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Persian bloggers : exile, nostalgia and diasporic nationalism

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PERSIAN BLOGGERS: EXILE, NOSTALGIA AND DIASPORIC NATIONALISM

by

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ABSTRACT

Exiled Iranian bloggers employ the cyber sphere to create an imaginary national community to remain connected to the homeland and to encourage a sense of belonging to a nation they were forced to leave behind. This constructed cyber community carries the nostalgic impulse of the exiled bloggers. The imaginary virtual Iranian community enables them to share past memories and their anticipation of a future return to Iran. This nostalgia is also located in the engagement in activism as they express nationalism while living in the diaspora. What tends to be absent when bloggers are engaging in a diasporic nationalism and the nostalgic impulse is an engagement of their diasporic experience, because they assume their exile is a temporary state. As a result of detachment from the diasporic experience in the blogs and a total disengagement from life in the diaspora, their integration into the new country is kept at bay.

Key words: Persian Blogging; Iranian diaspora, exile; nostalgia; nation; nationalism.

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I. Introduction

Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has faced the biggest brain drain of its history. In the past three decades, under the rule of the Islamic theocracy in Iran, waves of Iranian activists, writers and journalists have migrated from their homeland and are living in exile in the diaspora. Some exiled Iranians have employed transnational cyber-media communications, but more specifically the blogosphere, in order to remain connected to the homeland and to enjoy a sense of belonging to a nation they were forced to leave behind. Under the shadow of censorship and media crackdown of the ultra-conservative rule of the Islamic government in Iran, blogging has become a phenomenon that has enabled Iranians to find new ways to challenge the political oppression of the theocratic rule and to communicate with one another effectively. John Kelly and Bruce Etling (2008) suggest: "Given the repressive media environment in Iran today, blogs may represent the most open public communications platform for political discourse" (2). For this exiled population, blogging has emerged as a way to transform the physical distance, which has enabled an engagement in long-distance political activism and expressions of nationalism while remaining in the diaspora. These writers are vigorously engaged in a global discourse with the homeland, expressing national sentiments and raising their voices about political crackdown and social injustice in the home country.

This research project will examine the blog entries of four exiled bloggers in the Western diaspora, their strong sense of nationalism and belonging to the homeland in the Persian blogosphere and their disengagement from the social and political development, for instance, federal elections, provincial strikes and immigration and settlement issues in their host countries. Further in this research, I will address the reasons and the issues related to the selection of these four specific exiled bloggers. Drawing on my experience as an exiled Iranian

journalist in Canada, the initial motivation for this study originated from my personal interest in reading the weblogs of Iranians living in the diaspora. The main goal of this research project is that cyber space and the virtual existence of a community of Iranians in the cyber sphere facilitates the exiled bloggers' belonging to a national community and engagement in the discourse over national issues and provides an opportunity to continue political activism on-line and long-distance, which speaks to their loyalty and commitment to political change in the homeland. According to Thomas Eriksen (2006), "immigrants develop transnational networks with people from their own country as an alternative or a supplement to full membership in one nation or the other" (1). This raises the question, what is it about this "imagined" community in the cyber sphere that echoes more commitment and supports more concern for national issues of the homeland than a concern for their diasporic experience in the host country?

In this research I am arguing that the blogosphere assists exiles to create an imaginary nation that facilitates expressions of diasporic nationalism through a nostalgic lens (Said, Anderson & Boym). According to Ernst Renan (1990), a nation is a soul, a spiritual principle [...] the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form (19). These exiled writers echo their sense of loss and despair and create an intimate and familiar space that frees them from the isolation and solitude of living in the host country. By looking to the past memories of the homeland and by projecting a hope for a future return, the cyber-space created by the exiled bloggers engages the past and future; as a result, their lives in the present time in the diaspora is absent in their weblogs. In the imagination of the exiled bloggers, a lost home that existed in the past is restored by a virtual Iran in this cyber sphere. According to Eriksen, "The Internet can be instrumental in creating and re-creating a shared, collective past among its users" (1). This imagined community, what I am naming a

community of Iranianness, echoes the pain and misery of the loss of a homeland they were forced to leave behind forever (Anderson 56). By mourning the loss and despair of the past and ultimately engaging the nostalgic impulse, the exiled bloggers invest their emotional resources to restoring the memory of an ideal homeland, in a sense disengaging them from the reality of their lives in the diaspora, which constitutes opportunities for integration and construction of new lives in a more secure society than that of their homelands.

Diasporic nationalism and the nostalgic impulse in the cyber imaginary community creates an intimate sphere, a familiar home where these exiled authors long to remain connected to a homeland disengaged from the social and political life of the host country. As a result of an absence of living in the diaspora through their blogging and a complete detachment from their lives beyond the virtual borders of the cyber sphere, the integration of the exiled authors into the new country is kept at bay. While exile and the reality of solitude and isolation have transformed the diasporic experiences of these exiled Iranian bloggers in the Western countries, this research acknowledges that the diasporic reality of these non-white and non-European migrants in the Western countries also put them in challenging positions. In fact, it is important to recognize that the isolation and solitude of the exiled bloggers may have not entirely emanated from within and the condition of migrancy such as race, racism, the colonial encounter and the marking of the 'other' may have played out in their access to opportunities as well as their social and political integration in the Western diasporas. However, given the scope of this research project, I will not be able to address the issue of exiled bloggers' isolation and onus of integration in the host countries. While the exiled bloggers assume their displacement is a temporary state, they project their hopes for a return to the homeland and ultimately remain distant from their lives in the diaspora. What is certain is the diasporic existence of the bloggers remains absent from their

imaginary Iranian community in the cyber sphere.

By remembering and mourning the past and hoping for a future return to the homeland, the bloggers create a space between an imagined homeland and their lives in the diaspora. As a result, these bloggers float between two domains: the past, crucial for maintaining their national identity, and the future, a promise of a return to the native land. For these exiled populations, the past is vital for preserving their roots to the homeland's culture, language and heritage. The future, on the other hand, promises a possible social and political transition in the homeland. As a result, living and preserving the past dissociates the bloggers from their present life in the diaspora.

According to Anderson (1984), “[n]ation is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign” (48). I am examining here the ways that four exiled Iranian bloggers create their own imagined community in their weblogs.

I argue that cyber space makes available the opportunity to create a national community of ‘Iranianness’ that signifies to these specific bloggers an opportunity to express nationalistic sentiments while living in the diaspora. This space provides an opportunity to look at the past, through a nostalgic lens, and to restore the home country they were forced to leave behind (Boym xv). These exiled bloggers have made claim to a virtual cyber space in their weblogs and have created an online “presence” as if they are still living in Iran and can play a role in the process of change in Iran.

This research analyzes the content of weblogs as the principal text for an exploration of the Persian blogosphere in the diaspora. I will be examining the blog posts of four exiled bloggers, Mehrangiz Kar, Masoud Behnoud, Nikahang Kowsar and Sibiltala in a period leading to the June 2009 presidential election and its aftermath in Iran. In addition to focusing on the weblogs of

four bloggers, I will analyze the cyber communication between the bloggers and their readers and compare the two texts.

Mehrangiz Kar is an exiled blogger, journalist and activist living in the United States. Kar was an outstanding lawyer and women's rights activist in Iran but the increasing pressures of the Iranian government forced her to flee her homeland in the early 1990s. Mehrangiz Kar pursued her activism through writing in her blog and for the Persian on-line media in the diaspora. Kar represents the first generation of exiled Iranian women in the diaspora who maintained a vibrant social and professional life before and after the 1979 revolution. Masoud Behnoud is one of the most prominent writers and journalists both before and after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Behnoud experienced imprisonment in solitary confinement in Tehran's notorious Evin prison, state-sponsored crackdowns on journalists and media censorship which forced him to flee Iran for Europe where he has since been living. Along with his continued cooperation with the Persian-speaking media in the diaspora, blogging has enabled him not only to remain in Iran's national memory and maintain his popularity but he is also free to express a sense of nationalism and belonging to the homeland. Behnoud belongs to the first generation of exiled Iranians that has experienced both monarchy and theocracy during his adult life in Iran. Behnoud's blog enjoys a wide range of readership, among them are a diverse group of activists, politicians and three generations of Iranians, whether in Iran or in the diaspora. The success of Behnoud's blog is his lively interaction and/or tension with his readers, as if instead of a cyber interaction, he is actually engaged in a face-to-face real discourse with Iranians in the homeland. Sibiltala, a pseudonym to protect her identity, belongs to a 30- year- old exiled Iranian woman living in Canada. Similar to the younger generation of Iranian bloggers in Iran and in the diaspora, Sibiltala's weblog employs cyber-media not only to express her views freely but also to closely

monitor and to speak about national political, social and cultural issues. Sibiltala belongs to the second generation of Iranian migrants living in the diaspora and to a group of Iranians who are too young to remember the 1979 revolution in Iran. Nikahang Kowsar is an internationally renowned cartoonist and blogger living in exile in Canada. Kowsar owes his popularity and success to a short-lived era of flourishing media during the reform government of the former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami in early 2000. Following a period of media crackdown in early 2000, Kowsar was detained for drawing controversial cartoons about Iranian government officials. He was later accused of acting against national security by Iranian government's hard-line judiciary. In order to save his life, he fled the country in 2003 and left his family and homeland. Kowsar's blog enjoys wide readership among Iranians in Iran and in diaspora.

