

Gender in a Global/Local World

Series Editors: Jane Parpart, Pauline Gardiner Barber
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Gender in a Global/Local World critically explores the uneven and often contradictory ways in which global processes and local identities come together. Much has been and is being written about globalization and responses to it but rarely from a critical, historical, gendered perspective. Yet, these processes are profoundly gendered albeit in different ways in particular contexts and times. The changes in social, cultural, economic and political institutions and practices alter the conditions under which women and men make and remake their lives. New spaces have been created – economic, political, social – and previously silent voices are being heard. North-South dichotomies are being undermined as increasing numbers of people and communities are exposed to international processes through migration, travel, and communication, even as marginalization and poverty intensify for many in all parts of the world. The series features monographs and collections which explore the tensions in a 'global/local world', and includes contributions from all disciplines in recognition that no single approach can capture these complex processes.

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Chapter 12

Layered Meanings of Community: Experiences of Iranian Women Exiles in 'Irangeles'

Halleh Ghorashi

Introduction

By the end of 20th century, the impact of globalization was especially visible in the emergence of new forms of identifications. Hall (1992, p. 297), for example, says that 'modern nations are all cultural hybrids'. Young believes that 'heterogeneity, cultural interchange and diversity have now become the self-conscious identity of modern society' (Young, 1995, p. 4). The era of globalization has created strong bedding for the emergence of newly constructed local and/or transnational imagined cultural communities. In this chapter I will focus on the emergence of an Iranian community – 'Irangeles' – in Southern California, in the United States of America, and its impact on the lives of a group of Iranian women living in the area. The data presented in this chapter are the result of nine months of fieldwork in California in 1997 and another two months in 1998. During this period, I used the method of participant observation, by being actively present at Iranian gatherings and ceremonies. Also, I listened to the life stories of 20 Iranian women who were politically active in leftist organizations in Iran during and after the revolution of 1979. These women had to leave Iran because of their political involvement and went into exile in the USA in the 1980s. In the first section of this chapter I present the background of these women in Iran and their experiences of the revolution. I then describe the context of California where these women live at present. After that, I explore different, somewhat contradictory meanings that 'Irangeles' has for the women of this study. I argue that cultural communities in a new country can contribute to a sense of belonging for immigrants. However, when tradition is reinvented in these communities, it also means that traditional gender roles are reintroduced. The central point in this chapter is to explore how the women of this study deal with these somewhat contradictory aspects of their new community, through which multiple identities intersect.

The Impact of the Revolution

The involvement of women in the Iranian revolution of 1979 took place at many different levels. Their most intense participation was during the two years after the overthrow of the Pahlavi regime (1926–1979). During 1979–1981, which was called 'the spring of freedom', a number of political groups came into existence, which at that time were permitted by law. These groups advanced a wide range of ideologies, including forms of Marxism, Islamism, liberalism and women's rights. Both the extent of the freedom enjoyed during these years and the opportunity for political involvement gave Iranian women a chance to become part of political change in their country on an extensive level for the first time. Nahid, thirty-eight, mentions the following:

I can say that those years were the better years of my life. I think that I never in my life enjoyed life like that. I gained a lot of personal freedom at that time and socially all those restrictions were not there anymore. You could go wherever you wanted to go, you could do whatever you wanted to do. It was really a safe environment and a democratic one. It was friendly and everything was good. It was as if it was paradise – it was my paradise anyway. Those were the best years of my life.

I listened to the stories of women between the ages of 30 and 50, those who had lived in the United States for more than ten years. These women were involved with various Marxist organizations. Although they came from different social, religious and economic backgrounds, what they all had in common was that their political involvement in leftist organizations made it possible for them to transcend the limitation of their background, to some extent. As Nahid mentions, those years opened a door for them to 'feel free to do whatever they wanted to do'. This meant that being politically active, even for a short time, changed the lives of these women drastically.

