



WHO'S AFRAID OF IRAN?

AZAR NAFISI, SHIRIN NESHAT, ROYA HAKAKIAN, AZADEH MOAVENI,
SORAYA BROUKHIM, SUSSAN DEYHIM, NAGHMEH ZARBAFIAN, AND
LILA AZAM ZANGANEH

April 19, 2006

Celeste Bartos Forum

The New York Public Library

WWW.NYPL.ORG/LIVE

SORAYA BROUCKHIM: Hello. Salaam. Hello. My name is Soraya Brouckhim. I will be reading from *My Sister, Guard your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes: Uncensored Iranian Voices*. I will be reading two excerpts. And here we go.

“How Can One be Persian?” by Marjane Satrapi. “We are set, stuck, really, somewhere between Scheherazade’s famed *1001 Nights* and the bearded terrorist, with his manic wife disguised as a pro. By way of flattery we are told that we are Persians, and that Persia was a great empire. Otherwise, we are Iranians. The Persians are in Montesquieu’s writings and Delacroix’s paintings, and they smoke opium with Victor Hugo. As for Iranians, they take American hostages, they detonate bombs, and they are pissed at the West. They were discovered after the 1979 Revolution.

(laughter)

To begin with, let me remember that 'Persia' is the Greek terminology for Iran. The Greeks chose this name for our country because when Greece became a powerful nation, Iran was ruled by the Achaemenids, who were Persians, since they dwelled in the regions of Persis. But, Iran, for the last four thousand years, and for all Iranians, has always been Iran and it was actually Reza Shah, the last Shah's father, who in 1935 requested that every European refer to our country by its real name, Iran.

I left my country for the first time in 1984, never to return up to now, twenty-one years later. Since then, prejudices and clichés about Iran have never failed to astonish me."

The second excerpt is "Stuff That Dreams are Made Of" by Azar Nafisi. "The story I want to tell you begins at Tehran Airport, decades ago, when at the age of thirteen I was sent away to England to pursue my education. Most friends and relatives who were there on that day will remember that I was very much the spoiled brat, running around the Tehran airport, crying, I didn't want to leave. From the moment I was finally captured and placed on the airplane. From the moment the doors were closed on me, the idea of return, of home, of Iran, became a constant obsession that colored almost all my waking hours and my dreams. This was my first concrete lesson in the transience and infidelities of life.

The only way I could retrieve my lost and elusive Tehran was through my memories and a few books of poetry I had brought with me from home. Throughout the forlorn nights in a damp, gray town called Lancaster, I would creep under the bedcovers with three books I kept by my bedside. Hafiz, Rumi, and a modern female Persian poet, Forugh Farrokhzad. I would read well into the night, a habit I had not given up, going to sleep as the words wrapped themselves around me like aromas from an old spice shop, resurrecting my lost but unforgotten Tehran. I did not know then that I was already creating a new home, a portable world that no-one would ever have the power to take away from me, and I adapted to my new home through reading and revisiting Dickens, Austen, Brontë, and Shakespeare, whom I had met with a thrill of sheer delight on the very first day of school. Later, of course, I would begin to discover America through the same imaginative sorcery. The writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Saul Bellow, Mark Twain, Henry James, Philip Roth, Emily Dickinson, William Carlos Williams, and Ralph Ellison.

Yet for decades, whether in England or in America, my existence was defined by the idea of return. I imposed my lost Iran on all the moments of my life, even transferring to New Mexico for a semester mainly because its mountains and the shaded colors of its star-filled nights reminded *me* of Iran. Later, in the summer of 1979, two days after I completed the defense of my dissertation, I was on a plane, first to Paris, then to Tehran.

But, as soon as I landed in Tehran, I knew, irrevocably, that home was no longer *home* and it is apt, I presume, that home should never feel too much like home; that is, too comfortable or too smug. I always remembered Adorno's claim that the highest form of morality is not to feel at home in one's own home. So for spurring me to pose myself as a question mark, for altering my sense of home, as for so many other things, I should be grateful to the Islamic Republic of Iran. There was also one sense in which home was no longer home, not so much because it destabilized or impelled me to search for a new definition, but mainly because it forced its own definition upon me, thus returning me as an alien entity. A new regime had established itself in the name of my country, my religion, and my traditions, claiming that the way I looked and acted, what I believed in and desired as a human being, a woman, a writer, and a teacher, were essentially alien and did not belong to this home.

In the fall of 1979, I was teaching *Huckleberry Finn* and *Great Gatsby* in spacious classrooms on the second floor of the University of Tehran without actually realizing the extraordinary irony of our situations. In the yard below, Islamists and leftist students were shouting "Death to America!" and a few streets away the U.S. Embassy was under siege by a group of students claiming to follow the path of the Imam. Their Imam was Khomeini, and he had waged a war on behalf of Islam against the heathen West and its myriad internal agents. This was not purely a religious war. The fundamentalism he preached was based on the radical western ideologies of communism and fascism as much as it was on religion. Nor were his targets merely political. With the support of leftist radicals, he led a bloody crusade against Western imperialism: women's and minorities' rights, cultural and individual freedom. This time, I realized I had lost my connection to that other home, the America I had learned about in Henry James, Richard Wright, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty."

This is towards more the end of the excerpt, by the same writer, Azar Nafisi. “Calvino once said, ‘We can liberate ourselves only if we liberate others, for this is the sine qua non of one’s own liberation. There must be fidelity to a goal and purity of heart, values fundamental to salvation and triumph.’ And then he added a simple sentence which for me summarizes everything. ‘There must also be beauty.’ It is in just such notions, in a purely humane insistence on beauty, in our reveling in ideas, in the storied details of who we are, what we fear, and what we wish for, that the imagination strives. Too often, we conclude that we are practical creatures, essentially political animals, but in us there is a far greater impulse, a longing for what I will bluntly call ‘the universal.’ It is in this leap towards middle ground that we move closer to what effectively binds us. Culture, stories, language, for it is here, in what I like to call ‘the republic of imagination,’ that we are most humane.” Thank you.

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: The republic of the imagination. Welcome to the New York Public Library, I am the Director of Public Programs, now thankfully no longer called PEP, which sounds like something you might take if you have stomach problems, but LIVE from the New York Public Library. It is my great pleasure to welcome you to this evening, “Who is Afraid of Iran?” If I had had problems with my programming, in terms of getting women to come to these events, to be talent on these events, tonight I think I would have been vindicated—eight women tonight will be part of the program, but thankfully we’ve had Miranda July, Thelma Golden, Rosalynn Carter, Judith Martin (otherwise known as Miss Manners), Isabel Allende, Elaine Scarry, Elissa Schappel, Elena Poniatowska, and so many others.

George Orwell reminds us, “In a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act.” And this: as the director of the government’s ministry of propaganda during World War II, Archibald MacLeish knew that “dissent seldom walks on stage to the sound of warm, welcoming applause.” As a poet, and later the Librarian of Congress, he also knew that “liberty has ambitious enemies and the survival of the American democracy depends less on the size of its armies than on the capacity of its individual citizens to rely, if only momentarily, on the strengths of their own thought. We can’t know what we are about or whether we are telling ourselves too many lies unless we can see or hear one another, think aloud.” “Tyranny never has

much trouble drumming up the smiles of prompt agreement but a democracy stands in need of as many questions as its citizens can ask of their own stupidity and fear. Unorganized, unrecognized, unorthodox, and unterrified dissent is what rescues the democracy from a slow death behind closed doors.” That from Lewis Lapham.

This to kind of set up the evening, an evening of conversation where, as Azar Nafisi told me, the war of ideas, the war of conversation, the dissent that we might have when we disagree, comes alive. And no place is better than the New York Public Library to hold such an event because, after all, not only do we have the manuscripts of *Leaves of Grass*, where it is clearly said that we contain multitudes, but tonight we have a multitude of people coming to hear this conversation, which I think will remain rather mysterious until it envelops.