My goal in selecting these particular Persian weblogs was an effort to echo Iranian exiled writers' national concerns and long-distance political engagements with the homeland. In addition to the attention of this research to the diversity of the bloggers in terms of age, gender and the political period they left Iran, my main objective is to explore their common interests, themes and attention to the issues related to their lives at home and in the diaspora. These bloggers share common reasons for living in exile in the diaspora; their lives have been interrupted by the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and such drastic transformations in the social and political life has resulted in their migration to the diaspora. These exiled bloggers are all currently residing in developed and democratic states in North America and Europe; they enjoy freedom of speech and have access to the most advanced technologies and transnational media to facilitate their communication with the homeland.

II. Iranian Diaspora – Blogging Revolution

The diasporic Iranian community is a vibrant and multi-faceted one. Comparable to the population of Iran, the fabric of the Iranian diaspora is religiously and ethnically diverse. An ethnically and culturally distinct population, historically and geopolitically exposed to the revolution and war, Iranians have established their lives as global citizens. The existing scholarship of the history of emigration of Iranians to Western diasporas recognizes three major waves of exodus. According to the Migration Information Source Sept. 2006 report (“Iran: A Vast Diaspora Abroad and Millions of Refugees at Home.”) Shirin Hakimzadeh has observed that the first wave of migration during the period of 1950 to 1979 consists of Iranians who migrated abroad, a move that was triggered by Iran’s slow economic recovery and resumption of oil production after World War II. The second major wave of migration of Iranians took place after the 1979 Islamic revolution and directly corresponds with the post-revolution aftershocks and implementation of restrictive Islamic rules in Iran. The mass exodus of Iranians after the revolution included a large population of religious and ethnic minorities, social and political activists and former affiliates of the monarchy that fled from the Iranian government’s persecution and crackdown. In addition, the 8-year Iran-Iraq war (1980 - 1988) greatly contributed to the migration of thousands of Iranian refugees and migrants abroad. The mass migration of skilled and professional Iranians took place in this era and resulted in the biggest brain drain of Iran’s history. The third wave of migration during the mid-1990s has continued to date. Thousands of Iranian professionals have shaped the fabric of the population who fled Iran during this period. The third wave of Iranians migrants were significantly motivated by violations of human rights and intensified oppression of religious and ethnic minorities by the Iranian government and its state-sponsored strict control of social, cultural and political public

and private spheres of Iranians in the country.

The beginning of the Internet era and a short-lived period of media openness and freedom of expression during the presidency of reformist Mohammad Khatami in early 2000 in Iran was followed by increasing frustration and disappointment towards the increasing crackdown, imprisonment and torture of media activists; this led to the mass migration of journalists, writers and bloggers in the West. The exiled writers who were forced to abandon their professional lives in Iran and sought refuge in a new country, employed cyber media, particularly blogging, in order to bridge the distance with a homeland they left behind. They found a virtual status in their weblogs to remain connected to the developments in their homeland.

A significant characteristic shared by the four bloggers I am examining here is a deep and broad understanding of the situation in Iran and its ongoing social and political change, as well as an extensive familiarity with the powerful players in the ruling Islamic government in Iran. In addition, these bloggers represent four displaced Iranians whose personal and social lives were transformed by the aftermath of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. The impact of the socio-political changes of the post-1979 revolution in Iran on the lives of these four bloggers reflects the painful episodes of exilic life experienced by thousands of Iranians in the diaspora. In spite of relative familiarity with the official languages of their host countries, the exiled bloggers have chosen to write in Persian. Although language is a barrier and also a factor involved in the authors' decision to write in Persian, by publishing their blog posts in a language that is familiar and intimate for their audience they are able to effectively communicate with a wider population of Persian speakers across the globe and also to express their sense of nostalgia and nationalism in exile in the diaspora in a candid and spontaneous manner (Boym, Said).¹ In addition, writing

¹ - In order to facilitate this research I will be providing the English translation.

in Persian also supports the exiled bloggers' attempt to expand the realms of their cyber presence and enables them to articulate their nostalgia through the romantic language of Persian literature and poetry. More importantly, since Persian is the official language of Iran (Persia), the four bloggers' intent to write in Persian may also be an indication of authentic Iranianness and a protection of national identity and cultural heritage in the diaspora.

Women, both in Iran and in the diaspora, play a crucial role in shaping the diversity and vitality of the Persian blogosphere. According to Saeid Golkar (2008), 76% percent of weblog authors are men and 24 percent are women (53). In spite of the fact that the existing scholarship on the balance of male and female bloggers indicates less activity of Iranian women on the Internet compared to Iranian men, it is important to note that women in Iran and in the diaspora have an active presence in the Persian blogosphere but tend to maintain a more cautious presence in the virtual sphere. In an attempt to protect their security, many female bloggers hide their real identities; adopt pseudonyms and blog anonymously. More importantly, the virtual existence and active presence of the Iranian women in the blogosphere remains a strong indication of their critical focus on gender-related issues and their determination to employ cyber-media in order to promote the cause of Iranian women. This is also one of the reasons why I have chosen to focus on two female (Kar and Sibiltala) and two male bloggers (Kowsar and Behnoud) living in exile in the diaspora. In Iran and in the diaspora, blogging has liberated Iranian women like Sibiltala and Kar from social and cultural restrictions and has enabled them to express their views freely and without fear of persecution and discrimination. More importantly, by writing in their blogs, Kar and Sibiltala have been able to facilitate information exchange with like-minded Iranians who are active in the women's movement in the homeland, bridging the geographical gaps and surpassing the censorship on the flow of specific information on foreign organizations that

actively pursue women's rights while living in the diaspora. The use of the pseudonym by female bloggers, such as Sibiltala, is a political decision so they are able to express opinions on subject matters that are considered taboo in Iranian culture.

The interesting aspect of these particular bloggers is that each author develops a personalized virtual space which maintains an intimate and familiar nationalist literature that suits his/her exilic experience and each has different approaches to expressing their sense of loss and despair over separation from the homeland; however, what they have in common is an undivided and unanimous message of Iranianness in their weblogs. These bloggers, particularly Sibiltala who left Iran at a very young age, share a common desire to maintain their Iranian roots and cultural heritage and unanimously express a desire for the restoration of the Iranian nation as they imagine it. Boym (2001) suggests that the "[i]nability to return home is both a personal tragedy and an enabling force. This doesn't mean that there is no nostalgia for the homeland; only that this kind of nostalgia precludes restoration of the past" (252). The cyber space these bloggers have created and share is driven by a nationalistic and nostalgic impulse while often adopting different approaches and holding different views on issues such as personal and social values, politics and perspectives on the ways the transition of the homeland to a democracy should occur. For instance, Sibiltala has not lived her adult life under the ultra-orthodox Islamic system in Iran and believes in unrestricted freedom of speech that facilitates the construction of an Iranian society that tolerates opposing voices and democratic values not dictated by the state. On the other hand, Behnoud and Kar belong to a generation that witnessed the transition of Iran under the rule of monarchy to the establishment of the Islamic government in 1979. They believe in resilience and tolerance towards the democratization process. Kowsar has experienced the disappointment and frustration of the failure of the reform movement in Iran and is critical

of the lost opportunities of establishing a civil society in Iran.

These four exiled bloggers create a virtual Iranian identity in their weblogs and this familiar space separates them from the isolation and solitude of the exile in the new country. It is important to recognize that the nous of this diasporic sense of separation should not entirely fall on the exiled Iranian bloggers and the structural migration systems in the host countries also play a key role in isolation of the non- European migrants and their integration into Western societies. It is in this imagined sphere of Iranianness that the bloggers relive their past memories and maintain a sense of belonging to a national community that does not really exist in the diaspora. In spite of the fact that the four selected bloggers share a nationalist impulse, they have different ways of expressing their nostalgic sentiments. All four bloggers adopt diverse ways of expressing their sense of loss and pain of the forced migration, however nostalgia is a collective impression that the exiled bloggers share in their virtual existence in the cyber space. Kowsar's frustration with exile and inability to contribute to the cause of Iranians in the homeland is reflected in the following post:

Neda's² name comes up at least once or twice when I speak about current crisis in Iran with American and Canadian friends. In this part of the world, we have seen the video clip (of Neda's murder) hundreds of times, we have cried tens of times, we have repeatedly thought about what we would have done, if we were living there. What could we do...? Neda symbolizes innocence of a large group of people that are seeking justice from these oppressive groups. Neda's blood will one day haunt these tyrannical groups down. Revenge is not the answer! Never! [...] For me, Neda is a symbol of peace and serenity and denial of violence. Neda is the voice of a nation that is exhausted by the

² Neda is the name of a girl whose death during the post-election protests was captured by a cell phone camera.

violence and is in quest of freedom and democracy. (July 30, 2009)

As expressions of nationalism, nostalgia and human dignity are central to the virtual existence of the exiled bloggers on the net, the diasporic experience of the authors is absent from their Iranian cyber communities. These virtual communities facilitate the bloggers' existence in a familiar sphere, ease their pain of exile in the foreign land and assist them to relive the past memories and promises hope for a future return. In a birthday note to his father in Iran, Kowsar's pain of separation from his family is reflected in this blog post:

I have been constantly thinking about you these days. Six years of separation. Some day, we may meet again in the South Pole, years from now. I hope there comes a day that everyone appreciates you [...] a day will come that wise people will realize what you have achieved. Throughout the years, these individuals were rare to find. But their small numbers demonstrated their true values. Happy Birthday Dear Dad. (May 29, 2009)

The present however is absent from this virtual national sphere in the diaspora and the four selected weblogs resonate a total disengagement of the bloggers' with their lives in the new country. Such detachment in their diasporic existence impedes seizing the opportunity of embracing the new life and engaging with the social and political life in the host country. Instead of moving forward with their life in their adopted country, by looking backward through a nostalgic lens and engaging in long-distance political activism in an imaginary national cyber sphere, these exiled authors have chosen to embrace their cyber existence. Kowsar explains:

Why did I launch this blog?