The 'spring of freedom' did not last. Confrontations had been growing between secular/leftist political groups and the Islamists in power from the first days after the revolution. Those confrontations took a turn for the worse on 18 June 1981. From that date on, the streets of Tehran and other Iranian cities bore witness to terrible violence. Islamists began institutionalizing their absolute power. All other political groups were declared illegal and the majority of their followers arrested, tortured or killed. Neda, forty-five, is a highly educated woman who began her education in Iran and continued it in the United States. She describes those years of suppression as follows:

It was a period full of waiting and a period in which I lost a lot. I was questioning what had happened: was everything finished, would I not see these people anymore? [...] All that excitement, all those hopes and relations, all those were lost. I left the university; I divorced my husband. In the group I found my first love, then I lost it, and I was losing more and more. It was a very bad period for me. It was a period of waiting to see what happens next and I felt many losses. I probably was depressed then. When I remember that I become very sad. [...] The most difficult thing was the loss of ideals or dreams. So much enthusiasm and excitement and then there was

emptiness. [...] When I look at it now I realize that it was very complicated. You gave yourself a kind of value by being inside political activism. You gave yourself a kind of meaning. Doing this and that and this gave you a social meaning, a meaning between your friends and a status for yourself, not only a social status but also a psychological status. Then there was only a big emptiness.

Revolution changed the lives of these activists. Their souls were filled with dreams and ideals, and they were suddenly punished because of those ideals. They suffered during those years of suppression, either being arrested themselves or living in fear of being arrested day by day, or seeing their loved ones arrested, tortured, or killed. Those were the memories that made the women of this study – and many others – feel like exiles in their own country. Those who had a chance left the country and found themselves in exile outside Iran. A new start in a new country went together with the memories of a lost home and an insecure future. In the next section I first explore the Californian context where these women settled, and then describe their experiences in this new context.

Iranians in Los Angeles, 'Irangetes'

A sizeable community of Iranians lives in the United States, especially in Southern California, mainly in Los Angeles. Los Angeles is one of the most multicultural cities in the country, with one-third of its current population having been born in other countries (Kelly and Friedlander, 1993, p. xi). Los Angeles, called 'Irangetes' by Iranians and some Americans¹, has the largest number of Iranians outside of Iran, although estimates vary as to the actual number of Iranians in the city. The census of 1990 estimated the number of Iranians (including Iranian-born Armenians) in the United States at 285,000, of which 100,000 lived in the Los Angeles area (Bozorgmehr et al., 1996, p. 376, note 15). According to Iranian media, the number is much higher.

A Los Angeles Iranian magazine recently reported that, according to the 1990 Census, there are 1.8 million Iranians in the United States, a third of whom live in Southern California (Bozorgmehr et al., 1993, p. 73).

Time magazine reported the number of Iranians in Los Angeles by the early 1980s as 200,000 (Kelly and Friedlander, 1993, p. xii), and Iranian media sources estimated the number in the mid-1980s at between 200,000 and 300,000 (Bozorgmehr et al., 1993, p. 70). Blair estimates the number of Iranians between 250,000 and 400,000, based on the claim that no official statistics are available (Blair, 1991, p. 157). There are various explanations for the difference in the numbers. Bozorgmehr argues that the exaggeration of numbers by the Iranian media is based on political motives aimed at winning the support of politicians (Bozorgmehr et al., 1993, p. 70). Another possible reason is that a large number of Iranians living in the Los Angeles region are not legally registered, since they lack official legal documents. The census does not cover this group. Taking this aspect

into account, an estimate of the number of Iranians in Los Angeles is somewhere between the official data and the lowest numbers released by the media, around 200,000.

Sabagh and Bozorgmehr distinguish between two waves of emigration from Iran to the United States (1987, p. 77). The first wave arrived between 1950 and 1977, comprised of students who could be considered temporary immigrants, as well as other immigrants. The second wave came between 1977 and 1986, the years before and after the revolution of 1979. People in this second group are considered political refugees and exiles, whereas people in the first group are seen as immigrants.

The second wave, Iranians who left Iran as a result of the Iranian revolution, can generally be divided into two groups. The first group, those from the higher classes associated with the previous regime in Iran, left Iran with their extensive, accumulated capital when the political situation became uncertain. They came mainly to Southern California and settled in the better areas of Los Angeles, such as Beverly Hills. They used their capital to start cultural and political activities. Among them were politicians, famous singers, actors and radio and television personalities, who continued their activities abroad. They used their experiences in Iran to build new communication networks and cultural activities in L.A. The second group, which was the largest Iranian emigration to the United States, did not leave Iran until 1980. These newcomers, who left Iran because of the hardship of the years after the revolution, included many who departed because of their political convictions or religious backgrounds. Much more heterogeneous than the first group, the second one varies in class, education and political ideas.

