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# THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY FOR IRANIAN AND IRANIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN DIASPORA

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THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY FOR IRANIAN AND IRANIAN-  
AMERICAN WOMEN IN THE AMERICAN DIASPORA

by

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A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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Iranian immigration to the United States began in the 1940s, and escalated after the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Throughout the late 1970s and 1980s, thousands of Iranians immigrated or became exiles or refugees all over the world and significant numbers settled in the United States to escape persecution based on political, religious, or ethnic differences. The political uprising beginning in 1977, supported by a large and diverse public, included Iranians of all political and religious persuasion, united in their opposition to the current political regime and its leader the Pahlavi Reza Shah's repressive policies. Within a short period, after the replacement of the Shah it became clear that the new political power structure was just as repressive and unwilling to tolerate dissent. By 1980, the Ayatollah Khomeini and the clerics consolidated their power and instituted a series of policies to silence their critics. Dissidents, political and religious, including Marxist, Islamic, along with women, and religious minorities were jailed and some executed. Purges of political parties and universities quickly followed, in tandem with strict control of the media including the closing of newspapers. Religious dress codes, including women mandatorily wearing the veil in public, were strictly enforced. The Islamic Republic instituted harsh restrictions on women's freedoms by forcing the veil on women in public, limiting their political activism and severely restricting their movements in public. Large portions of the population including intellectuals, secularists, and religious minorities, and women, with the financial means to do so, quickly began to leave Iran to escape execution or imprisonment. It was this intense climate of fear that led to the mass exodus of Iranians into scattered areas of the world and particularly the United States.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the social consequences of the Iranian Revolution see: Nikki R. Keddie and Eric Hooglund,

Unlike many who immigrate with the intention of permanent settlement, many Iranians believed that the political and religious persecutions occurring under Khomeini and the new Islamic regime were only temporary and therefore they believed their exile would be only temporary also. In subsequent years, some families returned to Iran, but many more remained as persecution of various forms continued and as parents and their children, born in either Iran or the U.S., made the United States their home. The 2000 U.S. Census counted the Iranian-American population at 338, 226. Although, many believe that this number is disproportionately low because of the reluctance of some “to identify their country of origin due to troubled relations between the United States and Iran.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite their many years living in the United States and away from Iran, many Iranians have expressed feelings of alienation from both Iranian and American culture and as a result have developed a “hybrid” identity. Iranian and Iranian-American women have been especially vocal about feeling this lost sense of identity and of traveling between two worlds. When Iranian and Iranian-American women write about their identity, whether in poems, essays, memoirs, or blogs, they frequently articulate its

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eds. *The Iranian Revolution & the Islamic Republic* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1986), Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban and the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran's Islamic Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis McIntosh, “Iranian-Americans Reported Among Most Highly Educated in U.S.; Iranian-Americans Also Contribute Substantially to the U.S. Economy,” Major U.S. and World Publications, News Wire Services, January 13, 2004, Lexis Nexis Academic, <http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxy.lib.siu.edu/us/lnacademic/search/homesubmitForm.do/> (accessed April 16, 2010).

complexity by drawing on their experiences of trying to reconcile their Iranian heritage and culture with their residency or citizenship in America.

Many women in the Iranian diaspora, since 1979 experience “double jeopardy” in regard to discrimination or “feel a dual marginality”.<sup>3</sup> Many continue to face inequality, in their homes or/ and the society as a whole based on gender and they face discrimination and harassment based on their Iranian heritage. Both of these forms of inequality and discrimination, this intersection of gender and nationality, are integral to the formation and maintenance of the hybridized identity of women in the diaspora. As many Iranian women embrace, the more liberated roles assigned to women in the United States, their own concepts of gender, coupled with others expectations, have not always been as straightforward as it would seem. They relate feeling pulled in several directions regarding the traditional Iranian expectations of women, along with the new, modern, American expectations. Second-generations Iranians especially voice their confusion and frustration with weighing their own desires over their families’ expectations of them. A feeling of alienation from both cultures also contributes to their sense of dislocation. They express feeling like outcasts from both countries, Iran and the United States, because they are physically separated from Iran and socially and culturally separated from America.

One way in which Iranian and Iranian-American women have tried to close this social and cultural gap and to connect emotionally with other Iranians in the diaspora is through writing. Within the last decade as poets, novelists and memoirists, many Iranian

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<sup>3</sup> Zohreh T. Sullivan, *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 236.

and Iranian-American women have achieved great levels of success in the U.S. literary scene.<sup>4</sup> It is especially through writing that they have expressed their feelings regarding their relationship to Iran and the United States and the way in which both places contribute to their identity as women. These works have been important vehicles for the writers to “articulate the ways that women respond to, remember, and utter their ‘Iranian-ness.’”<sup>5</sup> This is one venue for women in the diaspora to communicate with other Iranian women about their experiences in Iran and America, but it has also been a venue for continuing the Iranian tradition of storytelling.