During the years (in Canada) that a part of my memory was lost, I had forgotten a period of my life (in Iran), my psychotherapist suggested that I should remember a phase of my life and start writing about my memories and express my feelings. (May 24, 2009)

While the exiled bloggers remain content in the comfort of an intimate cyber Iranian community, they tend to overlook the challenges and opportunities that the diasporic experience in a developed and democratic country may offer. In addition, far from the oppression and crackdown of the Islamic government, the exiled Iranian bloggers take advantage of the freedom of expression and technological advancements in their host countries; however, on rare occasions they will publish announcements of an event that is related to the Iranians in the diaspora, distribute petitions or announce a press release that condemns violations of human rights and imprisonment, it is unlikely that the exiled bloggers will incorporate their diasporic existence in their on-line virtual discourses.

Unlike some weblogs that deal with personal issues, these particular weblogs and bloggers actually place themselves in the public sphere and address a general audience and social and political topics of interest. While these bloggers share their personal experiences in the host country, such as meetings with interesting individuals and attending music concerts, the majority of posts focuses on the ongoing challenges of Iranians in the homeland and expresses their personal views about a perspective of change in Iran. Moreover, the authors and the readers communicate with each other through the cyber media and the interaction between the two creates a dialogue surrounding the debates on certain national issues. The communication and tension, facilitated by physical distance, between the bloggers and their audience establishes a long-distance relationship on common national concerns such as absence of personal and social freedoms, violations of human rights and persecution of activists in Iran. What is interesting is that the exiled authors not only assume they are fulfilling a national responsibility, they also believe they have an existence in the homeland. In an imaginary letter written by a young girl in Iran, Behnoud echoes the struggles of the young generation in the homeland:

My generation is seeking peace, a better atmosphere to live. (My generation) is tired of lies, empty and rusted words. (My generation) It has been exposed to bullet, blood and death. But (this generation) is determined not to turn into a blind rebel and fighter to eternally live with these words. We demanded the revolutionary songs from (Iran) the state broadcasting when we re-lived childhood memories in our peaceful underground lives, when the children of the tortured and the torturers gathered under the peace flags of 2nd of Khordad³ and when we demonstrated our affection to the homeland with love, and not with blood. (June 22, 2009)

Regardless of the authors' views on the political group that may have taken the helm of power in Iran, the posts reflect the bloggers' collective support for implementation of social and political change through civil and democratic means. Fascinated by the courage and determination of the young generation in Iran that seeks non-violence democratic change in the country, exiled Behnoud expresses his nationalist message in this imaginary letter sent from a young Iranian girl:

My generation is engaged in making history and is responsible for it too now. Even today, these words that are written by my hands are a part of the responsibility that my generation is taking. Now it is our turn to make a history, a history that avoids the curse of the next generation, a generation that had not welcomed this history. The blood that has unjustly been spilled will not be forgotten. This blood will make history, it will make a future, a future that is peaceful and belongs to silent fighters, those that have raised their hands to show victory. The future belongs to the unique image of an oppressed nation that have reacted with tolerance and silence and a nation that has put the (1979)

³ - 2nd of Khordad represents the reform movement of former President Khatami in early 2000 in Iran

revolution behind. A nation, that writes its slogans on small pieces of paper. This is a nation that doesn't believe in death and is full of life. (June 22, 2009)

In Iran, freedom of expression and the press are regulated by the constitution of the Islamic Republic. Due to the Iranian government's strict press policies and the crackdown on the media critical of the Iranian government and dissident journalists, hundreds of publications have been closed by Iran's hard-line judiciary and media activists were imprisoned, tortured and forced to confess to acting against national security. In July 12, 2009, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) described Iran, with a total of 41 journalists in jail, as the world's biggest prison for journalists and cyber-dissidents and expressed concerns about Iran becoming the world's most dangerous place for them to operate. The OpenNet Initiative (ONI) recently reported on the media crackdown and internet censorship in Iran by noting that because the Iranian press is under the control of religious conservatives who sit above elected officials in Iran's peculiar hybrid political system, and because that conservative control is used to silence dissent, Iranians who think differently go online to express their views (5). As a result of intense crackdown and repression of the Iranian government against the independent press, Internet and social networks such as Facebook have played a vital role in the flow of information from Iran and cyber media and blogs represent the most open public communication tool for social and political discourse among Iranians that take initiatives to surpass the Iranian government's censorship and crackdown on the media and freedom of expression.

The flourishing of blogs, in Iran and in the diaspora, created a new sphere for Iranians to freely express their ideas on social and political life, and weblogs in particular have revolutionized the way Iranians engage with the world and one another. According to Farid Shirazi (2008), "Iran is the third largest country of bloggers [...] and one of the world's most

vibrant blogospheres, surpassing the rest of the Middle East” (303). According to Golkar (2006), Persian is the fourth largest language community of Weblogs in the world (52). The diversity of Iranian bloggers include Iranian politicians, secular and religious groups, dissidents, exiles, human rights activists, ethnic and religious groups, writers and artists, youth, and women and students in Iran and in the diaspora to communicate with like-minded activists. ONI (2009) reports: “The Persian blogosphere has been heralded as one of the largest and most active in the world. The number of active Persian blogs is estimated to be approximately 60,000” (2). The content of blogs consists of a wide range of opinions representing diverse topics ranging from politics, human rights, and poetry to religion and culture.

Although the blogs are filtered or blocked by the Iranian government, the activities of Iranians on the Internet continue to grow at a fast rate and cyber media and blogs continue to be the most influential means for democratic discourse and information exchange under an Islamic government. Kelly and Etling (2008) note that “[e]ven in a restrictive media environment blogs can provide a more open political discussion space than is otherwise allowed in authoritarian regimes” (23). The Iranian government has sensed the influence that blogging has on rejecting its legitimacy on public opinion and has considered cyber media a threat to its existence. The Iranian government has launched widespread suppression of open discourse, has imposed punitive actions against Internet activists, filtered the blogs, intensified imprisonment and torture of bloggers who are considered an enemy of the Iranian government and bloggers have been accused of acting against national security and staging velvet revolutions. Following the Iranian government’s crackdown on media and Internet activists, bloggers were sent to jail and websites were blocked.

III. Blogging, Exile and Nostalgia

Under the rule of the ultra-conservative theocratic Iranian regime, hundreds of activists, in search of freedom have fled Iran's state-sponsored persecutions and are living in exile in the diaspora. The exiled populations of Iranian activists have suffered imprisonment, torture and prosecution and have been forced to flee their homes.

For the displaced population of Iranian citizens who are unable to revisit their homeland, the exilic experience is an open wound. Edward Said (2000) characterizes exile as the "unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted" (171). Hammed Shahidian (2000) suggests that "[e]xile means a mind torn asunder, pieces missing, pieces extra, memories convoluted" (72). Exiled Iranian writers who long for a past of their homeland and constantly hope for a future return seek a sense of belonging to a national community in the diaspora.

Nostalgia is an inseparable part of the exilic experience in the diaspora. A sense of loss and despair and a desire to return to a homeland left behind confines the exile's mind and soul in the alien land. In order to alleviate the pain of exile and reconnect their emotional bonds with a homeland they were forced to leave behind, Iranian bloggers reconstruct their past memories in an imaginary homeland in their weblogs, a national community, as Boym suggests, fantasizes a home that does not really exist in the new country.

Blogging has helped Iranian authors create imaginary transnational and trans-political spaces to replace an exilic experience in the diaspora, however, by creating this imagined national community, the myth of an idealized homeland, what Boym refers to as 'the romance of one's own fantasy', is replaced with virtual nationalistic and nostalgic sentiments. Boym (2001) suggests two kinds of nostalgia: "the restorative and the reflective. Restorative nostalgia stresses

the nostos [return home] and attempts a trans-historical reconstruction of the lost home. Reflective nostalgia thrives on algia, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately” (xviii). These exiled bloggers in particular epitomize the restorative nostalgia with a looking backward to a territorial land that is rooted in their history and cultural heritage. In their cyber communities, Iranian bloggers assume the responsibility of restoring a past in their homeland while remaining in exile. Boym (2001) suggests that “restorative nostalgia returns and rebuilds one’s homeland with paranoiac determination” (354). While the exiled are deprived from physically returning to Iran, they create a national community of Iranianness in their community in the blogosphere, a virtual national belonging that is recreated through a longing for a memory of what they have left behind in the homeland.

