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Exile, Memory, and Gender in Marjan Kamali's *The Stationery Shop*: Diasporic Identity and Cultural Translation

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Abstract:
Marjan Kamali's *The Stationery Shop* explores the emotional and psychological complexities of the Iranian diaspora through the character of Roya, whose life is defined by displacement, exile, and the longing for a lost homeland. This article examines how the novel engages with key themes in diaspora studies, such as exile, memory, language, and gender. Through the lens of exile theory, Kamali portrays the fragmentation of identity experienced by diasporic individuals, focusing on Roya's negotiation of cultural belonging in both Iran and America. The article also investigates how gender roles and familial expectations shape Roya's journey, particularly her struggles with the silence and suppression of her personal history. Additionally, it explores the role of language as both a means of survival and a site of cultural translation, where the tension between Persian and English reflects deeper emotional and cultural rifts. By drawing on theoretical frameworks from Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, and Svetlana Boym, this article situates *The Stationery Shop* within broader discourses of memory, nostalgia, and postcolonial identity, highlighting the novel's contribution to contemporary diasporic literature.

Keywords: Diaspora, Exile, Memory, Gender, Cultural Translation, Iranian Identity, Nostalgia, Language, Migration, Trauma, Postcolonial Literature

Introduction

The literature of diaspora offers profound insights into the complex processes of migration, identity formation, memory, and belonging. Within this genre, Iranian diasporic literature has emerged as a powerful vehicle for articulating the multifaceted experiences of displacement, particularly in the aftermath of significant political ruptures in Iran's modern

history. Marjan Kamali's *The Stationery Shop* (2019) is a poignant narrative that captures the emotional and cultural landscapes of the Iranian diaspora, weaving personal histories with national trauma. Through its deeply affective portrayal of lost love, migration, and the enduring influence of memory, the novel not only humanizes the diasporic experience but also interrogates the consequences of political upheaval on individual lives.

Iran has undergone profound transformations over the past century, most notably the CIA-backed coup d'état in 1953, which reinstated Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, and the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic. These political events precipitated waves of emigration, particularly to Western countries such as the United States. Scholars have noted that Iranian diaspora literature frequently grapples with themes of rupture, nostalgia, and cultural negotiation (Talajooy and Karim 2). Kamali's novel is situated within this literary tradition, yet it also brings a distinctly personal dimension to the genre by centering on Roya, a young Iranian woman whose journey from Tehran to the suburbs of Boston parallels the dislocation of many Iranian immigrants during the second half of the twentieth century.

The Stationery Shop uses the titular shop as both a literal and metaphorical space—a sanctuary of books and poetry that symbolizes a lost homeland and a bygone sense of stability. Through Roya's transnational journey, Kamali reflects on the tensions of cultural hybridity, the persistence of memory across generations, and the longing for a place that exists more vividly in the mind than in reality. As Azade Seyhan asserts, diasporic narratives often "construct imagined homelands that mediate between the past and the present" (Seyhan 7), and Kamali's work is no exception. The novel's nonlinear structure, interwoven with flashbacks and moments of cultural recollection, underscores the fragmented temporality that often characterizes the diasporic condition.

This article argues that *The Stationery Shop* articulates the emotional and psychological dimensions of the Iranian diaspora through its engagement with themes of displacement, nostalgia, gender, and cultural identity. By doing so, Kamali's novel not only contributes to the broader discourse of exile and belonging but also invites readers to consider how diasporic literature serves as a space for healing, resistance, and reconnection.

Historical and Political Context

To understand the diasporic dimensions of *The Stationery Shop*, it is essential to situate the narrative within the political history of twentieth-century Iran—a history marked by colonial interference, authoritarian modernization, and revolutionary upheaval. The novel begins in 1953 Tehran, a year of enormous political significance. In August of that year, Iran's

democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, was overthrown in a coup orchestrated by the CIA and British intelligence in an operation known as Ajax (Kinzer 8). The coup marked the end of Iran's brief experiment with democratic governance and reinstated the Shah, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who subsequently ruled with increasing authoritarianism.