Along with an examination of Iranian and Iranian-American women’s attempts to rearticulate their identity, I will be utilizing William Safran’s six-point definition of diaspora to further explore how Iranian women fit into the diasporic community. According to Safran, “expatriate minority communities whose members share several of the following characteristics” can be defined as a diaspora:

- 1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from an original “center” to two or more “peripheral” or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their

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<sup>4</sup> For example, Tara Bahrapour, *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), Gelareh Asayesh, *Saffron Sky: A Life between Iran and America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), Farideh Goldin, *Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2003), Firoozeh Dumas, *Funny in Farsi: Growing Up Iranian in America* (New York: Villard, 2003), Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* (New York: Random House, 2004), Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Persis M. Karim, ed., *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been: New Writing by Women of the Iranian Diaspora* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2006).

original homeland –its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not –and perhaps cannot be –fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendents would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.<sup>6</sup>

Safran recognizes that not all members of a diaspora will fit into each category.

The majority of Iranian and Iranian-American women on various levels conform to most of these criteria, yet just as important are the areas in which particular groups or minorities within the diasporic community do not fit. Using this model will help to explore the differences that do exist within the community. Furthermore, within this context of shared, and sometimes divergent, objectives, goals, attachments, and beliefs, the Iranian diasporic community in the United States very much fits in with Benedict Anderson’s concept of an “imagined community.”<sup>7</sup> In particular, the cultural symbols associated with Iran and Iranianness such as the Persian language, religion, rituals and a common history, all of which Anderson calls “cultural artefacts” help to unite a community that is no longer fixed to an Iranian physical, geographic space.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora* 1, no.1 (1991): 83-84.

<sup>7</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

## General Overview of the Iranian Diaspora in the United States

Multiple scholars argue that this “imagined community” in the United States is unique as an immigrant community in several ways.<sup>9</sup> As Ali Mostashari from MIT’s Iranian Studies group states, the majority of Iranians who came to the United States after the Iranian Revolution were “people of education and assets.”<sup>10</sup> Unlike most immigrant communities in the United States, Iranians did not arrive for purely economic reasons. Most came to the United States seeking educational opportunities or escape from persecution. In the U.S., Iranian levels of education far exceed the national average, in respect to university and graduate degree. The Iranian-American community also tends to be on average affluent with a median household and family income 20% higher than the national average.<sup>11</sup> One study conducted found that job opportunities, the intellectual environment, and education were the most important factors for Iranian and Iranian-Americans when deciding where to live in the U.S.<sup>12</sup> These factors help explain the high concentration of Iranian-American communities in metropolitan areas, especially Los Angeles which has the largest population in the United States. Half of all Iranians and

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<sup>9</sup> One of the earliest studies to note this is by Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Georges Sabagh in their paper, “High Status Immigrants: A Statistical Profile of Iranians in the United States,” *Iranian Studies* 21, no. 3/4 (1988), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4310603>.

<sup>10</sup> McIntosh, “Iranian-Americans Reported Among Most Highly Educated in U.S.”

<sup>11</sup> A study conducted by MIT based on the 2000 U.S. Census found that “Iranians over 25 years old who have obtained a bachelor’s degree or higher was at 57.2% in comparison to 24.4% for the rest of the U.S. population.” Ali Mostashari and Ali Khodamhosseini, Iranian Studies Group at MIT, “An Overview of Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Iranian-American Community based on the 2000 U.S. Census,” February 2004. [http://isgmit.org/projectsstorage/census/Socioeconomic\\_Iran\\_American\\_Census2000\\_Final.pdf/](http://isgmit.org/projectsstorage/census/Socioeconomic_Iran_American_Census2000_Final.pdf/) (accessed April 5, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Iranian Studies Group at MIT, “MIT ISG Iranian-American Community Survey 2005,” <http://web.mit.edu/isg/surveysummary.htm/> (accessed April 5, 2010).

Iranian-Americans in the U.S. live in California with New York and the Washington D.C. area falling distantly behind.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding broad terms of identification for those of Iranian descent living in the United States, many have chosen to identify themselves as Iranian-Americans, while many also continue to refer to themselves as simply Iranians or Persians. This choice of name identification is based on a number of factors, such as the number of years they've lived in the U.S. or place of birth. Just as with many other ethnic groups, even after spending the majority or all of their lives in the United States, some will continue to see and call themselves Iranian, preferring to identify with their Iranian place of birth or heritage.<sup>14</sup> In addition, there are those, especially in the case of Persians, who feel that the term Iranian has such negative connotations in the U.S. that they wish to disassociate from that name and the ideas that are often associated with it. On the other hand, those who were ethnic minorities in Iran, such as Jews, Baha'is, and Armenians, in particular, continue to identify as both Iranian and their ethnic or religious background. Fewer Iranian Muslims identify so strongly with their religion, most simply identify as Iranian or Iranian-American.<sup>15</sup> As multiple scholars note, the majority of Iranians, particularly Muslims living in the United States, are secular or non-practicing, which is not surprising

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<sup>13</sup> Modarres, Ali, "Settlement Patterns of Iranians in the United States," *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1 (1998): 31-49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4311117>.

