

OUR HOUSE

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**A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**GRADUATE PROGRAM IN FILM
YORK UNIVERSITY
TORONTO, ONTARIO**

May 2019

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ABSTRACT

Our House is a short film about Anahita, an Iranian refugee in Toronto, who runs into the man who brutally murdered her parents at their home in Tehran years ago. The back story embodies Anahita's attempts in the past to convince the authorities to reject this man's application for immigration. This man had nonetheless been admitted to Canada, and obtained Canadian Citizenship. The back story also encompasses Anahita's best efforts over the years to put the past behind her and to build a new life for herself with her Canadian husband and daughter. The encounter which provides the inciting incident, however, renews Anahita's tragedy and re-awakens her grief. Failed by the system, she decides to take justice into her own hands, which leads to considerable loss to her new life and her family.

Aside from engaging the audience emotionally, the story calls for the Canadian government's reevaluation of its immigration policies regarding instruments of corrupt governments, by bringing attention to the decades-long ignorance and/or deal-making methods embedded in the Canadian immigration policies that have produced horrific socio-political circumstances for immigrants, which remain for the most part unacknowledged. In other words, the film offers a critique of the power structure that these policies represent thorough the narrative that reveals the tragedies of these Faustian pacts between oppressive hegemonic forces.

Dedicated to

all Iranian Political Prisoners

living or murdered

free or in captivity

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The making of *Our House* would not have been possible without the guidance and support of:

- my sister **Mina Sophia Reiman**, who stood behind me in every step of this program and gave me the courage to push forward;
- **my mother** for her tireless helping hand and enormous support;
- my supervisor, **Professor Howard Wiseman**, whose guidance, support, and advice was invaluable in completing my thesis project; and for setting an example of excellence, as a mentor, an instructor, and a writer;
- my reader, **Professor Laurence Green**, for his generosity, benevolence, and patience throughout the evolution of the script; for his invaluable guidance and input; and for his constructive criticism and the enlightening discourse that truly refined and transformed this project;
- **Professor Amnon Buchbinder** for his lessons of wisdom as a storyteller, his encouragement, and because he believed in this project from the beginning.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Concerning the Label of Emigrant

I always found the name false which they gave us: Emigrants.
That means those who leave their country. But we
Did not leave, of our own free will
Choosing another land. Nor did we enter
Into a land, to stay there, if possible forever.
Merely, we fled. We are driven out, banned.
Not a home, but an exile, shall the land be that took us in.
Restlessly we wait thus, as near as we can to the frontier
Awaiting the day of return, every smallest alteration
Observing beyond the boundary, zealously asking
Every arrival, forgetting nothing and giving up nothing
And also not forgiving anything which happened, forgiving nothing
Ah, the silence of the Sound does not deceive us! We hear the shrieks
From their camp even here. Yes, we ourselves
Are almost like rumors of crimes, which escaped
Over the frontier. Every one of us
Who with torn shoes walks through the crowd
Bears witness to the shame which now defiles our land.
But none of us
Will stay here. The final word
Is yet unspoken.

- Bertolt Brecht (1937)

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A. Exile

We often think and speak of exile as if the term referred to a single particular circumstance: having been barred from entering one's native land. But the term subsumes far more than discarding Napoléon on Saint Helena: exile also refers to emigration that arises from ruthless and unyielding social and political phenomena that effectively and legally compel decampment. These forms of exile are often a function of various forms of local, national, or regional threats to one's life, freedom, and/or livelihood, or that of one's family. However, unlike the exile of the heads of states, which is a political or legal adjudication in cases of particular individuals, social and political circumstances usually lead to exile *en masse*; which arguably must have far different social and human connotations than the exile of an ousted head of state: these two forms of exile produce vastly different human experiences. What is more, the nature of the emigration-inducing phenomena itself introduces numerous variables to the human experience equation; for instance the history, culture, and psychology of the affected group; the regional and international geopolitical interests; the nature of the phenomenon (*e.g.*, famine, epidemic diseases, and tribal or civil conflicts); dictatorial methods (intellectual suppression/censorship or decapitation/removal of opposition).

These and many other factors in endless combinations, provide a very complex social and political basis for voluntary exile; rendering exile a word that describes far too many varied human experiences to be understood or applied without – at least- some qualifier, however general: social exile, political exile, and intellectual exile, for instance, are internationally recognized forms of exile.

In addition to this generic usage of the term, exile is also frequently confused with other – albeit at times overlapping—phenomena such as emigration, asylum, and refuge; and therefore, frequently misappropriated.

The confusion over the meaning and usage of the term “exile,” should not be attributed to contention, social indifference, or even negligence entirely. In short, the term “exile” is commonly ill-defined, slighted, and even misused. In fact the term has been in such fast and loose usage that its precise meaning is virtually unknown.¹ As such, it is necessary for the purposes of this thesis, that this term be clearly defined. Exile means expulsion from one’s native land, either by an authoritative decree or by force of circumstances. Since the beginning of the last century the word has started to suggest a specific form of political emigration and has been used as synonymous to refugee and political immigrant.² However, in contrast to those who choose to migrate to another country for economic reasons and in pursuit of “a better life,” exiles do not leave their native land by choice, but are effectively expelled from the society and stripped from the basic rights of citizenship: the right to speak freely, to exercise their religion, or to be thinking, opinioned entities. In other words, the exiles do not *leave* their homeland; they *escape* from it. Escape from religious and political persecution is a sweet lullaby compared to the other tales: covert assassinations of families in backyards; mass executions without trial; rape, torture, and murder of political prisoners in dungeons; and massive ethnic cleansings and castration do not leave the exiles with the choice of remaining: exiles must run to stay alive.

¹ “Exile” is an ancient concept, originating in a variety of political practices aimed at punishing transgressions. The term remains in common usage now, but it has become so loose as to virtually be without meaning....What even the “conventional” sense of the term means, however, is not entirely clear. *Exile in America: Political Expulsion and the Limits of Liberal Government*. https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/bitstream/handle/10822/760863/McGinnis_georgetown_0076D_12992.pdf?sequence=1.

² Renato Camurri, *The Exile Experience Reconsidered: A Comparative Perspective in European Cultural Migration During the Interwar Period-Exile and Expatriation* (2014), <https://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/6804>.

As Renato Camurri puts it “[t]he meaning of exile essentially indicates the experience of fracture, of displacement from the motherland, of alienation lived as a loss, an injury.”³ He goes on to quote Adorno that a life in exile is “a mutilated life.”⁴ Similarly, Edward Said, in his widely admired essay, *Reflections on Exiles*, writes, “the achievements of exiles are permanently undermined by the loss of something left beyond forever.” He then adds,

[e]xiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past. They generally do not have armies or states, although they are often in search of them. Exiles feel, therefore, an urgent need to reconstitute their broken lives, usually by choosing to see themselves as part of a triumphant ideology or a restored people.⁵

B. Migration of Iranians to Canada

It is reported that during the 1950s, less than a hundred Iranians migrated to Canada each year. The number had grown to only 600 by the late 70s, most of which were motivated by economic or professional reasons. Up to that point in time, the rate of Iranians’ migration to Canada was substantially lower than that of other groups. After the establishment of the Islamic Republic government in the early 1980s – following the 1979 revolt that replaced the monarchy with an authoritarian theocracy— the number of Iranian migrants to Canada grew exponentially to thousands per year. This pace was sustained through the 1990s. While a fraction of the Iranian migration to Canada was still attributed to economic motives, the overwhelming majority of Iranian migrants were fleeing the country for political reasons: the Islamic regime’s greatly

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life* (1954), 27.

⁵ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (2003), 47-64.

intolerant system; together with its appetite and readiness for the imposition of excessive punishments at the slightest sign of opposition.⁶

Considering the relentless and deadly suppression of Iranians by the post-revolution government since the 1980s, ascribing the relocation of Iranians to Canada⁷ in the past 40 years to a garden-variety form of immigration is a denial of the truth about Iranian exile after the 1979 revolution, and their experience as exiles. The Iranians exiled in Canada often live in close proximity to the very person(s) who committed the horrific crimes against them and their families that forced them into exile, and can come face to face with these adversaries in their otherwise picture perfect neighborhoods in Toronto or Vancouver.

The astonishing pace of the integration and Canadianization of the Iranians in Canada, together with their staggering advantages in education, relative to the average Canadian population⁸, would have made a perfect migration symbiosis; sadly, however, the Canadian immigration system seems to have failed to uphold its end of the bargain and to protect the population in return; and instead has been letting both the rabbit and the wolf through its fences, and into the loving arms of mother Canada.

⁶ Vahid Grousi, *Iranians in Canada: A Statistical Analysis*, (Feb. 2005), <https://www.iranian.com/News/2005/June/IraniansCanada.pdf>.

⁷ According to the 2016 census, 210,000 self-identified as dual citizen Iranian-Canadians. *See* <https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=PR&Code1=01&Geo2=PR&Code2=01&Data=Count&SearchText=Canada&SearchType=Begin&SearchPR=01&B1=Ethnic+origin&TABID=1>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

C. What is the Canadian Government Doing Wrong?

This thesis proposes that in its policies and treatment of the Iranian exiles, the Canadian government:

- 1) fails to take into account several critical factors including: a) the (often horrific) social and political circumstances that caused one to flee her country; b) the enormous affliction caused by the act of abandoning one's country and countrymen; and c) the unimaginable trauma and hardships of the journey itself;
- 2) fails to note that the phenomenon of the Iranian exile exists on a historical continuum that is preceded by a monumental event: a disturbance to the balance of the old country and its takeover by a totalitarian regime;
- 3) does not consider or understand the trans-national nature of this experience; namely the relationships with the country of origin complexities and significance of the relationship they maintain with their countries of origin, in this case Iran,
- 4) does not seem to be aware of and/or concerned with the building of exiles' social spaces⁹, and "interdependent microcosms which constitute an 'other' society, composed of so called "hétérotopies." (See Foucault, 1994, 752-62).¹⁰
- 5) does not realize or chooses to disregard the importance of public acknowledgment and symbolic recognition of the experience of immigrants; and
- 6) adopts a narration of the experience of the immigrants in their new country which over-emphasizes immigrants' prosperity and greater quality of life in their new home country, exaggerates their access to opportunities, and perpetuates the commonly held idea that immigrants are fortunate, merely, for being in this country; as if residing in Canada alone, invariably establishes one's happiness.

⁹ See Pierre Bourdieu, *Social Spaces and Symbolic Power* (1989).

¹⁰ <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00746742/document>.

III. HISTORICAL BACKGROUNDS

A. Human Rights in Iran

Iran has an appalling human rights record. After China, Iran has ranked second with the highest per-capita rate of executions in the world for at least last three years ¹¹; engages in systematic persecution, torture, rape, and killing of political prisoners. and the beatings and killings of civilians. Iran's violations of the norms of international human rights include disproportionate and harsh penalties for crimes, excessive punishment of "victimless crimes" such as fornication and homosexuality, execution of minors, restrictions on freedom of speech and the freedom of the press (including imprisonment, torture, and killing of journalists), restrictions on freedom of religion (especially persecution and execution of members of the Bahá'í faith), gender equality in Iran's Constitution, and violation of the rights of persons with disabilities.

The Iranian government discriminates against religious minorities, including Sunni Muslims; restricts and limits cultural expression and activities of the country's ethnic minorities such as the Azeri, the Kurds, the Arabs, and the Baluch; and maintains a de facto second-class citizenship treatment of immigrants. Iranian women face discrimination in personal status matters related to clothing (compulsive hijab), marriage, divorce, inheritance, and child custody. A virgin woman needs her male guardian's approval for marriage regardless of her age, and Iranian women cannot pass on their nationality to their foreign-born spouses or their children. A married woman may not obtain a passport or travel outside the country without the written

¹¹ Amnesty International, *The Death Penalty in 2017: Facts and Figures* (April 12, 2018) <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/death-penalty-facts-and-figures-2017> ; see also <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/04/death-penalty-2016-facts-and-figures>; <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/04/death-penalty-2015-facts-and-figures>.

permission of her husband. Under the civil code, a husband is accorded the right to choose the place of living and can prevent his wife from having certain occupations if he deems them against “family values.”¹²

Laws and policies that discriminate against women interfere with Iranian women’s right to work. Women confront an array of restrictions on their ability to travel, prohibitions on entering certain jobs, and an absence of basic legal protections which results in marginalizing women in the economy, such that they constitute only 16 percent of the workforce. The rate of unemployment for women is 20 percent, twice that of men.