Kamali deftly anchors her story in this moment of national rupture. The budding romance between Roya and Bahman is shattered by the chaos of the coup, symbolizing the broader disruption of lives and dreams caused by geopolitical machinations. The political backdrop is not merely ornamental—it serves as a catalyst for the novel's central narrative of displacement and loss. As Mohanty argues, postcolonial and diasporic literature often uses personal relationships to reflect the intrusions of the state into private life (Mohanty 17). Roya's forced migration to the United States is, thus, not only a personal tragedy but also a microcosmic reflection of larger migratory patterns triggered by political violence and instability.

Following the 1953 coup and especially after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, significant numbers of Iranians left the country, seeking refuge in Western nations. The United States became a particularly prominent destination, with many Iranian immigrants settling in California and Massachusetts. These migrants often faced the double burden of cultural assimilation and political alienation—particularly after the U.S. Embassy hostage crisis in 1979, which created hostile public sentiment toward Iranians in the U.S. (Mobasher 12). *The Stationery Shop* addresses this duality subtly but poignantly: while Roya establishes a life in the U.S. that includes higher education, a career, and a family, the emotional weight of exile permeates her experience. Her longing for Iran is never fully resolved, and her identity remains split between two geographies.

Kamali's treatment of diaspora is thus inseparable from the political currents that have shaped Iranian history. As Hamid Naficy observes, exilic and diasporic Iranian narratives are often "structured around a poetics of rupture and longing" (Naficy 17). Roya's story exemplifies this poetics. The Stationery Shop in Tehran becomes a lost utopia, a symbol of everything that has been interrupted or denied—not only by time and fate but by the deeper forces of political transformation.

Diaspora and Displacement

At the heart of *The Stationery Shop* lies a narrative of dislocation—both literal and metaphorical. Marjan Kamali uses the trajectory of her protagonist, Roya, to explore how diaspora entails not only physical movement but also a profound sense of emotional

fragmentation. Roya's sudden emigration from Iran in the wake of political unrest reflects the experience of many Iranian migrants whose journeys were shaped not by opportunity but by rupture. Her displacement is not merely geographic; it marks a temporal and psychological severance from the life she might have led in Tehran.

The thwarted romance between Roya and Bahman serves as a powerful metaphor for this loss. Their relationship, abruptly ended by the 1953 coup and the interference of Bahman's mother, is irrevocably tied to the political currents that redefined their nation. As Roya reflects later in life, "We had been twenty when the world had turned on us. Love is not always enough. Sometimes it is the timing, the circumstances, the choices we make in the moment that shape our destinies forever" (Kamali 262). This passage captures the emotional consequences of political displacement—how personal histories are derailed by historical events beyond one's control.

The titular stationery shop, owned by the gentle and poetic Mr. Fakhri, emerges as a space of solace and possibility within a city on the brink of upheaval. It is here that Roya and Bahman first encounter each other, exchanging not only books and poetry but also visions of a shared future. The shop's rich sensory and cultural ambiance—described as a place that "smelled of jasmine and old paper and possibilities" (Kamali 15)—serves as a sanctuary from the encroaching chaos. Yet its destruction following the coup mirrors the collapse of Roya's dreamscape and the irretrievable loss of her youth in Iran. The shop, and all it represents, is lost both physically and symbolically, echoing Avtar Brah's assertion that "diaspora space is inhabited not only by those who have migrated but equally by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous" (Brah 208). For Roya, that space collapses, forcing her into a life where memory must stand in for physical return.

Once in the United States, Roya confronts the emotional toll of displacement in a more intimate, internalized way. While she builds a new life—marrying an American man, pursuing higher education, and eventually raising a family—her diasporic experience is marked by a subtle estrangement from her environment. The dissonance between her external adaptation and internal dislocation is illustrated when she reflects: "Sometimes, in the quiet of her suburban house, she would think of Tehran's bustling streets, the scent of freshly baked noon, the warmth of her father's voice, and it would hurt like an old bruise pressed too hard" (Kamali 144). Kamali's prose captures the ache of cultural displacement, showing how memory functions not only as comfort but also as a source of unresolved grief.