<sup>14</sup> For this reason, I will continue to refer to the collective members of the Iranian diaspora as Iranian and Iranian-American, as opposed to simply Iranian-Americans, except in specific cases in which it is apparent that the particular individual prefers one to the other or another term. This is not to suggest that these are the only two ethnic identifications made. Some in the diaspora prefer the term Persians, or identify with an ethnic group such as Baha'is, and sometimes, in combination with their religion such as Jewish or Zoroastrian. Because I'm not focusing on ethnic divisions or distinctions for manageability's sake, I have chosen to limit the general terms used.

<sup>15</sup> Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "Internal Ethnicity: Iranians in Los Angeles," *Sociological Perspectives* 40, no. 3 (1997): 387-408.

considering that the majority of Iranian Muslims persecuted for not conforming to the new Islamic policies and who left during the Revolution, were secular.<sup>16</sup>

### **Nostalgia and Myth: Recreating the Homeland**

Beginning with the nationalizing movement in the 1930s, Reza Shah promoted a reimagining of Iran's glorious past with its pre-Islamic ancient Persian history and downplayed its Islamic culture.<sup>17</sup> One of the first ideological changes that Khomeini stressed was to reverse this policy and instead to promote "Islamic history, belief, and revolutionary themes...in the media, movies, schools, and the arts."<sup>18</sup> These two, often conflicting, versions of Iranian history are also reflected in women's memories of Iran in which they also privilege one set of memories, one version of their past, over another. When discussing their Iranian past women often focus on their memories of oppression, abuse, and the upheavals of the Revolution (in many cases part of their reason for leaving), but overwhelmingly when explaining their reasons for missing Iran, they evoke their memories of a cultural homeland in which they belong to the land, the history, and the people. A Baha'i educator, named Lily, who left Iran in 1979 "with two suitcases ...as if [she] were to return in three weeks" identifies particular characteristics of Iranian life and people that she misses most:

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<sup>16</sup> Georges Sabagh and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, "Secular Immigrants: Religiosity and Ethnicity Among Iranian Muslims in Los Angeles," in *Muslim Communities in North America*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and Jane Idleman Smith, 445-473 (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994).

<sup>17</sup> Afshin Marashi, *Nationalizing Iran: Culture, Power, and the State, 1870-1940* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

<sup>18</sup> John L. Esposito, *Islam and Politics*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1998), 217.

Most of all I miss our people, and I miss our mountains. Being Iranian is so many things. It is language, our books, culture, music, the way people look, the eyes, the eye contact... I used to live in Thailand ...and ...lots of Iranians used to come to Thailand. They were mostly Hezbollahi people with whom I didn't want to associate, but I would stand many a time in the corner and just watch them because they were young Iranians. Maybe it's very sentimental. Most probably it is.<sup>19</sup>

Iran is not remembered just as a geographical region or as a place of birth, but as a community possessing particular cultural traits and with people reflecting those traits. Sometimes the “collective memory” that is evoked isn't necessarily about the homeland itself but more about the Iranian people and about sharing “a sense of history, of living with [their] own past.”<sup>20</sup> Saeed-Vafa describes the connection that she has with other Iranians as “deeper and stronger than [she] experience[s] elsewhere”. The connection that she has is based on mutual personal experience and a shared history and nationality is integral to that. “I come from the same culture and language – I have suffered as a child, a youth, as a teenager, and as a grown woman in and out of marriage, so that my problems are similar to what other Iranian women go through.”<sup>21</sup> Cultural signifiers like “language” and “music” resonate with Iranians in exile as their connection to a lost past retrievable through other Iranians in exile. In many ways, traditions and cultural artifacts belong to a collective memory of a life that they no longer have.

Immigrants and exiles commonly remember a romanticized and idealized version of their homeland, as Safran's definition of diaspora attests, not only have they “been

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<sup>19</sup> Lily, interview by Zohreh Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 216.

<sup>20</sup> Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, interview by Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 232.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

dispersed from a specific original “center” but they also “retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements.”<sup>22</sup> Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa who left Iran in 1983 speaks to this vision of her lost homeland,

What I miss is a way of relating to people that I don’t and can’t have here. Here it is hard to see myself as part of American history, whereas I can see myself as part of Iranian history. To be honest, what I really miss are the streets, all the buildings that were part of my childhood and youth... I want to go and see those places even if they are all destroyed and gone. So if there is a magic in one’s childhood and youth, it’s all in those memories. My roots are not in contemporary Tehran. My roots go far back – those roots were cut, damaged, severed somewhere and sometime.<sup>23</sup>

As many women relate, part of the mythologizing of their homeland is due in part to the fact their homeland of memory is not reflected in the Iran that they see now, either in person through visits or secondhand through the media. Many Iranians hold onto a romanticized view of the past “as a way...to forget the present.” The present Iran seems just as foreign to some Iranians as the United States, as Zia Ashraf Nasr states, “The present Iran is not the country I love. I don’t see the present Iran as my own.”<sup>24</sup>

One common theme prevalent in several memoirs is the existence of two Irans, the fantastical Iran of memory and the current Iran associated with the Islamic Republic. In her memoirs of growing up in the United States and moving to Iran as an adult, Azadeh Moaveni recounts her journey of self discovery in which her identity shifts from

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<sup>22</sup> Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies,” 83.