Iranians in Los Angeles are considered by many to be a successful community with good educations and high incomes (Bozorgmehr and Sabagh, 1988, p. 25). Unlike many other immigrants in L.A, Iranians do not live in a single ethnic area but are spread throughout the city, mainly in the more prestigious neighbourhoods (Naficy, 1993b, p. 4). In spite of this, Iranians still form a rather tight community, through diverse activities organized by and for Iranians. Based on my observation, I can conclude that up to 80 percent of informal connections of Iranians in Los Angeles are with other Iranians. Religious beliefs and ceremonies as diverse as Islamic, Armenian, Judaist are practised by Iranians in L.A.² There are various political convictions, from monarchists to leftist activists. Activities organized in L.A vary from religious and cultural to political. During the 1980s, there were various Iranian political activities in this area. From the early 1990s, there was a shift in concern from political activities to cultural activities (Naficy, 1993b, p. 27).

My interest was mainly in the organizations in which the women I interviewed were active. Most of these women, who used to be leftist activists, are now strong defenders of women's rights. Some founded women's groups and others are active participants in these groups. *Jamiat-e zanan-e Irani in Los Angeles* (Society of Iranian Women in Los Angeles) is the only registered women's group among the three whose activities I followed. The group began in 1987 with the name *Jamiat-e mostaghel-e zanan* (Independent Women's Association). A number of women activists were initiators of this group. In 1997,

they registered the group with its new name as a non-profit organization. In 1998, they started a monthly newsletter named *taswir-e zan* (Image of Woman). The group organizes public lectures on women's issues and raises funds for humanitarian causes. *Goruh-e moteleat-e zanan-e Orange County* (Women's Study Group in Orange County) started its work in 1992. This group has informal monthly gatherings at members' homes. They discuss books in the group or invite guest speakers for informal lectures. They also organize public events and gatherings in order to raise funds. This group was the main organizer of the celebration of International Women's Day on 7 March 1999 at UCI (University of California at Irvine). Other groups involved were the Society of Iranian Women in Los Angeles and the Organization of Iranian Students of UCI. *Anjoman-e farhang-ye zanan* (Cultural Society of Women) is another informal group that mainly concentrates on the experiences of womanhood on a personal level. They organize study sessions and lectures. Next to these women-orientated gatherings, other Iranian group activities were popular in the areas in which they were organized (for more on this, see Ghorashi, 2003a). All these activities are mainly in Persian and the guests invited are also mainly Iranian diaspora from all over the world. During my own stay in L.A, I was invited to give lectures at some of these organizations.

In addition to these organizations, Iranians in California have access to a 24-hour Iranian radio station, which not only functions as an important medium among them but also between Iranians and American society. For example, different professional programmes present information about medical and legal issues. The latest changes in various legislation, for example, immigration bills, green cards, etc., are discussed and Iranians get a chance to call and talk to advisors in their own native language. In this way, an Iranian medium serves as a bridge for Iranians to interact within and stay updated about the American context. In addition to the radio station, there are also various Iranian television programmes: '...although relative newcomers, Iranians have been one of the most prolific ethnic minorities in this country in producing television programmes' (Naficy, 1993a, p. 327). Naficy reports that from 1981, of 62 regularly scheduled programmes broadcasted, many have disappeared and have been replaced by others (1993b, p. 64). What almost all of the TV programmes have in common is an overdose of commercials, which made them less popular than the radio programmes. Through these activities in Los Angeles, Iranians have claimed space for their cultural identity within America and, by doing so, they have added an Iranian flavour to the American context. In this way, a new piece of mosaic has been added to an already multicultural L.A – which means a little Iran next to little Mexico, Korea or China, to name a few.

