

Censorship of Poetry in Post-Revolutionary Iran (1979 to 2014),

Growing up with Censorship (A Memoir), and

The Kindly Interrogator (A Collection of Poetry)

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Abstract

The thesis comprises a dissertation, a linking piece and a collection of poems.

The dissertation is an analysis of state-imposed censorship in Iranian poetry from 1979 through 2014. It investigates the state's rationale for censorship, its mechanism and its effects in order to show how censorship has influenced the trends in poetry and the creativity of poets during the period studied.

The introduction outlines attitudes towards censorship in three different categories: Firstly, censorship as "good and necessary", then censorship as "fundamentally wrong yet harmless or even beneficial to poetry", and lastly, censorship as a force that is always destructive and damages poetry. Chapter one investigates the relevant laws, theories and cultural policies in order to identify the underlying causes for censorship of poetry. Chapter two looks at the structure and mechanism of the censorship apparatus and examines the role of cultural organizations as well as judicial and security forces in enforcing censorship. Chapter three contemplates and explores the reaction of Iranian poets to censorship and different strategies and techniques they adopt to protest, challenge and circumvent censorship. Chapter four analyses the outcome of the relationship between the censorship apparatus and the poets, providing a clear picture of how censorship defines, shapes and presents the poetry produced and published in Iran. Chapter five compares the type of censorship in Iran with two historical cases of Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Bloc to conclude that every censorship regime has particular characteristics and affects creativity in a unique way. It revisits the previous arguments in light of findings of the research and concludes that censorship in Iran has highly influenced the contemporary Iranian poetry, and that it leaves a lasting effect on creativity of the Iranian poets.

Growing up with Censorship is a self-reflective memoir which chronicles the author's personal encounters with censorship both as a reader and a writer from 1979 to 2014. It links the dissertation to the poems and provides an intimate narrative of the role censorship has played in shaping the author's poetic life and his poetry.

The Kindly Interrogator is a portfolio of 57 poems concerned with the themes of censorship, surveillance and persecution.

This research study is dedicated to:

- My parents, who made unimaginable sacrifice to send me away to study from an early age and worked hard to enable me achieve my goals. They are an eternal source of inspiration, support and unconditional love.
- To my brother, Mohammad Ali, who introduced me to the wonderful world of books, a man of great character who spent his life in a permanent struggle for justice and freedom and who taught me to stand up to tyranny and injustice.
- To my sisters, Fatemeh, Esmat, Zahra and Zohreh, for their love and devotion.

And

- To my adorable wife, Vida, my soulmate, my shelter, my refuge.
- To my lovely children, Behafarid, Mehrafarid and Bardia. I wish they will grow up into a safer, freer and more equal world.

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Note on Transliteration and Translation

The author has used the transliteration scheme of the International Society for Iranian Studies as described below:

Consonants

Z	ز	B	ب
T	ت	P	پ
Z	ظ	T	ت
'	ع	S	ش
Gh	غ	J	ج
F	ف	Ch	چ
Q	ق	H	ح
K	ک	Kh	خ
G	گ	D	د
L	ل	Z	ذ
M	م	R	ر
N	ن	Z	ز
H	ه	Zh	ڙ
V	و	S	س
Y	ي	Sh	ش
'	ء	S	ص

Vowels

Short	Long	Diphthongs
a (as in <i>ashk</i>)	ā or Ā (as in <i>ensān</i> or <i>Āb</i>)	-
e (as in <i>fekr</i>)	i (as in <i>melli</i>)	ey (as in <i>Teymur</i>)
o (as in <i>pol</i>)	u (as in <i>Tus</i>)	ow (as in <i>rowshan</i>)

Other rules:

- The *ezafeh* is written as *-e* after consonants, e.g. *ketāb-e* and as *-ye* after vowels (and silent final *h*), e.g. *daryā-ye* and *khāneh-ye*
- The silent final *h* is written, e.g. *Dowleh*
- The *tashdid* is represented by a doubling of the letter, e.g. *takhassos*
- The plural *hā* should be added to the singular as in *dast-hā*

Proper names of persons and places have been recorded based on the most common spelling which may or may not comply with the above transliteration scheme.

All translations are the author's work unless noted otherwise.

**Censorship of Poetry
in Post-Revolutionary Iran (1979-2014)**

Foreword

In the critical component of my thesis, I will comment briefly on the relative position of opponents and proponents of censorship in poetry. I will analyse the question of social harm claimed to be caused by poetry as the main pillar of the arguments in favour of censorship and will show how this question relates to the censorship debate in contemporary Iran. I will also elaborate on the position of those who disagree with censorship in principle but argue that it is unable to damage poetry or might even be beneficial to its creation. Ivan Klima, the Czech writer, is an author whose ideas I have considered in this context. I will then discuss the views of those who oppose censorship and regard it as destructive to poetry and the creative arts – under any conditions.

In order to provide a clear picture of the relationship between the Iranian censorship machine and Iranian writers and poets, I will offer a study of the structure of this state-imposed censorship in greater detail. I will describe the laws and policies on the control of culture and the reactions of poets and writers to these laws and policies. I will then analyse the outcome of this relationship in order to answer the main question of the thesis: does state-imposed censorship, as practised in contemporary Iran, have an effect on the process of the creation of poetry? If yes, how are these effects perceived by the poets and how lasting can such effects be?

As a poet who has written and published poetry in Iran, my personal experiences with censorship are presented in the form of a self-reflective, intimate memoir which is included in section two. It is intended to show how growing up with censorship has influenced and shaped my life as well as my poetry. The memoir will help readers to understand how my life experiences have been reflected in my poetry. While the critical component provides the background knowledge about the status of censorship in Iran, the memoir puts censorship in context and leads the reader to the poetry as the product of the conditions described.

Censorship is not acknowledged in the official discourse of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Instead, the authorities use the word *momayyezi*, which can be translated as ‘audit’ or ‘appraisal’ while the Dehkhoda Dictionary defines *momayyezi* as ‘to study and assess, to appraise a property, to estimate the tax, to assess the income of businessmen and traders for taxation purposes’.¹ Avoiding if not censoring the word ‘censorship’ is a clear indication of the sensitivity of this issue.

¹ Aliakbar Dehkhoda and others, *Loghatnāmeh* (Iran: Parsi Wiki Open Dictionary, 2015) <<http://www.loghatnaameh.org/dekhodasearchresultfa.html?searchtype=0&word=2YXZhduM2LLbjA%3d%3d>> [accessed 26 January 2015].

Documents on censorship are strictly guarded and no official information is disclosed by the government that I was able to find in the course of my research. Consequently, no unbiased and independent study of censorship is possible in Iranian academic centres. For the purpose of the present research, I visited the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, which is the main authority in charge of books and publications, on three different occasions and asked to interview the authorities in the Book Office or to meet some of the censors. Each time my request was denied. I was told that censors are anonymous and no authority will speak to me. The only book-length study that relies on documents from within the archives of the Book Office is a one called *Momayyeziy-e Ketāb: Pajuheshi dar 1400 Sanad-e Momayyeziy-e Ketāb dar Sāl-e 1375* (Censorship of Books: Research on 1400 Documents of Book Censorship in 1375 AH) by Ahmad Rajabzadeh. This book provides an exceptional insight into the archives of the Book Office and studies the censorship of books received by that source during the Iranian year 1375 (21 March 1996 - 21 March 1997). No other research of this type is available. In addition to this book, and in the absence of academic research, I researched hundreds of newspaper reports, personal accounts and interviews, and online material written by different writers, poets, translators, journalists, publishers and government officials in various positions, in order to gather the necessary information.

Writing this thesis would have been impossible from inside Iran, for no academic institution would sanction a research study into censorship. Therefore, under current regulations, there would be little chance for me to have my thesis evaluated by the Iranian higher education authorities. In other words, the years I have spent undertaking this PhD are effectively censored but freely presented here for a Western audience.

Introduction

Censorship is not only good, it is necessary

Plato is probably the first recorded thinker to formulate a rationale for intellectual, religious, and artistic censorship. In *The Republic*, he considers it the duty of the state to censor poets. He writes: ‘It is up to the founders to know the patterns within which the poets must tell stories, and beyond which they are not permitted to go’.² In Plato’s ideal society, a republic of virtue, there is no place for poets who might imitate things and compose narratives which might harm society. In his view, poets follow their instincts and do not care about the well-being of society, nor do they possess the capacity to judge what is right and what is wrong. He, therefore, believes that the State should protect the people from works of poetry which give way to undesirable feelings and emotions. He adds:

As for sex and anger, and all the desires and pains and pleasures in the soul which we say follow us in every action, poetic imitation produces effects on us of the same sort. It waters and nurtures them when they ought to be dried up, and establishes them as rulers in us when they ought to be ruled so that we may become better and happier instead of worse and more miserable.³

Advocates of censorship follow the same logic. They believe that poetry is able to cause harm and that it is the state’s duty to protect its people from this. Censorship is related to the way the 1979 Revolution is perceived in Iran. The official discourse sees that upheaval as an Islamic revolution aimed at transforming the entirety of cultural and social life, making society ‘Islamic’. Ahmad Shakeri, a writer and member of the Book Supervisory Board, said in an interview that ‘*Momayyezi* is the juice of what the Revolution is pursuing in its ideals’.⁴ Advocates of censorship defend freedom of expression but only as far as it stays within the framework of Islam and the Iranian constitution.⁵ The belief in the necessity of censorship of poetry is deeply rooted in the theory of cultural invasion. According to this theory, the West is using culture as a powerful tool to corrupt

² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. by R.E. Allen (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), p. 63.

³ Ibid., p. 341.

⁴ BBC Persian Online, *Ozv-e Heyat-e Nezārat bar Ketāb: ‘Momayyezi’ Osāray-e Ārmānhāy-e Enqelāb Ast* (London: BBC Persian Online, 8 June 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2011/06/110608_141_book_ahmad_shakeri_int.shtml> [accessed 20 April 2015].

⁵ For example, see the Memorandum of Association of *Anjoman-e Qalam-e Iran* (Iran: Anjoman-e Qalam-e Iran, 2015) <<http://www.anjomanQalam.ir/>> [accessed 15 February 2015].

the Islamic nation of Iran and to destabilize the system. Censorship is seen, therefore, as one way to fight back and to neutralize the effects of this cultural aggression or colonialism.

Censorship is bad, just not always!

There is a second group of thinkers, who believe in freedom of expression as a human right but think that censorship can lead poets into more creativity. In their view, the mere experience of censorship gives the censored poet more determination to overcome censorship and to find innovative and creative ways to express himself. It also encourages poets to see the significance of their functioning within society. As a result, censored poets feel more important and may find more meaning and purpose in their work. A controversy that arises with the censorship systems actually nurtures this idea, since dissident writers are often treated as unimportant by the censor authorities. At the same time, these ‘insignificant’ poets and writers are frequently targeted by powerful authorities and become the subject of defamatory books, articles and even TV programmes. It is in this context that some scholars argue that the challenges and struggles of writing under censorship lead to more creativity. Daniel Grassian, a researcher of Iranian contemporary literature, writes:

While most Western writers and critics would presumably agree with J.M. Coetzee’s claim that state censorship is “an inherently bad thing”, even Coetzee himself suggests that while “writing does not flourish under censorship [...] there may even be cases where external censorship challenges the writer in interesting ways or spurs creativity”.⁶

Coetzee has rallied extensively against censorship and this view does not adequately summarize his writings; but it shows that he also sees some benefit for creativity in the challenges of coping with censorship. Levin expresses a similar idea and views censorship as an impediment, but one whose very resistance makes another, more equivocal and double-edged style of writing possible.⁷

There is also a slightly different view – that a writer will write no matter how much external pressure may exist and that he has no duty to worry about publication, as his only duty is to write. Ivan Klima, an author who has first-hand experience of censorship, believes that it is an ineluctable part of modern life, arguing that contemporary society can neither exist in absolute freedom nor in tyranny. He divides freedom into what is external and internal, emphasizing the importance of

⁶ Daniel Grassian, *Iranian and Diasporic Literature in the 21st Century - A Critical Study* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Co, Inc., 2013) p. 169.

⁷ Ibid.

internal freedom. His thesis is that if you don't have anything to say, you cannot write; but if you have something to convey, you will write it even in the absence of external freedom. As an example, he refers to Russian literature of the nineteenth century which was created in one of the least free empires the world has ever known.⁸ Klima questions the significance or effectiveness of censorship. Further, he questions whether it is a good enough excuse simply not to produce a creative work because it will be censored. It seems that many writers who have written without any hope of publication were asking themselves the same question.

Censorship is destructive and there is no good in it

Advocates of this idea believe that censorship is a negation of freedom of speech and thereby a breach of human rights. To them, freedom of speech is a universal human right, not a social value specific to a certain culture or a certain political system. Ronald Dworkin, in 'A new map of censorship', argues that free speech is not simply a right among other rights but that it is the driving force for any change and fulfilment of other rights: 'However democracies may evolve, free speech will remain the right and empowerment without which the struggle for other human rights cannot even be articulated'.⁹ According to this constituency, the whole philosophy of censorship is based on a false view: the assumption that censors are there to protect people and regulate the morals of society. Harry White, author of *Anatomy of Censorship*, argues that moral acts stem from moral opinions, so it is in fact these opinions censors feel they need to protect. But why do opinions need to be protected or enforced at all?

Major reasons repeatedly advanced throughout the history of ideas are that they are divine commands or are necessary for social stability. Nonetheless, White believes that there is a more fundamental reason – the fact that opinions tend to vary. Not only do opinions vary, but also the acceptance or rejection of any opinion tends to vary from one person or group to another because it is in the very nature of opinions to vary. White writes: 'Whatever it may be about, an opinion cannot be convincingly communicated as knowledge from one person or group of believers to

⁸ Ivan Klima, 'Variation on an Eternal Theme' in *An Embarrassment of Tyrannies: Twenty-Five Years of Index on Censorship*, ed. by Webb, W.L. and Rose Bell (London: Victor Gollancz, 1997), pp.99-103 (p.101).

⁹ Ronald Dworkin, 'A New Map of Censorship', *Index of Censorship*, 1-2,23 (1994),9-15

another'.¹⁰ There is no reliable way to prove that someone's opinion is right and another's is false. Since people mistake their own opinions for truth, they can resort to violence to impose their opinions on others. Clearly, those who believe their opinions to be true are not happy with others that do not share them. But instead of thinking that their own understanding may not be the universal truth or that something may be wrong with their methods of persuasion and communication, they shift responsibility for the impasse to the other side. It is here that White believes censorship happens.

This shifting of responsibility from the speaker who cannot convincingly demonstrate the truth of his opinions to those who, consequently, do not accept them as true has served through the centuries to establish a hierarchy of belief. It allows the believer to see humanity not as distinguished by the variety of beliefs and opinions men hold, but by the supposed fact that a select and superior few know the truth, by virtue of the special gifts they have been blessed with, and that everyone else does not, due to some flaw within their character.¹¹ Opponents of censorship challenge both the question of harm and evidence for it. They argue that no evidence is normally given for the harm and that contradictory evidence is usually ignored. One example is the censorship of indecent expression. According to White, numerous studies in the West to find a relationship between indecent expression and harm have failed to establish such relationship. He maintains:

To justify censorship for the stated purpose of securing individuals from harm is a bogus claim not only for the reason that there is no evidence that expression can produce actual harm, but because it is not to protect individuals from harm that judges, or preachers, or feminists seek to censor. What they seek is to protect from attack the particular moral system they value and which perhaps is the basis of their power and authority. It is the harm which expression can do to ideas which censorship guards against.¹²

There also seems to be a strong sense of class distinction involved. In White's words, 'Material which the lord of the manor may read with impunity may fall into the hands of the maid or gardener whose minds, unlike his, are presumed to be more open to depraving immoral influences'.¹³ In

¹⁰ Harry White, *Anatomy of Censorship: Why the Censors Have it Wrong* (Lanham: University Press of America Inc, 1997), p. 101.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 104.

¹² Ibid., p. 100.

¹³ Ibid., p. 22.

order to be able to examine all of the above opinions, we first need to understand the mechanism of censorship in Iran and to find out how the censorship apparatus operates.

Chapter One: Laws, Theories and Policies of Censorship

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran defines its goal as the creation of a perfect Islamic state where mankind can be modelled ‘according to the Divine morality’.¹⁴ Consequently, all types of publications and mass media are seen as a means to achieve this goal. Radio and TV are exclusively state governed. Hence, no private radio or TV broadcasting is allowed. The mass communication media must serve the diffusion of Islamic culture and, to this end, the media should be used ‘as a forum for healthy encounter of different ideas, but they must strictly refrain from diffusion and propagation of destructive and anti-Islamic practices’.¹⁵ Article 22 of the Constitution defines the boundaries of freedom of expression as follows: ‘Publications and the press have freedom of expression except when it is detrimental to the fundamental principles of Islam or the rights of the public’.¹⁶

The constitution, however, fails to define the kinds of material which may disturb the fundamentals of Islam or the rights of the public. The highest cultural authority in the country, the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution, passes the relevant laws and defines the legal boundaries of free expression. A document entitled ‘Objectives, Policies and Regulations for Publishing Books’, ratified in 1988, acknowledges that books can be a manifestation of social and human freedoms but warns that they may also act as a ‘vehicle for encouraging intellectual insouciance and disturbing the rights of the public’.¹⁷ This requires government officials, including the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, to ‘enforce the legal regulations on publishing books and protect the healthy and constructive atmosphere for publications’.¹⁸ The law further lists the characteristics which makes a book ‘unworthy of publication’:

- A. Propagation and promotion of apostasy, and denial of the fundamentals of religion.
- B. Promotion of debauchery and moral corruption.
- C. Encouraging uprising against the Islamic Republic of Iran and enmity with the system.

¹⁴ Servat, *Iran - Constitution* trans. by International Constitutional Law (Switzerland: Servat, 2010) <http://www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html> [accessed 18 January 2015].

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Showrāy-e Farhang-e Omumiy-e Keshvar, *Ahdāf, Siyāsatā va Zavābet-e Nashr-e Ketāb* (Tehran: Dabirkhānay-e Farhang-e Omumiy-e Keshvar, 1988) <http://pcci.ir/?option=com_content&view=article&id=132:1>[accessed 18 January 2015].

¹⁸ Ibid.

D. Propagation and promotion of ideologies of illegal and combating groups, as well as the deviant religious sects, defending the monarchy or despotic dictatorship systems.

E. Provoking riots and ethnic or religious conflicts or disturbing the unity of society, endangering the territorial integrity of the country.

F. Ridiculing and weakening national pride and patriotism, and promoting the spirit of surrender to Western or Eastern cultures and civilizations and systems.

G. Promoting dependence on any world power and opposing the policies based on protection of the national independence.¹⁹

Such wide-ranging regulations provide a framework whereby every book needs to be submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, if it wishes to obtain a publication licence. The mechanism for achieving this is a department within this Ministry (the Book Office) being responsible for approving or disapproving the publication of books. Once a book is approved, a licence is issued and the publisher is authorized to print the work. A second permit is needed for distribution of the published book which is issued by the Book Office after ensuring that the printed book is an identical reproduction of the approved copy.

The Press Law of Iran was first ratified on 19 March 1986 and later modified on 18 April 2000. According to it, the main objectives of the press include ‘to fight against the manifestation of colonial culture (profligacy, love of luxury, rejection of religiosity, immorality and debauchery) and to propagate and promote genuine Islamic culture and sound ethical and moral principles’.²⁰ Article 4 of this law forbids all official and unofficial authorities from exerting any pressure on the press regarding the publication of any material or article or from attempting to censor or control the press.²¹ However, article 6 criminalizes publishing any material which might create division among the different strata of society or ‘may harm the basis of the Islamic Republic’.²² While supporting freedom of the press except in cases where the publication is deemed to be harmful to the principles of Islam or to the public interest, the law does not give clear guidance on what material might be seen as harmful to either or both considerations.

In addition to statutory laws, the acts and words of Ayatollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, are considered permanent guidelines. Freedom, including that of thought and

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Islamic Parliament Research Centre, *Qānun-e Matbuāt*, Art.2 (Tehran: Islamic Parliament Research Centre, 2015) <<http://rc.majlis.ir/fa/law/show/91180>> [accessed 21 January 2015].

²¹ Ibid., article 4.

²² Ibid., article 6.

expression, was one of the fundamental slogans during the Revolution in which Khomeini presented himself as a strong advocate of freedom of thought and expression. He regularly criticized the Shah for a ‘lack of freedom’ and promised that, under a new system, freedom of expression would be protected. In a speech delivered on 15 April 1964, he condemned censorship and urged the Shah to respect freedoms as envisaged in the Constitution: ‘We say you should act according to the Constitution; the press should be free; the pen should be free; let them write’.²³ In responding to the Shah’s accusations of the clergy being a regressive force, he emphasized the independence of the pen and noted the lack of affiliation of the media to the government, asking rhetorically: ‘We say the press should be free; are we regressive?’²⁴ A few months before the victory of the Revolution, a reporter from *Die Welt* newspaper asked Khomeini, still in exile in France, about proposed freedoms: ‘How about the rights of the religious, ethnic and political minorities? Will the Communist parties be free?’²⁵ In response, Khomeini asserted that Islam gives more freedom to religious minorities than any other school of thought and that, in the Islamic Republic, communists would be free to express their views.²⁶

Contrary to what had been promised, freedom of press after the Revolution didn’t last long. With conflicts between political factions widening, the regime felt threatened by a free press and tried to ban newspapers which expressed views less favoured by the clerics, most notably by Khomeini himself. On 8 August 1979, *Āyandegān*, a major newspaper, was closed down by the order of the Islamic Revolution Prosecutor General. A short while before this event, Khomeini had expressed dissatisfaction with *Āyandegān* by saying that he no longer read it. In addition to this casualty, more than 50 other periodicals were closed down.²⁷ Soon after this, in September 1979, in an interview with renowned Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci, Khomeini said that in Iran there was freedom of thought, freedom of pen, freedom of expression but no freedom to commit

²³ Ayatollah Khomeini, ‘Sokhanrāni dar Masjed-e Azam-e Qom’, 15 April 1964, *Sahifay-e Nur*, Vol.1 (Tehran: Moassesay-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsār-e Imam Khomeini [n.d.]) <<http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/books/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=177>> [accessed 23 January 2015].

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Ayatollah Khomeini, ‘Towbay-e Shāh, Hoquq-e Aqaliyathā, Rābetay-e Jomhuriy-e Eslāmi ba Gharb: Mosāheba ba Die Welt’, 7 November 1978, *Sahifay-e Nur*, vol. 4 (Tehran: Moassesay-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsār-e Imam Khomeini [n.d.]) <<http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/books/BooksahifeBody.aspx?id=1031>> [accessed 23 January 2015].

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Javad Talei, ‘Matbuāt-e Iran dar Manganay-e do Nezām’ (Germany: DW Persian Online, 6 February 2009) <www.dw.de/مطبوعات-ایران-در-منگه-دو-نظام/a-4008237> [accessed 26 January 2015].

conspiracy or corruption.²⁸ Fallaci mentioned the tens of thousands of people who were killed during the Revolution, shouting slogans for freedom, and asked if they had died for freedom or for Islam. Khomeini answered: ‘For Islam. The people fought for Islam. And Islam means everything, including those things that, in your world, are called freedom’.²⁹ As time passed, Khomeini became less tolerant of nonconformist opinions. Pointing to the critical condition in the country in an address to government officials on 30 August 1986, he warned those whose writings might weaken the Republic. He recommended that they should always be careful of the harm their writing might bring to the country. The Islamic Republic was the focal point, he opined, with everyone, including writers, having the duty of protecting it.³⁰

One may conclude that Khomeini’s opinions merely added to the confusion. He expressed contradictory opinions about freedom of expression, at times praising free speech while at other times threatening to break the satanic pens. His notorious fatwa against Salman Rushdie,³¹ author of *The Satanic Verses*, however, is a clear indication of his true stance, i.e. freedom is good but only for those who confine their expression within the boundaries prescribed by Khomeini’s own religious views.

In general, there seems to be no shortage of laws on the limits of free speech – but what these laws are short of is clear, unambiguous language which can show what is legally permissible and what is not. The vague terminology and different sources of legislation make it very difficult for an author or a publisher to predict what will be censored and what will pass the censor’s pen. This jumble of legislation has so far served the purpose of opponents of free speech, since they can justify their acts of censorship by arbitrary interpretation of the laws and pseudo laws.

In an assessment of the actual influence that laws and regulations bring to bear on censorship, the way they are translated into policies and projects is much more important than how they read. The prevalence of culture over economics and politics is rooted in the ideas of the

²⁸ Oriana Fallaci, ‘An Interview with KHOMENEI’, *New York Times*, 7 October 1979 <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=9F0DEEDA1438E432A25754C0A9669D946890D6CF>> [accessed 23 January 2015].

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ayatollah Khomeini, ‘*Sokhanrāni*’, 30 August 1986, *Sahifay-e Nur*, Vol.20 (Tehran: Moassesay-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsār-e Imam Khomeini, [n.d.]), p.127 <<http://sahifeh.net/?p=7702>> [accessed 23 January 2015].

³¹ The *fatwa* issued on 14 February 1989, sentencing to death Salman Rushdie and publishers of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*. This ordinance is available in many places, including the Imam Khomeini Portal <<http://www.imam-khomeini.ir/fa/3892/>> [accessed 23 January 2015].

founder of the Islamic Revolution. Khomeini believed that culture is the most significant element in any society and the principal factor in forming its identity; it can lead human societies to happiness or doom.³² Hence, shortly after the victory of the Revolution, the authorities sought to transform the cultural face of the nation through a project so extensive that was called the Cultural Revolution. Similarly, Ayatollah Khamenei, who succeeded Khomeini as spiritual leader in 1989, regards culture as the backbone of society and the main element in human identity. One of the most recurring topics in his speeches and statements is the importance of culture and its priority over economics and politics. On 18 May 2004, after visiting the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), Khamenei addressed the significance of culture, terming it the ‘spinal column of nations and the identity of nations’.³³ In another speech, he used the analogy of culture as the air we breathe – whether we want to or not.³⁴

The new Islamic rulers soon succeeded in defeating the secular opposition. As soon as Khomeini had established his rule, he gradually wiped out the diverse political groups that brought down the Shah in favour of clerical rule and Islamic governance.³⁵ The clerics recognized that in order to stabilize their rule, they needed to reinforce their ideology, and used all means at their disposal to do so. As Ali Mirsepassi remarks:

After the revolution of 1979, the new ideological regime and its intellectual ideologues found an unprecedented opportunity not only to formulate but also to try and enforce their notion of a pure and just religious community of believers based on the Platonic idea of a republic of virtue. They attempted to ‘Islamicize’ all aspects of culture, education, media, and even economy.³⁶

The new leaders launched the Cultural Revolution to establish their cultural and ideological hegemony. They closed all the universities, in order to purge faculties and student bodies. They rewrote all the textbooks and tried to create anew an entire educational system based on Islamic visions and virtues.³⁷ The universities remained closed for a whole four years. The clerics also

³² Ayatollah Khomein, *Velāyat-e Faqih* (Tehran: Moassesay-e Tanzim va Nashr-e Āsār-e Imam Khomeini, 1994), p. 78.

³³ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘*Bayānāt pas az Bāzdid az Sāzemān-e Sedā va Simā*’, 18 May 2004 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2004) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3232>> [accessed 28 January 2015].

³⁴ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘*Bayānāt dar Haram-e Motahhar-e Razavi*’, 21 March 2014 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2004) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=25993>> [accessed 28 January 2015].

³⁵ Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (USA: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 40.

³⁶ Ali Mirsepassi, *Democracy in Modern Iran: Islam, Culture, and Political Change* (New York: New York University Press, 2010), p. 85.

³⁷ Ibid.

established different organizations such as the *Sāzemān-e Tablíqat-e Eslāmi* (Islamic Propagation Organization) and its art subsidiary, *Howzay-e Honari* (The Art Council) and took over existing cultural institutions such as National Radio and Television and the Children and Young Adults Intellectual Development Organization. The aim of all these carefully planned interventions was to promote the cultural values of the Islamic Republic, to control the cultural space and to censor cultural products. Even the idea of Iranian patriotism and Persian identity seemed unpalatable to the new rulers. They advocated a world view of Islamic Umma and rejected any form of nationalism. Roxanne Varzi maintains: ‘As clerical power was consolidated, the memory of a ‘Persian’ monarchical past became a threat, and thus books related to monarchy, including those by William Shakespeare, were banned or burned’.³⁸

Another very important issue in understanding these cultural policies is the theory of cultural invasion, which is also called cultural aggression, cultural attack, cultural offensive, cultural destruction, cultural infiltration, cultural annihilation, cultural looting, cultural massacre, cultural imperialism, cultural NATO, soft war and many other names. According to this theory, the external world, especially the West, is attacking the cultural foundations of Islamic Iran and the Iranian cultural authorities must do whatever they can to fight back.

Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, is the main architect of the theory of cultural invasion. Since the early days of his leadership, he has warned of the dangers of Western cultural influence and the threat posed by what one might call westernized intellectuals. Ataollah Mohajerani, a former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, believes that Khamenei has a military-security attitude toward culture and politics, and uses military terminology in reference to culture. For instance, he likes to call university students the officers in a soft war.³⁹

Speeches by the leader have a snowballing effect and are broadcast and discussed in the media by different groups. The same ideas are amplified by hundreds of Friday prayer Imams all over the country. The legislative, judicial and executive forces then translate these sayings into regulations, bylaws, guidelines, policies and protocols. For the purpose of brevity, a few examples of the leader’s statements are cited to show how focal the issue of cultural invasion is in the cultural politics of Islamic Iran. Talking to the students in Qom Seminary on 28 November 1989, Khamenei compared cultural aggression to a chemical attack: ‘It acts like a silent, unfelt chemical bomb.

³⁸ Varzi, p. 42.

³⁹ *Shast Daqqa*, BBC Persian TV, 28 February 2015.

Imagine a chemical bomb falling somewhere silently, so that no one can feel a bomb has fallen, but after 7-8 hours they see all faces and hands are burnt'.⁴⁰ In a speech delivered to the cultural authorities on 12 August 1992, he gave a short history of cultural invasion in Iran which, he claimed, started long before the Reza Shah and with the birth of intellectual movements: 'Iranian intelligentsia was unfortunately born dependent and in malady. There were a few who were healthy and pure but they were lost. The rest were dependent, some on Russia and some on Europe and the West'.⁴¹ In his view, the cultural invasion was interrupted by the Islamic Revolution; but as the West became disappointed at its failure to defeat the Islamic Republic on the military and economic fronts, it decided to wage a cultural war against Iran:

One of their projects was to humiliate and seclude the revolutionary art and culture in Iran [...]. One of the important works that the Revolution has done is that it has trained a group of writers and artists who have cultural authority and – thank God – are not few in number. Many poets, many story writers emerged who wrote good Persian [...]. One of the works of the enemy is to seclude these loyal groups. The so-called artistic and literary journals show no interest in their work [...]. Another method is that global organizations award anti-Islamic and anti-revolutionary works with prizes. Why is it that among all these works which have received international prizes, there is no revolutionary work? Don't we have revolutionary films? Don't we have revolutionary poetry? Don't we have revolutionary plays? All these revolutionary products that our youth produced, none has artistic value? I think that if they could, they would even be ready to award a Nobel Prize to one of these anti-Islamic and anti-revolutionary elements – to make them famous around the world, to seclude the revolutionary figures! Isn't this cultural aggression?⁴²

In a meeting with the students of Shahid Beheshti University on 12 May 2003, Khamenei asserted that cultural aggression is more dangerous than military aggression: 'In military aggression, you know your enemy, you see your enemy; but in intellectual aggression, cultural aggression, soft aggression, you don't see your enemy before your eyes'.⁴³ Between 1987 and 2014, Khamenei's official website published 70 public speeches, Friday prayer sermons and messages on the subject

⁴⁰ Ayatollah Khamenei, '*Bayānāt dar didār-e Majma-e Namāyandegān-e Tollāb*', 28 November 1989 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 1989) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2228>> [accessed 21 April 2015].

⁴¹ Ayatollah Khamenei, '*Bayānāt dar didār-e Jam'i az Kārgozārān-e Farhangi*', 14 August 1992 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 1992) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2630>> [accessed 15 April 2015].

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³ Ayatollah Khamenei, '*Bayānāt dar Jalasay-e Porsesh va Pasokh-e Dāneshjuyān-e Dāneshgāh-e Shahid Beheshti*' 12 May 2003 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2003) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=3177>> [accessed 2 February 2015].

of cultural invasion.⁴⁴ That site also provides statistical analysis of the use of the expression ‘cultural invasion’ by Khamenei during the years he has served as leader (see Figure 1).

