

**DIASPORIC ROOTS/CIRCULAR ROUTES:  
KAMIN MOHAMMADI'S SEARCH FOR HOME  
IN *THE CYPRESS TREE*:  
A LOVE LETTER TO IRAN (2011)**

**RAÍCES DIASPÓRICAS/RUTAS CIRCULARES:  
BÚSQUEDA DEL HOGAR EN *THE CYPRESS TREE*:  
A LOVE LETTER TO IRAN (2011)  
DE KAMIN MOHAMMADI**

[https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs\\_misc/mj.20237383](https://doi.org/10.26754/ojs_misc/mj.20237383)

**PARISA DELSHAD**

Universidad de Valladolid

parisa.delshad@uva.es

<<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9394-518X>>

165

---

**Abstract**

This paper explores Kamin Mohammadi's position regarding the discourses of national belonging through the scrutiny of her circular route from England to Iran. Reflecting the interrelation between identity, home and the modern nation-state, *The Cypress Tree: A Love Letter to Iran* (2011) recounts the story of Mohammadi's journey back to Iran in search of a singular self. It recounts her story of growing up in Iran and England and the reason behind her displacement from both of these countries in 1979 and 1997. Indebted to Stuart Hall's take on the diaspora, Gaston Bachelard's reading of home and Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity, this paper rejects the synonymy between home and home country as well as exclusive belonging intrinsic to nationalism. The aim of this paper is to read Mohammadi's ultimate choice to settle down in England as a challenge to the homogenizing forces of nationalism that inhibited her sense of belonging to Britain and drew her toward Iran. As she embraces a hybrid identity by telling her circular story, beginning and ending in London, her literary contribution is a way to dismantle the link between belonging and the nation-state, as well as a challenge to the alleged homogeneity of the nation-states to which she belongs.

**Keywords:** *The Cypress Tree*, identity, diaspora, nationalism, home.

## Resumen

Este artículo explora la posición de Kamin Mohammadi con respecto a los discursos de pertenencia nacional a través del escrutinio de su ruta circular desde Inglaterra hasta Irán. Reflejando la interrelación entre la identidad, el hogar y el estado-nación moderno, *The Cypress Tree: A Love Letter to Iran* (2011) relata la historia del viaje de regreso de Mohammadi a Irán en busca de un yo singular. Cuenta la historia de cómo creció en Irán e Inglaterra y la razón de su desplazamiento de ambos países en 1979 y 1997 respectivamente. En deuda con la visión de la diáspora de Stuart Hall, la lectura del hogar de Gaston Bachelard y la noción de hibridación de Homi Bhabha, este artículo rechaza la sinonimia entre hogar y patria, así como la pertenencia exclusiva intrínseca al nacionalismo. El objetivo de este artículo es entender la decisión final de Mohammadi de establecerse en Inglaterra como un desafío a las fuerzas homogeneizadoras del nacionalismo que inhibieron su sentido de pertenencia a Gran Bretaña y la atrajeron hacia Irán. Mientras adopta una identidad híbrida al contar su historia circular, que comienza y termina en Londres, su contribución literaria es una forma de dismantlar el vínculo entre la pertenencia y el Estado-nación, así como un desafío a la supuesta homogeneidad de los Estados-nación a la que ella pertenece.

**Palabras clave:** *The Cypress Tree*, identidad, diáspora, nacionalismo, hogar.

## 1. Introduction: Beyond the Either/Or

Speaking from the interstitial space of a migrant memoir, *The Cypress Tree: A Love Letter to Iran* (2011) challenges the reactionary and politically conservative essentialism that territorializes culture and imprisons it within a given nation-state. It recounts the life story of Kamin Mohammadi, an Iranian-British journalist, and focuses on her return to Iran after eighteen years of living as an immigrant in Britain. As the narrator grows up, she struggles to cut all her ties with her past life and Iranian culture, mainly due to the rejection that she feels when she first arrives in London in the 1980s. The nine-year-old refugee finds her difference from British society frowned upon, which leads her to feel “ashamed of standing among the reasonable English people and not being one of them” (2011: 6). In order to rectify this and better assimilate in her host country, the young Mohammadi draws an English mask upon her face, rejects Iran at every turn, and eventually earns “the dubious honor by [her] British friends of not being considered Middle Eastern but ‘one of us’” (Mohammadi 2011: 212). Despite this “honorary citizenship” (Fanon 2008: 25), she is unable to ignore the “memories and the longing” for Iran that have “seeped inexorably” through her (Mohammadi 2011: 7), and fails to feel at home in

Britain. When a rather moderate candidate wins the general elections in Iran in 1997, and thus the ever-turbulent diplomatic relations between Iran and Britain restore to ambassador level, she begins to entertain the idea of return. She applies for an Iranian passport and travels to the only place she considers as her home, Iran. Mohammadi's desire to return to Iran can be explained by drawing on the well-known ideas of Stuart Hall and Avtar Brah. As the site that encompasses Mohammadi's hopes and dreams of a home, Iran is similar to Africa in Hall's study of the Jamaicans' return journeys. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Hall retraces the return of Jamaicans in Britain to Africa in search of a true African identity. This identitarian move is repudiated by Hall, for whom Africa is only to be found beyond "where [the] voyage of Discovery first began", and thus in the African diaspora (1992: 232). Comparably, Mohammadi's memoir treats return in a similar manner as it begins with a search for a home in Iran but ends with her relinquishing the idea of national belonging. In order to further explore Mohammadi's return, Brah's concepts of "homing desires" and "the desire for a homeland" can be employed. For Brah, "homing desire" refers to the diaspora's desire for a sense of belonging, rootedness, and connection to a place or community. It is a desire to feel at home. On the other hand, "desire for a homeland" refers to a specific longing for a physical location that is seen as the place of origin or ancestral homeland (Brah 2005: 177). In both Mohammadi's case and the Jamaican diaspora, the two concepts are conflated and the reason behind not feeling at home in Britain is inaccurately associated with being away from the ancestral homeland. Their homing desire drives them toward return. Thus, Mohammadi needs to take several trips to Iran and reassess different forms of belonging, before she settles into and celebrates her diasporic identity. Beginning and ending in England, the circular narrative of the memoir ultimately advocates that "homecoming is out of the question" (Said 2003: 179), precisely because it rejects the prevailing vision of national identity that sets strict boundaries between 'us', who come from a nation-state, and 'them', who lie outside it. The compulsion to return to Iran, suggesting a need to find herself and capture her lost home, reveals Mohammadi's initial preoccupation with a homogeneous national identity. As Edward Said argues regarding the return to culture:

[c]ulture comes to be associated, often aggressively, with the nation or the state; this differentiates 'us' from 'them', almost always with some degree of xenophobia. Culture in this sense is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that, as we see in recent 'returns' to culture and tradition. These 'returns' accompany rigorous codes of intellectual and moral behavior that are opposed to the permissiveness associated with such relatively liberal philosophies as multiculturalism and hybridity. In the formerly colonized world, these 'returns' have produced varieties of religious and nationalist fundamentalism. (1993: xiii)

Said's quote maintains that the return to culture and tradition, embraced by many emerging nations during the postcolonial period, merely deepened the divide between 'us' and 'them'. Mohammadi's return begins in a similar way. Stimulated by a total disregard for the distinct and multicultural spaces in which she has resided, Britain and Iran, her initial decision to return betrays a desire for a homogeneous nation and culture to which she can belong. Much to her chagrin, however, she realizes that she does not fully belong to her home country either, since she does not recognize its altered face upon her arrival in Iran. The shocking disappointment at not belonging to either England or Iran leaves Mohammadi skeptical about a homogeneous identity. Her journey eventually equips her to celebrate cultural hybridity and discard a national culture, which inevitably involves xenophobia and nationalism.

Mohammadi ultimately resolves all confusions about her identity because her return to Iran not only makes her acknowledge her failure to claim a homogeneous Iranian identity, but also provides her with the chance to review her childhood memories of growing up in her hometown of Abadan, a city which best embodies Iran's encounter with colonial modernity. The modern town of Abadan was developed in the twentieth century to house the expat communities and workers at the oil refinery patronized by the British Empire. Learning about her hometown's turbulent encounter with colonial modernity allows her to manage the interfaces between her two worlds and thus nuance the terms of belonging. She retraces her childhood memories in her house in Abadan and learns the extent to which her life was deeply and closely intertwined with the connection between her home and host countries. Knowledge of the history behind the acquisition of her house is definitive in Mohammadi's ultimate rejection of the hypostasized connection between home and home country.

Presupposing the conception of nations as internally undifferentiated entities to be a corollary of modern thought, and viewing national identity as a legacy of modernity (Hobsbawm 1992; Greenfeld 1993; Gellner 1994), this paper argues that *The Cypress Tree* reassesses the past and imagines a future 'by another route'—a circular one, as opposed to the forward-looking route conceivable by modernity. It draws on Stuart Hall, Gaston Bachelard, Avtar Brah and Homi Bhabha to enquire about issues of belonging, identity and home, and reads the memoir as a construction of Mohammadi's hybrid self through the self of the Iranian and British nations. In recent years, scholars have increasingly turned their attention to questions of diaspora and identity to explore how individuals negotiate cultural affiliations in a globalized world. A notable example of this focus can be found in *New Directions in Diaspora Studies: Cultural and Literary Approaches* (Ilott et al. 2018), which draws on a wide range of disciplinary perspectives to

provide important insights into the complexities of diasporic subjectivity. This study can be said to be aligned with the collection's broader scholarly conversation and engages with similar themes and debates. Particularly, as a "contemporary 'revisiting' practice of cultural memory", it relates to "conflicting subject positions of a national, ethnic, gendered, class-based, or generational nature brought about by the proliferation of (sometimes forced) intercultural crossing" (Ilott et al. 2018: xxiv). In light of this overarching theme of cultural memory, the article maintains that the anamnesis of Iran's encounter with modernity allows Mohammadi to reject unitary sites of belonging as championed by modern nation-states, redefine belonging beyond the national identity, and thus "interrupt the Western discourses of modernity" (Bhabha 2012: 199). Following the memoir's trajectory, which begins with accounts of homelessness in exile and ends with feeling at home in the diaspora, this article scrutinizes the representation of Mohammadi's identity by problematizing the correlation between the nation-state and belonging, established by the logic of modernity.