I invite you all to join our email list so you can find out all the other events we’re doing. We’re doing many events with the PEN World Voice Festival next week. We have an evening about multiculturalism in Europe, nothing could be really much more important now, with Richard Rodriguez, Pascal Bruckner, and many others. “On Revolution” with Baltasar Garzón, Gaspar Miklos Tamás, Christopher Hitchens, and then conversations with Philip Gourevitch, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Amartya Sen, and Salman Rushdie. An evening a week later, on May 8, on eavesdropping with James Risen and Jeffrey Rosen—James Risen, as you know, just won the Pulitzer Prize. Later in May I will have the pleasure of interviewing David Remnick, so I invite you to that as well. In the fall, we will start on September 11—I think you might know why—and then we’ll have in quick succession Chris Anderson, Jan Morris, and a number of other people, so you *will* want to join our emailing list. By joining our email list tonight, anybody who joins our email list tonight gets two free tickets to any event that isn’t sold out.

I am really delighted to have Lila Azam Zanganeh and I would like to simply introduce her, not only as the editor of this extraordinary collection, which she and the contributors will be signing afterwards, but also to tell you that Lila had the great fortune at the age of twenty-two of coming here to the Library with her mother and, as she told me, she fell asleep on the stairs of the Library in front of the two lions, so she was fearful of coming in. I am glad that tonight she is *in* the Library to introduce this extraordinary evening of reading and conversation. And Azar

Nafisi, who I just very recently met—Lila will be introducing all the speakers—we had occasion to speak together about the loss of country, the loss one incurs, when, as all of us, or many of us in this room, some of us are from somewhere but maybe from nowhere, somewhere in between, people always ask me where my accent is from, and I always ask them, “What accent?”

(laughter) We were speaking about the role of possession and loss. I’ve always been interested by the Latin origin of the word possession, which comes from *impedimentia*, impediment, and I quoted this to Azar, which I think nicely sets up the conversation Lila and Azar Nafisi may be having. This from Rilke, “Now, loss, however cruel, is powerless against possession, which it completes or even affirms. Loss is in fact nothing else than a second acquisition but now completely interiorized and just as intense.” It is with great pleasure that I introduce Lila Azam Zanganeh and Azar Nafisi.

(applause)

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: So I don’t think that Azar Nafisi needs much introducing any more. She is the author of *Reading Lolita in Tehran* and she was a professor of literature for many years and still is. She teaches culture and aesthetics at Johns Hopkins University. Well, we just read a part of your essay, “The Stuff That Dreams are Made Of,” and you speak in the essay of something that has struck a few of your readers. You speak of going to America to college after being in exile since the mid-1960s and of choosing New Mexico, because it reminded you, because the colors of the mountains of New Mexico reminded you, of the colors of the mountains in Iran. So you were looking for home, and of course you went back to Iran, and found that your home was no longer home. Can you tell us a bit about that, about the feeling of never finding home again?

AZAR NAFISI: Thank you Lila, before going—before Paul was talking, and I was looking at this amazing array of women in the panel, whom *I* should be talking about, *really*, and that’s what I’d rather . . . I thought, “My God, we talk about weapons of mass destruction? Here are Iran’s weapons of mass destruction.” **(applause and laughter)** I think we should give them a hand. I mean, it is so amazing to be able to connect to these amazing women, not because we were born in the same place, but because we share the same passions and dreams and those

familiar strangers, like for example, that Shirin Neshat always evokes in me and makes me question myself and re-look at myself. I am always, always grateful to her. So, what was the question? **(laughter)** Will you talk about loss and . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Leaving your home, and never finding home again.

AZAR NAFISI: The idea of leaving home—that was when the idea of loss came to me, and I realized how easy it is to lose *everything* that you identify with, everything from your language, your parents. And home, you mentioned New Mexico. I mean, what is home to you, wherever you are born? I think of Tehran, and I think of my childhood and the bluest of the skies before Tehran started competing with Mexico City for being the most polluted city in the world. I think of Tehran, and I think of the mountains that were always snow-capped. Unlike what people think, Tehran is not situated in a desert. It is . . . if you are a mountain person, if you were born surrounded by the mountains, then they ship you to a city called Lancaster, England. **(laughter)** I love the British and we need to talk about them, especially since this wonderful novel, *My Uncle Napoleon*, just came out, which is about the bloody British.

That is when you realize that you will never be home again. Rain at day, rain at night, the sign of blue is only in the museums, and the only thing I want to add to what you read, which was very sweet of you, was the fact that if you had been to Lancaster in the mid-Sixties you would know how damp it is, and there was a heater, and you put shillings in the heater, and if you get too close to the heater, you burn. If you are far from the heater, you die of cold. So you go under the covers, and then a hot-water bottle. And I love to say this. There was a book at that time coming out called *How to be an Alien*, and it said that the continental people have sex life, the British have the hot-water bottle. **(laughter)** I always wanted to write an article about the importance of hot-water bottle. Do not, do not, underestimate the hot-water bottle. **(laughter)** So that is how I learned to read my Hafiz and my Rumi and I remember what Nabokov calls about reading poetry, “the first tingle in the spine,” when I wrote *Much Ado About Nothing*, which was my first Shakespeare, and the language of poetry is like falling in love. You don’t understand it, but you see the world differently, and years later—and I’ll end with this because my daughter is not here

and I can say this behind her back without her raising her eyes and saying “Oh Mom, shut up,” you know.

She was around the same age I was, and she was in exile in Potomac, Maryland, and one day she came home and she said, “Mom, listen to these words,” and she was quoting an obscure line from *Romeo and Juliet*, in fact. It was not about Juliet, it was about Rosalind: “She is too wise. She is too fair. She is too wisely fair.” And I thought whoever is too wisely fair doesn’t deserve to be a Shakespearean heroine. As the ladies here know, you need the madness and the lunacy of a Juliet in order to deserve to be there. And the second thing that I thought was, “She’s found her home, she’s going to be okay.” And you learn to defend yourself against not just the revolution, not just the hurricane that takes away one of the most poetic cities in the world away from you, but against the fickleness of life, and in order to resist death, you learn to go to that other republic, and you learn to make your world portable, because that is the only thing that no-one can take away from you.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Hmm. So, in a way, and it connects to Paul’s quote, it was Rilke, our loss has been indeed a second possession. It’s something that Nabokov speaks of very often as well. That the moment when he lost his Russia it became more real, more vivid, than perhaps ever. And it was more alive and it became his literature. In a way for us, you know, our works of imagination, the people who actually are behind them—the creators, the artists, the writers, they have become for our Iran, more subversive figures than political figures can ever be today. I would love for us to talk about that, and that’s really what I think what this book is about—it’s about the other Iran, the other republic, not the Islamic Republic, but the other republic, you know?

AZAR NAFISI: Once people hear Sussan Deyhim, they know what the other republic is all about and that is why once you get into the world of imagination—I mean, these days, you don’t imagine a Sussan Deyhim singing in Tehran, you don’t imagine reading Henry James in Tehran, you only imagine, I mean, Mr. Ahmadinejad has become much more popular than George Clooney these days. Everywhere there is Iran, it used to be euphoria over Mr. Khatami, now there is hysteria over Mr. Ahmadinejad. It is like somebody asks me, “What is America all

about?” and I say Tom Delay. **(laughter)** He represents America. You laugh, but Tom Delay is basically saying the same things, isn't he, I mean, he's saying the same things that Mr. Ahmadinejad is saying. He talks about the fact that America is a Christian country, it was based on the foundations of Christianity, and he says that whatever corruption that happened under him or that he committed was God's doing, God wanted him to leave politics and go and lead the flock. That is not very far away from what Mr. Ahmadinejad claims.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Who are the creators today of the other Iran? Who is behind the other Iran?

AZAR NAFISI: Well, I think your book is some of the most creative people from very different perspectives, different ages. You have people like Roya, who talks about her own specific experience of what it meant to be a Jewish woman in Iran. Of course, Roya has many other talents, as well, apart from writing her memoir. If you ever want to find out about political Iran, please read her two editorials in *Washington Post* and in *Wall Street Journal* in order to find the other Iran. And then we have Azadeh, we have Naghmeh, we have all these people, and Mehrangiz, whose spirit is sort of hovering, her mischievous spirit.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: And Marjane Satrapi.