Authorities prevent girls and women from attending sporting events, including men’s soccer or volleyball.

In October 2012 the United Nations Human Rights office stated Iranian authorities had engaged in a “severe clampdown” on journalists and human rights advocates.¹³

On December 19, 2016, the UN General Assembly adopted a Canadian-sponsored resolution expressing “serious concern” about Iran’s high rate of executions without legal safeguards, ongoing use of torture, widespread arbitrary detentions, sharp limits on freedom of assembly, expression, and religious belief, and continuing discrimination against women and ethnic and religious minorities.¹⁴ Why is it then, one wonders, that Canada has become the haven for the Islamic Republic’s sons of the revolution?

¹² Human Rights Watch, *World Report, Iran Events of 2017* (2018),

<https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2018/country-chapters/iran>.

¹³ Nick Cumming-Bruce, *Iran Engaged in ‘Severe Clampdown’ on Critics, U.N. Says*, NY Times ☐. (October 2, 2012).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/world/middleeast/iran-engaged-in-severe-clampdown-on-critics-un-says.html>.

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council Resolution 1737, https://www.international.gc.ca/world-monde/international_relations-relations_internationales/sanctions/iran.aspx?lang=eng.

B. Canada: The Islamic Republic's Pirate Haven

How and when did Canada become the cave where the Iranian regime's corrupt offspring hid its treasures?

While most Iranians immigrated to Canada to escape the political repression of the Islamic Republic, in recent years, many Iranians with high connections to the regime have established second homes in Canada and acquired Canadian citizenship. These Iranians, who have typically accumulated their significant wealth through political connections, tend to spend most of their time in Iran, while their wives and children live in Canada and attend Canadian Universities and schools. Iranian Immigrants are distressed by the Iranian government's efforts to extend its influence in Canada. These immigrants also fear what might happen to their families in Iran—or themselves if they return to Iran—should they publicize their opposition to the Iranian government's tactics.

I, myself, am a good example. To be quite honest, I am afraid of what might happen to me or my family after my thesis project is made public. I am afraid to publish this supporting paper, or to even have a public defense session, because some children of Iranian government officials are abundant in the student body of York University, and wherever I look around the campus, I realize it is not safe for me to talk about my political projects with my fellow students, or to discuss my thesis openly. I do not even feel safe printing on the library printers or saving a file on a school computer. So, I wonder, what is the difference between being a student at York University or being a student at the University of Tehran, if they both shelter the same fears of persecution, torture, and death?

Is it not ironic that while the Iranian regime is publicly condemned by the Canadian government, the regime's inner circle has been admitted¹⁵ to Canada, and enjoys a rich and comfortable life with impunity?

An outstanding example of such Iranians is Mahmoud Reza Khavari, the former chairman of two of the most prominent banks in Iran.¹⁶ Khavari was granted Canadian citizenship under questionable circumstances,¹⁷ while he was a fugitive wanted by the judicial authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran for his involvement in the so-called 2011 Iranian embezzlement, the largest crime of its kind in the history of the country. As of October 2016, Khavari was wanted by Interpol. Nonetheless, Khavari remains a Canadian Citizen, and has been active, together with his sons in Toronto's real estate market. Reportedly he has purchased \$12.1-million worth of property between the years of 2010 and 2012; and held approximately \$11-million in mortgage debts.¹⁸ Canada has refused to extradite Khavari to Iran, to turn him over to Interpol, or to rescind his Citizenship. And Khavari by no means is one of a kind. Payam Akhavan, professor of Law at McGill University and an expert on his native Iran, in expressing his concerns with the upper-class regime-linked Iranians' rapid establishment in Canada; states:

¹⁵ https://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/30/world/middleeast/iran-bankers-return-sought-in-bank-scandal.html?_r=1; For more detail *see also*

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/iranian-banker-gives-3-million-toronto-house-to-daughter/article554924>.

¹⁶ These two banks are of particular importance because they were the first banks to be approved by the Islamic regime to conduct business under the newly established Islamic Banking Regulation.

¹⁷ On October 31, 2011, House of Commons of Canada member Irwin Cotler called for investigation on how Mahmoud Reza Khavari became a Canadian citizen. <https://irwincotler.liberal.ca/blog/tabling-of-petition-in-the-house-of-commons-iran-and-mahmoud-reza-khavari>.

¹⁸ Michael Petrou, *The Toronto developer, the Iranian fugitive and the bitter condo feud*, *The Globe and Mail* (July 8, 2016). <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/toronto/the-toronto-developer-the-iranian-fugitive-and-the-bitter-condo-feud/article30833853>.

There are numerous other accounts in the Iranian community of the Islamic Republic elite and their families making Canada their home and investing hundreds of millions of dollars in real estate projects in Toronto and elsewhere, spreading their illicit wealth, pernicious influence and menacing networks in our country.¹⁹

Iranian government officials who have dual citizenship in Canada can easily transfer money, or launder it through Canada, Dubai, Europe, and many other states.

In Iran, it is a known fact that Canada is a premiere destination for the illicit transfer and capitalization of wealth and one of the most discreet countries for the embezzling criminals and mobs. Guidy Mamann, a partner at MSK Immigration Lawyers, agrees:

Iranian regime officials are likely coming to Canada through the Quebec investor stream or through the refugee system. For the latter, it would be relatively easy, Mamann suggests, for an Iranian official to claim that he fell out of favor with the government or the religious police, and to get landing under Canada's refugee protection laws. The official could also lie by withholding the information that he is a government official. The next step is the application for permanent residency (PR) status. The PR application for refugees does not tend to inquire deeply about money and assets, and even if questions are asked, Canadian officials may not check to ensure truthfulness. The refugee brings with him his money – until then perhaps sitting in a Swiss account.²⁰

Under Quebec's investor stream, high net-worth foreigners can apply for permanent residency in exchange for making a \$1.2 million investment in Quebec. While other provinces have investor-style classes too, Quebec reportedly has the fewest safeguards.

The Canadian immigration and financial supervisory systems should create a database to ensure that corrupt officials, politically-connected businessmen, and human rights violators from

¹⁹ Michael Petrou, *Why Shutting the Embassy Won't Cut Off the Long arm of the Islamic Republic*, Maclean's (Sep. 10, 2012). <https://www.macleans.ca/news/world/closing-irans-embassy-will-shrink-but-not-end-its-influence-in-canada>.

²⁰ Sheryl Saperia & Saeed Ghasseminejad, *Is Canada a safe haven for corrupt Iranian officials and their money?* Toronto Sun, Guest Column (June 13, 2018).

systemically corrupt foreign states, such as Iran, are not able to use Canada as a money-laundering base and safe haven.

As explained by attorney Mora Johnson, “Anyone can start a company in Canada. It costs about \$200 and the owner of the company can remain completely anonymous.”²¹ According to Johnson, there are no requirements to register the true beneficial owners of a private company registered in Canada. As a result, money laundering or tax evasion, and banking the proceeds of one’s crime can be easily arranged.

So when shell companies, whose true owners are rarely ever known, buy expensive pieces of real estate in Canada, many questions arise, but there are no ways to know whether the property was acquired by a legitimate tax-paying wealthy entity or citizen, or by the Mexican cartel. Or as Johnson puts it: “by the Iranian government or North Korea, both of which are under UN sanctions.” Under current Canadian law, we cannot know. The Canadian law’s welcoming loophole for criminal activity is cause for concern, Payam Akhavan says, and is a security concern when people with ties to [criminal activity] want to come to Canada:

For several years we have expressed concerns to the government about the presence and influence of Iranian officials, many of whom like to make Canada their home. My fear is that this discovery is only the tip of the iceberg. Do we want Canada to become known as the investment destination of corrupt and abusive regimes?²²

It does not take much insight or sophistication to see that the Canadian government is turning a blind eye here, and is motivated by economic considerations. But at what cost, we must ask? First, the Canadian government’s current policy of greed welcomes within our borders real threats to our security and our political integrity; and second, policy chips away the crucial trust

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Amy Dempsey, Iranian tied to bank [sic] blacklisted by United Nations, *The Star* (Oct. 8, 2011).

between Iranian immigrants and their new country, which is essential for the establishment of the long-term and mutually beneficial goals of integration, diversification, and contribution; and third, it certainly has a chilling effect on the sentiments of the millions of Iranians that are fighting for their freedom and democracy in Iran.

It should not be forgotten that the first popular uprising of the so-called “Twitter revolution” took place in Iran during the massive upset of the June 2009 elections, the Green Movement, which became the prototype for what followed in the Arab Spring. The Iranian people, despite the regime’s stubborn persistence over four decades, are always on the verge of a revolution, and potentially reminiscent of the 1979 revolution, will undoubtedly take the world by surprise. Perhaps a) policies based on respect, rather than apathy for the Iranian people’s suffering, and b) support for grassroots democratic movements in Iran would not only be the humane and compassionate course of action, but also politically far more advisable than to feed the dictator’s dogs prime rib steak as a desirable alternative to the catastrophe of more war and violent change.

In this context, how does one defend Canada’s national reputation: condemning a government as a terrorist regime that tortures and executes without due process, while gladly handing out citizenship to the same regime’s corrupt officers and instruments because of the astronomical sums they are able to bring with them—sums that the Canadian government knows full well were stolen from the working public? How will Canada look when and if, the Iranian government is finally overthrown and Canada has been sheltering its thieves and criminals?²³

²³Canada enacted Justice for Victims of Corrupt Foreign Officials Act (Sergei Magnitsky Law) on November 3, 2017, “to provide for the taking of restrictive measures in respect of foreign nationals responsible for gross violations of internationally recognized human rights and to make related amendments to [] the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.” See <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/J-2.3/page-1.html>.

It is time for Canada to adopt comprehensive targeted sanctions — including travel bans and asset freezes — against senior officials of the Islamic Republic and their families, and against all those who by and through their connections to the regime killed, raped, robbed, and ravaged; and walked into the Canadian sunset.

After the fall of the Ben Ali and Gadhafi regimes, Canada had a hard time explaining to the people of Tunisia and Libya how it could have supported their freedom from those tyrants and at the same time, been a haven for the interests and assets of those same tyrants.

May we learn from history and let it not repeat itself: let Canada not undermine the Iranian people's struggle for freedom, whether it is in the name of upholding the moral values that we espouse as Canadians, or to contain "a significant threat" to global security.

C. Chain Murders of Iran

The infamous Chain murders of Iran, a series of gruesome murders, covertly orchestrated by the Islamic Republic government to snuff out the voices of its domestic critics left behind more than just the victims' bodies. It also left many underage children orphaned and pushed them into exile, scattered all around the world. The lives and experiences of these children, as children and as adults is the backdrop of my film.

1. A Brief History

The Chain Murders of Iran, 1998, were a series of murders and disappearances of Iranian dissident intellectuals who had been critical of the Islamic Republic and its systems. The murders and disappearances were carried out by Iranian government internal operatives.

The victims included more than 80 writers, translators, poets, political activists, and ordinary citizens, and were killed by a variety of means such as orchestrated automobile

accidents, stabbings, staged armed robberies, and lethal injections with potassium solution (simulated heart attack).