<sup>23</sup> Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa, interview by Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 233.

<sup>24</sup> Zia Ashraf Nasr, interview by Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 252.

being an Iranian in California to being an American in Iran. Moaveni recalls that as a child “raised on the distorting myths of exile” she imagined herself “a Persian princess.” Like other Iranians and Iranian-Americans in 1980s America, her family preferred to identify themselves as Persians instead of Iranians to disassociate themselves from ‘the modern country, the hostage-taking’ Iran.<sup>25</sup>

There is also the manner that Iranians, even before the Islamic Republic, were “split into two.” As Roya Hakakian describes it, she and “every thinking person” in Iran, in order to survive SAVAK (the Shah’s secret police force), lived separate lives in private and in public. She recalls how in public Iranians trying to not rouse suspicion or draw attention to themselves, learned to speak “in metaphors” and “allusions” to hide their true thoughts about the regime.<sup>26</sup> Only in private with their families were they able to express themselves honestly. In terms of memories of Iran, Iranian women seem to have compartmentalized in the same way. Their happy memory of Iran with their families is rarely spoken about in relation to the political turmoil occurring around them.

When visiting Tehran as a child, Moaveni describes the freedom and liberation she experiences “romp[ing] about freely” in mulberry orchards, visiting pastry shops and eating “saffron-colored” ice cream “perfumed with rose water.”<sup>27</sup> Romanticizing her memories of Iran, Moaveni draws a clear distinction between her American childhood and her trips to Iran. The childhood that she fantasizes about is romantic, luxurious, safe

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<sup>25</sup> Azadeh Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America and American in Iran* (New York: Public Affairs, 2005), vii.

<sup>26</sup> Roya Hakakian, *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2004), 37.

<sup>27</sup> Moaveni, *Lipstick Jihad*, 4.

and void of all worries, dangers and responsibilities, as opposed to her childhood in America.

This magical imagery is also invoked in Gelareh Asayesh's memoir *Saffron Sky* in which the quiet and peace that she experiences in one particular summer in Maryland reminds her of her long lost past "of childhood days in Iran, when activity ceased in the afternoon sun, and the neighborhood slumbered in silence, and [her] grandfather's garden filled with the sound of the wind in the apricot trees."<sup>28</sup> Her grandfather's garden is featured prominently in her memoir, punctuating her narrative is the imagery of the "smooth texture" of the "willow trees" and "the white cherry blossoms mingled ethereally with the soft pink blossoms of Japanese quince."<sup>29</sup> Much Like Moaveni's description, Asayesh remembers Iran as a place void of responsibility and conjures a world that is romantic and lush. This is not a place of political or social discontent, but a quiet yet blossoming ethereal garden made for her and her family.

### **The Effect of Americanness on Iranian Identities**

Iranian-American women describe their childhoods in terms of reconciling the two disparate parts of their heritage or nationality and the experience of traveling between two worlds. Iranian and Iranian-American identities are also subject to revision through their interactions with Americans and American culture. The United States and its values and culture have played a large part in how this diasporic group identifies itself. The relationship of Iranians and Iranian-Americans women with their new home in the

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<sup>28</sup> Gelareh Asayesh, *Saffron Sky: A Life between Iran and America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), x.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

U.S. is particularly problematized on two fronts, their status as outsiders and their encounters with Americans who treat them as such and the obstacles that they face due to cultural differences. These are all issues that substantiate and conform to Safran's third point that diasporic groups "believe that they are not...fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it."<sup>30</sup> This is especially evident in women's recollections of American's attitudes toward them in general as "others" and during the Iran hostage crisis of 1979 -1981, in which Iranians took hostage of Americans at the Embassy in Tehran. The anti-Iranian remarks and comments that women received were clearly perceived by them as an attack not on their gender, but on their Iranianness. Their nationality trumped gender as the discriminatory factor in this instance. During this time, as Tara Fatemi remembers, having one American parent and being born in the United States wasn't enough to stave off children's insults, such as "You're not half American/you are one hundred percent/I-rain-e-an."<sup>31</sup> In these instances, others decided who Iranian-American children were; their identity determined for them based on this one perceived difference.

Another Iranian-American woman, who writes under the penname PAZ, recalls her mother, "a woman who was fiercely proud of her country" in 1979 telling her not to tell people that she was Iranian. Not only was this confusing for her as a young child, but also she began to feel that she "was somehow to blame" for the troubles that she saw on the nightly news regarding the hostages. Soon not only was she not Iranian, but she

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<sup>30</sup> Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies," 83.