This tension resonates with Khachig Tölölyan's framing of diaspora as "a state of being that reflects a continual negotiation between the here and the elsewhere, the now and the then" (Tölölyan 13). Roya's diasporic identity is shaped by this negotiation: while she integrates into American society, she remains haunted by the cultural, linguistic, and emotional dimensions of the life she left behind. Her dreams are suspended between two worlds—neither fully Iranian nor wholly American.

Moreover, Kamali draws attention to the limitations of belonging in a host country. Roya's silence about her past, even within her marriage to Walter, points to the emotional labor required to navigate bicultural existence. She conceals key parts of her identity, a practice many migrants adopt as a form of emotional self-protection or survival. Walter's eventual discovery of Roya's past prompts her to confess, "I compartmentalized my life. I put my pain in a box and tried to never open it" (Kamali 270). This admission reveals the long-term psychological impact of migration and the way that diasporic subjects often suppress parts of themselves to move forward.

Ultimately, *The Stationery Shop* reveals how displacement is not a finite event but a sustained condition. It affects not only one's geographic orientation but also emotional and narrative continuity. Kamali's portrayal of Roya's interrupted love, her fraught assimilation, and her lifelong negotiation with memory illustrates that diaspora is not merely a demographic category but a lived experience of disjunction, longing, and resilience.

Memory and Nostalgia

Memory, in *The Stationery Shop*, is not a static recollection of the past but a dynamic, often agonizing force that shapes Roya's identity in exile. Marjan Kamali's narrative foregrounds memory as a site of emotional continuity—bridging the divide between the homeland and the hostland—and as a mechanism through which diasporic individuals make sense of loss. In diasporic literature, memory often serves to anchor the self in a past that resists erasure, even as the present demands adaptation. As Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" suggests, memory can persist across generations, creating "connections to the past that are not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (Hirsch 22). In Kamali's novel, this investment in memory is evident not only in Roya's own reflections but in how her life becomes shaped by the absence and silence surrounding her youthful romance and departure from Iran.

Roya's memory of her early life in Tehran—especially the days spent in the titular stationery shop—is deeply infused with nostalgia. Nostalgia, however, is not treated as simple

sentimentalism but as a complex affective mode that conveys both pleasure and pain. Svetlana Boym's distinction between "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia is particularly useful here. Restorative nostalgia attempts to reconstruct the lost home, often idealizing the past, whereas reflective nostalgia "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging" (Boym xviii). Roya engages in reflective nostalgia: she neither seeks to physically return to Iran nor imagines reclaiming her past life, but she continuously re-examines it, trying to make sense of its ruptures.

This reflective stance is powerfully rendered when Roya admits, "I never forgot. Not really. I buried it somewhere deep, but it lived in me—in the questions I asked, in the silences I carried, in the choices I made" (Kamali 219). Her life is structured by the silent weight of memory, and Kamali uses these silences to show how trauma—particularly the trauma of exile—resides in the unsaid. The memory of Bahman, too, lingers not as a figure of romantic idealism, but as a representation of a life trajectory permanently deferred. Even in her old age, Roya's return to the memory of Bahman and her youth in Tehran is not a nostalgic indulgence, but a necessary act of narrative reconstruction—a way to stitch together a coherent identity fractured by displacement.

The role of material objects in the novel—books, letters, and the ruins of the stationery shop—further reflects how memory and nostalgia are embodied. These objects serve as mnemonic devices, grounding Roya's fragmented past in physical form. The rediscovery of a letter that Bahman had written but she never received catalyzes the resolution of their story. It is a moment that both confirms her memories and revises them, underscoring the instability of memory itself. As Michael Rothberg argues, memory is not a passive archive but "a field of contestation, negotiation, and possibility" (Rothberg 3). Kamali thus portrays memory as both a burden and a resource—one that offers a measure of emotional truth, even if it cannot resolve the disjunction of exile.

In this way, *The Stationery Shop* positions memory and nostalgia not as retreats into the past but as vital components of diasporic subjectivity. They are what enable Roya to understand herself, to mourn what was lost, and to live meaningfully in the present. Kamali's novel invites readers to see memory not as an impediment to healing, but as its precondition.