The pattern of murders did not become conspicuous until late 1998 when six dissidents and intellectuals were murdered over a span of two months.²⁴

2. Murders

November 22: the political activist husband and wife team, Dariush Forouhar (1928-1998) and Parvaneh Eskandari (1938-1998) mutilated bodies were found in their home. They had been stabbed to death: Forouhar 11 times and his wife 24 times. Their home had been ransacked. It was thought that the couple had been under 24-hour surveillance by the Ministry of Intelligence and National Security of Iran, thus casting suspicion on that ministry for at least complicity in the murder.²⁵ Shortly before her death, Eskandari had told the Human Rights Watch in New York, "we are constantly living in the fear of being killed. Every night when we go to bed, we thank God for the blessing of having lived another day."²⁶

November 25: the body of Dr. Majid Sharif (1950-1998), a writer and translator, was identified at a Tehran morgue by his mother. He had disappeared in the early morning of November 19 (3 days before Forouhar and Eskandari's murders), when he left the house for a jog and never returned. He had a B.S. in Mathematics, an M.S. in Physics, and a Ph.D. in Sociology. He had published close to 100 articles, and had written or translated 20 books. For three years prior to his death, he was under constant pressure by the Ministry of Intelligence to write against the opposition, but he never obliged.

²⁴ The term "Chain Murders" was first used in connection with these murders due to their apparent links; but continued to be applied to other murders that soon followed. The term was later expanded by some commentators to include murders of similar nature that had taken place as far back as 1988.

²⁵ [Iran Terror.com](http://IranTerror.com), retrieved from the Wayback machine, archived on October 26, 2006 .

²⁶ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/01/the-chain-murders-killing-dissidents-and-intellectuals-1988-1998.html>.

December 3: Mohammad Mokhtari (1942-1998), writer, mythologist, journalist, and a member of the Iranian Writers Association organizing committee, left his home to do some shopping, but never returned. His body turned up in Ray, a town on the southern edge of Tehran, on December 9. He had been strangled.²⁷ He was an outspoken critic of the press censorship in Iran.

On the eve of the same day, the body of Mohammad Jafar Pouyandeh (1954-1998), a writer, translator and activist, was found in the Shahriar district of Karaj, west of Tehran, and was identified by his family at the morgue in Tehran on December 11, 1998. He too had been strangled. He was working on translating a book called *Questions & Answer about Human Rights* at the time of his death.²⁸

September 22: Hamid Hajizadeh (1950-1998) teacher, writer and poet was murdered in his home in Kerman. He was stabbed 38 times. His 9-year-old son, Karoun, was murdered while he was sleeping in his arms. A detailed report on Hajizadeh's murder was published by his brother. The report read:

[T]he government physician noted 27 stab wounds on my brother's chest, from below his throat to below his navel, and ten stab wounds on Karoun's chest... blunt trauma to their heads, puncturing of the heart, lungs, and intestinal tract, and skinning of Hamid's fingers on his right hand from which the physician deduced that Hamid grabbed the assailant's knife multiple times during the attack, resulting in deep gashes in his palm! Those who were at the mortuary or otherwise saw Karoun's body mentioned stab marks around his ear, face, and back, the latter of which must have been the cause of his punctured heart, lungs, and stomach... the murder was planned with military precision. In two or three days we realized what was going on.²⁹

The Medical Examiner Office's representative had determined that there had been three perpetrators and that they had even had tea prior to committing the murders. The killers had

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad-Ja%27far_Pouyandeh.

²⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hamid_Hajizadeh#cite_note-3.

taken with them the television and tape recorder along with some of his writings. The investigators also found cash in the house but had left it.³⁰ The authorities never openly and officially accepted responsibility for this murder. Hajizadeh's family questions the thoroughness and trustworthiness of the investigation. They were never informed of the findings and conclusions of the investigation.

3. Investigations

Several journalists began to investigate and discovered numerous links between the unsolved and mysterious killings of intellectuals and writers; including several others dating back to the late 1980s which were committed through strikingly similar means. Akbar Ganji, one of the journalists who investigated the murders, was imprisoned for six years after publishing a series of stories pointing the finger at a high-level minister, as well as some senior clerics who had given their blessings for the commission of the murders.

Ganji was released from prison, in extremely poor health, on March 18, 2006, after serving the full term of his six-year sentence. Ganji left Iran in June of 2006, and has been living in exile in the United States ever since.³¹ The facts, the evidence, and the clues gathered and reported by the investigative journalists were never acknowledged, nor investigated by the authorities.

Initially, the Islamic Republic insisted that Iran's enemies were responsible for the murders,³² but on January 6, 1999, the Ministry of Intelligence issued a brief statement,

³⁰ <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-7014/hamid-hajizadeh-pur-hajizadeh>.

³¹ Paul W. Kahn, *(Akbar Ganji in conversation with Charles Taylor)*, (Dec. 22, 2008). <https://tif.ssrc.org/2008/12/23/akbar-ganji-in-conversation-with-charles-taylor>.

³² One of the first notable sources to speculate on the cause of the murders was Iran's conservative Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the highest ranking political and religious authority of the country and a strong opponent of democratic reform. Khamenei blamed foreign powers, stating "the enemy was creating insecurity to try to block the progress of Iran's Islamic system." Conservative daily newspapers also blamed "foreign sources intend on

admitting its own agents had committed the crimes independently and not pursuant to official orders. The leader of the rogue mob, Saeed Emami, was the Intelligence Ministry's Security Directorate at the time. Emami was accused of having independently organized and carried out the murders, arrested, and imprisoned. On June 20, 1999, it was announced that Emami had died in prison. It was claimed that Emami had attempted to commit suicide by drinking a depilatory compound in the bathroom, had been taken to a hospital and undergone treatment, but had not survived.

Emami's death added to the public skepticism as several elements did not fit the circumstances of his death: (1) he was under around-the-clock surveillance; (2) prisoners do not have access to depilatory compounds, but even if one gets a hold of the compound, the depilatory compound used in Iran does not contain enough arsenic to kill a person; (3) Emami's previous testimony were dismissed publicly by the presiding judge as inadmissible evidence because they had no relevance to the case; (4) there are conflicting reports on Emami's suicide, and no photograph of his body, and the body itself was never publically seen or identified. His grave remains unmarked.³³

The fact remains that the murders remain "unsolved" to date; and substantial evidence supports the involvement of high-ranking officials and the Supreme Leader himself, in the commission and cover-up of the murders.

creating an environment of insecurity and instability in the country," for the killings. *See* World: Middle East Arrests made in Iran murder case BBC News, December 14, 1998.

³³ For further reading about the fate of the other murderers *see* <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2011/01/the-chain-murders-killing-dissidents-and-intellectuals-1988-1998.html> .

4. Surviving Children of Victims

(a) Parastou Forouhar

In November 1998, Parastou (36) then Forouhar and Eskandari's daughter, was at her home in Germany, waiting impatiently for her parents' weekly call from Tehran.

The 36-year-old had grown increasingly anxious when she received a phone call from a BBC journalist, inquiring about her parents:

The reporter said she had seen on the telex news that they had been attacked but she could not tell me the whole story. Afterwards, I called a close friend of my parents who was living in Paris in exile and he told me that they had been killed. What got me was the brutality of the killing - my mother was stabbed to death 24 times, and my father was killed in his study chair which was placed in the direction of Mecca in some kind of ritual killing.³⁴

(b) Sohrab Mokhtari

Mohammad Mokhtari's son Sohrab, who was 12 years old, when he left the house to do some shopping and never returned. "The last memory I have of him [is] the moment he left our home," recalls his son, Sohrab, who lives in Germany now, "I asked him to buy some milk as he was standing in front of the door. But he was a little bit different, as though he felt something wasn't quite right. He never came home."

Sohrab's older brother spent the next seven days searching the hospitals and inquiring the police stations all across Tehran for their missing father. What he did not know was that his body had already turned up at a cement factory on the outskirts of the city, that day after his disappearance. The family was not informed until a week later.

"My brother got a call from the medical authorities to come and identify his body," says Sohrab, "we were told he had no documentation or ID in his pocket, which was why they did not

³⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46356725>.

call sooner." According to the authorities, all that was found on Mohammad Mokhtari's body was a piece of paper and pen. He had been strangled to death, and his body reportedly bore bruising around the neck.

Mokhtari's son, Sohrab, describes a climate of fear in his household growing up, and the enormous apprehension and pressure to which all intellectual members like his father were subjected. "My father was threatened many times. I remember, one time, he got very angry [with] my mother [for telling me] this," recalls Sohrab, "[t]he Security Service watch his every move, all his phone calls and communications with the other writers and intellectuals involved in the fight for freedom of expression were under surveillance." On the loss of his father who was killed before Sohrab had even reached his teens, "the end of the world," Sohrab describes, "I couldn't really understand what had happened, I didn't know anything about life or death at that age." ³⁵

(c) Nazanin Pouyandeh

On the same day the Mokhtari brothers learned their father had been murdered, a family friend and a fellow writer/translator, Mohammad Jafar Pouyande also disappeared. Her daughter, Nazanin (17), was worried sick. Nazanin in total distress told her mom when she returned from work around 8pm, "he was supposed to be home around 5." Three days later, the body of Pouyandeh was found and, just like some of his associates, he had been strangled. Nazanin left Iran for France after a couple of months.³⁶

³⁵ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-46356725>.

³⁶ Philippe Dagen, *The disturbing paintings, Nazanin Pouyandeh*, Le Monde Magazin, No. 100, 30-33, (Aug. 13, 2011).

(d) Arvand Hajizadeh

“My brother, Aras and I got back from a wedding around 2:30 am. We noticed that all the lights were off, which was unusual. My dad always stayed up to make sure we had made it home safe. As we opened the door and stepped inside we saw a lot of blood and then the open chest of our father, and the body of our little brother, Karoun. My father’s manuscripts were dispersed all around. I ran out knocking at neighbor’s doors. We found our mother in another room, unconscious—we could not wake her up, she was sedated.”³⁷

On the 15th anniversary of Karoun and Hamid Hajizadeh’s murder, Arvand Hajizadeh, wrote in his weblog ³⁸:

I’m afraid to talk to him tonight. I’m afraid he might blame me for not being there 15 years ago to rescue, not him, but his Karoun, from those savages, so they wouldn’t be able to butcher him before his eyes, so that we wouldn’t forever be asking which one was murdered first, and then cry and say, what difference does it make? Whoever was first, it was hell for the other. And then talk about his kindness and say since Karoun was a kid and understood less, I pray to God that they killed my father first, so that he would not have seen how many times his Karoun was stabbed....

I’m afraid, afraid of dying. I’m not afraid of death, not at all. I’m afraid of dying and having Karoun ask me in the other world, where were you? And I would die again and again and again for not having an answer for him. I wish I could pretend to be an idiot. I might live many years more still, and by the time I die, they will have forgotten everything.

The majority of the surviving children of the victims of the Chain Murders are scattered around the world in exile. The elements that form their experience are numerous and rarely unique:

- loss of loved ones;
- loss of loved ones by murder;
- loss of loved ones by murder in gruesome and inhumane ways;
- loss of loved ones by murder in gruesome and inhumane deaths only because of their beliefs;

³⁷ Translated from: http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2014/01/140113_144_hajizadeh_serial_murders.

³⁸ <https://www.iranrights.org/memorial/story/-7014/hamid-hajizadeh-pur-hajizadeh>.

Consider now, if there were no recourse to the law; no justice to be served. Not only these men walked, but they were rewarded. Consider now, adding to such unbearable weight, the experience of exile; and the refusal of your new homeland to acknowledge the crimes against your loved ones. Finally, consider the level of trauma accumulated in the lives of these victims, and the trauma accumulated by their families from these life-altering, dire, and horrific experiences passed on through these individual victims to the next generation perpetrating a cycle of trauma. This gargantuan experience is the backdrop, against which I created this thesis film.