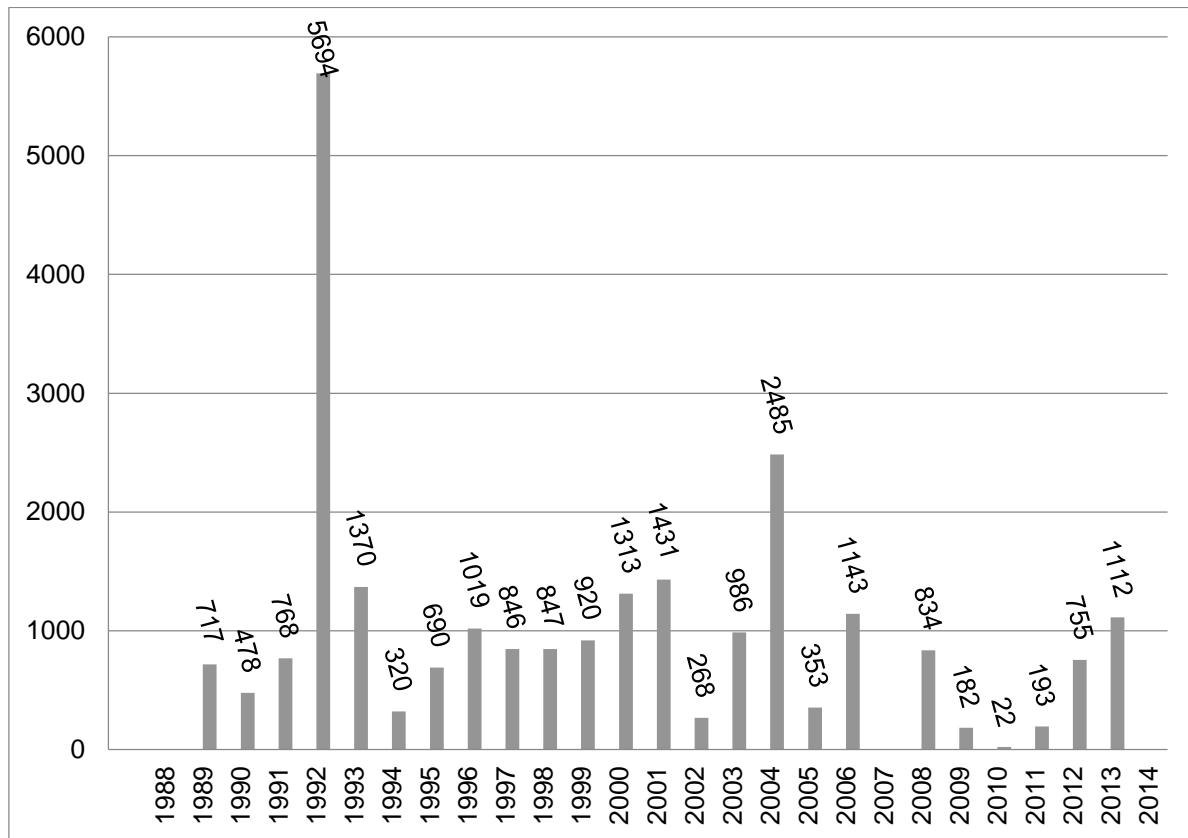


Fig. 1: Frequency of use per year of keyword ‘cultural invasion’ by Ayatollah Khamenei

According to Figure 1, Khamenei has devoted a considerable part of his public utterances to the issue of cultural invasion. In 1992, he used this term on no fewer than 5,694 occasions, that is, an average of almost 16 times a day! In second place comes 2004 (2,485 times).⁴⁵ This diagram shows how focal the issue of cultural invasion is in the theoretical frameworks of the Islamic Republic.

Khamenei shows a huge interest in literature in general and poetry in particular. The founder of the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini, also wrote poetry, and a collection of his Sufi-style poetry was published posthumously. Khamenei, signing his poetry as ‘Amin’, has also published poems in the

The list is available in the official portal of Ayatollah Khamenei (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2015) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/tag-content?id=1010>> [accessed 2 February 2015].

⁴⁵ Ayatollah Khamenei Portal, ‘*Tahājom-e Farhangi- Tedād-e Fish: 102, Tedād-e Maqāla: 1*’ (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2015) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/keyword-print?id=1010>> [accessed 2 February 2015].

classical style of ghazal.⁴⁶ He organizes annual poetry readings and acts both as an appreciative listener and an occasional critic. Both in these and in other meetings with cultural authorities, Khamenei announces the expectations he has for poets and elaborates on the type of poetry he approves of. In one such meeting on 15 September 2008, he recommended the need for moral poetry, adding that ‘Religious poetry which you call ritualistic poetry is good’.⁴⁷ As seen in 2009, he frequently advises poets to put their art to the service of the Revolution, also recommending no overindulgence in sentiment and love and to be discreet about romantic feelings: ‘Of course, I never recommend any poet not to write love poetry[...] But I can recommend to be careful not to exaggerate in this area’.⁴⁸ In a message to the ceremony commemorating Moshfegh Kashani, a well-known pro-regime poet, Khamenei praised this poet and wrote: ‘One good characteristic of Moshfegh’s poetry is that it is at the service of objectives, serving religious and revolutionary objectives’.⁴⁹ The outcome of these annual meetings are translated into guidelines for cultural institutions and the approved poets of the Islamic Revolution.

While Khamenei admires revolutionary poets, for their loyalty to Islamic and revolutionary values and for the literary merit of their works, he expressly condemns secular poets and loathes the most renowned Iranian poets. In a meeting with producers in Iranian state radio in 1991, Khamenei praised young poets and recommended the authorities use their poetry more frequently on radio at the expense of others: ‘Now our revolutionary young poets write poems which are much better than the poems of former secular poets who are unfortunately more famous’.⁵⁰ He has shown his contempt for and dislike of secular poets on other occasions, too. Yet Khamenei is known to have been associated with secular poets as a youth in Mashhad, Khorasan Province, where he was a regular visitor to different poetry circles. He once said that Mehdi Akhavan Saleth had been a friend of his when they were young and that he admired poets like Amiri Firoozkoohi, Rahi

⁴⁶ See for example; ‘*Chand She’r az Rahbar-e Moazzam-e Enqelāb-e Eslāmi, Hazrat-e Ayatollah Khamenei*’ <<http://www.tebyan.net/newindex.aspx?pid=934&articleID=412206>> [accessed 27 February 2015].

⁴⁷ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘*Bayānāt dar Didār bā Shāerān dar Māh-e Mubārak-e Ramadhan*’, 16 September 2002 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2008) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=4083>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁴⁸ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘*Bayānāt dar Didār-e Jam’i az Shoarā*’, 5 September 2009 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2009) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=8001>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁴⁹ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘*Bayānāt dar Didār-e Dastandarkārān-e Hamāyesh-e Nekudāsh-e Ostād Moshfegh Kashani*’, 12 August 2013 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2013) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=23500>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁵⁰ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘*Bayānāt dar Didār-e A’zāy-e Goruh-e Adab va Honar-e Sedāy-e Jomhuri-e Eslami*’, 24 February 1992 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 1992) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2597>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

Moayeri, Shahriar and Malekosharaye Bahar (classic style poets), as well as modernist poets like Nima Yushij, Mehdi Akhavan Saleth and two others whom he preferred not to name.⁵¹

Khamenei seems to take much pride in his association with poets in Khorasan, especially his friendship with Akhavan Saleth. His official website has published pages of his notebook containing a poem, along with a short commentary, written and autographed by Akhavan Saleth in 1962.⁵² This old friendship did not, however, stop him from harshly criticizing Akhavan Saleth. In a meeting with artists and cultural authorities on 19 October 1994, Khamenei complained that no famous author or journalist – not even one – had been attracted to the Islamic Republic. He accused the Iranian intelligentsia of opposition to Islamic values and recounted a story about an old poet friend of his. Khamenei had telephoned and asked him to come and join the new Islamic system and use his pen in the service of the Revolution and Islam. ‘I called that famous friend and said: ‘How are you; do you know that the Shah is gone and that everything has changed?’ [...] He answered in a very bad tone and said: ‘We are always against dominance, not for dominance’ [...] I said: ‘This is a very bad approach! [...] If the dominance is good dominance, you should serve such a dominance and be ‘for dominance’’.⁵³ Even though Khamenei does not name the poet, many believe that he is referring to Akhavan Saleth. Commenting on this, Faraj Sarkoohi writes: ‘Mr Khamenei leaves the rest of the story untold, but Akhavan told me and another friend that a few days after he rejected the Khamenei’s offer, a group of men attacked him in the street and severely beat him. Soon after, his retirement pension was terminated’.⁵⁴

Sarkoohi believes that the frequent poetry readings attended by Khamenei is a reflection of his inferiority complex and his inclination towards censorship and Islamizing culture, as well as a strong delusion of his being a poet and his love of being recognized as a ‘book-loving, literary scholar [and a] cultivated poet’.⁵⁵ This idea is supported by the propaganda that Khamenei is an

⁵¹ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘Bayānāt dar Didār-e Jam’i az Javānān’, 27 April 1998 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 1998) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=2884>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁵² Ayatollah Khamenei portal ‘Enteshār-e Dastneveshtay-e Akhavan Saleth dar Daftar-e Yāddāshth-e Ayatollah Khamenei’, 27 August 2014 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2014) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=27292>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁵³ Ayatollah Khamenei, ‘Bayānāt dar Didār-e Honarmandān va Mas’ulān-e Farhangi-e Keshvar’, 14 October 1994 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 1994) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=12893>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁵⁴ Faraj Sarkoohi, ‘Enteqām-e Shāer-e Nāmovafaq az She’r’, (Prague: Radio Farda, 7 July 2010) <http://www.radiofarda.com/content/F7_Commentary_on_Khamenei_Meeting_with_Iranian_Artists/2093557.htm> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁵⁵Ibid.

avid reader of poetry and fiction and has been praised by many important poets in the past. Hojatoleslam Ali Shirazi, a representative of the Supreme Leader, writes that when Khamenei was a young man in Mashhad, Amiri Firoozkoohi, the well-known poet, had frequently praised his poetic knowledge, telling Gholamreza Ghodsi, another renowned poet, that Khamenei was Iran's greatest connoisseur of poetry.⁵⁶

Khamenei's anger has been targeted at many leading poets. In an annual meeting with that profession, he said that the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad was not acceptable to society and that even intellectuals of the time had not approved of it because it was too outrageous. However, he said some other female poets were even worse than Forough: 'I'm not naming some other female poets. I've mentioned Forough because, firstly, Forough is dead and, secondly, I believe that she achieved redemption toward the end of her life. But some others did not achieve and will never achieve redemption'⁵⁷. On 12 September 2014, after undergoing a surgical operation, Khamenei was visited in hospital by a group of Iranian filmmakers. He read a poem by Parvin Etesami, an early twentieth-century female poet, and used the opportunity to attack Forough Farrokhzad again, observing that some people undermine Etesami with the intention of exalting Farrokhzad.⁵⁸ On another occasion, he criticized the efforts of independent literary circles to commemorate literary figures of the past. Using what amounts to abusive language, he said:

They bring forward a miserable fossilized name and try to discuss his poetry and his name and his so and so [...]. This poor man is a fossil now and even when he was young, he did not follow a good path! Now, should we commemorate such people? What service did they do to this country? What good story – good novel – good essay and good poem did they write on behalf of this nation? Other than attracting people towards corruption with their poetry, did they do any positive work? So why should we commemorate this gentleman or that lady?⁵⁹

The above examples show how personally involved Khamenei is with poetry. He is an originator and promoter of the concept of *khodi* (insider) and *gheir-e khodi* (outsider). He frequently

⁵⁶ Tasnim News, 'Tavarroqi bar "Yādestān-e Dust"', (Tasnim News Agency, 22 February 2015) <<http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/661006>> [accessed 27 February 2015].

⁵⁷ Ayatollah Khamenei, 'Bayānāt dar Didār-e Shāerān', 25 August 2010 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 2010) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=20753>> [accessed 25 January 2015].

⁵⁸ Fars News, 'Joziyāt-e Khāndāni az Motefāvet-tarin Ayādat-e Rahbar-e Enqelāb + Aks', (Tehran, Fars News Agency, 13 September 2014) <<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13930622000648>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

⁵⁹ Ayatollah Khamenei, 'Bayānāt dar didār-e Honarmandān va Mas'ulān-e Farhangi-e Keshvar', 13 July 1994 (Tehran: Khamenei Portal, 1994) <<http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=12893>> [accessed 27 February 2015].

recommends all cultural institutions to rely on those who are faithful to the Islamic regime and are, therefore, *khodi*. ‘*Khodi* elements can resist aggression. Esteem the *khodi* elements wherever they are. This is my word. I tell all the cultural authorities in the country, from the Ministry of Education to the Ministry of Islamic Guidance, the Islamic Propagation Organization, other cultural institutions and foundations: rely on *khodi* elements’.⁶⁰

Poetry has been the main medium of culture in Iran for centuries. It remains the most popular form of cultural expression today. In the introduction to an anthology of contemporary Iranian literature, Nahid Mozaffari mentions the ‘dominance of poetry over prose throughout the centuries’.⁶¹ Poetry is present everywhere: in religious ceremonies, in funerals, on gravestones and on the back of lorries and buses. Iranian culture has very strong ties with poetry and readers are aware of its aesthetics. In a book on Iranian contemporary cinema, Khaterah Sheibani attributes the success of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema and the works of renowned filmmakers such as Kiarostami and Beyzayi to inspiration they gained from classical and contemporary Persian poetry. She comments: ‘Poetry was not only the most popular aesthetic form, but it was the language of philosophical ideas and socio-political commentaries throughout the ages. Iranian art films employ this deeply rooted poetic-ness’.⁶² In recent history, poetry has been used to promote political ideologies and mobilize masses. The poetry nights of *Khusheh* and *Dah-Shab* (Ten Nights) in the Goethe Institute of Tehran were attended by tens of thousands and are believed by many to have contributed significantly to the Revolution.⁶³ Prisoners write poetry on their cell walls, as Mehdi Aslani, a former political prisoner, notes:

The prisoner records his being by the help of poetry and shares his being with others by writing poetry on the walls [...]. Considering the fact that no pen or pencil is available to prisoners during interrogations, it was extraordinary to see so many lines on the walls of the cell. Poetry was pouring from the door and walls of the cell.⁶⁴

⁶⁰Ibid.

⁶¹ *Strange Times in Persia: An Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature*, ed. by Nahid Mozaffari and Ahmad Karimi Hakkak (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009), p. xvi.

⁶²Khaterah Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film after the Revolution* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), p. 3.

⁶³ For further information, see: Shamim Doustdar, ‘*Dah Shab-e Goethe, Revāyat-e Yek Ruydād-e Farhangiy-e Mohem*’, *Tamasha*, BBC Persian TV, 17 August 2012

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2012/08/120817_10nights_tamasha.shtml> [accessed 7 May 2015].

⁶⁴ Mehdi Aslani, *Kalāq va Gol-e Sorkh: Khaterat-e Zendān* (Paris: Arash, 2009), p.119.

Both clerical leaders of the Islamic Republic, Khomeini and Khamenei, have shown a personal interest in poetry. This personal relationship, especially Khamenei's, with poetry may have also contributed to its perception as a powerful medium of expression.

Chapter Two: Structure, Mechanism and Practice of Censorship

Due to the sensitive nature of censorship, there has been little access to the archives of the Book Office, and no official document has been released. However, Ahmad Rajabzadeh was able to obtain exceptional access to the censorship documents for Iranian year 1375 (1996-1997). Judging by the statistical study of Dr Rajabzadeh, contemporary Persian poetry endured substantial censorship. In that year, about 800 poetry collections were published in Iran. 428 of these books were the divans of classical poets (poetry written before the 1940s) and a lot of them were reprints. 331 books belonged to post-1940s poets. About 21% of these books (70 titles) were elegiac or panegyric poems for the Shia saints, which are not usually categorized as poetry since they are only verses read in religious rituals. About 100 of the books belonged to those who are known as poets of the Islamic Revolution (including Khomeini, Gheisar Aminpoor, Shafagh, Joolideh Neishabouri and Moosavi Garmaroodi). These poets, however, are staunch supporters of the regime. Only about 160 collections were the works of independent contemporary poets. According to Rajabzadeh, 105 collections of poetry were assessed by the censors as either unauthorized (23%) or conditional (77%). 71% of the censored poetry books belonged to post-1940s non-panegyric poets, mainly the works of less famous figures. Famous poets – contemporary or classic – were also censored. The Divan of Mohammad Taghi Bahar, the renowned poet of the constitutional era, as well as a collection of lyric poetry by Fereidoun Moshiri and a collection of poems by Abolghasem Lahouti were labelled as unauthorized. The list of conditional books includes a variety of classical poets, those of the constitutional era and the most famous poets of the Iranian modernist movement.⁶⁵

Based on Rajabzadeh's research, the most significant area of censorship of books has been literature.⁶⁶ The statistics indicate that 46% of all literary books submitted to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance that year were deemed unauthorized or conditional. The ratio of works that were either banned or sent back for revision to those approved was as follows: literary criticism: 2.43 to 1, Persian novels: 1.99 to 1, foreign fiction: 1.17 to 1, Persian folk or local poetry: 1.21 to 1, satire : 1.43 to 1 and anthologies: 1 to 1. In the same year, 107 poetry collections, mainly modern contemporary poetry, were not approved, some 13% of the total of 800 books published. We should notice, however, that many of the books published were multiple prints of classical works such as the Divan of Hafiz (80 prints), the *Shahnameh* (17 Prints), Baba Tahir poetry (17 prints) and Rumi

⁶⁵ Ahmad Rajabzadeh, *Momayyeziy-e Ketāb: Pajuheshi dar 1400 Sanad-e Momayyeziy-e Ketāb dar Sāl-e 1375* (Tehran: Kavir, 2001), p.202

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 61.

(44 prints). Moreover, many other books classified as poetry were versified sermons or religious hymns. If we deduct these books, we will see that the actual percentage of censored contemporary poetry is much higher.⁶⁷

Poetry is censored for various reasons. The following list includes the most common reasons cited by censors for rejecting the publication of poetry. It is not a comprehensive list because, in many cases, censors tend to give no reason, and reading their mind is not always possible.

1. Censorship for Political Implications

A large number of poetry collections have been censored for their political implications. Due to the nature of poetic language, direct political content is rare in poetry. However, censors have found various faults with some poems, and have indicated these faults by remarks ranging from direct statements like ‘communist content’ to ambiguous remarks such as ‘argumentative and toxic, dangerous meaning, containing a type of political thought’ or simply ‘poetry with political meaning’ as shown by the examples below.

Inja Setārehhā ham Misuzand (Here the Stars Burn, Too) by contemporary poet, Hossein Saffaridoust, is rejected for seven reasons, mostly political, including: ‘ambiguous and harsh tone of the poem; political and revolutionary dimension and soft text’;⁶⁸ political dimension; creating suspicious analogies’.⁶⁹

Sokhan-e Del (Word of Heart) by Khaled Bayazidi faced five corrections, all political. In the line, ‘My words are raising the dove of peace and reconciliation in prison. Each word of mine will change into a bullet in a freedom fighter’s gun’, the censor has remarked: ‘alluding to prison and freedom fighting’. At ‘They closed my eyes, silenced my voice, created fear, hanged me on the rope of ignorance and superstitions’, the censor has written: ‘poems with dangerous meaning’. As for ‘Saturday, execution of one... Thursday, all ropes hanging... Friday, all puppies on the gallows’ – the censor has noted: ‘Toxic and provocative poem’.⁷⁰

Khāneh (Home) by Mehdi Akhavan Langroodi faced seven cases of censorship and was denied a publication licence. The censor wrote: ‘As the majority of poems are about homesickness

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 60-61.

⁶⁸ The author is unaware of what the censor means by ‘soft text’.

⁶⁹ Rajabzadeh, p. 221.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

and in memory of homeland, these poems contain negative political load and should be deleted'. Samples of lines to be deleted are as follows:

- Home! | I want to weave a violet dress | for you | from waters
- The sky over my home | is bright | in the commute of those | who have been carrying | their homeland on shoulder | for years
- These are the flames of your love | burning me | this is me | calling you | fire does not burn my voice.⁷¹

As the above examples show, even a nostalgic piece admiring his homeland, written by a poet who lives overseas, is considered politically undesirable and, therefore, censored.

A collection by Seyed Ali Salehi, a popular poet, called *Neshānihā* (The Addresses) is also considered to contain some poems 'full of political allusions'. One example is 'the prayers of you and that restless bird | both fluttered and flew away | they sat on the arch of a broken tile | I had cried the sorrow of freedom | for a thousand lost birds | and you knew not'.⁷²

Another sensitive political topic seems to be ethnic and minority issues. *Nasim-e- Kārevān* (The Breeze of Caravan), the first collection by Yousof Azizi Banitorof, an Iranian Arab writer, is refused as 'unauthorized'. The censor has observed:

As the local problems are being magnified throughout the book and a nationalistic spirit is being propagated, and the author even lies to mobilize the sentiments of the people, I concluded that it is not expedient to allow publication of this book in the current situation because it will intrigue nationalistic [ethnic] sentiments. Such problems exist in all minorities and ethnicities, and they have not been created by the regime; and broadcasting such problems merely benefits the enemies of Islam and Iran.⁷³

The way censors are treating poetry indicates a presumption on their part that poets are using allegory and symbolism to attack the Islamic Republic because of a perceived lack of freedom of speech and that, therefore, they have the duty to 'discover' and 'neutralize' such attacks. This is, in fact, an admission of censorship by the censors, who offer extreme interpretations of texts which are not necessarily political and would not be perceived as such by the ordinary reader. In the example of *Khāneh* by Langroodi, an ordinary reader would view those poems as evidence that someone is missing his homeland. However, the censor who deeply, though unconsciously, acknowledges the lack of freedom in the country, reads them as political statements. There are

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 222.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 223.

some other books that were denied a publication licence, although no definite reason was given by the censor. Some of these works have no sexual, moral or religious implications, so we can guess that they have also been rejected for reasons perceived by the censors to be political.

2. Censorship for Sexual Implications

Many collections have been censored for what is viewed as sexual implications. Such books are usually labelled as *mobtazal*. This is a very difficult term to define. In common usage, it means banal, commonplace, cheap or clichéd. However, in the official language of the Islamic system, it normally refers to anything of a sexual or erotic nature perceived by the authorities to be degrading, demeaning or shameful. Hence, we may say that *mobtazal* is a euphemism aimed at associating any sexual reference with low, vulgar and commonplace conduct. This euphemism helps easily reject a large volume of art and literature and leaves the creators of such art or literature defenceless, since few people would want to defend clichéd, stereotype and commonplace literature.

Dar Āvār-e Daryā (Under the Rubble of the Sea) by Manouchehr Cohen faced 17 corrections; 10 of them were marked *mobtazal* and idolizing love. Examples include: ‘Naked water | nude rocks | hurrying wave | endless love’ and ‘The fire of love | and the peace of your arms | the tumult of whirlwind | and the silence of mountain | the river inevitably | flows into the sea’.⁷⁴

Dar Sarābi Digar (In another Mirage) by Ziaoddin Torabi required six corrections. The censor remarked these lines as follows:

- The woman became naked | between two dreams (‘*mobtazal* line and sexually stimulant’)
- Berry of pleasure | under the tooth of coitus (‘stimulant metaphor, *mobtazal*’)

Paranday-e Bibāl (Wingless Bird) by Mohsen Souri faced four corrections, such as:

- I slept with myself in sleep and while awake (‘meaningless and *mobtazal* sentence’)
- They tell me you embrace the body of the daughter of fire | the fire poem is a bastard | the fruit of your sin (‘*mobtazal* sentences and swear words’).⁷⁵

There are many instances where there is no sexual reference. However, it seems that censors are treating sex very broadly. Any talk of friendship between the sexes or any reference to love, even

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 225.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

platonic, might be censored. Examples include poems by Manouchehr Cohen from *Barāy-e ke Besorāyam?* (For Whom Should I Write?):

- A glance | a desire | a memory | an evening.

In *Che Kasi Bud ke Goft?* (Who was it that said?) by Hida Eskandari, 16 pages are ordered to be deleted. According to Rajabzadeh, the content of those pages was the unity of lover and beloved and their mutual expectations expressed in a manner which is very common in classical Persian poetry.⁷⁶

3. Censorship for Religious Implications

In *Tārikh-e Tahliliy-e She'r-e Now* (The Analytical History of Modern Poetry) by Shams Langroodi, the censor demanded seven instances of corrections for matters related to religious rituals. They included the deletion of 'Reza Shah's using a prayer bead', which the censor described as 'an insult to the sacred things and the Islamic rituals' – apparently because Reza Shah (the First Pahlavi King of Iran) is not supposed to be depicted as somebody who is interested in religion. Another example from the same book is 'I am captive in this black cloth, for more than a thousand years', concerning which the censor has remarked: 'About the restrictions on women'.⁷⁷

In *Seiri dar Divān-e Shams* (A Survey through the Divān-e Shams) by Ali Dashti, the censor required the word *mullah* to be replaced, since he finds it an insult to the clergy. The line reads: 'At that time, the mullahs were very influential and were against the Sufis'. The censor also wanted the following sentence corrected: 'Due to his perfectionist nature, he could not remain content within the narrow frame of religious systems'.⁷⁸

The above examples show that censors have little respect for or knowledge of historical facts. As the Islamic Republic intended to portray the Pahlavi dynasty as a corrupt system, anything that might allude to a religious interest in the Pahlavi kings is censored, even a simple act of holding a prayer bead – which is not necessarily a religious act, for many people in Iran keep one and turn the beads as a habit or pastime. The clergy is also treated as untouchable, with no criticism allowed. The word *mullah* is today considered derogatory but was not so in the past. In fact, it means 'knowledgeable' and used to be a very respectful title for learned men. However, the censor seems to pay no regard to the historical period that is the subject of the book in question.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 226.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 241.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

In *She'r-e Now* (Modern Poetry) by Mohammad Hoghooghi, the censor adds the comment ‘untrue and improper analogy’ to a line which reads: ‘The Davidian voice of Abdul Basit flew side by side the song of Parisa’. Abdul Basit is a well-known Egyptian Koran reciter and Parisa is a female Iranian classical music singer. The censor, it appears, dislikes the idea of comparing reciting the holy book to singing, even though Parisa is known for singing spiritual and Sufi poetry. The fact that female solo singing is banned in Iran might have also played a role.⁷⁹

4. Censorship for Technical Reasons

Very often, the censors pose as editors and refuse a publication licence for reasons that are merely technical. This happens mainly in the case of works by less famous poets. Rajabzadeh lists numerous poetry collections in this category in 1996-97. The list is summarized in the following table:⁸⁰

Title of Poetry Collection	Name of Poet	Comments by Censor
<i>Ārezu</i> (Wish)	Gholamreza Yamani	Lack of basic principles of poetry
<i>Fardā Parandayi be Harf Miāyad</i> (Tomorrow a Bird Will Start to Talk)	Unknown	Lack of a considerable poetic essence
<i>Golbāng-e Shādi</i> (The Call of Happiness)	Narguess Mousavi	Inability of the poet in composing poetry and satire, lack of awareness of the quality of satire and inability to distinguish feeble and weak poetry from satiric verse
<i>Rāyehay-e Reyhāneh</i> (The Fragrance of Reyhaneh)	Behzad Kashani	Cheap and commonplace in view of content, defective rhyme and rhythm
<i>Divān-e Ghazaliyāt-e Ghasemi</i> (Divan of Ghazals of Ghasemi)	Haj Sheikh Mohammad Ghasempour	Weak rhyming, coarse verses, lack of attention to meaning of words in the verse

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 249.

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 218-219.

Title of Poetry Collection	Name of Poet	Comments by Censor
<i>Divān-e Eshq</i> (Divan of Love)	Aziz Fattahi Poldashti	Lots of problems in view of composition
<i>Tefl-e Khāki va Mām-e Aflāki</i> (The Terrestrial Child and the Celestial Mother)	Delneshin Shali	Weak language, lack of any clear message, poet being a beginner
<i>Divān-e Eshq</i> (Divan of Love)	Ali Rangamiz	Poor content
<i>Az Kelid tā Ākhar</i> (From Key to the End)	Abbas Habibi Badrabadi	Lack of meaning
<i>Qadah-e Zarrin</i> (The Golden Cup)	Sona Allahyarzadeh	Too many technical defects
<i>Entezār</i> (Waiting)	Aminolsharia Najafi	Defective rhyme and rhythm
<i>Zemzemahāyi dar Esārat-e Ghorbat-e Zamin</i> (Whispers in the Nostalgia of Earth)	Javad Abolfazli	1. Absurd poems; 2. Void thought; 3. Defective and mixed-up forms; 4. Dispersed verses lacking proper rhythm. This book resembles the first writings of schoolchildren and has no artistic and literary value
<i>Sokhan-e Āmuzandeh</i> (Didactic Words)	Karamali Khosroshahi	Weak writing; 2. Uncanny defence of the values in parts of the collection, which seems as if the publisher himself has intended to write poetry. Except for a handful of poems, the rest is very weak and suffer various problems in form and content.
<i>Feqdān</i> (Loss)	Lorestani	This is not <i>She'r</i> (poetry), it is <i>M'er</i> (bullshit)!
<i>Montakhabol Ash'ār</i> (Selected Poems)	Forghanparast	The book is a mixture of different types of poetry and prose, from satire and lampoon to the praise of Imam

Title of Poetry Collection	Name of Poet	Comments by Censor
		Ali. The author has not followed any specific purpose. It is, therefore, unpublishable

Table 1: Poetry collections refused a publication licence in 1996-97 for technical reasons

The censor's reaction in some cases shows anger or frustration with a work they clearly don't like or can't connect to.

5. Censorship for Miscellaneous Reasons

Hālā Hekāyat-e Māst (Now, It is Our Tale) by Emran Salahi was refused a publication permit for a number of reasons, including insult to the print and publication authorities in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Two of the sentences which were considered offensive to the censors are as follows:

- ‘To be able to publish a book, you need to obtain a qualifying card. We should be grateful they don’t demand a qualifying card for writing a book’.
- ‘In order for his ghazal not to face problems with the moral police, he should print it like this: I wanted to catch his moustache, I couldn’t find a ladder, instead of the original: I wanted to kiss her lips, I couldn’t find a ladder [indicating that the beloved was tall]’.⁸¹

Arash Hejazi, a translator and publisher, had his publishing company closed and his licence revoked after he appeared on international news outlets and testified about the murder of Neda Agha Sultan in the post-election uprisings in 2009. Hejazi, who is also a medical doctor, tried to resuscitate Neda after she was shot and the cameras recorded him. Consequently, all books he had translated, including many bestselling titles by Paolo Coelho, were removed from bookstores.⁸² In this case, the ban had nothing to do with the content of the books. A similar example is the request of the censor to delete names of authors or translators who are considered politically undesirable. Adel Biabangard Javan, a poet and translator, told the author that the authorities had asked him to delete the name of his co-translator Kian Tajbakhsh, who was a political prisoner, from the Persian

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 250.

⁸² Mostafa Khalaji, Bronwen Robertson and Maryam Aghdami, *Cultural Censorship in Iran - Iranian Culture in a State of Emergency* (London: Small Media Foundation, July 2011) <<http://smallmedia.org.uk/censorship.pdf>> [accessed 27 February 2015].

translation of Kipling's *Epitaphs of the War*, in order to allow the publication to see the light of day. He refused the request, so the book was never published.⁸³

6. Censorship for Unspecified Reasons

There are some poetry collections that have undergone censorship without the censors indicating any reason. In some cases, censors have written 'ambiguous or twofold meaning', as in a poem by Hafez Mousavi in *Satrīy-e Penhāni* (The Hidden Lines) or considered text to induce 'absurdity and nihilism', as in *Sayyāray-e Bitaskin* (Restless Planet) by Mehdi Ghahhari.⁸⁴ However, many poems are refused a licence without any reason being cited and there is very little to suggest why these poems were considered undesirable.⁸⁵

Books on the history of poetry, anthologies, criticism or commentary on poetry have also undergone censorship. According to Rajabzadeh's research, there were only 14 books on literary history and literary criticism published in 1996-97, while in the same year, 34 books in this category were rejected. This represents the highest ratio of unsuccessful to successful submissions (2.4:1) among all book categories.⁸⁶

The censors suggested that the names and poems of Nader Naderpour and Esmail Khoi should be deleted from an anthology called *Az Panjerahāy-e Zendagāni* (Through the Windows of Life). They also sought the omission of the poetry and name of Simin Behbahani from another anthology *Golchin-e She'r-e Farsi* (Selections of Persian Poetry). A collection and critique of the poetry of Abolghasem Lahouti edited by Mohammad Ali Sepanloo was refused a licence and the censor wrote: 'This book is unauthorized for publication because it glorifies the poetry of a communist poet of the period. Bringing up his name as a freedom-seeking poet by Sepanloo is worthy of attention'.⁸⁷ There is a tacit threat in this remark addressed to Sepanloo for editing this

⁸³ Adel Biabangard Javan (facebook chat with the author, 26 December 2014).

