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I would like to start with an aside: I find the title given to this conference most disconcerting. I resent being confined in between “tradition” and “modernity,” in their inevitable Eurocentricity; for in Iran - like in many other countries in Asia, Africa and South America - the very notion of the opposition between “tradition” and “modernity” references the tragic historical contact with European colonialism, in whose vocabulary “tradition” is bad and primitive (unless it is Western tradition) and “modernity” is progressive and good; “tradition” is the point of departure and “modernity” is the final port of arrival. This most orientalist opposition breeds the confused identities that rise in reaction to Westernization - as in the “traditional” and the “authentic” - or their counterparts, identities modeled after the Western conceptualization of “the modern,” identities that give some credence - in spite of its acute xenophobia and implied faith in religious ideology - to Al-e Ahmad’s notion of *westoxication*. Perhaps the only context in which one can speak of a space *between* tradition and modernity is historical - therefore fictional - roughly coinciding with, but having started before, the Constitutional Revolution during which, pressured by colonial interventions and under the gaze, we were deeply in debate over our own place and appearance in the world. We crossed the threshold of “modernity” through the massive modernization schemes of the two Pahlavi shahs. Today, in Iran, where religious schools in Quom run computer training centres and a cleric, traditionally clad in *aba* and *amameh*, is in the office of the president – this uniquely modern institute of governance - the space between tradition and modernity is also fictional. Just so that I am not accused of conflating modernization with modernity, I

must point out that the discourse of modernity – as an epistemic and cultural discourse - entirely hinges upon the material conditions of production and technologies of governance in the society. (I am using the term technology in its Foucauldian sense of the term.) However different the cultural and historical colouring of these conditions and technologies, the product is “modern.” To speak of the contemporary Iran in terms of a binary opposition between “tradition” and “modernity” is to assume that “tradition” is monolithic and unchangeable and to ignore that in the age of “globalism” modernity itself is an old tradition.

In contesting the title of this conference, I seek to launch into my own predicaments that, after all, should be the focus of this talk.

From the title, right from the outset, I admit to a precarious positionality: For to name exile is to acknowledge a double vision at the very best—having one eye on the place of “origin” and one on the place of residence, one on the past and one on the present. At its worst, exile implies a blurred vision: Mistaking, as if in a daze, the signs and the landmarks of the absent space-time with the signs and the landmarks of the present space-time, blurring the very distinction between the past and the present, the here and the there. To name exile, inevitably, is also to assume historicity for exile, as we commonly know it, is as old and singular as modernity itself: It is the formation of modern nations that marks the rise of exile as a global phenomenon: The forced movement of dispossessed peoples across the borders: Slaves. Indentured labourers. War refugees. Economic migrants. To name exile is to evoke the memory of a century of

struggle for decolonization. And, to name exile is to slip into the shadows amidst the traffic of bodies:

Airports, border crossings, refugee centres, visa offices, immigration boards. Airports, border crossings, refugee shelters in church basements, language schools, coffee shops in the ghettos, city centres. Working in the restaurant kitchens, cleaning floors, driving cabs, baby-sitting, house-cleaning. The traffic of bodies crossing borders, scattering seeds of sorrow in the soil left behind, planting discontent in the one moved into.

To name exile is to evoke the ambiguity and the irony of a double entendre for if exile is a loss—of labour, education, presence—to the nation of origin, it is a gain for the host nation—of already trained, cheap labour, a presence that can be considered absent at the polling stations, yet must be surveilled for its dangerous ties to the forces outside the sacred Western national borders. To name exile is to gesture to the separation of families and friends, the breaking of these most basic relations of power and alliance, the entrance into a powerless state. To name exile is to refer to, in Homi Bhabha’s words, the “gathering on the edge of foreign cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafes of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language; gathering the signs of approval and acceptance, degrees, discourses, disciplines, gathering the memories of underdevelopment, of other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival, gathering the present.”