AZAR NAFISI: These people take you to the other Iran, because what politics does, and what politics is doing to us today—and we need to talk about this—is polarize and categorize and generalize. If you want to know what another person is, as the narrator in *To Kill a Mockingbird* says, you need to put on their shoes and walk around a little bit. You need that other experience. And how do you get that other experience, is through curiosity. Lila being wonderful, she was my find through my books, this is how we connect, and she being a Nabokovian—and writing a book on Nabokov actually—knows one of the things Nabokov, do you remember, used to say to his students, “Curiosity is insubordination in its purest form.” You want to be insubordinate against the tyranny, against the fundamentalism, whether in this country or in Iran? Be curious! Because then you start to question, then you put yourself in other people's shoes, and then you see a video like *Turbulence*, you read a book like *My Uncle Napoleon*, where you find out are

Iranians—do Iranian women really like to be flogged? Is Iran really not a sensual culture? What is Hafiz doing there? When he talks about his way of communion with God is through wine. When he talks about hypocritical clerics, who flog people in public and drink in private. What is Khayyám doing there, who was an atheist? What are these people doing? And in Pezeshkzad's novel, which was the most popular novel in Iran since the Seventies, you see the sensuality, the tenderness, the love, and self-criticism and irony, and you realize that what connects us with other people is not the differences, which we should celebrate, but it is the shock of recognition that we do bleed whenever we are pricked, whether we are a mother in New Orleans, a mother in Baghdad, or a mother in Tehran. Loss is loss, and we love the same way, we grieve the same way, and we are bad in the same manner. I think that is what your book does, *Lila*.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Yes, I mean, I hope so, but in many ways in fact, even, you know, even the title of the book comes from your book, from *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, it's one of the slogans of the 1979 revolution, *My Sister, Guard Your Veil; My Brother, Guard Your Eyes*, and basically for us it meant, if you are too conservative, whether you are American or Iranian, don't even read this because it's too hot in a way, because . . . and could you please tell us something about that?

AZAR NAFISI: You had some good ideas, you tell us something about it, please.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: For us it was all about, it's about the gaze. It's about how the gaze was eroticized in the Islamic Republic, how it was, how the feminine gender was polarized, how there was both an obsession with morbidity and an obsession with sexuality, which I think are both the two components, in a way, of the Islamic Republic. And in a way they find an existence in this sentence that was one of the slogans of the revolution, and which we wanted it to be an ironic title for all of us who are trying to, precisely to detach ourselves, and trying to make a statement, as well, as to who we are in many, many, many different ways.

You were talking about the question of a cultural relativism, and that's something that I really want to talk about with you, about the problem that we have as Iranians, to exist not just in terms of our place and our race in America. There's a kind of dual trap, I would say, there's a dual

identity trap in America, both—you're either, they either ask you to forget, and melt in completely, and not just in America, I would say in many Western republics, probably even much more so in France, or they ask you to be completely locked up into that ethnic space, and how do *you* deal with that as an intellectual, as someone who has left her home, how do you deal with that, the dual conundrum of identity?

AZAR NAFISI: Actually, I'd like us to continue on this because I remember when I first came here, they all said, "Oh, you know, you're set for life. You're a woman, you come from an Islamic society, so you can go into Middle Eastern Studies or Women's Studies." I said, "No *you* go into Middle Eastern Studies or Women's Studies." **(laughter)** You know, I mean, literature, imagination, thought, has no borders. When you come to the New York Public Library, nobody asks you at the door, "Are you a woman or a man, are you a Republican or a Democrat, what are your beliefs? Do you believe in this or that?" They welcome you, because *that* is the space where *you* are *you*. You're dealing with matters not politically, but existentially. I thought that is what academia was all about, because literature is always about the other, isn't it, because even when you're writing about yourself, you're writing about that stranger in you. Margaret Atwood, when they asked her, "How do you begin to write?" and she said that "I don't know. It seems as if there are distant voices beckoning me," and she said that, "It seems as if there's a bloody cleaver in the middle of the living room and I say, hmm, where does that cleaver come from? It needs to be investigated." So, you need to be read by others, and be *interpreted* by others the way, for example Naghmeh interpreted Kundera. It would be new to Kundera, and that is how books survive. Otherwise, they are like hothouse flowers, they die. So I want to talk about Nabokov, I want to talk about Zora Neale Hurston.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: And yet, you talk about Nabokov, you talk about these young women reading Lolita in Iran, you talk about them reading Jane Austen, and you come to the U.S. and all of a sudden, you're accused of being a neocon.

AZAR NAFISI: Yes. These bloody neocons! **(laughter)** I mean, they are really amazing, because they hatched this plot when I was about three, because that is when my father started reading me Pinocchio and La Fontaine. Actually he translated La Fontaine into Persian. And then

when I was in Iran, the book that I wrote was *Anti-Terra: A Critical Study of Vladimir Nabokov*, and Naghmeh can be witness to this, the Iranians did not think that I was an imperialist agent. The book is now rare, and nobody can find it anymore. As a woman, my problem with the Islamic Republic, as well as my problem living here or anywhere else, is not political, it's existential. You look at this gorgeous woman, sitting here. If *Lila* wants to be *Lila*, the way she looks, the way she walks, the way she thinks—if somebody comes tomorrow, and says, “the way you look, the way you walk, the way you think, the way you feel, it is alien, and I want to impose my figment of imagination upon your being.” Lila, as a woman, as a writer, as a journalist, as a critic, can she be herself? So she responds existentially. And my response is not political, it is existential. It's not my fault if the regime has turned us as women and writers and artists into semiotic signs, you know.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: But how ironic that you should travel for me because actually I was infuriated when I first heard those allegations, there are some scholars that we both know, who we both know, who wrote articles about you being . . .

AZAR NAFISI: I love them. They're fiction-makers. I love them.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: . . . the slave of Paul Wolfowitz, just because you're interested, just because you talk about these women finding a sense of freedom, finding a measure of universality, through these books in the Islamic Republic. Now it seems to me, that in a very strange way, we're stuck between, you know, the neo-Orientalists and the neoconservatives, because damned if you do, damned if you don't.

AZAR NAFISI: You're right. I mean, I could be a neocon, if your description of a neocon. . . . I mean, I hate positions. You don't know people by their political positions. Because if I tell you my political position—I'm pro-gay rights, pro-women's rights, and my critique of the war in Iraq went before the war, okay? But what does that tell you about me? Because you disagree with many people who have the same political positions as you do. Are they just against the administration when they criticize the war in Iraq, or are they pro-Iraqi people? Where are they coming from? The debate is important. I remember Jon Stewart once said on Larry King—and I

used to like Jon Stewart before he became trendy, I'm not watching him too much nowadays. It was before *Indecision 2000*, you know. Jon Stewart once was saying on Larry King that the extreme right and the extreme left have taken over. What about the rest of us? And the rest of us should start thinking.

You have religious people, Muslims who are very liberal and very secular and you have them who are fundamentalists. You have Marxists who are like Stalin. By the way, like the Islamic Republic, Hemingway and Faulkner and Camus and Sartre, in the Soviet Union, were banned as decadent. They cut the death of Swan in *Swan Lake* so that masses would not be depressed. **(laughter)** Everybody had to smile. You have Stalin. You have Adorno, who's also a Marxist. You have Bertolt Brecht, who says, "Claudel is a reactionary but he's a great poet." So we choose whether we want to become party-liners, and smug, or we keep our political independence. I'm not going to—Lila, because I love her, and she asks this question, and this is the first time I'm publicly responding, I never do. I'm not going to—that sort of vulgarity, I'm not going to be involved in it. Let them say whatever they want to say. If anybody wants to read my books, they read and find out where I am at. The rest, I'm going to write great acknowledgments for my next book, so that rather than reading my book they can go to the acknowledgments, you know.

(applause)

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: A very strange question that was posed to me, a couple of weeks ago.

AZAR NAFISI: Don't ask me that. I'm going to leave . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: They said, "You know, well, if Iran is as repressive as you say it is, why do you have such great artists, why do you have these great intellectuals? It can't really be a dictatorship." I would love for you, for us, to talk about this. That, in fact, tyranny in many cases is a muse and for the Islamic Republic it *has* been one and perhaps it is our hope. Perhaps in twenty, thirty years, because this other Iran has slowly come to life, perhaps we will have the

first real democracy, sort of home-bred democracy, of the Middle East, you know, outside of Israel, we will have it in Iran, because we have the building-blocks, we have the education, we have the women, you know, educate the girls, and we have all this intellectual life as well. How do you feel about this?

AZAR NAFISI: Yes, you're very right. I think that—I always tell people that my generation was so spoiled. We didn't know what it meant to fight for your rights. Naghmeh's generation, in order to be where they are now . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Naghmeh was one of your former students in Tehran.

