I Am a Magic Carpet: Life in a Liminal Space

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I Am a Magic Carpet: Life in a Liminal Space

by

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B.A., Shiraz Azad University, 2007

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
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This thesis entitled:  
I Am a Magic Carpet: Life in a Liminal Space  
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I Am a Magic Carpet: Life in a Liminal Space

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Melanie Walker

ABSTRACT

The life of immigrants is discussed in two chapters: living in the country of origin and living abroad. The space that exists in between these two countries and places, is diminished and not discussed because it is not physical but more of a mental space that is rarely recognized unless it is experienced firsthand. Even though only a minority of people will understand this liminal space, it is important to be aware of its existence. Those who reside in this space need to recognize they are not alone, even if their liminal space is different from others, so that they can easier cope with living in this world.

This thesis explores my life as a female Iranian immigrant in this liminal space. I illustrate my post-immigration experience and life in between places by incorporating images into an optical device of my creation, which contains constructed photographs to inform my audience. Through this piece, I construct a place and time I have experienced since my immigration. In order to do so, I examine perspectives and elements that impact this liminality. In this paper I first define liminal space and show how this space is a product of a liminal identity, which for me is symbolic of a magic carpet. I conclude how these ideas connect to my work.
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INTRODUCTION

I made the decision to move to the United States in 2011. Before that, I used to travel to the United States frequently, and I also attended kindergarten there. After seven years into the presidency of Mahmood Ahmadinejad, the conservative leader of Iran, when the corruption in the country reached its peak, I finished my undergraduate degree in Iran. The younger Iranian generation became hopeless regarding the future, and I was part of the lucky population who held Green Cards. I decided to move to the United States to live in a better environment with more opportunities to grow and pursue my dreams.

I love my country and have great memories of my home country. I developed a place attachment and bond to my hometown as a result of having good memories there. I left my country by choice and go back to visit my friends, family, and memorable places very often.

However, after I departed from my home country, I never fully arrived in this new country and culture. I was distanced from Iran and Iranian culture, but I did not become American. For me, a liminal space was created and developed over time to the point that it became my reality. My liminal space is created from an intersection of countries and cultures and is evident of a struggle of my physical being with my mental and psychological being.

With my thesis, I am describing my immigration life as a sacred experience. My work is an intimate exploration of my post-immigration life in this liminal space, which to me is living in between places. For this project, I have created a Shahre Farang, which
is an Iranian peep box that has deep roots in my culture, to house my photographs. This project examines the hybrid identity I developed as a result of departing from one culture and never fully arriving in another. Ultimately, this work explores my life as an immigrant to expose this liminal space.
Ch. 1 Review of Literature

Liminal, or “in betweenness” is a point or place of transition. “Liminality” refers to an intermediate, ritual phase during initiation in which initiates can be considered either sacred or potentially polluting to the mainstream society because of their unusual social position. New social rules are commonly taught during the liminal phase, and strong, endearing, and creative bonds often develop between fellow initiates.¹ In rituals, “liminal” is the quality of ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of rituals, ² when participants no longer hold their pre-ritual status but have not yet begun the transition to the status they will hold when the ritual is complete.³ In architecture, “liminal” is similar to a threshold, where you stand in between two identified spaces, such as indoor/outdoor.

Homi Bhabha, an Indian English scholar, has studied the liminal space of immigrants. Homi Bhabha’s theory of liminality is a postcolonial discourse that describes how the indigenous people of a culture carry the first space he/she belongs to into the second space, which is a colonial space, meaning a space invaded by colonizers. But this second space (colonial space) does not allow immigrants to articulate their identity as they feel it. They cannot fully function in the second space and cannot perform as they were performing in the first space (their indigenous space) because of the difference in the language, culture, and also being perceived as “The Other.” As a result, immigrants carve out a third space, where they develop a hybrid culture and identity. They create a hybrid identity, which is performative. This hybrid, performative

identity allows them to function in this liminal third space.

I learned about Homi Bhabha after my immigration, when experiencing living in a liminal space. I physically moved from my home country, but my strong bond to Iran prevents me from mentally moving away from that place. I have been placed in a new country and culture where my Iranian identity could not perform/achieve in the way that it had in Iran. However, I was not also performing like an American either. So I developed a performative hybrid identity, which was neither Iranian nor American, but constructed in order to survive. This hybrid identity has elements from both cultures. For example, I think in Farsi but convey my thoughts in English. I developed a performative identity in the hope of diminishing my sense of “otherness” and being an outsider.