<sup>31</sup> Tara Fatemi, "My Turn," in *A World Between: Poems, Short Stories, and Essays by Iranian-Americans*, ed. Persis M. Karim and Mohammad Mehdi Khorrami, 46 (New York: George Braziller, 1999).

“became Greek” to further hide her true identity.<sup>32</sup> PAZ’s story of alienation from American schoolmates who mercilessly taunted her and sang songs of how they were “gonna blow you up damn I-raynian” speaks to how all Iranians and Iranian Americans during this time were treated as complicit in the hostage crisis. These children confronted issues of nationality, heritage and identity through the lens of discriminatory and racist persecution.<sup>33</sup>

Children were not the only ones who suffered from these kinds of insults. An Iranian woman identified by the pseudonym Pari, recalls being in a graduate seminar in 1981 and finding it impossible to identify herself as Iranian to her fellow graduate students “[n]ot because [she] was ashamed” but because she “knew that all these people who were sitting around the table had some sort of anger at Iranians.”<sup>34</sup> While this group of students may or may not have felt angry with her “the frenzy of the atmosphere” in which bumper stickers on people’s cars said “Nuke Iran” and “Iranians: Go Home” or “We Play Cowboys and Iranians” quickly revealed the opinions of some Americans.<sup>35</sup> Pari recalled a “painful” Thanksgiving dinner, which she attended in the same year in which the American hosts declared that, “Iranians are shits. We should get the hostages out and exterminate the entire land.”<sup>36</sup> Sentiments such as this make it understandable why so many Iranians during this time were reluctant to reveal to Americans that they

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<sup>32</sup> PAZ, “1979,” in *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been*, 68.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Pari, interview by Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 226.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, Dumas, *Funny in Farsi*, 36.

<sup>36</sup> Pari, interview by Sullivan, *Exiled Memories*, 227.

were Iranian or of Iranian parentage and it explains why so many felt like outsiders, alienated from American life.

Many of the same writers who discuss the effect of American anti-Iranian attitudes also note how they tried to make sense of their new emerging identities, which were not based solely on their Iranian past or their present Americanness, but a hybrid of the two. The attention they received for not being blond and blue-eyed, or for their “foreignness” leads to the questions that they themselves present about their identity. Through their writings, many Iranian and Iranian American women continue to grapple with a clear definition of who they are. Hearing and telling stories of their Iranian homeland, learning the Persian language, visiting Iran and embracing aspects of Iranian history and culture is one facet of their identities and yet, they also embrace many aspects of American culture and values which are at times at odds with their Iranian heritage. The proper role of gender and sexuality is one issue in particular that Iranian and Iranian-American women have struggled with in the United States.

The poet Sanaz Banu Nikaein expresses this tension of adopting American societal norms while seemingly rejecting those of tradition. In her poem “Bad”, she identifies herself as such because her physical appearance, her attitude toward sex, career and marriage are all based on her decision to be independent and transgress the boundaries of traditionally acceptable Iranian womanhood. Having facial piercings, blue hair and posing “nude for arts students” are all things that are relatively accepted in the United States as part a young adults life, yet are things, which she recognizes as “bad” in “the eyes of [her] community”. Her choice “to disobey [her] husband/have a career...and control birth without his permission” are other transgressions that she feels “no shame”

for, instead “proud” and yet realizes that to make these choices she will be “disown[ed]” by her community and in turn, she chooses to “disown” the Iranian culture that does not grant these freedoms.<sup>37</sup>

### **Elements of Iranianness in U.S.**

The United States’ more liberal attitudes toward women’s equality and sexual freedom are one aspect affecting their identity that Iranian and Iranian-American women have embraced. The continued adherence to certain Iranian values and beliefs in the United States is disappointing for some women especially for those who left Iran with the hopes that they would experience a more liberated country with greater opportunities for women. This was especially disappointing and discouraging for women who moved to the United States with husbands who strongly believed in the strict adherence to the “proper” gender roles that existed in Iran.

The adherence to a sexual double standard by Iranian men in the diaspora is one way in which the two identities continue to clash. Iranian women continuously try to come to terms with who they are and how they want to define themselves and must contend with two sets of societal values regarding their personal lives. Many women find Iranian men who subscribe to traditional notions of sexuality and dating, particularly problematic. Based on a sociological survey of young Iranians in Los Angeles, Shideh Hanassab found that “tension has arisen” due to parents “struggle[s] to retain their traditional culture” and their children’s “new set of values and new ways of thinking

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<sup>37</sup> Sanaz Banu Nikaein, “Bad” in *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been*, 196.

