

Unhomeliness and Transcultural Spaces: The Case of Iranian Writing in English and the Process of Re-Representation

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Introduction

The mass exodus of Iranians after the 1979 Islamic revolution has produced a diaspora burdened with certain cultural and national ambivalences. Uprooted, many Iranians of minority backgrounds and many of those with particular political views, who until then had prided themselves with their national identity and rich cultural heritage, became disconnected from their homeland. In the diaspora, not only were they faced with the distance of their roots as well as the legacy of that glorious past, but they also suddenly found themselves and their country misrepresented. As Lila Azam Zanganeh puts it, “whether as a haven of exotic sensuality or a stronghold of fanatic religiosity, Iran has, since ancient times, inflamed the [western] popular imagination.”¹ While prior to the revolution Iranians were seen as exotic orientals described as “the most cheerful people in the world,”² after the revolution, particularly after the hostage crisis, the Iranian identity in the West changed drastically. The hostage crisis, which started in November 1979 when sixty-three Americans were taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran and held for 444 days, resulted in a heavy anti-Iranian attitude in America. Such an attitude was reinforced for the public through the media, with the constant bombardment of Americans with descriptions of Iranians such as “non-rational,” “hungry for martyrdom,” and “unwilling to compromise.”³ These beliefs, it seems, were ingrained in everyday associations of Americans with the Iranians, as Professor Yahya Kamilpour found out in a survey in 1997. This survey included a word association section in which five hundred students across five cities had to associate words with Middle East, Arabs, Muslims, Iranians and Israelis. The words associated with Iran were: Ayatollahs, Khomeini, extremism, hostages,

¹ Lila Azam Zanganeh, *My Sister Guard Your Veil; My Brother Guard Your Eyes* (New York: Beacon Press, 2006), p. xi.

² John Malcolm, *The History of Persia* (London: John Murray, 1829), p. 66.

³ Mohsen Mobasher, ‘Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation Among Iranian Immigrants in the United States’, *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 50, no.1 (2006), pp. 100–117.

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anti-American, war, oil, mean people, dark skin, terrorism, religious, poverty, Muslim, strict, fanatical, 'Not Without My Daughter', sand, Arabs, death, hated, Saddam Hussein, Iran-Contra missiles, and oppression.⁴ It is no wonder that in this setting many Iranian migrants felt discriminated against, making it very difficult for them to integrate into American society.

In describing this crisis that the Iranian diaspora faces I find Homi Bhabha's concept of 'unhomeliness' most accommodating. Unhomeliness, according to Bhabha is not about being physically homeless but rather more about a feeling that "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world in an unhallowed place" that "creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself...taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'."⁵ Although, according to Bhabha, "inherent in that rite of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation," unhomeliness confuses the well-known "borders between home and world," and can be an unsettling space to occupy.⁶

From a psychological perspective, this sort of unhomeliness, particularly one that entails discrimination can be damaging to a person's sense of sustained identity. Kelly Oliver, a scholar specializing in the relationship between oppression and identity, believes that individuals who have experienced discrimination and subordination, have been 'othered.' Oliver argues that, "being othered, oppressed, subordinated, or tortured affects the person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent. Oppression and subordination render the individuals or groups of people as other by objectifying them."⁷ The pathology of oppression, according to Oliver, creates "the need to demand recognition from the dominant culture or group ... to be recognized by their oppressors, the very people most likely not to recognize them."⁸ It is by becoming a speaking subject and "through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, [that] those othered can begin to repair their damaged subjectivity."⁹

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⁴ Yahya Kamalipour, 'The TV Terrorist: Media Images of Middle Easterners', *Global Dialogue*, vol. 2, no. 4 (2000), at <http://www.worlddialogue.org/content.php?id=116>. Accessed 05/06/10.

⁵ Homi Bhabha, 'The World and the Home,' *Social Text*, vol. 31/32 (1992), pp. 141–153.

⁶ Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 9.

⁷ Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 7.

⁸ Oliver, *Witnessing*, p. 9.

⁹ Oliver, *Witnessing*, p. 7.