2

My recent digital text, *Of Shifting Shadows*, is a hypermedia environment: By this I mean that it is a hypertext whose textuality is produced through the layering and interconnectedness of different media - including digital video, audio, writing and graphics – and whose discourse is mediated by the reader’s exploration through electronic paths connecting independently-standing textual blocks. *Of Shifting Shadows* is an open text, with multiple points of entry, no fixed closure, and wide gaps in between, constructed through the layering of texts in different media, multiple provisions for navigation, and the juxtaposition of sound and silence. In what follows, I would like to highlight some of the intentionalities in the narrative’s content and form. The reading I produce intends neither to fix the meaning of the text nor to foreclose the possibility of differing readings.

Of Shifting Shadows is voiced by four fictional women who construct themselves - with the reader as their accomplice and witness - through conscious acts of speaking and remembering. They take – as a point of departure – the 1979 Iranian Revolution, and inscribe, on the skin of history, *their* struggles, the lives they lived and those they have witnessed. In this environment the calculated insertion of silence acts as a memorial to the historical silencing of women's voices, and becomes the means of establishing a textual space for the entrance of those “others” chronically excluded by the chroniclers from the traditionally masculinist narrations of nations.

The Women:

Working in the garden, BITA becomes conscious of Nakir and Monkar [angles of death in Islamic mythology], whose appearance triggers her reflective journey in the forgotten spaces of a history at once profoundly personal and deeply political. She, and with her the reader, moves through a circle of hanging rooms in each witnessing a woman engaged in a different struggle, as a metaphor for or in direct reference to specific moments in our history. Her allegorical guide, the blue moon traveling the sky of her last night, appears as a woman whose gestures invite BITA, and the reader, to ponder upon the events in each room - ruptures in time and place, where the familiar becomes the site of remembrance and resistance.

MINA's story takes the form of a testimonial, a statement that she had written to deliver in her immigration hearing and that was found after her accidental death. In her "statement" she recounts stories about her involvement in the Revolution, and the subsequent terror she faced as a political activist opposing the Islamist government. MINA at once reproduces and struggles against the fixity of the grand, humanistic (read modernist) ideals that in all their naivete and inevitable contradictions guided her generation's eager, self-sacrificing engagement in the revolutionary events. Succumbing, like many exiles, to nostalgia, she guards her idealism as her local shifts from her home town in Iran to the home of her exile, King Street, which she sees as a microcosm representative of universal injustices. In her statements, she continuously challenges the court's authority in interrogating the validity of her personal claim to history. And in her counter-interrogations she reconstitutes *herself* as the authority.

GOLI takes issue with simplistic representations of herself right from the start. She interrogates the desires and intentions of the author of her story, and she continuously comments on and contradicts the author. In the course of this conflictual relationship, GOLI, who insists that she is only a “character,” remembers life in Iran during the Revolution and simultaneously problematizes her present exilic ‘status’. A woman only in possession of painful memories, she makes her pain and her memories the site of her offensive as she deploys her sometimes harsh language to undermine the Author’s and thus the reader’s desire to categorize and classify her in rigid constructs of identity.

The AUTHOR assumes the role of the commentator and the archivist in this environment. Her section is not independently accessible to the reader as her comments only appear in relation to the other women’s stories. In contrast to theirs, the AUTHOR’s language generally appears non-personal, at times deliberately factual, only occasionally ponderously poetic. She documents newspaper stories and headlines as well as popular slogans from the revolutionary period, highlighting the violent character of the events. These are used to bring the reader’s attention to the neo-colonialist political environment in which the Iranian Revolution unfolded. At times the AUTHOR quotes (in Farsi) from literary canons to problematize culturally specific representations of women, representations that were part and parcel of the revolutionary and post-revolutionary sexual discourses.