AZAR NAFISI: Yes, she's sitting there. For that generation, like Azadeh writes about it, for the Iranian women to be able to dress so rebelliously, for over two and a half decades they have been flogged, they have been taken to jail, and they have been tortured. So they're flesh and blood, they understand what it means when we talk about individual rights. And people don't understand that. They say, "Oh, Iranian people have given up politics, they only want to have a good life." First of all, that's not true. You read Roya's article about the bus drivers, about women on March eighth, coming into the streets and the feminist eighty-year-old Iranian poet Simin Behbahani, leading them on March 8th, you should read the slogans these women use. Apart from freedom being neither eastern nor western they talk about why don't we have the right to be judges. Shirin Ebadi was a judge before the revolution.

We have now felt with our flesh and blood what it means to have the right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. Some Americans have the misconception that the rest of world do not want to pursue happiness, that somehow life and liberty and pursuit of happiness is somehow an American or a Western phenomenon. But Iranian women *love* to be flogged, they say, "Oh, it's our culture," you know. But bloody hell, if it is our culture, than burning witches in Salem was your culture. Harriet Beecher Stowe, an international best-seller, goes to England in 1800s. She is not allowed to read in public. Her husband reads her speech for her. In that lovely, beloved England, at that time, women when they went to the parliament, they could not be seen. There was a gallery for ladies to see but not be seen. There were preachers who were saying that

slavery and women staying at home is in the Bible. Elizabeth Cady Stanton did not live to see American women gain the right to vote, which was in 1924. So if these people are my culture, and not Hafiz and Rumi, and then Thoreau and Emerson and Whitman and this library is not your culture. Tom Delay is your culture. I don't know why I keep mentioning Tom Delay, I have to beg his forgiveness. Could you mention some other name? You talk.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Oh, no, you're supposed to talk. Something I would very much like to address with you is something that you talk about in your essay, and that you've also talked about in the past, is that we keep mentioning the fact that Iranians are reading Western masterpieces in Tehran, but also the fact that they are reading them, and just the fact that they are there, that they are so hungry for that culture, also brings so much to the Western culture. We tend to forget, we think that the Iranians are always the recipient, and always on the receiving end, but they are also *adding* something to this extraordinary cultural effervescence that's going on, somewhere in the Middle East for sure and hopefully also somewhere on the American coasts. **(laughter)**

AZAR NAFISI: I'm so happy you mentioned that. I was so shocked, I think it was the second year of my teaching, and this was a graduate seminar, and I was just nonchalantly saying "de Tocqueville," I thought, well, God, everyone knows, my Persian students know, who de Tocqueville is, and this blue-eyed blonde-haired girl, a wonderful girl, put up her hand and said, "Excuse me, who is de Tocqueville," you know? Okay, go on Persian blogs and read the students, or read Akbar Ganji who used to be a hostage taker and who now gives an eighty-page manifesto from jail quoting Hannah Arendt and Karl Popper. You know, who? What? So many of my American students do not know who Karl Popper or Hannah Arendt are! So, Lila, are we finishing? Because we don't want to take other people's time.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: I think we're fine, we still have a little bit of time.

AZAR NAFISI: I'm sorry, it's lovely to have a monologue, isn't it? And it's lovely when you look at Lila, and she's such a wonderful reporter, she makes you sort of —the best reporters are

the ones who bring out—the best conversationalists—she’s not a reporter, I just remembered **(laughter)** bring out, want you to talk.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Reading Saul Bellow...

AZAR NAFISI: We had so much fun with Naghmeh and Saul Bellow. We used to make fun of these Persian intellectuals who would always call people by their first name, we used to talk about “Saul” all the time, and the gift, first of all, I think that Americans do know that ignorance is not bliss, so if they do not know about Hafiz, or Rumi, or Khayyám, or Ferdowsi, and through that ignorance, they confiscate our images and redefine us, it’s not our fault. So it is to the great credit of the Persians, who are reading Austen and Bellow and giving a new interpretation of Austen and Bellow. And Bellow, who in *More Die of Heartbreak*, I think this is the one you are talking about and *The Dean’s December*, and in *Bellarosa Connection*, because he talks about Romania and he talks about his favorite city before he left it, Chicago, and he’s talking about how tyranny in Stalin’s Russia is so raw, and so brutal, so you can’t question it. When you talk about Mr. Ahmadinejad there’s a full stop. Vulgar people usually do not make your mind work, you know. But when you talk about the West, you know, what *he* was afraid of, and I think we need to be afraid of, is its sleeping consciousness he talks about and he said that what he is afraid of is atrophy of feeling, because literature, art, is sensual, it is by nature profane.

Salman Rushdie has proved that to us. Salman Rushdie was condemned to death not because he wrote against Islam, but because he is such a playful, ironic, profane—the sanctity of art is the sacredness of the profane. And *that* is what he was condemned to death for. And right now when the cartoons come out, he is one of the few intellectuals who was not timid, who wrote out against the violence that was committed in the name of Islam. But when he writes a novel called *Shalimar the Clown*, then he tries to understand his enemy. The domain of knowledge is the domain of understanding and this is what Bellow was worried about in the West. You want to be insubordinate, support your libraries and your bookstores and your readers and let your publishers know that you don’t want to be sleepy. I think this is what the danger is, this is where the danger is.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: One thing that I've been asked over and over again in the last month, and somehow I always try to respond, and I do think there are a number of logical responses, at least rational. If Iranians are this thriving society with these women, these creators, if this other republic exists, well, why do they vote for Ahmadinejad?

AZAR NAFISI: You want to go into that politics? You *do* know about the voting, maybe Roya would actually be able to respond to that better, but you know that that 60 percent they say who voted, there is a lot of question marks there. First of all, even Rafsanjani, and Mr. Karroubi, the former president and the former speaker of the house, talked about the rigging of the election (text out as tape flips) For eleven million people did not vote, they boycotted the elections, and third of all Mr. Ahmadinejad, who did not get a lot of votes in the first run, then all of a sudden he comes to the second run. He was almost unknown, he was very marginal and unknown, but I won't get into that. I'm not trying, and I hope none of us, are trying to create a rosy picture about Iran. We have a lot to answer for. At least, I think I do. I still believe in the same principles I believed when I was a student. And I don't mean to be not leftist, or not progressive, but I think we were blind. We were not imaginative. We were not empathetic and right now the danger in Iran is that Iranian people, being deprived of so many things for twenty-five years, they become reactionary. You react to what you are deprived of, you become timid, you're like *My Uncle Napoleon*, you wait for a force from outside, the Great Satan, maybe, to come and help you. These are problems that we need to face, but the only the way we face them is by creating a debate, and bringing in the different viewpoints.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: And I think that's why it's important, I think, in this culture to keep breaking out of the bubble, not to have this temptation to always speak of our own ilk, to always be together and always in the same group and in the same clan, and with your own ilk. I think it is important to try and, you know, to cross the boundaries, constantly, but even not just cross the boundaries of imagination, but cross the boundaries, even here in America, physically, intellectually. It's always really painful and strange to me, when I see it on campuses. You almost see the color line visually. You see the Middle Eastern students gathering and speaking together, you see the Mexicans and Japanese, and when you want to go and sort of test out the other tribes, at first there's a great degree of suspicion, and it takes a long time to break in. Most

of my foreign friends, my Iranian friends, actually don't have—whatever that is—but white American friends. Or you know, Anglo-Protestant or Catholic American friends, and it is so strange. And I think that we have brought it upon ourselves, and I feel that we're much less powerful if we keep to that ethnic bubble. It's so important for us to try, and it's a struggle every day. You win one day, you have to try to win the following day. You've never quite completely won the battle, and you have to go on and just cross the line and, you know, don't forget, but don't give in, don't be snug in your little ethnic and intellectual bubbles.

AZAR NAFISI: I completely agree and I think that's why you do need literature and culture because they constantly take you out of your bubble and into another world and I think that is why art and literature, no matter whether the author is a radical leftist or a neocon, the wonderful people who are neocons, whom I know, and who think very well—no, really—and who think very well and who write very well and who are very, very democratic.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Wolfowitz writes quite well.

AZAR NAFISI: Nowadays, he doesn't, but he did, yes. That is true, he does write well.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: He's actually intelligent.