## **2. Homeward Bound: Diasporas and Return**

169

Mohammadi's decision to return to Iran, which reflects a persistent obsession with a unified self, coterminous with a specific geography, needs to be considered within her initial exile following the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The memoir begins with the events that triggered her displacement from Iran to England. Recounting her migration process and loss of home at a young age, Mohammadi writes about the forces that drove her to assimilate in England by "ignoring Iran" and "denying its existence" (2011: 6). This was her way of renouncing the traces of her previous connections to the place that "dealt [her] young heart such a shattering blow" that would comfort her sense of "shame" and unease (6). She had to renounce her previous home, which was associated with "radical images and ideals of the Islamic Republic", the "hostage crisis" and "the austere looks of Ayatollah Khomeini", to find a new home among the "reasonable English people" (6). To belong to 'here', her previous life 'there' has to be repressed and concealed, which contributes to her alienation in the host country. This generates a sense of exclusivity regarding national identity and drives her to become ambivalent about which of the two countries to call her home, England or Iran. As her attempt to define home and identity in exclusive terms is the reason behind her failure to accept England as her home, she conflates her feeling of not belonging to England with her separation from Iran and, thus, she feels the need to return. Contrary to Hall, who believed that "[f]ar from being grounded in a mere recovery of the past [...], identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves

within, the narratives of the past” (1992: 225), Mohammadi views identities as transcendental. She embarks on her journey while still oblivious to the fact that identities are not “eternally fixed in some essentialized past”, but are “subject to the continuous play of history, culture and power” (Hall 1992: 225).

Thus, influenced by nationalist thinking, which territorializes the stabilizing space of home within a nation-state and renders it coterminous with one’s home country, Mohammadi sees return as the only option to ease her pain of not belonging. “Iran would not be willed away” (2011: 7), because it is synonymous with home for her. The failure to reject Iran and settle down comfortably in England is connected to her conception of home as “a body of images that give mankind proofs or illusions of stability” (Bachelard 1994: 17). Her memories of the “rose garden” in her old house, “noisy family gatherings”, and “balmy nights” (Mohammadi 2011: 7) create this illusive body of images, which persists and frustrates Mohammadi’s effort to feel at home in England. Her fixation with her childhood home as the exemplar of happiness and protection, with which nothing compares, eventually driving her to return to Iran, is reminiscent of Gaston Bachelard’s notion of home in *Poetics of Space*:

170

We comfort ourselves by reliving memories of protection. Something closed must retain our memories, while leaving them their original value as images. Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams. (1994: 5)

Recollections of the halcyon days of childhood set the definition of happiness and, accordingly, the feeling of being at home. For Mohammadi, who was displaced as a child, her house in Iran and metaphorically the country as a whole, stand for home. The “closed” period of childhood that retains her memories of protection accompanies her into the new house in London and nuances the meaning of home. Thus, England, as the new “outside world”, is set against and falls short of the “tonality” of the memories she has of her home in Iran. This tonality is reflected by Mohammadi in such memories as the “cornucopia of different fruits arranged delicately on top of each other” that she compared with the “paucity” of fruit bowls of her new neighbor, Angela Baker (2011: 157). This different tonality drives her to decide that everything in her world was “so much bigger, larger, more abundant, and in comparison, England seemed so small, pale and controlled” (2011: 163). Corresponding to Bachelard’s notion of home, Mohammadi’s “entire past comes to dwell in [her] new house” (Bachelard 1994: 5). The illusive, stabilizing, and familiar past in Iran is the only space where her “certainty of being is concentrated”, and allows her “a life that would be [her] own, that would belong to [her] in [her] very depths” (Bachelard 1994: 33).

Especially because she left Iran with no prospect of return, her journey back and

revisiting the people and places that have remained accessible only in her memories encompass all her anticipations for a reconciliation with her lost home. For Mohammadi, just like many Iranians who were exiled after the Revolution, Iran is the “the vision of paradise”:

For every Iranian the vision of paradise encompasses our land. [...] Our roots go deep in Iran —we are exiles with a Lost Paradise forever swimming in our eyes, steeped in the culture of our lost land while living in foreign countries, [...] ours is not just romantic love for an idealized country but also an expression of the loss each of us feels on being physically separated from Iran. (2011: 11-12)

Mohammadi's nostalgia for Iran exemplifies the dream of regaining a prelapsarian self, before the Fall of the Revolution condemned her to a life in exile. Her return embodies a diasporic vision of the home country as a paradise from which it was forcibly removed, and to which it will eventually return (Safran 1991: 83). Thus, as the way to retrace her steps became accessible, the anticipation of finding a welcoming home drives her to pack her newly obtained Iranian passport, in addition to her rusty Persian language, which she speaks “hesitantly and with an English accent” (2011: 7), and travel to Iran in 1997.

Upon her arrival, however, she soon realizes that her return is not a rewarding reconciliation with the past, as it offers no solution to her dislocating sense of homelessness. Even when she reunites with her extended family, she feels lost and confused as the complexities and nuances of everyday life escape her:

The rules of behavior in this new Islamic Republic were so confusing to me that I learned to hang back and be quiet and let others take the lead. I was trying to understand my own culture and this mortified me. I was swept off to palaces and museums. [...] The city I had grown up in had become a confusion of criss-crossing motorways. Everything had changed. (Mohammadi 2011: 20)

Her return to Iran is traumatic. Not only does she have her dream dashed, but Mohammadi also has to readjust her memories, as well as her old self raised in England to the realities of a homeland she does not fully recognize. One of the factors that contribute to her sense of unfamiliarity with Iran is the radical transformation in the appearance of many Iranian cities, including Tehran and Abadan, the places where Mohammadi once lived. She searches for familiar sites where her “memories are housed”, “have refuges” and are “clearly delineated” (Bachelard 1994: 8). But her initial excitement to reunite with her homeland wanes and is replaced by the disturbing realization that the remnants of her past can only be traced in museums, which, as the above quote demonstrates, she visits like a tourist. Like the experience of many second-generation Iranian migrants who return to the home country, Mohammadi “oscillate[s] between tourists and native identities, never quite settling into either position” (Darznik 2008: 57). She

is mortified and feels out of place as she “spent those first days in Tehran not quite a tourist not quite a local; neither British nor properly Iranian, but lost somewhere in the gap between the two, an empty space which was more dislocating than [she] had anticipated” (Mohammadi 2011: 19). The terrifying realization that she needs to struggle constantly to make sense of what she perceives as Iranian culture compounds her sense of dislocation.