IV. WRITING THE SCRIPT

Two years ago when I was applying for the MFA in Film Production at York University, I proposed another story for my thesis. It was the story of a journalist who was imprisoned for investigating an environmental catastrophe, and the journey of her life-partner who is determined to help her end her hunger strike and get her research published. I wrote a detailed treatment and began working with my thesis committee on this story, thinking that it could be the first part of a larger series about Iran, set in Tehran and Toronto.

Shortly after writing the treatment, having made the hard choice of leaving Iran to enjoy some level of artistic freedom in Canada, a dark reality hit me: I had left Iran because of its sick, dark, and eroded political environment, where massive corruption in the regime and its embezzling agents had robbed a nation of its riches: the hooligans and the loyalists had accumulated unending wealth, while the rest were struggling for their daily loaf of bread. Dungeons or the noose awaited those who dared speak the truth. I had left Iran because I could no longer stomach those monsters, and the corrupt government that had sired them. Yet shortly after settling in Canada, I learned that I was living in the company of the Iranian hooligan loyalists who, under the protection of both regimes, had defrauded and embezzled their way to enormous wealth, some responsible for the largest fraud in the history of Iran, and were now living luxurious lives, safe in Canada.³⁹

I was shocked – at first—and then outraged: how could it be possible? How did they get away with it so easily? How did Canada welcome some of the most notorious embezzlers of recent Iranian history with open arms? Then a bigger reality hit me: those who had benefitted from decades of political tyranny and oppression, and robbed the Iranian people by controlling

³⁹ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/business/2014/05/24/iran-billionaire-executed-over-26b-bank-fraud/9535639>.

the economy, the judiciary, and the military were here in Toronto and threatened to plunder in Canada by infiltrating the arena of politics. I tried to imagine my own parents murdered., I tried to picture close family friends, whom I had grown up calling “auntie” and “uncle” murdered; I pictured them stabbed cowardly and barbarically. I wondered how it would feel to come face to face with one of those who had stabbed my parents tens of times, even after they were already dead. I cannot know; and perhaps, I cannot even imagine; But I *tried* to imagine the myriad of emotions that would overtake me. I imagined I would feel helpless, powerless, mournful, disgusted, enraged, and restless, all at the same time; and would be reminded that justice was never served. After much contemplation, I decided to shelve the proposed project about the journalist, the environmental catastrophe, her husband and her hunger strike, the suppressed research. Instead, I started to focus on the sense of powerlessness felt by such a character, and imagined a different film, one that reflected on the restlessness of such a character in Canada who discovers all this corruption and wanted to capture this character’s desire “to do something!”

I found this story particularly striking because it rests evenly on the shoulders of two countries, (which incidentally are the exiles’ old and new homes). Stories of this kind might appear in fiction from time to time, but true stories that pack such an exciting combination of related and overlapping elements are indeed quite rare. In developing this story, I hoped to make a small contribution to the stories and memories of the victims of the “Chain Murders” and to bring attention to a particular and relatively unknown but serious social problem that touches the lives of exiles in Canada, Iranians in particular, others as well, and indeed, affects the non-immigrant communities as well, who are subjected to the same social anomaly of mobs, bullies, and criminals of their past living among them.

As a writer I faced two great challenges in choosing my story: one, I had to confront Canadians with a tragedy that is many steps removed from them and not easily relatable; two, present them with a problem that has no clear solution but might still somehow speak to all viewers. As a writer, I took up the obligation of encouraging the citizens of this country to look in the mirror and at the immigrant population, and to think critically about the Canadian immigration policies. I believe the story and the set up tackles both challenges.

A. First Version

The script on which I settled tells the fictionalized story of a young Iranian-Canadian woman who lives in Toronto, in the context of the social, political and murderous corruption which I have been recounting in the preceding pages. One day, my protagonist runs into a group of men in her friend's bar and immediately recognizes them as the members of a gang of loyalists to the Iranian regime who committed the biggest embezzlement in the history of Iran. What if her father was a key witness to that crime, and was therefore murdered by the mob? Not realizing she was also Iranian, they speak openly and brazenly about their crimes in *Farsi*. She decides to expose them in some way (*e.g.*, by recording their dialogue and posting it on social media). In that first script, while she succeeds in her scheme and exposes her adversaries, she also pays for it with her life.

I worked on this story with my supervisor Howard Wiseman, my reader Laurence Green, and professor Amnon Buchbinder in his course "Selected Topics in Screenwriting." I decided to propose this story as my thesis and modify the story for two reasons: first, despite all the support provided by my committee and professor, I was not satisfied by the realism and the genre I had chosen for this narrative content. A thriller seemed too mainstream and I decided that I needed a

more genuine and intimate way of telling the story, the focus of which was the pain and the rage of a nation for the injustices committed by its government. Even with a completed draft, I had too many remaining questions: what should be done with the criminal immigrants? Who should be granted asylum and given permanent safety? How can the victims of the government-sponsored crimes live side by side with those who victimized them?

These are political questions that require political solutions. The art of film, however, holds out the potential for contributions to addressing these questions by depicting such unique but complex realities, and how individuals facing these realities grapple with their overwhelming affect. How can a film attempt to rectify these complex realities or remove and/or expose these individuals? How could an MFA thesis film succeed or fail in doing so? Despite its promising set up, this first script lacked sufficient dramatic tension - I first introduced all the characters in the bar, and then painstakingly disclosed the contextual details. It was too expositional.

I did not want to overlook the script's dramatic shortcomings although I was proud of its clear deployment of ethical and political dilemmas. I wanted to plunge my fingers into the wound of the Iranian people living in Canada by letting them know that the mob and the executioners were living among them, among ordinary folks, nearby their victims, and going about the streets of Toronto smiling and pretending to be good citizens. More so, though, I wanted to interrogate the Canadian government indirectly with this film, and ask questions about what ideals the Canadians had forced themselves to sacrifice in the name of greed, in order to bring in money.

B. Second Version

With the understanding and support of my committee I wrote new versions, new drafts, and produced a final shooting script. The story of Anahita (35), an Iranian refugee in Toronto who has the chance to face the man who was behind the murder of her father and mother back in Iran in front of her eyes. This man lives a prosperous life in Toronto. For years, Anahita and her husband, previously her boyfriend, tried to inform the Canadian government about the person they had unwittingly welcomed into her new country. She tried to convince the government to deport him but she failed to accomplish this with any success. This and the fraudulent embezzlement provides the back story against which the story unfolds.

Anahita has tried to forget about her past life and build a new life and a new family here in Canada, but she is unable to escape her past. During a chance encounter at Anahita's daughter's school, she meets the man in question, her father's murderer; she cannot stop herself from following him and confronting him. However, this encounter affects her new life and the dynamic of her new family. She is overcome by the man's callousness and she loses control thus putting herself and her family in danger.

My feelings about this new story are well expressed by the following quote: "I think whatever course we choose to address the sins of the past, they'll always haunt us. And yet, if we're ever to escape from humanity's repeated repressions, art may provide a path." If as the old slogan claims, the personal is political, then stories that show us people actually changing, or even trying and tragically failing to change, may be the only way to change the world.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Brett Campbell, *Death and Maiden Reivew: A History of Violence* (Mar. 20, 2018) <http://www.orartswatch.org/death-and-the-maiden-review-a-history-of-violence>.

V. CHARACTERS

The characters of *Our House* are inspired by: 1) my memories of growing up in Iran during the dark years that followed the Islamic revolution and the establishment of the murderous,⁴¹ oppressive, and dictatorial Islamic republic, and eight years of the Iran-Iraq war;⁴² and 2) my first-hand interaction with Iranian refugees and immigrants in Canada, in combination with my research on theoretical and socio-cultural ideologies and concepts regarding exile, and migration in general.

Our House, purports to dramatize this complex and recurring experience of exiles by reducing it to four characters, all of whom were rendered based on real people:

- A. Anahita learned of her parents' murder years before by the regime-linked mob. The character of Anahita is a composite of the real individuals (I have known or read about) whose parents were actually murdered by the regime.
- B. Saeedi (and company) is the murderer of Anahita's parents. The character of Saeedi, is inspired by a real-life personality who was involved in the aforementioned embezzlement, was admitted to Canada, and in time obtained his Canadian citizenship.
- C. Mikey, Anahita's Canadian husband, had helped with his wife's attempted legal actions that were aimed at Saeedi's deportation, and now echoes the advice of the Canadian

⁴¹ Mass executions.

⁴² The Iran-Iraq War began on September 22, 1980, when Iraq invaded Iran, and ended on August 20, 1988, when Iran accepted the UN-brokered ceasefire. An estimated 1,000,000 Iraqi and Iranian soldiers had died, not including the civilian casualties. The conflict is particularly marked for Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iranian soldiers and civilians; which it obtained from United States, West Germany, and the Netherlands. See Federation of American Scientists, *Iraqi Scientist Reports on German, Other Help for Iraq Chemical Weapons Program*, last retrieved May 10 2013; see also, Wright, Robin, *Iran Still Haunted and Influenced by Chemical Weapons Attacks*. Time Magazine ISSN 0040-781X (Jan. 20, 2014).

government to her - forget the past and move on with your life. Mikey's character was based on my close friend's husband.

D. Jana, Anahita's little daughter, is my symbol of the Canadian population that the government tries hard to foster, encourage and build. She is the fruit and the victim of the Canadian government's immigration policies.

They Are Real People

As stated above, I based the characters on real people whose sentiments, actions, and behavioral patterns, I decided, fell within the acceptable norm. My characters remain unchanged: over the film's short timeline, the personality, psychology, and behavioral tendencies of the characters remain unaltered: Saeedi's character remains a corrupt and self-assured criminal; Anahita's rage over her parent's murder does not abate or resolve, and her horrific memories haunt her like a never-ending nightmare and do not vanish. These nightmarish memories keep returning disguised in different forms. Even Mikey, who is the most dynamic character in the story, does not transform during the timeline – his message to his wife remains consistent. While he seems to gradually lose his faith and to wonder whether he knows his wife, and even question the foundations of their marriage, he nevertheless, remains immobile and constant. The story leaves these characters pretty much where they started where the script opens, because this is how the stories of real people in a short term go: no monumental moment of awakening, transformation, or reinvention.

The relations between Anahita and Mikey are meant to showcase the contrast between them. In their relationship, Mikey embraces Anahita with loving arms and shows her kindness in his own way of being understanding and supportive and as long as nothing comes along to

disturb their calm routine, their union seems to be working. For Anahita, though, the intricacies of memory and madness, the aftermath of violence, and the uncertainty of truth and narrative, represent her daily reality and for Mikey, are a sobering realization. It can be sobering to realize there exists another perspective, one that views people, indeed, humanity as having not managed to learn from our past, where torture has not been abolished, justice is rarely served, censorship prevails, and the hopes of a democratic revolution can be gutted, distorted, and warped. At first, viewers may side with the husband who believes Anahita's reaction is unreasonable and dangerous. As the director and screenwriter I hope viewers come to understand Anahita's urgent need to confront the source of her trauma, and side with her.

The husband's character, born and raised in Canada, has never experienced life in a cruel, unjust, and lawless country, he has been sheltered and safe. He is naïve and believes that justice is always served by the truth and the rule of law. He believes in legal forums where repentant criminals break down and confess to their crimes and subsequently receive appropriate punishments and rehabilitation. For Mikey, such a process helps the victims heal and gives closure to them and society at large. Mikey believes in the law and its power to confront any sin or transgression. Anahita, on the other hand, does not have much faith in the legal system, in Iran or in Canada: Iran's judicial system has failed her; and Canada has disregarded the injustices committed against her father. Anahita feels she must take matters into her own hands. Anahita is traumatized and vengeful but she is not quite sure what she is precisely seeking from her father's murderer. Is it confession? Repentance? Vengeance? She does not know what she seeks because she does not know what would help her heal, relieve her of her constant, exhausting, feeling of guilt, and make her recurring nightmares go away.