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 228.

⁸⁵ Rajabzadeh gives a list of poetry collections censored for no obvious reasons. The list includes *Kabutarān-e Sahar* (The Doves of Dawn) by Taraneh Sohrab, *Nabz-e Ettefāq* (The Pulse of Incident) by Iraj Safshekan, *Sarzamin-e Man, Bānuy-e Man* (My Homeland, My Lady) by Manouchehr Cohen, *Dar Jostojuy-e Ān Loghat-e- Tanhā* (In Search of that Lonely Word) by Yadollah Royayee, *Seksekahāy-e Mard-e Pelāstiki* (Hiccups of Plastic Man) by Amir Aslani, *Ruzhāy-e Talkh* (Bitter Days) by Afsaneh Afroz, *Entezār Tanhā Hādesa Bud* (Waiting Was the Only Accident) by Nargess Esmaili, *Man-o- Nāzi* (Me and Nāzi) by Hossein Panahi, *Az to tā Tarāneh* (From You to the Song) by Mohsen Saeed Sadat, *Sāqi va Jām* (Saqi and the Cup) by Hashemi Gohar, See Ibid., p. 229.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 231.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 204.

collection. The censor is questioning the motives behind this scholarly work and is taking on the role of the inquisitor rather than the censor.

Many other names were considered undesirable. In *Bāzandishiy-e Zabān-e Farsi* (Rethinking Persian Language) by Daryoush Ashouri, the censor demanded the removal of the names of Ahmad Shamloo and Mehdi Akhavan Saleth from the sentence: ‘In the poetry of major poets of this time, Shamloo and Akhavan’. *Talā dar Mes* (Gold in Copper), a collection of essays on Persian contemporary poetry by Reza Baraheni, was assessed as unauthorized for the following reason: ‘The author has frequently commended anti-regime thinkers such as Faraj Sarkoohi, Gholamhossein Saedi, Mirza Agha Asgari, Eslam Kazemieh, Khosro Golsorkhi and Nader Naderpour’.⁸⁸

Āshenāyi bā Adabiyāt-e Moāser (An Introduction to Contemporary Literature) by Hormoz Rahimian is unauthorized on account of:

Praising Talebov, Akhonzadeh, Malkam Khan, Bozorg Alavi, Mohammad Ali Forooghi the freemason and Sadegh Hedayat. [...] Whitewashing the corrupt faces of literary figures such as Reza Baraheni, Simin Daneshvar, Gholamhossein Saedi, Samad Behrangi [...] and Bahram Beyzayi. Distorting the history of contemporary literature through magnifying the influence of anti-Islamic writers and ignoring the *healthy* literary figures.⁸⁹

In many other books on the history of literature, the censors asked the writer to delete the entries on a large number of influential writers and poets of the twentieth century and demanded that the authors ‘correct’ their biographies. The censors, however, did not offer any guidelines on how one can correct someone’s past life. All books by Shojaoddin Shafa and Fereydoon Tonekaboni were banned because they had ‘supported Salman Rushdie’.⁹⁰

Although the rules and regulations on censorship remained the same, changes of government usually brought about some variation in censorship policies. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance acted differently under different ministers. For instance, there was no state-imposed censorship on books during the early years of the Revolution (1979-1981). According to a report by Farrokh Amirkaryar, the highest growth rate in book publication (an average of 52%) is seen immediately after the Revolution. He attributes this growth to social changes, in addition to the lack of a controlling authority. Amirkaryar believes that, as with any other commodity, the

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 234.

⁸⁹ Ibid. p.235

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 235-236.

production of books suffered during the war with Iraq (1981-1987) but recovered after the war: ‘By the end of the war, book publication increased about 90% in a matter of one year and reached 7848 titles in 1988’.⁹¹ In addition to logistical issues, Amirkaryar credits changes in the cultural and social environment for the growth. A large number of pre-Revolutionary writers and poets were unable to publish anything during the war. By its end, though, the ministry had changed its policies gradually. New journals obtained a licence and censorship was relaxed a little. These policies, however, were harshly criticized by different sources of power within the system. The Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Mohammad Khatami, came under pressure for his liberal approach to culture. According to Amirkaryar, ‘Poems and stories published were scrutinized; words and phrases extracted and used in order to attack the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The sensitivity was mainly directed towards the older generation of Iranian poets and writers’.⁹²

The pressures forced Khatami to resign on 22 August 1992. In his autobiography, he attributes his resignation to disputes with the competing and higher authorities and writes: ‘Due to difference in opinion and methods between myself and some of the relevant authorities, I resigned in 1992 in favour of freedom of expression, democracy and the rule of law which I deeply believed in’.⁹³

Although the resignation of Khatami and appointment of Ali Larijani to the post reduced the pressure considerably, some policies were still being criticized. On 14 February 1994, Mostafa Mirsaleem replaced Ali Larijani and held the post for four years. During that time, publishing books became very difficult. All books were required to obtain a new licence for each print run, even if their previous licence had been obtained only a few months before. Amirkaryar writes: ‘The lengthy process of issuing licences, assessing all books – even books in pure science disciplines – and banning advertisement of books prior to their publication were among the policies adopted during this period’.⁹⁴

⁹¹ Farrokh Amirkaryar, ‘*Nashr-e Ketāb dar Sāl-e 1377*’, *Jahān-e Ketāb*, 87-88 (October 1999), p.2

⁹² Ibid., p. 3.

⁹³ Mohammad Khatami, *Zendagināmeh* (Tehran: Khatami Portal, 2015)
<<http://www.khatami.ir/biography.html>> [accessed 11 February 2015].

⁹⁴ Amirkaryar, p. 3.

The Book Office was closed to publishers or authors. If a book was refused publication, the office would issue a short notice on plain paper – no letterhead, stamp or signature. A sample notice, which the author himself saw, is as follows:

Mr Ali Abdollahi,

Your book *Bar Pāgard-e Yādhā* (On the Stairwell of Memories) is assessed as unauthorized based on the rules and standards of book publications.⁹⁵

Amir Hassan Cheheltan, a novelist, believes that censorship was harsh in all periods except for a short while during the Khatami presidency and the first two years after the Revolution when the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was not yet well established. He claims that it was only during Khatami's time that he could negotiate with the censor.⁹⁶ Amirkaryar confirms that during Mirsaleem's time, publication of literature decreased considerably.⁹⁷

The election of Khatami to the presidency in 1997 brought about major social and political change. Under his rule, newspapers flourished and the publishing industry developed considerably. In 1999, according to Christopher de Bellaigue, the combined circulation of Iranian newspapers and magazines doubled to around 2,750,000, compared with a couple of years previously.⁹⁸ Likewise, the publication of poetry and fiction increased considerably. In 1998, 220 new poetry titles were published, most of them belonging to emerging poets.⁹⁹ In a study on the publication of books during the first two decades after the Revolution, Alireza Mahdiani and Seyed Hassan Mortezaei wrote: '1997 through 2002 [the year of publication of their study] saw the highest number of literary books published. The average growth of literature publication during this period was about 10%. However, literature is the only category of books that has always had a negative growth rate after the Revolution, in view of the ratio to the total publications'.¹⁰⁰

The reformist government came to an end in 2005 and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president. The crackdown on the press entered a new phase and censorship became much stricter. Ahmadinejad's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Saffar Haradndi, a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, undertook to introduce new cultural policies and to put an end

⁹⁵ The author has personally seen this note. He accompanied Ali Abdollahi to the Book Office and was present when this note was handed to him.

⁹⁶ Amir Hassan Cheheltan, interviewed by Alireza Gholami, *Tajrobeh*, 4.32 (October 2014), p.27

⁹⁷ Amirkaryar, p. 3.

⁹⁸ Christopher de Bellaigue, *The Struggle for Iran* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2007), p. 7.

⁹⁹ Amirkaryar, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Alireza Mahdiani and Seyed Hassan Mortezaei; *Simāy-e Nashr-e- Ketāb dar Iran tayy-e do Dahay-e Akhir, Rahyāft*, 31 (Autumn and Winter 2003), p.29

to the more relaxed regime of the previous government. According to Payam Yazdanjoo, the result of this new approach was ‘unprecedented severity in issuing a publication licence for books of ‘problematic content’, i.e. contrary to the Sharia, the Islamic ethics or the prestige of Islam or the Islamic Republic, as well as obliging publishers to obtain a new licence for reprinting previously published books’.¹⁰¹ Consequently, many books which would have successfully passed censorship under the former administration were rejected and some titles that had been repeatedly published before were now banned. The new censors also encouraged self-censorship. Harandi openly recommended authors and publishers to delete what he called problematic content from their books before submitting them to the censor. Yazdanjoo writes: ‘Submitting any book that would fail to pass the censorship due to problematic content would create a negative point for the publisher and frequent negative points would put an end to the activity of the publisher and would eventually nullify the publisher’s business licence’.¹⁰² This type of punishment was a permanent threat which endangered the economic sustainability of publishers. As a result, many became extra cautious and avoided the risk of accepting books which might be rejected by the censor. The new administration did not even honour licences it had granted. Ramezani Forati, Director of the Book Office, observed that a book might obtain a licence and be published but that its distribution might be prevented at any time if it was understood that the office had made a mistake.¹⁰³

To help the censors search for undesirable material, publishers were also ordered to deliver a CD of every book, in addition to the printed copy. This led to speculation that the censor might be using software to identify problematic words and that many works might be rejected simply because no one even cared to read them.¹⁰⁴ During the presidential debates in 2009, the reformist candidate, Mir Hossein Mousavi, identified some of the problems of Ahmadinejad government in the area of culture: ‘Somebody’s book has been published 15 times. The book has obtained a licence from this same government. It is banned in its 16th reprint [...]. Every government should

¹⁰¹ Payam Yazdanjoo, ‘*Sarkub-e Maktub: Dāstan-e ketāb dar dowrān-e Ahmadinejad*’ (London: BBC Persian online, 30 June 2013)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/blogs/2013/06/130627_blogfa_144_nazeran_censorship> [accessed 17 February 2015].

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ BBC Persian Online, *Vezārat-e Ershād va Emzāhāyi ke Zirash Zad; Hasht Sāl Laghv-e Mojavez-e Ketāb* (London: BBC Persian Online, 31 July 2013)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2013/07/130724_141_books_banned_ahmadinejad_list> [accessed 17 February 2015].

¹⁰⁴ Bahram Rafiee, *Mahdudiyathāy-e Jadid-e Vezārat-e Ershād*, ([n.p.]: Ettelaat Network, [n.d.])
<<http://www.ettelaat.net/06-04/news.asp?id=13300>> [accessed 17 February 2015].

honour its signature and stand by what it promises'.¹⁰⁵ Ahmadinejad agreed with his opponent and stated that he had written and spoken to the minister.¹⁰⁶

Policies did not change during Ahmadinejad's second term. Mohammad Hosseini, his next Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, was also a member of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The BBC has published a list of books which had been licensed and published during Khatami's presidency but were denied a reprint licence by Ahmadinejad's administration. This list, which is incomplete and has been compiled with the help of authors who have provided the information, includes the titles and bibliographical information of 103 books written in Persian and 42 books translated from foreign languages.¹⁰⁷

Censorship during Ahmadinejad's term was so vast and comprehensive that even supporters of the Islamic Republic, including those known as Islamic revolutionary poets, for instance Mostafa Rahmandoost, Abdoljabbar Kakaei, Afshin Alae and Soheil Mahmoudi, started to criticize it openly. Rahmandoost, a former high-ranking official in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, considered the period of Ahmadinejad administration a bleak time for culture: 'During the past dark years, a catastrophe struck culture and art which cannot be remedied easily'.¹⁰⁸ Seyed Mehdi Shojaei, a novelist who had previously published a novel in praise of the 1979 Revolution, was censored and the authorities prevented distribution of one of his novels. He then wrote a story castigating the cultural policies of Ahmadinejad and the structure of the Islamic Republic.¹⁰⁹ Rahmandoost claimed to have documents to prove that major classic works like

¹⁰⁵ BBC Persian Online, *Monāzeray-e Bisābeghay-e Entekhābāti Miyan-e Ahmadinejad va Mousavi*, (London: BBC Persian Online, 3 June 2009) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2009/06/090603_op_ir88_mousavi_ahmadinejad_debate> [accessed 17 February 2015].

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ BBC Persian Online, *Vezārat-e Ershād va Emzāhāyi ke Zirash Zad; Hasht Sāl Laghv-e Mojavez-e Ketāb*, (London: BBC Persian Online, 31 July 2013) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2013/07/130724_141_books_banned_ahmadinejad_list> [accessed 17 February 2015].

¹⁰⁸ BBC Persian Online, *Sālhāy-e Siyāh-e Farhang; Enteqad-e Tond-e Jam'i az Shāeran-e Irani az Dowlat-e Ahmadinejad* (London: BBC Persian Online, 19 September 2013) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2013/09/130919_141_book_ershad_advice_poetry_day> [accessed 23 February 2015].

¹⁰⁹ Ali Jeihoon, *Hamchenān Zemestān Ast, Negāhi be Sānsur pas az Enqelab* (London: BBC Persian online, 6 February 2014) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2014/02/140205_144_35th_iran_revolution_censorship> [accessed 20 February 2015].

Mathnawi by Rumi and *Khosro va Shirin* by Nizami, as well as many other classical masterpieces, had been censored.¹¹⁰

Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013. He appointed Ali Jannati as the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Jannati expressed discontent with the censorship system and, in one of his first interviews, revealed his plan to abolish pre-publication censorship and entrust the publishers with *momayyezi*.¹¹¹ He expressly criticized the arbitrary censorship of the previous administration and complained that the security and secret services were dictating policy to cultural directors and treating culture as a security concern. He acknowledged that directors in cultural organizations had a security attitude toward culture or were directed by security authorities. He claimed to have a list of 50 publishers who were not allowed to take part in international book fairs – based on instructions from security organizations.¹¹² He added: ‘There were about 400 books which were either refused publication or left undecided just because they had once been published by the publishers who were now on the blacklist’.¹¹³ He also acknowledged that there existed a long blacklist of writers whose works were banned, regardless of what they wrote. ‘It was enough for a book to have a name of this list on its cover to be banned from publication’.¹¹⁴ He even claimed that the censors would tend to censor the Koran if it were not revealed word of God and would assess some parts of it as immoral and against public decency.¹¹⁵ Although the new administration sparked many hopes, it did not deliver much. Censorship of literature relaxed a little bit and some books previously categorized as unpublishable found their way to the market. Still, there are many books that undergo censorship and a large number remain banned.

Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, the renowned Iranian novelist, has spoken about two of his novels *Zavāl-e Colonel* (The Colonel) and *Tariq-e Besmel Shodan* (The Path to Martyrdom). German, English, Hebrew, French and Italian translations of *The Colonel* have been published. This novel

¹¹⁰ Āftāb News, *Rahmandoost: Mathnawi ham Momayyezi Shoda Ast* (Iran: Āftāb News Network, 19 August 2011) <<http://aftabnews.ir/vdcd5x0fkyt0sj6.2a2y.html>> [accessed 20 February 2015].

¹¹¹ Farnaz Amiri, *Goftragu bā Mohsen Parviz dar Bāray-e Sānsur va Moāvenat-e Farhangi, Āsemān*, 63 (24 September 2013), p.102

¹¹² BBC Persian Online, *Vazir-e Ershād: Dastgāhhay-e Amniyati be barkhi az Modirān-e Farhangiy-e Sabeq Dikta Mikardand* (London: BBC Persian Online, 4 December 2013) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2013/12/131204_141_book_jannati_security_comments> [accessed 20 February 2015].

¹¹³Ibid.

¹¹⁴Ibid.

¹¹⁵Iranian Labor News Agency, *Ali Jannati: Agar Koran Vahy-e Monzal Nabud, Momayyezān ān rā ham rad Mikardand* (Tehran, ILNA, 8 October 2013) <<http://www.ilna.ir/news/news.cfm?id=111441>> [accessed 20 February, 2015]

was also a candidate for the Man Asian Literary Prize in 2011¹¹⁶ and won the Jan Michalski Prize in Switzerland in 2013,¹¹⁷ but the original Persian version has not yet been allowed. Dowlatabadi wrote *The Colonel* in 1983-84 and waited for 24 years before his publisher applied for a publication licence. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance has so far returned the manuscript to the writer a few times and demanded corrections. According to Dowlatabadi, he has agreed to apply changes at least four times, in the hope of publishing his novel in Iran, but to no avail. The minister who had spoken favourably about issuing a publication licence for this book was threatened with impeachment by parliament.¹¹⁸ According to the BBC, the authorities who had spoken favourably about this novel retracted their statements and Hamid Reza Moghaddamfar, a senior Revolutionary Guard figure, warned against publication of *The Colonel*, calling it the ‘most anti-revolutionary’ novel after the 1979 Revolution and describing any idea of publishing it as a ‘major deviation’.¹¹⁹ This evidence shows that censorship operates on a higher scale and is not merely controlled by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

President Rouhani has frequently criticized the state of censorship and has asked authors and publishers to teach the authorities how to supervise book publication. He defends censorship but wants it more regulated. In the 32nd Book of the Year Award Ceremony in February 2015, Rouhani said: ‘I don’t say whether to have *momayyezi* or not, I am saying that we cannot have a hundred principles for *momayyezi*. Censorship is necessary but it should be limited to moral standards, sacred principles and national security issue’.¹²⁰ His initiative to assign censorship to authors and publishers has been criticized both by hardliners and by authors. The hardliners believe that this would relax censorship and the authors and publishers fear it would add to more self-censorship and compromise their security, because they would be held more responsible.¹²¹ *Kānun-*

¹¹⁶ Alison Flood, ‘Man Asian Literary Prize announces longlist’, *The Guardian*, 2 November 2011 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/nov/02/man-asian-literary-prize-shortlit>> [accessed 23 February 2015].

¹¹⁷ Jan Michalski Foundation, *Edition 2013* (Montricher: Jan Michalski, 2013) <<http://www.fondation-janmichalski.com/en/prix-jan-michalski/edition-2013/>> [accessed 23 February 2015].

¹¹⁸ Amir Hakkak, *Mahmoud Dowlatabadi: Barāy-e Ākharin bār be Vezārat-e Ershād Miravam* (London: BBC Persian Online, 8 November 2014) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2014/11/141107_141_book_Dolatabadi> [accessed 23 February 2015].

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Alef News, *Rouhani: Naqd-e Rang-e Kafsh va Lebās Naqd Nist* (Tehran: Alef News, 8 February 2015) <<http://alef.ir/vdcewo8wpjh8nxi.b9bj.html?259326>> [accessed 23 February 2015].

¹²¹ BBC Persian Online, *Rouhani az Sharāyet-e Momayyezi-e Ketāb dar Iran Enteqad kard* (London: BBC Persian Online, 8 February 2015) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2015/02/150208_iran_book_audit_censorship_rouhani> [accessed 23 February 2015].

e Nevisandegān-e Iran (Iranian Writers' Association) acknowledged that some unpublished titles had been published and that censorship had been relaxed, but they said it would be too optimistic to congratulate ourselves: 'Let's assume that the books delayed in the Ministry of Culture obtained a publication licence and that the licensing is now quicker and censorship less strict. Now, what have we achieved except a more relaxed and speedier censorship'?¹²²

In general, we can assert that except for the first two years after the Revolution, poetry has been censored during the lifetime of the Islamic Republic. The degree of censorship varied depending on the political atmosphere and the government in charge. From 1981 to 1997, censorship was strict. During the reformist Khatami government (1997-2005), it was relaxed. Ahmadinejad's two terms in office (2005-2013) was one of the darkest periods for culture and Iranian poetry experienced an extreme censorship climate. Since the election of Rouhani in 2013, censorship is less strict and some procedures have improved.

Policies of the government of Iran in regard to control of culture are not limited to censorship of books and publications. There are a large number of other policies and activities in place which can be divided into two main categories – punitive policies (intimidation) and encouraging policies (tokenism). Punishments include closing down newspapers and literary periodicals, revoking business licences of publishers, financial hardship, violation of privacy, interrogations, imprisonment, vilification and defamation, murder, preventing memorial services, interfering in funerals and burials, and even destroying gravestones. There are numerous organizations and forces involved in these acts. The system rewards its favoured poets and writers with financial incentives, positions in cultural institutions, political establishments and academia, through fame and recognition, literary awards, foreign trips, official memorial services and by commemorating them through naming public places after their death. In 'When they Beat Us, We Suffer', Dario Fo writes: 'There exists another kind of censorship, to do with prizes, grants, opportunities to tour [...]. It is a kind of blackmail which governs the selection of texts'.¹²³ The State has many tools at its disposal to effectively use both tokenism and intimidation.

The government has exclusive control over the paper market and the paper ration acts as a controlling apparatus. While pro-regime press and publications have unlimited access to subsidized

¹²² *Kārnāmeh-e Yeksāleh, Andishay-e Azād*, 3.8 (August 2014), pp. 3-4.

¹²³ Dario Fo, 'When they Beat Us, We Suffer', in *An Embarrassment of Tyrannies: Twenty-Five Years of Index on Censorship*, ed. by W.L. Webb and Rose Bell (London: Victor Gollancz, 1997), pp. 122-125 (p. 123).

paper, independent publications have to struggle to purchase paper from the black or free market. Mehrangiz Kar, a prominent Iranian lawyer, writes:

Since 1981, and while the regime was busy suppressing the opposition and fighting the war with Iraq, the government has collected the books which had been published in the free environment after the Revolution and which reflected views opposing the Islamic Republic. Since then, paper was provided to the publishers at two different rates. The cheap subsidized rate was accessible only to publishers who published books conforming to official policies and the political taste of the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. The free market rate was so expensive that publishers who did not receive subsidized paper were unable to buy and they, therefore, decided to stop publishing books. Consequently, economic censorship was imposed on books.¹²⁴

Another financial tool at the disposal of the government is the distribution of official advertisements, which are a main source of income for newspapers and magazines. The amount of direct governmental aid to the press is huge and has always been kept a secret. Saeed Leylaz, an economist, writes: ‘Exclusive rights [...] in ordering advertisements is not to be ignored when government companies are practically banned from offering advertisement to reformist newspapers such as *Sharq* or *E’temād* which are opposed to the government; and even the directors of such companies are prosecuted if they place advertisements with these newspapers’.¹²⁵

Buying books for public libraries is another huge financial tool in the hands of the government. Public libraries are controlled by a body called the Public Libraries Institution. Based on their portal, this institution is the biggest buyer of books in the country. On average, this institution spends IRR 200 billion a year on the purchase of books, the majority from governmental or semi-governmental publishers.¹²⁶ They purchase the type of books ‘containing material which strengthens the fundamentals of Islam, the Islamic Revolution, the Velayat-e-Faqih and the components of Iranian national identity, and those which promote family values, obedience to God, spirituality and the unity of God’.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Mehrangiz Kar, *Sānsur: Si Sāl Hamrāhi bā Engelāb* (Washington DC: Gozaar, 2 June 2010) <<http://www.gozaar.org/persian/articles-fa/4167.html>> [accessed 10 March 2015].

¹²⁵ Sayeh Fathi, ‘*Rotbabandiy-e Ruznāmahā*’, *Tejarat-e Fardā*, June 2014<<http://tejarat.donya-e-eqtesad.com/fa/packagestories/details?story=ddfc7407-68ce-4493-a285-907acccf8aab>> [accessed 10 March 2015].

¹²⁶ Amir Rostagh, *Dah Rokhdād Mohem-e Arsay-e Ketāb va Nashr dar sāl-e 93* (London: BBC Persian Online, 23 March 2015) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2015/03/150323_151_yearender_93_books> [accessed 29 March 2015].

¹²⁷ Nehād-e Ketābkhānahāy-e Omumiy-e Keshvar, *Shivahāy-e Kharid-e Manābe’ dar Nehād-e Ketābkhānahāy-e Omumiy-e Keshvar* (Tehran: Nehād-e Ketābkhānahāy-e Omumiy-e Keshvar, 2012)

Tehran International Book Fair attracts more than 5 million visitors and is a very important opportunity for publishers to sell their books and gain much-needed cash for their struggling businesses.¹²⁸ The governmental publishers and publishers of religious books are normally given the best and largest stalls, while undesirable publishers are regularly banned from attending the Book Fair and selling their books.¹²⁹

While pro-regime poets enjoy prime-time TV shows and extensive radio interviews, independent authors are rarely invited to appear on TV or to talk on radio. On the rare occasions that they are invited, this will lead to huge criticism. One example is the appearance of Ali Dehbashi, writer and editor of *Bukhara*, a literary journal, on TV. Tasnim News reported criticism of national TV's Channel 4 for inviting him: 'Questions arise about the logic behind the appearance on Islamic Republic TV of those who do not believe in the fundamentals of the Islamic Revolution [...]. Last night the presence of Ali Dehbashi, editor of *Bukhara*, which is a main tribune for the intellectual movement in Iran, on a TV programme called *Be Vaqt-e Mahtāb*, sent waves of objections toward the station'.¹³⁰

In order for the Islamic Republic to promote its cultural goals, it has established or taken control of many cultural institutions. The most important of all is National Radio and Television, which was later renamed IRIB. The president of this organization, which controls all internal and external television and radio broadcasts, is appointed by the leader.¹³¹ In addition to TV and radio, this huge organization owns a major film production company and a university, and publishes different books and journals.

According to the Constitution, radio and TV are exclusively state owned and state run, and must serve for the 'diffusion of Islamic culture in pursuit of the progressive path of the Islamic Revolution. To this end, they should draw upon a healthy debate of different ideas, and strictly

<<http://www.iranol.ir/portal/Home/Default.aspx?CategoryID=d2bbc618-ff69-45db-88dd-710b2bd2d281>> [accessed 19 March 2015].

¹²⁸ Statistics from the portal of Tehran International Book Fair, e.g.

<<http://www.tibf.ir/page/535619014c00003f0815368d>> [accessed 21 March 2015].

¹²⁹ One example is a report by Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Tehran International Book Fair launches crackdown on 'harmful' titles', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2012 <<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/may/02/tehran-international-book-fair-crackdown>> [accessed 17 February 2015].

¹³⁰ Tasnim News, *Be Vaqt-e Mahtāb*, Dehbashi, *Televizion va Montaqedān* (Tehran: Tasnim News, 21 January 2015) <<http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/628344>> [accessed 15 May 2015].

¹³¹ Asl-e 175 Qānun-e Asāsi (Iran: Peyk-e Modirān, 2015) <<http://peyk.iribu.ir/asasname.html>> [accessed 2 February 2015].

refrain from diffusing and propagating destructive and anti-Islamic traits'.¹³² However, in his interview with *Tajrobeh* magazine, Cheheltan accused the national broadcaster of bringing harm to the Persian language by its censorship of independent writers: 'Radio and TV should not omit the juice of the Iranian contemporary literature from their programmes. Somebody who lives in a remote city has no means to know independent authors'.¹³³ He argues that 90% of people nowadays watch TV or listen to the radio and that the state-run media use a neutral, formal Persian in which good literary works are not represented: 'Literature that carries the manoeuvrings of the Persian language creates a very thin margin and this is one of the catastrophic results of censorship'.¹³⁴ Therefore, the Persian language suffers.

In addition to IRIB, there are many other institutions advocating the type of poetry and literature favoured by the regime and consequently undermining independent literature. Such institutions have abundant financial resources and are highly subsidized by the state and promoted by the official media. *Howzay-e Honari* (The Art Council) is an organization affiliated to the Islamic Propagation Organization. It has offices in all provinces and undertakes various literary projects through its Centre for Literary Creations.¹³⁵

The Children and Young Adults Intellectual Development Centre, Cultural Departments of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and the Baseej Organization, The Supreme Leader's Representative Office in universities and the Islamic societies in universities and mosques are all funded by the state. They organize numerous festivals and events, and publish many journals and books.¹³⁶ Independent poets and authors have no share in these activities.

Tehran Municipality Cultural and Art Organization owns 34 cultural centres (*Farhangsarā*) in Tehran. It even has a mobile culture house which enables mobile phone users to enjoy cultural

¹³² Islamic Parliament of Iran, *Preamble to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Tehran: Islamic Parliament of Iran, 2015) <<http://en.parliran.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=84&pageid=3054>> [accessed 24 February 2015].

¹³³ Cheheltan, p. 40.

¹³⁴ Ibid., p. 37.

¹³⁵ Website of the Howzay-e Honari, <<http://hozehonari.com/Default.aspx?page=20297>> [accessed 24 February 2015].

¹³⁶ Mohammad Reza Rostami, 'Sahm-e Vezārat-e Ershād az Budjaye Farhangi Cheqadr Ast? Fehrest-e Nehādhāyi ke Barāye Kār-e Farhangi Budja Migirand' (Tehran: Khabar Online News Agency, 5 May 2014) <<http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/353289/culture/5519>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

programmes via suitable applications.¹³⁷ An examination of its website shows that there is at least one programme on poetry in one of its cultural centres every day.¹³⁸ Municipalities in other major cities have similar facilities and offer comparable activities. In Tabriz, it organizes the Annual Book Festival and manages the Tabriz Literary Award.¹³⁹ These organizations provide employment opportunities for poets and authors who undertake to follow the standards of desirable literature prescribed by the system.

In addition to the above institutions, there are many smaller organizations working more specifically on poetry and fiction.

Anjoman-e Qalam-e Iran (Iran Pen Association) is one such organization. The founding members include political figures such as Drs Ali Akbar Velayati (advisor to the Supreme Leader), Ali Larijani (Parliament Speaker) and Mohsen Parviz (former Deputy Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance). Some of its activities include: nominating a day as the Universal Day of Pen in the Islamic World; granting academic equivalent degrees to poets, writers and literary critics; recommending the publication of a hundred books authored by emerging poets and writers, and 40,000 pages of poetry and fiction by established poets and writers. It has also established the literary award of *Qalam-e Zarrin* (The Golden Pen); granted numerous interest-free loans to members; organized the literary festival of ‘Salam Nasrullah’; published *Ashāb-e Qalam* (Friends of Pen) quarterly; created an initiative to establish an ‘Islamic World Writers Union’ and meeting with international writers’ clubs, including the Arab Writers Union.¹⁴⁰

The above list of activities shows the full range of facilities at the disposal of this body and the huge financial benefits of joining it. This association was established to undermine the activities of *Kānun-e Nevisandegān-e Iran* (Iranian Writers Association) which is the only independent association of authors in Iran and to create a direct confrontation with PEN International. When the latter criticized the use of its registered name, the Iran Pen Association reacted fiercely. It

¹³⁷ Website of the Tehran Municipality Cultural-Art Organization,
<<http://www.farhangsara.ir/%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%86%DA%AF%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%A7.aspx>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

¹³⁸ Poetry Events Page in the Website of the Tehran Municipality Cultural-Art Organization,
<<http://www.farhangsara.ir/%D8%B5%D9%81%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%AA/%D8%B4%D8%B9%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A8%D8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%AA.aspx>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

¹³⁹ Website of Tabriz Municipality Cultural-Art Organization, <<http://honar.tabriz.ir/#/>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

¹⁴⁰ Website of Anjoman-e Qalam-e Iran, <http://www.anjomanghalam.ir/?page_id=5> [accessed 26 February 2015].

asserted that God had sworn on Pen in the Koran, and that PEN International and other organizations should be questioned for unauthorized use of this word which was undoubtedly under the absolute ownership of Muslim nations, including Iran.¹⁴¹

Khānay-e Shāerān-e Iran (Iranian Poets' Society) is another organization devoted to the promotion of poetry. Established in 1999, its range of activities include poetry readings, poetry courses, publication and translation of poetry. Its charter defines its role as supporting poets whose work evinces the values of Islamic culture.¹⁴² A subsidiary organisation, *Daftar-e She'r-e Javān* (Young Poetry Office), recruits young poets (15 to 25 years of age) from all over the country¹⁴³ and offers them training, support and publication, thus investing in the future generation of poets. *Kānum-e Adabiyāt-e Iran* (Iran Literary Centre) was established in 2002. So far it has organized more than 600 different workshops, 30 international gatherings, three major international congresses, each with above 50 foreign guests, and the first international congress on Latin American literature, attended by 30 Latin American poets and writers.¹⁴⁴

While joining any of the above organizations brings financial and other benefits to those poets who support official cultural policies, independent literary awards in Iran lack any government or even corporate sponsorship. They serve mainly as a source of recognition and have very little or no financial value. For example, even the Golshiri Award is insignificant moneywise. The Best Novel and the Best Short Story Collection each receive only IRR 10,000,000 roughly equal to £220.¹⁴⁵ The Nima Poetry Award, Khorshid Poetry Award and Journalists' Poetry Award are three independent poetry awards with small financial reward. In 2013, the latter's awarding committee announced that it could not afford any financial payment and might consider giving

¹⁴¹ Faraj Sarkoohi, *Anjoman-e Qalam-e Irani va Jahāni, Hamnām va Bishebāhat* (London: BBC Persian Online, 20 December 2011)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2011/12/111219_141_book_international_pen_vs_ghalam.shtml> [accessed 26 February 2015].