(laughter)

AZAR NAFISI: He's very intelligent yes, he's very very intelligent. I hate demonizing anyone, even when you talk about Mr. Ahmadinejad, you have to refuse to go into the domain which you criticize. If you think—it is like Scheherazade with the king—if you think that the domain of Mr. Ahmadinejad is the domain of violence and reductionism and smugness, you don't talk about him the way he talks about you. And sometimes I forget, and the only way I can remember is through writing and reading, because when I write I have to become much more compassionate than what I am in reality. And that is why I do not want to just take positions—I always do that at some point, it's a good job it's not wine, let's leave it. I'm sorry. It's your fault. **(laughter)** But

that smugness, I think that smugness is what is very dangerous and that smugness is very dangerous in this country where we think we are free and we are . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Exactly, and that's actually the end of your essay when you talk about Calvino and "there must also be beauty." But I think you know probably what the last thing I'd love to talk about here tonight with you is the fact that imagination and everything you've been mentioning—books, creativity, artists—are not disconnected from, you know, human rights and that the republic of imagination is eminently a political republic but in the best possible sense, in the Greek sense, not in the sleazy trash journalistic sense of, you know, politics or *junk* politics. And I think what you've done and the response that you've gotten in this country, the *extraordinary* response that you've gotten for *your* book in this country, speaks to the need to actually address these political issues in a different way.

AZAR NAFISI: Yes, I'm so glad we're ending with that, because, you know, Bellow talks about the "ordeal of freedom." He said that the sufferings of tyranny are very obvious but what about the ordeal of freedom? And the ordeal of freedom is the domain of human rights and imagination. And how can you be empathetic? Not being politically correct, but to really feel for a child in Darfur, or a child in New Orleans. You have to—have to make the imaginative leap of putting yourself in their place. And that leap creates a third space, which is the space of imagination and human rights, and in human rights you don't ask, "Is this guy a neocon? So I'm not going to support his rights." If tomorrow Mr. Ahmadinejad is arrested on trumped-up charges, would we not support him? We have to support him. In the same way that this is one of the greatest democracies in the world and I believe in it. But when Abu-Ghraib happens, you have to be accountable. It doesn't matter. Human rights does not know class, gender, nationality, nor does imagination, and, as subversive people, we should join that domain and create that third space. May I just finish with one person's name?

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Of course.

AZAR NAFISI: One of the—last year was a hard year for our field. We had Milósz, one of the greatest poets and human-rights activists in the whole world, die, Susan Sontag died, Arthur

Miller died, Saul Bellow died, and last week, Muriel Spark died. How many people? Did you hear it anywhere, apart from some pages of the *New York Times*?

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Apart from an Iranian woman telling you about it?

AZAR NAFISI: This is the woman who wrote this amazing novel called *Loitering with Intent* and what she meant was as an artist and a writer, loitering with intent, we need to take poetry and literature back to where it belongs, in the town-hall meetings, and we need to reconnect and we need to know really, who Muriel Spark is, so I just wanted to end with Muriel Spark. Just Muriel Spark, Muriel Spark.

(applause)

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: And now we're going to have a song by Sussan Deyhim, who is probably Iran's, who is Iran's, most talented vocalist and who is going to sing a song inspired from a poem by Rumi, who is in turn one of our most famous poets.

SUSSAN DEYHIM: I know the house is going to be burning by the end of the night by female eloquence and passion, so I thought I would bring a little bit of words of wisdom from our mystic poet, Rumi, to our night because what's a night of Iranian gathering and Persian gathering without having a few words of one of our mystics. This piece is called "Fire Within" and it's in collaboration with Richard Horowitz, and it's a new experiment with this poem.

(song not transcribed)

(applause)

PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: More music after a fifteen-minute reception. Please join us.

(intermission)

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: So we're going to start the second part of the evening with a song, this time a song that will illustrate what Azar was talking about in terms of crossing boundaries. It's a song sung by an Iranian vocalist in English and it's called "Cradle of Lovelessness."

SUSSAN DEYHIM: I'd like to introduce my very, very dear friends. I asked them today if they would like to come improvise with me. Two of my most favorite musicians in New York City—Graham Haynes on trumpet (**applause**) and my long-term partner and collaborator Richard Horowitz on *ney*. (**applause**) This is a sort of an inspirational song with a blues tradition, which I've always been really into. As I think we've already said that many times that creativity has its own land and landscape, so, in a way, it doesn't matter where we're from as long as we are like really inspired and illuminated by something that's creating beauty and positivity and moving things forward in that direction. Voila, let's do it, let's do the real thing, man.

(laughter)

(song not transcribed)

(applause)

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: So here we are with four new women, who have all dealt in their own ways with issues of identity, whether it's identity as being a Jewish-Iranian woman, which is an extraordinary conundrum for Americans. (**laughter**) Soraya Broukhim is also Jewish-Iranian. She always says people say, "What? Jewish what? Iranian? You know, I thought you were all Arabs and fundamentalists," so she's going to talk about that. Roya is a writer who just wrote a memoir about growing up in Iran, in revolutionary Iran, as a Jewish girl, and it's called *Journey from the Land of No*. Naghmeh Zarbafian will talk about her own journeys through the labyrinth of identity as she grew up in the Islamic Republic of Iran. She has one of my favorite essays in the book, it's called "Misreading Kundera in Tehran." She's a poet. She is one of Azar Nafisi's former students in Iran. She writes, in my book, she writes, about the—about Kundera's identity in Iran and how it's been censored out of recognition and what happens as the students

realize that the book, especially the erotic parts of the book, have been censored completely, and that they don't really quite react in the way that she was expecting them to react. And then of course we have Shirin Neshat, who is a visual artist, who's a photographer, who has made many, many short art films, who's now working on her first feature and who is an internationally acclaimed visual artist. And finally we have Azdeh Moaveni, who just wrote a book called *Lipstick Jihad* about growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran. Exactly the kind of, you know, identity problem and sometimes schizophrenia, that we're all dealing with, what we're talking about. You're never quite home, you're never quite in the right place, you're always looked upon as the other. And she's going to talk about it. Shirin's—as an artist, her problem, I think, and I would love for her to address that—has been working on art as an Iranian woman outside of the homeland and constantly being challenged as to the identity and the legitimacy of her work as an Iranian woman, as Iranian work, as for a woman who very seldom visits Iran nowadays, at least since 1996. I would love for you to start off with maybe a personal story about how all of you have encountered problems, issues with identity, how at some point, someone tried to pin you like a butterfly and somehow you squiggled out. Roya?

ROYA HAKAKIAN: I want to start by thanking Azar for all the praise she heaped upon us, but for the Pentagoners among you, I've recently become a mother of two, and can't afford to be dropped on any nations anywhere. So we *are* weapons of mass destruction, but please refrain from dropping us anywhere, for the time being at least. **(laughter)** The topic of identity is one of those fashionable topics that I guess we have all had to deal with. In some ways, in a country like the United States, where everybody comes at least from four different places, it becomes in my view a superfluous subject and in some ways also meaningless to discuss. However . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Would you like to leave?

ROYA HAKAKIAN: Yes, actually I just talked myself out of the importance of being here at this stage **(laughter)** but on the other hand, I think the issue of being Iranian and being from Iran and a Jew from Iran, is something that I constantly encourage everyone to think about. Precisely, even as we celebrate the holiday of Purim, people are shocked to find out that I'm an Iranian Jew. And I say, "Didn't we just read that Esther was in Iran?" I think it's one of the well-kept

secrets of the realities in Iran, the other Iran that Lila and Azar were talking about, the fact that Iran is a country that is still home to the largest Jewish community in the Middle East outside of Israel. There are twenty thousand, perhaps more or a little less, Jews still remaining in Iran, and they were—even by Khomeini himself—Jews were declared a legitimate religious minority—people of the book—and there are functioning synagogues and Jewish schools in Iran. That said, I have to go back to the points that Azar and Lila were trying to painfully paint, which is, that that doesn't mean that life in Iran is good for Jews. I think what's important about the whole issue of Jews in Iran is precisely because it really illuminates two realities, both about the eternal questions of what it has meant through history to be Jewish, which has been that we are constantly driven out of places to which we painfully consider ourselves belonging to, on one hand, and then on the other hand it illuminates the realities of what it means to be an Iranian that doesn't see eye to eye with the rest of the regime. In other words, what it means to be an Iranian that really doesn't cast him or herself in the image of a zealot.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: There are two things in your essay in particular that I love, and I've quoted far and wide is that—and that really speak to this dual reality. First of all, the name of your essay is called “The Last Chapter in the Book of Exodus,” again, a new exodus out of the Islamic Republic of Iran. And yet before actually leaving the Republic, she talks about, she talks about Passover, it was at Passover, right, when they—in Tehran, they used to say “Next year in Jerusalem,” when in fact they never wanted to pack their bags and they wanted to stay in Tehran.