Mikey is like an honest jury member who genuinely wants to get to the bottom of Anahita's tragic experience, and to help her achieve closure and move on. But his ideas of healing fail to take into account even the most basic elements of victims' experiences such as the desire for justice, Mikey lacks any understanding of victim psychology—which shows his inability to look beyond his own general understanding and point of view.

Mikey's wife, on the other hand, knows that no forum is ready to hear the shocking and abhorrent truth of the situation, or help her to change matters. She also believes that no one—not even Mikey—is naïve enough to think the brutality that she witnessed can be forgotten. But only the victim and the victimizer can truly know how it feels to be one or the other; what the suffering the crime was really like and they know that only by swapping places could they know how it feels to be the other. All that comes naturally to Anahita, based on what she has witnessed and experienced, Mikey cannot fathom.

At the end of the film, Mikey, the earnest do-gooder, is desperately torn between, on the one hand, his love for his wife and their life together, and on the other, his naïve belief in the system. He cannot accept that love alone may not be enough to save a marriage and stumbles around the front garden of their house, in a daze, at a loss. Saeedi, on the other hand, displays little but the naïveté of an ordinary citizen, he wears a disguise. We barely get a glimpse of the terrifying monster beneath that facade.

VI. GENRE AND THEME

In developing and making of this short film, I intended for *Our House* to (1) draw attention to a real socio-political condition and its implications in terms of social issues and potential accompanying events; (2) critique the power structures behind these conditions and to hopefully initiate some new dialogue; (3) reveal the tensions between oppressive and hegemonic forces, and their victims; (4) suggest and dramatize a politically oppressive continuity extending far beyond the immediate moment; and (5) present a critical realism, in a way it would barely require parsing for political intent.

Visual Treatment

The Film opens with a pleasant song - Anahita is driving, with her blonde daughter in the passenger seat. They are singing along loudly to an Iranian pop song both joining in with the female singer's voice. Despite the theme and lyrics of the song about a home far away, these two characters are meant to look happy and harmonious. They are framed in wide shots and colorful lighting. I want this to be Anahita's starting point. Later, when she encounters the man who killed her father, and in later scenes, when she first sees him at her daughter's school and is plunged into a dilemma about what to do, the camerawork will become fluid and will follow her struggle, reflect her desperation and intent. These camera movements gradually, along with the lighting, lead us to a world of anxiety and anger.

The film ends with the protagonist in a much more vulnerable position than the opening scene, and, despite living in Canada, reduces her to the panicked reminders of her past life. Living thousands of miles away in the comfort of her new home, she feels the same desperation and helplessness that plagued her life in Iran, her inability to do anything for the brave people

being arrested or killed for demanding their basic human rights. I want Anahita's character arc to end there, feeling low, angry, and isolated from the world she cares so much about, isolated from her new home and her family. My intention is for Anahita to be last seen lonely, and unsafe, without a homeland. The camera's framing and lighting in these last shots reflect on her gloomy state of mind, her claustrophobia.

The film begins with the optimism and fantasy of childhood, the colorful life in a comfortable and beautiful home. The film ends with a fracture in her marriage and the loss of any feeling of safety in her new homeland. My intention was to present her as exhausted and broken, surrounded by her daughter and husband, people who know nothing of her former country, or the crimes against her father. For me, Anahita in the final scenes is a stranger in a strange land.

VII. FILM INFLUENCES

Although many films have influenced me in making of *Our House*, four films were particularly influential: *Death and the Maiden* (Roman Polanski, UK, France, USA, 1995), *Leviathan* (Andrey Zvyagintsev, Russia, 2015.), *I, Daniel Blake* (Ken Loach, UK, France, Belgium, 2016.), and *The Hunt* (Thomas Vinterberg, Denmark, Sweden, 2012.)

In the process of developing *Our House*, each of these films helped me tackle specific dilemmas and choices. For instance, while writing *Our House* I was faced with many questions such as: How do people heal from past violence? Is confession enough? Must confession be accompanied by repentance? Is vengeance the answer? Or is burying the past and moving on the right way? In answering these questions, I found myself referring to these following four films.

1. *Death and the Maiden*

Contextually, the main focus within most of my filmic studies centers around characters and their motivations influencing the plots events. Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden* written by Rafael Yglesias and Ariel Dorfman, based on a Chilean play by Ariel Dorfman, presents the story of Paulina, a woman who awaits the return of her husband as the sun goes down. The dictatorship that plagued her land has just fallen, and everything is uncertain. Paulina is full of fear, gripped by a secret terror that she shares only with the man she loves. During the night and the day that follows she will have to confront that fear, she will bring the doctor to justice in her living room who she believes is responsible for having tortured and raped her years ago. Her husband, a lawyer in charge of a commission investigating the deaths of thousands of dissidents under the previous regime, must defend the accused man because without the rule of

law the transition to democracy will be compromised; if his wife kills that doctor, the husband will not be able to help heal a sick and wounded land. Ariel Dorfman states:

Twenty years ago, when *Death and the Maiden*, opened in London at the Royal Court Upstairs, the country where that woman, Paulina, awaited a constantly delayed justice, was my own Chile or the Argentina where I was born. Or South Africa. Or Hungary. Or China. So many societies that back then were being torn by the question of what you do with the trauma of the past, how to live side by side with your enemies, how to judge those who had abused power without destroying the fabric of a reconciliation necessary to move forward.

Today, as the same play is revived in London's West End, its main drama is echoed in Egypt, Tunisia, Syria, Iran, Nigeria, Sudan, Ivory Coast, Iraq, Thailand, Zimbabwe and now Libya. [...] The core dilemmas of *Death and the Maiden* are more relevant today than they ever were.⁴³

With *Our House*, I wanted to tell the story of a woman who suffers from PTSD and carries the burden of guilt and shame. Although Anahita is the victim of violence, I did not want to let my protagonist off the hook. When writing, I doubted whether Anahita should become violent and place herself, her husband and her child in danger, and so I looked at Polanski's Paulina. *Death and the Maiden* covers similar territory but experiments with time and induces an even greater air of uncertainty.

Anahita, like Paulina, the woman who had been raped and tortured and betrayed, and was the most violent character in *Death and the Maiden*, my protagonist has to answer the questions: are you going to perpetuate the cycle of terror, how can you forgive if the price they are demanding is that you forget? Anahita does not opt for such a transgressive manoeuvre in a country claiming to be democratic and lawful without suffering the consequences of placing her family's safety in jeopardy.

Death and the Maiden covered a huge swathe of history in order to suggest that some crimes are so grievous they can never be forgiven.

⁴³ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/oct/14/death-maiden-relevance-play>.

As I was writing *Our House* I was asking myself: Is private revenge ever justified? And is there any judicial framework that can cope with endemic evil?

Death and the Maiden raises fundamental questions about the nature of justice as well.

Writing *Our House* I was also thinking about the nature of guilt and identity: this man who murdered Anahita's parents, who stole billions from Iranian people, is there any chance that he has perhaps changed? Was he a product of his times - even a victim of the times, which forced some to be executioners no less than requiring others to be victims? If he is guilty, does he repent? Is there forgiveness for his crime? Does Anahita, by attacking him and taunting him in front of his grand child, descend to his level? Is her husband in some way caught up in a Canadian conservative mindset which pits him against a traumatic refugee like her? Is there an instinctive camaraderie that requires him to join with "democratic" forces against anyone, any refugee from the so-called "undeveloped" countries? The most difficult question I found: How must we punish evil? If a man kills, must he then be killed? The most compelling argument against capital punishment, for me, is not that society should not execute, but that society should not make anyone into an executioner.

All of these questions lurk under the surface of *Death and the Maiden*. The story is not about whether this is the same man who tortured her, but about the question: What then? There is even the subtle suggestion that - if he was the perpetrator - he was not as cruel to her as he might have been, might even have shown her some twisted kindness, during those dark days when an evil society forced captors and their prisoners to enact the rites of torture.

2. *Leviathan*

While developing the story of *Our House* I wondered whether the story would be interesting for audiences from countries other than Iran and Canada, so I thought of *Leviathan*, a Russian film directed by Andrei Zvyagintsev. *Leviathan* is a remarkably direct broadside against the collusion of the Russian Orthodox Church and local corruption on pretty much every conceivable level.

The main character, Kolya lives and works on a small but desirable piece of waterside property that the local mayor, Vadim covets and has claimed for the town. The story opens when an old army buddy of Kolya's who is now a slick Moscow lawyer (Dmitri) arrives to help Kolya fight for his land. Though Kolya loses in court, corrupt under Vadim's influence, Dmitri then goes to the mayor and presents him with a sheaf of incriminating documents he has gathered. It is blackmail of a sort but at first it seems to work. Apoplectic, Vadim agrees to cut a deal. *Leviathan* points toward people's surrender to the security of an authoritarian regime like Putin's – a theme that obviously has implications for many countries besides Russia. Since I was writing my story to similarly convey a sense of pervasive political corruption, as a daring and scathing critique of conditions in Canada, I studied *Leviathan*. In *Leviathan* the thoroughly corrupt, Vadim belongs to a national hierarchy that, Zvyagintsev pointedly suggests, is not much different from the Communist one it replaced. Indeed, while a statue of Lenin still stands in front of the courthouse, a glowering portrait of Putin looms over Vadim's office. Yet today's strongmen, rather than trying to eradicate religion, are bolstered by their mutually beneficial support of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Given *Our House* is a short film, I wanted to write a simple and emotionally direct story, which contains a core of mystery and ambiguity in order to be able to invite the audience's

sympathy and keep them engaged. In this respect, *Leviathan* was not especially helpful as the invocation of the mythic and the Biblical along with related historical, philosophical and political ideas in Zvyagintsev's drama lies in wrestling with its multi-leveled meanings.

3. *I, Daniel Blake*

Unlike Zvyagintsev, Ken Loach has taken a simple and straightforward story in *I, Daniel Blake* and pushed it to quite a sophisticated level. It is a powerful and raw movie, with a big emotional punch. It is an honest and brutal portrayal of ordinary people. It is very simplistic in its storytelling and I think that is where the film's power lies. Loach is one of the most political filmmakers of our time, and his work has always focused on issues of social justice and inequality all through his career.

I, Daniel Blake is a realistic political film about Daniel Blake, a 59-year-old widowed carpenter who must rely on welfare after a recent heart attack leaves him unable to work. Despite his doctor's diagnosis, British authorities deny Blake's benefits and tell him to return to his job. As Daniel navigates his way through an agonizing appeal process, he begins to develop a strong bond with Katie, a destitute, single mother who is struggling to take care of her two children. While developing *Our House*, I came across this question of whether in a realistic film, an ordinary woman could fight a battle bigger than herself, alone. Anahita, an ordinary woman, is pushed to eventually take direct action because she had taken every step available to her through the legal authorities. The story of Anahita for me was not fiction, but a painfully true story. I was asking myself if hers could relate to the audience as a true story on the screen.

I, Daniel Blake is a drama of tender devastation that tells its story with an unblinking neorealist simplicity. It captures a world in which the opportunity to thrive, or even just survive,

is shrinking by the minute. With the right handling, the movie has a chance to connect with audiences as few Loach films ever have.

I, Daniel Blake is about a man who pretty much goes to war against the state, and the unwavering level of red tape he has to go through for his jobseeker's allowance and the character descends into desperation.

Loach rails against the system with his trademark style of stripped-down social realism. The reason that *I, Daniel Blake* as a political drama touches the soul, is that viewers believe, completely, in these people standing in front of us, as Ken Loach imagined them. Despite the film's deliberate pace, quiet tone and intimate camerawork, Loach's rage is unmistakable. He packs a hefty punch, both personal and political. He actually says: "If you're not angry, what kind of [a] person are you?"