In his book Orientalism, Edward Said, who is a founder of post-colonial studies, argues how the West looks at the East through a lens that distorts reality. He argues that the West views the East as “The Other,” whose people are from an exotic land. Said writes:

> The way the West, Europe and the U.S. looks at the countries and peoples of the Middle East is through a lens that distorts the actual reality of those places and those people. He [The Westener] calls this lens through which we view that part of the world Orientalism, a framework that we use to understand the unfamiliar and the strange; to make the peoples of the Middle East appear different and threatening.4

After immigration, I felt like “The Other.” I was encountered with pre-existing expectations that shaped a projected, imaginary persona of my background and experiences. This pre-constructed persona is filled with fascination and sometimes with

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fear, or both.\(^5\) It prevents me from establishing my own identity. I went back and forth between defining my hybrid identity, or letting my previous, yet dysfunctional identity show through and agree on permanently live in isolation. I have felt both invisible and overly visible living in the United States. In this way, this "otherness" that Said talks about can be seen as pushing a developing identity based on pre-existing expectations and misrepresentations.

As a result of my immigration and trying to move completely from my first country/space to the second and failing to fully leave behind the first country/space in a search for a sense of comfort that I had living in my home country, I started creating my own, middle, third space. I developed a new hybrid identity, known as diasporic identity, which is both and neither at the same time.\(^6\) Development of a diasporic identity is a result of life in a "diaspora," which Lavie and Swedenburg, in their book *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, define as "the doubled relationship or dual loyalty that migrants, exiles, and refugees have to places, their connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with 'back home.'"\(^7\) In my case, I left my country to pursue a better life and future. After my immigration, my picture of my home country transformed to a utopia. The only thing that could relieve the pain of the separation from my loved ones was by visiting my home country, the space that holds my childhood memories and can satisfy my desires of language, family, home, and culture.

As I am baptized into American culture, I allow myself to criticize both of these


\(^{7}\) Ibid.
countries, Iran and the United States; however, if others do the same, I defend both places. Shirin Neshat in a TED talk puts this idea in words:

*We’re fighting two battles on different grounds. We’re being critical of the West, the perception of the West about our identity—about the image that is constructed about us, about our women, about our politics, about our religion. We are there to take pride and insist on respect. And at the same time, we’re fighting another battle. That is our regime, our government -- our atrocious government, [that] has done every crime in order to stay in power. Our artists are at risk. We are in a position of danger. We pose a threat to the order of the government.*

Shirin Neshat is also an Iranian artist, who has been displaced. This description of dual loyalty parallels the experiences of many immigrants, including mine. I am not only constantly criticizing both of my countries but also constantly defending them.

In the book *Blind Owl* by Iranian author Sadegh Hedayat, the narrator tells his life events to his shadow on the wall. Throughout the novel, there are reoccurring magical events taking place in mundane settings and the making of familiar elements unfamiliar. The border between reality and dreams is blurred, and we never get to know what events took place and what events were only the narrator’s delusions from taking opium. There is a mental and physical segregation. The narrator has been disconnected from reality. My life after immigration is similar to this novel. I am going through a metamorphosis, from being Iranian to becoming American, but in between this transition, I became a magic carpet. The fabricated barrier beneath my feet does not allow me to become fully American, but I cannot live fully Iranian in this new country either. So I became the imaginary, yet known to all, exoticized body, just like the magic carpet.

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8 Samira Mazloom, phone conversation with author, April 2nd, 2018.
As in Hedayat’s novel, where reality and dreams blur together, the border between my Iranian identity and performative hybrid identity is not clear. I constantly recall real and false memories from my homeland. False memories develop as a result of emotional attachment to my home country, where its absence becomes quite present in some moments. Azar Nafisi, in her book *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, expresses this strong presence of absence: “This is Tehran for me: it’s absences were more real than its presence.”\(^{10}\) It is the absence of the place and the country that I feel all the time, but the absence of my identity in the arrived land, which I call “houseland,”\(^{11}\) is what strikes me the most.

To me a house is not home. A “house” is simply a place where I reside and belong physically, while “home” is a place where I belong psychologically. For me, past experiences and special life events integrated with post-immigration experiences in the “houseland” have a role in creating my liminal space and liminal identity. External impacts, such as pre-constructed personas in the “houseland,” also greatly impact my life experience in the new space and in forming false memories. This doubled relationship creates a false belief in my mind as a result of an emotional bond that I have to Iran, and I constantly think about my home country. I am reborn in this new culture and have to relearn new social rules, as if I am an infant with no previous experience. I need to live like an experienced, mature person, even though my experiences are limited and I am still new to the most mundane Americanisms. For example, when I first arrived in the United States, I did not know what Skittles are, though they are a popular candy that many Americans enjoy and nostalgize. Also, in

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\(^{11}\) To me a house is not home. “House” is simply the place where I reside and belong physically, while “home” is a place you belong psychologically.
this new country, I could have not even talk about weather temperature or other qualities that have different measuring systems from my home country. According to my experiences in this country and culture, I started graduate school in America when I was the equivalent of only a few years old, like an infant.