¹⁴² Website of Khānay-e Shāerān-e Iran, <<http://poetry.ir/?sn=abouts&lang=>>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

¹⁴³ Khānay-e Shāerān-e Iran, *Farākhān-e Ozviyat-e Daftar-e She'r-e Javān* (Tehran: Khānay-e Shāerān-e Iran Website, 16 October 2014) <<http://poetry.ir/?sn=news&pt=full&lang=&id=daftarsherejavan>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

¹⁴⁴ Website of Kānum-e Adabiyāt-e Iran, <<http://kanonweb.blogfa.com/>> [accessed 26 February 2015].

¹⁴⁵ Website of Golshiri Foundation, <<http://www.golshirifoundation.com/award.htm>> [accessed 28 February 2015].

some ‘pistachio nuts’ to its award winners.¹⁴⁶ Facing such obstacles, the Golshiri Award halted its activities in 2014.¹⁴⁷

The government, on the other hand, grants lucrative awards. Jalāl-e Āl-e Ahmad, established in 2008, rewards authors in categories such as novel, short story, literary criticism, history and life writing, with each winner receiving 110 gold coins. The market value of each coin is around IRR 10,000,000, which means each winner receives equal to IRR 1,100,000,000 (roughly equal to £24,000).¹⁴⁸ This is over 100 times higher than the financial value of the Golshiri award, the most prestigious independent literary prize in Iran.¹⁴⁹

The Jalāl-e Āl-e Ahmad literary award defines its aim as the promotion of language and national-religious literature through acknowledging the creators of new works that are distinguished and progressive.¹⁵⁰ Parvin is another award scheme managed by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This prize is aimed at ‘paving the way for the growth and development of women’¹⁵¹ and is awarded biannually to female authors in two areas of authorship and translation. Gām-e Avval (The First Step), the Book of the Season, the Book of the Year and the Literary Criticism Festival are other awards granted by that ministry. During the two governments of Ahmadinejad (from 2005 to June 2013), nearly 18,000 gold coins were awarded in literary festivals.¹⁵² Based on an average value of IRR 10,000,000 for each coin, the amount paid out is around IRR 180 billion (roughly equal to £4 million).

¹⁴⁶ Alireza Bahrami, ‘Ehdāy-e Pesta bejāy-e Jāyezay-e Naghdi’ (Tehran: Asr-e-Iran News, 2013) <<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/262257/%D8%A7%D9%87%D8%AF%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%BE%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A8%D9%87-%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B2%D9%87-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%AF%DB%8C>> [accessed 28 February 2015].

¹⁴⁷ Website of Golshiri Foundation <<http://www.golshirifoundation.com/award.htm>> [accessed 28 February 2015].

¹⁴⁸ Website of Tehran Goldsmiths and Jewellers Trade Union, <<http://www.tgju.org/>> [accessed 15 March 2015].

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Āl-e Ahmad Award, ‘Āyinnāmay-e Ejrāyi-e Jāyezay-e Adabiy-e Jalal Āl-e Ahmad’ (Tehran: Āl-e Ahmad Award, 2015) <<http://jalalprize.ir/%D8%A2%D8%A6%DB%8C%D9%86%E2%80%8C%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87%D9%94-%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B2%D9%87/>> [accessed 28 June 2015].

¹⁵¹ Parvin Award, *Award Bylaws* (Tehran: Parvin Award, 2015) <<http://www.parvin.ir/HomePage.aspx?TabID=4501&Site=parvin&Lang=fa-IR>> [accessed 28 February 2015].

¹⁵² Nafiseh Esmaili, *Chand Sekkay-e Bahār-e Āzādi dar Dowlatāy-e Nohom va Daham e'tā Shod?* (Tehran: Fars News Agency, 29 May 2013) <<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920307000357>> [accessed 17 May 2015].

In spite of the financial value of state-sponsored awards, they are not popular with the literati. Mohammad Javad Jazini, a novelist and researcher, told the Iranian Book News Agency that while the state literary awards were worth lots of money, what they lacked was prestige on account of adhering to official policy that might not be popular with the people.¹⁵³ Sarkoohi believes that literary awards are a tool in the hand of the government to continue its suppression of independent writers. He accuses the judges in such awards of sponsoring censorship and believes that even if a relatively independent poet or writer wins an award, it is actually the result of a trade-off, with the person bestowing the distinction buying the reputation of the recipient in exchange for the money that accompanies the prize.¹⁵⁴

As regards literary magazines closed down by the government, *Gardun*, *Takāpu*, *Ādineh*, *Donyāy-e Sokhan* and *Kārnāmeh* are some in this category. *Takāpu* was closed because of publishing an open letter against censorship, which became known as the ‘Letter of 134 Writers’ (1994).¹⁵⁵ Mansour Kooshan, editor of *Takāpu*, observes: ‘The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance did not sell *Takāpu* subsidized paper. They knew I had to sustain at least IRR 5 million loss for each issue, as I had to buy paper from the free market, and they knew the economic hardships we were facing. They, therefore, expected *Takāpu* to be closed for economic problems’.¹⁵⁶ When this did not happen, the authorities put the magazine under pressure by giving regular notices. Finally, they revoked its licence after 14 issues.

Ādineh was taken to court and tried for a number of pieces published in different issues, including a poem by Nima Yushij which, the complainant claimed, ‘showed all modes of woman’.¹⁵⁷ The court fined the licence holder and permanently annulled the magazine’s licence,

¹⁵³Political Studies and Research Institute, *Negāhi be Jāyezahāy-e Adabiy-e Defā'e Moqaddas az Did-e Kārshenāsān* (Tehran: PSRI, 2015 <<http://www.irpsri.com>Show.php?Page=ViewNews&NewsID=4159>> [accessed 29 February 2015].

¹⁵⁴Faraj Sarkoohi, ‘Ma'nāy-e Jāyezay-e Jalal’ (Amsterdam: Radio Zamaneh, 4 December 2014) <<http://www.radiozamaneh.com/191456>> [accessed 29 February 2015].

¹⁵⁵Reza Baraheni, ‘Gofteguy-e Hassan Zerehi bā Reza Baraheni’ (Paris?: Iranian Writers’ Association (in Exile)), 4 January 2015) <<http://iwae.info/1393/10/14/%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%DA%AF%D9%88%DB%8C-%D8%A2%D9%82%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AD%D8%B3%D9%86-%D8%B2%D8%B1%D9%87%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D8%AF%DA%A9%D8%AA%D8%B1-%D8%B1%D8%B6%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%86%DB%8C/>>[accessed 10 March 2015].

¹⁵⁶Mansour Kooshan, *Tabassomhā va Taa'ssofhā* (London: H&S Media, 2013), p. 282.

¹⁵⁷Vahid Pourostad, *Mohākemay-e Ādineh* (Tehran: Rooznegār, 2002), p.31.

for ‘publishing materials which compromised public decency’.¹⁵⁸ *Gardun* was closed down for its cover design, which was perceived by some to be insulting to Hijab. In court, *Gardun* was accused of enmity toward the Islamic Republic, of spreading rumours, of insulting the authorities, the clergy, the sacred defence [Iran-Iraq war] and the Hezbollah¹⁵⁹, as well as promoting royalist ideas.¹⁶⁰ In addition to *Gardun*, at least six other newspapers and magazines (*Sharq*, *Phārād*, *Hayāt-e Now*, *Āzād* and *Zan*) have been closed down for publishing controversial cartoons.¹⁶¹

Kārnāmeh was closed down after 49 issues. Saeed Taghipour, Director General of Press in the ministry, confirmed that *Kārnāmeh* was shut because of publishing some poems and other texts which were found by the Supervisory Board to be incompatible with public decency.¹⁶² Rebecca Knuth, who has researched cultural destruction, writes:

As regimes consolidate control, often becoming totalitarian, they tend to cast libraries and books in a suspicious light, as either inherently seditious or the tool of the enemy or a scapegoat for a nation, an ethnic group or class of people that thwarts their policies. Looting, co-option, censorship, neglect, and violent destruction of books and libraries are therefore sanctioned practices.¹⁶³

In 1990, *Noqreh* publishers was set on fire for publishing *Zanān bedun-e Mardān* (Women without Men) and the writer Shahrnoosh Parsipour was imprisoned and all her books – even those published during the Shah regime - were banned.¹⁶⁴ In September 1995, *Morgh-e Āmin* Bookstore was set on fire for publishing *Va Khodāyān Doshanbeh-hā Mikhandand* (And Gods Laugh on Mondays). Masoud Noghrehkar, a researcher, believes that both acts were organized libricide decided upon by security officials and carried out by Hezbollah thugs.¹⁶⁵

Sometimes, the conservative media or religious authorities call for the recall of some books. *Shohadāy-e Iran* (Iranian Martyrs) cultural website described *Lolita* (Vladimir Nabokov’s novel)

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁵⁹ Not to be mistaken for Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a general name for hardliner supporters of the Iranian regime. It is used in the same meaning throughout this thesis.

¹⁶⁰ Farnoosh Amirshahi, *Janjālhay-e Kārikātūri*’ (London: BBC Persian Online, 30 September 2012) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/09/120930_142_ir_caricature.shtml> [accessed 10 March 2015].

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² BBC Persian Online, ‘Māhnāmay-e Adabiy-e Kārnāmeh Towqif Shod’(London: BBC Persian Online, 7 April 2005) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/story/2005/04/050407_pm-karnameh-suspended.shtml> [accessed 10 March 2015].

¹⁶³ Rebecca Knuth, *Libricide: The Regime-Sponsored Destruction of Books and Libraries in the Twentieth Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), p. 50.

¹⁶⁴ Faraj Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, (Sweden: Baran , 2002) , p.94.

¹⁶⁵ Masoud Noghrehkar, ‘Tāvān-e Dādkhāhi’ ([n.p.]: Asr-e Nou, 29 October 2007) <<http://asre-nou.net/1386/aban/7/m-nogrekar.html>> [accessed 10 March 2015].

as ‘the obscene monster of literature’ and urged further controls be placed on it.¹⁶⁶ During the early years of the Revolution, many people destroyed their books for fear of prosecution. Nasser Zeraati, Iranian writer and filmmaker, has made a documentary called *Khānay-e Pedari* (Ancestral Home) about the books he buried in his basement during the 1980s, which he hoped to return to soon and recover. He was able to visit that house 20 years later when most of the books had rotted.¹⁶⁷ The author’s own brother had to throw his entire library into a dried-up water well, as described in the memoir section.¹⁶⁸

Ali Asghar Ramazanpour, a former Vice-minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, revealed that all types of censorship are supervised by institutions that prioritize censorship based on their assessment of social, political and cultural conditions: ‘Institutions affiliated to the leader, the part of clergy which is supported by the regime and the commanders of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards are on top of this ‘Supreme Supervisory System’’.¹⁶⁹ The security forces and the judiciary are also very active in suppressing independent writers and poets. Faraj Sarkoohi, editor of *Ādineh* magazine and a victim of torture and imprisonment, recorded that the censorship authorities and staff cooperate openly with the security services.¹⁷⁰ In 1998, *Salām* newspaper revealed that the press law which was being debated in the parliament had been actually drawn up by the intelligence forces. It published a top-secret letter by Saeed Emami, Vice-Minister for Intelligence, which proposed further legal restrictions on the press to enable the judiciary and security forces to prosecute not only the directors and licence holders in the media but anyone involved in content production.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Shohadāy-e Iran News Site, ‘*Hayoolāy-e- Mostahjan-e Adabiyāt dar Vitrin-e Ketābforushihā Hayoolay-e- Mostahjan-e- Adabiāt dar Vitrine Ketabforoooshiha*’ (Tehran: Shohadāy-e Iran News Site, 23 February 2015) <[¹⁶⁷ Radio Zamaneh, ‘*Rasānahāyi ke Madfun Shodand*’ \(Amsterdam: Radio Zamaneh, 13 February 2008\) <\[http://zamaaneh.com/movie/2008/02/post_77.html\]\(http://zamaaneh.com/movie/2008/02/post_77.html\)> \[accessed 15 March 2015\].](http://shohadayeiran.com/fa/news/67052/%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%88%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%8C%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87%D8%AC%D9%86-%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A8%D8%DB%D8%C%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%88%D8%8C%D8%AA%D8%B1%D8%AC%D9%86%D2%80%8C-%DA%A9%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%A8%D2%80%8C%D9%81%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B4%D8%8C%D2%80%8C%D9%87%D8%A7> [accessed 23 March 2015].</p>
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¹⁶⁸ See ‘Growing up with Censorship’, p. 77

¹⁶⁹ Aliasghar Ramezanpour, ‘*Gunayi Naslkoshiy-e Farhangi dar Jariyān Ast*’ (interviewed by Payam Ghasemi) (Washington DC: Gozaar, 23 April 2008) <<http://www.gozaar.org/persian/interview-fa/3532.html>> [accessed 19 March 2015].

¹⁷⁰ Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, p. 102.

¹⁷¹ ‘*Saeed Emami Pishnehād-e Eslāh-e Qanun-e Matbuāt rā Dadeh Ast*’, *Salam*, 6 July 1999, p.1.

When the censorship failed to bring about the desired outcome, the authorities decided physically to remove the undesirable elements from the cultural scene, as Sarkoohi notes:

The tools of physical removal included murder, imprisonment, torture and crushing your personality. The goal was to seclude and neutralize active writers and poets. The methods used included: spreading rumours; magnifying real or fictional weaknesses of individuals; creating internal disputes and rivalries between intellectuals; discrediting; false accusations; forced televised interviews; censorship and imposing self-censorship; promoting false critics who would appear to be advocating the same messages as the independent intellectuals but who were, in fact, related to security forces or various factions within the system; fabricating secretly dependent institutions to monopolize independent activities or institutions which allow limited activity to others but keep the key areas exclusively to the state; neutralizing the influence of independent writers and poets by luring them into programmes and projects affiliated to the government in one way or another[...]. The theory of cultural invasion was the guiding light of religious despotism in Iran for two decades and had all the facilities of the country at its service.¹⁷²

Sarkoohi claims that he suffered flogging, hanging, handcuffing, sleep deprivation and psychological tortures in prison: ‘The same tortures of the Shah regime were common during the Islamic Republic, but some new tortures such as Chicken Kebab had been added. Psychological torture had aggravated and had become very common. I myself underwent three mock executions’.¹⁷³

Seyed Ali Salehi claims that, in 1984, his publisher was threatened for publishing his rendering of parts of *Avestā*. Salehi himself was attacked with the book – a thick and heavy volume: ‘They hit me on the neck with the book so forcibly that I lost my balance. One of them said to me: “Are you Zoroastrian? You are a Seyed [believed to be descendants of Prophet Mohammad] and now you follow Zoroaster”’?¹⁷⁴ One very influential form of torture is overt stalking. The security forces stalk writers and poets in a manner certain to be noticed by the victim, who will ask himself why he is being followed and what wrong has he done? This leads to further self-censorship. It is also a common pre-arrest practice to frighten the victim and make him ready to sign a confession.

¹⁷² Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, p. 129.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Seyed Ali Salehi, *Chenān ketāb rā bar Gardanam Kubidand ke Taādolam rā az Dast Dādam* (interviewed by Hadi Hosseininejad), ILNA, 17 July 2013) (Tehran: Shahrwandan, 2013) <<http://www.shahrwandan.ir/news/12749>>[accessed 19 March 2015].

In Sarkoohi's words, 'As a result, the victim becomes his own interrogator. He tortures himself and is torn from within. Then he gets arrested'.¹⁷⁵

The events of autumn 1999, which became known as 'chain murders', revealed an extensive programme of extrajudicial killings and the disappearances of political and religious dissidents, including a number of well-known intellectuals, writers, poets and translators. The number of extrajudicial killings is subject to speculation. Akbar Ganji, who researched the killings and was imprisoned for six years for the publication of his findings, believes that the murders were part of an ongoing government project decided on at the highest level and ordered directly by the Supreme Leader. He claims that when summoned to the Ministry of Intelligence, they informed him that they were aware of over 300 assassinations but were unable to investigate them.¹⁷⁶ Saeed Emami, who was named as the man behind these murders, is quoted as saying: 'Fighting cultural invasion is a jihad against the enemies. In war, any tactic is allowed. We don't like homicide, but we cannot allow the Revolution and the country to be played with by a bunch of corrupt liberal intellectuals'.¹⁷⁷

Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, a defector from *Ansār-e Hezbollah*, has described how the intelligence forces tortured Ali Akbar Saeedi Sirjani, a renowned writer, essayist and poet, forcing him into self-loathing televised interviews and then killing him by injecting air into him.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, Akbar Ganji believes that the security forces intended to get rid of all major intellectuals in a public gathering, such as a funeral. He holds that the system saw intellectuals as security threat: 'Based on the theory of cultural invasion, intellectuals are the main agents of the cultural aggression of the West. They act as catalysts for change through cultural activities and turn loyalists into revisionists and make people indifferent toward the sacred fundamentals of Islam'.¹⁷⁹

Although these murders apparently stopped in 1999 when President Khatami ordered an investigation and the Ministry of Intelligence admitted the wrongdoings of a number of its agents, the true scope of the plot was never revealed. Emami, the highest-ranking suspect, allegedly

¹⁷⁵ Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, p. 129

¹⁷⁶ Akbar Ganji, *Qatlhāy-e Zanjirayi Prozhay-e Hokumat Bud* (interviewed by Jamshid Barzegar) (London: BBC Persian Online, 7 December 2010)
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2010/12/101207_ganji_serial_murders.shtml>[accessed 23 March 2015].

¹⁷⁷ Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, p. 175.

¹⁷⁸ Amir Farshad Ebrahimi, *Barāy-e Mordanash Hanuz Zud Bud* ([n.p.]: Iran Human Rights, [n.d.])
<<http://www.irhumanrights.com/sirjani.htm>>[accessed 8 April 2015].

¹⁷⁹ Akbar Ganji, *Ālijenāb-e Sorkhpush va Ālijenābān-e Khakestari* (Tehran: Tarh-e Now, 2000), p. 6

committed suicide in prison. Some experts believe that he was murdered to block the investigations and to save people at the top, Akbar Ganji commenting that they ‘closed the dossier midway’ by killing Emami.¹⁸⁰ However, Emami’s arrest and subsequent events prompted some writers to disclose horrific events which nobody had dared to talk about before. One was the story of the trip to Armenia, after the Armenian Writers Union had invited Iranian writers to a gathering in that country. The Iranians decided to hire a bus for the journey. According to Sarkoohi, at first 35 people decided to go. Some then cancelled their trip for different reasons. 17 or 21 (according to Sarkoohi and Kooshan, respectively) got on the bus. Sarkoohi alleges that the Iranian Intelligence forces took control of the trip either from the very beginning or sometime in the middle of the programme.¹⁸¹ The bus driver (Khosro Barati, who was later named as one of the killers in the chain murders) tried to throw the bus down the valley twice in the middle of the night when most passengers were asleep.¹⁸²

In April 2004, a letter faxed to *Kārnāmeh* office threatened to ‘wash the territory of the Islamic Iran with the blood of the corrupters on the earth [who use their] dark pens to annihilate Islamic culture’. The letter included a list of 61 names – that of the author amongst them – whom the writers promised to kill, pursuant to their ‘revolutionary executions’ of 1999.¹⁸³

In order for the killers’ message to work particularly well, they added humiliation and defamation to murder. When Saeedi Sirjani, a renowned author and scholar, was arrested in March 1990, *Keyhān* newspaper reported the cause of his arrest as addiction and drug dealing, and later added the crimes of sodomy and espionage. He was later killed in one of the safe homes of the Ministry of Intelligence.¹⁸⁴ Ahmad Miralayi, a renowned translator, was found dead with two bottles of home-made vodka by his side.¹⁸⁵ When the intelligence forces raided a party at the home of the German cultural attaché, they arrested six poets and writers, filmed the dinner table, searched the guests and, after planting something in the pocket of a novelist, found it and declared it to be opium.¹⁸⁶ Dissidents who were of religious backgrounds, even clerics, were usually accused of

¹⁸⁰ Ganji, interviewed by Jamshid Barzgar

¹⁸¹ Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, p. 154.

¹⁸² Ibid., p. 150.

¹⁸³ *List-e Terror-e Sepāh-e Sarboland-e Mohammad*, 23 April 2004

<<http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/009574.php>> [accessed 23 March 2015].

¹⁸⁴ Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, p. 94.

¹⁸⁵ Ganji, *Ālijenāb-e Sorkhpush*, p. 110.

¹⁸⁶ Sarkoohi, *Yās va Dās*, p. 139.

sodomy, addiction and espionage, and those who had no religious background were accused of illegitimate relationships, promiscuity, addiction and espionage.¹⁸⁷

Ever since the early years of the Revolution, some pro-government newspapers, especially *Keyhān*, have published defamatory material about writers, poets and intellectuals. *Keyhān* used to run a series of articles called *Nimay-e Penhān* (The Hidden Half), in which they tried to portray intellectuals as agents of the West and spies of Israel, people who indulged in promiscuity and lacked any moral standards. These articles were later made into books and distributed in large circulations with lurid subtitles.¹⁸⁸

On occasions, Iranian national TV has broadcast self-loathing confessions recorded under detention. *Cheragh* (Light) and *Hoviyat* (Identity) are two examples of TV series that targeted intellectuals. *Hoviyat* was broadcast in 1995. Ahmad Pournejati, Vice-President of IRIB at the time, later wrote:

Ali Larijani, President of IRIB, contacted me and told me that a programme had been made about the performance of some of the anti-revolutionary and problematic cultural elements and that it's good to be broadcast on Channel 1 [...]. From the taste and colour of the programme, I knew in what kitchen it had been cooked! I told Larijani that this work was more a dark, one-sided piece of propaganda by the intelligence forces than a work of the media.¹⁸⁹

Keeping a diary entails a permanent risk for an Iranian poet. The author was interrogated about the contents of his diary for hours. Faraj Sarkoohi claims that his interrogators played an audio file secretly recorded in his bedroom and that he was forced to listen repeatedly to his orgasmic sounds during interrogations.¹⁹⁰ He considers that one of the most effective psychological tortures is the use of the victim's personal information, whereby the tortured, flogged and sleepless victim is

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁸⁸ Some of the sub-titles include 'The Secret Army of Intellectuals', 'The Cavaliers of Cultural NATO', 'Documented Untold Secrets on the 20-year Activity of the Intellectuals', 'The Face of Agents in Culture and Politics: Vol. 8, Daryush Shayegan, Gholamhossein Saedi, Ahmad Shamloo, Ali Dashti', 'The Face of Agents in Culture and Politics: Vol.7; Bagher Momeni, Sadegh Hedayat, Simin Behbahani, Abbas Pahlavan, Farrokh Ghaffari, Jafar Rayed'. According to the Keyhān Institute, 53 volumes of 'The Hidden Half' have been published so far.

For further information, see the Keyhān Institute website
<<http://www.keyhanbook.ir/?cat=4&paged=8>> [accessed 12 April 2015].

¹⁸⁹ Kalemeh News, *Khāteray-e Pournejati az Barnamay-e Hoviyat va Dr. Zarrinkoob* (Tehran: Kalemeh News, 19 September 2013) <<http://www.kaleme.com/1392/06/28/klm-158702/>> [accessed 2 April 2015].

¹⁹⁰ Faraj Sarkoohi, *Ta'qib, Robāyesh, Takzib; an interview with Faraj Sarkoohi* ([n. p.]: Khat-e Solh Monthly, 20 February 2014) <<http://www.peace-mark.org/taghib-robayesh-takzib>> [accessed 1 April 2015].

hauled into the interrogation room and put under psychological pressure by disclosing the details of his private life.¹⁹¹

In writing about the Soviet Union under Stalin, Irena Maryniak quotes Vitaly Shentalinsky, who believed that there were many informers amongst his fellow-writers and that even the Writers' Union had been created by Stalin and used to spy on its own members.¹⁹² In the interrogations of the suspects of the 1998 chain murders, one of the security agents disclosed the name of one of their informers, called (or nicknamed) Dariush, who is claimed to have belonged to the small circle called the Advisory Group that was managing the Iranian Writers' Association (*Kānun*) in the absence of an elected committee. In a chilling narrative, Mehrdad Aalikhani, Director General of the Ministry of Intelligence during the chain murders, retells how he and his colleagues killed Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh, the celebrated translator. As he told his interrogators: 'While on route, the source (Dariush) called me on my mobile and informed me of his friends' analysis. He said that the Advisory Group are of the analysis that this type of action contains a message by the killers. The message is that we want to kill and we want to kill openly. It's serious. They have panicked'.¹⁹³

The memoir section has recorded the attack of the Hezbollah and the security forces on the memorial service for Siavosh Kasrayee, the poet who had died in exile. Mahmoud Dowlatabadi recalls that *Kānun* had intended to hold a memorial service for Ahmad Shamloo, the most unique poet in recent centuries but that this had not been allowed and that the deceased's family had been also forbidden to hold a memorial service.¹⁹⁴ M. Azad, the poet, died in January 2006 and his family decided to bury him in Imamzadeh Tahir Cemetery. They obtained the necessary permit but the security forces did not allow the burial. Simin Behbahani remembers how the body was stranded for hours while his friends and family were negotiating with different authorities. At last, Behbahani herself urged the participants to put the body into the grave and not to wait for permission: 'Should we put the body of a poet on the mountain to be eaten by vultures? Azad was

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Irena Maryniak 'The Lubianka's Hidden Treasure - An Interview with Vitaly Shentalinsky', in *An Embarrassment of Tyrannies: Twenty-Five Years of Index on Censorship* ed. by W.L. Webb and Rose Bell (London: Victor Gollancz, 1997), pp. 177-181 (p. 177).

¹⁹³ Mehrdad Aalikhani, pages from interrogations (unconfirmed), different online sources including <http://freedomvatan.blogspot.co.uk/2009/01/blog-post_06.html>[accessed 14 April 2015].

¹⁹⁴ M. Ravanshid, *Bejāy-e Hamay-e Ānhā ke Gom Shodan: Goftogu bā Hey'at Dabirān-e Kānun-e Nevisandegān-e Iran* (Sweden: Ketāb-e Arzān, 2014), p.63.

born without permission and we will now bury him without permission'.¹⁹⁵ The funeral of Manouchehr Atashi (November 2005) also turned into a confrontation between the mourners and the security forces. According to a report by Alireza Jabbari, Atashi had repeatedly requested to be buried near his dead friends in Imamzadeh Taher Cemetery. On the day of the funeral, the authorities ordered the body to be transported to the southern city of Bushehr (his birthplace), a decision that caused huge dissatisfaction and stirred protests among the participants.¹⁹⁶ A similar scenario arose with Behbahani. Her body was buried in Behesht Zahra against her express will and in spite of the fact that she had previously bought a grave for herself in Imamzadeh Taher Cemetery, beside her husband's and grandchild. As a result, some members of Kānun decided to boycott the funeral of this leading member in order to show their objection.¹⁹⁷ It seems that even a gathering of dead poets is considered dangerous.

The gravestone of Ahmad Shamloo was broken a number of times. Ezatollah Fouladvand, a scholar, traces such acts to the early days of Islam in Iran and the prosecution of scholars and poets for religious or ideological reasons. In his article, 'From breaking the gravestone of Shamloo to the intention of destroying the mausoleum of Hafiz', he describes how poets of the past had been prosecuted, how the clerics did not allow the body of Firdausi to be buried in the public cemetery and how Hafiz mausoleum once came close to destruction. He asks: 'What can be behind breaking a piece of black stone which has nothing inscribed on it except the name of Ahmad Shamloo and his birth and death dates'?¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁵ Asr-e Nou News, '*Simin Behbahani: M. Azad bi Ejāzah Motevallé Shod va bi Ejāzahham Dafn Shod*' quoting from ILNA ([n.p.]: Asr-e Nou, [n.d.])<<http://asre-nou.net/1384/bahman/12/m-azad.html>> [accessed 13 April 2015].

¹⁹⁶ Alireza Jabbari, *Atashi Hargez khāmush Nakhāhad Shod* ([n.p.]: Gooya News, 25 November 2005) <<http://news.gooya.com/culture/archives/039920.php>> [accessed 13 April 2015].

¹⁹⁷ Radio Zamaneh, *Raeis Dana: Kānun dar Masāsem-e Tashyi'e Simin Behbahani Sherkat Namikonad*, (Amsterdam: Radio Zamaneh, 21 August 2014) <<http://www.radiozamaneh.com/170851>> [accessed 13 April 2015].

¹⁹⁸ Ezzatollah Fouladvand, *Az Shekastan-e Sang-e Mazār-e Shamloo tā Āhang-e Veyrāniy-e Maqbaray-e Hafez*, *Hafiz*, 76 (November 2010), p 53.

Chapter Three: How Do Writers and Poets React to Censorship?

Independent writers and poets in Iran have reacted differently to censorship. Some left the country and started a life in exile. Others preferred to stay but stopped publishing or even writing. Some others decided to resist censorship and find ways to fight back. Those who stayed and continued writing adopted two distinct policies. On the one hand, they criticized censorship and did whatever they could to show their dissatisfaction publicly. They wrote open letters, signed statements and tried to organize collective acts of protest. On the other hand, they tried to use every means to publish their work and circumvent censorship. Both of these measures are described in more detail below.

The idea of writing to the authorities and demanding the rights of free speech dates back to pre-Revolution time. The most recent example before the Revolution is probably the letter sent to Premier Abbas Hoveida in June 1977, 18 months before the victory of the Revolution. Ervand Abrahamian, a historian, writes: ‘The letter denounced the regime for violating the constitution, demanded an end to censorship, protested that SAVAK [the Shah’s secret police] stifled all cultural, intellectual, and artistic activity, and argued that many citizens were in prison for the ‘crime’ of reading books disapproved of by the police’.¹⁹⁹

After the Revolution, some writers published open letters demanding civil and democratic rights, and objected to policies such as censorship. One such writer was Aliakbar Saeedi Sirjani, who published letters addressed to the leader and paid the price with his life. As also noted, the most important public declaration was that known as the ‘Letter of 134 Writers’ of 1994, signed by that number of writers and poets, which became a landmark for the struggle against censorship in Iran. Some of the signatories took back their signature under pressure from the security forces; nevertheless, it remained a document of defiance and resistance. In part of the letter, we read:

We are writers. By this, we mean that we write our feelings, imagination, thoughts, and scholarship in various forms and publish them. It is our natural, social, and civil right to see that our writing – be it poetry or fiction, drama or film script, research or criticism, or the translation of works written by other writers of the world – reach the public in a free and unhampered manner. It is not within the capacity of any person or organization to create obstacles for the publication of these works, under whatever pretext these may be.²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁹ Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton:: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 502.

²⁰⁰ ‘The Declaration of 134 Iranian Writers, 1994’, quoted from *Strange Times in Persia*, p. xv.

Ali Ashraf Darvishian, a prominent novelist, believes that the huge success of the letter was due to the fact that it came out during a period of absolute silence, a time that no one dared to oppose censorship openly. It was broadcast through satellite television and radio stations overseas, and was hugely copied and distributed inside the country. In an interview with M. Ravanshid, Darvishian says: ‘Some friends were arrested and some withdrew their signatures under duress. But others resisted. Regressive newspapers which were influenced by hardliners started to build up cases against the members of Kānun and wrote many articles against them [...]. They wrote more than 1,000 pages against Kānun and the signatories to the Letter of 134 Writers’.²⁰¹

On numerous occasions, Iranian poets and writers criticized the arresting or prosecution of authors, expressed their views on social issues such as women’s and children’s rights and expressly emphasized on their right of free expression. On 16 October 2012, a letter entitled ‘Annul the Book Publication Licence’ was signed by more than 170 authors and was widely published online. This letter called on the government to annul not just the licence but all relevant laws and regulations.²⁰² In addition to such letters, individual poets and writers have written letters to stress their independence from the system. Alireza Abbasi and Shams Langroodi, two poets whose books were nominated for the Fajr Poetry Award, published letters asking for their books to be withdrawn. Alireza Abbasi wrote: ‘I cannot accept a poetry award from an organization that enforces censorship’.²⁰³

One major force in combatting censorship is Kānun. Since its foundation in 1968, it has continued to stand by the principle of free expression with no exclusion or exception. Kānun regularly publishes its statements in reaction to different cultural and social issues, and strongly rejects any censorship. In November 2008, Kānun declared 4 December (the anniversary of the murder of Mohammad Mokhtari) as the Day to Combat Censorship and independent Iranian authors commemorate this day since then.²⁰⁴ Furthermore, the Iranian diaspora has created Iranian

²⁰¹ Ravanshid, p. 32.