My other concern with *Our House* was to ask if my protagonist can lose her battle? As an activist, I am inviting my audience to act, I am trying to motivate them, as the director and screenwriter, I was telling them - but you will lose. But also *I, Daniel Blake* tells the story of ordinary citizens and does not let anybody off the hook with a happy ending. The emotional wallop grows with almost every sequence, and Loach refuses to go easy on his audience and the film ends with a final declaration of principles. These include: "I am not a client, a customer, nor a service user," and "I am not a shirker, a scrounger, a beggar, nor a thief." To sum up, "I am a man, not a dog. As such, I demand my rights."

Writing *Our House* I constantly faced the question of why my characters do not change. And that is one of the striking things about *I, Daniel Blake*, the sense that things cannot change and raises the seriousness of stagnation and impotence for change to a fatal element that at the end kills the main characters. In *I, Daniel Blake*, Loach is using the medium for one of his most

crucial purposes: to shine a light on injustices that kill people. Loach starts with a fairly depressing premise and it gets more depressing from there – you know how it is going to end right from the start. But that is not to detract from it as a powerful narrative. The film is about identity, and about how no matter who you are or where you come from, you need to have recognition and a place within this world.

4. *The Hunt*

The Hunt, a Danish film by director Thomas Vinterberg, is a huge inspiration of mine for its slow pace and minimalist style. This is a film about an underexplored topic in cinema: pedophilia, but what it really deals with is injustice, guilt, social conventions and belief. Lucas is a solitary teacher with an unfortunate life, has a temporary job at a small nursery school. Despite having lost his proper teaching post as a result of economic measures and having fought a bitter battle with his ex-wife over the custody of their teenage son, Lucas sees his luck changing gradually when he finds love again and gets good news about the custody of his son. When all seems to be great, the protagonist is accused of molesting a child and his life collapses irreparably.

The brilliant deconstruction of mob mentality and sharp screenplay which spins a psychological horror story rooted at every step in credible reality would be enough to make *The Hunt* fascinating, but the filmmakers push things even further with the aid of fantastic performances.

I love the story of *The Hunt* and the way it is developed, but it is *The Hunt's* cinematography, performances and music that I found the most influential elements of the film during the making of *Our House*.

Vinterberg was one of the pioneers of pared-down Dogma '95 cinema, made with natural light, hand-held cameras and no music. *The Hunt* is less beholden to those rules than Vinterberg's celebrated *Festen* (1998) but still shares the heritage. As superbly registered by Charlotte Bruus Christensen's excellent photography, the time is late autumn, the nights are drawing in, there are falling leaves and a few snowflakes in the air. I was hoping for a similar setting for *Our House*.

I shot *Our House* in November, hoping to achieve some of *The Hunt*'s beautiful autumnal cinematography. Toronto is gorgeous in autumn, but Toronto's November is more like winter, so sadly I was not able to capture the fall colors as I had hoped.

The Hunt, much like *Death and the Maiden*, is very much an actor-driven film. Learning of *The Hunt*, I studied the performances and how they were made so effective. The film is superbly acted by a cast that never strikes a false note or softens the impact with consoling sentiments. Wedderkopp in the role of Klara, was my example of Jana's character's acting as the child who triggers a maelstrom and then gets bundled out of the way, Wedderkopp gives a brilliance and uncanny performance of naturalness and vulnerability; and in the role of a teenager caught in crossfire, Fogelstrom is equally good.

Mads Mikkelsen's performance in *The Hunt* was the clear model for Anahita. I wanted my lead actor's performance to propel the film in the same way. I wanted Anahita to be an engrossing portrait of a broken woman, and her suffering and confusion throughout the film and to be totally engaging and emotionally devastating as Mads Mikkelsen's devastating characterization of Lucas, as an intense, wounded, wrung-out and pushed to the brink of insanity. What I wanted to achieve in *Our House* was for the audience to ask: what if I was in her place? What if I was Anahita? That kind of affection from the audience happens only in great stories

with excellent direction and, of course, amazing performance by actors such as Mikkelsen, whose high caliber acting forms such intimate bond with the audience.

VIII. PRE-PRODUCTION

A. Locations

I needed to find a mansion for Saeedi's residence, a character who as a real-life personality owns a 3-million-dollar mansion in Toronto. We found a similar-looking mansion in the same area, but unfortunately it was vacant and for sale at the time and we could not get in touch with any owner or agent to obtain the necessary authorizations to use the property as a film location. After a long search, we found another mansion that fit our criteria, and made all the arrangements to use of the property for our location. On the day of shooting, we arrived at the location, we pull into the driveway, and we could not believe our eyes... the house was covered in Christmas decorations... lights on every contour, Santa and his reindeer on the roof, and much more - but it was only November! No one on my team had anticipated this. My character is supposed to be a conservative Muslim who would never decorate his house for the Christmas. I immediately jumped in a car with my DOP, and searched for and found the next house we could use as a replacement. I quickly changed my blocking and shooting plans and we ended up shooting in front of this house without having the actors enter or exit from the building.

B. The Budget

The first rough estimate, including the deals on prices I was hoping for, put the final projected budget at around \$10,000 Canadian. This figure was our "best case scenario" estimate. The final cost of the production was closer to \$17,000. The discrepancy between the estimated cost of production and the final cost can be attributed to a number of factors. For instance, we had free access to the equipment from York University only during the summer and I shot my

thesis film in November, so I had to rent all the equipment. Because November was a busy season, the equipment houses were also taxed, and unable to let their equipment go for free or at a discount. The production took place in November and was scheduled as a 5-day shoot.

While I managed to get a good deal from Ontario Camera and Charles Street, it was still not as good as I might have been able to get under different circumstances. Further, I could not find a line producer, the key collaborator I needed to focus on the budget and free me up for more creative pursuits. I had a production manager to help with the production tasks, but I still ended up being much too involved in shouldering the producing responsibilities.

C. Casting

1. Anahita (Bahareh Yaraghi)

The Production Manager, Samiramis Kia, and I handled the casting. We used the York studios and equipment for the auditions. Our main concern was casting the main character, Anahita. Whoever played Anahita's character had to be able to play the role of a vengeful victim very compellingly. Plus, she had to speak both Farsi and English fluently. I had put a call out for a female actor in her mid-30s who speaks Farsi without an accent, and speaks a very polished and well-spoken English that has a hint of not having been born a Native-English speaker. None of the people who auditioned met such criteria, they were either born and/or raised in Canada, their Farsi accents reflected that fact, or they were Iranian Immigrants who had the aspirations of becoming actors but had no professional experience or training. Eventually, after many disappointing days of auditions, we were connected with Bahareh Yaraghi, a five-time Dora Mavor Moore Award nominee, and a powerful actor. I met her in coffee shop and I knew instantly that she was the one to play Anahita. Her English did not sound like she had been in

Canada for ten years which I had imagined for Anahita's character, but her Farsi suited the character perfectly, and more importantly, as an actress, she felt could relate to the story as an Iranian woman from an immigrant family.

Another important element of Anahita's character is the vulnerability I hoped to convey alongside an immense amount of strength. The actor playing Anahita had to look the part as I imagined it: a nice girl, who could unleash a deadly dragon when the time comes. In our first rehearsal, when Bahareh screamed at Saeedi's character, I saw the dragon unleashed, and started to shake from joy. Bahareh, in what I consider a powerful performance, gives Anahita a spirited and spunky image, underneath which a lonely volcano boils and simmers waiting to explode. Without Bahareh's contributions to Anahita's character, Anahita would probably not be sculpted so well. Without getting bogged down by a typical temptation to overplay the rage of the character, Bahareh, instead brings many colors to the development of Anahita's character. Watching Bahareh, there are times at which, I hope the viewers feel like the dialogue transports the viewer back to the past and into the events she is remembering.

2. Saeedi (Sasan Ghahreman)

Finding Saeedi was more challenging. His role was crucial. I needed a professional Farsi speaking actor in his 60s, which is a tall order in Toronto. The Iranian Canadian actors are mostly young. What I had imagined for the character of Saeedi was a tall, broad-shouldered physical presence with the look and physique of an ex-military man who could intimidate Anahita. I wanted Anahita to appear fragile and vulnerable next to him, especially when she chooses to attack. But the only good Farsi speaking actor in his 60s that attended the audition was Sasan...and he is petite. But Sasan did not let his physique get in the way of his portrayal of the character. He transmitted all of Saeedi's arrogance and cockiness through his facial

expressions. The bonus was that Sasan had a leg injury from an old accident which gave him some difficulty walking in the November cold. I capitalized on Sasan's limp to suggest his military past.

3. Mikey (Ryan Hollyman)

Initially, we found no one of interest during the auditions for Mikey's role. I knew Ryan from a short film by one of my fellow filmmakers, and had liked his performance. Additionally, Bahareh and Ryan had worked together in the past and there was a sense of chemistry between them. Ryan was a natural for the role of Mikey, and quite credible in the role of the guy who would want to dissuade Anahita from her plans. I contacted him.

4. Jana & Sam (Rojan Divanbeigi & Arwin Ghahremanian)

For role of Jana, I needed a blonde and fair-skinned bilingual Iranian-Canadian girl who resembled Iranian-Canadian children. The majority of Iranian-Canadian children speak only English. So I had to find a child actor with two Iranian parents, who was also born and raised in Canada. This meant I was unable to cast Jana from the children in the drama school which was my initial plan. I searched the Iranian community for her, and was successful. Sam's character has very few lines so casting him was mostly a matter of finding a boy with a compelling look. I wanted an actor who could impersonate a shy Iranian child. We put a call out for children in the Iranian community for both child actors. On the first day of responses, we narrowed the field down to two actors for each Jana and Sam; and we chose Rojan and Arvin in the call back. In auditioning children, I was not so concerned with their ability to deliver lines, I was more interested in whether the child could take direction, and whether he or she seemed to enjoy the process.

5. Others

Finding the rest of the cast was less challenging. Pooria Fard, a brilliant Iranian actor of the right age, with an Iranian look and accent was the best choice for Mehdi Saeedi. Niaz Salimi, an amazing Iranian actress had all the right elements to play Mrs. Salimi, Anahita's mother. Khosrow Pakzad, a friend of mine, with her honest and honorable demeanor, fit my idea of a man of dignity, Anahita's father. For the killers' leader, I used an actor who had studied stage combat, and could teach the other non-actors in the killers' roles to fight safely.

D. Rehearsals

I had only two days for the rehearsals before the shoot was scheduled to begin. During this time, I managed to finalize the blocking for some key scenes, and have the main actors- Bahareh, Sasan, Ryan, and Rojan- interact in order to develop some chemistry and bond with each other, and especially to have some fun with the child actors to make them comfortable on the set.

We read the script together and discussed the dialogue in key scenes and made some necessary modifications. We also discussed the storyline and the characters. During the rehearsals, I watched the actors closely, and asked myself: Do I believe my characters and their words? Is what they are saying relatable and essential to who they are, or are they just uttering words?

The actors also asked their own questions. For instance, why would this character say that? And in response, we re-arranged the wording of some lines. When, I thought a performance lacked authenticity, I would discuss that section of their performance with the actor. We would discuss what the lines meant and were intended to convey both in terms of the story and in terms

of the character development and portrayal. I would help the actors relate to the context, or would remind them of the characters' backgrounds. Together we fleshed out the lines and the characters, so the desired level of authenticity could be achieved.

E. Crew

1. Production Designer—Sabrina Sorour Pourzadeh

Since my main interiors were a) in Anahita's house which I hoped would have an Iranian-Western mix in its decor and b) Anahita's parents' apartment in Tehran (from the flashbacks), I needed someone who was familiar with Iranian interior design. Especially because I did not have the budget to purchase new props for my locations, I also hoped to find someone who could provide appropriate furniture and props on loan. Unfortunately, all our efforts to find an affordable and available production designer who was familiar with the Iranian culture were unsuccessful. We contacted four brilliant Iranian production designers but none were available. As a last resort, I decided to use an Iranian painter friend, Sabrina. I sent her my director's vision, which included my ideas for the palette, tone, casting and costumes. She created her own vision boards, and together these acted as the visual references for the other creative crewmembers. Our biggest production design challenge was the budget, so in terms of set dressing, we had to work with what was already available to us at the locations.