My experiences in a liminal space created—and still create—a sense of alienation. I live within a society and am a citizen of this country, but I look, feel, and grew up differently. Even though these are what make every individual unique, in my case the society tends to focus on the differences rather than similarities; thus, my alienation feels like an asylum. *The Yellow Wallpaper* is a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and is about a woman who has been sent to an asylum by her husband in an ornate castle. However, her asylum quickly becomes a prison to her. Her room is adorned with yellow wallpaper. She becomes obsessed with the patterns on the wallpaper, and she starts writing about them but hides the writings from her husband. At the end of the story, the woman determines to free herself from this prison by removing the wallpaper. My immigration story and living in a liminal space resembles life in an asylum-turned-prison as represented by this short story. I am hoping to free myself by exposing this life.

This thesis project is an intimate exploration of my post-immigration life. It examines the hybrid identity I developed as a result of departing from one culture and never fully arriving in another. Creating this piece, the Shahre Farang, has helped me to internalize my experiences and was a meditative process of understanding myself better.
I am greatly influenced by the Iranian peep box called Shahre Farang. A Shahre Farang is an optical device from the 19th century at the height of European colonialism (Figure 1). “Shahre Farang” can be translated to “foreign city.” Mozaffar-al din Shah, the 19th-century king of Iran, first saw this device on a trip to France for an international exhibition. When he returned to Iran, he wanted to have similar optical devices, so he sent the foreign minister to bring a few to the country. This device was displayed in marketplaces in Iran in the 1900s. It contained photographs of different places in the world, such as Buckingham Palace, the Eiffel Tower, Versailles, etc. An operator changed the photographs and told stories in a lyrical way, while people were looking inside a peephole and through a lens (Figure 2). People, including children, paid money to the operator, to see the photos. The duration of time in which they were allowed to look at the photos was dependent on the amount of money they paid. The aesthetics of this device were highly elaborate and decorative, with Iranian symbols and embossed images of the king. Sometimes these devices were decorated with lights in order to attract the audience of children.

I am astonished by these devices. In its own time, they allowed people to become familiar with other parts of the world and sparked the imaginations of viewers. Traveling was difficult and less common, yet through these photographs people got a chance to see other parts of the world, which were radically different from their own familiar environments. Through the Shahre Farang, vendors were selling modern European content, specifically European cities with their modernization and
technology. Looking through the peepholes of the Shahre Farang was a kind of exoticized entertainment.

Figure 1. Peep Show in Golestan palace Tehran (photo from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Peep_show_Iran.JPG).

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In thinking about how the Shahre Farang was operated, I saw parallels to my own life and liminal space. Thus, I created my own contemporary version of the Shahre Farang by building an optical device, which is highly elaborate and decorative with Eastern architectural elements. It is reminiscent of oriental castles. Inside of it, I housed six constructed photographs that represent glimpses of my life in a liminal space. My purpose was to isolate myself from my viewers to reinforce the sense of alienation I experience living in this third space. My audience looks through a lens, which is “a lens that distorts…actual reality,”\textsuperscript{13} to see the photographs. This setup becomes theatrical to represent the constructed performativity of the photographs. It allows a voyeuristic

\textsuperscript{13} Edward Said, interview by Sut Jhally, Media Education Foundation, 2005, transcript.
perspective into my life in this liminal space. Through the lens, viewers are transported to this “in between” life that exists and is invisible to everyone else. They will see my private life that has been given physicality. Viewers also see images that are cropped traumatically by the frame to reinforce the experience of lacking an identity, as my identity has been constructed through socially cultivating it in this new culture and through my own memories, background, and experiences in my previous culture (Figure 17, 18 and 19). With this project, I am questioning my identity and how much of it is performance. Does a person’s identity take shape with performance, or is identity a reflection of internal experience? Or is it a combination of both?

I am inspired by the work of the artist Joseph Cornell. He created miniature theatre boxes, or shadow boxes, which illustrate a dream-like image that depicts his childhood memories (Figure 3). Cornell, through his images and use of objects, their placement, and the way he collages these objects together, transforms both photos and objects into three-dimensional surreal spaces. ¹⁴ I value the materiality of Cornell’s work and the fact that they are tactile objects, which invade a physical space. His work influenced me to create a space resembling the liminal world I am living in by having the Shahre Farang take up space in its immediate environment, so it can establish its own existence and be seen and experienced. Scale and the creating of a world that is recognizable but unfamiliar are aspects of Cornell’s work that influence mine. My photographs represent how my world is constructed by elements from different times and places that come together to create my current life.