about sexual and romantic relationships.”<sup>38</sup> Hanassab’s research found that Iranian men will date and have sex with both Iranian and American women but, prefer to marry Iranian women who are virgins or at least inexperienced, because, as one male stated “they think that’s the way it should be for Iranians...Now that I think about it, I prefer it too. Maybe there was a reason that our culture has set up these standards.”<sup>39</sup>

Iranian-American women in particular are attuned to this double standard and recognize it as a major problem regarding dating and marriage with Iranian men. One female blogger voiced her frustration over this in a piece titled “The Renewed Virgin”:

If I were to ask a Persian man to paint me a picture of their ideal girl, I have a feeling it would be something like this: Young, good looking, hard working, smart, and inexperienced. If it seems like I'm drawing stereotypes at this point, you're probably right, I am. But after being the subject of interest of a number of Persian men looking to train me into their running mate in the race that is marriage, it's hard to rule out the repeating pattern of educated and accomplished Iranian men looking for a wife 10 years younger than them. The burning question remains, what has led to this hypocrisy?<sup>40</sup>

Iranian and Iranian-American women are discovering that as they become more independent and experienced, Iranian men prefer to marry women who conform to a more traditional and Iranian standard of womanhood. One question that they are asking is where does this leave them? Some women are trying to change the way Iranian men

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<sup>38</sup> Shideh Hanassab, “Sexuality, Dating, and Double Standards: Young Iranian Immigrants in Los Angeles,” *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1, (1998): 74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4311119>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Rana Rabei, “The Renewed Virgin,” *Iranian.com*, posted December 1, 2006, <http://www.iranian.com/Shorts/2006/dec2006.html#1/> (accessed April 19, 2010).

regard women by giving advice about how to treat Iranian women and about what Iranian women are looking for in a mate.

Iranian and Iranian-American women's writings attest to the strong hold that Iranian culture and values continues to have within the diasporic community. This is in part a reflection of the fourth part of Safran's definition of diaspora in which Iranians continue to "regard [Iran] as their true, ideal home."<sup>41</sup> Even if they do not believe that they will permanently return there, there is a sense that by retaining the cultural and societal values that they associate with the homeland, they are creating a smaller version of Iran in their home and community.

Language is one important way that members of the Iranian diaspora have managed to retain their cultural heritage and create a sense of home in their new communities. Anderson credits cultural artifacts and especially language as one of the main factors in creating national consciousness. Even though the diasporic community does not constitute a nation, as a community created and sustained through adherence to cultural values and symbols, the analogy applies. Just as nations unite and connect through imagined concepts, the diasporic community creates or recreates its own consciousness through many of these same cultural artifacts. Through the written word and "print capitalism," Iranians dispersed over wide areas and throughout the world are able to communicate their experiences and desires with Iranians that they have never met and continue a sense of community based on their commonalities, especially their Iranian heritage.<sup>42</sup> Books and websites created by Iranians and Iranian-Americans are frequently

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<sup>41</sup> Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies," 83.

<sup>42</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 39.

available in Persian, English or both. The Persian language is very much alive in the community as evidenced by the large numbers of newspapers, journals, and websites aimed at the diasporic community that appears in Persian. For the many that do not read or speak Persian and want to learn, most metropolitan areas have Persian language schools or courses.

Iranian-American Cristina Killingsworth writes about rediscovering her Iranian roots and embracing her Iranian heritage and identity, as she grows older. Having “never been to Iran” and being monolingual, she sees it as “[her] job to learn the [Persian] language that [her] parents never taught [her].” Killingsworth recognizes that she never considered herself Iranian before, but “an American with an Iranian mother.”<sup>43</sup> She credits her newfound Iranian identity with being “introduced to the culture in [a] significant way” at The University of Texas and its Middle Eastern program.<sup>44</sup> This idea that engagement with the Iranian culture serves as a catalyst or adhesive for Iranian identity was earlier noted by sociologist Ali Akbar Mahdi who surveyed second-generation Iranians in the late 1990s and found that “parents [who] engaged their children in cultural and social activities associated with Iranian culture and community” were “more likely...to identify themselves as either “Iranian” or “Iranian-American.”<sup>45</sup>

Some parents speak of holding onto traditional Iranian cultural symbols not for themselves but so their children will have a more real connection to Iran. For example,

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<sup>43</sup> Cristina Killingsworth, “Am I a Hybrid?” in *Hyphenated Identities: Second-Generation Iranian-Americans Speak*, ed. Tara Wilcox-Ghanoonparvar, 42(Costa Mesa, Calif.: Mazda Publishers, 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Killingsworth, “Am I a Hybrid?” 43.