(a) Anahita's Parents' house

Anahita's parents' apartment in Tehran was shot in my own apartment, and Sabrina had to rise to the challenge. To make my apartment work as Anahita's parents' home, we replaced some of the furniture with pieces that we had borrowed from Iranian friends to make it believable as a middle-aged Iranian family's house in the 1990s, in Iran. We were however stuck

with the style of doors, door knobs and beige-colored walls typical in Toronto, but we covered some unauthentic elements, such as the intercom, the electrical panel, and the power outlets with Persian artifacts to give the apartment a more authentic look.

(b) Anahita and Mikey's Apartment

For Anahita and Mikey's apartment, we used the house of a young Iranian couple I know, so the location was already sporting a modern design with a Persian touch. We just added family photos,⁴⁴ Jana's drawings and toys and a photo of young Anahita with her parents in Iran. The challenge at the location was to recreate the little girl's room. We borrowed the furniture from Rojan, our child actor's room in her own house, and asked her to help us make her room look the way her real room was arranged in her own house. We also used some of Rojan's drawings in recreating her room. We were lucky very lucky to have found a child actor with such a kind and collaborative family. We also borrowed a frozen castle from another friend. We recreated a realistic child's room for Jana, even though we needed to shoot the room from only a single angle. The idea was to create a safe and familiar environment for Rojan so she could feel more comfortable during the shoot.

(c) The Election

During the photo shoot on the day before filming began, we also shot photos for the election posters. Sabrina also came up with multiple political party names and slogans. Luckily, the Ontario Council elections had just happened right before our shoot, and we were able to post our own posters over the old ones so to capture those scenes in a realistic manner.

⁴⁴ We had a photo shoot the day before the filming began. We took family photos of Anahita, Mikey, and Jana to use as props in their apartment.

2. Make-Up—Roksana Razavi

We had two major scenes that relied heavily on the make-up team:

(a) *The Flashbacks*

For the flashbacks, I hoped we could make the character of Anahita look 15 years younger. To suggest the passage of time, we decided to straighten Bahareh's natural curly hair for the contemporary scenes and leave them curly for the flashbacks. Curly hair usually makes for a more youthful look. I now wish we had done the opposite, as the filming coincided with rainy days in Toronto, and the moisture in the air made Bahareh's hair curl up as soon as she would step out of the car, which became a huge continuity headache. Our Make-up artist was constantly concerned with Bahareh's hair. She straightened her hair between takes and took her to the hair salon during lunch breaks.

(b) *The Fight Scene*

When Saeedi is hit by Anahita, he is injured and blood streams down his face. As is, this scene was already demanding in terms of make-up, but the real challenge came when we had to shoot the scene on a rainy day and Saeedi's character had to fight in the rain and lie down on the wet pavement for repeated takes. This created a major continuity problem for our make-up artist and my team, but our make-up artist came through beautifully and in my opinion, we were able to keep perfect continuity.

3. Costumes—Leyla Shamshiri

Our costume designer, incorporated the palettes I provided with help from my Production Manager, in a range of warm to cool tonalities. We decided that the beginning of the film should open with warmer tones and gradually move the tonality toward colder and colder colors until Anahita's character becomes fully immersed in grey at the end of the film. We also started with a

very neat and put-together Anahita who progresses toward a more and more sloppy look which was adjusted to reflect her state of mind as the movie progresses, and finally, we close her story with her looking completely disheveled. For the wardrobe, we used the actors' own garments and borrowed a few pieces here or there as needed.

4. Director of Photography—John Palanca

I met my director of photography only two weeks before the shoot.⁴⁵ In our first meeting we discussed my ideas about the filming techniques I wished to use to depict Anahita's anxieties and tensions. Amazingly, we were immediately on the same page regarding our vision for the cinematography:

- 1) The use of handheld camera techniques—to open the film, soft and fluid—almost impressionistic shots accelerating towards more drastic and turbulent camera movements in the middle of the story, and in the end to use a confused camera, suspended in air to capture the turmoil of my ending.
- 2) Our idea was that the camera should *physically* follow Anahita at all times to show her movement through time and space, and the *movement* of the camera would capture her *state of mind* and her reflect her *thought process*. The camera movements capture Anahita's journey and her struggle seeking revenge and her eventual discovery of what she truly wanted.
- 3) The cinematography starts with steady handheld shots in the car, turn in to a shaky camera at Anahita's first encounter with Saeedi, and, change to ultra-queasy in the fight scene. The final drastic movements signify her distress and we hoped to capture how distraught she becomes through the suspended camera.

⁴⁵ I had reached out to two DPs before John. One had decided to decline after days of deliberation with his family due to the political content, and the other withdrew from the project without proper notification of any sort.

The cinematography does not only follow the events and Anahita's ever-increasing panic, but her ever-increasing distrust of the State and its capacity to render justice. I instructed the DOP to follow Anahita from behind and shoot her in a style that reflected *Leviathan* and *The Hunt*. I asked John to watch these two movies that were especially influential in terms of their visual inspiration: *Leviathan*, for its elegant choreography of subtle camera movements, muted natural lighting, and the comings and goings of several actors, all of them part of an ensemble that's uniformly excellent; and *The Hunt* for the elegantly framed widescreen compositions of cinematographer which maintained a certain detachment in the establishing action, bearing witness to the awful events with distressing clarity. We watched selected scenes from both films to discuss the cinematography. As we delved into other aspects of my vision, such as the palette, the forms and contours of images, and cameras, it became more and more clear that we had similar tastes in the aesthetics and techniques of cinematography.

John and I visited all of the locations together before filming began and discussed the blocking, the production design, the color palettes. However, given the time constraint, our tour of the locations and the related deliberations were quite rushed; nonetheless we made the most of the time we had before the shoot.

Two days before the shoot we went over the shot-list. Our discussion took place over the phone as I was in the midst of rehearsals with the actors the entire day. During the shoot, however, we spent half an hour every day reviewing every scene and every angle and scene we were going to shoot that day. We made revisions to our shot list every day and informed the assistant director accordingly. John constantly asked me questions about the story. We challenged each other but the dynamic was very constructive. Neither one of us insisted on being right or expected an apology from the other for the positions we each took, and we freely

admitted when we liked the other's idea better. On rare occasions, when we could not reach an agreement on the ideal angle, we would shoot the scene from both angles (his and mine) to keep the options open for editing, when we would see which would ultimately work better for the film. My only regret, looking back now are the time constraints which did not allow us to capture all the shots we had in mind for the film. A single additional day would have allowed us to shoot the kind of details that would have added significant sophistication and power to the meaning and weight of the story, and the film, overall.

IX. PRODUCTION

A. Camera

We used a Canon C300 because, among the cameras available in light of our budget, it has the capability of capturing the most filmic and stunning images. John Palanca, my director of photography, already owned a C300, was very comfortable with it, and preferred it over other cameras, and as such, he was willing to bring in his own camera for a very good price. John also preferred to record in RAW format which is always preferable for professional cinematographers, and C300 had the capability to shoot in RAW.

B. Directing

1. In General

For my direction of *Our House*, I did not draw storyboards and did not create a floor plan for all the shots. The first and second assistant directors, who worked well as a team, were the last members to join the crew and they both withdrew two days before the shoot without having accomplished anything. My production manager, Samiramis Kia, accepted to act as the first assistant director as well as the PM. Within a half day we realized it was impossible for her to do both jobs, and do them well, so I asked our production coordinator, Aria Taleghani to take over as the first assistant. This meant that for the duration of the shoot, the entire time on set, I had to keep an eye on Aria and make sure that the AD's job was being done properly. This was an additional source of stress I could have done without. While, overall, I am pleased with the results, I do feel that our coverage suffered from this lack of preparedness, primarily due to my having too much responsibility as a director without an experienced assistant.

In addition to preparing a strong vision and a thorough understanding of the material, I believe, directing is about making the best of the talent around you, especially the actors. This may seem obvious and deceptively simple, but it is everything but. In practical application, this principle is an ever-changing challenge. There is no single way to master it. As the cast and crew change over the course of the shoot, a director faces a constant re-evaluation of her methods, her practices, and her ideas. There are also so many other challenges that provide opportunities for one's focus to be drawn elsewhere; it is simply impossible to focus entirely on directing alone.

At best, directors are great problem-solvers and troubleshooters, and the more prepared the director, the more prepared the crew; and the more flexible we all are in facing and solving the obstacles that are invariably thrown in our way in the process. In ideal circumstances there should be plenty of time to prepare for the unknown, and to revise the plan, and to hone one's craft.

The rehearsals gave me the opportunity to learn how to better communicate with the actors and learn that they trusted me. The success of the rehearsals meant that additional direction did not take much time on set. Though I wrote the script, I refrained from doing a script breakdown. In the past, I always examined and analyzed the action and the dialogue in the script, and reflected on the characters' motives, with a focus on the heart of the scene. I determined the intentions behind almost every line so that, once on set, I knew what I wanted from the actor, and how to direct her. I believe the actors are less likely to make bad choices, which I might not recognize without having done my homework.

In making *Our House*, my interaction with the actors during the rehearsals allowed me to engage in a far more organic and natural form of directing.

2. Scenes and Actors

One of the most intimate and challenging scenes was shot on the first day of the shoot. It was the scene of an argument between Anahita and Mikey. The scene was crucial to the story in terms of setting up the story properly and later delivering the film's satisfying conclusion. This scene had to convince the audience that the relationship between Mikey and Anahita was affectionate and loving, but was also fractious because these two were from different worlds and backgrounds that Mikey, in particular was not really equipped to understand. Anahita's mental and emotional condition and her feelings of guilt and regret, her symptoms of her PTSD are beyond him.

As I tried to direct the actors, the scene, which was supposed to display distance and alienation between husband and wife, seemed to have morphed into a loving, understanding husband, embracing and kissing Anahita's character in a supportive way. To change the dynamic of the performances, I told Ryan to think of Anahita as a person who had put his real-life son in danger, even if that person was his real-life wife. Employing Ryan's paternal instincts helped his performance and summoned my intended tension. The second most important scene was Anahita's confrontation of Saeedi in the plaza, near the end of the film. Looking back, I think the scene should have been written with a much more prolonged denial on Saeedi's part which would increase the tension and would allow more time for Anahita's rage to build up and raise the stakes as she loses it entirely and becomes violent. I had not worked with Sasan before as an actor. During rehearsals I noticed that he had the tendency to make melodramatic choices in his performances which was not at all ideal for my script or film. To diffuse his exaggerated tendencies, Sasan and I worked together to try to achieve a more naturalistic portrayal, which seemed to be effective. However, as soon as we were back on the set, he, unfortunately, reverted

back to his melodramatic acting style. Due to the time constraint and our tight schedule, I was ultimately unable to influence his performance in a meaningful way. Consequently, his parts generally suffer from overacting.

In the editing phase, the difficulty of cutting around the takes was exacerbated by my lack of satisfactory coverage of particular scenes. I learned that if after several takes, I am not able to get the performance that I absolutely need it is important to add more coverage and more shots, to have more choices in editing. The fight scene with Anahita and Sasan in the plaza was very challenging to direct but even more difficult to edit, not only because it was shot in heavy rain which added many challenges including make-up, but also because, Bahareh and Sasan had such different acting styles. Sasan was used to improvisation and did not memorize his lines. He would use rough approximation of the dialogue and needed to be reminded of his lines constantly. This is despite my repeated appeals to him to memorize his lines word by word. This was a major distraction for Bahareh who was quite meticulous and precise with her lines and those of the other actors. I also only realized, after the fact, that Sasan and I had not sufficiently discussed his character's background or hashed out Saeedi's inherent attributes. As Such, the scene proved very challenging for both actors, and made the dialogue impossible to deliver without significant emotional and contextual investment and on-set tension and chemistry.