Instead of “an easy panacea for matters of identity”, Mohammadi’s return to Iran “revealed a new layer of complexity” to her feeling of not belonging (Maghbouleh 2017: 131). This “new layer of complexity” emerges during the first few days of her arrival as her previous life, including her language and cultural knowledge, is now inaccessible to her. Stuck in a liminal space between “estrangement and familiarity with Iran and its resonant cultural impact” (Karim 2013: 106), Mohammadi does not grasp the social and linguistic nuances that govern modern Iran. She begins to see herself as “a foreigner” who is “nonetheless Iranian enough to be mortified by [her] own lack of appropriate manners and language” (Mohammadi 2011: 19). In Iran, she is compelled to observe social rules, such as “*ta’arof*, the elaborate Persian<sup>1</sup> form of courtesy, whose deciphering has dogged [her] life” (Mohammadi 2011: 7). While she could avoid the numerous nuances of Iranian conventions in England as she tried to refashion herself anew as an English girl, they unexpectedly stand up against her in Iran to challenge her sense of belonging at every turn.

In spite of her initial shock, this situation is familiar to her. For the adult Mohammadi in Iran, the strangeness of the place is reminiscent of England when she first arrived as a child refugee. Faced with the realization that she has to struggle to assimilate to her home country in 1997, she feels the same shame she felt in London after the Revolution in 1979:

The first thing I learnt in England was shame. The second was shyness. I was ashamed of my inability to understand what people were saying to me and ashamed by the stare of the cashier when I, as a nine-year-old who was large for my age, bought English books in large print, intended for children half my age. (Mohammadi 2011: 166)

She felt ashamed because she failed to perform simple acts including speaking or reading. Everyday activities such as shopping terrified her, causing her to withdraw and transform from a sociable child in Iran to a shy and quiet one in England. The failure to fulfill what was demanded of a nine-year-old refugee drove Mohammadi to project the shame of being allegedly different from the rest of the society onto the Revolution; on “Ayatollah Khomeini’s austere looks”; on the “radical images and ideals of the Islamic Republic”; on the fact that they had to flee Iran; and on not belonging to the “reasonable English people” (Mohammadi 2011: 6).



To deal with this shame, she struggled to become fully British by relinquishing her Iranian origins:

Growing up in Britain in the 80s, I had slipped on the mask of Englishness, had declared Britain my country, had stuck my flag in her soil and given myself to her denying Iran at every turn refusing to speak Farsi until I had forgotten my language, and rejecting my relations every time they rang, not knowing how to speak to them, what to say, how to carry out this. Over the years, I had become so good at wearing the mask that eventually, the mask became my face. (Mohammadi 2011: 211)

The little girl shed her skin as she grew up. She pulled an external veneer of Englishness over her face by breaking off all ties with Iran, refusing to speak to her Iranian relatives, and forgetting her mother tongue, Farsi. After all, in keeping with Fanon, “to speak a language is to take on a world, a culture” (2008: 25). Farsi is an unnecessary burden to carry for the young immigrant eager to become “whiter” by gaining “greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is” (2008: 25). As language became intertwined with notions of Englishness, she pinned down a model of belonging on the basis of national identity and rejected Iran in order to adhere to her model of exclusive nationality and carve out a place for herself in her new country. Her fixation with a national identity, which was her reason for taking Iran as the solution to her feeling of homelessness in England, is also evident in her negative verdict on the Iranian community in London: “[w]e had all become masters of disguise, brilliant chameleons able to change color and even shift shape as we moved between our two worlds” (Mohammadi 2011: 211). Rather than a positive skill, she saw this maneuvering and handling of different circumstances that arise as a result of being a foreigner in England as a treacherous act. Mohammadi frowned upon her fellow Iranian migrants’ “mimicry” (Bhabha 1984) and appropriation of certain strategies to carve a place in the national space of their common host country, and despite the use of the term “chameleon”, she failed to appreciate the very first function of a chameleon’s changing color, namely, survival. As Homi Bhabha remarks, in the interstice of either/or, there is always a third option, “camouflage” (1984: 172). As “a mode of appropriation and of resistance”, Bhabha argues, “mimicry” or “camouflage” exemplifies “the assertion of the hybrid” which transforms “the insignia of authority” into “a mask, a mockery” (1984: 172). This is the reason why he finds it “difficult to agree entirely with Franz Fanon that the psychic choice is ‘to turn white or disappear’”, as there is always “the more ambivalent, third choice: camouflage, mimicry, black skins/white masks” (1984: 172). Contrarily, Mohammadi’s choice was precisely to either turn white or disappear. Having inherited the modern discourse of identity and belonging, which assumes an integral identity for everyone living within the borders of the nation-state, as well as the colonial discourse of purity, which rejects miscegenation and mixing,

Mohammadi wondered what the Iranian migrants, the chameleons, were doing among the “reasonable English people” (2011: 6).