²⁰² ‘Mojavvez-e Chāp-e Ketāb rā Laghv Konid, Andishay-e Āzād’, 3.6 (August 2013), p.31.

²⁰³ Peyvandsara, *Emitenā’ az Paziroftan-e Jayezay-e Dowlatiy-e She’r-e Fajr* ([n.p.]: Payvandsara website, 12 March 2015) <http://payvandsaraa.blogspot.co.uk/2015/03/blog-post_76.html> [accessed 15 April 2015].

²⁰⁴ *Andishay-e Āzād*, 3.6 (August 2013), p. 53.

Pen in Exile²⁰⁵ and The House of Free Speech,²⁰⁶ with the aim of promoting free expression and fighting censorship.

Iranian poets use different tactics to publish their work in spite of censorship. These tactics can be categorized into two groups: ignoring censorship and outwitting the censor. They have ignored censorship by making their work accessible to readers through unofficial channels. They also employed different innovative techniques to present their work in a manner to pass censorship or undergo as little change as possible.

During and immediately after the Revolution of 1979, many white-cover books appeared in the market. They became popular because of the fear of persecution. According to Abdolhossein Azarang, many books were published uncensored and without being registered anywhere during 1977 and 1978. A few months before the victory of the Revolution, underground publication turned into open publication. Books with huge circulations of hundreds of thousands and even above a million were published. A new generation of readers appeared who, Azarang notes, would devour any book or journal forbidden previously.²⁰⁷

Some well-known works of literature by contemporary poets and writers are also sold illegally on the street. Although authors of such books earn no income from the sale of their books, many of them have no objection because, in most cases, it is the only way they can reach the reader. In reacting to the news of the illegal sale of his collection of poetry, *Madāyeh-e Biseleh* (Rewardless Panegyrics) on street corners, Ahmad Shamloo said: ‘Do you expect me to complain against these poor booksellers? And to whom should I complain? To the censors? [...]. These brilliant people have broken the barrier of censorship with their works during these years. They have kept many valuable books circulating’.²⁰⁸

Banning a book attracts attention and acts as good publicity. When Judge Mortezavi summoned Dr Cyrus Shamisa to court and ordered him to collect all distributed copies of his scholarly book *Shāhedbāzi dar Adab-e Farsi* (Male Homosexual Love in Persian Literature), or face prosecution, the book became an instant sensation in the black market. As reported by Sayer

²⁰⁵ For more information, see the website at <<http://wwwiran-pen.com/english/home.html>> [accessed 9 April 2015].

²⁰⁶ For more information, see the website at <<http://www.thofs.org>> [accessed 12 January 2015].

²⁰⁷ Abdolhossein Azarang, *Nashr-e Makhfi bā Horuf-e Riz*, *Andishay-e-Puyā*, 23 (January-February 2015), Centre for the Great Islamic Encyclopaedia <<http://www.cgie.org.ir/fa/news/27439>> [accessed 12 April 2015].

²⁰⁸ A.M. (Akbar Masumbeygi?), ‘Nush-e Jān-e Shān’, *Andishay-e Āzād*, 3.1 (Spring 2011), p.16.

Mohammadi, the news spread and led to a cheap print of large numbers of the book. The following day, all booksellers near Tehran University were making a fortune from sales of it.²⁰⁹

Since the early years of the Revolution, small publishing houses have been set up by the Iranian diaspora. Publishers like Arash, Baran, Ketaab-e-Arzan and Bokarthus in Sweden, Asr-e-Jadid, Forugh, Gardun, Sujet in Germany, Khavarjan in France and Dena in the Netherlands, as well as those in North America, such as Ketaab Corp and Ibex, publish Persian books in many different areas.²¹⁰ During recent years, publishing outside Iran has become more popular. As more poets and writers become frustrated with censorship, they choose to publish their works overseas. Increasing popularity of electronic publication has contributed hugely to this trend. Nogam, a company in London, mainly publishes books previously censored or forbidden in Iran. Nogam was established in December 2013 and has published 26 titles up to April 2015, all of which are downloadable for free.²¹¹ H&S media, an on-demand publisher based in London, has published 440 books, including 90 works of poetry since its inception in May 2011.²¹² Nakojaa has been publishing traditional and electronic books since February 2012 in Paris.

In recent years, online publishing has come to the aid of poets and writers. Although there are strict rules about online publishing and many websites are filtered, controlling the internet is more difficult than managing print publications. Blogging was the most popular way of online publishing from 2000 to 2010. According to Azadeh Moaveni, ‘It has been estimated that by 2003, Iran ranked third in the world in terms of the number of weblogs produced by a single country’.²¹³ Today, there are hundreds of online journals and websites dedicated to publishing Persian poetry. Furthermore, there are numerous websites and book sharing clubs which offer free download of banned books and have helped the readership inside Iran to access censored materials.²¹⁴

²⁰⁹ Sayer Mohammadi, *Bāzār Siyāh-e Ketābhāy-e Jeld Sefid, Iran*, 27 April 2014, p.12.

²¹⁰ Sepideh Zarrinpanah, *Dar Jostojuy-e Hall-e Moshkel-e Nashr-e Farsi dar khārej-e Keshvar* (London: BBC Persian Online, 30 June 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2011/06/110630_141_book_farsi_publication_abroad.shtml>[accessed 8 April 2015].

²¹¹ Azadeh Iravani (Email to the author, 9 April 2015).

²¹² H&S Media website, <<http://www.hands.media/books/>> [accessed 8 April 2015].

²¹³ Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (U.S.: Public Affairs, 2006), p.128

²¹⁴ Some popular websites include: <https://azadieiran2.wordpress.com/>, <http://ketabnak.com/>, <http://www.takbook.com/>, <http://www.parsbook.org/>, <http://www.irebooks.com/>. An example of a book sharing club in social media is <https://www.facebook.com/groups/BashgaheKetab/>

Some of those who publish their books underground do so out of disappointment at never getting a licence. Salehi submitted his collection of poetry *Yek Nafar Inja Dustat Darad* (Someone Loves You Here) to the censor in 2009. In June 2013 he was informed that his work was rejected and he, therefore, decided to publish it underground.²¹⁵ Some others knew in advance that their books would never get a licence because of the content. Reza Khandan Mahabadi published *Enferādiyeh-ha* (Memos of Solitary Confinement) underground, as did Rouhollah Mehdipour Omran who had written the novel *Ān ke Nevesht* (The One Who Wrote) about student uprisings. Alishah Molavi published his collection of poems, *Kāmelan Khosusi barāy-e ettela'e Omum* (Totally Private for the Public Information) because he didn't believe in censorship and didn't recognize the publication licence process. Baktash Abtin published an audio CD of his poems called *Muriānayi ba Dandānhāy-e Shiri* (A Moth with Baby Teeth). Most of the poems reflected a critical view of the Iran-Iraq war which challenged the official narrative of the state.²¹⁶

The identity of censors is strictly protected in Iran. There is speculation that many of them are not qualified for the job and that they sometimes rely on computer programs to detect problematic words and phrases, and that, for that reason, the outcome of their censorship looks mechanical. Ali Shojaei Saein, a former director of the Book Office, rejects such accusations. He told news agencies that university professors, PhD holders and PhD candidates work as censors. In the area of literature, he said: 'Our team comprises university professors in literature and writers and poets'.²¹⁷ Ahmad Shakeri claims that the reason for automatic censorship is the low wages of censors.²¹⁸

Whatever the level of knowledge of censors, Iranian poets try to outwit them. One way is to use words or phrases which are not easily comprehended, for example, 'obsolete', or less known literary words. By experience, Iranian writers know that words related to alcohol or sexual organs/acts are censored. They, therefore, use less known or outdated equivalents. In the author's latest collection, the word *Nushgāh* is used instead of the more ordinary equivalents of *bar* or *Meykhāna* (tavern) and it seems the censor did not work out the meaning. Mohammadreza

²¹⁵ *Andishay-e Āzād*, 3.6 (August 2013), p. 20.

²¹⁶ 'Akhbār-e Ahl-e Qalam', *Andishay-e Āzād*, 3.4 (September 2012), pp. 14-15.

²¹⁷ *Jong-e Khabar, Modir-e Edāray-e Ketāb-e Vezārat-e Ershād: Felan Salāh Namibinam Momayyezān rā Kasi Beshnāsad*, quoting from Khabar Online <<http://www.jonge-khabar.com/news/articlecat.php?id=2402&mode=v>> [accessed 12 April 2015]

²¹⁸ Faraj Sarkoohi, *Nevisandagān-e Khodi va Gheir-e Khodi* (London: BBC Persian Online, 20 December 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2011/12/111219_l41_book_iinternational_pen_vs_Qalam.shtml> [accessed 14 April 2015].

Pourjafari, novelist, showed the author a glossary he had compiled which provided less known equivalents for a list of forbidden words and phrases.²¹⁹

One other way is to use figurative language. Speaking of the difficulties facing translation of Persian poetry into foreign languages, Daniel Grassian wrote: ‘In order to get their work published in Iran, Iranian poets typically have to cloud it in dense, figurative language while downplaying or cutting any actual or potential political implications and anything that could be deemed insulting or injurious to the Islamic regime or Islam’.²²⁰ Hence, a change of date or location can save a work from censorship at times. Ghazal Mosadeq informed the author that her father, Hamid Mosadeq, deleted the date of writing from his poem *Qodrat va Qalam* (Power and Pen) which was published in the *Sâlhây-e Saburi* (Years of Patience) collection. All the poems in this collection are dated except this one. According to Ghazal, her father didn’t date this so that if he were questioned, he would be able to claim that it was written before the Revolution. Simin Behbahani did the same for some of her poems published in *Khati ze Sorat-o az Ātash* (A Line of Speed and of Fire).²²¹ In addition, many poets and writers use [...] in their books to denote that something has been censored. In many cases, the reader is able to guess what the missing word or phrase might be. The author has used this tactic in one of his collections, *Spâgeti bâ Sos-e Mekziki* (Spaghetti with Mexican Sauce).

Some books were able to obtain a publication licence by the author changing the title and sending it to a different censor department in the provinces. Jalil Shahcheshmeh’s collection of poetry *Saghanghur* (Sandfish) was rejected at first. He then changed the name to *Rigmâhi* – which means the same – and obtained a publication licence from the representative branch of the Book Office in Mashhad. Sometimes, publishers find a censor in a provincial city that is less strict and send rejected books to that department. There have also been some rumours of favouritism and bribery in issuing publication licences.

One other way to avoid the consequences of censorship is to remain anonymous. By publishing anonymously, the writer loses their right to be recognized officially as the creator; however, this can sometimes be a life-saving tactic. Using a pseudonym is another way to avoid some of the consequences of censorship. Although a pseudonym does not provide full anonymity, many poets use pseudonyms to separate their literary life from their personal life. If you choose a

²¹⁹ Mohammadreza Pourjafari (in conversation with the author, 23 March 2012)

²²⁰ Grassian, p. 190.

²²¹ Ghazal Mosadeq (in conversation with the author, 19 December 2014)

pseudonym, you might be able to get away with the consequences of your writings in your workplace or family environment. The author himself has written and published under more than five pseudonyms and has written social and political commentaries in Iranian newspapers under the name of Ali Mollah Mohammadjan. He has also published online under the names of Arash Aryan and Hossein Mohammadi, as well as publishing his poetry under the name of Alireza Abiz. Furthermore, he has written articles under his real name, Alireza Hassani. The author never wanted to be associated with the material he wrote under some of the above pseudonyms, for it could endanger his life. Although Alireza Abiz is the name he is known by, the fact that it is not his official name provides him with a degree of safety and security. Using initials instead of a name is another way to attract less attention.

Mockery and satire are another response to censorship. There are many pieces of satire and even jokes about censors. The following lines from a satirical poem is one such example. In this poem, the poet mocks the use of ... (three dots) as a sign of words omitted and uses the ‘beep’ sound as a sign of alarm when describing different parts of his beloved’s body:

Oh my beloved, your stature three dots!
Your face in all modes, three dots!
Your lips beep, your mouth beep, your head and body beep!
What more can I say, your entire being beep!²²²

²²² Hadi Jamali, ‘Ay Delbar-e Man, Ay Qado Bālāt Senoqta, available in many online places, e.g. <<http://www.cloob.com/u/1samani/114282193/>%D8%A7%DB%8C_%D8%AF%D9%84%D8%A8%D8%B1_%D9%85%D9%86_%D8%A7%DB%8C_%D9%82%D8%AF_%D9%88_%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AA_%D8%B3%D9%87_%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B7%D9%87> [accessed 12 April 2015].

Chapter Four: How is Censorship affecting Iranian Poetry?

In previous chapters, the structure and performance of the censorship machine have been investigated and the reactions of Iranian poets delineated. This section will analyse the outcome of this interaction, in order to see how censorship has affected poetry. To find this out, we should consider the special characteristics of censorship in Iran and bear in mind the differences between this unique type of censorship and what has been experienced elsewhere. The most significant consequences of censorship of poetry in Iran are discussed below.

The Iranian regime sponsors and advocates classical forms of poetry against free verse and blank verse. The majority of poets who support the Islamic Republic write in the classical forms. A poet, Salehi, confirms that, without exception, all pro-government media support classical poetry.²²³ Censorship has also encouraged a revival of mystic and Sufi poetry. Quoting Ali Dehbashi from a personal meeting and commenting on the revival of Rumi during the 1990s, Christopher de Bellaigue writes: ‘Historically, mysticism has arisen in response to doctrinal pressure’.²²⁴

Some poets adopted very complicated figurative language. Some wrote poetry with very obscure meaning or none at all. Hooshyar Ansarifar, a poet and literary critic, told the BBC *Tamasha* programme that one of the reasons why young Iranian poets were attracted to a radical version of language poetry and wrote poetry that nobody could understand was the fact that:

After the Revolution, poets were faced with powerful commands such as to write poetry which should be at the service of the Revolution or the Sacred Defence. And one solution that naturally comes to mind is that when you have no choice but to express subjects 1, 2, 3, A, B and C, one choice is to challenge the expression itself, that is, to challenge the idea that poetry should carry any meaning. The natural solution would be to avoid expressing anything.²²⁵

On the other hand, censorship and persecution act as a kind of publicity for some poets. When Alireza Roshan, an emerging poet, was arrested and put into prison, sales of his book soared. In a

²²³ Kaleme News, *Seyed Ali Salehi: She'r Yani Royāhāy-e yek Mellat, Royāhā rā Namitavān Sānsur kard* (Tehran: Kaleme, 30 December 2014) <<http://www.kaleme.com/1393/10/09/klm-206224/>> [accessed 15 April 2015].

²²⁴ de Bellaigue, p. 138.

²²⁵ ‘She'r-e Dahay-e Haftād dar Goftoguy-e Ekhtesāsi bā Houshyar Ansarifar’, *Tamasha*, BBC Persian TV, 4 November 2014 <http://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/2014/11/141104_142_vid_tamasha_houshyar_ansarifard> [accessed 21 February 2015].

short period, the book reached eight runs and was the second best-selling book of his publisher for the entire year.²²⁶ The same thing has happened to other poets whose arrest or wide publicity surrounding censorship of their work have attracted attention to their books. Mehdi Mousavi and Fatemeh Ekhtesari are two other examples. After their arrest and short-term confinement, public interest in their poetry increased hugely.²²⁷ The policies of cultural control in Iran made the work of these poets very popular, a popularity that cannot be attributed to their literary merit alone. Another side effect of this conditions prevailing is the turning of poets and writers into heroes. Without asking for it, poets become heroes of society and society expects them to represent social and political issues of popular interest through their poetry. Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian poet and writer, has described how Salman Rushdie, by then a novelist, suddenly became a hero in the forefront of ‘Jihad for freedom’, in the aftermath of Khomeini’s fatwa.²²⁸

In a letter to the censor dated 15 September 1993, Ahmad Shamloo objected to the censorship of his selected translations of poetry *Hamchon Kuchayi bi Entehā* (Like an Endless Alley): ‘Based on the views of the censor, I can conclude that he has no competence to judge poetry and his low literacy level is evident even from his handwriting[...]. His sexual complexes are extreme’. At the end of this letter, Shamloo wrote: ‘Quite naively, I experimented to damage the poems and follow the censor’s orders, but at the end I concluded that I’d rather censor the entire book and forget about its publication’.²²⁹ Fanoos Bahadorvand has explained how a translation of Federico Garcia Lorca’s poetry was submitted for a publication licence in 2004 and how she struggled until 2011 to obtain a response to her application, finally giving in in 2011 after much correspondence, changing publishers, visiting the Book Office and numerous censorship interventions.²³⁰ Moreover, many authors claim that they would have written much more if it were not for their frustration with censorship. Reza Jolayi, novelist, informed Alireza Gholami in an interview that the conditions didn’t allow him to write more. ‘I could have written better but losing

²²⁶ Aamout Publishers, ‘Porforushtarinhā’ (Tehran: Aamout Publishers, 19 March 2015) <<http://www.aamout.com/search/label/alireza-roshan>> [accessed 22 April 2015].

²²⁷ For information about their arrest, see Harriet Staff ‘ Iranian Poets Fateme Ekhtesari and Mehdi Moosavi Imprisoned’<<http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/12/iranian-poets-fateme-ekhtesari-and-mehdi-moosavi-imprisoned>>[accessed 22 April 2015].

²²⁸ Wole Soyinka, ‘Jihad for Freedom’, *Index on Censorship*, 18-5 (1989), pp.20-21.

²²⁹ *Nāmay-e Ahmad Shamloo dar E’terāz be Sānsur She’r, Andishay-e Āzād*, 3.4 (September 2012), p.17.

²³⁰ Fanoos Bahadorvand ‘Āncheh be Nām-e Momayyezi dar Edāray-e Arzeshyābiy-e ketāb-e Vezārat-e Ershād Rokh Midahad’, *Andishay-e Āzād*, 3.4 (September 2012), p.16

hope in the audience, in the critics, in myself and the censorship – add the fear of tomorrow to this list – did not let me write better'.²³¹

Censorship makes publishing a book a joyless experience for many. When a poet or writer submits a manuscript and waits for years for publication, only to find out that one-third or a quarter of his book is deleted, little room remains for happiness. Many people might just lose interest in continuing to write under such circumstances. Describing his meeting with an Iranian novelist and journalist Mehdi Yazdani Khorram, who had just received a licence for release of his novel, de Ballaigue wrote: 'Even now, permit in hand, his satisfaction was mitigated. One regret was that the book would appear with some two hundred changes'.²³²

The economic pressures caused by censorship have affected the creation and publication of literature significantly. Mahmoud Dowlatabadi complained about the economic hardship he had suffered and how it had affected his creativity: 'Imagine that my books have been banned for four years. I have not been allowed to publish them. During these four years, I have had no income. This has, in fact, changed the fate of my economic life; and when I object to this, they treat my objection as a crime'. Asked whether the economic problems directly influenced his creativity, Dowlatabadi answered 'Yes, definitely'; he had been writing for 40 years but still needed to borrow money to make ends meet. That hindered his work. Furthermore, he felt that part of the purpose of censorship is to force writers to admit defeat.²³³

Economic hardship is a very powerful tool, one the Iranian government uses very effectively. A majority of independent poets and writers have no regular job. Based on the author's personal knowledge, many live on a meagre income earned by occasional teaching in private institutions, proofreading jobs or completely irrelevant professions such as driving a taxi or selling goods on the street.

On 30 April 2013, Philip Roth received the Literary Service Award at the PEN Gala. In his speech, he told of his memories of travels to Czechoslovakia and described how writers and thinkers had been deprived of proper jobs:

Some whom I met and spoke with were selling cigarettes at a street-corner kiosk, others were wielding a wrench at the public waterworks, others spent their days on bicycles delivering buns to bakeries, still others were washing

²³¹ Reza Jolayi, interviewed by Alireza Gholami, *Tajrobeh*, 3.22 (August 2013), p. 57.

²³² de Ballaigue, p. 205.

²³³ Ravanshid, pp. 54-56.

windows or pushing brooms as a janitor's assistant at some out-of-the-way Prague museum. These people, as I've indicated, were the cream of the nation's intelligentsia.²³⁴

Roth ended his talk by describing Ivan Klima's being interrogated about the reason for Roth's annual trips to Czechoslovakia. Klima answered: 'He comes for the girls'. This saved him and ended the interrogation. However, if Klima had been interrogated in Iran, this answer could have put him in still further trouble.

Notwithstanding these conditions of extreme poverty for Iranian intelligentsia, when the most celebrated novelist struggles to make ends meet, governmental organizations pay huge sums for commissioned books. According to unconfirmed reports, *Bonyād-e Adabiyāt-e Dāstāni* (Fiction Foundation) paid IRR 550,000,000 to Ali Moazzeni to write a novel about the life of the 12th Imam of Shia. This is more than 20 times the amount an ordinary Iranian novelist may receive for one book of similar size (c. 300 pages). The novel sparked much controversy over the writer's handling of the subject and its literary quality, and in the end the government decided to collect all copies from the bookstores.²³⁵

Mohammad Hassani, CEO of Fiction Foundation, informed of 50 contracts for commissioned novels, defended offering high remuneration to writers by saying that they received insignificant amounts compared to footballers.²³⁶

One outcome of censorship is that no text can be trusted to be genuine. Faraj Sarkoohi wrote about three different translations of a single book, *Notebook*, by Jose Saramago, the Portuguese writer. One of the translators, Ali Ghaderi, compared his translation with the other two and found that most of the parts censored in his translation were published uncensored in one of the other two

²³⁴ Philip Roth, 'In Prague', *The New Yorker*, 3 May 2013, <<http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/in-prague>> [Accessed 18 June 2015]

²³⁵ Ketabenaab Website, *Negāhi be Hāshiyahāy-e Romān-e 'Davāzdahom'-e Moazzeni; Daghdagħay-e Dini yā Siyāsikāri?/ Enfeāl-e Säderkonandegān-e Mojavez!*, <<http://ketabenaab.ir/1393/05/10/%D9%86%D9%AF%D8%A7%D9%87%D9%8C%D8%A8%D9%87%D8%AD%D8%A7%D8%B4%D9%87%D9%80%D9%87%D8%A7%D8%8C%D9%85%D9%88%D8%B0/>> accessed 20 April 2015

²³⁶ Shabnam News, 'Budjay-e Āfarinesh va Pazhuhesh dar Bonyād Kamtar az Dastmozd-e yek Fasl-e Bāzikon-e Football Ast' (Tehran: Shabnam News, 23 April 2014) <<http://www.shabnamnews.com/news/14479>> [accessed 21 April 2015].

works. He told ISNA News that the Book Department had treated the three translations differently and that this proved the arbitrary nature of censorship.²³⁷

In another example, Mohammad Hashem Akbariani wrote about a dialogue with a book-loving relative. He wrote in *E'temād* newspaper that one of his relatives was angry with censorship and was swearing at the translator of the book he had just read. He was complaining about why the translator had compromised the quality of his book in order to approve a publication licence, noting that the ‘omissions and alterations were so annoying and insulting to the reader’s intelligence that it would be wise to crush the translator under my feet’. He threw the book into the rubbish bin so that the smell wouldn’t stink out the whole house. Akbariani believes that censorship causes the reader to lose trust in the genuineness of a work and thus lose interest in reading. He concluded that reading will not be as pleasant an experience if you feel what you are reading is not ‘original’.²³⁸

According to many scholars of censorship, the most effective and lasting type is self-censorship. A successful imposition of self-censorship is the ultimate goal of censor systems. Breyten Breytenbach, himself a victim of censorship in South Africa, believes that it is fatal for a writer to consent to censorship because ‘It takes root inside you as a kind of interiorized paternalism [...]. You become your own castrator’.²³⁹ In a different passage, he observes that once someone yields to the restrictions imposed by those who seek to manage one’s thoughts, the game is lost.²⁴⁰ If censorship succeeds in establishing itself as a regime of writing and reading, then the writers have only two options – either obey or disobey. Effim Etkind, who has studied Soviet writers, describes the first option as a form of ‘self-regulation via what Isaac Babel called ‘the genre of silence’ or via writing for the desk drawer’.²⁴¹

The Iranian censorship machine lacks clear guidelines and indirectly places responsibility on the writer and publisher. Consequently, writers tend to apply self-censorship to avoid getting into trouble. It is a belief shared by a number of Iranian poets and writers, including some of those

²³⁷ Faraj Sarkoohi, ‘*Haft ruz-e ketāb*’ (London BBC Persian Online, 1 September 2011) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/2011/09/110901_141_books_7_days_1sep_11> [accessed 14 April 2015].

²³⁸ Mohammad Hashem Akbariani, ‘*Yādhāyi az Sālhāy-e Dur va Nazdik*’, *E'temād*, 16 April 2015, p. 16 <http://www.etemaad.ir/Default.aspx?NPN_Id=125&PageNO=16#> [accessed 20 April 2015].

²³⁹ Breyten Breytenbach, *End Papers* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986), p. 134.

²⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 109.

²⁴¹ Effim Etkind, *Notes of a Non-conspirator*, trans. by Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 174-175.

interviewed for this study,²⁴² that long-term, state-imposed censorship encourages self-censorship. In an interview with Mehdi Yazdani Khorram and Alireza Gholami, Nasser Taghvayi, a prominent Iranian writer and filmmaker, opined:

Censorship has continued for so long and has been so overwhelming that it has infected everybody's mind. In the process of writing, you are all the time thinking of censorship and thinking of who will be offended and who will not [...], to Hell! You should be able to write and just let it go, but all the time you are thinking of what disaster will happen to your work. You don't think of what you are writing as much as you think of censorship [...]. You work hard day and night to publish a good work and then somebody crosses it out! As simple as that! Therefore, I decided that whenever I face censorship, I either find a solution for it or don't do the job at all.²⁴³

Mohammad Hashem Akbariani criticizes the arbitrary nature of censorship and holds it responsible for self-censorship:

You hold the pen and set your imagination free to wander and do its job, but in each paragraph and each page you are confronted with the fear whether this sentence or this description or this scene will be approved for publication? And you keep deleting and changing sentences and scenes and descriptions. At the end, you see yourself turned into a censor who is sometimes more strict than the official censor.²⁴⁴

To many poets and writers, keeping a diary is a way to record their life. It is also a useful source of raw material for literary creativity. However, the author does not know any Iranian writer or poet who keeps a diary. His own diary was taken away and he underwent lengthy interrogations in the Intelligence Department offices about its contents. Hence, the fear of disclosing one's private thoughts leads to self-censorship, which may then turn into a lasting habit.

²⁴² For example, Masoud Ahmadi, M. Ravanshid and Ali Abdollahi.

²⁴³ Nasser Taghvayi, interviewed by Mehdi Yazdani Khorram and Alireza Gholami, *Tajrobeh*, 3.22 (August 2013), p.28.

²⁴⁴ Akbariani, *Yādhāyi az Sālhāy-e Dur va Nazdik*.

Chapter Five: Conclusion

Advocates of censorship normally resort to social values to justify their opposition to free speech. The most recurrent justification is the idea of the harm that freedom of speech inflicts. Censorship of poetry in Iran is also justified based on laws which claim to protect cultural values of Iranian society and to prevent harm to these values. The apologists for censorship, however, have not provided any tangible evidence for their claim. No single poem has been named that has led to moral corruption or destabilization of the moral foundations of society. Therefore, their opposition to more openness is usually categorical and based on vague and ambiguous statements.

There is also a strong idea of class distinction in enforcement of censorship. The censor does not actually censor the content but its availability to ordinary people. This sense of class distinction is deeply rooted in the mentality of Iranian clergy. Very openly, they divide people into two groups – *khavās* (the elite) and *Avām* (the laymen). Much of the censorship is aimed at protecting the *Avām*, who are perceived to be naïve and inferior. In the same way, it seems that the ruling class in Iran considers censored material as a way to identify those who are morally weak and corrupt. Therefore, not only is the material censored but if you possess a censored book or movie, this says something about you. It shows that you cannot be trusted and are prone to corruption. This fact places the censorship authorities and their supporters – the ruling clergy – in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, they consider themselves above corruption. On the other, they act based on their own response to the material they are censoring. For example, they find it necessary that a word such as ‘breast’ be censored, claiming that it creates sexual arousal in the reader. But how do they know that this word has such an effect? There is no way to know it about others unless we assume that this word gives arousal to these pious men themselves.

The limited circulation of modern poetry books in Iran and the type of readership leave little justification for censoring poetry based on the theory of harm. That is why even many of the religious poets and the authorities in the government, especially in cultural organizations, criticize the state of censorship. In a more general perspective, one may argue that the lifting of bans on many cultural products during the past 35 years is a clear indication of the futility of censorship. For instance, during the first decade after the Revolution, possession of a music cassette might have put you in jail, as owning a video player could have in the second decade. Both of these bans have been lifted for years now. The development of information, satellite TVs, the internet and social

media makes censoring poetry and literature a futile – if not absurd – act. In fact, one may claim that censoring poetry is a lost battle.

In response to those who argue that censorship can help literature flourish and cite the examples of nineteenth-century Russian literature or Eastern European literature under communist regimes, there are some important issues to consider. First of all, those writers who are praised for creating masterpieces under censorship do not support this argument themselves. Eli M. Oboler invites those who argue that the great nineteenth-century Russian literature flourished in spite of and/or as a result of Tsarist censorship to think again:

The famous case of Tolstoy's unwillingness to write what he feared the Czarist censor might forbid bears repetition at this point. Tolstoy once wrote: 'You would not believe how, from the very commencement of my activity, that horrible censor question has tormented me. I wanted to write what I felt; but at the same time it occurred to me that what I wrote would not be permitted, and involuntarily I had to abandon the work. I abandoned, and went on abandoning, and meanwhile the years passed away'. Who knows what riches for the human spirit have been lost to society through fear of the censor?²⁴⁵

People like Ivan Klima, who argued that a writer writes and does not need external freedom, seem to be ignoring the fact that the achievement of some writers in writing good works of literature under some sort of censorship does not rule out the possibility that those same writers might have produced much better works in the presence of external freedom. There is no way to refute the assumption that nineteenth-century Russia could have produced dozens more great writers and hundreds more masterpieces if there had been no censorship. He also seems to be over-excited about his own success and that of a few of his peers, and consequently has ignored a larger number who felt sterilized by censorship. Coetzee uses the term 'alienation' to describe the process Mandelstam went through when he felt the urge to write *Ode to Stalin* in hope of winning mercy from the tyrant.²⁴⁶ It can well be argued that Mandelstam's experiences of life under censorship prompted him to say, famously: 'I divide all of world literature into authorized and unauthorized

²⁴⁵ Eli M. Oboler, *The Fear of the Word: Censorship and Sex* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1974), p. 138 (quoting from *The Great Society*, by Graham Wallas (New York: Macmillan, 1923), pp. 196-197.

²⁴⁶ J.M. Coetzee, 'Osip Mandelstam and the Ode to Stalin', in *Giving Offense, Essays on Censorship*, by J.M. Coetzee (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 109.

works. The former are all trash; the latter, stolen air. I want to spit in the face of every writer who first obtains permission and then writes'.²⁴⁷

It has been argued that censorship stimulates creativity and that authors find innovative ways to express themselves. The use of figurative language, symbols and allegories might seem like creative achievements to some scholars. Advocates of this idea seem to be ignoring one major principle in creativity, i.e. the freedom to choose a style. To employ euphemism as a literary device is not always an achievement. Matthew d'Ancona, in 'Lexicon of War', writes: 'Euphemism is the subtlest form of censorship'.²⁴⁸ Employing metaphor by choice is one thing; being forced to overuse it to overcome censorship is quite another. Many Iranian poets have expressed their anger at what they consider to be a sheepish act of cowardice. Alishah Mowlavi, a poet who published his books underground, wrote in a poem dedicated to Simin Behbahani: 'How many metaphors, metaphors, metaphors | those who take refuge in metaphor | grow old with their dreams | they should shout it transparent like you | viva Freedom'.²⁴⁹ Some scholars who have studied censorship in the former Soviet Bloc hold the same idea. The novelist Tadeusz Konwicki observed that censorship may indeed 'Mobilize a writer to create ways of by-passing censorship, thus [forcing] the writer to employ metaphors which raise the piece of writing to a higher level'.²⁵⁰ However, in time the hyper subtle forms born out of the game with the censor will themselves become conventions and the 'secret language becomes public, and the censor will ban it too. So newer, more subtle forms are devised. And so it goes, on and on, the literature becoming increasingly more obscure, eventually losing all traces of life'.²⁵¹ The literature produced by such a web of deception can hardly be considered creative. In Coetzee's words: 'Censors can and often have been outwitted. But the game of slipping Aesopian messages past the censor is ultimately a sterile one, diverting writers from their proper task'.²⁵² In the view of this author, it is nothing but a waste of creative energy.