Gender and Family Dynamics in the Diaspora

Marjan Kamali's *The Stationery Shop* offers a compelling examination of gender and family dynamics within both pre-revolutionary Iran and the Iranian-American diaspora, illuminating how traditional expectations, patriarchal structures, and intergenerational tensions are negotiated and, at times, contested by women. Through the character of Roya, Kamali illustrates how women's lives are often structured by familial obligation, cultural

silence, and gendered limitations—but also how they navigate these forces with resilience and resistance.

In Iran, Roya's budding relationship with Bahman is not only shaped by their own desires but tightly regulated by the social structures around them—most notably by Bahman's mother, who represents the controlling force of traditional family honor. Bahman's mother, driven by fear of political instability and societal judgment, intervenes to dissolve the couple's union, asserting that "a girl like Roya was not suitable for her son, especially not in times like these" (Kamali 198). This moment encapsulates how personal autonomy, especially for women, is often sacrificed in favor of family reputation and stability, particularly during times of national crisis. Roya's eventual exile thus becomes a gendered displacement—she loses not only her homeland, but the possibility of self-determination within it.

In the diaspora, Roya continues to experience the lingering effects of patriarchal expectations, but they take on new and more subtle forms. Although her marriage to Walter appears egalitarian on the surface, Roya's silence about her past reflects an internalized belief that her traumas—and by extension, her identity—are burdensome. This silence is not just personal but deeply cultural, indicative of what Leila Ahmed describes as the "gendered script of exile," in which women's stories are often muted or erased in the retelling of migration narratives (Ahmed 168). Roya's unwillingness to share her full history with her family can be read as a consequence of this script, in which emotional survival requires concealment.

Kamali also highlights the gendered transmission of cultural memory and trauma through intergenerational dynamics. Roya's interactions with her sister Zari, and later with her own children, show how women often bear the burden of cultural preservation and emotional caretaking within diasporic families. Despite being worlds apart, Roya and Zari's correspondence reflects the emotional labor that sisters and mothers perform to sustain familial connection across borders. In this way, *The Stationery Shop* aligns with theorists like Chandra Talpade Mohanty, who argues that women in the diaspora are frequently positioned as "cultural carriers," expected to uphold traditions even as they are subject to them (Mohanty 87).

However, Kamali does not portray Roya solely as a passive subject of gendered and familial pressures. Over time, she asserts agency in subtle but significant ways: by pursuing her education, by raising her children with values of empathy and openness, and ultimately by confronting her past through her reunion with Bahman. This final act of emotional

reconciliation signifies not just personal closure, but a reclamation of narrative authority. Roya tells her story on her own terms, refusing to let it be defined by others' decisions.

Thus, *The Stationery Shop* intricately weaves gender into its diasporic framework, showing how women's lives in exile are shaped by both the constraints and creative negotiations of familial and cultural forces. Roya's journey affirms that in the face of displacement and silence, female agency endures—quietly, but powerfully.

Language and Cultural Translation

In *The Stationery Shop*, language operates not merely as a tool of communication but as a repository of culture, emotion, and identity. For diasporic individuals, particularly those who have migrated from non-Western contexts to the West, language becomes a terrain of negotiation—between past and present, origin and assimilation, memory and forgetting. Marjan Kamali foregrounds this linguistic tension through Roya's shifting relationship with Persian and English, exploring how language mediates the diasporic experience of belonging and alienation.

Roya's early life in Tehran is rich with the lyrical cadences of Persian poetry and literature—texts exchanged in the stationery shop and woven into her romantic and intellectual identity. The poetry of Rumi, Hafez, and Forough Farrokhzad frames her emotional world, offering both cultural grounding and philosophical depth. For example, when Bahman gives Roya a volume of Hafez's poetry, she treasures it not only for its literary beauty but for the intimacy and shared cultural heritage it represents: "She traced the words on the page as if they could speak to her, as if they understood the ache inside her chest" (Kamali 54). In these moments, Persian functions as a language of emotion and connection, encoding a worldview that is profoundly different from the pragmatic and often dispassionate tone of English that she later adopts in America.