Over the years, many diasporic Iranians who have experienced this sense of unhomeliness and damaged subjectivity have tried to deal with it and regain their subjectivity by constructing a new sense of home for themselves through various modes of expression, including through the creation of Iranian media networks and visual arts. But among them the most prevalent and effective way has been through writing, particularly writing in English. The aim of this paper is to consider, how unhomeliness has become, to put it in Elleke Boehmer's words, an "impulse of narrative of reconstructed identity," in the literary self-expression of diasporic Iranian writers, as a way for them to "transform their experience of cultural schizophrenia into a restorative dream of home... or a consolatory lyric combining diverse melodies,"¹⁰ to construct a transformative and uniquely diasporic-Iranian transcultural space of belonging. Although there have been numerous texts — and numerous studies of these texts — by Iranians abroad in Persian that deal with this condition,¹¹ in this paper I deal only with works in English. While the novelty of English books by Iranian writers makes them an attractive and fertile ground for study,¹² I find that that the employment of English as a medium of expression, as well as the mixture of elements of English and Persian languages and cultures, is imperative in constructing this hybrid space of belonging. After all, language plays an important part in articulation and in becoming a speaking subject and thus is essential in creating a sense of national and cultural identity. In a new setting, tapping into that language and the culture attached to it, can be one of the basic principles for opening up a transcultural and transnational space of belonging as a way for overcoming one's sense of national and cultural unhomeliness.

¹⁰ Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 113.

¹¹ See for instance, Mehrdad Darvishpour, 'The New Nest and Horizons of Exile,' *Sociology of Diaspora Literature* at <http://sociologyvofiran.com/index.php>, accessed April 2010. Similarly, see the last pages of Hoora Yavari's 'Modern Iranian Stories' at http://www.rezaghasssemi.org/fiction_modern.htm, accessed April 2010, and Nasrin Rahimieh 'The Quince-Orange Tree, or Iranian Writers in Exile,' *World Literature Today*, vol. 66. no. 1 (1992), pp. 39-42. The BBC in Persian also has dedicated section Iranian Story in Exile http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/arts/story/2004/07/040726_pm-literature.shtml, accessed April 2010, that showcases and analyses the writings of Iranian outside of Iran on regular basis.

¹² Diasporic Iranian writing in English is a new and emerging field. To date the study of this field also remains relatively unexplored except for a few studies. There is my own Ph.D thesis *A Study of Post-Revolutionary Diasporic Iranian Writing in English* to be completed at the University of New South Wales 2010; Jasmine Darznik, 'Writing Outside the Veil: Literature by Women of Iranian Diaspora' (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2007); and see the special edition of *MELUS*, vol. 33. no. 2, (summer 2008) dedicated to Iranian American Literature.

Many diasporic Iranians are aware of the opportunities offered by the English language in the process of regaining their sense of subjectivity and in the construction of a new sense of home. Roya Hakkakian, a Jewish-Iranian journalist, for instance, acknowledges the importance of English in the process of dealing with her own sense of unhomeliness in her memoir *Journey From the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran*. In the opening pages Hakkakian tells us why and how she began writing her memoir about the years of the revolution. As a journalist with CBS in 1999 Hakkakian receives a call from another journalist, David, at *The New York Times*, asking her to write a piece about the student clashes in Iran. But Hakkakian, “embittered by [her] history” finds herself unable to write an objective piece. She writes an apologetic email to David confessing “the past and the events that followed the revolution had biased me forever,”¹³ and that she was, perhaps, not the best source for this article. Instead of accepting her apology David writes a quick note, “tell me about them.”¹⁴ However, recalling and sharing memories, initially, is a difficult task for Hakkakian, for not only does she view memories as the ‘only belonging’ to an inaccessible past for a refugee, but also fears that their exposure could make the narrator the object of unwanted and unwarranted issues and capsize the hard earned identity that the migrant has attained in the new environment. She writes,

