence and utterance introduce the dramatic *parole* of the play as a field laden with multiple levels of interpretation. These utterances function as ideologemes: they intersect with the exilic narrative as a dramatic text, become assimilated into it, or are signified by it.¹⁵

A similar device is at work in another of Khaksar's works, *Baghal-i Kharzavil* (The Grocer of Kharzavil), a collection of essays and short stories written in exile. There he distinguishes among the voices that are produced in the here-and-now of exile. One voice contests the urgency of having left Iran, while another calls forth the plight of the ones who have stayed behind.¹⁶ These voices, I here propose, are not differentiated; they operate on the basis of the logic of equivalence.¹⁷ Similar to Man in *Akharin Namih*, one of the voices in *Baghal-i Kharzavil* remains silent before responding in an ironic, quiet tone: "We came here to be the voice of our country, the voice of those who remained enchained behind; to declare the suffering of the people of our country to the world."¹⁸ These appositional voices—silence as an ambivalent and disillusioned reply to a voice that is the critical reminder of staying committed to social change in the homeland—signify the crisis of meaning the intellectual exile contends with.

In *Akharin Namih*, the breakdown of meaning is depicted as the crisis of a sign that was conveniently associated with a signified branded as revolutionary, committed and oppositional. In this context, the exile finds himself in a liminal zone whose ambivalence and instability incorporate both exile and homeland or the "origin" which he knows he has simulated. In this manner, concepts such as nationalism and ideological chauvinism—which in many cases might have initiated the necessity of exile—have paradoxically turned into participants/personae in a fragmented discourse whose

dynamics pose an assault on their claims to certainty. Thus, exilic liminality and ambivalence constitute an intertextual field whose dynamics overwhelm the confines of definitive meanings. The text of exilic liminality is radical in the sense that it emancipates the exile from pre-set conditions of cultural determinants. In *Akharin Namih*, the traditional categories of meaning have lost their aura in the life of the play's male protagonist.¹⁹ Nonetheless, the protagonist is still pursued with taunting questions regarding commitment and social change that rise out of his own revolutionary past. Man listens to these questions and simultaneously strives to articulate himself in relation to them. The outcome is silence and an emptiness which he calls nihilism:

M: (Reads in a loud voice.) And it is at this point, in spite of our wishes, that we come to have faith in the anti-hero within. The main ground for this anti-hero, if you wish to choose a philosophical term for it, is nihilism—confronting the necessity of destruction, destroying yourself and the world, death. Annihilation. Annihilating both the self and that which one faces. In this limbo of reflection, one seems to wield a pick and shovel to destroy everything built up, along with oneself. Neither God nor human. Amid this destruction there seem to be constructions as well. Sometimes a piece of stone flies from the pickaxe and rests on top of another piece. Something emerges. It has shape, volume, and height. But it is not a home. And this means that everything in the world, everything appears in the shape of a ridiculous mask. Then we begin to exhibit it in the name of life. The first thing the anti-hero doubts is his being in exile. He creates a mocking face of it, so he can deepen this negative opinion of himself as much as possible. From the beginning we were taught to base our belief in human existence on their attitude toward toil and suffering. The greatness, the significance of one's focusing upon these, depends on the trials and tribulations they endure. Consequently, when such a man rises in exile to deny his own pain and works more than anyone else, he

becomes the first to put his finger on the unworthiness of life and of his own being. Now this insignificant man, not believing in himself, is able neither to know himself and his own problem, nor to initiate anything for others. The closed circle of his life is a circle in which nothing can take shape.²⁰

The exile admits the collapse of meaning in his current existential dilemma. According to this letter, neither the present nor the past could console him. Generalizing his own lot by using the first person plural subject pronoun “we,” Man extends his situation to all exiles. He explains that exile, which was meant to be the continuation of struggle away from home, turns out to be the juncture where “we” have come to meet the anti-hero within ourselves. Gradually, “we” realize, it is silence which has been the articulation of our being.²¹ He further explains that among the first things the exile doubts is himself; he doubts his deranged memories and aspirations. The exile in his/her hybrid existence comes to view his/her own image as a signifier of nothing; the most coherent sound in his life is that of silence. He has arrived at this stance by means of a solitary freedom that is found in the liminal space between his memories and his life as he lives it in exile.

In exile, the protagonist is set free into a frustration that takes him to unfamiliar nihilistic grounds; this ambiance is created in the play’s hyperreality as a memory play. An expression of this freedom is seen in how different sounds and voices are juxtaposed in the play to convey aspects of the exile’s reality. The sound of silence, the sound of a train passing by at certain intervals, the voice of Woman, and the voice of Man reading his undelivered letters permeate his mind and echo the array of memories and preoccupations in his disoriented life. Man ponders these sounds in order to have a more intimate grasp of his estranged self. Thus, *Akharin Namih* portrays the exile as a Man

who is engaged with his new fate and its bleak freedom. Man is no longer content with defining himself in terms of those past ideological narratives whose claims on universal categories of truth had left his present uncertainties unheeded. Thus, he is taking a courageous step in facing himself and his new reality; but in taking this step he lets die in himself a hero who was meant to advocate change in his homeland.

