I started writing plays and doing theatre long before I had heard the term Diaspora. To me, the most important motivation for doing theatre was being part of the efforts to build a community in Berkeley. A few years after the revolution, many of us in the Iranian community were politically active. We all met on a weekly basis to discuss political issues. Typically, close to 40 of us gathered in one of UC Berkeley’s classrooms to discuss an abstract subject, like how many stages the future Iranian revolution would have or what mode of production was dominant in the Soviet Union. But the real reason behind such discussions and meetings was our need to belong to a community who spoke the same language, grew up in the same land and shared the same experiences. These gatherings were a source of sanity and belonging for all of us. I looked forward to our weekly meetings, the passionate fights and going out afterwards for Pizza and beer and more discussions. We led sheltered existences in sort of a protective bubble, mostly out of touch with the community at large. I remember we referred to Americans as foreigners. They were the Others! As a student at the time, I felt disconnected with fellow classmates, seldom talking to anybody in my classes. Yes, I did feel somewhat insecure about my English, particularly my accent. I suspected my classmates in their spare time get together and ridiculed me. They were the Others! Simply, I was out of place and I needed my community in order to survive!

When political groups were decimated in Iran and Reaganomics prevailed in the US, disillusionment and cynicism became order of the day. And that was the end of our Friday night gatherings! We really did not know where else to go from where we were stuck. Some of us found refuge in the arts. Our community split into two groups: those who performed and those who watched the performances. When I first started doing Farsi-language plays in Berkeley, I did not find anything absurd or strange about it. Farsi
was our language in which we conversed, felt and expressed our emotions; in short, we lived inside the comfort of our language. Many of those who initially joined the group eventually discovered that theatre was more than just a temporary shelter for their damaged souls and stayed in the group. Others found other means to anchor their identities with and left.

One more point, I would like to add here is that most of us in the early 80’s were somehow disconnected from Iran. Going back to Iran seemed like an unreachable dream for most of us. So our bubble became even more impassable.

I started writing my plays under those circumstances. My early plays were mostly personal accounts of a young woman coming of age. They were either inspired by my brief romantic experiences or my memories as a young girl in Iran. My first long play "If you leave, I will be lonely!" performed by Darvag theatre group was a collection of wishes, fears, memories, sorrows and confusions. It was my way of coping with the early 20s. The protagonist of the play was a young woman married to an 8-foot monster dreaming of release, of emancipation. She thought the two women who brought her the chest of memories and desires were her rescuers. But in the end she realizes that they could only point the way. The play was not in Realistic style; I used music freely: Iranian childhood songs, modern western music and opera. I also integrated traditional Iranian folk tales, and of course, my personal experience as a modern woman. The play was an adult fairy tale: adventures of three women, sometimes as mere witnesses, other times as participants. With this play, I was labeled a feminist playwright. The label did not bother me because I was one. But my plays were just my observations. They were not intended as a political discourse.

In my next play, “The man, his four wives, and his mother”, I tried to illustrate the confusing and depressing world of a man who had to retain his dominant gender, while struggling with his desire and need for nurturing and love. Although the phrase of “four wives” may imply that this was a play about a Muslim man, my main goal was to question the workings of a patriarchal society.
In my first few plays, I dealt with issues at a subconscious level. The plays were inspired by childhood memories of happiness, resentment, and anger that I was carrying inside; an attempt to connect with what my grandmothers, my mother, and my aunts went through in a traditional society.

I would like to mention a very important point that what most people miss either unintentionally or intentionally. When we talk about “Middle Eastern” Women and their conditions, we should not put all the blame on Islam. The oppression of women in Iran is only partially due to the Islamic traditions, but the injustices happening to women all over the world are commonly shared among many non-Muslim cultures. Pre-Islamic Persia was no feminist utopia!, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Latin American, Mormons, Orthodox Jewish, conservative Christian, and so many others cope with similar patriarchal oppression. I despise demonizing a group for political convenience, as it is currently customary these days when we deal with the so-called Islamic world.

During the 80s, we were dealing with real life problems, such as, immigration status, obtaining work permits, financial woes, unemployment, and family issues. The majority of us came to the US with student visas and received money from Iran to pay the out of state international student rate tuitions. A few years after the revolution, it became very difficult for our parents to send us money due to the war and other symptoms of a deepening economic crisis. Iran’s isolation from the rest of the world had led to an unprecedented free fall of Iranian currency, Rial: from a pre-revolutionary currency exchange rate of one US Dollar for 70 Rials, in less than two years, the exchange rate plummeted to 1000 Rials for one US Dollar, a 1400% increase.