When you belong to a breed on the verge of extinction, a Jewish woman from the Islamic Republic of Iran living in the United States, one small slip can turn you into a poster child for someone else’s crusade. And you know nothing more suspect than a crusade. Memory is the membrane in which the past is sealed and also the blueprint of what you once, when you were at your most clearheaded, envisioned as the future. You keep silent. To guard all that, true. But also because you cannot tell pain from anger. And you do not wish to displace them onto an innocent listener, you do not allow yourself pain or anger. You walk on. You must walk on. In the new country, you must begin anew.¹⁵

A change in her eventual decision to narrate her story comes when she is on assignment to investigate the story of an ex-Navy man who claimed he suffered from respiratory disease caused by exposure to a chemical on a ship many years before. When Hakkakian appears sceptical about his story, the man slaps his chest and says “his heart could no longer bear the weight of a history denied.”¹⁶ In an emotional moment, he asks Hakkakian if she “understood what

¹³ Roya Hakkakian, *Journey From the Land of No* (Auckland: Bantam, 2004), p. 13.

¹⁴ Hakkakian, *Journey*, p. 13.

¹⁵ Hakkakian, *Journey*, p.13.

¹⁶ Hakkakian, *Journey*, p.18.

it meant to be bearing a story never told.”¹⁷ That night, in a private moment, Hakkakian realizes her own similarity to the former sailor and faces the reality that if she were to survive she, too, must unload the weight of her silent story. What is interesting to note, however, is that for Hakkakian this realization goes hand in hand with her gradual recognition of the English language as a new medium for expression and with David as her avid reader. As she writes,

To write in Persian would be daunting. Instead of re-examining the memories, I feared that in Persian, I might begin to relive them. Persian could summon the teenager at sea. English sheltered the adult survivor, safely inside a lighthouse. I did not know how to use the language of the censors to speak against them; to use the very language by which I had been denied so much as a Jew, a woman, a secular citizen, and a young poet. The love of Iran was still in my heart, yet I could not return. The irrevocable journey I had made was not the physical one, out of Iran. It was the journey from “no,” from the perpetual denials. And what I had painstakingly arrived at, greater than even the new land, was a new language, the vessel of my flight to vast possibilities.¹⁸

This new language offers Hakkakian the possibility of not only regaining her voice and become a speaking subject against both oppressions in Iran as well as discriminations in the West, but it is also the key to her successful integration into her new homeland and in negotiating a new space of belonging. Recalling that people of minority background, like Hakkakian, were denied an acknowledged position in the narrative of the sequence of events in Iran, then, as she herself points out, English gives her a new language, beyond the language of the censors, with which she could open up a space and narrate her own version of events against the forces that had silenced her. Speaking up legitimizes her sense of identity beyond the events in history books and gives her the possibility to assert herself in relation to her own homeland.

Additionally, English, by being a language that is understood by the people of the host country, has opened up a space of recognition and acknowledgement for the diasporic Iranian community in other countries in which English is spoken. One of the major issues contributing to a sense of unhomeliness for diasporic Iranians has been a prolonged lack of recognition from their host countries, particularly in the face of political tensions between Iran and West. The majority of Iranians abroad who left Iran after the Iranian revolution of 1979 arrived into a space where they were hypervisible in the Western media as religiously fanatics and hostage-taking mobs. This hypervisibility, however, led to an ironic lack of recognition for the Iranian migrants as individuals since, as Kelly Oliver reminds us, this hypervisibility

¹⁷ Hakkakian, *Journey*, p.18.

¹⁸ Hakkakian, *Journey*, p. 15.

which makes a spectacle and stereotype can lead to invisibility of individuals. Both hypervisibility and invisibility, according to Oliver, are 'bad visibility' that do not allow for those represented to be seen or recognized as individuals.