3. Directing Children

This was my first experience working with child actors in a fiction film⁴⁶ and I found it to be quite challenging as children tend to be unpredictable and it takes a tremendous amount of focus and skill to direct them. Labor laws impose strict guidelines and limitations on working with child actors. For instance, limits are set for the length of time children can be kept on set or

⁴⁶ I have previously worked with children in my documentary film, *I am not Little*, (2012), in which children between the ages of 3 and 6 were the subject of the film.

be kept in front of a rolling camera; there are minimum requirements for sleep, rest, and meals, and schooling. These rules vary depending on the age of the child, but the current ACTRA guidelines for children between the age of 6 and 11, state that the child “can be on set for up to 8 hours, on camera for up to 4 hours, with a 12-hour door to door turn around. For each 45 minutes on set they should take a 10-minute break.”⁴⁷

We had ACTRA actors on set and therefore, we followed union rules. We, of course, followed all the rules and regulations, and even went above and beyond to ensure the welfare of our child actors. But working with child actors involves more than just legalities. Acting on camera can be exhausting for kids. It takes a lot of energy for them to remain focused for long periods of time. Being hungry or thirsty is a big distraction and they need to go to the bathroom often, and they need to go when they need to go. As a result, we had to work in short spurts and take lots of breaks. Of course, our craft/catering department was overly prepared, with plenty of healthy snacks and other options.

Another consideration is to ensure that children are fully shielded from witnessing anything inappropriate or disturbing for their age. They should never be exposed to any violence (or violent scenes) or other fictional or real spectacles of sexual content, so during filming, we had the difficult job of protecting them and keeping them away from all adult content. It was easy for the crew to forget the children’s presence, and to use inappropriate language and behavior around the children. I personally tried to ensure that my Assistant Director repeatedly reminded the cast and the crew that children were present on the set and that everyone must refrain from inappropriate behavior including shouting, smoking, or cursing in the presence of children.

⁴⁷ See <https://www.actratoronto.com/performers/at-work/child-performers>.

The children had already brought their toys and their books on set, but of course, I realized that I had to also buy them toys and prizes to keep them entertained while they were resting or waiting for their time to come on set. I realized that bored children make bad actors: they either refuse to cooperate or act overly-hyper. This was especially important with Rojan, who played Jana and was on the set nearly the entire time we were shooting.

I love children and am always very kind and loving toward them, but I decided to be a professional with Rojan like any other actor, and to treat her like a professional as well. I decided I would not try to get her to like me by being excessively nice or funny or accommodating. I also asked the crew to refrain from giving her excessive praise, giving her high fives or congratulating her on her performances throughout the day and to save their positive spirit for the end of the day. I took this approach because I knew Rojan would act accordingly and would give me her best performance. I kept my tone the same whether I was addressing her or the adult actors and tried to avoid her when she was not on set, and to give her clear and sincere instructions, as I was impressed with how emotionally intelligent she was, picking up on the fact that I was not treating her differently than the other actors, I did not treat her like a child. By the same token, Rojan could also pick up on my frustrations and annoyances very easily, so after the first day, I decided to hide all my frustrations and to only feed her positive energy. I believe my approach with Rojan worked extremely successfully. But now that I look back on my approach, I think I could have also used the child actors' excitement of being on the set to my advantage. I should have rewarded them by letting them look through the viewfinder on the camera or clap the slate, but the tight schedule meant I could not spend a moment entertaining the children.

All in all, the children were masters of role-playing. It was a delight to watch them transform into their characters and play their roles. Rojan had a natural ability to become Jana in an instant but only when she was properly engaged; and Arwin tried so hard to do precisely as he was told. For example, in the school scene, when I asked him to take a few steps, he asked, “how many steps?” I told him, “3 or 4 should be good.” He was counting his steps backward in every take from then on, so I had to ask him to stop counting out loud. To keep the children engaged, I had to get them to trust me and also trust what I needed them to do. I needed to be oversensitive to their feelings and to keep them comfortable and properly prepared and energized.

Usually in the first part of the day Rojan was fresh and easy to work with, but in the afternoon she was so tired that she did not want to do anything. It was extremely difficult to direct her when she was tired, so I had to give her more breaks. On the other hand, too much idle time would disconnect her from her role or she would get bored.

We shot the scene of her singing and dancing for her parents on the first evening before her bedtime. Indeed, she was exhausted, and maybe because the first shooting days are usually more confusing and more tiresome for children, she was ready to play the scene that way. But she did not want to sing and was embarrassed to dance alone in front of the camera with the entire crew looking at her. We did whatever we could to make her comfortable. I asked her dad to sing along with her and dance with her. We gave her a break so she could relax. Craft/catering offered her favourite snacks. The costume designer, who was a close family friend did the dance for her, to show her exactly what we wanted her to do and she had her repeat it back like they usually do in parties. Nothing was working. I was losing precious time and I was desperate. We had Long resets, which were more than enough for her to lose interest. It was the only time I had Ryan, Bahareh and Rojan together on set, so it was my only chance to shoot the scene. We were

already shooting that scene day for night, because Rojan could not work past five o'clock due to labor regulations, and this was my only chance to get the shot.

At the end, Rojan's performance was not satisfactory, and I also did not get enough coverage of the scene, so I am missing close-ups and reactions. Regardless, I could not and would never prioritize my film above Rojan's wellbeing. She is only seven and very precious to me.

In the end, with all my errors and the opportunities that I admittedly missed, I believe that my directing goals, in terms of overcoming the specific challenges and hitting the benchmarks that I had set for myself, were accomplished. My first goal was to achieve performances that are more natural than my previous films. The acting in *Our House* shows the beginning of my movement toward a more naturalistic performance style.

My second goal was to successfully create a suspenseful and dramatic motif, coupled with rich visual imagery. I believe I achieved this goal. These accomplishments give me more confidence in my abilities and encourage me to push myself still further with my next film.

X. POST-PRODUCTION

A. Editing

As I was searching for an experienced editor, in Toronto, sent the project to my usual editor, Mohammadreza Sarmadi, who resides in Iran. I had worked with Sarmadi before and we know each other's working styles very well. He sent me a cut every three or four days and we talked over the comments extensively on the phone. We also had Skype sessions during the editing process of the assembly. Obviously I would prefer to sit next to my editor during the whole process. In the mean time I found Reza Salsany. Reza is a very patient insightful editor so I decided to hand the project to him.

The rough assembly was 25 minutes long. With Reza's elegant cuts, the film began to take shape. Furthermore, Howard Wiseman and Laurence Green's insight and feedback were tremendously helpful. Howard made suggestions as to where I might be able to cut entrances, or around poor performances, to make the scenes tighter and to add emotional impact. He also suggested to cut off some lines from the Kitchen scene. Laurence made suggestions about moving some of the scenes around, replacing some of the shots from behind the protagonist with frontal close ups, and adding more counter/reverse shots. These changes had an immediate positive effect on the film.

The rough cut, at an acceptable 19 minutes, was already much better. I was too attached to my original dialogue, and was worried that the final film was not going to be as communicative as I had hoped to non-Iranian audiences. Some lines in the Parking lot and kitchen scenes weighed the story down, yet they contained the information that I initially thought was crucial to my story. With the guidance of Howard and Laurence I became less attached to various lines, however, and decided to cut down some lines. The final cut is 15 minutes.

B. Sound Design

While writing *Our House* I was thinking specifically about potential sound design for the flashbacks. I wrote detailed notes on the sound design in the script stage. In the first flashback when Anahita sinks into the couch in her living room while a hockey game is on TV, we see a soccer match on a different TV, and quick glimpses of Anahita, ten years younger, all happy, watching soccer with her parents in an Iranian-style apartment. My idea was to hear no sound but only Mikey's and Jana's breathing from the present. When we see a quick glimpse of a few men forcing themselves in the apartment, the sounds of men yelling and cursing mixes into Mikey's and Jana's breathing from present. When we see quick glimpses of Ali's head being slammed brutally against a wall and Sara's throat being grabbed by a man's hands, as she tries to fight back, my idea was for the viewer to hear no sound except the sound of the crickets of Toronto's night.

I hoped mixing images from past with sound from present could create another layer of meaning. Ideally, I want to bring the past to the present for Anahita's character as a reflection of her state of mind which like her past, present and future can never be completely separated. I hoped to create the impression that her past flows into her every day present tense. Using of this idea could give the viewer direct access to the protagonist's perspective, and/or enhance the connectedness between the main character's past and her present tense engagement. The viewer is left to hopefully make a connection between her present state of mind of the character's memories from her past. I wanted Anahita to seem haunted by her past. After the rough cut was edited, Bardia Karbalaee and I, sketched out a sound design to test our ideas. In the flashbacks, Bardia noticed, however, that it conversations from real life are not often repeated verbatim in when we dream about the conversation; and that often a fragment of the exchange might reoccur

and not even necessarily in the same order. She suggested that instead of using the sounds of present, we would use a few lines of the dialogue from the flashback mixed with the sounds of the present. To me, this sounded like a fantastic idea.

C. Music

Having a massive orchestra or a huge choir in film soundtracks is really not my style. The problem is not its unaffordability. I would not do it even if I could afford it. I would never use music to artificially stoke the tension or overcharge the emotions or add to the sentimentality of a scene. I think bulky music disturbs the audience and distracts them from the images. For me music in film must come from the heart of the drama or from the scene. Despite having some of the best musicians in Tehran at my disposal, when I lived there, the best soundtrack we created for one of my movies was the one I recorded during the shooting of a documentary, a simple tune played on a harmonica by my main character, and then lightly processed by my sound designer. The most effective musical moments in films are not always the biggest and most expensive, they can also be the simplest and most readily available. With that in mind, I decided to use the music of *Our House*, the song Jana and Anahita sing together in the opening scene for the whole film and the credits.

Reza and I sketched this idea during the editing process. The song is perfectly suited and helps to enhance the sense of suspense in certain scenes, and fits seamlessly to the following scenes leading to the climax and into the last scene where I believe it will play an important part in the ambiguity of resolution. It is my intention to leave the ending as bitter and open-ended.

D. Film Release and Promotion

The sound design and music for *Our House* at the point of my thesis defense remain worked-out but not finalized and the color correction has not started yet, due to lack of funds to finish the film. I am in the process of raising the funds to complete the post-production phase through a fundraising campaign on Indiegogo and hopefully the Lindalee Tracey fund. The film will be completed in the summer of 2019 after which I will hire a distributor to send it to various festivals. Once it has finished its festival run, I hope to broadcast it on short film channels. Otherwise, I will broadcast it on the Internet. My hope is that the film will resonate with others who have experienced loss and injustice. I plan to screen it in political organizations for those struggling with unresolved grief and post-traumatic stress disorder to facilitate conversations around grief, and/or to encourage art as a way to express political issues.

XI. FINAL THOUGHTS

We shot the flashbacks in the last hours on the last day of shooting. In the scene, the killers force themselves into the Salimies' apartment, while the happy family is watching a soccer game together. They kill both of Anahita's parents in front of her eyes and we watch Anahita just sitting there, frozen, incapable of moving, and no screams from the voiceless. After five intense days of mostly exteriors in the rain, snow, and Toronto's cold November weather, we were all gathered in my apartment to shoot the last scene. All the extra members of cast and crew were behind the closed door of my bedroom, listening to the actors' performances, waiting for my AD's words "It's a wrap." After a couple of takes we were done, but I did not hear anyone cheer in joy. I looked around my living room, and saw everyone was in tears. I opened the door to tell the rest of the cast and crew to come out, but they also were crying. It occurred to me in that moment that maybe I will never be able to go back to Iran after this film, maybe I will never make a comedy again. But I also felt proud of my attempt to be the voice of all those voiceless victims.

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