'Irangels': Home Away from Iran

In many ways, the Iranian community³ in Los Angeles is a re-creation of the years before the revolution, an Iran outside of Iran. For many Iranians who were brought

up during the reign of the Shah, 'Iranjeles' feels more like Iran than the Islamic Iran after the revolution. A passage from my field notes in LA shows this re-creation of the homeland, which in many ways is replacing the 'real homeland':

This morning I was listening to California-based Iranian radio. During the programme an old woman called and she said that she had taken out a subscription for six months and that she was going to Iran for a while. She said that she would miss the radio terribly while staying in Iran. One of the things that would make her happy to come back to the US would be the continued existence of the radio. What I found interesting was that an elderly Iranian lady would miss the Iranian radio programme abroad while going back to visit Iran. This shows how one can feel at home when a concept is separated from its original place and is re-created in a new home. Iranians who were brought up during the time of the Shah would hear the music from their childhood. The old lifestyle is much closer in LA than in Iran after the revolution. Iran consistently has other elements that would attract Iranians, especially emotionally. But the fact that Los Angeles can in many ways replace Iran as a homeland creates a familiar environment for Iranians to deal with their new lives in a new context and in a less-conflicting way (field notes of 23 July 1997).

Los Angeles had the same impact on me, as a person who had left Iran about eleven years before and who was in search of her roots, while living in the Netherlands. I soon felt at home in Los Angeles in many ways. I could relive so many similar images of my childhood, the ones that I had already lost when I was still in Iran. The whole setting of Iran outside of Iran, or 'Iranjeles', serves as a familiar environment for many, similar to the places where they grew up. As a result of globalizing processes, a selected form of Iranian culture has been detached from its 'original' physical space and time and reinvented within a new space. 'Iranjeles' clearly concerns Iranian cultural space that has moved from Iran and taken root in California. The fact that Iranians in America select and promote their old pre-Islamic culture in America is due in part to their own upbringing before the Islamic revolution; but it also has to do with the message they wish to bring to the American community by distancing themselves from Iranian-Islamic government. In this way, this process of de-territorialization and re-territorialization is about hybridity. In this case, hybridity is about the creation and promotion of a kind of Iranian cultural identity that makes possible a link to American national identity. In this way, along with other communities in the US, Iranians contribute to a diversity of ways of being American. For this reason, Hall's quotation at the beginning of this chapter ('modern nations are all cultural hybrids') is probably even truer for America than it is for other nations.

The existence of 'Iranjeles' could stimulate Iranians' sense of belonging in California. Feeling at home is not merely a reflection of the conscious choices that people make, but also of the surroundings where they could feel at ease: familiar surroundings to the embodied history in the form of cultural/social *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 56, for more on this, see Ghorashi, 2003b). The existence of the past in present-day Los Angeles, or the continuation of the cultural/social *habitus*, has partly contributed to the fact that Iranian women in this study see themselves as part of American society. But, as mentioned before, this link to

American society is a connection of one's own cultural identity to the American national identity. In this way, American national identity serves as a rather thin umbrella that covers a diversity of cultures (for more on this, see Ghorashi, 2003a, 2003b, 2004). Women living in California also have conflicting ideas about 'there' and 'here', combined with the emotional bond to Iran; but these multiple feelings do not keep them from feeling at home in LA.

In 18 interviews, life in LA is mentioned in a positive sense. Many consider Iran outside of Iran even more positive than Iran itself. When the women talk about Iran, there is still an emotional attachment, but the explicit, rational choice is for their lives in LA. When the interviews reveal a conflict between past and present, between rational and emotional choices for 'there' and 'here', the final choice is often LA.

When I asked, 'Do you consider yourself a stranger in this society?' Shadi, an artist of 45, who has lived for more than ten years in the United States, answered, 'Not now'.

Then I asked, 'Has this become your home in a way?' She said:

Yes, I don't like to think of going back to Iran. [...] It is possible that I would go back later, and would stay there, but not now in my present situation. I like the kind of life that I have here. A life in Iran has nothing for me. I have expectations from life that I can fulfil here. At least I think this now. Another point is that I have better possibilities on my own here in comparison to Iran. My wishes can be fulfilled here.

When I asked, 'Could you give me some examples?' she replied:

Take for example my work in music [she composes classical music – HGJ]. By making music I can give my past a place. You do it through anthropology, I do it through music. There are also my social activities on women's questions. [...] Sometimes when I think of Iran, I become emotional. I feel like crying, despite the fact that my whole family is here. However, there is something from my past, which is there. [...] I miss my friends. I miss the cities and the people, the streets, all those things. When I am melancholic, I become emotional and feel like crying. Even now, when I say that I do not want to live in Iran, I still become emotional.