Her disdain towards hybridity harks back to anxieties related to the imperialist discourses of racial purity in nineteenth century England “that valued boundaries of all kinds between people, and that devoted great energy to establishing and defending them” (Ritvo 1996: 44). As “a fundamental part of British national identity from at least the mid-Victorian period up until the mid-twentieth century” (Ashcroft and Bevir 2019: 26), and out of the fear of destabilizing social hierarchies and the strict borders of cultural unity, the imperialist mind-set permitted only exclusive forms of belonging to a place. Therefore, her use of the word “chameleon”, as well as her search for a singular identity, signals a desire for a stable and unchangeable self or, in Bhabha’s words, an impatience with the “ambivalen[ce] of the world of ‘not quite/not white’” (1984: 132). However, when she realized that “the mask of Englishness” that she had “slipped on” (Mohammadi 2011: 211) did not help her to “turn white”, she decided she had to “disappear” (Fanon in Bhabha 1984: 172) and return to Iran.

174

Eighteen years later, in her alleged home country, a similar culture shock overwhelms her. In the light of the shattered illusion of regaining her place and the subsequent realization of lacking anywhere to call home, the question arises as to where she might seek solace during this time of displacement. The answer to this predicament can be found within the realm of her life experience. Even though she feels out of place in her alleged home, there is a difference between her immigration to England and her return to Iran. Despite a familiar shock that the new refuge is far from a welcoming home, this time, and as an adult in Iran, she is equipped with long years of acculturation in a new place that quickly help her uncouple the reason for her failure to feel at home in both of these countries from the place. As Bachelard claims, while past memories are important, “all *really* inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home” (2004: 5, emphasis added), which raises a question about the quality of living. If one really inhabits a space, then, what induces nostalgia for a home and the struggle to return to an earlier, happier state? In other words, what inhibits the real inhabiting of the young refugee’s new home? If England is not Mohammadi’s home —as the term ‘host country’ suggests— then she must feel like a guest in it, which makes one enquire into another important question: why are “immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers imagined as guests of the host nation-state?” (Manzanas Calvo 2013: 2). Feeling like a guest in her home country drives Mohammadi to contemplate whether it is possible to be native to a place and feel homeless in it, nonetheless. Having turned skeptical about her project of regaining a home in Iran, she begins to delve deeper into its history. As the next section demonstrates, she relinquishes her search for a unitary site of belonging

once she sets her own homelessness in tandem with that of many other Iranians who became guests in their own homes following Iran's encounter with modernity.

### **3. Guests of the Home Country**

Mohammadi disavows the conflation of home and home country when she learns about the history of her hometown. Her successive trips to Iran provide her with “precious insights, bits and pieces of information” (Mohammadi 2011: 40) about the way in which colonial modernity interrupted the “livelihoods” of many people, by depriving them of the place where “their certainty of being” (Bachelard 1994: 33) is located, namely, their homes. Her return enables her to locate her memories of growing up in her childhood house and retrace the history behind its acquisition, the people who passed through it, as well as the land on which it was built. Mohammadi spent her childhood in Abadan, one of the most important sites of Iran's encounter with colonial modernity. Before the arrival of imperial Britain, Abadan was an island where Arab and Bakhtiyari<sup>2</sup> tribes lived and on which they relied for their subsistence. Along with the other south-western town of Masjed Soleyman, the modern town of Abadan was primarily developed for the Anglo Persian Oil Company's (APOC) employees who came to live side by side with the 24,000 Bani-Kaab Arab tribesmen who originally dwelled on that mudflat island (Ehsani 2003: 372).

Mohammadi describes the unequal development of the town by sarcastically repeating the APOC's colonialist view of the lands on which her hometown was built: “a town which had so recently just been an island in a marsh was thriving” (2011: 65). The APOC had leased the marshes, which it considered as a “wasteland”, through a concession from the local authorities in 1901.<sup>3</sup> Because its colonial sensibility was incapable of perceiving other modes of life, the APOC saw the open expanse of the marshes as an “empty waste land” lying unattended, waiting to be exploited (Ehsani 2017: 433). As Kaveh Ehsani asserts, the APOC,

justified this claim based on the absence of permanent settlements, agricultural farms, and private property claims registered by the central government. This perception conveniently overlooked the fluid nature of property relations in migratory pastoral societies and the social and political relations that underlined them. Tribal territory and its control was the foundation of the Bakhtiyari economy and its social and political structures. Pastoralists made seasonal use of pastures, and the maintenance of their flocks relied on migratory routes that were assigned to each clan by the tribe. (2017: 433)

The colonial mentality on the side of the APOC and the local authorities justified the dispossession of the local marsh dwellers' means of subsistence. The nomad

pastors who inhabited the lands seasonally and returned to them the following year to allow them to recuperate were seen as alien to the modern/colonial mind-set of extracting resources of a land to the last drop. This unsedentary lifestyle, along with their different property relations, contributed to their characterization as ‘primitive’ by the colonial mindset.

As a modern town, Abadan was the embodiment of such differentiation in the logic of coloniality and separating ‘modern’ from ‘primitive’. By subjugating both nature and subsequently other forms of life that respected it, the logic of coloniality instituted the two opposing categories of the ‘modern man’ —characterized by his power to overcome nature— and the ‘primitive man’ —distinguished by his proximity to it and thus his barbarity. As Walter Mignolo remarks,

The modern man built his sense of superiority and his pride in the process of cutting the umbilical cord with ‘nature’, while ‘primitive man’ was still too close to it; and being close to nature meant (from the perspective of “modern man”) being far from civilization. However, Incas for example, were both, close to Pachamama and civilized. But that idea was destroyed by the rhetoric of modernity in order to build the logic of coloniality justifying actions over the ‘barbarians’ later on translated into ‘primitives’. (2011: 172)

176

“The logic of coloniality”, exemplified by the Iranian authorities’ obsession with settlement, as well as the invading nomadism of imperial Britain, considered the allegedly ‘primitive’ ways of the nomads in the south of Iran as the antithesis of ‘modern’ projects. It therefore subjected the nomads to a modern life. The nomads’ life was “circular”, to borrow from Edouard Glissant, and was in stark contrast to the “arrowlike nomadism” (1997: 12) that colonialism represents. Glissant applies “arrowlike nomadism” to colonialism, characterized by its “absolute forward projection” indebted to its being “neither prudent nor circular”, and its “devastating desire for settlement” (1997: 12). Thus, the totalitarian and arrowlike nomadism of the “logic of coloniality” paved the way for the expansion of modernity and the obliteration of the older ways of life, which resulted in binding and constraining the nomads to one place.