The exiled bloggers’ cyber existence assists them to remember the time that they belonged to a national community and grants them the freedom to relive their past in an imaginary space that resonates Iranianness in the foreign land. Reconstructing and reviving the past memories restores the image of a lost homeland and liberates the bloggers from the alienation of exile and the prospects of future return appear real and possible. Restorative nostalgia allows exiled bloggers’ cyber presence to renew the past memories, and reflect on the life that existed in the past. For the exiled populations, the longing to return and the mourning for the loss of the homeland becomes a part of the new existence and an enduring ritual of everyday life in the diaspora. Kowsar explains the pain of separation in this post:

This morning, I felt distressed when I remembered the incidents and several experiences of the past 12 years, (a period) that fortunately or unfortunately I have spent half of it outside Iran [...]. Safety of many, including myself was not secured (in Iran) so I was forced to migrate [...]. I was separated from my wife and child for four years and many may not be

able to comprehend this (dilemma) but you should go through the consequences of such loss and despair on both sides in order to understand this experience. [...] One that has been forced to (exile) and is separated from one's child and wife does not have similar experiences with the one that has abandoned his/her family to divorce. (May 24, 2009)

Frustrated over the inability to return and motivated to remain connected to the social and political life in the homeland, exiled activists have generated a powerful and dynamic force to employ transnational cyber media to create an imagined community of Iranianness in the blog sphere. Boym (2001) suggests that exiles "develop a peculiar kind of diasporic intimacy, a survivalist aesthetics of estrangement and longing in imagined homelands of the exiles who never returned" (xix). The determination to create a cyber community in the blogosphere is rooted in the authors' desire to restore the memory of an imaginary homeland in their blogs and liberate their souls from the isolation of exile and alienation in the foreign land. Boym (2001) argues that "ordinary exiles often become artists of their lives, remaking themselves and their second homes with great ingenuity" (253). Exiled bloggers' initiative to create an imagined community of Iranianness in their weblogs while living in the diaspora is a coping mechanism to diminish the isolation of the strange and alien land. In the 5th anniversary of launching his blog, exiled Kowsar writes a thank you letter to his readers:

Dear Patient Readers of "Memoirs of an Angry Exiled" Weblog,

Thank you for reading a large number of my posts and thanks to those who have continued reading my blog. I have lived with this weblog (and lived) with its readers and with those who wrote comments. I have lived with those that I made jokes about and pulled their legs (on-line). (May 24, 2009)

The reconstructed imagined national community in these blogs carries a nostalgic impulse

of authentic 'Iranianness' as it shares common culture, language and heritage and a strong sense of attachment to the homeland. While exilic experience deprives the bloggers from participation in national debates, the authors claim a virtual presence and engage in a debate with the homeland. In a letter addressed to I.R.⁴ Sibiltala writes

Hello I.R.,

After eight years, I saw my bedroom in Tehran today. I looked out through my bedroom window and I looked into the window of my dead grandfather. I have missed him immensely. I wasn't there when he died. They informed me fifteen days after his death, I damn them with poison of sorrow. I used to get up and look into his window before I sleep in my bed. I could tell he is still up and (he is) reading a book when the light was on. And then I could go to sleep. (May 15, 2009)

The nostalgic impulse in Sibiltala's blog post is an expression of despair and agony for childhood memories in a homeland. The author's exilic isolation in the diaspora and projections of hope for change and return to the homeland ignites the longing of Sibiltala to articulate her sense of loss in a letter to her homeland's authorities:

Dear I. R.,

How would you understand separation? It (separation) is something that elucidates the continental distance with the very first teardrop that falls from one's eyes from this part of the world to the other part of the world. One would not imagine that a space in between a small television, the computer monitor and the camera would resonate so much sense of nostalgia and separation. With the very first teardrop, one would feel it (nostalgia). In between two cameras, dear daddy, could you move the computer, a bit further [...] Oh daddy, how much the trees have grown! When did you install the pond? Was it always

⁴ Islamic Republic

there? When the tears are falling down, in between crying out loud and extreme mourning and grief, one would decide to write you a letter. (May 15, 2009)

Through access to advanced cyber media in the diaspora, Sibiltala brings life to her imagined Iranian community in the cyber sphere. The nostalgic urge inspires the author to reconstruct a cyber presence in the homeland located in the past. Similar to the other three bloggers, Sibiltala shares a sense of nostalgia for a homeland that she left at an early age. Her virtual existence in the weblog is an opportunity to look backwards, her life in the diaspora is focused on a time that she may be able to return to Iran, which undermines her presence in the host country.

For these particular Iranian bloggers, migration to a new country and looking forward to a new home in the diaspora is not an alternative solution; instead by looking back to the past through memories and restoring the lost home in an imaginary national community they seek to heal the despair and pain of solitude in the foreign land. An imagined nation in the cyber sphere of the weblogs assists these exiled bloggers to travel to the past, an imagined time and space that resemble living at home, intimate and familiar. The notion of stepping out of one's national heritage and culture makes the exiled population's diasporic experience a complicated and multifaceted phenomenon. Boym (2001) suggests "[e]xile is both about suffering in banishment and springing into a new life. The leap is also a gap, often unbridgeable; it reveals an incommensurability of what is lost and what is found" (256). Moreover, survival tactics to reconcile with the new environment in the diaspora do not seem to diminish the anguish of the displacement and separation. Past memories while living in exile restore the life that existed in the past. The intimacy of this on-line community is a complex flow of two zones of time and space reflecting their presence and absence from the homeland, fluctuating between nostalgic feelings of despair and hope, proximity and separation. Boym (2001) suggests that nostalgia is

longing for a place but also yearning for a different time (xv). The intimacy of the imagined cyber community relieves the isolation of exilic life. The familiar sphere enables the bloggers to dedicate the virtual space to mourning the homeland they left behind and indulging in a shared nostalgia for a by-gone era. Reflecting upon memories of the day Kowsar left his homeland in exile, he writes:

It is now six years that I have been separated from my homeland. I am extremely nostalgic, but [...] I don't claim I will return home in a few months. When I was hit by my last moments in Tehran's Mehrabad airport, I anticipated that a day would come that an oppressive force will prevail (in Iran) and no one will be able to stop them. (June 26, 2009)

By reflecting on the experiences that landed Kowsar in prison, the author acknowledges the impossible notion of return to the homeland and as a result he lives within virtual territories of his imagined Iranian community in the diaspora. For Kowsar, his cyber activity acts as a coping mechanism that alleviates his feeling of loss and echoes his nostalgia for the homeland. Situated in between the past and the future, Kowsar is positioned in a third surreal virtual space that enables the author to alleviate the isolation and alienation of life in the diaspora. Because of his active participation in the virtual community, he maintains an active presence in Iran. In his cyber imaginary community of Iranianness, Kowsar remembers the familiar past and is concerned that prospects for change in the homeland remain uncertain:

It appears the mottos⁵ that we promoted in the early revolution are about to vanish: we now have neither the republic nor the Islamic values that they had claimed (to establish). Our dependence has also been violated by our nuclear dependence to the Russians. And we have forgotten about freedom long ago. (June 12, 2009)

⁵ Independence, Freedom and the Islamic Republic

The existence of the exiled bloggers in the diaspora is the shuttling between two layers of living, those of homeland memories and those of imagining their return to their homeland in the future. Nostalgic sentiments create the impression of living in a temporary state in the host country. By existing in a transient state, the exiled authors are living in between past and future. For these exiled authors, the past is not going to be forgotten, it is restored and remembered and makes the present alienation in the diaspora endurable. The tendency for the central discourse of the bloggers is focused around the events that happened in the past or what they hope takes place in the future. While restoring the past will not secure a future return of the authors to the homeland, the impact that such nostalgic nationalism has on the bloggers will transform their exilic experience in the diaspora. Behnoud's writing skills and his extensive use of metaphors express his concerns for the homeland in his blog as he remembers Iran's historical milestones through a nationalistic lens. Behnoud writes:

My generation is the offspring of the revolution. For the same very reason, this generation decided to dedicate a glorious celebration to the next generation, to establish peace. A peace that doesn't eliminate the enemy, but it fosters friendship for its generation and for the future generations. My generation has struggled for peace. Outside the safe make up of the family, my generation has exercised friendship, a friendship that is free from any ideology. My generation has exercised peace but it has not distributed weapons and political statements in its underground life. My generation practiced music, danced and created joyful moments. My generation has been contented; it made jokes and memories and laughed at the oppression. My generation has chosen to live and it has eliminated the slogans of "Down with..." (June 22, 2009)

In his exilic isolation and in his imagined national community, Behnoud remembers

episodes of Iran's history when the popular uprising turned into the 1979 Islamic revolution and the monarchy was overthrown. The author restores the past memories in a contemporary context and imagines how the younger generation of Iranians may take a similar path in the future. In his virtual Iranian community, unable to return to the homeland, he relives 30-year old memories of his presence in the political development in Iran and recreates an imaginary role for the young generation of Iranians, discouraging them from revolutionary sentiments in the future.

By focusing on the homeland, these exiled bloggers reconstruct a sense of national belonging in their blogs, thereby protecting their cultural roots. Boym (2001) states: "It is the promise to rebuild the ideal home that lies at the core of many powerful ideologies of today, tempting us to relinquish critical thinking for emotional bonding. The danger of nostalgia is that it tends to confuse the actual home with the imaginary one" (xvi). By creating an imagined national community through a nostalgic lens, the uprooted bloggers are looking for ways to validate their authentic Iranianness and maintain their Iranian roots in the diaspora. The imagined community of Iranianness in the cyber sphere assists these bloggers to alleviate the pain and loss of exile and renew their emotional bonds with a nation that existed in the past.

By expressing the pain and despair of their alienated and uprooted exilic lives in the diaspora, exiled writers establish their national belonging and cultural roots in an imagined national community in their blogosphere. In a letter to the Iranian government, Sibiltala insists on the emotional bonds with the homeland and the importance of maintaining roots in the diaspora.

Dear I. R.,

And what do you know about root? You would not need to fly from one place to the other in order to uproot yourself and displace your deep roots. The root is much stranger than these claims. It is impossible to liberate yourself from your origin. Root is something that

generates a sarcastic definition of freedom [...] what is it in the roots that confine you when you step into “freedom”? (May 16, 2009)

Banned from geographical territories of the homeland, the virtual community of the blogosphere is the authors’ imaginary license to escape the realms of exile and return to a time that they were actually living in Iran, a revisiting of the past that in reality is impossible. Shahidian defines exile as a “redefining and remapping borders, homeland and host land. Borders become the sites of difference between interiority and exteriority; they are points of infinite regressions” (72). Disengagement with the life in the diaspora makes the present experience of these exiled bloggers an exhausted effort to join the forces of a time and space that no longer exists. Frustrated with her exilic life, Sibiltala is thriving for a familiar sense of belonging and intimacy in the diaspora. While the national community that allows her to preserve and protect her Iranian roots does not exist in the host country, she has created an imaginary native land in her weblog. Sibiltala writes:

Roots and love of one’s native land is “something” that one cannot describe. I assume that our despair is more rooted than these claims. If this is something that is impossible to define, it is also an eternal feeling [...] The moment one is connected to his/her homeland through improved technology and is able to look into one’s bedroom window and the dead grandfather’s bedroom window, a space that is “in between” one’s mind and the advanced virtual technology, in between this space, tears fall down and one would comfort oneself. (May15, 2009)

This joyful return to the bedroom window is associated with a sense of nostalgia and mourning for what has been lost or left behind. The acts of remembrance, expressions of regret and remorse drive the exiled subject to take action to restore an ideal homeland and to bridge the

gap between the past and the future. By writing about the past and remembering a utopian homeland through a nostalgic lens, the blogs have become the meeting place for organizing virtual demonstrations and expressing solidarity and unity with the Iranians at home.