Figure 3. Joseph Cornell, Tilly-Losch, 1935-38 (Photo from http://www.theartstory.org/artist-cornell-joseph.htm).

Marcel Duchamp, the Dada artist, is another artist whose works influence me. His last major body of work “Given” is another inspiration for my project. The “Given” is a tableau that can be seen through a pair of peepholes on a door (Figure 4). The piece allows viewer to peep through holes, taking them on a voyeuristic journey and making them aware of the world that exists behind the door in the museum. Duchamp created a whole new world through large-scale diorama behind the peeps, and I am creating my own fictional world through the use of photographs (Figure 4 and 5).

Other contemporary artists, such as Bruce Nauman, inspire my art. Nauman uses neon lights to create simple animation (Figure 6). My photographs create a soft animation: viewers get to see my disappearance and transformation into a magic carpet—which is reflective of my identity and living in a liminal space—by circumambulating and both visually and physically engaging with the piece.

Figure 6. Bruce Nauman, Double Poke In The Eye II, 1985, Tate Modern (Photo by Yasmin Mazloom).

Joan Fontcuberta, in his work *Landscapes without Memory*, created a series of realistic landscapes using software that was developed originally for military use. He renders landscapes that do not exist in reality by forcing the software to translate famous paintings by Dali, Turner, Cézanne, Pollock, and others into realistic
photographs of landscapes (Figure 7). Fontcuberta is well known for exploring the intersection of art, science, and illusion. With his work in mind, I created photographs that are surreal so that certain elements seem magical. This resembles my experience of living in a liminal space where there are many layers of memory and experience that create my current identity and where there is a parallel development of these two layers.


Shirin Neshat is an Iranian artist who lives and works in the diaspora and whose work I appreciate. In her video piece named “Turbulence,” she performs a song that sounds more like a woman in agony. The sound invokes feelings in the viewers and
conveys the sense of pain and suffering. I am interested in sound as the most direct way of communication. Therefore, the sound piece on my Shahare Farang indicates the existence of life in a liminal space, a life that is private. The sound is composed of myself singing a famous Persian song named “Bahar e Delneshin” from 1950's. I am using both words and murmuring to evoke emotion to a universal audience. For an Iranian viewer they should be able to recognize the song or pick up the words when I am singing rather than murmuring. However, the sounds can still convey a sense of private life for non-Farsi listeners. The recording can be heard when a person gets close to the device and allows my audience to connect to my experience by getting a step closer. In my contemporary version of the Shahre Farang, the recording replaces the operator, who used to stand by the Shahre Farang telling a story in earlier times.

Here is one of the stories that the operator of Shahre Farang used to tell the viewers when they were peeping in. I have provided both the Farsi version an English translation:
اینجا شهر، شهر فرّنگه از همه رنگ، خوب تمامشان کن. بنیش سیاحته کن
اینجا رو که می‌بینی فرگنتونه
خیابونای این شهر فرّنگه از این سر تا اون سرش و حتی راو پیله‌اش سنگ‌شکر. جراغائی نفتی شهر هم‌هله شب روشن‌ها، توی ماه‌های صبح
شهر، شهر فرّنگه آدم‌شان از همه رنگ. این خانوم که می‌بینی روباه‌ها در دو رنگ‌ش داره و دو داره توی کاج سینگ سه‌شاخه به پلیش می‌کوبه، رنگی، رنگی دو دوشه. رنیس دو دوشه این شهر فرگنتونه نیم دو دوشه سه‌شاخه از یه قاره اون ور ابها، یه جالی، یه جالی، یه حلقه اون ایکه ده که این نوکریش... روحم بی‌خمره که درانه می‌بایسته جانی، توی کو‌های، اون ور آب و پشت این اقیانوس، زمینی آرزویه و یه دختر
چهاردق که سر، تیپتی، یه جالی کنچ بسقف بی در و توی نشسته و زانهاش توی بغل، سردشی آی... شهر، شهر فرّنگه از همه رنگ. این همه اوله که توی این شهر فرگنه ویلولن قاوم، قارام و قارام رویی صدمه... صدم هزار بشکه، نفته که دود می‌کنه به یه... که اخه می‌جو... اون مادام خانوم می‌خواه به جورایی زودی به تیکه و شامش برسه تا یه بی‌خمره، بی‌خمره، بی‌خمره، بی‌خمره، بی‌خمره... تا یه بی‌خمره، بی‌خمره، بی‌خمره.