ROYA HAKAKIAN: Right. Last week at this Passover, I was having my very first conversation with a cousin of mine, a second cousin of mine, who's here on a student exchange program from Israel. He's only seventeen. And I asked him—he was born and raised in Israel—so I asked him, “What is it that your parents have told you about life in Iran?” And he said, “Well they've told me, what I understand”—this is the narrative that this seventeen-year-old person has built of life in Iran—“what I understand is that everything was really good and we were getting along very well in Iran until 1978.” Now, that said, I always have to try to make sure that certain nuances are also interjected in this debate, by that I mean that this is not to say that anti-Semitism didn't exist in Iran, but it's very difficult when we are discussing the issue of anti-Semitism in the Western world, to say that, you know, our point of reference when it comes

to anti-Semitism shouldn't be the experience of Jews in Western or Eastern Europe. Far and wide, the experience of Jews in Iran has been far better and in many ways incomparable to what we historically as Jews refer to, in our minds, being the primarily the experience of Holocaust or the pogroms in Russia. But at the same time anti-Jewish sentiments in Iran have been rampant and they continue to exist in Iran and I think one of the hopes that I have is that we will have an opportunity to engage the subject of the Jewish identity in Iran and the experience of being Jews in Iran, not because as a Jewish person this is what I like to see come forward, but I think it is precisely the issue of vulnerable minorities, among which are the Jews, the Bahá'is, the gays, in Iran that really prove to be a measure of our democratic-mindedness and civilization.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: And in fact one of the many ironies of this book for me, and especially collaborating with you and many of the other writers is that my dream was for the title to be *Next Year in Tehran* and my publisher went into this huge debate that no, it was going to be construed as an anti-Semitic title because we're Iranians. And I said, no, it's in one of the essays by this woman who herself is an Iranian Jew, so the debate continues of course. So actually I would love to go to Azadeh, because you have also been straddling identities, as the subtitle as your own book says, *Growing up American in Iran and Iranian in America*. Can you tell us something about that?

AZADEH MOAVENI: I came to the subject of identity and using and writing about identity in my writing in a very personal way, because for me, as Azar and you were talking about earlier, I think for many of us it does begin as an existential question, as "Where do I fit in between two worlds?" and if that is not complex enough, "How do I fit in between two worlds, one of which has changed," and I understood it as one sort of world and then I go back and find that it's another, so these multiple layers of complication that sort of make the question of "Who am I and where do I fit in?" sort of what I wanted to explore in my writing. That was a long time ago, it seems now, and I think that these questions of personal identity, perhaps, you sort of deal with at some early point in your life and then you move on. So for me, personally, the personal question of "Where do I fit in?" is much less interesting to me today as I explore Iran more as a journalist and come back and forth a lot between . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Yes, I forgot to say, sorry, that Azadeh is now reporting in Tehran for *Time* magazine so she's actually based in Tehran right now.

AZADEH MOAVENI: So, one of the things that comes up often—because I go between Tehran and the U.S., talking about my book, talking about politics, and about Iranian youth and what they think, and the issue that has come up for me about identity is a troubling one, especially in these times, and that is representation. Who represents Iran? Especially at a time when understanding what Iranians think about their regime, what they see in terms of the future, how they feel about the West, about the possibility of American intervention in their country—I think that understanding these questions has never been more urgent, and many of us have things to say about this. I think that we all see Iranian exiles scrambling to find ready ears in Washington to sort of advocate what *they* see as Iranian reality. There are the exiles in Los Angeles, who are all vying for a bigger portion of the Congressional money, and so this question of who represents Iran? The Iranian government, in the legal sense, obviously, does, but we all know that it's not a popular government and doesn't really reflect what Iranians think and feel. And then there's all of us, who write about Iran as either novelists or memoirists or as . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: When you go to Tehran, do they look at you as a full Iranian?

AZADEH MOAVENI: No, when I go to Iran I think I'm in this category of "hybrid," but because I think any country that's had a revolution suddenly has this category for its diaspora, whether you left or came back, you're one of those who "wasn't here during the hard times."

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: I'd love to know what it was to be what it was like to be there during the hard times, and to see these people coming back, and, Naghmeh, you lived all of your life in the Islamic Republic of Iran and yet you wrote this essay in English, truly in a very poetic and beautiful English, and I would like to know, for you, have you had any issues defining your identity not so much against a *foreign* place but perhaps against your own regime in your own homeland?

NAGHMEH ZARBAFIAN: I would like to start by thanking Azar, who changed the color of my life, and she actually made it colorful, let's say. About identity and the concept of homeland and identity, all I can say, the only word that comes to my mind, is "absence." I remember when I went to Alborz Mountains and I used to look at Tehran, I tried to find Tehran, but it was all wrapped in this hell of smog, I could never find it. When I came to the US all I heard about Iran were these murky words like "terrorism" and "nuclear weapons." I cannot find it here, it's just absent. About having this experience of living in Iran, I remember when I looked at my mirror every morning before going to work, and I just saw that piece of cloth on my head in that veil that did not belong to me. I couldn't find my own image—that was not me, it was just a shadow, and it was at that time that I can say I decided to find my own identity in poetry. I started to read poems of Nima Yooshij which is mostly about absence and loss and I saw that the only way out is to shape this absence through poetry, and not only that. And so from then on, I'm just searching for my homeland in luminous words of Hafiz or in dark colors of Andrew Wyeth; I don't know, I'm still searching.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: But this is why, exactly what you just expressed is why I don't think that the question of identity is fashionable in that sense, but it's really at the heart, personally, it's at the very heart of my life, of the way that I am growing up outside of Iran, and how constantly you're permanently challenged, you know, as to the way, whether it's in the absence, outside the absence of your own homeland when you're in a foreign country or then the absence of something that defines you when you're inside. So, I mean, for very many of us it has been at the heart of our concern. Shirin, in very many ways Iranian identity has been, of course, although I know you don't like to be pinpointed and certainly all art, that's what we're trying to say, but I'm you know—perhaps elusive identity—but there has been also this constant quest in your work. Can you tell us about it?

SHIRIN NESHAT: I think for most of us sitting in this room, in this panel, and for myself, certainly, there are two things that seem to run parallel. Is the personal life of an artist—**(microphone being adjusted)** Wouldn't go very well in Iran. **(laughter and applause)** What I wanted to say, and I think what becomes for me the heart of the matter is that, at least for me, I didn't become an artist, or I didn't try to go about this who I am today because of an idea that I

had. More or less it was a kind of a need, in other words, what sort of ran parallel in me is the personal need and the most existential questions that I had in relation to my position, my relation to my country, etc., and the world that I lived in, meaning both East and West, so I think it's important and that really, for an artist, reveals the vulnerability of an artist, and I always feel very uncomfortable when somehow I come across, or my work is viewed or discussed, as somehow that I'm the speaker or the ambassador for my country, etc., because it undermines the absolute fundamental aspect which is the anxiety and vulnerability of this person behind the work.

And certainly I cannot be the speaker or the person who would be able to articulate factual realities about this country that I come from. And to make it more complicated, I'm very conscious about this boundary that I stand on, meaning the East and the West and finally myself. So how could I possibly have any type of a complete command of all of these? And so I would go to Azar and say that I have created a world for myself which is the world of my imagination, I don't know where it belongs to, what it's all about, but it is where I feel most comfortable. And sometimes I find myself wanting to be pulled toward the political discussion because my life *is* political, because my life has been *defined* by politics—not because I am a political person, I've been in exile, I've been separated from my family and my country, and that, unfortunately, cannot be separated from the personal life, so the personal and the political have become *one* and that has created *me*, and *my* work is a result of who *I* am. Now, take this out of the context, you have nothing. I am not going to be able to give *anyone* any reality check on Iran. And I think this is very important, because a lot of the viewers, the people who are attracted to Iranians and artists such as us are *looking* for the *truth* that we cannot deliver, and this is really important to stress. And I just want to say that I'm proud to be in the fiction world, in the world of imagination, but I fail terribly if I'm going to be the speaker for my country, because I won't be able to.