The dual existence of the bloggers in exile in the cyber community and constant shift between past and present generate a state of living in between two time zones, neither of which exist in the present. The challenge of establishing new roots and a sense of belonging within a diasporic community beyond their cyber existence remains a real one for these exiled bloggers. Their hyperreal existence remains remote both from their homeland and from the new country in which they physically reside.

IV. Blogging and Diasporic Nationalism

For these particular exiled Iranian bloggers, long distance nationalism in the diaspora is central to the debates in their blogosphere. Blogs have assisted exiled bloggers to invent a virtual community of like-minded Iranians. Such a cyber community of Iranians has facilitated the bloggers to engage, communicate and express nationalism with members of a nation that share a similar language, culture and roots in the homeland. The displaced bloggers construct a virtual national community in exile to restore their membership in a nation they were forced to leave behind. Moreover, belonging to a community of Iranianness is a significant component of the virtual community of the exiled bloggers. In their cyber community, the exiled authors claim a long distance political activist space in the diaspora on the net that is engaged in a diasporic nationalism. Benedict Anderson (1984) states that:

It is quite possible to conceive of the emergence of the new imagined national communities without any one, perhaps all of them being present. What, in a positive sense, made the new communities imaginable was a half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction between a system of production and productive relations (capitalism), a technology of communications (print) and the fatality of human linguistics diversity. (56)

These exiled bloggers, as Anderson suggests employ the blogosphere and create an individualized imagined nation in their cyber existence while living in the diaspora. Detached from a national community to which they belonged in the past and uprooted from their authentic Iranian culture and heritage in the homeland, they long to join a familiar Iranian community and establish a surreal existence within the sphere of their weblogs. Said (2000) argues "[n]ationalism is an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage. It affirms the home created by a community of language, culture, and customs; and, by so doing, it fends off

exile, fights to prevent its ravages” (176). By writing about the homeland, its social and political life and its ongoing struggles for change, the exiled Iranian bloggers express a sense of nationalism through a nostalgic lens and feel they belong to an Iranian virtual nation in the cyber sphere, an instrumental sphere that is emotionally empowering and provides them with an effective means to look to the past in a homeland where they share common culture and heritage. As Erikson has argued: “Nations thrive in cyberspace, and the Internet has in the space of only a few years become a key technology for keeping nations (and other abstract communities) together. Nations which have lost their territory [...] nations which are for political reasons dispersed [...], nations with large temporary diasporas overseas [...] or nations where many citizens work temporarily or permanently abroad [...] appear in many guises on the Internet - from online newspapers and magazines to semi-official information sites and "virtual community" homepages. (77)

By writing about national issues and expressing solidarity with the people and feeling the suffering of the people that they were forced to leave behind, these exiled bloggers assume the task of creating a virtual imaginary community of Iranian society and collective nationalism in the diaspora. In their imaginary national existence in the cyber space, these bloggers desperately seek to contribute to a homeland that existed in the past and does not exist in the new country.

While cyber-nationalism in the diaspora has effectively altered the positioning of these exiled bloggers by including them in a national community, engaging in the ongoing process of transformation in the homeland and living a fantasy of participating in social and political life in Iran, they see themselves as involved and invested in crucial ways as if they are still residing in Iran. By providing a critique of the Western lifestyle as complacent and indicating that a certain conventional characterization of life is defined and dictated to her in the diaspora, Sibiltala

supports the notion that despite claims that the West is democratic, she claims it is not. Instead, Sibiltala expresses her nationalism for Iran and belonging to a community of Iranians. Unable to return to the homeland, Sibiltala claims a virtual space of Iranianness in her blogs.

I live with Iran. This is the truth. I am happy that I live with Iran. If my life wasn't engaged with Iran, I could be a relatively happy and lifeless human being. I was like those that live in the West, those that are slaves of daily routines. Certain conventional characterization of life are defined and dictated to them: This is freedom, these are rights, this is democracy, and this is prosperity. (June 22, 2009)

As the author restores an imaginary existence in the homeland, she recreates a dual virtual presence that is neither in Iran nor in the diaspora. The exiled blogger overlooks her existence in the diaspora, and as a result, she confines her presence to a blissful but surreal longing for a time she belonged to a national community. What is it about nationhood and a homeland that existed somewhere in the past that has become a platform for expression of nationalism and Iranianness in the weblogs? The existing scholarship offers different interpretations of nation and nationalism. Benedict Anderson (1984) argues that nation "is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow- members, meet them, or even hear of them; yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (48). While these exiled bloggers long for membership in a national community and belonging to Iranian nation, they compensate their physical absence from the homeland by creating an imaginary community of Iranianness in the virtual sphere. Diasporic nationalism reflected in the cyber national community enables the exiled bloggers to fulfill their lives on an alien soil in exile, share concerns and aspirations with members of a community of Iranians and relive their past memories in a nation that is imagined in their virtual existence and doesn't exist in the host

country. In the case of the exiled Iranian bloggers, Sibiltala's diasporic nationalism and praise for Iranians exercising their democratic rights in the June 2009 presidential election is reflected in the following post.

I am going to vote because I don't want to be alienated from this spirited nation (Iranians), and the good and bad uniqueness. I want my life and my culture to be tied to this nation. I am going to vote and while I am browsing at the news, newspapers and Internet, no matter how unfortunate we have been, I am grateful to God that at least we are alive. We are extraordinarily thriving. (June 12, 2009)

By writing in her virtual imagined community of Iranianness, Sibiltala expresses her emotional nationalist sentiments. By constructing a virtual community of Iranianness, she wants desperately to hold on to an imaginary nation to express nationalism, while remaining unconcerned about her life in the diaspora. The concepts of "home" and "the Iranian People" mobilized by these four bloggers become symbols of nationalism expressed through a nostalgic view of events such as solidarity with politically active Iranians at home, and condemnations of brutal state-sponsored crackdowns on peaceful protests in the homeland.

Through the expression of a diasporic nationalism, the exiled bloggers form a united nationalist front that engages in the social and political life of the homeland through their cyber sphere. The presidential elections in 2009 led to an increase in online political organizing, which provided a further impetus for increasingly contentious controls on the web sites used by legitimate opposition contenders. These particular bloggers were constantly engaged with the election fallout in Iran and reacted towards the violent crackdown on peaceful protests of Iranian people by security agents of the Iranian government, engaging in these discussions as if they were in the homeland. As a result, the debates in the blogosphere focused on what was considered

Iranian and related to Iran, and life in the diaspora existed where there was an event and/or public announcement organized to express solidarity with the people of the homeland. In a testament to her strong sense of nationalism and commitment to the process of change in the homeland, Kar writes:

We keep asking each other where in the moment of history we are standing. Responses are inspiring and they promise “change”. Each of us have personal angles, we have particular judgments and share our views: It’s time for the (Iranian) government to genuinely assess its shaken legitimacy [...] It is time to support all political prisoners [...] It is time for all Iranians, in Iran and in the diaspora to contemplate the criticisms and defiance that deferred solidarity and unity. (July 12, 2009)

The bloggers’ constant reflections on the pain and suffering of Iranians and the expression of solidarity with like-minded activists in the homeland are manifestations of their cyber presence. It solidifies the idea that they are still living in Iran. Distressed and saddened by the violent crackdown of the Iranian government security agents against Iranians who had protested the election results and frustrated from his inability to contribute to the cause of his nation, Behnoud writes:

Look, my Iran has turned Green. The streets represent the redness of its flag. And its people demonstrate the whiteness of denying violence.

My Iran, Look...

Green, White and Red

Look, I have demanded the glory and respect for my Iranianness. (June 22, 2009)

In his cyber surreal existence, Behnoud’s imagination is drawing the flag of his homeland. In the cyber imagined Iranian community, the author’s creative mind is playing with the colors of the

flag: Green reminds his readers of a current civil green movement⁶ that was ignited by the Iranian people during the June 2009 presidential election in Iran. Red symbolizes the blood of people in the author's homeland who were killed by security agents of the Iranian government during the massive protests in June and July 2009 of the election fallout. White represents the peaceful nature of Iranians' uprising. In his imagined cyber presence, Behnoud seeks his Iranianness and claims a metaphorical authentic Iran as if he is carrying the flag in the streets of his homeland. The determination to invent a cyber community in the blogs is rooted in the exiled authors' desire to take steps towards preserving their national identity through a nostalgic lens.