²⁴⁷ Osip Mandelstam, *The Collected Critical Prose and Letters*, ed. and trans. by Jane Gary Harris (London: Collins Harvill, 1991), p. 316.

²⁴⁸ Matthew D'ancona, 'Lexicon of War', in *An Embarrassment of Tyrannies: Twenty-Five Years of Index on Censorship*, ed. by W.L. Webb and Rose Bell (London: Victor Gollancz, 1997), p. 167.

²⁴⁹ Alishah Mowlavi, 'Kāmelan Khosusi barāy-e Āgāhiy-e Omum' (Iran: Underground, 2012), p.10

²⁵⁰Tadeusz Konwicki, 'Delights of Writing under Censorship (Poland): Interview with one of Poland's best-known writers, whose novels are banned', *Index on Censorship*, 15/3 (March 1968),p.30

²⁵¹ Tadeusz Konwicki, quoted in *On Cultural Freedom: An Exploration of Public Life in Poland and America*, by Jeffery C. Goldfarb (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 90.

²⁵² Coetzee, p. VIII.

One other important issue to consider is the special characteristics of censorship in present-day Iran and how it compares with other societies around the world. Censorship in Iran is ingenious, extensive, amorphous, arbitrary and unpredictable. It covers all areas of literary activity, as well as the public and private life of authors and readers. Going back to the argument of Ivan Klima and his example of nineteenth-century Russian literature, it should be noted than none of those great works which passed Tsarist censorship would have had any chance of publication in Iran unless they underwent further, more comprehensive censorship. Mohammad Hashem Akbarian wrote: ‘They say censorship is universal and exists in all countries. It is true but only a small portion of truth. The larger portion of truth is that the scope of censorship varies considerably from one country to another and this is what really matters’.²⁵³ It is the scope of censorship and the severity of its consequences which makes it such a huge problem – of unimaginable proportions – in Iran. Nadine Gordimer once said: ‘Yet we should not forget that censorship is in many places a matter of life and death, of torture and immense suffering, as a perusal of any issue of the *Index on Censorship* will confirm’.²⁵⁴

Lack of clear guidelines allows Iranian censors to use their own discretion. As a consequence, censorship is very confusing. Many young writers grow disappointed and may stop publishing their works. Political groups and influential figures can pursue their goals and play with censorship as they desire. Books freely published under one administration may be banned in the next administration. Censorship becomes a tool for political game playing and power struggles. Security forces are hugely involved in it. As a result, in many instances censorship goes beyond the books and affects authors in their personal lives. Writers and publishers who repeatedly produce works that do not appeal to the censor come under scrutiny and may be banned, and their records are sometimes handed over to the security authorities. Censorship thus turns into inquisition. As Daniel Grassian observes: ‘The Iranian government often acts upon a premise of suspicion and paranoia [...]. Literature can then be seen as being either a political tool for the author or something that can have significant political importance’.²⁵⁵

The fact that many books never get the opportunity to be published gives an imperfect image of the state of literature in Iran. Fathollah Biniaz, a novelist and literary critic, believes that

²⁵³ Akbarian, *Yādhāyi az Sālhāy-e Dur va Nazdik..*

²⁵⁴ Nadine Gordimer, quoted in *Literature and Censorship*, ed. by Nigel Smith (Cambridge: D.S. Brower, 1993), p. IX.

²⁵⁵ Grassian, p. 168.

the best works of Iranian writers never see the light of day: ‘The best works never obtain a publication licence. Good works usually receive about 70-80 corrections, most of them disappointing. The third-degree works receive between 30-50 corrections and neutral works of little literary value usually get between 10-15 corrections from the censor’.²⁵⁶

As a result of censorship, self-censorship becomes widespread and impacts enormously on creativity. In a critique of Shahriar Mandanipour’s novel *Censoring an Iranian Love Story*, which was published in exile in the United States, Grassian writes: ‘Such self-censorship can and does affect the writing itself. With so much attention placed upon what can and cannot be written, the writer’s energy can be dissolved merely in the act of writing a scene. Self-censorship can also disallow a writer from writing what she or he wants to convey to the reader’.²⁵⁷ Based on what Mandanipour has depicted in his novel, Grassian concludes that ‘a contemporary Iranian writer simply cannot write an effective and realistic love story, and that it has become increasingly difficult to establish normal and satisfying relationships under the dictates of the Islamic regime’.²⁵⁸

An Iranian author lives in constant fear that his home can be raided, his manuscripts taken away and destroyed, and this permanent worry may have huge psychological impact. In his article ‘My Temptation’, which includes reflections on his life as a dissident writer, Vaclav Havel wrote:

One of the expressions of the various obsessive neuroses which I suffered from at that time (or perhaps still do) is one that is well known to every dissident: you live in fear for your manuscript. Until such a time as the text which means so much to you is safely stowed somewhere, or distributed in several copies among other people, you live in a state of constant suspense and uncertainty – and as the years go by, surprisingly enough, this does not get easier but, on the contrary, the fear tends to grow into a pathological obsession.²⁵⁹

In the view of some critics, surrendering to censorship is an immoral act. Akbariani was scathing of it: ‘Censorship is changing the text – against your will – in a manner to be acceptable by the censor in exchange for a licence, i.e. the right to publish the book. This is hypocritical, exactly what

²⁵⁶ Fathollah Biniaz, *Interviewed by Sepideh Jodayri* (Canada: Shahrgon, 25 April 2015) <<http://shahrgon.com/fa/2015/04/25/%DA%AF%D9%81%D8%AA%E2%80%8C%D9%88%DA%AF%D9%88-%D8%A8%D8%A7-%D9%81%D8%AA%D8%AD%E2%80%8C%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%84%D9%87-%D8%A8%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B2/>> [accessed 27 April 2015].

²⁵⁷ Grassian, p. 177.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 186.

²⁵⁹ Vaclav Havel, ‘My Temptation’, in *An Embarrassment of Tyrannies: Twenty-Five Years of Index on Censorship*, ed. by W.L. Webb and Rose Bell (London: Victor Gollancz, 1997), pp.134-138 (p. 135).

you do when you change your behaviour to please an employer in exchange for a job or bonus. Surrendering to censorship is the same as surrendering to hypocrisy'.²⁶⁰ This hypocrisy is reflected very well in the way Iranian fiction depicts Iranian life. According to Amir Hassan Cheheltan, in many Iranian contemporary novels, public space and political life are absent. In an interview with *Frankfurter Algemeine*, he states: 'The life of Iranians in the Iranian novel is a big lie and a distortion of truth'.²⁶¹ He considers writing a high-risk profession and believes that under current conditions, Iranian writers are attracted to self-destruction and narcotics or prefer a life in exile over staying in Iran, and that those who stay have no way but to surrender to censorship.²⁶²

The effects of extreme censorship can be devastating. All techniques adopted by poets and writers to circumvent censorship entail a degree of hypocrisy. The necessity of taking on fake identities impacts upon the development of the writer's identity. Restricting free information can lead to the prevalence of lies. It damages creativity and curtails free imagination. According to Rushdie:

The worst, most insidious effects of censorship is that, in the end, it can deaden the imagination of the people. Where there is no debate, it is hard to go on remembering, every day, that there is a suppressed side to every argument. It becomes almost impossible to conceive of what the suppressed things might be. It becomes easy to think that what has been suppressed was valueless anyway, or so dangerous that it needed to be suppressed. And then the victory of the censor is total.²⁶³

Direct involvement of the government in literature can send wrong signals to the young and to emerging poets and writers. A special group of poets receive huge publicity and a distinct trend in poetry is being patronized. It limits the access of young poets to the true variety of literature produced in the country. The lack of independent literary journals deprives poets of insightful editorials. Literary criticism cannot develop under such conditions. The natural relationship between different generations is cut off or hampered. Emerging poets are denied the benefit of enjoying the experiences of previous generations.

²⁶⁰ Akbariani, *Yādhāyi az Sālhāy-e Dur va Nazdik*.

²⁶¹ Amir Hassan Cheheltan, 'Zensur im Iran', *Frankfurter Algemeine*, 7 April 2015
<http://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/debatten/amir-hassan-cheheltan-ueber-romanzensur-in-iran-13524175.html?printPagedArticle=true#pageIndex_2> [accessed 3 May 2015].

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Salam Rushdie, 'Last Chance?', in *An Embarrassment of Tyrannies: Twenty-Five Years of Index on Censorship*, ed. by W.L. Webb and Rose Bell (London: Victor Gollancz, 1997), pp. 115-118 (p. 117).

When such conditions last for a generation, they can have disappointing consequences. Salehi frames the context succinctly: ‘We are living in fear of historical censorship. In such conditions, there is rarely anyone who does not lose his aspirations and his creativity. Censorship means suffering. It makes creative human beings inactive. Censorship of any form and in any manner is destructive’.²⁶⁴ The Iranian Writers’ Association called the work of censors a ‘slaughtering of ‘self-representation and its tools’ aimed at ‘negating the right of the Iranian people to enjoy avant-garde non-governmental art and literature’.²⁶⁵ Kayvan Bajen, an Iranian essayist, believes that censorship acts like a needle which picks out the essence of thoughts and the true meaning of literature thereby bringing disappointment to the writer and hastening a ‘young death to art and literature’.²⁶⁶

The effects of such censorship can last for as long as the victim of censorship lives. Nadine Gordimer once said: ‘Censorship is never over for those who have experienced it. It is a brand on the imagination that affects the individual who has suffered it, forever’.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ Seyed Ali Salehi, *Chenān ketāb rā bar Gardanam Kubidand ke Taādolam rā az Dast Dādam I* (interviewed by Hadi Hosseininejad,) ILNA (Tehran: ILNA, 17 July 2013) <<http://www.shahrwandan.ir/news/12749>> [accessed 20 April 2015].

²⁶⁵ Statement of the Iranian Writers’ Association, 13 November 2008 (emailed to the author)

²⁶⁶ Keyvan Bajen, ‘*Sānsur; Tazadd-e Miyan-e Jahl va Āgāhi*’, *Andishay-e Āzād*, 3.4 (September 2012), p.1

²⁶⁷ Telegraph Books, ‘Nadine Gordimer: Ten inspiring quotes’, *The Telegraph*, 15 July 2014 <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/10967194/Nadine-Gordimer-Ten-inspiring-quotes.html>>[accessed 1 April 2015]

Growing up with Censorship (A Memoir)

Sara and I were the top students in our class. We enjoyed a constant rivalry and each claimed to be brighter than the other. We had a small library in school – one shelf of children’s books – and Sara was in charge of the library. I wanted to borrow a book, *Babrhāy-e Gharibeh* (“The Foreign Tigers”). She asked me the name of the book to fill out the borrowing card. I read it incorrectly as *Babarhāy-e Gharibeh*, which is a meaningless phrase. She ridiculed me and I was really embarrassed. On the same day, we received term results. I was the top student and she was second. The following year, I wanted to borrow the same book for my cousin. However, the book was not available anymore; so I asked my teacher, Mr Afshang, about it. He said: ‘We removed that book because it was published by the Farah Foundation and encouraged the spirit of surrender to strangers. Such books are not good for the Revolutionary children’. Revolution was in its stormy days and even our remote village was burning with the fever. Mr Afshang was a lovely man with a beautiful thin moustache and eyeglasses. I admired him and accepted what he had said wholeheartedly. After all, he was also a close friend of my brother.

I will probably never forget that sunny afternoon in May 1980. At break-time, children were playing in the yard of Khayyam Junior High School, which had newly changed name to *Valiy-e Asr*. A first-grade student, I was reading the last pages of the Persian translation of *Nous Retournerons Cueillir les Jonquilles* (“We Will Return to Pick Daffodils”) by the French writer, Jean Laffitte. It was a story about a group of French communist partisans during the Nazi invasion of France. Mr Nourouzi, the school bookkeeper, came towards me, grabbed the book from my hand and tore it apart in several pieces! I cried, saying I had not yet finished the book. It was such a lovely story. He smiled – a bitter smile it was – and left, limping away.

My brother and his friends collected their books and opened a library in our village. They named it *Ketābkadāy-e Shariati* “Shariati Library”, after the martyred teacher of Revolution, Dr Ali Shariati. The library was a room near the gendarmerie station on our way to school. It had a black signboard, metal bookshelves and two folding metal chairs. Sa’ādat and I were the librarians. We were very enthusiastic about our job. We felt very special and important. My brother and his friends used to come to the library every afternoon and talk passionately about revolution. After a short while, whispers of worries and concerns were heard about this library. Some older people warned my brother that reading books was dangerous and that these were communist books that were being given to the children. My brother argued that their books were approved by a clergyman and therefore there wasn’t a problem. However, after a short time, the library was closed and all the books were taken to our house. Summer had just begun; the best summer of my childhood. I

sat and read as much as I wanted. I had plenty of books to read: thick books, large books and books with small fonts on yellow paper. I enjoyed reading them all, although some were too complicated for me to understand. At nights I would stay up and read in the light of a kerosene-burning lamp. My mother used to tell me: 'Don't read that much. You will lose both your eyes and your mind'.

In autumn of the same year, our neighbour informed us that the books had been reported to the Islamic Revolutionary Committee and that one of these nights they would come and search our house. The neighbour suggested that we get rid of all the books. Late that night, my brother, my father and I carried the books to the basement. A disused water canal had been flowing under our house and there was a dried-up well in our basement. My father opened the mouth of this well and we poured the books into it: Balzac, Stendhal, Maxim Gorki, Chekhov, Ahmad Mahmoud, Mahmoud Dowlatabadi – all went into the well. I could only save one book *Mohammad, Prophet to Know Anew (La Vie de Mahomet)* by Constantin Virgil Gheorghiu. I told my father that this book was about the Prophet. 'It is an Islamic book; let me take this'. My brother also took a very thick book with tiny fonts entitled *Collected Works of Lenin*. He said that it was a very important book and that we needed to keep it. So we went to the garden attached to the house, dug a deep hole, wrapped the book in plastic, put it in an old leather bag and buried Lenin in our garden under a sour cherry tree.

Influenced by my elder brother and the leftist literature I used to read, I had turned into a young Communist. I would go on to the rooftop on summer afternoons and shout names of revolutionary figures, as well as any Russian names I knew: Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov Lenin! Joseph Stalin! Mikhail Yevgrafovich Saltykov-Shchedrin! Anton Semenovich Makarenko! Ho Chi Minh! Ernesto Che Guevara de la Serna! There was a magic around these names. I would convert the stories I read into dramatic games and then play those games in the empty fields or in the street with other children. Stories from Indonesian freedom fighters, Chinese revolutionaries, French partisans and Cuban guerrillas were frequently acted out in our games. Through animating their life stories, I felt united with all freedom fighters around the world; Djamila Boupacha, Patrice Lumumba, Malcolm X and others. As I was good at writing and eloquent in speaking, I was usually chosen to represent our school on formal occasions. I remember a particular first of May when I was in my second year of junior high school (7th grade). For the first time, a clergyman had come to our school and we were surprised to see him there. We had seen mullahs only in the mosques before. The Principal had told me to prepare and read something about International Workers' Day. I knew nothing about that day, so I went through my books and journals and found an article in

Nabard-e Dāneshāmuz (“The Student’s Combat”) which was the student journal of the Iran People’s Fedai Guerrillas. I copied the article and read in the school hall in the presence of teachers and students and that clergyman: ‘On 4 May 1886 in Chicago...’.

When I had finished, it was clear that the mullah didn’t like the idea of mentioning a communist movement in the country of the Great Satan as the basis for International Workers’ Day. Later, our literature teacher told me that the mullah had raised concerns about the type of books I was reading. Gradually, books in our school library were changed for more Islamic titles. Many of those I could read in the first or second year after the Revolution were now banned. Books that I loved so much, books by Iranian writers like Samad Behrangi, Ali Ashraf Darvishian, Mansour Yaghouti, Nassim Khaksar, Ghodsi Ghazinour and some others, were all removed. Instead, we could read stories about religious figures, imams and great clerics. Repression outside school also intensified. Not only many books but also different types of music were now banned, and listening to music or owning music cassettes became a crime. I remember the day my brother put 35 cassettes belonging to my sister’s husband in the stove, fearing that someone might inform on us. They were all popular songs from pre-Revolution singers. Instead of pop music, we could now listen to revolutionary songs on radio. There was no TV in our village.

For high school, I went to the city, Ghaen. There was a public library in Ghaen that I joined and I spent much lovely time there. Although there were no “communist” books, I could still find a wealth of classic literature. I read many writers, such as Victor Hugo, Guy de Maupassant, Balzac, Jack London, Alexandre Dumas, Stendhal, Sir Walter Scott and Charles Dickens. For the first time, I started to read non-fiction books on the likes of Islamic teachings, philosophy and psychology.

While in high school, I joined the school theatre club and made my first attempts at writing. I wrote and directed some plays. It was also during high school that I wrote my first lines of poetry. They were in the classical form of ghazal. In spite of writing ghazals, I still wanted to become a playwright and a novelist. In 1987, I was admitted to the English Language and Literature programme in the Ferdowsi University of Mashhad. For an induction tour, all fresher students went on a four-day tour to Baghrood Camp in Neyshabour, around 120 km west of Mashhad. Boys from our class were in a row of tents and there was a senior student in each tent. I thought these senior students stayed with us to help and give us information about the university. That was partly true. Part of their job, however, was to spy on us, to identify us and to categorise us. They were all members of the Islamic Society of the University and some worked for the student branch of the

Intelligence Department. In the morning of our first day in camp, the daily programme was announced via loudspeakers while we were having breakfast. The first event was a lecture by a clergyman. As I heard this announcement, I said: Who wants to go and listen to the nonsense of an idiot mullah this beautiful morning”? Well, I was a very simple-minded young lad. A senior student named Alaghband got very angry with my remark and said: “You should be careful about what you say. You are now a university student and this behaviour is not acceptable”. As I found out later, Alaghband was the Head of the Islamic Society in our college. On that very first day of my university life, and even before entering the campus proper, I had made myself known to the agents as a non-conformist and a troublemaker.

Mashhad University is one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Iran. The Faculty of Letters and Humanities, where I was now a student, boasted about its reputation as one of the best academic institutions in humanities. It also had one of the best libraries in the country. The faculty was named after Dr Ali Shariati, who had studied here. Dr Shariati was nicknamed the ‘Teacher of the Revolution’; a sociologist who had introduced a new version of Islam to the revolution generation and was disliked both by the Shah regime and by the conservative clerics alike. Like many others of my generation, I was fond of his books and ideas. Mashhad was also famous as the birthplace of major classical and modern poets, and always had numerous active poetry circles. I joined a few of these poetry groups, where I met poets of different generations and styles. At the same time, I started to take writing poetry more seriously. It was believed that there is at least one agent in each classroom to spy on professors and students. Most of the students were careful not to make any comment which might have a negative impact on their studies or future career. However, I was very outspoken by nature and when something came to my mind, I couldn’t keep my mouth shut. For this reason, I was always in trouble with the Islamic Society authorities and the Student Disciplinary Committee (SDC).

I remember one day I received an invitation to a lecture by a visiting MP. When I opened the letter, Sassan Ahmadei, one of my classmates, asked me: “Do you know why only you and Noushin (a girl in our class) get these invitation letters”? I said: “It’s obvious! Because we two are the most knowledgeable persons in the class”. He said: “No, because you two are the most outspoken students. You both say things that you shouldn’t and you have been reported. That’s why they invite you to such lectures – to observe your reaction”.

However, I was idealistic and passionate about poetry. The poems I used to write were very different from the type of poetry expected from our generation. The Iraq-Iran war had just ended and everybody was expected to write poems either about the war or about the martyrs. The poetry readings were usually organised by the Islamic Society. I sometimes submitted poetry that was very different, both in style and in content. I remember one occasion when I read a very expressive love poem in the amphitheatre. The students reacted with extraordinary applause. I don't know if it was the content of my poem or the reaction of the audience which prompted one of the Islamic Society authorities to go to the podium and read some lines he said he had just improvised. These were a direct attack on me and my style of poetry. He said: "These poets know Lorca by heart, but have not even heard of Kaveh"! By Lorca, he meant Federico Garcia Lorca, the Spanish poet; but who was Kaveh? Kaveh was one of the war commanders of Iran who had been killed in the recent war. The only reason he put these two together was the common "k" sound in them; but what he intended to say was that people like me are corrupt and westernised, individuals who know the poets of foreign lands but do not value their national heroes.

Gradually, I made some close friends from among like-minded students. We used to spend much time in hot debates on different issues, mainly literature. From time to time, poets or lecturers would come to the university to read their poems or deliver talks. If these people were supporters of the regime, we would make sure to be there and to raise objections. Once there was a poetry reading by some of the well-known supporters of the regime we used to call the "state poets". They wrote sonnets and odes in praise of the war and the martyrs and the founder of the Islamic Revolution. The Iranian state-run media were always at work to promote them as the main literary figures. On the other hand, the independent poets had only a few journals and were under constant pressure.

In that poetry event, Hamid Sabzevari, the favoured poet of the Supreme Leader, was invited to read. Before reading his poems, he gave a short talk about the non-revolutionary corrupt poets and called Forough Farrokhzad, my favourite poet, and the most important female poet of modern Persian literature, a whore. To me, this was really outrageous. Therefore, I stood up and objected and another friend of mine, Asghar Izadi, joined me. Our objection faced harsh reaction by the organizers who made angry remarks about me. Although I knew many of the students supported my view, none of them dared say anything in our support. When I saw the organizers running toward us, we left the amphitheatre through the back door shouting swear words.

The university was a very strict environment at that time. There were rules on dressing. Short-sleeve shirts were forbidden. Boys and girls were not allowed to socialise or even talk to each other. In spite of all difficulties, I was doing well in my courses and enjoyed university life. Everything looked normal until June 1990.

On 16 June 1990, I invited some of my friends to my home for tea. Two of these friends, Saeed and Abbas, were housemates. Abbas wrote poems in the classical forms while Saeed was a free-verse poet, like the rest of our group. Abbas and Saeed were always fighting over which style was better. Abbas believed that the reason we write free verse is because we are incapable of making good rhymes. We argued that rhyming was very easy in Persian and that there was no merit in rhythm. When we arrived home that day, I decided to prove to him in practice that rhyming was indeed very easy and that I could improvise with no problem. So I made up a few lines and other friends contributed lines. The lines were good and funny, and while we were improvising, one of the friends, Hadi, wrote them down. There was no purpose behind these lines and some of them were absolute nonsense. The only thing we cared for was the rhyme and rhythm. When they left, I read the piece and found it amusing. So, I rewrote those lines and kept them as a reminiscence of a happy day spent with friends. Under the piece I added: "These lines were composed by Hadi and Saeed and Taghi and me on 16 June 1990". I had no idea that this piece of paper would change the course of my life forever.

It was autumn 1990 and I was in my senior year. I had met a girl, Maryam, in my theatre group and we had become intimate. At that time, I was living in a large student house with a dozen other students. I shared a room with Ali Mostafayi, a student of Geography. One afternoon, while I was in my room with Maryam, agents from the Islamic Revolutionary Committee entered. These committees, which had been formed immediately after the Revolution, were known for their brutality and were mainly involved in controlling what they called “illicit relationships”. They patrolled the streets in 4WD Nissan cars, stopped people and interrogated them about their relationships. They were later merged with the police and their duties were assigned to the Moral Police squads. They came into my room and searched everywhere. They arrested the two of us and took us to a detention centre. Maryam had been already suspended from school because of a previous alleged illicit relationship. Her family didn’t know of our relationship and she was afraid that if they came to hear this news, she would not be allowed to go back home. It was certain that she would be thrown out of university and might even receive much more severe punishments. As for me, it was my first time and I predicted that I would be flogged and suspended from study.

In fear and anxiety, while she was sitting in the back seat of the 4WD between two Islamic Revolutionary Committee members and I was squatting in the boot, I told her in French, “We are engaged”. This was the only way I thought we could avoid further problems. We didn’t have any intention of marriage until that point and I had even recorded in my diary that I shouldn’t marry before I turned 30; and even if I did, that I shouldn’t marry Maryam. I was only 22 at the time. They took us to a detention centre and put me in a dark dirty room with a number of other detainees.

The next day I was interrogated. The interrogator showed an interest in poetry and asked me to read some of my poems to him. I thought it was a trap and didn’t want to read any of them, because they were not the type of poetry an interrogator from the Islamic Revolutionary Committee would like to hear. However, I read a few to him and he looked pleased. He said that our case would be sent to the Islamic Revolutionary Public Prosecutor’s Office and that we could be released on bail now. My friend, Ali Sharifi, brought their house ownership deed as bail and they released us. A few weeks later, my brother and I went to Tehran and formally asked Maryam’s parents for her hand in marriage. Her father knew a marriage registrar who issued a certificate confirming that we had been religiously married six months earlier but that our marriage had not been officially registered because of an absence of documents. I took this to the committee but it didn’t solve the problem. They said that I had made this up and that I needed to prove that we were really married; and how could they know that we wouldn’t divorce in six months’ time?

The story didn't end here though. After a few days, I received a letter summoning me to SDC. There I was interrogated for several days. The man who interrogated me was as resentful and angry as if I had killed his father. He wouldn't even look at me in the face, nor would he listen to my defence. When I saw him for the first time, I remembered having seen him in my house before. Now things became clearer. The gentleman in the room facing my room had been a member of the intelligence forces and this man had come to our house before to visit him. The same neighbour had asked my roommate to inform on me. So, while I was in detention, they had come to my room and collected all my notes and writings, including my diary, and had submitted them to SDC.

The SDC interrogations took a long time. At last they decided that Maryam should be banned from study permanently. They hung a huge banner outside the library which detailed the student number, field of study, crime and the punishment of the girls and boys who had been sentenced. They didn't write the name, but everybody could find the name through the student number, because it was exam time and all exam result sheets were on the walls for the students to see. The result sheets included names and student numbers, so everybody could easily match Maryam's student number and identify her. Maryam had received the harshest punishment; permanent dismissal from university. I felt guilty. It was in my home that we were arrested. Why was I so naïve to have trusted my roommate? Why did I put this poor girl in this terrible state? What will her family say? How could we bear the embarrassment? I was also suspended, but by then it was June and I had actually graduated. Then they handed my case over to the Intelligence Department and told me to go to their office. They gave me the address – No. 13/1, Koohsangi Street – and instructed me not to tell anybody. I told Nasser Berangi and Hamid Naji, two of my close friends the day I went there and asked them to inform my family if I hadn't returned by evening.

Koohsangi Street is a very beautiful street in Mashhad. There are old trees on both sides, large detached houses and a nice park at the end. I had lived in this street for a while and had frequently passed number 13/1. It was a small aluminium door with a window beside it. There was nothing unusual about it except the long wall which stretched from one alleyway to the next.

I knocked on the window and a man with a green hat opened it. His green hat signified that he was a Sayyed and everybody called him Sayyed. I told him my name and he opened the door. There was a waiting area with benches. After some time, he called me by name and took me into an empty room with a desk and two chairs. He told me to face the wall and never to turn round. The first thing I saw was a tiny piece of writing on the wall in blue ink. It read: "This will also pass", a popular saying in Persian. This small piece of writing showed that other people had been in my position, had sat on this very chair facing this very wall. Then the interrogator entered the room and asked: "You have been told not to turn your head during the interview, haven't you?"

I said "Yes" and asked for a glass of water. He brought water for me but my mouth was so dry that I asked for another glass. I drank the second glass but my thirst didn't go away. I didn't dare to ask for a third glass. He then gave me a pen and a number of papers. He would ask a question and I was supposed to write the answer and sign after each answer. His first question was: "Why was your brother arrested"? I knew that my brother had been questioned a few months earlier but I said: "I don't know. I am hearing this from you for the first time. Even if he had been arrested, he wouldn't tell me because I am much younger than him and he treats me like a child". It seemed this worked.

Then he asked about my childhood and about the type of books I read. He seemed to know everything about me or maybe he was playing tricks on me. I tried to be clever. When asked if I had read Samad Behrangi books, I said "yes" and then named his insignificant works. I also exaggerated about my study of religious books and knowledge of those written by the clerics. When asked about my closest friends, I didn't name my real friends. Instead, I named some of my associates who were either politically impartial or were religious people. Then the main part of the interrogation began.

The accusations were numerous. I was accused of illegitimate relationships with different girls, including a classmate of mine who was married. Their proof for this was a letter she had written to me which was mainly a quotation from a book by Nikolai Ostrovsky. I didn't even know

myself why she had written that to me. There were poems written by girls who had asked for my comments. But the funniest part was the accusation that Forough Farrokhzad had been my girlfriend and had written me love poems. If it were true, I would have welcomed it! But Forough Farrokhzad died in February 1967 [in a car accident in Tehran] and I was born in August 1968 [in a village near the Afghanistan border].

Their ‘proof’ of this was again a poem by Farrokhzad which a friend of mine had found in an old journal and had written down – the name of the poet included – and which they had discovered among my papers. When I told them that this was not fair and that if they had done even a little research or asked somebody in the Faculty of Letters, they would know how absurd this accusation was, the interrogator got angry and started swearing. He said: “Shut up, we have literature experts ourselves”! However, he said that these things were not their concern. They didn’t involve themselves with ‘moral’ problems because there were other departments to deal with these issues. What was important to him was the political and ideological part. In addition to numerous reports on my past misbehaviours and the people I associated with, there was a poem I had written on the anniversary of the demise of the founder of the Islamic Revolution, the great leader, Ayatollah Khomeini.

I was given the text of the poem, line by line, and asked to justify it. They had underlined some lines and had marked them with words such as ‘political’, ‘apostasy’ and ‘denying the unity of God’. They claimed that I had written it on the anniversary of the death of Imam Khomeini, to insult him. Surprisingly, there were many lines which could lead you to such a conclusion if you were suspicious or paranoid. One such line was: *Dar ānjā ke esyān namudār shod | Saram hamcho Mansour bar dār shod* (Where the Original Sin was revealed | My head went on the gallows like Mansour’s).

Mansour Hallaj is a very famous mystic. He lived in the 10th century and was executed by the Islamic orthodox clergy because of his unorthodox way of worshipping God. He is said to have claimed “I am the God” and thus the religious authorities of the time executed him. He is treated as a saint in Persian literature. The reason they were concerned with this line was that the most famous poem attributed to Ayatollah Khomeini had a similar theme. Khomeini’s poem, which was widely broadcast at the time of his death, started with this line: *Man be khāl-e labat ey dust gereftār shodam | Hamcho Mansour kharidār-e sar-e dār shodam* (I was enchanted by the beauty mark on your lip | And fell in love with the gallows like Mansour). The interrogator was trying to force me

to admit that my line was a reflection of and a response to Khomeini's poem. I explained that Mansour was a very old character in Persian literature and that many other poets before Khomeini had alluded to his life story in their poetry. I named some of them and read some of those poems to him. Some other problematic lines in my poem included:

Palangi savār-e yeki babr shod | Sarāsar zamino zamān abr shod

Khorushi barāmad ze tablo dohol | Cho mirikht bar gurhā dasteh gol

Azāy-e tamām-e gholāmān-e māst | Vafāt-e rā'is-e olāghān-e māst

(A leopard jumped over a tiger / the entire universe was covered with clouds

The drums and kettledrums were beating / when flowers were thrown at the graves

All our slaves are mourning / it is the demise of the boss of our donkeys)

To the interrogator, these lines were a precise description of the burial and mourning ceremony of Imam Khomeini. When they took his body to the cemetery, people rushed toward the coffin and no one could stop them. They had to carry the coffin away in a helicopter and bring it back later when the security people had re-established order. There was a week of mourning and the entire country was in black and people were in tears. According to the interrogator, I had considered all people as inferior slaves and Imam Khomeini as the chief of donkeys, and donkey is of course the nickname for stupidity in Iranian culture.

Until now, I was only accused of insulting the founder of the Islamic Revolution. This was a serious charge, but what came next took the entire issue to a new level. I shivered with fear as I tried to combine fact and fiction to find a way out. I had also written: *Khodā korkharash rā savār ast bāz | khodā bā kharash miravad dar namāz* (God is riding his donkey / God is going with his donkey to worship the God). I was accused of believing in two gods; one god who is riding a donkey and a second god who is being worshipped by the first god. Monotheism is the foundation of Islam and *shirk* (polytheism) is the greatest sin. I explained that the idea of God riding a donkey came to my mind from the life story of Jesus, who is believed by Christians to be the Son of God and who rode a donkey. I added that the word *khodā* (God) in Persian also means "owner", as in combined words such as *Dehkhodā*, meaning "owner of the village" or *Baghkhodā*, meaning "owner of the garden". I explained that this line could also be interpreted as the owner of the donkey who is riding his donkey and goes to a place to worship God.