(applause)

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Here we have the quote from Adorno that I think Azar loves, that “the highest form of morality is never to feel at home in one's own place, in one's old country, in one's own home,” and so that's perhaps one of the tasks of the artist. Now, we're all women

here, and we've been making comments, and Paul has been making jokes about his quotas, and then you know, "weapons of mass destruction," and I'd love also adding to the conundrum of identity already being straddling worlds, or straddling religions, or cultural eras, there's also the problem of actually being a *woman*. And I think we've all been confronted to it in different ways. We've tried to write about women or to grow up and grow into a professional world as Iranian women. Roya, could you tell us something about that? Does that come in, does that factor into the equation of your identity and how complicated has it been to straddle?

ROYA HAKAKIAN: Being a woman? Certainly. I remember, well, I have three older brothers, and I was playing soccer until the age of twelve, until somebody told me that, "You're a girl and you shouldn't be in a soccer field." And naturally, especially after the Revolution, I realized that I was, that as many days had passed, I begin to wish that I were not a woman, that—especially after the veil or the Islamic hijab became mandatory, I began devising ways of how it is that I can appear like a boy and do away with the scarf and just walk on the street. The movie *Osama* to me was not at all fictional. For those of you who saw it, it's the story of a boy—of a girl—who shaves her head and plays a son to her Afghan mother, and this is precisely what I was fantasizing when I was a teenager living in Iran after the revolution.

However, I think that as time went by, and especially after I came here, and I realized that no matter where you go, there are pieces of you that you leave behind, and there are pieces of you that need to be redefined, and that no matter what you do, having been a woman in Iran, having been a Jewish person in Iran, and then having come here as an Iranian, and then feeling that I'm still on the margins of the society. That perhaps the best place to be, the place that I most like to be, is precisely on the margins. That, in fact, the day that I shed the desire to belong was the day that I felt most liberated. To realize that really, I don't want any part of this pool of people trying to lure me to take a membership in their club. I actually *don't* want to be in the club and I realize perhaps, and I don't know whether that's true for Shirin, but this is where art happens. The moment that I realized that I'm absolutely lonesome, that there's nowhere else to go, was the moment that I went to my art.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Did you feel that?

SHIRIN NESHAT: Did I feel what?

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Did you feel that because you were on the margins that's what led you to create your work?

SHIRIN NESHAT: No. I think there's a certain madness, or a certain hysteria, a certain aspect to myself and to the world that I live in that I don't quite comprehend, and the work becomes a conversation between me and the world and I think that's the way I do it. It becomes a series of question and answer, and in result I create a dialogue, this is the way I see it. The question of being a woman. I don't know how much that plays a part, other than the fact that we are born as woman and the only thing I can identify with the femininity of the material is that yes, I make very emotional work, because that's the way I am, and how I deal with the world.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: And yet you began, you became famous with a series called "Women of Allah," where you're portraying women martyrs with inscriptions on their bodies, and then that sort of sparked this enormous controversy. You were accused of romanticizing Islam, of sexualizing martyrdom and Islam.

SHIRIN NESHAT: Well, I was very interested to know the person behind this action, what type of person that was. Being a mother, being a lover, being a faithful one, being one that lives with an incredible sense of conviction. There is so many contradictory material. This obsession with death, and yet incredibly erotic, sensual being, and so for me particularly the female warriors became an incredible phenomenon of study, and somehow I think that I saw that contradiction in myself. The weakness and the strength coinciding, the desire to believe in something, but simultaneously being betrayed by that faith, and the sense of vulnerability that all of us are looking to want to believe in something, the idea of the savior, that there is maybe a glimpse of hope somewhere. And I wanted to think that there must be something these people are after—and that for me there was this incredible intersection between spirituality, politics, sexuality, politics, everything, and so this became for me a huge subject of curiosity, as Azar said.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: You mention eroticism and sensuality. Of course, one of the things that one hears, it's almost become a cliché now, it's no longer news, you know, people tell you about orgies in Iran, about the sex lives of Iranian women in the Islamic Republic. Whereas for a while, it might have been news, and it seemed completely subversive, now it seems that that's become the mainstream. In fact but we—Azadeh wrote an essay in the book called “Sex in the Time of Mullahs,” which I like very much. **(laughter)** It's very Pasolinian, and can you tell us about that, and also, now that you've been in Iran, is that really all of Iranian reality, do Iranians really have orgies all the time? **(laughter)**

AZADEH MOAVENI: I don't remember if you came up with that title or I did. I think it was you. It was her. Tell my mother. **(laughter)** For a long time, yes, this orgy myth, and this sort of underground culture of extreme hedonism was extremely—a trendy news topic for documentaries and any visiting correspondent. And when I lived there for two years, I thought, well, obviously if there are orgies, I should hear about them, and go and see what they're doing there. It's my responsibility as a reporter. **(laughter)** And what I found, and that's what I ended up writing my piece about, was that they were there, and there would be these parties where everyone would dress in white, and it was just this very incredibly decadent, extreme sort of form of hedonism, but what I found was that obviously that was an extremely marginal experience. It was extremely Westernized, affluent Iranians, who are very bored and very obviously alienated by the daily reality and who were sort of finding some sort of diversion for themselves by these games.

But after I left that I then realized that this was not the sort of experience of the average Iranian young woman or man, but what *is* the average sexual experience? I began to investigate that, and I found that what's happening is because young people are getting married so much later, because the economy is bad, and a young man—it takes him often to the age of thirty-five to be able to afford an apartment. Women are going to university. So people are doing other things rather than getting married at the age of twenty, like they did thirty years ago, or fifty years ago, so in between those years, well, they're doing something. **(laughter)** The amazing thing that I found is that in the middle class, and this is middle-class Iran and that's what I wrote about, is that premarital sex is no longer a taboo. It happens. It's not widely discussed, there are not

articles in magazines about it, really. It's not something that a twenty-five-year-old woman and her mother or parents would have a discussion about, but it's something that happens, and it's because of these changing realities.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Not just in Tehran, all across the country.

AZADEH MOAVENI: Well, my field research was not that extensive, but . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: I'm very curious about the rural areas, no, seriously, because it's so powerful, and you can read it everywhere and so on and so forth and I would love to know and I'm going to ask Naghmeh in a minute, if really it is the truth for the entire Iranian population? You also end your essay on a number of different notes, but one that I love very much, saying that in a strange paradoxical way these parties aren't that different from the parties of the pre-revolution and these masquerades, and so on, and is that correct?

AZADEH MOAVENI: When I wrote that, I think that the point that I was trying to make was that the parties are misleading. The parties are not necessarily your key to unlocking what actually happens in people's rooms and in their bedrooms and at home.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: You describe probably what would be more middle-class, remember at the end of your text?

AZADEH MOAVENI: The scene that I think I end on, or the scene leading up to the end, is about these very down-to-earth, not colorful, not hedonistic, not drenched in designer drugs and this kind of experience, but parties where people sit on the ground, they drink homemade or homebrewed alcohol, and they listen to Iranian music, and they're talking about their daily reality. And those couples go home, if they find places to go, and they *live* that way. And so the parties where everything is hedonistic and people are dressed in white and it's an orgy is not what is going to explain to you or illustrate what ordinary Iranian reality is like. It's these parties that are *not* exciting, and they're *not* sexy and they're not going to make it into *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, but that is where change is happening.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Sensuality is at the heart of Naghmeh's essay, where she talks about reading a novel by Kundera called *Identity*, which is a love story between Jean-Marc and Chantal, and then there are some erotic scenes that strangely have been cut out, but the violent words haven't been cut out. You have the word "rape" that's still in the book, but somehow, you know, the caresses and the more erotic parts have been completely censored, and I would love for you to speak about that, and tell us what your take is on sensuality in the Islamic Republic today.