Man's drama/trauma unfolds in his memory. Memory, as both remembering and forgetting his homeland and his past, operates as a chronotope that organizes the narrative events.²² Memory, whose figurative presentation is made palpable through the split cast of Man/Woman protagonists, is the voice of the exile at the same time as it is an exiled voice coming from the homeland. The male protagonist stands for the fugitive, the cast aside; yet the exilic narrative is not limited to his *parole*: it is a discourse between different representations of his liminal existence. Woman is the other participant in this dialogue. She is equally exiled from a revolution that has betrayed her. She is an outcast in her own country where she is treated worse than an alien; she has been imprisoned, violated and raped. Moreover, she has seen how other members of their revolutionary group, driven by fear and anger, turned against one of the members who was suspected of being a police informer; they tried and executed him. In spite of this, Woman asserts her preference for staying behind in Iran by leaving Man at the end of the play.

Woman appears on the stage in order to find out why Man has changed so much. In a *recherche du temps perdu*, she looks among his papers, disturbing the order of his writings on the bookshelves.²³ The array of the collected letters and writings in the exile's library signifies the chaos of a memory whose appearance is now disturbed by the inquisitive hands of Woman.²⁴ She seeks in vain some evidence that would testify to his

commitment to their revolutionary past. More specifically, she is looking for some writing regarding their mutual comrade who was executed:

W: By the way, do you have that folksong the three of us used to sing together?

M: Which one?

W: You know the one. (She gets up and goes toward the bookshelves and looks at the cassettes.) It was the summer before the war. The three of us were up in the north. This was the song we sang in the forest.

(A moment of silence. M, as though gradually remembering, begins murmuring a folk tune under his breath. W listens.)

W: A year before his arrest he was working in a factory. He was so good at it that even the informers inside the factory could not spot him. (Pause.) Why can't I find it? It's not among these! (Facing M.) Have you really forgotten?

M: I might have it.

W: I say something, and you answer something else!

M: You said you couldn't find it. So I am saying I might have it.

W: It wasn't among these.

M: It may have wound up in a corner somewhere.

W: Yeah, it may be back there somewhere. Or so far away that, as something lost, you won't ever find it!

M: What are you talking about?

W: About something you said may have wound up in a corner. (Pause.) I don't know. Maybe you're right and I'm looking in vain for something that should have been forgotten by now.²⁵

Man is unable to produce any viable evidence to satisfy Woman's intrusive curiosity. Instead, from among the scattered papers on the floor, he picks up a letter which he first reads silently to himself and then to Woman. As discussed earlier, this letter is his personal manifesto on exile and a critique of history in respect to his present exilic stance, but it is not the answer she is looking for. Woman wonders about the exile's inability to take any political action and blames him for betraying his time and his freedom—an occasion for crying out the cause of the oppressed in his country of birth. In turn, Man responds with silence, pause, sardonic bursts of laughter and an intrinsic anticipation of being misunderstood. Their dialogues introduce a third-level narrative which incorporates the effects of exile. The latter articulates a separate set of issues that declare the exile's identity as a no-man in his new home. This subject is addressed, metaphorically, in Man's enthusiasm to participate in the host culture:

M: I told you that tonight I had gone to a kid's birthday party—remember? (Pause.) A real party. You know how children are when they are happy! But I was standing there.... a dead person. I didn't know it until I got inside. I ran into my upstairs neighbor in the hallway after I returned. The same one I lost to in chess. I showed him the invitation. I said, "See! I was finally invited to a party." He said, "The invitation wasn't for you." I said, "You're mistaken. Look carefully. The first letter of the name they've written here is the first letter of my name. And the address is my address. Only the last name is one letter short." He said, "No; it's not yours." I asked, "Whose is it?" He said, "It belongs to someone who lived in this house two years ago." I asked, "Did you know him?" He said, "Yes. I was standing by his bed the night he passed away. He had a fever and was delirious."²⁶

Proud that he has finally received an invitation from one of his neighbors, Man attends the birthday party. Yet, once again, he must discuss his address and identity to prove that he is in fact invited. To his dismay, Man realizes that he is attending the birthday party in place of a dead person, someone who used to live at his current address. This confirms his recent conclusion that his exilic life is a limbo between living and dying, that he is more dead than alive: a realization that makes him feel ridiculous. The grotesque nature of his situation is expressed in his initial appearance on the scene as he returns home from the party: “In his hair and on his clothing there hang party streamers and ribbons.”²⁷ Decorated with the remnants of a party that has tolerated him in place of a dead man, Man returns home to resume his delirious existence.