Once in the United States, Roya's relationship with language becomes more fractured. English is the language of opportunity and survival, but it also distances her from her emotional roots. This tension is especially clear in her interactions with Walter and her children, where certain expressions, idioms, or cultural references from her Iranian past cannot be easily translated. The emotional resonance of Persian poetry, for instance, becomes "untranslatable," not only linguistically but affectively. As Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak argues in her work on translation and subalternity, "language is not everything, but it is a lot" (Spivak 179). In *The Stationery Shop*, the inability to fully translate the nuances of Persian into English symbolizes the broader difficulty of rendering diasporic subjectivity legible within Western frameworks.

This problem of cultural translation is further compounded by Roya's silences—both imposed and self-chosen. Her decision not to share the details of her past with her American family reflects a kind of linguistic displacement: she lacks the vocabulary, or perhaps the emotional space, to tell her story in a language that does not hold the same connotations as Persian. As she puts it late in the novel, "Some things don't translate. Not into English. Not even into time" (Kamali 266). This statement encapsulates the diasporic dilemma: that translation is not just a matter of words, but of context, memory, and emotion.

At the same time, Kamali suggests that language is also a site of possibility. Roya becomes a translator of experience, bridging two worlds for her children, who grow up largely American but remain connected—however distantly—to their mother's Iranian past. Her use of English does not erase her Iranian identity but reshapes it, allowing her to occupy a space of cultural hybridity. This aligns with Homi Bhabha's theory of the "third space," in which cultural meaning is produced not through assimilation or resistance alone, but through the negotiation of difference (Bhabha 55). Roya inhabits this third space, crafting an identity that is neither wholly Iranian nor fully American, but uniquely diasporic.

Through its nuanced portrayal of language and cultural translation, *The Stationery Shop* underscores the complexities of voice, silence, and self-expression in the diasporic condition. Kamali reveals that language, far from being a transparent medium, is a contested and affectively charged terrain—one that both constrains and enables the articulation of identity across borders.

Conclusion

Marjan Kamali's *The Stationery Shop* offers a rich and emotionally layered portrayal of the Iranian diaspora, interweaving themes of exile, memory, language, and gender to construct a nuanced narrative of displacement and resilience. At the heart of the novel lies Roya's story—not merely as an individual separated from her homeland, but as a diasporic subject negotiating multiple histories, silences, and cultural identities. The novel resists the linear trajectories often found in immigrant narratives, choosing instead to dwell in the affective complexities of nostalgia, trauma, and unresolved longing.

Through the lens of exile theory, Kamali renders the psychological weight of forced migration palpable. Roya's emotional landscape illustrates Edward Said's assertion that exile is both "an experience of discontinuity" and a "privileged insight" into the tensions of belonging and estrangement (Said 173). Her fragmented memory and deep silences exemplify the exilic condition as a state of both internal rupture and narrative opacity. Yet *The Stationery Shop* does not succumb to despair; instead, it proposes that exile, while deeply

painful, can also foster forms of emotional strength, cultural hybridity, and eventual reconciliation.

The novel's attention to gender further complicates its diasporic politics. Roya's story foregrounds the ways in which women in diaspora must navigate not only political exile but familial and patriarchal constraints, often bearing the burden of memory and cultural continuity. As Chandra Mohanty and Leila Ahmed have emphasized, diasporic women frequently inhabit a dual space of cultural preservation and resistance. Roya's ability to sustain her identity while also redefining it across generations affirms the subtle power of diasporic female agency.

Moreover, Kamali's treatment of language and cultural translation highlights the disjunction between what can be said and what must remain unsaid in the diasporic condition. Roya's shifting linguistic reality—from the poetic elegance of Persian to the pragmatic utility of English—marks a transformation not only of speech but of identity itself. This linguistic negotiation situates the novel within Homi Bhabha's "third space," a conceptual zone where hybrid identities are formed and cultural meaning is reimagined (Bhabha 55).

Ultimately, *The Stationery Shop* contributes meaningfully to the canon of diasporic literature by offering a distinctly Iranian-American perspective, while simultaneously engaging universal questions about love, loss, memory, and identity. Kamali's work challenges the reader to consider diaspora not simply as a geographic or demographic fact, but as a profound existential condition—one in which past and present, self and other, silence and speech are constantly in dialogue.

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