When I asked in what ways she misses Iran, Sadaf, an artist of 35, who came to the United States about fifteen years ago, responded: 'The memories. I know that when I go back to Iran many things will shock me. [...] Before, I missed Iran more, but not now'.

[HGJ] This has become your home, in some way?

'Yes, I feel that.'

[HGJ] You told me that you don't feel a stranger here.

I don't feel like a stranger in my daily life, but there are incidents at my work and my school [this refers to some discriminatory acts she had faced – HGJ] when I feel like a

stranger, but in general I am very happy and do not feel like a foreigner. I spoke to a friend who lived in Germany and she told me that there you feel like a foreigner all the time and you have no feeling of belonging. They look at you as a foreigner. This feeling is very weak in me, it is possible that this is somewhere inside me but it is not something I think of very often. [...] It is not like that at all here. When I came here, I thought that I had entered paradise. I wrote to my aunt that it is paradise here.

When I asked 45-year-old Jaleh, who has lived for more than ten years in the United States, the question, 'Do you feel at home here?' she answered, 'Yes, I do'.

[HG] Do you feel like a stranger here?

No, I feel that I have become part of this society, in some ways. Maybe I feel like this because my husband is American. However, this feeling is not always present. Even in Iran, I felt that I did not belong to anywhere, but to everywhere.

The majority of the women in this study, 18 out of 20, felt as if they were part of the new society. For these women, being Iranian and living in the United States are not mutually exclusive forms of identification. They have been able to combine their Iranian cultural identity with their present lives in the United States. Some of them call themselves Iranian-American, which means that these two identities are not defined in an exclusive way. Iranian women feel a sense of belonging in the new context and are able to position themselves in a diversity of practices. Sometimes this diversity could mean a combination of different cultures in a ceremony, for example, celebrating Thanksgiving in an Iranian way. But feeling at home in the USA means mainly being Iranian in an American way, or having an Iranian cultural identity that relates to and fits in with American national identity. The claim of Iranian-American identity certainly has to do with the thinness of American identity (2003). This thinness is partly related to fact that American identity is rather a design through ideological means' instead of 'cultural means' (Stratton and Ang, 1999, p. 141). Being an American is about respecting the universal, abstract idealist terms and values such as democracy and freedom. This results in a thinness of identity on the national level, which creates space for a diversity of cultures related to American culture. This, in turn, makes American identity culturally heterogeneous. It may not be too far fetched to claim that being American is about being culturally different.

Yet, it is necessary to add that hybridity here is not only about the ways that Iranian culture has been changed to meet the American context. It is also about the ways that the presence of Iranian culture has added a new element to American identity. It shows that, for this group of Iranians, home does not necessarily have to coincide with the national borders of 'the country of origin'. In this way, the often taken-for-granted linking of home to 'the country of origin' is de-territorialized (see Appadurai, 1988; Malkki, 1992). Home outside of Iran is linked to the newly constructed space, 'Iranjeles', located in the USA. In this way, the existence of 'Iranjeles' is an example of a constructed form of de-territorialized local, cultural community through which past and present, tradition and modernity intersect. This

intersection is the result of immigration as a consequence of globalization. This new space called home has contributed to the sense of belonging of this study of Iranian women in Los Angeles. However, there have been other factors, such as structural similarities, history of and discourses on immigration, that have contributed to this sense of belonging as well (see Ghorashi, 2003a).

When There is Home, There is Tradition

One of the reasons Iranians imagine that community contributes to a sense of belonging of Iranians in LA is that it can serve as a strong social resource, safety net and network for Iranian people of various backgrounds and interests. The Iranian network provides information for all Iranians living in California. Wherever people are, if they have legal or health-related financial problems, the Iranian network operates efficiently to help them. The following is an example. On 27 October 1997, the Metro section of the *Los Angeles Times* reported the following: 'Tragedy: Woman who was holding her 4-year-old daughter survived jump from a hotel roof, but the girl died. Now the mother faces murder charges while her husband and her relatives feud'. The American media reported the accident extensively and public opinion saw the mother as the murderer of her child. The court was also strongly in favour of the father of the child, the defendant. But the Iranian community actively participated in making clear to the court that the woman, abused by her husband and emotionally very unstable, did not act on purpose. Some Iranian lawyers helped her with the case, and many gatherings were organized to discuss the issue. Different Iranian cultural and religious organizations collected money and sent her letters of support. When I went back for my second fieldwork in 1998, I heard that she had won the case, mainly due to the support of the Iranian community.