<sup>45</sup> Ali Akbar Mahdi, “Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Iranians in the United States,” *Iranian Studies* 31, no. 1, (1998): 85, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4311120>.

one Iranian woman wrote of how she continues to celebrate the Persian New Year, Nowruz, “for [her] children’s sake” even though the “celebrations do not stir the same emotions and excitement as before.”<sup>46</sup> Mohammad A. Chaichian found in his study of Iranian immigrants in Iowa, that women in particular were “committed to socialize their children based on Iranian cultural values in order to guarantee some degree of ethnic and cultural continuity.”<sup>47</sup> Persian cultural centers scattered throughout America are used by parents as another way of engaging their children with Iranian cultural symbols. As one woman in Berkeley, California during a Nowruz festival explains, “We want our children to be exposed to the culture, to learn and know about that culture. That’s one of (the center’s) missions... We try hard to celebrate it, to keep the culture alive.”<sup>48</sup> The founder of the publication *Second Generations* also contends that aspects of Iranian culture can be maintained in the United States and that their children do not have “to grow up outside of Iranian culture.”<sup>49</sup>

The cultural symbols and rituals associated with Iran, such as food, cooking, and storytelling appear to have a most lasting and positive hold on women. As one woman in California explains upon receiving a sculpture made in her small hometown in Iran, “I

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<sup>46</sup> Shahrzad Sepanlou, “Shahrzad’s Blog-The Diary of a Singer”, posted March 20, 2010, <http://sepanlou.blogspot.com/search?q=identity> (accessed April 19, 2010).

<sup>47</sup> Mohammad A. Chaichian, “First Generation Iranian Immigrants and the Question of Cultural Identity: The Case of Iowa,” *International Migration Review* 31, no. 3 (1997): 623, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2547288>.

<sup>48</sup> Steve Holgate, “Iranians in America Celebrate Nowruz; Celebration Strengthens Sense of Community among Iranian Americans,” State Department, March 18, 2004, Federal Information and News Dispatch, Lexis Nexis Academic, <http://www.lexisnexis.com/us/lnacademic/search/homesubmitForm.do/> (accessed April 16, 2010).

<sup>49</sup> Termeh Rassi, “Searching For and Talking About Identity,” *Iranian.com*, <http://www.iranian.com/Sep95/Termeh.html/> (accessed April 19, 2010).

felt that I had brought a piece of my lost identity, something I had been forced to leave behind, into my life.”<sup>50</sup> One common theme utilized by Iranian-American women to identify their links to the homeland is the food native to Iran. Persis M. Karim’s poem “Pomegranates,” draws on her memory of her family, newly arrived to the United States and how “they planted olive, almond, quince, pomegranate/[t]o remind them of their foreignness.” While her parents planted the trees “[t]o root themselves in their new home” Karim tells of the “embarrassment” of finding this “leathery bulb” in the school lunch her mother packed for her. The eating of the foreign fruit “is a slow and exacting endeavor, an act of worship” which clearly could not be performed “without being conspicuous.” The ritual- like aspect of eating a pomegranate, which she describes while fully appreciated as an adult, for a child marks one as suspect, different and is fodder for “embarrassment.”<sup>51</sup>

### **The Future of Iranian-American Identity**

Killingsworth, among others, mentions that another aspect of the awakening of her Iranian identity is the effect of the current anti-Middle Eastern atmosphere within some sectors of American society. Much like other writers who speak of being unable to hide their Iranianness because of “her Middle Eastern features, her accent, her family or her past,” Killingsworth believes that because of this discrimination often “the rest of the population chooses [her identity] for her.” Within this context, all Iranians are “Arabs,”

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<sup>50</sup> Nazy Kaviani, “My Identity,” *Iranian.com*, May 22, 2007, <http://www.iranian.com/Kaviani/2007/May/Identity/index.html/> (accessed April 19, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> Persis M. Karim, “Pomegranates,” in *Let Me Tell You Where I’ve Been*, 102.

“Muslim,” “terrorists,” who are “against the Israelis,” and “disrespect our women.” The importance for Killingsworth for both claiming and presenting a more accurate Iranian identity is to help “preserve it and its reputation” and “to maintain a good name for the Middle Eastern and Iranian people.”<sup>52</sup> This desire to protect the notion of Iranianness corresponds well with Safran’s final two points in his definition of diaspora. The members of a proper diasporic community “believe that they should, collectively be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their homeland” and “they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another and their ethnocommunal consciousness...[is] defined by [its] existence.”<sup>53</sup> Iranian-Americans such as Killingsworth may not be committed to the actual, physical homeland, but they are committed to maintaining and restoring the homeland’s reputation and its members. As one woman simply puts it, “I want people to think highly of Iran, because it is a great place, the land of our ancestors.”<sup>54</sup>

This is evident within the rest of the diaspora as well. After the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks and George W. Bush’s subsequent “Axis of Evil” speech, private and public agencies used racial profiling to enforce new restrictions on Iranians and Iranian-Americans access to travel. Hate crimes, including violence and vandalism, were committed against Middle Easterners, including Iranians and even those who “looked”

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<sup>52</sup> Killingsworth, “Am I a Hybrid?” in *Hyphenated Identities*, 44.

<sup>53</sup> Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies,” 84.