The bloggers' emotional bonds with the homeland along with the projected hopes for a future return generate a kind of virtual nostalgic nationalism that is not only an affirmation of Iranianness in exile but also a personal space to relive and remember the memories of homeland. "Exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one's native place; what is true of all exiles is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both" (Said 185). Such an intimate virtual national community however exists in a time that is constantly shifting between past memories and future aspirations of the homeland. "A life of exile moves according to a different calendar, and is less seasonal and settled than life at home. Exile is life led outside habitual order. It is nomadic, de-centered, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew" (Said 186). In the virtual Iranian community, the persistent pain and inability to contribute to the cause of the nation is replaced with cyber expressions of unity and solidarity with the Iranians that are trapped under state-sponsored violent crackdowns in the homeland. In the aftermath of the

⁶ Green symbolizes supporters of Mir Hussein Mousavi, reformist contender in 2009 presidential election in Iran.

crackdown on reform supporters in Iran, Kar wrote in her post election commentary:

Iranian diaspora is not missing a moment in the cyber sphere. Solidarity and unity with the post-election political determination have never been so widespread and unconditional. [...]. Since me and like-minded friends are forced out to exile, we have no other choice but to live “on-line” and respond to questions of the younger generation, for which we often don’t have clear answers [...] everyone is busy with on-line exchange in the Facebook [...]. In one side of the scene (in Iran), hopeful young players have exposed their fragile bodies to oppression and violence, in the other side (in the diaspora), young players denounce the violence and inform the world [...]. I feel that the positive and negative energy of the huge events that is going on in Tehran’s streets has captured my space in exile. (June 2009)

Cyber-communications has assisted these particular exiled writers to pursue national discourse over developments in Iran and freely exercise an online dissent while remaining within the safe virtual borders of their weblogs in the diaspora. During the June 2009 presidential election campaign, in the virtual Iranian community of their weblogs the exiled bloggers expressed support for their candidate of choice, recreated the joyful street celebrations, shared views after the election fallout, expressed solidarity with the protesters that accused the Iranian government of vote rigging and condemned the loss of lives during crackdown of the Iranian government against peaceful protests. Similar to other public virtual spheres, the weblogs carry the tension of differentiating between the best methods to protect the Iranians from the violent crackdown and the best contributing forces to the social and political movement in the homeland. Interestingly, similar approaches were adopted by the bloggers during the election fall out and massive protest demonstrations in Iran. Behnoud reflects on participation of Iranians in the election and speaks as if he is actually participating in the process in Iran:

Good for you that waited in the long lines and voted and protected your vote from vigilantes that want to hide behind few votes of their supporters. I was hoping I would not see such a scene in my lifetime. You witnessed that we did everything within our abilities to persuade people to participate and vote and have the final say. The June 12th vote turned into the most politically motivated vote of (Iran's) contemporary history. Whatever the consequences bring about depends on the nation's initiatives and statesmen's dignity and pragmatism. (June 12, 2009).

Behnoud's blog exhibits the author's constant engagement with the national issues and promotion of nationalism among Iranians. For Behnoud, blogging has emerged as an instrumental emotional mechanism to physically remain in the diaspora and maintain ties with an imaginary Iran in his weblog. Karim (2006) states that "there appears to be an attempt by diasporic participants in cyberspace to create a virtual community that attempts to eliminate the distance that separate them in the real world" (10). Through his meticulous attention to the development in the homeland in his virtual Iranian community, Behnoud expresses nationalistic enthusiasm over pre-election civil participation in Iran in his virtual Iranian community:

In an atmosphere of deceit, lie and hostility; "Green hope, Green truth, Green enthusiasm and Green friendship" (are born). Friendship and intimacy had faded away for so many years. And once again, you (youth) reminded us of the sweet taste of Green hope in the blue sky of truth and honesty. I praise your Green faithfulness because even the emperor of lies and its fraudulent and deceitful system were unable to steal your Green dignity. I admired your defiance when you challenged the emperor of deceit and (you) confronted him in order to attest that your presence signify denial of his ideology. You spoke for us. You and your presence embody the Green security in the garden of aspiration. I

wholeheartedly believe in your truthfulness and innocence. (June 20, 2009)

Through a romantic and nostalgic nationalism, Behnoud claims an Iranian space and a belonging to a nation. Behnoud is remembering the nation, as it existed in the past. Edward Said (2000) notes that “exiles feel an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as a part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people” (177). Through his virtual presence, Behnoud seeks to compensate his absence from the homeland and restore his lost homeland in his weblog. Behnoud speaks with and for Iranians and as a result not only engages with his audience but also feels that he is still a member of the Iranian nation. Interestingly, this cyber discourse frees Behnoud from isolation and alienation of exile in a foreign land. More importantly, this virtual community has been able to foster the bloggers’ existence in the remembering, reliving and recreating non-physical home borders and express a cyber-nationalism as if they still have a presence there. In Behnoud’s blog, an anonymous reader writes to the author as if they live in the same country:

Dear Behnoud,

I am very optimistic and hopeful for the future of our beloved Iran. The existence of these brutal enemies rests in the darkness of human’s ignorance. This darkness has long begun to leave this Arian land [...] my fellow citizen: If I rise, if you rise, we can take revenge of beloved Neda’s blood that raises our call for freedom from these enemies. (July 6, 2009)

The ongoing interaction of the exiled bloggers with their readers and constant long distance dialogue over the issues related to social and political process in Iran demonstrate the complicated layers of a diasporic nationalism in exile in the diaspora that is fascinating though problematic for the authors’ life in the diaspora since it totally disengages them from the reality of the society they are currently residing. It is important to note that Behnoud’s disengagement

with the host society may be involuntary and the European country may have disengaged the non-European and non-white exiled blogger. This raises the important question is the onus of such disengagement on the migrant or the host society, although addressing this issue will not be within the scope of this research. More importantly, the safe existence of these particular bloggers in the diaspora has secured them the privilege of benefiting from advanced cyber technologies to mobilize support for the homeland and causes of Iranians in times of social and political crisis. During the June 2009 presidential election fever, the weblogs were filled with expressions of long-distance nationalism and the responsibility the authors felt in helping Iranians in their struggles for democratic change in Iran. In a blog post before the June 2009 presidential election, Kar writes:

Despite the existing cynicism, I am going to vote. Under the current circumstances, I wonder whether the candidates would be able to fulfill their promises. I am fascinated with their claims and over-statements. For me, voting in the current situation is a sort of pronouncement on Iranian identity. It is like renewing your Iranian passport. This campaign has attracted my attention. (June 2009)

The constructed diasporic nationalism in the blogosphere is an attempt to express a sense of belonging to the homeland and to corresponding national affiliations. Eriksen (2006) notes that “in a “global era” of movement and deterritorialisation, the Internet is typically used to strengthen, rather than weaken, national identities” (77). The national identity and the sense of belonging to a nation that these exiled bloggers seek in their cyber imaginary Iranianness community position them in an in-between state that restore the past that does not exist in the diaspora and diverts their attention and dedication to their new life in the diaspora. Said (2000) suggests that “exile, unlike nationalism is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being” (177).

The temporary state of exile and the fascination with the memory of homeland in a different time and space haunts the imagination of the exiled bloggers and manifests itself as a sense of nationalism in the virtual Iranian community. In anticipation of participation in the June 2009 presidential election in Iran, Sibiltala expresses her national sentiments for Iranians living globally:

Our people have high spirits. Five buses are traveling to Ottawa to vote. It will take these folks twelve hours to get to the embassy [...]. The people of our country are very cool. I hope they always remain cool. Their prosperity lies in this morale. (June 12, 2009)

Blogging has opened avenues for Sibiltala to engage in the homeland's political process while living in the diaspora. Karim (2003) notes that "by employing new communications, migrant communities endeavor to make homes (even if "temporarily") in milieus that are away from the home" (9). Assuming her exile as a temporary state, Sibiltala has created a virtual community of Iranianness and is constantly engaged with a cyber presence that is obsessed with national issues and the process of democratization and civic participation of Iranians in Iran and in the diaspora. More importantly, while the presence of Iranianness in Sibiltala's blog is overwhelmingly evident, she does not reflect similar attachment to the social and political advancement of the host country that has facilitated such an independent and liberating national existence in the cyber sphere. We are left to ponder the nature and extent of this obsessive commitment and loyalty to an imaginary national community in the cyber space, so that a blogger such as Sibiltala who has spent a greater part of her adult life in the diaspora prefers to contribute her virtual existence in promoting civic participation and democratization in the homeland than pursuing socio-political life in the host country.

Before Iran's presidential election, Behnoud expresses his fascination with the civic

participation of Iranians in the election campaigns and their engagement in a democratic process in the homeland. Behnoud's diasporic nationalism and engagement with the process of change in the homeland appears in this blog post:

The events of these days represent the capacity of Iranian society and this generation. It also affirms the regime's ability to tolerate democracy, freedom and vitality. Such characteristics make Iran a unique model for the Middle East. This is how power will be established in the country, not with the slogans and heroic and epic propaganda. Showcasing this capacity petrifies the opponents. (June 09, 2009)

By writing in his weblogs, Behnoud is constantly shifting from his exilic solitude in the diaspora to membership in a wider social sphere of Iranians, whether at home or abroad, a population that shares the same past and desires the same changes in the future. According to Said (2000) nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt from not being with others in the communal habitation (177). The pain and loss of separation from membership in a national community and the gap between the actual homeland and the exilic existence in the diaspora is occupied by constant engagement with a life in Iran that the authors are unable to claim. For Behnoud, belonging to a community of Iranianness, in Iran and in the diaspora is compensation for separation from a nation that he mourns. When the bloggers engage in cyber political activism, the isolation of exile and the alienation of the new country disappear and a familiar sphere of intimate presence on the net appears. As a result, the diasporic experiences of the exiled bloggers are shaped by national concerns, looking to the past and mourning the life they have left behind.