Accordingly, robbed of their “livelihood” (Bachelard 1994: 33), the nomadic tribes were the victims of the Iranian modernization project that considered nomadism as an impediment to the nation-state it was striving to establish and thus prohibited it by imposing forced settlements (Cronin 2009: 369). “[T]he largest proportion of Iranian territory was under the control of tribes” when modernity arrived in Iran. Therefore, the Iranian central government introduced the “tribal problem” as “a key weakness in Iran’s development” and struggled to eradicate tribal identities by presenting them as an “internal other of Iranian national identity” and thus “hostile to the national unity” (Özdemir and Ergun

2021: 98). Iran's integrative nationalism, argues Ervand Abrahamian, entailed overcoming tribal identities along with linguistic, religious and ethnic diversity (in Vejdani 2014: 12). Mohammadi alludes to this history when she writes about the Iranian monarch's "land reforms" as an instance of his sprint toward modernity at the expense of "the poor", "the peasant" and "the nomad":

[King Reza Pahlavi] forcibly settled the nomadic tribes and his land reforms attempted to create modernity at the expense of the poor and peasant classes, now joined in round by nomads whose enforced settlement turned them into impoverished farmers raising their cattle on arid land. [...] Tehran's dominion over all aspect of this emerging nation state allowed the strong man to keep all the threats of the country directly in his own hands and, in the meantime, become the biggest landowner in Iran. (2011: 42-43)

To forge an Iranian national identity, many people had to relinquish their means of livelihood and subsistence. Encroaching on people's homes, the central government confiscated their lands and leased them to forward development projects such as constructing the oil refinery, and erecting new neighborhoods and shanty towns.

Mohammadi's family eventually acquired a house in the *Braim*, a neighborhood that stood out from the surrounding native neighborhoods. Built with an English aesthetic to offer a familiar sight to the British expats who worked at the oil refinery, the neighborhood was exclusively inhabited by the British up until the nationalization of the oil company in 1951:

The British had built Braim for themselves and their manicured lawns and ordered gardens recalled the suburbia with a paler sky many thousands of miles away. They stopped short of the mock-Tudor facades and double or triple stories standard in Surbiton. These houses were mostly bungalows and though the population of up and down saw that this was exactly like England, an English man, confronted by date palms soaring into the firmament in the garden and walls of tumbling bougainvillea against the humid blue sky, would certainly not have agreed. (2011: 65)

Even though it was built to offer a hospitable and familiar site to the British who were far away from their homes, the weather and flora of Abadan, as well as the architecture, felt too foreign to them. The Braim was English, but "not quite", to repeat Homi Bhabha's quote mentioned above, even if it felt authentic to the Iranian observers who were barred from entering it. Rather "uncanny", it was far from hospitable to both the English and the Iranian neighbors. The term uncanny is a reference to the way Gayatri Spivak, drawing on Freud, problematizes the loss of our common humanity as a result of colonialism. In his famous eponymous article, where he describes situations that induce certain irrational fears, Freud proposes that repression of any kind of affect will turn that emotion into an anxiety, which then "recurs" and produces an uncanny feeling (1976: 634). In *Death of a Discipline*,

Spivak focuses on the etymology of the German equivalent of the word uncanny, *das Unheimliche* (literally unhomey), and connects the uncanny to colonialism. She defines *heim* (home), at the root of *unheimliche*, as the state of being “human in the world” (2003: 57), which colonialism has rendered inaccessible and “inhospitable”, and which eventually recurs and provokes “anxiety or *Angst*” (2003: 57). She argues that, “the name of what comes forth to transform this familiar shared humanity [...] into a source of fear and anxiety (*Angst*), may be something called ‘colonialism’” (2003: 57). Apart from the difference in climate and architecture between England and Abadan, which was too obvious for the expatriates to feel at home in their houses in Braim, an equally hostile social segregation in the town made the place uncanny. The segregation was even visible in the urban geography of Abadan. Located in a part of the island where “the breeze made the extremely hot climate somewhat tolerable”, Braim was far away from the “native town”, where Arab villages were located, or the “the sprawling shantytowns” and urban neighborhoods that housed lower rank workers (Elling 2016: 191).

178

As Mohammadi describes her hometown, before the nationalization of the oil company, “something like an apartheid” existed in Abadan, which “barred ordinary Iranian workers from occupying high management positions and entering Braim” (2011: 62). Ironically, the segregation continued when the Iranian oil industry was nationalized in 1951 and the APOC—which was by now called the ‘AIOC’, Anglo-Iranian Oil Company—changed to ‘NIOC’, National Iranian Oil Company. The forging of the nation, mirrored in the evolution of the oil company’s title, did not necessarily equal the inclusion of all the people who lived within the national geography. In other words, though Iran was becoming the alleged home of the nation, in reality not everyone was at home in it. With the nationalization of the oil industry, a new class, which Ehsani calls “the labor aristocracy”, was born (2003: 370). These “new Iranians” (Mohammadi 2011: 94) substituted the British and came to occupy higher positions in the Oil Company. Having studied in England, Mohammadi’s father “was one of the three men appointed to keep the power station supplying the refinery working when the British departed” (Mohammadi 2011: 62). In Abadan, this group that “identified with Western culture more than their own were classified as the elite of the city” (Farzaneh 2021: 63), while the rest of the town’s population served them “as housekeepers, cooks, cleaners, maids” (Mohammadi 2011: 66). The houses of Braim “were allocated to Iranian managers” (Mohammadi 2011: 65), like Mohammadi’s father, who came to live in it with his English wife, who hired a local man as a cook specialized in preparing English food. As Mohammadi follows the different people that passed through her house in Braim, she ultimately arrives at the moment when her family were ousted from it. With the increasing divide between the different social classes caused by political