I was trying to offer him different ways to look at the text. I explained about hermeneutics, about the idea of the death of the author and the interpretability of the text. I told him that I had never intended such things, as he claimed, and that if he could look impartially at the text, he would see that different, harmless interpretations were also possible. Many taboo words were used in this poem. To justify it, I gave examples from the divans of very famous and pious poets of the past who had written similar poems for fun or as sarcasm. I explained to him that this was a long tradition in Persian poetry and that any poet, even Sa'di and Hakim Suzani Samarqandi who were both religious leaders in their time, had written such obscene poems in their divans for fun or for poetic challenges to their peers. My overall defence was that this was a nonsense poem. Our only intention in writing was to create an accurate rhyme and rhythm. Any meaning inferred was accidental and arbitrary. It was just a stupid act of fun and no insult was intended. Then he asked me to name my co-conspirators!

All the resistance literature I had read as a child came to my mind. A man of integrity will never betray his friends. I decided that I would never betray them, no matter what happened to me. I was afraid that they might face problems. Hadi came from a politically involved family. His uncle, a member of one of the leftist groups, had been recently released from prison after a long sentence. Naming him would definitely get him in trouble. So I told them that Hadi was doing his military service somewhere in Azerbaijan and that I didn't know his address. Saeed, who was a student of engineering, was not a proper type of person to appear before those people. His appearance was itself a crime in the eyes of the intelligence forces. He had long, messy hair, and a big moustache – the kind of moustache popular with Iranian communists. He was definitely not favoured by the Islamic Society in his college, and if the Intelligence Department asked for a report on him, he would certainly get negative feedback. Hence, I told them that Saeed had done very poorly in his studies, that I thought he had been dismissed from university on academic grounds and that he had returned to his hometown in the south of Iran – and I didn't know his address either.

The only person who would not be harmed, and might even be of some help in this situation, was Taghi. Taghi was a student of Persian literature. He was said to be the only observing Muslim among us. He was an ordinary student with no peculiarities, unlike the rest of us. He had also written poems of mourning for Imam Khomeini and had read these in meetings and on Mashhad radio. Therefore, he could probably help me out. Before going for the first interrogation, I had talked to all four of these people and we had agreed that I would name Taghi, and that when they

summoned Taghi, he should defend me and say that there was no suspicious intention behind those poems.

Taghi was soon called to visit no. 13/1. I briefed him and taught him exactly what to say and how to behave. However, I underestimated the fear that the name ‘Intelligence Department’ invoked and how naïve Taghi was. As he told me later, they asked him about the poem and he said that we hadn’t had any bad intention and had written it just for fun. Then they said: “We have looked into your file and we know you are a good boy. But how do you know Alireza Hassani has good intentions”? He was deceived and testified in writing that he did not know me well and that he was a mere acquaintance, and that he could not testify in favour of me. According to his own story, he admitted that I might have been guilty. He confessed to me later that he was terrified by the whole environment and the only thing he could think of was to get out. I couldn’t blame him. The fact is that I had been frightened too. When I was sitting in that room facing the wall, I could hear interrogations from other rooms. I heard a woman crying and saying: “My daughter is a brilliant student. She just thinks of her studies. She has no political activity”. And I could hear the interrogator shouting at her: “Your daughter has been seen in demonstrations in front of the Iranian embassy in Rome”. I also heard another interrogator questioning a student from the Faculty of Engineering on why he had mocked the beard of a member of the Islamic Society. I thought if laughing at the beard of a co-student can put you in such troubles, what would happen to me? If they know what the Iranian students do in Rome, they definitely know everything about me!

I couldn’t make up my mind about marriage. Even my family were puzzled to see me undecided. At last, we planned our wedding for 30 September 1991. On the morning of my wedding, I attended the interview for admission to postgraduate studies. I had passed the nationwide entrance examinations and been invited to interview. There were very few places on offer for postgraduate studies back then. In 1991, only two universities in Iran offered postgraduate studies in English Literature. The University of Tehran would admit ten students and Allameh Tabatabaei University five students. So, the total number of people who could enter a postgraduate course in English Literature in the entire country was limited to 15. There were about 1,200 applicants. The admission process involved three stages. First, there was the written examination, including a general English test and English literature test. If you passed this exam, then you would be invited for a subject-based interview with a panel of professors from the universities involved. The last stage was the selection based on the reports in your file, local investigations and your ideological and political views.

I had passed the written examination and was invited to the interview. There was a queue of interviewees. I told them about my wedding in the afternoon and they allowed me to jump the queue. The interview went very well. I was assured by the panel that I had done exceptionally well. After my wedding, I went back to my parents' house and helped my father with his farming. I was waiting for the final admission results and the start of the university year. To my disappointment, I received a letter from the Student Selection Committee informing me that I had been refused a place. The letter read as follows:

In the name of God

Dear Applicant, Mr Alireza Hassani,

This is to inform you that you were not approved as qualified under the general selection criteria and your admission to the postgraduate studies is hereby rejected.

The letter was signed and sealed by the Students Selection Committee, Ministry of Culture and Higher Education.

Moreover, my wife had been dismissed from university and no university would accept her to complete her studies. It was a miserable state of affairs. I had to go and meet different people and ask forgiveness for the sins of my wife. I would wait long hours in the corridors to meet somebody from the Islamic Society, the Supreme Leader's Representative Office, SDC, the Vice-Minister for Students Affairs, the Minister's Office, the Chancellor's Office and anybody who might be of help. I would explain to these people that my wife was now married to me and that if she had made any mistake out of ignorance and youth, to forgive her, please. Now, she was a married woman and repentant of her past misdeeds. This whole process was really frustrating. It was not only very embarrassing: it was also against my principles. Finally, they allowed my wife to transfer to Allameh Tabatabaei University and resume her studies in French Language Translation. She had by now been out of education for two years.

As I couldn't enter the postgraduate programme, I was summoned to compulsory military service in February 1992. We were a large group of university graduates. They divided us into several groups at random. Some were sent to the Army. Some were sent to the Law Enforcement Department. The largest group were sent to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I was among this latter group. The good point about IRGC was that it was not a well-organised military force at that time. Training was much easier than in the Army. Educated soldiers were less common and

therefore enjoyed a better position. The negative part for me was that it was a more Islamic institution and you had to associate with more religious-minded people.

Nevertheless, my military service started. At the beginning, I was serving in a research department in West Sepand Street in central Tehran. The building was a confiscated hotel now in the hands of IRGC. The dining hall was in the basement, which had originally been a famous cabaret called Cabaret Continental. Like all similar establishments, it was confiscated by the government after the Revolution. The majority of those working in this building were ordinary conscripts like me. A small group of official members of IRGC were also working as supervisors and commanders. The centre was a management studies centre and my role was to translate management texts. I was free in the evenings, but with no money there was not much I could do.

Those days were very sad for me. Our dormitory was a dark and dirty room where about 20 soldiers had to sleep on three-storey bunk beds. My wife was in the same city but I couldn't see her because I didn't have good relationships with her parents. I couldn't afford to rent a place to live with my wife. However, I finally succeeded in getting a part-time teaching job in a language school. I also got some translation jobs. After a while, I was transferred to the Infantry College. I was assigned work in the Research Department. There was a small library in this department and I became the librarian. At last, I was in the place I loved. I would sit in the library and read for pleasure the whole day. Because of my degree, I was considered an officer and was allowed to leave the barracks after working hours; but since I had no place to stay, I would spend the night in the building. It was a huge four-storey building and I was the only one staying there at night. I had the library and the audio-visual section at my disposal. I would watch movies – mainly war movies – and read books. After about a year I had saved enough money from teaching and translations to rent a room with a small kitchen and a shared bathroom. I asked my wife to come and live with me.

Whenever I could get a leave of absence, I travelled to Mashhad to follow up on my case. I visited many people and asked them for help. One day I went to meet the Chancellor of Ferdowsi University. I asked for an appointment and I went to his office. His office was grand and chic. I introduced myself as a graduate of his university and told him that I had scored the top grade among all applicants nationwide. He looked sympathetic and interested. He promised that he would solve my problem soon. Then he called the Secretary of the SDC, of which he was a member. He talked for a few moments on the phone. When he hung up, he was a completely changed man. He looked

at me very angrily and ordered me to leave his room. He said: “The Governor’s Office is after you. The Intelligence Department is after you. Your crime is a very serious one. Leave my office at once”. It was a huge disappointment to me. He was the Chancellor but he spoke so timidly with that Secretary. It was clear that he felt inferior! And the way he treated me was far from any nobility. I hated him more than anyone because I expected him to be at least sympathetic if not helpful.

One of my friends knew a journalist named Morteza Fallah who was the representative of *Keyhān* newspaper in Khorasan Province. My friend believed he had connections with the intelligence forces and might be able to help me. We went and met him. On his desk, I saw novels by Iranian writers like Bozorg Alavi and Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, the types of novels that you didn’t expect somebody linked to the intelligence forces would read. I suspected he might be a censor. He looked a very open-minded person and promised that he would help me. After a few days he informed me that my case was too serious and that he could not do anything about it.

There was a mature student of Persian Literature in the Islamic Society of our faculty. His name was Aliakbar Torabian Torqabeh. He liked poetry and was also a friend of a friend and offered to help me. On the one hand, I couldn’t trust him but, on the other hand, was not in a position to refuse his help. So, I went to his house in Torqabeh, near Mashhad and stayed with him for about a week. During that week, I pretended to be an observant Muslim doing my prayers every day and even went to mosque with him every evening. He was a friend of the imam of the mosque and every evening, we would go to the imam’s house and accompany him to the mosque. I was startled to hear the filthy jokes this imam would always tell. His jokes were all of a very strong sexual content. At last, this man found somebody who was a member of the Intelligence Department. His name was Hassan Erfanian. He promised that he would look at my file and let me know if he could be of any help. One night, we met this man near his house in Adl-e Khomeini Street in Mashhad. He said: “I am sorry, your case is very serious. I am surprised you are not in custody. People would get executed for this type of crime”. He also informed me that Mr Izadi, the Vice-Governor for Political and Security Affairs of Khorasan Province and Mr. Taqavi, the Governor of Mashhad, had a special interest in my case. He asked if I had any enemies in the governor’s office. I couldn’t think of anyone. At last he said that I had better not pursue this case anymore or I might get arrested. He also said that if I still wanted to keep it going, then I should complain against the Intelligence Department to the Revolutionary Court. Complain against the Intelligence Department? How could I ever dare imagine such a thing?

Therefore, we decided to try another acquaintance, Mr Hamid Honarjoo, who was a colonel in IRGC. He had studied Persian Literature in our Faculty and knew and respected me as a poet. When I told him of my problem, he said that he could do nothing because he didn't have any connections. But then he said: "Why don't you ask your own classmate Dayi Sadeghi for help"? "Dayi Sadeghi"? I said, "What can he do"? "Dayi Sadeghi is the Chief of University Intelligence", he answered!

Unbelievable! Dayi Sadeghi was a very charming and funny guy. He was a fat man of about 50. He grew a long beard and was always laughing and very friendly. I never had any suspicions about him. I remember sitting with him on a bench in the campus and telling him everything about my life, my ideas, everything. I also remember another friend of mine who was openly making jokes about Khomeini in his presence. He never participated, but never objected either. Once, when the security in Azad University had called me and two other friends into their office because we were checking out the girls, he intervened and saved us. The security mistook him for our professor and he defended us. In his narrative, one of us was a martyr's brother, the second one was a war hero and I was a Sufi poet always engaged in celestial thoughts and never thinking about worldly matters. So, how could such a nice man be the Chief of Intelligence?

Anyhow, I tried to find Dayi Sadeghi. Through a former classmate, I found the telephone number of his mother-in-law. I called her and found out that Dayi Sadeghi was now the Military Attaché of the Iranian Embassy in Moscow and would be back in Iran in six months' time. When the true identity of Dayi Sadeghi was revealed to me, I panicked. If Dayi Sadeghi could be an intelligence officer, then anybody could be one! In my narrow view, an intelligence officer was secretive, serious-looking and nasty. How could a pleasant, charming and funny man be an intelligence officer? As a result, I then also became suspicious of my host and left Mashhad immediately.

Still, I didn't give up. I met anybody who was kind enough to meet me. I wrote letters to the Leader's Office, to the Minister of Intelligence, to the Central Selection Committee and to the Leader's Representative Office in universities. I met Dr Ali Akbar Sayyari, Vice-Minister for Culture; Dr Hadi Khaniki, an advisor to the Minister; Mohammad Reza Behzadian, the MP for our city; and wrote letters to different authorities. I was also in regular contact with Mr Issayi, Secretary of the Selection Committee in the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education. Mr Issayi suggested that I take part in the entrance exams again and that if I passed – which I definitely would – they

wouldn't ask anybody about me and would admit me. This meant the failure of all my efforts. To me, it meant admitting my guilt. I believed that I had done nothing wrong and that there was no reason to re-sit the exams. In the end, I gave in and enrolled for the coming entrance exams.

About one month prior to the exam date, I received a letter informing me that I could now attend the University of Tehran (my first choice) and start my MA studies. I never knew if it was the outcome of all my efforts or the result of a change in policies as instructed by President Rafsanjani. Therefore, in March 1994, one month after the start of term and three years after I had passed the entrance exam, I entered the Faculty of Foreign Languages in the University of Tehran,

Now I was a student but also needed to support myself and my wife. I started writing and translating for literary journals. They wouldn't pay, of course, because they were independent and could hardly survive. There was a magazine called *She'r* ("poetry") which was affiliated to *Howzay-e Honari* (The Art Council). One of my friends had published some translations in their magazine and said that their pay was good. I didn't intend to give them anything of my own writing but my financial needs succeeded in persuading me that publishing translation in that magazine could be forgiven. Still, I didn't want to compromise my name. So, I translated an article called 'Historiography in Literature' and wrote the translator's name as "Ali Mulla Mohammadjan". The surname was unusual and a little funny. It was a refrain in a famous Afghan song. The article was published and they called me one day to go and get my money. I went to their office and was talking with the sub-editor in her room when the editor-in-chief entered. This lady tried to introduce me as Mr Mulla Mohammadjan. She couldn't pronounce the word correctly and started to laugh, but she was upset that it would be considered rude. The editor-in-chief, Hadi Saeedi Kiasari, knew me by my real name and was aware of my anti-regime sentiments. He didn't say anything but both of us knew why I wanted to use a pseudonym. In the same year (1996), I submitted my first collection of poetry, *Negahdār bāyad Piyādeh Shavim* (*Stop, We Should Get Off*), to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance for a publication licence. After a long time, they gave me the following note: "Dear author, your work was not approved for publication" – as simple as that!

Spring 1997 brought new hopes for the people. Presidential elections were held on 23 May. One of the candidates, Mohammad Khatami, was introducing new slogans in his campaign. His main slogan was "Iran for All Iranians". In his speeches, he regularly talked of 'civil society', 'democracy' and the 'rights of the opposition'. He frequently quoted Voltaire, Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Popper. Although he was a clergyman; he looked very different. He was well

spoken, handsome and always smiling. He talked of women's rights and of human freedoms. The winds of hope were blowing. Although I was very pessimistic about any change at all, and although I didn't trust any cleric, I was swept away by his idea of change – like many others. He won the elections in a landslide victory.

During Khatami's first years in office, the press experienced a huge revival. Many newspapers and magazines were published. Political and philosophical debates were at the core of any discussion. These newspapers motivated me to write for them. I wrote some articles in *Jāme'a Daily* and *Sobh-e Emruz* daily. In order to avoid problems, I would use simple tricks. It has been a habit of Iranians to write things and to sell it as translation. This would provide them with an excuse if they were caught. They can say: "Well, I didn't write it. I just translated it". I used this trick. I remember I wrote an article entitled 'Tolerance'. The article focused on the significance of tolerance of 'the other' and the recognition of the right of 'otherness'. In one part of the article, I quoted a scholar called Ali Abdullah Siyujani, Professor of Political Sciences in the University of Tunisia, saying: "The age of dictators has come to an end. Even in many African and Latin American countries, dictators are gone and replaced by democratic systems. So, the conditions of the modern age and the information explosion will bring an end to dictatorial regime even if they claim to be legitimate or virtuous dictatorships". I could have never written such sentences directly addressing the Supreme Leader and the foundation of the system. By pretending that this was a quotation, I was able to protect myself from prosecution. The name Ali Abdullah Siyujani was actually a combination of a friend's name – Ali Abdullahi – and his place of birth, Siyuan.

One day, the new Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, who was one of the major reformist forces, was giving a speech in Sharif University of Technology in Tehran. My wife and I attended his lecture. Afterwards, I approached him and asked: "Mr Mohajerani, when is this censorship going to end"? He responded: "Censorship is never going to end. Censorship is not necessarily bad". He then asked about my problem. I told him about my collection and he took my name and the name of the book to see what could be done. I didn't see him again and I don't think he did anything about my book but the fact that he was honest about censorship and he listened to my complaint was heart-warming.

So, once again, I tried my luck. Now that a reformist government was in power, I had renewed hopes of publishing my book. This time, the censors gave me a list of poems to be deleted. The list was long and included about one-third of the book. I didn't accept it and asked to see the

Head of the Book Department. His name was Mr Khosro Talebzadeh. He looked an intelligent and knowledgeable man, and I was surprised to see an open-minded person like him in the position of chief censor. He accepted most of my reasoning and approved many of the poems. However, in two instances, he said that I should delete them. One piece was sarcasm on the theory of cultural invasion, which was and still is the official cultural theory of the regime. Mr Talebzadeh said: “What do you think! You are mocking the cultural invasion theory. A theory that was introduced and advocated by the Supreme Leader himself”! Another passage included praise of poets. I gladly agreed to delete these two passages to save the rest of the book. It was published in 1998.

On 21 November 1998, the reformist papers informed people that the mutilated bodies of Daryoush Forouhar, Leader of Iran’s People Party, and his wife Parvaneh Forouhar (Eskandari), had been found dead in their home in central Tehran. Forouhar was a political dissident. His wife was a poet and a political activist. Forouhar had received 11 knife wounds and his wife 24.

A few days later, on 2 December 1998, Mohammad Mokhtari went missing. He was a poet and writer and one of the main figures in the Iranian Writers’ Association (*Kānun*). After one week, his body was identified in the Coroner’s Office. He had been suffocated and left near a cement factory south of Tehran. On the same day that his body was identified, Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh, a prolific translator, was kidnapped in Iranshahr Street in broad daylight. Pouyandeh was well known for his translations of French philosophers and feminist writers. Very shortly afterwards, his body was found along the roadside in Shahryar, south-west of Tehran. These murders heralded a massive campaign to eliminate Iranian intellectuals or, as they came to be called, *Degarandishān* (those who think differently). I knew both of these men in person. I admired Mokhtari for his courage and bravery in writing about issues in a manner openly critical of the system. He was one of the few who openly criticised dictatorship and discussed a political system that was based on the idea of ‘sheep needing a shepherd’. He was also an accomplished poet. Pouyandeh was a very hardworking translator. He had received his PhD in Sociology from a French university and chose the books he translated very carefully. Each of his books addressed one of the issues that Iranian society was involved with. These murders became known as chain murders and the list of victims increased. Newspapers identified a systematic plan of physical annihilation of intellectuals and estimated the number of victims as between 350 and 600.

There was much talk and whispering about these killings. There were rumours of telephone tapping. A friend of mine advised me not to speak openly in public places and to be very careful

about the words I exchanged with taxi drivers. Some believed that the murderers had acted based on a religious fatwa, meaning the victims were considered apostates. So, if they overheard you making an offensive remark about the Prophet of Islam, you might be considered an apostate and your blood would be considered *hadar* (“waste”).

The President assigned a committee to investigate. They limited their investigations to four murders: Forouhar and his wife, plus Pouyandeh and Mokhtari. Soon they arrested a number of personnel from the Ministry of Intelligence, headed by the Vice-Minister of Home Security, Saeed Emami. They claimed that this group had acted on its own and that no one in a higher position was involved. Emami was the closest intelligence officer to the Supreme Leader. It was later revealed that he was the one who accompanied the Supreme Leader’s family on their foreign trips. Numerous stories were told, but in the end they claimed that Emami had committed suicide in prison. As stated by the official media, he swallowed hair removal powder in the bathroom. The arsenic in the powder caused his death. When I saw Emami’s picture in the papers, I trembled with fear. Oh my God, I have seen this man – this man wanted to arrest me!

It was a sunny day in March or April 1996. Siavash Kasrayi, a renowned Iranian poet, had died in exile in Vienna, Austria. The Iranian Writers’ Association organised a memorial service for him. It was a traditional Islamic ritual in a mosque, though because of the crackdown on writers, no speech was planned. With two of my friends, I went to the mosque, Hojjat ibn al Hassan Mosque in Sohrevardi Street, north-east of Tehran. When we arrived, the mosque was already full. A security officer in plain clothes held a big camera and was filming the participants. We were standing in the street talking when we heard noises from inside the mosque. A blind clergyman was reading the Koran when somebody took the loudspeaker from him and said: “If you were not blind, you wouldn’t have read the Koran to this group of infidels and kaffirs”. Then he addressed some of the writers by name and started swearing at them. The intelligence forces then rushed into the mosque and started beating those inside. Another group, led by an old man called Haj Bakhshi, who called themselves *Ansār-e Hezbollah* (“The Friends of Hezbollah”) started marching on the pavement outside the mosque. They had loudspeakers and were shouting slogans. Their slogan was the commonest of all we had heard over the years: ‘Down with Monafegh’. *Monafegh* literally means “hypocrite or traitor”. The Islamic Republic used this term – derived from the Koran – widely to brand the opposition.

I saw Mohammad Qazi, a pioneer translator who was in his eighties, bleeding from his head. The intelligence forces ordered us to leave and go home. The police officers from a nearby police station joined their operation. I complained to the police commander, a major, and told him: “You are a police officer. You see that these forces are disrupting order and you command us to leave? Aren’t you supposed to protect us”? At this time, two young boys from Ansār-e Hezbollah approached us and shouted at us: “Get away, you uptown dandy boys”! I tried to respond when a tall man with a nicely trimmed black beard and large dark sunglasses approached us. He pointed his finger at me and said: “Get lost. This is the third time I’ve seen you! If I ever see you again, I will take you where there is no return”. I opened my mouth to answer him when my friend, Mehrdad Fallah, pulled my hand and said: “Alireza, let’s just go”. We did.

That man’s picture remained in my mind. It was only years later when I saw his photo on the front page of newspapers that I realised that he was the second most powerful intelligence authority in the country – the Vice-Minister for Home Security and a close associate of the Supreme Leader –and the man responsible for hundreds of kidnaps and disappearances, the frightening Saeed Emami (Eslami).

On 27 April 2004, *Kārnameh Literary Journal* received the following fax:

Now that we see the devilish scribblers are using their dark and satanic pens to target the Islamic culture and annihilate the righteous principles of Muhammad’s religion, following the revolutionary executions of the corrupt and worthless enemy in 1998, we are fully prepared to dry out the seed of corruption in this land. We are ready to send the kaffirs who have surrendered themselves to Satan to hell with the help of the Koran and as any truthful free man should do. When our divine country, Iran, is being destroyed at the hand of a bunch of worthless scribblers, no patience is allowed. The punishment of kaffirs who oppose Islam will continue until they are completely uprooted. We, the Proud Army of Muhammad – seeking help from the Almighty and under the shadow of the Holy Koran – will wipe out all signs of infidelity and corruption from this land and promise the Muslim and suppressed people of Iran and the survivors of the martyrs that a better day will arrive. Now that the divine decree is being enforced by the flash of swords of the Proud Army of Muhammad, we request the noble people to pray to God to dry out the dark pens of infidelity. Amen.

In their first revolutionary act, the Proud Army of Muhammad will wash the terrain of Islamic Iran with the corrupt blood of the following group of Corrupters of the Earth:

Mahmoud Dowlatabadi, Ali Ashraf Darvishian, Simin Behbahani, Fariborz Raees Dana, Seyed Ali Salehi, Mohammad Mohammad Ali, Akbar Masoumbeigi, Ali Sedaghati Khayyat, Changiz Pahlavan, Gholamhossein Salemi, Mohammad Ali Sepanloo, Amir Hassan Cheheltan, Mohammad Khalili, Moniroo Ravanipour, Shirin Ebadi, Javad Mojabi, Abbas Mokhber, Kaveh Goharin, Iraj Kaboli, Mehrangiz Kar, Sayer Mohammadi, Hafez Mousavi, Nastaran Mousavi, Nasser Vhadati, Sadegh Homayouni, Nahid Foroughan, Pouran Farrokhzad, Mahin Khadivi, Abutorab Khosravi, Maryam Khorasani, Reza Khandan Mahabadi, Mohammad Ali Shakeri Yekta, Jahed Jahanshahi, Nahid Tavassoli, Alireza Panjaei, Alireza Babayi, Farkhondeh Aghayi, M. Ravanshid, Abdolhamid Abolhamd, Shiva Arastouyi, Majid Amin Moayed, Ali Babachahi, Yarali Pourmoghadam, Changiz Pahlavan, Alireza Jabbari, Reza Chaychi, Aliasghar Rashedan, Moniroo Ravanipour, Nasser Zarafshan, Reza Abed, Farzaneh Taheri, Emran Salahi, Shams Langroudi, Javad Shojaeifard, Faramarz Sedehi, Hossein Sanapour, Esmail Raha, Ghasem Roubin, Jalal Bayram, Firouz Gouran, Hossein Atashparvar, Asghar Elahi, **Alireza Abiz**, Hashem Banapour, Ghasem Roubin, Farideh Razi, Farzaneh Karampoor, Maryam Khorasani, Iraj Ziayi, Abutorab Khosravi, Fariba Vafi, Farkhonda Hajizadeh.

[Signed] The Proud Army of Muhammad

The same text was faxed to some of the writers and poets named in the letter. The Proud Army of Muhammad was not known to anybody. To many of those who received the letter, as well as to those who wrote about it, it was just a new name for a group inside the Intelligence Department or another part of the security forces within the system. I also received the fax in my office. It had been faxed at night and there was no number or sender particulars on it. The selected list of names was interesting. I tried to figure out what united us all on this list, for those on it did not belong to any special ideology or political view. The list included the most prominent writers and poets, but also people less known like myself. The majority were members of the Iranian Writers' Association. What I personally found common in this group was adherence to values like freedom of speech, struggle with censorship and defence of human rights. From this observation, I came up with a theory. The system knew exactly what it was doing. This was a very clever choice indeed, based on long-term observation and follow-up. It was the work of a team of experts who had profound insider knowledge of literary circles. The list included people who were socially conscious and who had the moral integrity and the personality to believe in something and to be able to stand up for a cause.

I was not that much concerned about my own safety. The list included over 50 people and I didn't consider myself a prime target. On the other hand, nobody knew how the killers would prioritise their victims and therefore there was some legitimate concern. A few younger writers tried to protect those considered more at risk. Some slept in the house of Houshang Golshiri, editor-in-chief of *Kārnameh* and one of the major novelists, seen as a first target. Simin Behbahani voiced concern and a group from the Iranian Writers' Association met the Minister of Culture. President Khatami soon reacted and promised investigations.

At that time, I was living in an apartment in west Tehran with my daughter Behafarid and my sister Zahra. My wife was in Australia and I was having a very difficult time raising my child without her mother's support. After a troubled married life, we immigrated to Australia out of despair to get away from everybody and to work out our marriage. While in Australia, I came to the conclusion that I could not go on any more. I took my daughter and returned home, while my wife stayed in Australia. I had applied for divorce but because my wife was not in Iran, the procedure took a very long time. My sister came to live with me and take care of Behafarid.

It was an evening in May 2004. I had met a girl on a Yahoo chat room and had gone out with her a few days earlier. Her name was Azadeh and she wrote poetry for children. She invited me that night to go and meet her in an office belonging to a friend of hers. The office belonged to a company which sold internet cards over the phone and she had agreed to stay the night there to answer the phone. There was a bed in the office and she was supposed to sleep there. I was too shy to tell my sister that I was going to stay the night with a girl. After all, I was still a married man, although my wife and I were living in two different hemispheres. So, I told her that I was going to visit a friend, Mojtaba. I told her that I would be back by midnight.

I went to see Azadeh in the office. We spent the night together. She didn't let me leave and I agreed to leave in the morning. My mobile battery died. When I decided to leave in the morning, Azadeh locked the door and hid the key. She had unplugged the landline telephone and put it in a locked cupboard. She just wouldn't let me go. I was also not in the right condition to think about my poor sister. I had no idea that she had seen the terror list and that she knew of the life threat. Naturally, she was very frightened. She called my friend and when she didn't find me, she took a taxi and searched all the police stations and hospitals. She went back home in the morning. It was Friday and she had to wait until the next day to go and search the morgue. I came to know all this news when, at last, I managed to go back home. I opened the window and threatened Azadeh that

I would scream and ask for help if she didn't let me go. It was the last time I ever stayed overnight in a strange woman's place, and I never saw Azadeh again.

In 2004, I also published my second collection, *Spāgeti bā Sos-e Mekziki* (*Spaghetti with Mexican Sauce*). I faced similar problems as with my first book. Some poems I deleted myself before submitting the book for consideration, because I knew they would not be allowed. This time, they gave me a list of poems to be either deleted or revised. Again, I complained and entered into a bargaining dialogue with the censor department. I consented to replace "a glass of beer" with "a cup of coffee", "Israeli sleeping bag" with "feather sleeping bag" and "swimming pool" with "promenade". Some of these changes did not harm the poem too much but some of them would totally destroy it. Therefore, I decided to take such poems out.

When Ahmadinejad was elected President in 2005, the hopes for any reforms died. The process of disillusionment had started a long time earlier mainly since the second term of President Khatami in office. Khatami failed to bring about the changes he promised and the reformists gradually lost their positions of power including their majority in the Parliament. Ahmadinejad's election was the final blow to any hope of reform. I remember the frustration and anger I felt during the election period. In my view, election of Ahmadinejad was a collective suicidal act on the part of the nation caused by despair and lost dreams. Many people didn't take part in the elections because they didn't believe any good could come out of the ballot box. The overall feeling at the time was that of anger. People felt betrayed by the institution of politics and were longing for a fundamental change, if not for better, for worse. Many poets of my generation had been working as journalists in the reformist media. Failure of the reformist movement meant that a large number of them lost their jobs or faced persecution. Some left the country and others took jobs other than writing. I also focused my attention on my family and my translation business. The papers and magazines I used to write in were closed one after the other. I started blogging and wrote political commentaries under different pseudonyms.

From 2004 until 2014, I didn't publish any poetry collection of my own. I had lost my enthusiasm for publication and even for writing. I published my translations – which are less prone to censorship. In 2006, I co-wrote a radio play for the BBC Radio 4 which was based on a real story of sexual harassment in the IRIB. The victim, my co-writer, was a well-known dubbing artist and producer and the offender was a high-ranking security official in the same organization. The play was a success and was shortlisted for a Sony Award. However, it was no match to the level of

unhappiness and despair I was feeling in Iran. Gradually, I thought of going away for a few years. I decided to travel to the UK for a PhD in Creative Writing and I finally found myself in Newcastle upon Tyne.

My early days in Newcastle worked like magic. I started to write poetry again. I felt the mental pressure was gone. I was able to think about subjects which I had always ignored. I wrote about my personal experiences of detention and interrogations. I felt a degree of freedom to write more openly about my personal life as well. In 2014, I published my third collection, *Az Miz-e Man Sedāy-e Derakhti Miāyad* (*I Can Hear a Tree from My Desk*). The original book was 120 pages. The publisher advised that about 20 pages be deleted. The censor department demanded another 25 pages be deleted or revised. At last the book was published, in 75 pages. I have two new collections ready for publication. I am thinking of publishing these books overseas to avoid censorship.

Although I don't feel the strong pressure of state censorship as before, I still have to be cautious in publishing my work. Any publication even online or overseas may endanger my safe travels to Iran. I am not sure if censorship will ever become a story of the past for me. Even when I write about censorship or against censorship, I feel the strong hand of censors. The fact that I devote my precious time to thinking and writing about censorship shows that the censors have become victorious. They have enslaved my imagination. It is an ongoing internal conflict and I have no idea when it will end or if it will ever end at all.