Unable to return to the homeland and deprived from actual physical presence in Iran, these

bloggers launched an intense long-distance political activism to assist the information flow to a homeland that was entangled in a circle of censorship and internet filtering and offered their solidarity and sympathy for their colleagues and friends that were detained or beaten by the government's security agents. In their virtual community of Iranianness, the exiled bloggers assume the responsibility of healing the pain and suffering of Iranians and not only express solidarity with the nation but also delegate support to assist the transition in the homeland. In his cyber sphere, Kowsar is constantly engaged in a long-distance solidarity with his colleagues in Iran and expresses a sense of responsibility towards a nation that he was forced to leave behind. Leaving his homeland, family and a flourishing profession behind, blogging facilitated Kowsar to enjoy freedom of speech in the new country and to support the cause of Iranians that seek change. In order to condemn the imprisonment of journalists and activists in the aftermath of June 2009 election fall out and to publicize the misery of his jailed colleagues in prison in Iran, Kowsar launched a cyber campaign and published the news releases, statements and petitions of the international media organizations in his weblog. While Kowsar is deprived from physical presence in the homeland, he expresses concern over imprisonment of his friends and criticizes violations of freedom of speech in Iran in this post:

Naturally, I am worried about my friends and journalists in Tehran. Activities of the foreign media are banned, Iranian journalists could have provided good resources for the foreign correspondents; confirm or deny the truth behind the events. But it seems that the regime is not even tolerating this small assistance. This regime it seems is based on sheer lies and fears the truth. (June 22, 2009)

For Kowsar, forced to abandon his flourishing profession in the homeland, blogging in exile in a democratic country is a fundamental means to create an imagined Iranian community

in this blog, to engage with like-minded Iranians and to promote his national aspirations. Through his cyber sphere, Kowsar enjoys new opportunities in exile to promote his views about freedom of speech in the homeland, while his weblog does not reflect the author's view on similar issues in the host country. What is the nature of this diasporic nationalism that echoes more loyalty towards an imaginary homeland in the cyber sphere than virtual commitment to the new country that has provided safety and security for them? Kowsar's concerns over national issues and lack of efficient leadership in Iran are reflected in this post:

Our country has drastic disparities with India. The most important difference is that we don't have a "Gandhi"! But even if we had one, how efficient and well was he able to denounce adoption of violence while viciously harassing and manipulating the nation?
(June 14, 2009)

As a result of living in an imaginary community, the prospects of integrating into the host society in the diaspora remain vague. By writing in their virtual Iranian community, these exiled writers seek belonging to a familiar space, an intimate home to which they used to belong. Instead they assume their exile is temporary and they take their diasporic experience in the new country for granted. Gokcen Karanfil (2008) suggests that "transnational media consumption promotes communications and frees the migrant from the pincers of a 'frozen image' of the homeland" (29). As a result, the present life in the diaspora is obscured in the blogs and remains outside the authors' cyber existence. Sibiltala's virtual exilic existence in the diaspora resonates with her euphoric memories of the homeland that she left behind long ago. She candidly speaks out about her exile and nationalism in the diaspora in her imagined community of Iranianness in the virtual sphere. In her cyber sphere, Sibiltala writes of Iranians' spirit:

Iran reminds me of a different world, a world that its people are struggling with so many

challenges, they are relentlessly besieged, yet, they are alive. They survive and thrive. Iranians are not depressed; they are not happy slaves of a conventional and predictable system. Some may argue that by presenting life (in the diaspora) in this way, I am not making any sense. Some may even claim that life is rosy here. I realize it is not. I swear to your life that I live with Iran every day. But I still can't figure out where the human being's prosperity lies in. I am sure that human being's prosperity is not what I am witnessing everyday in this free, democratic and wealthy country that I live. (June 12, 2009)

Far from alienation and isolation in the diaspora, this imagined Iranian community on the net is a safe, intimate and familiar cyber presence for Sibiltala and allows her to look into the familiar past in Iran, offers common interests and often represents symbols of Iranianness such as the Persian language, culture and heritage. Said (2000) states “[f]or an exile, habits of life, expression, or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus both the new and old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally” (186). But Sibiltala's cyber space is a community of Iranianness and she is not concerned about her position in the diaspora and belonging to the new society. While exiled bloggers enjoy the luxury of having access to the advanced communication tools and cyber media in a developed country in the diaspora, the constructed imagined community of Iranianness in their weblogs is only engaged with their Iranian identity and belonging to their native land. It is important to note that the responsibility of the host society in the migrants' social and political engagement is an important issue that needs future research. More importantly, while the weblogs of these particular displaced writers proves that national heritage and cultural roots are inseparable element of their cyber existence, they do not demonstrate similar interest and attention to their new hybrid identities in the diaspora. The on-

line community has become a meeting place of Iranians and a virtual examination of Iranianness and expressions of Iranian nationalism in the diaspora. The imagined community of exiled bloggers has created a virtual front for political debates and exchanging views on what is taking place in the homeland. Kowsar writes:

One of the mistakes that some of my colleagues make is to have little expectation from of the politicians. Basically, the problem is rooted in assuming given that our country is not following Switzerland (political) model, the journalist should not expect to be able to question the politicians' accountability [...] We are responsible for allowing the serial killings to remain unsolved [...]. We are the ones who forget. We, the journalists are not doing our true professional work. Our politicians do whatever they like and they know that we are not going to question them. (June 10, 2009)

Cyber-presence has facilitated Kowsar's claim to a space and a sense of virtual national presence in Iran. Kowsar's imagined community is a virtual sphere where he is able to articulate his nationalism in a foreign land. It is, however, important to note that most of these exiled bloggers are arguably living in safer conditions in the new country than in their homeland and their safety and security is not at stake as it was in Iran. Similar to some of the other bloggers in this research, Kowsar has been enjoying the safety and comfort of diasporic life while employing his cyber presence to communicate with Iranians and participate in socio-political developments in the homeland. While Kowsar expresses concerns for the political future of Iran, he does not acknowledge that the time and the actual place that he was forced to leave has changed and is not going to be the same again. This reluctance to leave the past behind, and to forge a connection with the new country suggests that the exiled blogger is desperately trying to hold on to an authentic Iranian identity in the diaspora.

In the aftermath of the June 2009 presidential election fallout and during the massive crackdown of Iranian government's security agents against peaceful protests of Iranians, these particular bloggers revolutionized their virtual on-line community and became the voice of the Iranians who had been silenced. They praised the bravery and resistance of Iranians in opposing the election fraud and promoted non-violent dissent. The authors' expressions of solidarity, frustration, loss and pain for their compatriots in Iran filled cyber space as if the bloggers' cyber Iranian front was fighting for the same cause as those in the homeland. Behnoud writes:

The eventful Khordad ended with a Red and Green Saturday. 'Death', a word that I always avoided and 'bullet' had become a worn out word [...]. Years have passed since 'blood' was a part of the dusty revolutionary songs and 'martyr' had been purged from the nation's daily conversations, once again (they) have emerged from our literature. (June 22, 2009)

The exiled bloggers in the diaspora are not only engaged in political activism in an on-line sphere but also are taking part in a wider communication with their readers. The debates in the blogs are not neutral and more importantly, the readers also play an active role in driving the bloggers' national sentiments. Some readers argue that the exilic life in the diaspora has transformed the authors' political views and thus they question their arguments; others feel close to the bloggers' ideology and welcome their solidarity and sympathy. The aftermath of the June 2009 presidential election in Iran and massive crackdown of Iranian government against the peaceful protests, similar to other exiled bloggers, Behnoud expresses solidarity and unity with Iranians in the homeland in this post:

I whisper in your ears: You are not alone. Our fears disappeared. [...] We are not alone [...] we are Iran [...] Give me your hand. Tell me your name. (Aug. 06, 2009)

In response to Behnoud's blog post on solidarity with the Iranians in the homeland, an

anonymous reader comments:

How long do I have to read about unity of this nation and shed remorseful tears to seek solidarity with Iranians? [...] I think about those in exile and how they painfully live through (the uprising) through YouTube videos and Facebook photos and how they agonizingly seek one second of solidarity with this beautiful Green wave, let alone shaking the hands of fellow citizens or knowing the names of these compatriots. (Aug. 06, 2009)

Engaging in the blogosphere in a discourse on social and political life with the Iranians inside Iran has enabled Behnoud to maintain his membership to an Iranian community and to assume he is bearing the long-distance responsibility of uniting and encouraging a nation that doesn't exist in the diaspora. As Renan (1990) argues, "[s]uffering in common unifies more than joy does. Where national memories are concerned, grief is of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort" (19). The comments and the on-going cyber dialogues over the social and political life in Iran represents these bloggers' persistent desire to belong to a community of Iranianness and to play a role in the process of change in the homeland.