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خوب تمامشان کن
این یکی جزو که می‌بینی خک، خانک وطنه. سرتا سرش سیزه و دشت، صحراش هم صحراهاه... توی هر دونه شن‌هار و یکتا خاطره، پره از رازه، پره از رمزه، این‌ها همش جادوییه

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اینجا بابا جون به شهیره... شهری که یه جالی تو جن‌وها، آبی و یه جالش مردابه. یه جالی باغه و اما یه جالش سرتناس خاشکه. یه جالی پره از چاله و یه جالی دیگه بیلاته اینجا رو که می‌بینی مرد می‌گوش تا کوش واپساندن، خبره شنی، به کوش هم یه پچ و یچ. قرار، قرار، اعدامه
این بابا رو که می‌بینی اون بالا ناشته سیبیلاشم از بنا گوش در رفته، کندخایه و اموز خون داره خونش رو می‌خوره نه بابا جون، مغلول کجا، دسته و هنگ و سوار وحشی کجا یک هفته ده دزنی از اون زمونه رفته و پاز... باراکا کسامه و راه سلوقونه که خراب

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اما اموز رو جوونی توی شهر... دل داده، عاشق شده
بشنیش بابا جون، حوصله که قصه بگم، قصه، قصه عاشقه
این چورون که می‌بینی، امشت غلامه. یه چند صبحی مکتبت رفته و این که یا دیوار نشسته و گریه تو جاد شیتی که دش پر ریشه، یه نه، کج بخته... باباشم شل. خدا هم که با انصافه

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19

Here is the city, the city of the foreigners, of all colors. Watch closely. Sit down and 

Watch carefully.

What you see is the foreigner’s land.

The street of this city of foreigners—from this corner, to the other corner, and even its 

bridges—is all paved with stones. The city lights are lit all night long, until morning, from 

the oil lamps.

The city, the city of foreigners, has people with all different colors.

This lady, whom you see with a fox around her neck, in her white stone palace, walks in 

heels. She is the queen of her castle. Half a dozen black slaves from across the ocean, 

from another continent, from the other part of the world, have been brought to her, 

though her soul does not know that, that somewhere in this world, in the mountains, 

behind this ocean, the earth has been shaken and a girl with a veil, with no blanket, is 

sitting somewhere, in a corner, where there is no ceiling, no door, and no wall. She is 

sitting and hugging her knees. She is cold.

Hey, the city is the city of the foreigners of all colors. The cars and vehicles that you
have in this city, driving *vroom vroom vroom*, not a hundred but 100,000 barrels of oil that smoke and for what? So that this madam can get to the theater and dinner. This city is the city of foreigners. Come see what's happening. People's hair is the color of gold (blond), and their hearts are made of stone.

..............

Watch closely. This other place that you see has soil from our homeland. From this end to the other end, it is all green and plain. Even its desert is a real desert. There are a thousand and one memories encapsulated in every grain of sand. It is filled with secrets, filled with mysteries, filled with magic.

..............

My friend, here is a city, a city where you can find water or swamps in its water canals. Some places are like gardens, but there is arid land around it. Here, you see people standing shoulder to shoulder, listening and listening, staring, listening, and murmuring in each other's ears. An execution is about to take place. See, this man, whom you can see is sitting up there and has tattered mustache, is the mayor of the city, and today he is not happy. No, dear friend, what is the Mogul? What army of Barbars and savages? Few centuries passed that time but still … the market is down, and the road to the countryside is destroyed as well.

..............

But today, a young person in the city devoted his heart, and fell in love! Sit down young friend and join. Have patience; let me tell you a story, a love story. The young man that you see is called Gholam. He attended school for few days, and the person who is sitting by the wall and crying inside her veil with a broken heart is an unfortunate mother. Her father is lame, and God is fair.

..............

This is the day when the little girl of the royal family of the city with her exotic shoes, *clickity clack clickity clack* and with her fake bangles, *jingle jangle jingle jangle*, she left footsteps on someone's heart, and the young man spontaneously jumped and kissed her. Next day, when the mayor found out, it was as if the sky cried and this city is the city of all evil. The mayor's men came with guns and bullets pouring into the passage. One screams: Hey, here, is this the city of foreigners…!? No, of course not. Then, what's a kiss? What's love? What are pavement and the asphalt? Well, look carefully. The soil belongs to the homeland.
You see a life passed of that day, but ...
The madam with the hat is behind steering wheel of her car, and her slave and the oil from her car engine is in the air. I wish that these pictures were not real, and all this sorrow and grief would not be in the heart of the operator of the Shahre Farang. But, still, who knows when that old land, in every corner, was a place where there are five doors, an instrument, a song. It is both green and arid. It has gravel and a wheatgrass plain, water and rice fields. People with dark hair, their heart in a color of mountain snow. In the corner of each house, there is a niche filled with memories and memorial. The operator of the Shahre Farang stayed and will stay in its frame.