In the mid 80’s, I received a bachelor in Mathematics. I wanted to go to graduate school, but I needed a job to support myself. A Job?!! Where?? Up to that point, living in the bubble was so convenient for me and I did not need to relate to the Others. Now here finally, after having lived in this country for many years, I had to come out of my bubble and look for a job. Working in a company or any institution is different from going to
school in that you can always ignore your classmates and just show up for your classes, turn in your papers, and take the exams, without making school part of your life. But you can’t ignore your customers, your co-workers and your boss if you want to hold on to your job, a job you need to survive. This is how little holes started to appear in the bubble, though not to the point of bursting it yet, but deflating it slowly for sure.

In the meantime, our theatre group also needed to re-define itself. Each of us needed to answer some tough questions:
What are we doing in this country performing in Farsi?
What resources are out there?
Can we pursue our theatre dreams while we need to work a job all day and rehearse at night?
Can we sustain our group financially with our own resources only?
Who are we? And for whom are we performing?

We were losing audiences and members for different reasons. Some people started integrating into the American society as professionals and as individuals and did not want to identify with the “Iranian Community” per se. Some who could not deal with these complications decided to go back to Iran and pursue their dreams there. For the rest of us going back was not an option, especially for me. I was a woman and I was writing about women’s issues. I enjoyed my freedoms here as a woman and as an artist and I loved Berkeley. Berkeley was my beloved second home that had given me so much. I considered myself blessed living in one of the best places in the world where I could easily be myself without any fear of the Islamic Republic censorship and the judgment of the “masters”; the pioneers. I should mention that the fear of those “pishkesvat-ha”, masters, experts, was much more real than Islamic republic censorship. If I lived in Iran, I could not easily start writing plays, I needed the stamp of approval from an authority. The authorities were usually very hostile I could have easily been discouraged by unkind words of people I highly respected and loved and never put the pen on the paper again.
In the late 80s, I wrote the last play of my bubble era, “Who is going to give us another chance?” a play heavily influenced by German expressionism. Everything on the stage was black, white and gray. I wanted to give the audience the impression that they are watching a black and white film and the story was about the love and friendship of two women and their betrayals.

Finally, after 15 years, in the early 90s, I re-visited Iran for the first time. When I got off the plane at the Mehrabad Airport, contrary to my expectations it was like I never left. For the first in my life, I truly understood the meaning of home. Much later, I learned that this longing for home while living outside of your country is called Diaspora. You can always love the land you are living in, like I love Berkeley, but my roots are still in Tehran. This was the complete burst of the bubble. So I knew I am an Iranian woman living in Exile, but Iran is still in me.

This visit to Iran changed me, and my plays changed as a consequence. I started writing realistic plays with realistic dialogues with real characters. Now, I was a mature woman with real things to say from my direct experience of the world. So I wrote about the lives and experiences of Iranians outside of Iran. My first play of this new period was “The Early Bird” staged by Darvag and directed by my husband Hamid Ehya; it told the story of three Iranian women from three different generations at a chance meeting inside a Laundromat in LA at 3 am. At first, all these three women have a hard time relating to each other. What does an 18 year punk second-generation Iranian girl who hardly speaks and understands any Farsi, who hates Iranian classical music, and uses the word of “Fuck and shit” in every other sentence, have in common with a 74-year-old Iranian woman who has left the country in her late 50s to be with the Children who have now abandoned her? The answer of the play to this question is A LOT! They have a lot in common and they can heal each other’s wounds if they give each other a chance. I wrote two other plays in that period “The Beginning of the Cold Season”, and “In Memory of Kazem Ashtari”. The Beginning of the Cold Season staged by Darvag and directed by Bell Warda is the story of an Iranian family living in Oakland, a mother, her servant who has lived with the family since her childhood, the daughter and the son we
never see, but hear a lot about. This was the story of unveiling of those dark family secrets that we all keep locked up inside.

In Memory of Kazem Ashtari performed by Darvag and directed by Hamid Ehya is a feminist comedy. In this play for the first time, I write about a family in Iran. After more than 20 years, I felt connected enough to the current Iranian society that I could actually write a play about Iranians in Iran. What connects the people in Iran to the people in the Bay Area is the daughter of the family who is studying film at San Francisco State University. My plays go through the same sociological and historical changes that Iranians in Iran and outside of Iran went through: Beginning with a connection through memory, and ending with a real physical connection to home. These plays; “The Early Bird”, “The Beginning of the Cold Season”, and “In memory of Kazem Ashtari”, were published in Iran in 2007.