The bloggers' invented national community results in claiming a virtual territory that has captured the past, ignoring their present existence in the diaspora. Moreover, the cyber-community of the exiled bloggers resonates with their perseverance in re-living past memories, feeling nostalgic for what they have left behind in the homeland. While the exiled bloggers invent a familiar feeling of home through their memories and hopes for a return to the homeland, they are wandering in a virtual territory that is located neither at home nor in the diaspora. Kar's constant focus on national issues and expressions of nationalism indicate her desire to recreate her past in her present life in exile in the diaspora:

Past frequent opposition to a regime that has banned my participation and engagement of

like-minded individuals has been documented. I am still opposing those ideas (of the government). The (presidential) candidates do not represent us. But during the years that I have lived in the diaspora, I have reached to this recognition that the existing democracies' path to where they are now has been a long one. Perhaps, under current circumstances, participation and voting in an election that the players are trying to bring the process closer to the global standards are the sole responsibilities of every Iranian. (June 2009)

Unable to return to her cultural roots and heritage, Kar focuses on recreating an imaginary Iran in the blogosphere, her membership to a national community and engages in a political activism in the diaspora. Said (2000) argues that "a state of exile [...] is designed to reassemble an exile's broken history into a new whole – is virtually unbearable, and virtually impossible in today's modern world" (177). For Kar, diasporic nationalism appears to be a coping mechanism to confront the experiences of isolation in exile and alienation in the diaspora. Cyber presence of the exiled bloggers echoes an active virtual presence in Iran as if they still live in the homeland though this personal sphere fails to engage in a discourse over the diasporic experience in the host country. Such diasporic nationalism can construct images of an ideal home in an imaginary virtual space that lacks a real emotional and physical bond with the present and instead is entangled in a web of past memories that cannot be framed within the image of the homeland that they have left behind. While Sibiltala is far from the geographical borders of her homeland, she is expressing sense of nationalism while living in Canada. By making a distinction between homeland and nationalism and implying the political responsibility of nationalism and love of her homeland, exiled Sibiltala writes:

Dear I. R.,

Every one, our parents, schools and leftist universities taught us to maintain an

“internationalist” position. And we are still preoccupied with our country. Sometimes I try to justify it as a sense of nationalism. But it is not. It is one’s love of the homeland! Dear I.R. Do you know what one’s love of the homeland is? (May 15, 2009)

In her blog, the author proudly defends her national identity, indicating a strong sense of nationalism and belonging to a homeland that she left behind at an early age. These exiled authors have assumed the responsibility of echoing common goals and shared concerns over the fate of a nation they were forced to leave behind. Sibiltala’s blog is a virtual community that puts numerous national subject matters in an open discussion forum and engages in social and political life in Iran. Unlike the other three bloggers that have been exposed to Iran’s state-sponsored censorship and imprisonment, Sibiltala has not experienced similar restrictions and has been able to enjoy the safety and security of expressing her views on national concerns with the protection of democratic values and advanced cyber media communications in the host country.

These exiled bloggers create an imaginary Iranian community in their weblogs to restore the memory of the homeland and to express nationalism in a virtual time and space, which existed in the past. While time and space may have remained static in the lives of the exiled bloggers and nationalistic sentiments may have not been diminished in the course of time, it is a fact that Iran, Iranians and their social and political demands have changed and rather transformed in the course of time. While providing migrants with equal opportunities and the role that the host society plays are essential means in their engagement and socio-political integration into the receiving country, ultimately, while this research acknowledges that the host countries play a key role in the migrants’ integration process, the exiles’ nostalgic view of the homeland and diasporic nationalism is problematic since those who exist in this realm

cannot move forward and integrate into the new society in the diaspora. As a result, they create a new space, in-between the created imagined cyber community and their lives in the diaspora.

This temporary existence in the diaspora along with cyber presence in a virtual imagined national community challenges social and political integration into the host society. Looking to the past through a nostalgic lens and hoping for an end to the temporary residence in the new country and return to the homeland shuttles the exiled bloggers between the past and the future and as a result, the present remains absent from their lives in diaspora.

At this extreme the exile can make a fetish of exile, a practice that distances him or her from all connections and commitments. To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as we; as querulous lovelessness. (Said 183)

For the exiled blogger, residence in the new country appears to be a transitional period that enables them to hope for a future return to the homeland. Ultimately, such obsession with the homeland and expressions of diasporic nationalism in a cyber sphere position the exiled bloggers in a dual existence: the cyber community of their blogs and their diasporic experience in the new country.

Assessing the possibilities of change in the homeland disengages the bloggers from the developments of life in the new country and isolates them from attention to their new social identity in the diaspora. More importantly, the exiled bloggers' dual imaginary existence in exile poses challenges for their settlement and integration into the new society. Said (2000) suggests that "no matter how well they will do, exiles are always eccentrics who feel their difference (even as they frequently exploit it) as a kind of orphanhood" (182). In this imagined national online community, traces of the bloggers' existence in the diaspora have been eliminated in order

to maintain the virtual space as Iranian as possible. The relationship between the exiled bloggers and the host country is significant in understanding the dynamics of the authors' contribution to the host society and their commitment to the social and political process in the new country.

While the bloggers' creative ways of communicating with the Iranians through their cyber communities are significant in restoring nationalist sentiments and expressing nationalism, recognizing the impact of such communities on active participation of this population in the process of change in the host society is of distinct importance. While the bloggers claim a cyber existence in the community of Iranianness and assume that they have preserved their cultural roots and have treasured their national heritage, what seem to be at stake is a total disengagement of the exiled bloggers from life in the new country and the actual absence of diaspora in the imaginary virtual sphere. Said (2000) suggests that "the achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind forever" (173). While most of the existing scholarship praises the instrumental role of transnational communication technologies, claiming that they "have effectively changed the positioning of the migrants by including them in the ongoing process of change in the homeland", (Eriksen 1), it is important to note that transnational networks, especially these weblogs may act as effective means to impede the integration and settlement process of migrant communities. The risk of diasporic nationalism through a nostalgic lens is that it distracts the authors from reality of living in the diaspora and complicates the dual existence and belonging of the exiled migrants and results in total disengagement from the diasporic experience and ultimately delays the integration process into the host society. It appears that forced migration and absence from Iran is the priority of these exiled bloggers and there is little reference to life in their blogs. Outside the virtual boundaries of the cyber community of Iranianness and the reality of life in the diaspora, a gap emerges

between their past life and future return.

The terrains of this imagined community do not share borders with the new country in which the exiled bloggers reside. Instead, the kind of long-distance nationalism that is expressed in this sphere posits a nostalgic view of life in the past, glossing over the present. Thus we need to question whether such dedication to diasporic nationalism and virtual long-distance activism is an urgent desire to return to a homeland that seeks transition to democracy or is this nostalgic impulse in these particular weblogs a coping mechanism to alleviate the pain of exile and create a sense of belonging for subjects who feel a drift. More importantly, the self-claimed personal space of the blogosphere that reconstructs an idealized home creates an emotional gap between the migrant and the diaspora. The exiled bloggers have drawn national borders within their imagined cyber presence, well protected by a relentless sense of nationalism that will not penetrate the diasporic experience. In addition, in the imagined virtual community, the diaspora is the strange foreign land and the virtual blogosphere is the intimate heritage and national land. Shahidian (2000) suggests that "exiles are physically in one land, and intellectually in another" (72). Their obsessive recalling of past memories and their active participation in debates over the social and political future of the homeland in the blogosphere engages the authors so much so that their cyber existence overshadows their presence in the diaspora.

Although the term nostalgia may not explicitly appear in the blogs, the authors' expressions of nationalism and fascination with Iran and Iranianness are clear indications of the fact that they are constantly dwelling in a longing for the homeland and its memories within the boundaries of their cyber imagined communities. Said (2000) argues: "The exile knows that in a secular and contingent world, homes are always provisional. Borders and barriers, which enclose us within the safety of familiar territory, can also become prisons, and are often

defended beyond reason and necessary. Exiles cross borders and break barriers of thought and experience” (185). This cyber-imagined community is a place that frees them from their exilic alienation in the diaspora. While the onus of such separation and isolation is not entirely on the exiled bloggers and the host countries can impede and/or motivate their engagement into the society, they however appear to be totally disengaged from their lives in the diaspora. It seems as though the present life in the new country is withdrawn from their Iranian existence, in which they live in their blogs’ invented nation. By disengaging with the civil society and democracy in the new country, the community of the Iranian bloggers in exile is actively promoting similar achievements in the homeland.

V. Conclusions

Blogs have transformed the way exiled Iranian authors express nationalist sentiments towards their homeland while living in the diaspora. The exiled bloggers, on whom I've focused here, Behnoud, Kar, Kowsar and Sibiltala, have created a cyber community of Iranianness in order to engage in the social and political development in the homeland and to express concerns for a homeland they were forced to leave behind. These particular exiled authors echo nationalistic sentiments through a nostalgic impulse. The cyber community of Iranianness, as a virtual sphere, assists these exiled bloggers to maintain a national belonging to their native land: it facilitates social and political debate through longing of the past by sharing memories with the community and a hope for a future return. By creating a community of Iranianness in a cyberspace of the blogosphere, one of the main objectives for these authors is to create a sense of belonging to a national community so they can cope with the isolation and alienation of living in a foreign country. What I have identified in this research is that with the creation of this cyber community comes a great deal of long-distance political activism and expressions of nationalism while living in the diaspora. The focus for these exiled bloggers on the future and their return to Iran assumes their state of exile is a temporary one as they project an anticipated hope for a future change for Iran as a nation and for the bloggers' ultimate return to the homeland.

I argue here that the diasporic experience of the exiled bloggers is absent from this virtual existence, this community of Iranianness. The fascination with remembering and reliving the past by recalling memories and projecting hope for future return makes invisible their present existence of living in the diaspora and overlooks the possibilities and opportunities of establishing new identities and communities of belonging in the diaspora. More importantly, constant engagement with national issues and concerns about the future of Iran results in total

disengagement with their lives in the diaspora and challenges the process of social and political integration in the new country. Given the scope of this research project, I have not been able to address the role in which the host countries play in the disengagement of the exiled bloggers from the new society, however, I have acknowledged that the sense of isolation and alienation that the exiled bloggers experience in the Western diasporas may be the outcome of conditions of migrancy and with issues such as how race, racism, the colonial encounter and the marking of the 'other' have played out in their diasporic reality. As a result the onus of integration is not entirely on the migrants and the host country plays a key role in their integration process. An assessment of the exiled bloggers' commitment to the construction of an online national community and to restoring an imaginary homeland in their weblogs is a key factor in understanding the dynamics of émigré diasporic nationalism and its impact on migrants' exilic experience in the host country.

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