This is an oppressive force since "the seeing/being seen dichotomy mirrors the subject/object dualism that is symptomatic of oppression. The seer is the active subject while the seen is the passive object."¹⁹ As Oliver argues "oppression makes people into faceless objects or lesser subjects. The lack of visage in objects renders them invisible in any ethical or political sense."²⁰ This sort of oppression operates on the basis of the lack of recognition of similarities. But the cycle can be broken when oppressors recognize a similarity between themselves and the other. As Oliver puts it, 'recognition requires the assimilation of difference into something familiar.' This means that "the subject recognizes the other only when he can see something familiar in that other, for example, when he can see that the other is a person too."²¹ For Hakkakian and others who choose to write in English, the choice of the languages immediately opens up a space for communicating the similarities and breaking down the differences. It is in breaking down these differences that subjectivity can be reattained and the sense of unhomeliness lessened. Hakkakian, for instance, who had been denied her voice in Iran and who upon migration lived under the guise of the 'Persian princess' or 'terrorist', can now assert herself as an Iranian-Jewish woman in America with ease beyond the stereotypes.

The choice to write in English, however, operates beyond the individual level and can be a means of constructing a new hybrid transcultural space of identification and belonging by drawing on and emphasizing recognisable elements of both their home and host cultures. Since literature plays an important part in construction and maintenance of a sense of identity for any community, many Iranian writers draw on recognisable literary elements of Western and Persian literature to construct this shared space of recognition. Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a memoir about Nafisi's life as an Iranian-American professor of English literature in Iran where she taught at various universities between 1979–1997 and ran a private book club where she and seven of her favourite female students discussed works of Western literary canon, is a prime example of this kind of hybridization. Throughout the memoir, as Nafisi and her private class introduce and discuss various classical books of American and English literature, such as *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby* as well as works by James and Austen, there is a parallel constantly drawn

¹⁹ Oliver, *Witnessing*, p. 149.

²⁰ Oliver, *Witnessing*, p. 149.

²¹ Oliver, *Witnessing*, p. 9.

between the Iranian society and elements of works being discussed. In fact, Nafisi sets this up, and prepares the readers for this kind of parallel reading in the very first page of her book when she writes, “what we search for in fiction is not so much reality but the epiphany of truth. Yet I suppose if I were... to choose a work of fiction that would most resonate with our lives in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it would not be *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* or even *1984* but perhaps Nabokov’s *Invitations to a Beheading* or better yet, *Lolita*.”²²

As the in-depth discussions of canonical books continue, as readers we also get insight into the Iranian society and Iranian way of life through the texts. When Nafisi introduces the Iranian society into the Western world through familiar and recognisable elements and narratives of the Western literary tradition, she immediately opens up a space for recognition and breakdown of differences between the Iranian characters, the Iranian society, and the Western reader and society at large. When, for instance, Azin, one of the girls at the book club pours out her heart about marriage in Iran by saying: “the Islamic Republic has taken us back to Jane Austen’s time. God bless the arranged marriage! Nowadays, girls marry either because their families force them, or to get green cards, or to secure financial stability, or for sex — they marry for all kinds reasons, but rarely for love,”²³ the reader familiar with the human struggles of Austen’s characters, then sees Iranian girls not as stereotyped hypervisible or invisible characters, but as individuals, like themselves as people, struggling with tensions between individuals, love, and societal expectations. This, in turn, has the potential to make the people of the host country more tolerant, accepting and welcoming of the diasporic Iranian community, which makes for better integration for Iranian migrants and lessens their sense of unhomeliness. Additionally, the recognition of the Iranian girls’ similarity of their lives to elements of the Western culture, mirrors the possibility of a similarity between the diasporic Iranian individuals and their host society at large. If the girls in Iran can identify with Austen’s characters, then there is a chance that Iranians in diaspora, many of whom have distanced themselves from their host culture because of their unfamiliarity, can find something familiar and identifiable in their host culture.

However, as much as this hybrid writing is a site for the construction of a space of belonging and recognition in the host country, is it also a site for the maintenance and construction of an Iranian diasporic identity. Many diasporic Iranian writers, by the very virtue of being Iranian, inherently carry with them their national, cultural and literary heritage and identity. In fact, for many, an emphasis of this background — either in dealing with trauma, or creating a

²² Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Fourth Estate, 2003), p. 3.