So far, I have produced this reading as if there were only linear paths for reading the women and their stories, and as if these existed in isolation from each other. This has

limited and conditioned the meanings I have produced. However, the discourse of the narrative is constructed through the plurality of presences, of the characters and of the media and story fragments. The plurality expands the narrative's virtual dimension and demands a more active mode of engagement from the reader. Challenging our habitually linear reading practices, the division of the screen space into distinct windows, and the simultaneous presence of these, simulate the temporal and spatial plurality of witnessing and remembering. This inherently non-linear structure, incorporating the possibility of transience, of moving from one story fragment in one character's space to another's at any moment, blurs the boundaries that separate them, thus reshaping the surface of the text into forms more hospitable to the fragmented collectivity of women's historical lives. Designed for establishing an intimate relationship with the reader and demanding the reader's active participation in the production of the narrative order, the text approximates a mirror: Its surface meaningful only when the reader brings to it her own acts of imagination and the desire to look into it, to read it. This approach evokes an aesthetic of the will and desire in whose shifting spaces the agency of the reader as the final producer of meaning is, finally, realized.

3

My practice revolves around textuality and space, both traditionally manifesting the masculinist worldview. This worldview, from which I am exiled - yet it encompasses me - is essentially linear and hierarchical and has fixed centres of power. I, arriving from a beginning-to-be-told-to-be-heard history of rebellion, the story – beginning to be written to be read - of over a century and a half of surfaced feminist consciousness in Iran, cannot suffice in my practice to bringing new themes into my fiction but must push to alter the very formal structures governing the text itself, breaking the specific power relations that have conditioned and contextualized the rise of the towering textual canons - objects and practices - in whose very shadows my history and my story suffocate in silence, in exile. My very survival depends on my ability to change the conditions of my exile through my practice. *This* is the productive chasm. The chasm: A rift opened through exile, the crossing of borders of national – therefore, modernist – loyalty, entering into the transient state of not-belonging, of neither here nor there, of neither right now nor back then, of choosing to be neither absent nor quite present. (I must point out that this transient state - this ultimate alienation - is entirely independent of location; it was/is as likely to experience it in Iran as it was/is to face it in Canada.) In producing my texts, in practicing the art of textual creation, to tell the stories that I weave, I must subvert masculinist assumptions governing traditional modernist modes of narrative, hence my texts do not form around points and lines, the geometric essence of the linear and the hierarchical, the hallmarks of masculinist world.

Placing my work in the context of experimental feminist practice is in recognition of myself as engaged with other women and many men in struggle against forms of oppression. Notwithstanding my aversion to a technology that is the product of the masculinist war machine, at the moment, it seems to me that the frontier of experimentation is in the realm of digital communication. In fact the presence of semi-underground sites where so much activism has been stirred around political, personal and environmental issues of relevance to all of us convinces me that digital technologies can be and must be used, as much as they have the capacity for, to question, precisely, the very world view that is pushing them down our throats through strategies of global consumption. Clearly, I do not wish to engage in an ideological discussion around the privileges of access to the technology. My existence as an urbanite in North America precludes the relevance of such discussions. The technology conditions my daily existence, so I cannot but use it as I revolt. The irony inherent in the act of using the master's tool to bring down the master's house amplifies the productive power in the one who picks up the tool.

Earlier I admitted to a contingent positionality. It should be clear now that the contingency is not as much because of a single word in the title of my talk. In a more significant way, it is how this word colours my situated and historied specificity that puts me, as an individual and, because I take the privilege to speak, as a representative of a particular group in an uncertain position. This position bears the entire weight and ambiguity of the themes of this conference, for who else but the Iranian woman - individually and categorically - has been used - for over a century and a half - to

emblemize the very concepts and practices of tradition and modernity and the shifting ground of their interplay? Exile is the woman, trapped within and at once alienated from the narrative borders of a nation, the locationless nation, that has, to so much collective chagrin, constructed its masculinity on female oppression. The woman, the exile, is the absent presence in the dominant narrations of our histories, the presence populating the untold peripheries, the invisible footnotes. The woman, the exile, with her very appearance crossing the edges of alienating cultures; transgressing the borders of the kin's and the nation's belief in themselves, appropriating the half-life, half-light of masculinist languages, degrees, disciplines, discourses; and, in her uncanny fluency in these, gathering signs of acceptance, disapproval and rejection; leaving behind signs of tradition and of modernity, of worlds lived retroactively. The exile, the woman, rewriting the past in a ritual of revival, rewriting the present. The productive chasm of existence: Acts of resistance, strategies of subversion.