<sup>54</sup> Nazanin Ghassemlian, “Dr. Ahmadinejad is Blowing Up (My Identity),” *Iranian.com*, April 12, 2007, <http://www.iranian.com/Diaspora/2007/April/Identity/index.html/> (accessed April 19, 2010).

Middle Eastern.<sup>55</sup> The discrimination that many experienced led to a re-evaluation of their public image and a reassessment of their participation in politics. Despite their high achievements in both the public and the private sectors, as owners and CEOs of successful businesses, and university professors, in particular, Iranian-Americans have been hesitant to seek public office and participate further in civil activity. The highest office held by an Iranian-American is as mayor of Beverly Hills, CA.

Recently, organizations, websites and newspapers created for the Iranian diaspora are calling for greater Iranian-American participation in politics by running for public office and voting. A greater participation in politics is viewed as one way to actively create and influence policies important to Iranian-Americans and to have an active voice in the mainstream of American politics. In addition, this would enable the community to change the image that is associated with Iranians, to actual put a face to the people that are so negatively, identified with the Islamic Republic. These same organizations such as Alliance of Iranian Americans, National Iranian American Council, Public Affairs Alliance of Iranian Americans and the newspapers, Iran Times and Payvand are educating the Iranian diaspora on the importance of an accurate census count. Calling on Iranians and Iranian-Americans to fill out their 2010 U.S. Census forms and to write in their nationality to ensure that they are counted, is just one of the ways in which the modern generation of Iranian-Americans are showing how their two identities,

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<sup>55</sup> For an in-depth look at the effect of September 11, 2001 inspired discrimination on Iranians, Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans see Sara Mahdavi, "Held Hostage: Identity Citizenship of Iranian Americans" *Texas Journal on Civil Liberties & Civil Rights* 11, no. 2, (Spring 2006): 211-244, *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed April 25, 2010), or Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

despite conflicting at times, will be harnessed to enable political and personal power intrinsic to self identification.

## **Conclusion**

The mobilization projects for increasing political participation is one example, of many, of how the Iranian diaspora is reaching out to its community on the basis of shared ethnic identity to create positive change for their communities and their image, for themselves and for others. The desired result of Iranians and Iranian-Americans becoming more invested and active in both communities has the potential for strengthening both identities.

The confusion and fluidity of identity that many experience in all communities, amongst all peoples, is evident within the Iranian-American communities as well. For some, it is because Iran has changed so dramatically in the past thirty years and therefore their relationship to the homeland has changed, for some the homeland is even somewhere, which they don't recognize or wish to return. For many women who came to the United States before or during the Islamic Revolution, the home that they remember is no longer there. The culture has changed; the people have changed in part simply because of the passage of time, but also because the ethnic, religious and political pluralism that they remember has been strictly compromised since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The sense of isolation that many feel in the United States is further exacerbated by cultural, linguistic or religious differences.

For those whom Iran was the home of their parents and grandparents, the "magical land" where they for only a short time lived or visited, Iran serves as one

reminder of their difference from American women. The poet Fatemi explores how the image that others have of her, effects that image that she has of herself, “I am invisible already/ I cannot see who I am / only who I am not.”<sup>56</sup> As children, these women often saw Iran as the site of their difference, in both positive and negative ways. Informed by their experiences in America, Iran became the place in which their frustrations and fantasies could be directed. Reconciling their two often opposing identities has been and continues to be an ongoing project.

Iranian and Iranian-American women in some ways are picking and choosing what elements in American culture that they want to identify with. The social values such as freedom of expression, freedom of choice in terms of sexuality, career, and marriage are values which many Iranian and Iranian-American women appear to embrace. At the same time, the picking and choosing also occurs regarding their Iranian heritage. Cultural symbols such as language, food, national holidays and history appear to be the qualities of Iran that women feel most comfortable and eager to retain or introduce into their lives and are maintained or become a part of their identity. As some women feel troubled or confused by the hybrid identity that they have in America, others see it as having “the best of both worlds.”<sup>57</sup>

The repeated references and questioning of their “hybrid” identities in Iranian and Iranian-American women’s work is significant for understanding how identity becomes a major source of confusion for those whose heritage and nationality have traveled between

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<sup>56</sup> Tara Fatemi, “Five P.M. Express,” in *A World Between*, 49.

<sup>57</sup> Kaviani, “My Identity” May 22, 2007, *Iranian.com*, <http://www.iranian.com/Kaviani/2007/May/Identity/index.html/> (accessed April 19, 2010).

two worlds. National cultural identity is not confined by geographic space and continues outside of political boundaries. The continued adherence to Iranian identity in the diaspora speaks to the power of nationalism and the power of cultural symbols as representatives of meaning. Cultural symbols and traditions are not confined by geography and as long as they hold meaning for a people, they will continue to help the community maintain an attachment to the homeland. The continued production of cultural artifacts, writings especially, will create new and yet slightly different associations for a people living in the diaspora. As women writers continue to create these artifacts, they have the power to re-determine what it means to be an Iranian woman and an Iranian-American woman in the diaspora.

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