²³ Nafisi, *Reading Lolita*, p. 258.

didactic and culturally informative piece of work — either through memoir or fiction, forms a central pillar of their creative expression. For many diasporic Iranians this literature that draws heavily on Iranian elements is in itself accommodating and creating a diasporic space of belonging. In the recent years many Iranian writers have tapped into well-known and valued tropes and concepts of Persian literary tradition and drawn from them in their creative expression in English. Among them, reflecting the diasporic Iranian community's sense of unhomeliness, the concept of home and homeland, has been a recurring theme. In classical Persian literary tradition, the idea of home is quintessential in one's sense of identity. As Afsaneh Najmabadi describes it, rooted in writings of early Muslim travelling poets, the image of homeland took on an inherently connotative quality when wandering scholars produced a large body of work in which they expressed their exilic sentiments towards their birthplace and homeland "akin to the grief to the pain from the loss of mother, agony of separation from a protective bosom."²⁴ This type of sentimental and nostalgic remembrance of the homeland, according to Najmabadi, "often expressed through the remembrance of the homeland's scents and scenes, a sensuality of seeing and smelling" also informed the later nationalistic sentiments of Iranian society. Additionally, on a spiritual level, in Sufi poetry, the idea of home and return to one's place of birth took on an allegorical connotation, where a return to the home symbolized the return to "the spiritual world, the abode of unification with the divine."²⁵

These connotative representations of home that populate classical and contemporary Persian literature over the years have also formed much of the Iranian people's basis of their sense of identity and led to the construction of a strong emotional, national, and spiritual attachment to their homeland. Many diasporic Iranians carry these concepts and believe that their true identity lies in an inherent connection to their homeland and they strive "to construct a new identity abroad through the use of imagination, nostalgia, and memories."²⁶ To maintain this connection, the theme of return to the homeland, either as real, imaginative, or a through memory, is a recurring one in much of diasporic Iranian writing. While a number of memoirs, including Azade Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* and Tara Bahrapour's *To See and See Again* have been written by those returning to Iran or by those remembering their past, like Sattareh

²⁴ Afsaneh Najmabadi, 'The Erotic Vatan [Homeland] as Beloved and Mother: To Love, to Possess, and to Protect,' *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 39, no.3 (1997), pp. 442–67.

²⁵ Najmabadi, 'The Erotic Vatan', p. 447.

²⁶ Nilou Mostofi, 'Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity,' *The Sociological Quarterly* vol. 44, no.4 (2003), pp. 681–703.

Farman-Farmaian's *Daughter of Persia*, and Afschineh Latifi's *Even After All This Time* or Roya Hakkakian's *Journey From the Land of No*, there have also been a few books of fiction, such as Nahid Rachlin's *Foreigner* and *Married to a Stranger*, Manoucher Parvin's *Avicenna and I*, and Susan Pari's *Fortune Catcher*, that deal with the necessity of the maintenance of a sense of identity through connection with the homeland. These books, by the very virtue of emphasizing a shared sense of nostalgia and a desire for connection to the homeland, in themselves could be seen as a new space for constructing and maintaining a shared sense of diasporic identity that although dealing with the realities of distance are very much rooted in the stabilities of the homeland. The fact that these books are written in English and across the gender and age bracket points to the fact that this site is not only constructed and maintained by those first generation aging migrants, but that rather it is shared by diasporic Iranians across the board.

But there is one problem with this site. Although these books are a way for many Iranians to maintain their Iranian identity and lessen their sense of unhomeliness by reminding them of the stability of their homeland, they could in fact be seen as contributing to a worsening of their sense of unhomeliness in diaspora. If for many the crux of their diasporic identity is based on this site that is dwelling in 'collective memory, vision, or myth of their homeland,' then by constantly living in relation to that space, many could fail to integrate or accept other possibilities of having a sense of identity beyond an attachment to their homeland.²⁷ This results in feelings of further unsettlement.