Be careful not to let the black dog come and get you

Below is the original poem in Farsi and the translation of what I am singing, which is only a few random lines from “Bahar e’ Delneshin” that I sing and murmur:

Ta behtar dar dasht-e ansa-ye sooye Jomn
Jon nisim no behtar br asheyanam khan khan
ta ke galbaram shod kalbe wiranam min

... Ta behtar zandegi amd beya aaram gan
cjon seyndam br ser areshnamen beshinam demi

... Ta behtar dar dasht-e ansa-ye Jomn
Jon nisim no behtar br asheyanam khan khan
ta ke galbaram shod kalbe wiranam min

... Baj 1 bebin dar heat-e beashkun seyndam kholtam
ai roo to aiyine am echquetem diliyine am

... Ta behtar dar dasht-e ansa-ye Jomn
Jon nisim no behtar br asheyanam khan khan

... Baj 1 bebin dar heat-e beashkun seyndam kholtam
ai roo to aiyine am echquetem diliyine am

... Ta behtar dar dasht-e ansa-ye Jomn
Jon nisim no behtar br asheyanam khan khan

16 Samira Mazloom, Email message to author, May 10th, 2018.
Until when the pleasant spring arrives to the meadows,

(Murmuring, Murmuring, Murmuring)

So that my ruined cottage will be filled with flowers.

(Murmuring, Murmuring, Murmuring)

…my ruined cottage

(Murmuring, Murmuring, Murmuring)

The spring of my life, come closer, you are peace in my life

(Murmuring, Murmuring, Murmuring)

Like a breeze in springtime come pass my nest

(Murmuring, Murmuring, Murmuring)

…my ruined cottage

(Murmuring, Murmuring, Murmuring)

Until when the pleasant spring arrives to the meadows,

Like a breeze in springtime come pass my nest

(Murmuring, Murmuring, Murmuring)
Ch. 3 Life in a Liminal Space

*Just like how death is a transition to another world,*

*or birth is a transition to this world,*

*immigration is a transition to a new life.*

I live in a liminal space. What this means to me is that I live “in between” places and time. My liminal space has been created from the intersection of two cultures and geographic places. Now I have a threshold identity called Iranian-American, which means I am quasi-American. I am separated from my culture of origin but never fully assimilated to my new country and culture. I got stuck somewhere in the middle of the ritual phase, right before I was initiated as an American, where I cannot connect fully to my background culture but neither can I move forward in my adopted culture. Because of this, I started experiencing life differently. Every simple, mundane task has been transformed into a magical event, as if it was simultaneously familiar to me but also from another world. I have started experiencing time differently; it has become constrained. I have started learning about my new space and exploring my new identity in this space. However, in this world, I am alienated from others while interacting with them, becoming exoticized, invisible, and sometimes overly visible.

With the sculptural piece of the Shahre Farang, I am creating a physical and tangible liminal space (third space) that houses my photographs (first space) and places it in the museum (second space) (Figure 9). The photographs depict my hybrid identity and psychological landscape. I feel that it is important for viewers to physically experience my work; therefore, the device puts my viewers in an uncomfortable position.
of bending over or sitting in order to establish a fundamental relation between them and my work (Figure 11). The goal is to have different audiences experience my work on different levels. Similar to my different daily interactions with people in my new culture, my viewers can choose to only see the device from far away, or they can choose to get closer, peep in, view my photographs, listen to my voice, and see their own distorted reflection on the top mirror. The traumatic way that the photographs are cropped indicates how there is more to my story, which is hidden from viewers’ eyes. My audience will see only parts of the photographs created by layers and will never see them fully. The whole truth is hidden from the eyes, just like how Plato argues, “Things are infinitely less real than we suppose. They are for the most part phantoms, projected by our culture onto the walls of our fragile and flawed minds.”\(^{17}\) I convey this idea by layering my photographs and placing them back together. My viewers only see the portions of the photo that I am allowing them to see and cannot distinguish the separation of layers that create each photograph.

Ultimately, the piece is a multimedia sculptural piece that contains photographs that poetically portray my abstract life. This piece is alive in the sense that it resembles my presence by taking space in its environment and being responsive to viewers who approach the device. The sound component is only heard if someone gets close enough to the piece. The device secretly contains photographs that people can view if, and only if, they get close enough. This reflects how my liminal space is private and personal and how my identity is the nature of the liminal space I reside in. This identity

is created by the memories I have, my past in contrast with who I am now in the present.