As discussed earlier, Man’s anxieties about the dying away of his identity and his past memories into oblivion are exercised in writing. In inscribing himself and his memories, in the very act of writing, Man regenerates a simulated hyperreality that creates the play’s present. This exilic presence, however, is not simply a juxtaposition of two temporalities, the present and the past; it communicates an absence of time and space: a lack that nears nihilism with all its tumultuous bearings. The exilic time in *Akharin Namih* finds its counterpart in Baudrillard’s analysis of the simulacrum. For Baudrillard, the real does not exist in a Platonic sense: there is no coexistence between reality and its shadow; the shadow is the real. Reality is no more than the sum of miniature simulations—generation of a real that has no origin or reality; it is a hyperreal:

The real is produced from miniaturized units, from matrices, memory banks and command models—and with these it can be reproduced an indefinite number of times. It no longer has to be rational, since it is no longer measured against some ideal or negative instance. It is nothing

more than operational. In fact, since it is no longer enveloped by an imaginary, it is no longer real at all. It is a hyperreal, the product of an irradiating synthesis of combinatory models in a hyperspace without atmosphere.²⁸

Man's past, his identity, and his commitments are blasted away by the force of his current dilemmas. The homeland is not conceived as a concrete concept; it also has become a fabricated narrative. In tracing his fleeting thoughts, Man writes himself as an exiled text whose transformations supersede territorial dislocation. He articulates a marginal narrative produced on the grounds of a cosmopolitan perspective that perceives "reality" to be a processed artifact that can be made and unmade. The spatial logic of his simulated present stance manifests a momentous effect on his former perceptions of time as progress: the conception of the past as referent is challenged by the unbounded text of the exilic memory.²⁹ His acquired consciousness has produced a perception of time that is scattered in the structural design of the text as a memory play. History, ideology and the truth are accordingly transformed into strange personae that jolt him in and out of his oblivion.

As has been discussed, *Akharin Namih* approaches the question of "origin" not in terms of a nostalgic longing for the homeland, but of the anxiety of forgetting it. Throughout the play, Man remains in his exilic presence as phantoms from his evasive past appear to him. The play's exilic discourse brings the question of spatiality to the foreground. Man lives in an intertextual periphery: a political exile who is an alien in the host culture, he has constructed an imagination that incorporates Woman. Man needs to remain bonded with Woman in order to have a better understanding of his estranged self. Woman, however, is ostracized from Man's exilic experience: she is not prepared

to understand his amnesia. The unresolved nature of their dialogue articulates different aspects of a mutual marginality: dissociation with the host culture as well as the homeland.

In *Akharin Namih*, exilic memory manifests a liminal zone that contains “here” and “there”: while enhancing both zones, this memory belongs to “nowhere.” It is in this spatial zone of ambivalence that the exile comes to doubt himself and his former convictions. His memories thus do not convey a nostalgic longing for the past; they are the trace of that which is no longer convincing in the present. Here, memory is the ground of social and individual critique. The play’s protagonist is emancipated by a solitude that, in his case, has illuminated the fallacy of grand narratives such as ideology and the promise of an imaginary future—dreams that for him have turned out to be sandcastles. The exile’s life in the homeland, his political identity and commitments as well as his loved ones are gradually dying away. Pondering the collapse of meaning in his life, the exile is too inert to challenge the status quo or to revolutionize the world; he is now challenging himself. Writing the letters is his way of mourning the loss of his past and coming to terms with the confusing reality of exile. Writing in exile, however, like everything else, remains incomplete. The hyperreal text of exilic memory in *Akharin Namih* does not come to any closure. At the end of the play, Woman returns to the homeland and Man remains in exile. Yet they are bound to meet again since in the life of the exile the “real” is neither a domain outside or opposed to its simulacrum, nor a concept that can be falsely represented as ideology or commitment.