NAGHMEH ZARBAFIAN: I'd rather not talk about my experience as a woman, but talk about a certain kind of pastry. As probably you remember about the cartooning scandal, after the cartoons about the Prophet were published in Danish newspapers, the minister of commerce in Iran one day announced on national TV that from today on, you cannot call Danish pastries as Danish pastries, but you should change it to Mohammedan Rose pastries. The poor pastries, they could only survive if they could change their identity and be covered by false appearance, and I guess their guilt was being enticing, being sweet, and having the taste of the other.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: That's what you talk about in your essay. Will you tell what happens, what's going on when you're reading a text that's actually been touched up, that's been cut, and when your own friends and students, perhaps, react by saying, "Well, that's fine, who cares, this is what we want to read anyways."

NAGHMEH ZARBAFIAN: That was the experience I had with my students, and this is how I was encountered with the world of the other in Iran. No matter—novels, movies—they were all manipulated and cut into pieces and it was very, very shocking for me to see that. One night I asked my friends to come, and I told them all the censored parts and they said, "We don't care," they even said that, some of them said that, "We'd rather read it this way," and some of them said that, "So what, we have been reading these novels like this for years." And another experience I had with censor was one day at Shiraz University we had this video room which that was the first time I saw Hitchcock's *Psycho* and in the first sequence you see Janet Leigh with a bra moving just around the room, and we were all so shocked, "Why, why, nobody is

cutting this piece,” and I missed the whole sequence, and then we came to know that the guy who was responsible for this had fallen asleep. **(laughter)** But I missed the whole sequence because everybody, you know, they were whispering that “why?” and we couldn’t watch it.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: The consequences that you draw from it are very interesting. You say, you explain that this problem, this failure, to actually want to see the other as the *other*, makes dialogue impossible.

NAGHMEH ZARBAFIAN: Exactly. I think it’s the obstacle that they made for you. Because we were supposed to be a unified mass, any traces of the other, any traces of Western culture, it should have been either removed or manipulated.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: For me, it’s a fascinating topic because usually we have a tendency also to criticize the West for not trying, for failing to understand the complexity of Iranian life, but what’s so fascinating about this example is that you have a group of young Iranian students of literature, architects, extraordinarily cultivated, and yet they’re not that interested in understanding the other, right?

NAGHMEH ZARBAFIAN: They are used to—because their privacy, their private world and privacy have been constantly shattered—I feel that this is the result of it, that they have become used to this censored world and they cannot get away from it and find another world.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: What is the hope? Again, everyone keeps on mentioning that except for Mr. Kiarostami perhaps, some of the most well-known Iranians abroad are all women. I’d love to understand why. Is it connected to historical circumstances? Is it chance? Is it by accident?

ROYA HAKAKIAN: Why not? I think for twenty-five years, it’s probably the Darwinian laws of evolution. Either you’re going to completely be annihilated, or you will come out at the other end much more equipped and capable of managing the mullahs, and I think precisely this is what happened in Iran. For people who are familiar with the women’s movement in Iran, even prior to

the revolution, or where women were, which is in a very accomplished place in the society, I think the period between '79 and '89 was in a way a mishap, a blip, in our history, and therefore I think somewhere around 1990 women began to think that they have got to get it together and turn this thing around, and I think this is precisely what eventually happened. I think Darwin would have predicted this.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Do you have any explanation?

AZADEH MOAVENI: I'm asked this every now and then, and I don't really think I have a very convincing answer. All I can really think of is that, in the field of cinema, it's not necessarily that way, and I wonder, I think it's striking also that the Iranian women who live here, who are part of this, suddenly there are all these Iranian women who are active and where are the men? Well, most of us are outside and I think it's the men inside who are the filmmakers, who tend to be able to have access to society, they're able to work there, they're able to navigate themselves well, and I think that that is one aspect of why you see this sort of distinction.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Also possibly, as being women and saying all these things, one of the great dangers, I guess, is to be too smug about being you know women outside on the margin, and that's probably the death of us, right, I mean, if one keeps on saying we're dissidents and we're subversive, then we aren't so subversive anymore. So how does one keep on working and trying to do work that's original, that makes statements, without running the risk of becoming mainstream and self-satisfied and smug as women outside?

SHIRIN NESHAT: I think that for people, such as us, who are operating outside of our own place of birth, it's a mixed blessing in some ways. We have a chance to have a voice, etc., but we carry an extraordinary challenge in misrepresentation of our culture, in feeding the expectation of the Western audience in the way that they tend to idealize us, people who fantasize us but are fearful of us, and somehow we become desirable. There is no doubt in my mind that Iran is a country that is very popular like Iraq was, or Afghanistan, etc., so whether we like it or not, as writers, as artists, as journalists, whatever, we carry a tremendous responsibility.

Even if we want to disclaim that, and say, I'm not an ambassador, I'm blah blah blah, but whatever it is we have a voice and the complexity of this is how do we navigate this job, where we don't oversimplify or stereotype or reiterate everything that the West thinks about us, as this victimized nation, and yet not criticize our government, not criticize the problematics of our culture since the revolution. At the same time, let's be honest. We're also very critical about this culture, and we have a lot of doubts about this culture and, yet, this is a culture that has given us a place of refuge. So I find it is an extremely difficult task. Because on one hand, you can say, this is just about me, my own existential questions, whatever, but yet, once you're in the public domain, you really carry an enormous responsibility and I think that this is something that most of us don't expect.

And the greatest danger of course is the Western expectation, the pressure that becomes on all of us as writers as artists in really simplifying and simplifying and simplifying, and the thing we have to do is refusing that simplification and I think we as people are maybe sometimes, do not have that confidence in ourselves because we don't even *live* in our own country and yet we find ourselves in this sort of demand. There is a great risk involved, and I just want to—while we are celebrating all of us as this creative people to really point at the risk we all take in representing—or misrepresenting—our culture. And this is a very serious business and I think that many people living in Iran very likely would criticize *us* sitting up here saying all of that we are saying, so I always look at myself as a person full of contradictions, and I think we all, as artists or writers, should do the same.

(applause)

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: I would like to close, perhaps, on the notion of irony. So much in these dark difficult times, in these shifting times, it seems that everything is always so literal, so simplified, and it doesn't leave room for the nuances, the many games and subtleties of irony, and I wanted to ask Naghmeh what you feel about that as a poet, as a writer, as an Iranian woman, is it something that's part of your art, that's important to you or to the way you live, the way you create, the way you write.

NAGHMEH ZARBAFIAN: I guess so, because I learned to have a two-sided life, lives, let's say. And I can say that I just try to build a room of my own and try to—especially when I used to live in Iran—reconciling that public self with this private self was very difficult, but it was only through my writing that I could achieve it and . . .

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Would you like to say something about irony in your work? Or as part of what we—I think basically the idea is not to just sit here and celebrate being women, or writers, or intellectuals, but I think it's so important to always every day try and open new ways, open new boundaries, to resist the dual temptation of at once forgetting who we or of being completely locked up in this identity and it's a permanent labyrinth. I think it's what in French we called *métissage*, and *métissage* is being hybrid and it's so difficult to be hybrid, and perhaps we can never express best as when we're constantly trying to nuance, to never quite sit in our own places, and always look back and perhaps criticize our own work. What do you think, Roya? You're very critical.

ROYA HAKAKIAN: As I was listening to Naghmeh talk about the scene with the woman in the bra, Janet Leigh, and I thought of this anecdote, which I don't think it was an anecdote, it's the truth, that for a while Iran had a blind censor who was censoring film in Iran. **(laughter)** And I thought this was a joke and then I heard from many filmmakers who came to visit the United States that this was the truth, that there was actually a blind censor assigned to censoring films, and the reason I talk about this is precisely because you think irony is important and I think it's also the predicament of why it's difficult to explain what it means to be an Iranian, and under that broader category, why it's difficult to explain what it means to be an Iranian American, what it means to be an Iranian American Jew, and all of these things, because the moment you say something positive, which I think the previous panel and us in part were engaged in trying to say, which is “Iran is a wonderful place and people in Iran do wonderful things.” You also have to make sure that you say the other side of the tale, which is it's also a terrible place and terrible things happen there. I think in that we are always straddling, not simply between two aspects of our identities, but also between good and evil and the challenge of interjecting a sense of nuance in a conversation that the whole universe seems to be busy trying to simplify it.

LILA AZAM ZANGANEH: Thank you. Anything else? I think that's it. Thank you so much! I think we're going to end the evening, because we were a bit delayed, and so unfortunately I don't think we'll have time for a Q and A but perhaps you can get to talk with the panelists a bit before leaving. Good night. Thank you.