The Kindly Interrogator

(A Collection of Poetry)

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Preface

The poems in this collection are selected from previously published and unpublished material and represent about 15 years of my work. Originally written in Persian, I translated them into English in dialogue with my supervisor, Professor W.N. Herbert. The choice of poems was intended to best reflect the theme of my research, censorship, both in content and in style. Translation is the key element in shaping this collection as it is in the act of censorship. Censors translate poetry into a language that is different from that of the poet. They misread, mistranslate and misinterpret the text thus distorting the meaning and stripping the word of its meaning. This is why the word becomes so precious to me and that's the key to the aesthetic criteria in my poetry. A minimalist approach to poetry, minimal use of punctuation and surprise endings are all techniques used to intensify the content of the poems. The surprise endings encourage the reader to reread, reconsider and rethink. The cognitive dissonance helps build up the shocking effect of the surprise endings. The use of ironic mode and deceptive diction is not only a way to pass censorship, it also best represents the contradictory and paradoxical nature of writing poetry under suppression. The use of symbolism and dream metaphors as well as the implicit approach to sensitive issues is indicative of a style of poetry adapted to censorship conditions.

The poem on page 113 depicts the immediacy of death in a surrealistic setting but the language used is neutral and ordinary. It is also true of other poems where threat, surveillance, murder and mutilation (as in page 144) are treated as ordinary and commonplace. The flattening of tone and affect creates a poetry of highly paradoxical craft. Neutral, cold and indifferent tone is used in describing the most shocking events. Animal symbolism as well as different historical and geographical allusions are used to contextualize the poems. All the poems in this collection are concerned with the ideas that are considered problematic by the censorship authorities in Iran. Detention, surveillance, militarization of the society, prosecution and murder are all sensitive issues to write about. Poem one page 110 describes the misery of life under permanent surveillance and makes use of animal symbolism to convey the dark image of life under constant eye of the Big Brother. The Big Brother appears in the form of an omnipresent informer in page 124 and polices the streets in page 112. This poem is about identity, the loss of identity and the adoption of identity. Photolessness, namelessness and a fatalistic attitude represents the Kafkaesque experience of life in contemporary Iran. Militarization of society is the subject of a number of poems as is the criticism of war and violence. *Puberty in the Trenches* (pages 114-5) describes war from the viewpoint of a young soldier while the poem on page 111 reveals the

frustration with the military. Poems about interrogation (pages 147, 167, 168, 169 and 171) reflect upon my personal experiences and provide insight into the lasting psychological effects of interrogations on the victim. Depiction of sexuality and eroticism within the cultural constraints is another central theme in the collection. *To Sha^h Chera^gh Shrine, all my lemons* (pages 120-1) describes the sexual desires and fantasies of a young girl of religious background in a closed society with little chance of gratification. Exile, displacement and the idea of home are subject of some other poems.

In view of the censorship rules, these poems can be categorized into three groups: poems written for publication, poems written for the desk drawer on the hope of publication in an unknown future, and poems which could only be written overseas. Writing this last group of poems was not possible for me while in Iran because of the overwhelming psychological pressures which did not allow me to think of those experiences as a subject for poetry. Poems on interrogations and those about the 2009 uprising belong to this group. Some of these poems have been previously published in Iran. In order to pass censorship, I had to make some changes. Appendix A provides a list of censored poems and the changes made to meet the censor requirements. Poems published in journals or online are mainly those that were excluded from my books by the act of censors. Most of the poems in the ‘unpublished’ section as well as some published online have no chance of publication in Iran under the present censorship regime.

Detention

The heater was swallowing both our shivers

And the jug of gas oil

And its smoke in the half-dark cellar

Went up to help the spiders

A middle-aged man was laughing joyously

He had killed his neighbour

An old man, fingers trembling,

Put a cigarette between yellow teeth

While eyeing the teenage boy

Who was singing in a sad voice

A young man swept slowly

He had long fingers

And had been brought in drunk from the gutter

I had only written on the wall:

“Safoora, my darling

I’d die for you, my red rose”.

For a long time now, this black cat
Has been sitting on the veranda outside my room
-With his eyes shining-
Looking at me through the dark

It's a long time since I've been a sparrow
Since I've been a dove
Even since I've been a backyard hen
But still this black cat
Is sitting on the veranda outside my room
-With his eyes shining-
Looking at me through the dark

1992

3.

From behind many hills

The wail of jackals wakens me

And the futile voice of the dawn

Bugles cough like sick roosters

And the morning sun

Bursts through the needles

Of the garrison's pines

The tired soldier

Hangs his boots around his neck

And pisses in his helmet

1993

4.

The agent asked me for an ID card

And none of my cards had a photo

I had to talk to the woman passing outside in the street

The woman fell down

And was changed into a blade of grass

Terrified, I returned

The agent still had my card- photoless- in his hand

We went out into the street

The woman was passing, her handbag over her shoulder

I approached and called out to her

She turned and in the form of a lifeless dove

Descended onto my ID card

1993

5.

We came out of the cafe at five

For a short walk in the street

For a short walk in the street

We came out of the cafe at five

A man kept shaking his head

In the butcher's on the right

In the butcher's on the right

A man kept shaking his head

When at 5 they beheaded us

We also shook our heads

We also shook our heads

When at 5 they beheaded us

1994

6.

Puberty in the Trenches

Fall in!

Fall in!

You stand in line in Palanga^{an} Mosque

Your knapsack being filled

With tins of tuna and gifts of nuts

Magazine pouches ornament your waist

Fall in!

In a long queue you climb Mount Sha^{hoo}

Listening to the breeze through the grass

And the river flowing down in the valley

Sit behind that boulder

And let the river below pass through the valley

The men carry water in white containers

Sit behind that boulder

And aim at the bull's-eye — fire!

Spring grass is being crushed underfoot

It has covered the graves,

And the moustaches of Akbar Komoleh

Company! Forward!

Your boots are too big for your feet

When you turn the first corner

You see Dervish Faareess

With his long carbine

Rolling a cigarette

You're scared—

Grip your M-1 tightly

In your Israeli-made sleeping bag

You sleep comfortably with no report of guns or bullets

In your wet dream

You've been left behind

By the company which has gone up to the front line

In the tamarisk bushes

With a tin of hot water

“I wash my body for the sake of Ghusl Janabat

It’s an obligation for me to purify, to get close to Allah!”

1999

7.

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

Comes to mind and the hunchback who

Under the mulberry in the alley by the mosque

Would blow on his tea in the saucer

And take a fingertip of snuff from a little bottle,

Facing the small bazaar where a girl in a white veil was passing.

Since Saturday evening he has squatted behind his door

Like a dog curled up by the side of the road

Who neither barks nor howls

Just gnaws at the core of your soul with his eyes

The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock

When he goes down four steps

Not to see his mother washing people's clothes,

And goes up two other steps

To get back to sightseeing the neighbour's roof

Azan is called

In the small bazaar

Women slowly come and go

Talking of Michael Angelo

1999

8.

The ship stood by the shore

And the one-eyed captain went on deck

A huge fire could be seen on the beach

And in the cathedral bells were tolling

We thought the ship was burning

And threw ourselves into the water in terror

The fire was still ablaze on the shore

And the natives were dancing around

We were in the ship and the ship was in us.

1999

9.

Love Letter from Sydney

The first epistle rises out of the broken parts of the ship

And from the tumult of the seabirds

In a turbulent night

From among the bare bodies on cool sands

Maroubra Beach, Malabar Beach, Bronte Beach,

And (does it taste French?) La Perouse

Who stands on the deck and shouts: *La Terre! La Terre!*

And another world is born

And the first epistle takes form

From shingle and starfish

And the naked voice of waves at night

And the terrified souls of sailors

Which with each wave

Are pounded on the shore and repelled

And the black flags with broken skulls prowl the seas

One-eyed thieves

Hide the treasures of the world on unseen islands

New islands take form

Lands are born

And like little warts

Sit on the body of the ocean

- A weekly ticket-

And a walk round the harbour

Among the couples strolling from one café to another

For whom the pillars of bridges and the corners of walls

Are poles and curtains

And the park grass

Is a wedding bed

- With the permission of Captain Cook-

Amigo, Amigo, Amigo

And the wave of the crowd with the scent of Parisian perfume

And the sweat of women who have danced till dawn

- With the permission of Captain Cook-

And empty beer cans floating in the canals

The first epistle comes to an end

And a taste remains in the mouth

From a good night's drinking

From an ongoing vertigo of voices and laughter

Hurrah!

- Stop! We have to get off

2002

10.

To Sha^h Chera^gh Shrine, all my lemons

Reassure me, reassure me oh God!

Doesn't remembering you assure the hearts?

I was picking lemons, picking lemons in the garden

Dropping them into my lap

The hem of my dress in my teeth

My navel was showing, oh God my navel was showing

And a little above, a little below

A breeze was blowing on my newly-ripened body

Up to my armpits

I was picking lemons, dropping them into my lap

The breeze was swirling about my body

Entering by my sleeves

Leaving by my neckline

I was picking lemons, dropping them into my lap

The breeze was blowing up my legs

Swirling about my thighs

Chilling my young buttocks

I was picking lemons, dropping them into my lap

I wanted the gardener to come

Or the gardener's horse

The watchman to come

Or the watchman's dog

Reassure me, reassure me oh God!

2002

11.

Private Library

The books feel at home in the private library

They loll on the shelves

And gossip endlessly

They mix in no order and without discipline

When a new book arrives

They conspire to kick it out

In that corner

The Collected Works of Marx

Is staring open-mouthed and besotted

At Madam Bovary

2003

12.

I dream I've swallowed an oak tree

And its branches are spreading in my stomach

Soon it will grow out of my skin

A dove is building a nest on a bough

And a leopard is napping in the shadow of the tree

In the leopard's dream

I am his mother and I'm suckling him

I want to wake up

I'm afraid I may disturb the leopard's dream

2003

13.

To the ceremony for selecting the finest informer

I too was invited

I wore my best shirt

My shiny black shoes

And my Italian suit

I put on a tie and I used cologne

Inside the hall, the presenter was on the podium

All the candidates were left outside

All the seats had already been taken

By the officers responsible for informing on the ceremony

2004

14.

Guardian of the Faith

I jumped out from behind the rock, barred his way and cried “Halt! Hands Up!”

I searched his pockets, found nothing, shouted “Halt! Hands Up!”

I took him in, laid him down, rolled him up, and stuck him to the wall

I searched his shoes and socks, found nothing, shouted “Halt! Hands Up!”

I searched him from head to toenail, I searched the inside of his pants

The roof of his mouth, the corner of his eye, the hole of his arse

I extracted blood from his veins, tissue from his muscles

Grey cells from his brain and neurons from his nerves

I removed his balls and fried them in a pan

I searched through his mind with a magnifying glass and found nothing

That heretic had hidden his dirty thoughts somewhere else

Somewhere a short distance above his head or about his body

In an aura that I could and could not see

He glanced at me, grinned and was gone

I was left standing there, like a guardian of the faith.

2004

15.

The night behaves differently toward me

Since yesterday when I came to the world

As if I had never been here before

Where did I come from yesterday to this world

That I should be treated differently?

Since yesterday

It takes me away, it brings me back

It grips me, shakes me

And casts me off

It spins me around

And drives me away

It walks me down the hallway, on the cold carpet, on the cold brick

It tears me apart, warp from weft

Ancestor from offspring

I see a camel in the darkness

Her hump, her neck, her eyes

The world is a dark corridor

I wish I were a camel in this world

I might have been treated differently

2005

16.

There was a lamp on in the Anatomy Hall

Standing on tiptoe I can see through the window

The table in the middle and the quick movement of hands

There is silence, the sound of my breath

And the one bent over the table in the hall

Standing there I can see him craning his neck

Outside the window

I see his fear, the sound of his breath

And the flash of the knife in the dim light of the hall

He bends over my head and smiles

Looking at me like a butcher looks at a carcass

On the table in the middle of the hall,

Relaxed, I sleep

2005

I was speaking to the tree in the night

Of the happy days which are endless

The sun was shining on the flowers

I went down the alley between the gardens

A piercing pain enveloped me

Blood was springing from my hands

I was whistling a shepherds' song

The child remained in the gardens

I went out of the alley

At home

There was talk of the gardens and the alley

I am on fire, my body is burning

I leave my flesh, creep into you

2006

18.

It was the year two thousand and six

I was working in an office

Every day till into the evening

From my desk came the voice of a tree

Sometimes with clients

There would be talk of love

I never looked back though

I divorced you – an absolute divorce.

2006

19.

You will cross the bridge in vain

Nothing is happening on the other side

On the other side your brother is dead

And his men have fled to the forest

The bridge ends when you cross the bridge.

2007

20.

Tonight is the second of February- the evening of February the 2nd

Outside the snow is swirling and the wind is wailing

In the basement everything is calm

Warm and peaceful

Even a drip of water in the bathroom can be heard

In the quad outside

A few people come and go

In winter clothes

On the second of February, on a night like tonight

In a different year

In a different century

When the second of February has faded into night

Neither I nor those who come and go in the quad outside will be here

On the walls are pictures of ancient places

These images will persist

On the walls are portraits of history makers

These images will persist

But what remains of these famous men?

A name and a few traces are left behind

How does it benefit them

Whether we admire their works or not?

How does it benefit Ferdowsi?

Sa'adi or Khayyam? Rumi?

That poet whose anniversary was a few days ago-

The hundredth? Two-hundredth?

Three-hundredth? Birthday? Deathday?

In whose memory the whole of Scotland immersed itself in celebration

Reciting poems and draining glasses

In whose name they took pride and fired their passion

Engaged in both the art and the act of love

How did it benefit him

The peasant ploughman, Robert Burns

Who spent his life in poverty and unhappiness?

Dead for years

Is there anything left of him to rejoice at the people's joy?

On this winter night, this night of February the 2nd?

Feb. 2009

21.

I am sitting in Legends

In a dark corner of the bar

Nursing a glass of beer

And thinking

In a hundred years- just one hundred years-

None of these people will be alive

Not that one up there on the little stage

Playing a new track every few minutes

Nor those young boys and girls skilfully filling glasses

And taking money

Nor this crowd moving their bodies un-rhythmically

And not me

-The melancholic scribbler of these lines-

And the almighty god of these words

Not one of us will continue to be

We'll all be lost in Legends.

From the window of my basement room

Only the topmost wintry boughs are visible

I hear the crying of the crows

A cold morning envelops me

In the mirror another man looks at me

With puffy eyes and white hairs in his temples

A two-day beard

He says: Look at the world with fresh eyes

Tomorrow night there's a seminar "Rejuvenate with Love" in the Methodist church

"People of all faiths and no faith welcome"

The man in the mirror asks me in English:

"What is your faith?"

I reply: Speak in your mother tongue

With the words that you carry in your mind from the distant past

Speak with the words of your ancestors

Did my grandfather suffer any doubt in his faith?

Does my father ever think about this?

The world is too brief a space for thought.

Feb. 2009

22.

All winter I have thought of death

All winter is too short to think about death

My body is full of death

Death flows in my veins

My blood, my lymph is composed of death

Death runs in me

I see her in the movement of my muscles

In the opening and closing of my eyelids

In the shedding of my hair

In the growth of my nails

*

I lift a cup of tea to my lips

In its pleasant warmth

Is a secret delight

A secret delight I have borrowed from death

Beyond this winter

Trees are drowned in blossom

The spring breeze blows in my hair

Death, with an affectionate smile on her lips,

Gives me another chance

Feb. 2009

23.

I left the house at night following a young rabbit

She took me through the trees toward the sea

A fierce wind blew and a sudden rain fell

I stood on an esplanade and looked out at sea

The rabbit was moving off on a shining board

The sea was terrifying and I was shaking

The rabbit was still moving away on the board

I said nothing about my dream to you

I said nothing about my dream to her

I went back home from the sea, hopeless,

The rabbit was sleeping soundly in my bed.

Feb. 2009

24.

The Writer's Study

The writer's study is dim in the light of dawn

-The curtains are closed-

He should have opened them- he hasn't

If I were the writer

I would have thrown open the curtains

Unlatched the window

Invited the light into the room

I am not the writer

Only the scribbler of these lines

Out of extreme idiocy

I have drawn the curtains

On this beautiful morning

I am sitting in the kitchen

Staring at a can of salt on the table

Feb. 2009

25.

The whole of existence frightens me

Kierkegaard

In the wind there was a strange desire

A pulsing urge to blow

It wanted to blast and to endure

In me there is a similar desire

A beating urge to survive

And stir up the sea

And create tall unending waves

And shatter ramshackle walls

A high desire which helps me overcome

My fear of existence

Feb. 2009

26.

Red and White Domes

Paul Klee

Red and white domes

Blue and turquoise domes

Mud-brick and clay domes

These domes

Grown everywhere across the earth

Their beauty is so motherly

Their curve so feminine

They haven't raped the sky

They have crept into it slowly and softly

They have slept like a dream on the bed of air

When you look down from the sky

The earth looks like a thousand-breasted cow

With domes of red and white, blue and turquoise, brick and clay

Under the ceilings of these domes

Life flows like warm milk in the veins of time.

Feb. 2009

27.

Pilgrims pass along mountain roads

Through plantations and across pastures

Across the infertile deserts

Over the rivers and over the seas

They pass through the forests and through the woods

They pass by sleeping sailors

They pass by tired harvesters

They pass by dogs and they pass by sheep

They are always on the road

In every city they have a street in their name

An inn, a monastery, a temple

They are forever on the road

From one pilgrimage site to another

In a continuing bewilderment

Which will not end until they themselves

Become a new pilgrimage site

Feb. 2009

28.

I come home by myself

My wife is not in- she's gone

I take the water bottle out of the fridge- it's empty

I put a glass under the tap

Black smoke emerges

A ghoul takes shape

It looks into my eyes

With two burning coals

Claps me on the shoulder saying:

My friend!

It hasn't rained here for ages

Stay thirsty for today

Tomorrow will be cloudy

I went out into the street after her

Distraught, I went after her

Ecstatic, she was fleeing on the back of a white bird.

May 2009

29.

My whole life has been a lie

I have always lived with lies

I have lied to others

I have lied to myself

Lying is part of me

Apart from lies, I am nothing

Without lies, I don't exist

November 2009

30.

I opened the door to her

Invited her in

She closed her umbrella and entered

She sat on a chair

I brought tea

We smoked

Talked about the weather and politics

I led her to the bathroom

Sliced her into small pieces

Placed her in the freezer

Her umbrella is hanging from the coat rail.

November 2009

31.

My pear tree was stripped naked

In the wind and snow of November

Rotting apples dropped in the yard

A flock of birds crossed the sky

In the desert, with wings wide open

The birds glide smoothly

The sky is clear blue, dotted with white clouds

I want that desert and those birds

And to be seven years old

On the vast plains of Khorasan

November 2009

32.

Worthy is the lamb who was slain

5- Revelations (The New Testament)

The fog is coming toward me from the end of the alley

From the corner where a gate stands half-open

It engulfs the black Ford and the red Honda

Creeps on and slowly fills the alley

It climbs the hedges and the walls

Swallows the houses opposite one by one

Until only the chimneys are visible

It stands in front of me like a wall

Curls around the tree facing my window

I open the window

The fog embraces me

I close my eyes and with thousands of other ghosts- am carried away

February 2010

33.

I have a kindly interrogator

He's interested in philosophy and free verse

He admires Churchill and drinks green tea

He is delicate and bespectacled

He is lightly-bearded and has a woman's voice

He is polite and doesn't insult me

He has never beaten me up

He has never demanded false confessions

He says: only write the truth

I say: on my life!

February 2010

34.

I enjoy travelling

To roll my case behind me through the airport

And go from one end to the other

In the airport, beauty is abundant

I enjoy watching beautiful faces

While sitting and drinking cappuccino

With a nicely-proportioned suitcase beside me

And a newspaper before me

Every now and then raising my head

To assess the passers-by

The smiles of the saleswomen please me

And of those women who ask:

Do you live in the U.K.?

With a wicked smile I say: No

And I'm delighted when they respond:

I see! You're too handsome to live in the U.K.

February 2010

35.

I wish there were a way to that island
A wooden bridge to pass over these weeds
And between those white swans and ducks
A bridge I could walk across
And lean upon its rail
To look at my reflection in the water of the lake
In this hand-knitted hat
With this beautiful face
That I have brought from the Khorasan plains
To here

May 2009

36.

On the morning after a late night the telephone rings

Telling me that someone close has died.

I look from behind the curtains

A small bird has a worm in its red beak

And is dragging it from the earth.

May 2009

37.

Now that I am dead

I am the same as that runner or this jumper

As one who watched over his body for his whole life

Or another who exercised three times a day

Now that I am thrown here

Onto this slab in the mortuary

Look at me

I am the same as the corpse beside me

Perhaps more gaunt

Eyes more sunken

But if you look closely

We are the same

We are both dead.

May 2009

38.

On the notice-board, there is a photo of a poet
Who died when he was fifty
And beside it, the poster for ‘The 400 Blows’
Which I saw at the cinema last Thursday
To the right of this poster,
An invitation to a poetry reading in the botanic gardens
Beneath it, the instructions for operating the Venetian blinds
And beside those, the recycling schedule

In the centre, is my daily schedule
According to this, I am now asleep
At 11:00 hours, I have breakfast
At 13:00 hours, I translate
At 15:00 hours, I am in the library
At 19: 00 hours, I do whatever pleases me

For a few years now, I have resided at 19:00 hours.

June 2009

39.

I chased the fly out of the kitchen

He will die tonight

I opened the door onto the yard

And many times I shooed him out with the yellow napkin

And each time he came back in.

In a small saucepan on the stove

I was cooking black-eyed beans

The fly flew toward the pan

Drinking in the steam from the beans

I swatted at him with the napkin

Careful not to hit him-

I don't want his blood on my hands.

He made a turn and hid under the table

I could easily have grabbed him

I was scared I would catch germs and kill the fly as well.

I don't want his death to be at my hand.

I chased him out with the yellow napkin

And quickly closed the door

If I want to have a smoke in the yard

I must remember to shut the door after me

If the fly were smart

He would go and sit on that vent- is it from the boiler?

There is always warm steam there

I don't think he is that intelligent

And I wouldn't know how to explain this to him

And anyway, he is not going to last the winter is he?

November 2010

40.

Then I told myself

Think of more important things

The leaf that fell from the branch

The butterfly that escaped from the bowl of milk

The breeze that suddenly blows at midnight

And the fear of death

June 2013

41.

Does the man who throws himself under a train
Think about what he is wearing?
Does he put on his best clothes?
Or whatever comes to hand?

Maybe he changes clothes again and again
Says to himself: I've just bought this suit
This shirt is a better colour
This sweater doesn't look good on me
These shoes are scuffed

Maybe he puts on an old jacket
Takes out his wallet, and puts it in the drawer
Writes a note leaving everything to his brother
Maybe he smiles once in the mirror
Smokes a cigarette
Looks for the last time at that orange cloud in the left-hand corner of the sky
Opens his mouth to the fine drops of rain
And with the longing of a woman whose husband returns to her from war
Leaps toward the train

April 2014

42.

The thin blue flame
Yawns and falls off the fire
Lies down for a while
Arches and stretches
Gathers strength and rises up dancing

Darkness fills the valley
And over the border, the lights go on

May 2014

43.

Leonardo Alighieri

Beatrice! Beatrice!

Lady of the Virtues!

Fuck your mother!

From behind the dry stone wall

I was eyeing you up

Rubbing yourself against the fig trees

Fuck your mother!

In your long skirt

You pissed on the altar

And smiled at the icon of the Virgin

Fuck your mother!

There was a slit at the back of your dress

To receive Sodom and Gomorrah

I was dying for your middle part

Fuck your mother!

I saw your mother in the heart of the grassland

Hand shading her eyes from the sun

And you grazing the cattle of Helios on the hillside
Rubbing the skin of the milk and red mud onto your lips

At night around the shepherds' fire, hey!

You splashed flame on the mountain

The wind lifted your skirt

And I saw the statue of salt

On the upper floor, on the upper floor

Your maids sing sacred songs

Beauticians, musicians, magicians all pamper you

You stand on the veranda

With a Venetian square spinning beneath your feet

Peddlers, petty thieves and open-shirted poetlings

Fart on the canvases of paintings

Beatrice! Lady of the Virtues!

Tear it all apart...

Cut it open...

Night, with the bleeding throat!

2004

44.

Plain of Paradise

I've been invited to a wedding party in Dasht-e-Behesht

Does this mean anything to you?

I've been invited to a wedding party in Hotel Evin

Does this mean anything to you?

When the waiters in frock coats and white gloves

Place large dishes of lamb and Palou on the table

When the battle of forks and plates breaks out

On the long table as the guests move round

What is happening next door?

On the other side of this wall? Under these watch towers?

2007

45.

I have many things

Glass teapot sugar bowl

Table chair central heating

Gas oven dishwasher fridge-freezer

Socket napkin ashtray

Dining room sitting room kitchen

Staircase bathroom bedroom

Sheet pillow case blanket

Toaster coffee maker ironing board

I don't have human rights

Freedom, a happy heart

November 2009

46.

Behboodi Street

It is a time of mourning

The young are in jail

And the mills are turning with blood

The wine press is empty of red grapes

It is a time of mourning

The young are on the gallows

And the mills are turning with blood

The wine press is empty of white grapes

I crossed over the Ka[^]shmar plain

Heads were scattered in every direction

I passed through the Balkh meadows

Bodies were heaped in Ha[^]moon Lake

I gave vent to a bitter song

The mills were turning with blood

I crossed the river, crossed the desert

I crossed the burnt mountain

I crossed the bolting plain

On the horizon, the sky is blue

In my sleep I saw a bloodied axe

In my sleep I saw a white rope

In my sleep I saw a clean garment

I rolled from one dream into another

Sleep stole my dreams

In my sleep I saw a slaughtered camel

In my sleep I saw a beheaded sheep

A white swan flew from my chest

The night reached its midst and the time for sleep arrived

I tore my clothes

Dishevelled my hair

Took up residence in the alley

From nightfall till the morning, weeping was heard from my desk

January 2010

47.

They say the world is a better place than 50 years ago

Dictatorships have died out in South America

Coups d'état are fewer

Large scale conflicts are rare

Drought and pandemics kill less

Cruelty and grief diminish, joy increases

They count up examples and you are persuaded.

January 2010

48.

I was the gardener here for forty years, Crow

Remember that

Tell them to plant a tree in my memory at this corner

And a red rosebush

In the shade of the tree, a wooden bench

And on the bench, a plaque in my name:

“No one may sit on this bench except for lovers

And nothing may be drunk here except red wine”

Thus said Alireza Abiz

That old warrior

May 2009

49.

The doors of the house open and we rush inside

I light a cigarette to blow smoke in the eyes of a middle-aged man

An elderly lady appears on the veranda

Like a tightrope walker I am unbalanced

On the building site opposite, workers are carrying bricks

A teenage boy siphons petrol from a motorcycle

Black smoke rises from burning bins

Hold my hand and don't let go

Don't let go of my hand in the dark back alleys

January 2010

50.

I would like to live long enough

To go back one day to Mashhad

To 13/1 Koohsangi Street

To knock at the little window

For the green-hatted Sayyed to open the door

To go in

Sit facing the wall in the room to the left

See ‘this too shall pass’ on the wall

And while filling in sheet after sheet

For once to turn around and without permission

Look into your eyes!

January 2010

51.

I would like to live long enough
To go back one day to Mashhad
To 13/1 Koohsangi Street
To see you come out of the gate
In the same dark glasses
See the corner of your eye
Which looks as if it has been sutured
To follow your car to your door
See you put the key in the lock
And go into the house
Greet your wife
Pick up your child, ask: what's for dinner?

I would like there to be a full-length mirror in your bedroom
So that at the exact moment you turned off the light
My eyes looked at you through the mirror!

January 2010

52.

I would like to live long enough

To go back one day to Mashhad

To 13/1 Koohsangi Street

To knock at the little window

For the green-hatted Sayyed to open the door

To enter

To see all of you in the dining hall

Eating and telling jokes

Each of your faces unique

One of you has a sick wife

And another has lost his father

Someone's daughter has a new suitor

Another's son has been admitted to college

A neighbour's child has fallen down the stairs

And you've bought a new TV

I like to watch you

And look into your eyes.

January 2010

53.

When I first saw ‘The Thirty Nine Steps’

My wife was not dead

There was no sign of the Green Rebellion

I was young

June 2013

54.

Last night in my dreams I composed a poem

Like every night

A translucent poem which shone upon me like a prism

I woke up and wrote down a line:

A dancing wall appeared before me

“A dancing wall appeared before me”

“A dancing wall”? Why “dancing”?

And why did it appear before me in English?

What was wrong with the Persian?

What was marvellous about *A dancing wall*?

I who am a Persian poet

Like the Persian more

There are plenty of walls in my memory

In my Persian memory

I was also a Persian poet in my dreams

I was afraid to write in my diary

I was afraid my roommate Ali Mostafayi

Might betray me to the Intelligence Service

I was afraid they might take me to Koohsangi Street

To number 13 slash 1

February 2014

55.

Until this moment I had not thought
About the pressure gauge across from me
But I have thought a lot
About Breyten Breytenbach
And about his apology for his brilliant poem
To which he appended a list
Of those who had lost their lives
As well as the name of their murderer
“Dear Prime Minister,
I honestly apologize.
Writing that poem was unjustified
As was its publication”

So, sincerely, to the dictator
Apologized Breyten Breytenbach, poet
July 2014

56.

I always write that which is not
That which is defeats me
I store it in the mind's attic
Beneath odds and ends of memories
Where I can't see it
Where it can't easily come to mind
Where it can rest and rot
In the soul's dark depths

That which is is too terrifying
To wear the garment of the word

July 2014

57.

Iftar

The girl opposite looked like my cousin

We sat on the white cloth

I was offered dates and took one

Allah-u Akbar Allah-u Akbar

Azan came to a close and Iftar began

Allah-u Akbar Allah-u Akbar

On the lips of those being shot

And on the lips of those doing the shooting

July 2014

Appendix A: Notes on censorship of individual poems

Page 115. The line ‘in your Israeli-made sleeping bag’ was unacceptable to the censor. I changed it to ‘in your feather sleeping bag’

Page 125. This poem was fully rejected by the censor. I replaced the words ‘inside his pants’, ‘the hole of his arse’ and ‘his balls’ with ‘...’. I also added the title of ‘Last word by Mullah Omar in Afghanistan’ so that it may appear that the poem is written about the Taliban government in Afghanistan and has nothing to do with Iran. The original poem was untitled.

Page 134. The line ‘nursing a glass a beer’ was unacceptable to the censor. I was forced to delete this line.

Page 152. The lines ‘ And beside it, the poster for ‘The 400 Blows’ | which I saw at the cinema last Thursday’ were crossed out by the censor.

Pages 158-9. This poem was published in *Maniha* website which is a website for underground publication of Persian poetry based in Sweden. It was also published along with the German translation and audio in Lyrikline.org. Written in 2004, it was never published in Iran and there is no prospect of publishing this poem in Iran under the current regime.

Page 160. The last two lines were ordered to be deleted. I decided to remove the entire poem instead.

Page 161. The last two lines were ordered to be deleted. I decided to remove the entire poem instead.

Pages 162-3. The entire poem was ordered to be removed.

Page 164. The entire poem was ordered to be removed.

Page 165. The last four lines were ordered to be deleted. I decided to remove the entire poem instead.

Appendix B: Explanatory Notes on Individual Poems

Pages 114-5. The setting of this poem is Kurdistan, Iran during the early 1980s. Kurdish partisans including Komoleh Party were fighting the government forces. Palanga^n is a village on the foothills of Mount Shahoo. Dervish sects have a strong presence in this area. Ghusle Janabat is a ritual washing of the entire body by a Muslim after ejaculation.

Pages 120-1. The first line has an allusion to verse 28, Chapter 13 (Al Rad'd (Thunder)) in the Koran which reads: "*Those who have believed and whose hearts are assured by the remembrance of Allah. Unquestionably, by the remembrance of Allah hearts are assured.*"

Page 139. The title is a quotation from Soren Kierkegaard

Page 140. The title is a reference to the painting by Paul Klee

Page 160. Dasht-e-Behesht (Plain of Paradise) is the name of a set of banqueting halls adjacent to Evin Prison in Tehran. Hotel Evin (Evin Hotel) is a 5-star hotel across from Evin Prison.

Pages 162-3. Behboodi Street is the name of a side street derived from Azadi Street in Tehran. It was the sight of violent clashes between protesters and the riot police in 2009 uprisings

Pages 167, 168, 169 and 171. No.13/1 Koohsangi Street is the address of one of the offices of Intelligence Department in Mashhad, centre of Khorasan Province.

Page 147: There is a special type of beard which the Iranians associate with government officials and technocrats of the Islamic regime as well as the intelligence officers. It is usually well-trimmed and kept at the minimum expected by their religious belief. The English translation of this poem was published in *In Protest, 150 Poems for Human Rights*, University of London, 2013

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