Notes

- 1 I first discussed this play in a conference presentation entitled “The Role and Function of an Exile’s Memory in Khaksār’s *Akharin Namih*,” at the Annual Conference of the Middle East Studies Association of North America held in Phoenix, Arizona, in 1994. This discussion was part of the panel on “Iranians in Diaspora: The Problematics of Iranian Exile Culture.” I became interested in this play as a result of my discussions with the author Nasim Khaksar and the actor/director Nusrat Rahimi, who had recently played the role of the protagonist in the stage production of the play in the United States.
- 2 Iranians publish community-based periodicals and broadcast radio, television and internet programs in most major cities of Europe and the United States. These programs serve commercial, cultural and political purposes at the same time as they are designed to entertain the community. Los Angeles and Paris have the largest Iranian diaspora communities and host the most active political dissidents. The latter are not a homogeneous whole but incorporate individuals ranging from supporters of the Pahlavi monarchy to members of secular and Islamic leftist organizations. See Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 3 For information on this topic, see the following resources: Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, eds., *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996); Hamid Naficy, ed., *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Ron Kelley and Jonathan Friedlander, eds., *Irangleles: Iranians in Los Angeles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exilic Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).
- 4 Nasim Khaksar, *Akharin Namih* (West Germany: Navid, 1988). Cf. Firoozeh Papan-Matin and Arthur Lane, “Text and Memory in the Literature of the Iranian Diaspora: *The Last Letter*, a Play in One Act,” in *Iranian Studies* 30:3-4 (Summer-Fall 1997), 309-25. Henceforth, these references will be cited as *Akharin Namih* and *The Last Letter*.

5 Nasim Khaksar was born in 1944 in Abadan, an industrial port town in the south of Iran. Labor unions had a strong presence in Abadan and a formative influence on Khaksar's political sensibilities. As a young man he became a sympathizer of the left and one of the editors of the periodical *Honar va Adabiyat-i Junob* (The Art and Literature of the South). During this period he began working as a teacher. In 1967, the journal was planning to release an issue on Palestine. In the same year, Khaksar participated in a teachers' strike and was arrested as one of the strike organizers and a closet revolutionary. He was released from prison in 1969. In 1973, he was arrested again on charges of collaborating with the underground Marxist-Leninist organization, Saziman-i Cherikha-yi Fadai-yi Khalq-i Iran (The Organization of the People's Devotee Guerrillas of Iran). During the 1979 revolution, when Prime Minister Bakhtiar was in office, Khaksar, along with other political prisoners, received amnesty and was released from prison. In 1980, when the Islamic Republic was establishing its legitimacy as a state, Khaksar was arrested and imprisoned. He was accused of giving arms to someone who was to assassinate the Revolutionary Guards. The alleged assassin was executed and Khaksar was released two months after his arrest due to overwhelming pressure put on the regime by the public. Khaksar fled Iran in the summer of 1983 and crossed the border into Turkey on foot. Soon after, he went to Holland on a false passport. He has been living in Holland as a political refugee since 1983. Khaksar's literary production is rich and diverse. In Iran he published a short novel, four collections of short stories and five children's books. One of his children's books, *If People Would Love Each Other*, won the international award for the best children's storybook in 1980, issued by IBBY (International Board on Books for Young People). In exile he has published fifteen books, five of which have been translated into Dutch, and he has written other plays that were staged in different towns in Holland, including *The Exiles*, *Sardine Fish*, and *Under a Cheap Roof*.

6 The protagonist's fate is similar to that of the author, who wrote the play five years into his stay in Holland.

7 *Last Letter*, 310.

8 *Last Letter*, 312.

9 Exile, generally defined as being away from one's place of origin, or from the homeland, has recently undergone considerable reexamination. As a postcolonial phenomenon (with all its concomitant scatterings), "origin" has lost its traditional aura, its longstanding capacity as a synchronic referent. The problems posed by poststructural discourse on the breakdown of the Saussurian sign and binary oppositions, address the grand narratives of origin and identity as contested concepts. Moreover, traditionally conceived categories of exilic identity (communal and/or personal) bound up with an "origin" are now juxtaposed with new paradigms of undecidability. Accordingly, exilic discourse articulates a liminal narrative based on the arbitrary nature of origin as a point of departure.

10 *Last Letter*, 317-18.

11 *Ibid.*, 312.

12 William Gass, "The Philosophical Significance of Exile," in *Literature in Exile*, ed. John Glad (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 4.

13 *Last Letter*, 320.

14 *Ibid.*, 318.

15 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. Leon S. Roudiez, trans. Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980), 36-37.

16 Khaksar, *Baghal-i Kharzavil* (West Germany: Navid, 1988), 5.

17 Kobena Mercer, "'1968': Periodizing Politics and Identity," in *Cultural Studies*, ed. Lawrence Grossberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1992), 428.

18 Khaksar, *Baghal-i Kharzavil*, 5. Cf. *Akharin Namih*, 23-25.

19 Mercer, "1968," 424.

20 *Last Letter*, 321.

- 21 Ibid., 320.
- 22 M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 243-58.
- 23 *Last Letter*, 317. Cf. *Akharin Namih*, 13-19.
- 24 Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 60.
- 25 *Last Letter*, 316-17.
- 26 Ibid., 324.
- 27 Ibid., 310.
- 28 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*, trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton and Philip Beitchman (New York: Semiotext(e), Inc., 1983), 3.
- 29 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 21-49, for a discussion on the prosody of postmodern time and space and its response to authenticity and history.