restrictions and economic disparity, Iran was becoming the exclusive home for a select few, including the 'new Iranians' such as her own family, whose modern lives were epitomized by the ruling elite:

Unseen by families like mine, cushioned from the grim realities of political outcry and economic deprivation, the vast majority of traditional Iranians —those peasants and workers who were now uprooted from their traditional livelihoods on the land— were looking with increasing resentment at not only the Shah and the unspeakably rich elite that surrounded him, but also at the comfortable lives of corporate new Iranians such as my father. (2011: 94)

Produced by both imperial powers and the national sovereigns' desire for modernization and progress, the "grim reality" of the constant disturbance of people's "livelihoods", against which her family had been "cushioned", is assumed by Mohammadi to be behind the violent upheavals that eventually displaced myriads of Iranians. On the one hand, with "the ascendancy of oil as a major global strategic resource" during the course of WWI (Ehsani 2014: 174), the invasive nomadism of the British Empire in search of provisions for funding its participation in the war heavily impacted the lives of many Iranians. For the British Empire, access to oil meant "the mass production of military hardware that operated with the internal combustion engines, such as tanks, airplanes, automobiles, and submarines" (Ehsani 2014: 174). Imperialism allowed Britain to extract the oil that gushed beneath the marshes and impact the ways of life that existed on them. On the other hand, the coloniality that is hardwired into forced modernization, propelled the Iranian authorities —what Mignolo would call 'modern men'— to exercise their control over the traditional —'primitive'— population and eternally transform their dwelling.

Recounting her hometown's encounter with modernity and tracing the history of the disappearance of the different kinds of dwellings —of the nomads', the expats', and her family's— from the land on which her childhood house stood, Mohammadi's self runs parallel to the construction of the disturbed selfhood of her nation. The knowledge that the nation-state is not the home for everyone living in it prompts Mohammadi to rewrite belonging in terms distinct from the myopic imagining permitted by nationalism, and instead to claim a cultural identity. Her return is therefore circular and brings her back to the diaspora. Similar to the Jamaicans' "symbolic journeys" in Hall's study, Mohammadi's return, "necessary" and "necessarily circular" (Hall 1992: 232), gives her the home she was searching for. Departing from the well-trodden path of national identity, Mohammadi eventually settles in a home built from the multiplicity of the "routes" that she, and many other Iranians in the diaspora, take "through politics of memory and desire" (Hall 1992: 232):

Whether it is my cousins making good their new lives in Europe, North America or Australia, bringing up their children and stitching new identities on top of the old one, or the cousins still in Iran living in the big city or a small town, trading clothes or erecting skyscrapers, showing off or falling out, studying and marrying and negotiating a curious mixture of all the new that Iran now is, or whether it is us, our own mini-village of Mohammadis gathered around my mother's kitchen table in London, we have all survived. (Mohammadi 2011: 269)

Acknowledging the overlapping and porous boundaries of the collective identities that she inhabits simultaneously, Mohammadi, therefore, arrives in Iran “by another route”, a circular one that takes her from an exilic identity to the diaspora. She manages to reassess the past and learn that people are not enveloped in a singular social world. Mohammadi is able to shift her focus to her ‘homing desire’ rather than a ‘desire for a homeland’ by embracing the diaspora’s “multi-locationality within and across territorial, cultural and psychic boundaries” as described by Brah (2005: 194). Beginning in London at her mother’s house, her route takes her through her aunt’s house in Iran —her “*Maman Dob*”, second mom— where she hears “we have all lost a lot, but there is life. You have to look in front of you, *ghorbonetam* [darling], not back” (2011: 269, emphasis in original). It eventually brings her back to England, to her mother’s house in London, where she writes: “Sedi is much more to me than my mother —she is my mother tongue, my motherland, and to me, she is also my beloved Iran” (2011: 260).

180

#### 4. Conclusion

My discussion of Mohammadi’s memoir has highlighted the extent to which the knowledge of the imperial experience can “transform our understanding of both the past and the present and our attitude toward the future” (Said 1993: 17). It critically examined Mohammadi’s longing for a home by drawing upon Bachelard’s reading of the fundamental aspects that shape the concept of a home. The essay put forth the argument that Mohammadi’s motivation to return to Iran is not simply rooted in a conventional understanding of a home, but rather driven by a “homing desire” as conceptualized by Avtar Brah. It refuted the conventional notion of returning to the past that often occurs within many diasporic experiences. Imagining alternative routes, this essay has questioned the putative neutrality of the term national identity and challenged the unitary narrative of national belonging, according to which dispossession and homelessness are allowed. Accordingly, it examined the homogenizing forces of nationalism and took hybridity as its point of departure in order to scrutinize Mohammadi’s desire to



find a home in her native land. It also focused on her struggle and failure to assimilate in Britain, as well as her subsequent disillusionment with not fully belonging to Iran, in order to highlight the significance of cultural memory as a vital resource that aids Mohammadi in overcoming her sense of homelessness. Central to this study was Mohammadi's revisiting of the previous lives that dwelt in the place where her childhood house stood, which drives her to acknowledge that nation as a category is embedded in colonial modernity. The paper illustrated that as she juxtaposes her personal history with that of other Iranians whose loss of livelihood was a consequence of nation-building endeavors, she abandons her pursuit of a singular site of belonging. Retracing her memories, she learns that even an Iranian identity is internally contested and thus her ambiguous world transforms into the heterogeneous social worlds she inhabits. From this new interstitial position, she ceases to view her home and host societies as internally integrated societies and settles into her hybrid identity.