On the top middle part on both sides of the Shahre Farang, there is an oval frame that holds a relief of an Iranian mythological creature called Simurgh (Figure 15). Simurgh lives on the Peak of Qaf Mountain in Iran, can heal any illness, and is aware of hidden secrets. There is the myth that Simurgh is so old that he sees the destruction of the world three times. 18 It is also known to purify the land. For me Simurgh represents the highest level of awareness and consciousness, which is standing on the top of my sacred liminal space and watching my transformation.

The top part of Shahre Farang has a cloudy mirror. Viewers get to see themselves in this cloudy surface, which distorts their perception of themselves (Figure 14). Thus, they can reflect on the piece with a new perspective of themselves that they obtain from the mirror. On the sides, there are two minarets, which are cylindrical structures holding domes on top of them. The domes are known as the vault of heaven, and the domes in the Shahre Farang are illuminated and cast light on the ceiling, signifying the awareness that comes from being a conscious observer (Figure 10 and 16).

The small decorative doors on the Shahre Farang reinforce the fact that this architectural piece is a house (Figure 12 and 13). The number of doors is significant and taken from Iranian architecture, which has three or sometimes five doors to enter the main room in a building. The design of the doors with geometric shapes and stained glass is taken directly from the doors from one of the most famous mosques in the

world, which is in my hometown. The mosque is called Nasir ol-molk and is now a
historic place that visitors pay to visit (Figure 8 and 9).

Figure 8. Photograph of Nasir-ol-Molk Mosque

Figure 9. Photograph of Nasir-ol-molk Mosque windows
(photo from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/15/nasir-al-mulk-pink-mosque_n_4959362.html).
Figure 8. Photograph of my version of Shahre Farang in the CU Art Museum.

Figure 9. Photograph of my version of Shahre Farang in CU Art Museum.
Figure 10. Close-up photograph of my version of the Shahre Farang.
Figure 11. Side view of my version of the Shahre Farang.
Figure 11. Photograph of viewer engaging with the Shahre Farang in the CU Art Museum.
Figure 12. Close-up photograph of the middle part of the Shahre Farang.

Figure 13. Details of the doors.
Figure 14. Details of the top part.

Figure 15. Details of the Simurgh relief in the top part of the Shahre Farang.
Figure 16. Details of the minaret and the illuminated dome that represents the vault of heaven.
Figure 17. Photograph through lens of Shahre Farang cropped traumatically.

Figure 18. Photograph through lens of Shahre Farang cropped traumatically.
Figure 19. Photograph through lens of Shahre Farang cropped traumatically.
Ch. 4 I Am a Magic Carpet

Based on discovered manuscripts from an old assassin castle at Alamut, near the Caspian Sea, magic carpets existed and were woven and sold until the late 13th century, when the science behind its creation had been suppressed and their existence was denied for several economical and moral reasons. The magic carpets became an empowering device that was mainly owned by men. In Islamic lands, there was a belief that men were not intended to fly, and that the flying carpet was a sacrilege to the order of things. Also, there was urgency that camels and horses should remain the standard means of transport.19

In the story of Queen Sheba and King Solomon, beautiful and powerful Sheba gifted a magic carpet to King Solomon as a token of her love. King Solomon was busy with building his temple and did not receive the gift. Instead, he gave it to his courtiers. Queen Sheba was heartbroken, dismissed her artisans, and never had anything to do with flying carpets again. There is another story that King Praates II from the Parthian empire in the 2nd century B.C. in modern-day Iran and Iraq, flew from the height of the Zagros Mountains on a carpet or a piece of cloth to confront his enemy, which he destroyed with fire and lightning while flying on the carpet.20

The magic carpet is a symbol for my life; the magic carpet is a symbol for a culture that does not exist. Magic carpets are products of the East, and Persian carpets are famous around the world. A magic carpet is an object that originated in the East, mostly in the myths from the Middle East and more specifically in Iran, and they have

been introduced through stories, myths, and media to people all over the world, and everyone knows about them. As opposed to normal, everyday carpets, which are objects made to be set on the ground for comfort or decoration, magic carpets are suspended in the air and are a means of transport; they operate in a liminal space. 

Magic carpets have an established identity even though we have not see or experienced them firsthand. This is similar to how my identity is established through preconceived notions of exoticization: I am suspended and do not live where I physically belong. I became objectified and exoticized while living in this liminal space, just like how magic carpets are exotic symbols in Western thought.