Some Iranian writers and scholars are aware of this sentimentality of the homeland that has caused a sense of unhomeliness in the Iranian diasporic community and have taken it upon themselves to construct and demonstrate alternative, and even invert, possibilities of identity beyond the necessity and limit of return or constant reminiscing about the homeland. In her novel, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith*, for instance, Gina Nahai, draws on the safety and security of a nationalistic home only to invert it and point to alternative possibilities of belonging beyond the borders of Iran. *Moonlight* recounts the story of a Jewish woman in Iran, Roxanna, who has never, even since childhood, found any sort of stability, warmth or security in her home or homeland.

Contrarily, growing up as the awkward daughter of a superstitious family in the Jewish ghettos of Tehran who believed she was doomed to ruin the family by running away, she is constantly rejected by her mother and denied any sort of love commonly found in Iranian families. Unable to cope, and hoping for a better possibility beyond the walls of the ghetto, she

²⁷ Mostofi, 'Who We Are', p. 682.

eventually does run away, falls in love and marries a wealthy Muslim man with whom she bears a daughter, Lili. But soon, after a one-night affair with her father-in-law, initiated by him, the family turns on her and imprisons her in the house. Once again Roxanna is trapped in a house ruled by traditions in which she is constantly looked down at and reminded of her unacceptable position and unimpressive background as a Jewish woman in a Muslim family and society. Unable to live with the labels and the shame she had caused, Roxanna once again runs away, leaving her daughter behind. But this time she does not stop until she has reached well beyond borders of Iran. When Lili, who has spent thirteen of her eighteen years searching for her mother, eventually finds her, nearly dying in America, we realize that much of her need for running away had been to free herself of the traditions and ideas in a home and homeland that had tightly bound and defined her sense of identity, never allowing her to live beyond what they had labeled her to be. As Roxanna eventually tells Lili, “you could love the old country all you want. Sometimes, exile is the best thing that can happen to a people.”²⁸ Indeed, it is only when mother and daughter reunite beyond the borders of Iran in America that they start a new binding phase of their lives together.

Here, by inverting the necessity of the belief of stability of a sense of identity in Iran, prominent in Iranian literature, and highlighting that there are impairing limitations in being rooted to one country and its social and cultural beliefs, Nahai is offering readers alternative possibilities for constructing a sense of identity without necessarily returning or reminiscing about the homeland. The fact that Roxanna realizes and verbalizes those limitations and that the mother and daughter reunite to start a relationship anew points towards this possibility. As Tina Jackson writes in the afterword of the novel, it offers ‘chance of a new beginning’ where one could construct one’s identity independent of the homeland and with the possibilities of looking forward to what the new place has to offer. In this way, the novel is denying the necessity of sentimentality towards a nationalist state in constructing one’s sense of identity and instead opens up possibilities of alternative transnational spaces of belonging.

Conclusion

Although the above pages address some of the ways that the Iranian diasporic writing in English is constructing a transcultural space of belonging for the diasporic Iranian community in which they address their sense of unhomeliness, their contribution resonates far and wide in closing the gap between various social and political differences of the Iranian and Western

²⁸ Gina Nahai, *Moonlight on the Avenue of Faith* (London: Scribner, 1999), p. 360.

cultures. As a literary discourse what makes this space important is that it is an active transcultural space for the construction of a mutual recognition within which both the Western and Iranian cultures and concepts of identity and belonging are constantly challenged, renewed and renegotiated. This category of writing is a first a step in creating 'newness,' which as Bhabha puts it, is 'not part of the continuum of past and present;' rather it is an intervening space derived from hybridization of Iranian and host-country culture and literature. This hybrid space, in turn, "creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation... it renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present."²⁹ It is a healing space that is accommodating and reflective for those who suffer the consequences of unhomeliness. As Persis Karim, one of the leading scholars of Iranian American literature puts it, through these writings, "Iranian culture is manifesting itself in new forms, shaping American culture, challenging the old and subverting the paradigms that have been around for a long time."³⁰

²⁹ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 9.

³⁰ Quoted in Omid Memarian, 'Books: Women Writers Inject Humanity into Portrayals of Iran', *Inter Press Service English News Wire* (23 September, 2006), at <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P1-127324101.html>. Accessed April 2010.