Finally, in 2008, I took a major step in my playwriting career and wrote an English play called, “It’s not about Pomegranate!” which is the title of my talk today. First let me explain how I came up with this title. In spring of 2008, I went to City Lights Bookstore in San Francisco for a book reading. The author was late and we had to wait for him, so I started looking at books. As I was walking through different sections, I felt that one of the tables was magically calling me toward itself. I walked to that table and it was full of books about Iranian women. Although I had heard about most of those books and had read a few of them, seeing all of these books about Iranian women and the majority written by Iranian women was a very exciting experience. Even for someone like me who understood the political reasons behind publishing and promoting those books, it was a glorious moment. I looked over my shoulder to attract other people’s attention to MY table. However, the glory did not last very long. As I looked at the images on the covers and the titles of the books, such as, Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America and American in Iran, Freedom: Over the Oceans, Other Side of the Mountains: An emotional true story of a courageous Iranian Woman, A Mirror Garden A Memoir, Living In Hell: A True Odyssey of a Woman's Struggle in Islamic Iran Against Personal and Political Forces, Reading Lolita in Tehran, and many others, I noticed that
on the contrary to my initial feelings that an unknown supernatural energy pulled me toward the table, it was actually the familiar images of middle eastern women, depressed faces longing for western freedom, women in veils that you could only see their eyes, (very rare image in Iran) on the covers of these books and all the dark titles had pulled me toward that table. With a few exceptions, such as, Persopolis by Marjan Satrapi and Funny in Farsi by Firoozeh Dumas, I could not identify with the majority of those books. I never considered myself a victim of a savage world. I never perceived myself caught between the clash of civilizations. Who are these women they are writing about? Who are these writers? Why did they write these books? Who are the readers of these books? The veil, the mystery, the pomegranates, the secret gardens, the oriental beauty, the Persian mysticism, and the exotic existence of these supernatural being were the dominant themes of these books. My first reaction was anger and I felt betrayed. Of course, writers can write about anything they like to write, but I did not want my non-Iranian friends read these books and expect me to act in any mysterious fashion. Or other Iranian women read these books and feel there is something wrong with them because they are as normal as any human beings and they have failed the test of being exotic. The misrepresentation of the Iranian women in these books was both tragic and comic. I was also very amused by these fairy tales represented themselves as memoirs. So that night, I could not sleep all night and I felt traumatized. The next day, I started writing this play. The play is about an Iranian woman, Atoosa, who is a playwright and has submitted one of her plays to a major theatre company in the Bay Area. The play starts as Atoosa is waiting for a meeting with the reader of the company, Sean, a white man. Sean has read her play and has been impressed with her writing, but there is a big problem with the play. The play was written by an Iranian woman and is about love and as Sean puts it, “…Nobody is interested in seeing a play about a Persian woman falling in love with an American man. They want to see the experience of an Iranian woman in the Diaspora…. But in your play there is no reference to your ethnicity, your culture and all the problems related to adapting to the Western culture. If you remove the names from this play, it’s like anybody from anywhere could have written it.” In response, Atoosa asks Sean, “…So are you telling me you like my play and my style, but you expected a different play because I am Iranian?”
This is what scares me the most as an artist in the Diaspora, pigeon-holing me, fixing my identity and expecting me to produce my art within those boundaries. Atoosa tries to defend her artistic freedom as a person, not as an Iranian woman, she says, “Frankly, I don’t write about pomegranates!...Sorry to have misled you with my name and resume. There is nothing mysterious about me. I am just an Iranian woman, just a woman, an average woman with average human feelings...When I write a play about a mysterious veiled Muslim woman who enjoys the taste and color of pomegranates and falls in love with a Western man and is struggling between two worlds I’ll send it to you.” These two individuals, Sean and Atoosa, take the journey of love together in the next two scenes. Against all odds, they try to reach each other’s souls and pass through all stereotypes. What happens to them is beside the point, but as an artist, as a woman, and as an Iranian, I do not want the authorities, be it the Islamic Republic of Iran or my most favorite writers or the western media or the market to tell me what to write about, how to feel and how to be. While I love pomegranates, Iran, Persian mysticism, my heritage, and my history I am still just a woman, an average woman who writes about her feelings, her experience and her world and I refuse to just write about pomegranates.

October 24, 2009
1:15-2:30 p.m. Session II, Social Activism in Iranian Diaspora II

• Fatemeh Keshavarz, Ph.D., author, “The Role of Literature in Global Communication”
• Samira Yamin, graduate student, University of California, Irvine, “Transformational Engagement through the Arts”
• Sepideh Khosrowjah, Darvag Theatre Group, Berkeley, "It's not About Pomegranates"
• Partow Hooshmandrad, Ph.D., California State University, Fresno, “A Case Study of the Musical And Devotional Practices of the Ahl-i Haqq of Guran”