This series of photographs that I have created are illustrating my metamorphosis from being a female Iranian immigrant to becoming a magic carpet. In this metamorphosis, my identity has been invisible, and Westerners have projected onto me a pre-existing identity of “The Other” and made me overly visible. I am seen like a magic carpet; I am from the Middle East and feel suspended in between places. I am exoticized by others as if I am a magic carpet.

My photos contain surreal and traditional Iranian elements. In half of the photographs, there is an unidentified figure, and in the other half, the figure disappears, representing the disappearance of my identity in this new country, an identity that is sometimes invisible and, at other times, overly visible. My viewers will engage physically by circumambulating, bending, and looking through the lenses in order to see my photographs. These photographs can be viewed as a whole, though each can stand on its own. Viewers can voyeur my world differently depending on the order in which they

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view the photographs. The colors are bold and bright in the photos, adding more to the fictional quality of my life.

With this photo (Figure 20) I am breaking the fourth wall, which means I make my audience aware of the performative nature of life in a liminal space, which I created physically through the Shahre Farang. The figure in the photograph that holds the curtain is me; it demonstrates how I am becoming aware of my fictional nature in this liminal space and am willing to reveal something hidden. The viewers peep into the Shahre Farang, but I force them to peep out with this photograph. They enter a voyeuristic journey that reveals a secret for those who chose to participate.
The photograph shows a domestic space with yellow wallpaper, suggesting the sense of being trapped, as is the woman in Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Sadegh Hedayat’s “Blind Owl” also directly influences the voyeurism in this photograph and the magical realism created in the blurring of the lines between reality and fiction.

![Figure 21. Untitled](image)

This photograph (Figure 21) takes the viewers outside behind the window in the previous photo. Viewers get to see the unidentified figure more closely, though the identity is still unknown. Yet, there are elements suggesting the figure is a girl, and her clothing suggests she is from another place. The pomegranates in her hands and at her feet are exotic fruits that are originally from Iran. In the photo, they suggest “otherness.”
In a deeper context, the renowned palace of King Solomon, the receiver of the magic carpet from queen of Sheba, had columns, the capitals of which were all adorned with pomegranate forms. ²²

The distortion of the background creates a familiar yet unrecognizable place. This space in which the figure stands is in between the foreground and the background, suggesting my own in betweenness.

![Figure 22. Untitled](image)

This photo (Figure 22) brings the figure back into the domestic space, the house. Her clothing is different now, and it mimics Persian carpet patterns, suggesting the overly exoticized body through existing stereotypes. She is holding a burnt book, which

represents censorship that has influenced my past experiences and identity: I am visible only as an exoticized female figure from an exotic land. I am holding the book in my hand, revealing my desperate mental hold to what is being censored or deconstructed in the asylum—or prison—of this liminal space.

On the other side of the Shahre Farang, there are other photographs in similar places without the figure. The hand is gone from the window, and there is only the house with no one inside it (Figure 23). This photograph brings the viewers back to the domestic space, which reinforces the feeling of being trapped. The shadow of the girl behind a window is still visible. This is the closing photograph where the girl that was holding the curtain is diminished but the performance is still in action.
Figure 24. Untitled

The above photo (Figure 24) is a continuation of the photo of female figure holding pomegranates. There are four pomegranates on the ground and the figure is gone. The figure has been replaced by a carpet, which is a Persian carpet. Suggests my disappearance and transformation into an object of fantasy from an exotic land.
Figure 25. Untitled

In this photo (Figure 25), the girl is not in the domestic space anymore. There is only the burnt book left, which symbolizes that only a censored or destroyed history is left. But reveals the tight to this history and identity.
CONCLUSION

This is ultimately an autobiographical piece, and the form of the optical device is necessary to create the liminal space. While having a physical architectural and sculptural piece is essential to convey this search for home and belonging, the third space is the place where the performative, hybrid identity develops.

I illustrated my post-immigration experience of being seen and exoticized through photographs, which have been housed in an optical device where a liminal space is created. The viewers become voyeurs into my life and have the chance to engage physically with my work and, therefore, my experience.

I hope that through this piece I can expose the existence of the liminal space in an immigrant's life. My piece allows viewers to look at immigrants’ experiences from a safe distance. With my project, I wanted to show how life in a liminal space creates an identity that is both visible and invisible, deconstructed and recreated. I want to share the experience of my metamorphosis from a person with a country and culture to a magic carpet without belonging and alive only through pre-constructed personas.

My challenge was how to tell my story as an allegory that invites viewers to reflect on the piece through emotional connection to my work. I am only showing part and glimpses of my life. My viewers also are only able to see part of the photographs and attempt to see the whole while the traumatic cropping and framing becomes the barrier. The space that I live in now is a sacred space in which I find myself able to grow by finding the balance between being both invisible and overly visible.
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