## Notes

---

1. Persian and Iranian are used interchangeably throughout this essay.

2. One of the two biggest tribes in Iran.

3. The Arab date farmers and pastoralists were under the rule of the paramount Sheikh Khaz'al who leased those lands to the British (Ehsani 2017: 433).

## Works Cited

---

ASHCROFT, Richard T. and Mark BEVIR. 2019. "British Multiculturalism after Empire." In Ashcroft, Richard T. and Mark Bevir (eds.) *Multiculturalism in the British Commonwealth*. California U.P.: 25-45.<<https://doi.org/10.1515/9780520971103-003>>.

BACHELARD, Gaston. 1994. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. M. Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press.

BHABHA, Homi K. 1984. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28: 125-133.<<https://doi.org/10.2307/778467>>.

BHABHA, Homi K. 2012. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

BRAH, Avtar. 2005. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. London: Routledge.

CRONIN, Stephanie. 2009. "Re-interpreting Modern Iran: Tribe and State in the Twentieth Century." *Iranian Studies* 42 (3): 357-388.<<https://doi.org/10.1080/00210860902907297>>.

DARZNIK, Jasmin. 2008. "The Perils and Seductions of Home: Return Narratives of the Iranian Diaspora." *Melus* 33 (2): 55-71. <<https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/33.2.55>>.

EHSANI, Kaveh. 2003. "Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman." *International Review of Social History* 48 (3): 361-399. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859003001123>

EHSANI, Kaveh. 2014. "The Social History of Labor in the Iranian Oil Industry: the Built Environment and the Making of the Industrial Working Class (1908-1941)." PhD Dissertation. Leiden University, The Netherlands.

EHSANI, Kaveh. 2017. "Pipeline Politics in Iran: Power and Property, Dispossession and Distribution." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116 (2): 432-439. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-3829522>

ELLING, Rasmus Christian. 2016. "War of Clubs: Struggle for Space in Abadan and the 1946 Oil Strike." In Fuccaro, Nelida (ed.) *Violence and the City in the Modern Middle East*. Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P.: 189-210.

FANON, Frantz. 2008. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Trans. C.L. Markmann. London and New York: Pluto Press.

FARZANEH, Mateo Mohammad. 2021. *Iranian Women and Gender in the Iran-Iraq War*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse U.P.

FREUD, Sigmund. 1976. "The 'Uncanny'." *New Literary History* 7 (3): 619-645.

GELLNER, Ernest. 1994. "Nationalism and Modernisation." In Hutchinson, John and Anthony D. Smith (eds.) *Nationalism*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.: 63-70.

GLISSANT, Édouard. 1997. *Poetics of Relation*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

GREENFELD, Liah. 1993. *Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P.

HALL, Stuart. 1992. "The Question of Cultural Identity." In Hall, Stuart, D. Held and T. McGrew (eds.) *Modernity and its Futures*. Cambridge: Polity Press: 273-316.

HOBBSAWM, Eric. 1992. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth Reality*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.

LOTT, Sarah, Ana Cristina MENDES and Lucinda NEWNS. (eds.) 2018. *New Directions in Diaspora Studies: Cultural and Literary Approaches*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.

KARIM, Persis M. 2013. "Guest Editor's Introduction Iranian Diaspora Studies." *Iranian Studies* 46 (1): 49-52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2012.740896>

MAGHBOULEH, Neda. 2017. *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*. Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P.

MANZANAS CALVO, Ana María. 2013. "Junot Díaz's 'Otravida, Otravez' and Hospitalia: The Workings of Hostile Hospitality." *Journal of Modern Literature* 37 (1): 107-123.

MIGNOLO, Walter. 2011. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham: Duke U.P.

MOHAMMADI, Kamin. 2011. *The Cypress Tree: A Love Letter to Iran*. London: Bloomsbury.

ÖZDEMİR, Zelal, and Ayca ERGUN. 2021. "De-nationalising Nationalism in Iran: An Account on the Interaction between Domestic and International Dynamics." *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi* 18 (69): 87-102. <https://doi.org/10.33458/uidergisi.849365>

RITVO, Harriet. 1996. "Barring the Cross: Miscegenation and Purity in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain." In Fuss, Diana (ed.) *Human, All Too Human*. London: Routledge: 37-59.

## Diasporic Roots/Circular Routes: Kamin Mohammadi's Search for Home

SAFRAN, William. 1991. "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return." *Diaspora* 1 (1): 83-99. <https://doi.org/10.3138/diaspora.1.1.83>

SAID, Edward W. 1993. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage.

SAID, Edward. 2003. *Reflections on Exile: and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P.

SPIVAK, Gayatri Chakravorty. 2003. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia U.P.

VEJDANI, Farzin. 2014. *Making History in Iran: Education, Nationalism, and Print Culture*. Stanford, CA: Stanford U.P.

Received: 28/10/2022

Accepted: 11/05/2023



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.