For Iranians in California and especially in Los Angeles, the existence of diverse groups, different activities, and other considerable resources are essential to their feeling of being socially included in the new society in an Iranian way. The Iranian social resources available to Iranians in LA for internal communication enable a tightly knit network among its members. In this way, the Iranian community in Los Angeles serves as a safety net for its members, even when Iranians select their own activities and contacts within their own community. This safety net creates a sense of continuity for Iranians with past experiences in Iran, where they had their own networks of families and friends. However, the existence of an extended Iranian community in the new country has a less attractive side in terms of gender. The re-creation of Iranian networks and the revival of Iranian culture in the United States means that some traditional ideas related to expectations of women remain intact. One of the obvious manifestations of the reinvention of tradition through Iranian networks is the reproduction of traditional ideas through gossip in daily life. During my stay in Los Angeles I have heard amazing things about myself, based on rumours that I was both married and divorced during the nine months I stayed there. The funniest thing was when, in a

gathering, a woman approached me when she heard I was from Holland, assuming I was a tourist, and started to tell me stories about an Iranian woman anthropologist from Holland, not knowing that I was that woman. The power of gossip in 'Iranjeles' is especially limiting for women who want to transcend the boundaries of traditional gender relations and roles, and therefore have less space to do so. This is especially important for women in this study who were activists in the revolution.

What Makes These Women Different?

The experience of political activism in Iran had a great impact of the ways that the women of this study considered gender relations. Those highly politicized years had a complex influence on gender relations. On the social level, those years gave women in general greatly increased social possibilities and mobility. Women from various strata of society participated in social and political events. Regardless of the extended space created in those years, public participation was not new for all women. For the first time in decades, women from all levels of society were present in public. The impact of those years of activism was such that most of the women I interviewed were very aware of their limitations as women in Iran because of the traditional ideas. During the years of suppression, they faced those limitations on a daily basis (see Ghorashi, 2003a for more details). Those revolutionary years made these women fighters and achievers, who were no longer limited by traditional ideas. These experiences of the past changed these women in four significant ways.

Firstly, political revolutionary training made these women fighters. They learned that they could not expect anything without fighting for it. This fighting attitude towards life created an important driving force for these women to settle in a new country. Also, they learned not to take anything for granted. Disappointments after years of suppression resulted in them trusting no one but themselves. They could no longer be 'made' happy by the life offered to them, either by society, their families or their husbands. They were resolved to take life into their own hands.

Secondly, they could no longer be satisfied with a simple life bereft of higher ideals. One woman said, 'There is no way back. When you have experienced the complexities in life and had higher ideals, you cannot go back and accept a simple life by just having a beautiful house, cooking, and raising children'. Many new ideals have replaced old political ideals. What almost all of them have in common is the wish to make at least a small contribution to changing the world. This aspect of changing the world is expressed in various ways. Some do it by their choices of study. As one of them told me:

What I do now and my plans for the future are influenced by my past. I am not a member of the organization now but my life is formed by my past: I still have ideals, but new ones. Take for example my choice of study, psychology. This choice is unconsciously or maybe consciously influenced by the past: I want to help people.

Others seek to contribute by voluntary involvement in various human and women's rights organizations. Most of the women in Los Angeles with a leftist background are involved in women's organizations. Some women present their ideals through their work as artists and filmmakers. Others are involved in human rights, such as Amnesty International or Human Rights Watch, or leftist political organizations of the new country, like the American Green Party. The most visible example of a woman who had a shared background with the women of this study is Ms Sara Amir. Ms Amir was the Green Party candidate for Lieutenant Governor of California in 1998, receiving a quarter of a million votes. The following quotation from her website shows the link with the past: 'Her background as an immigrant from a repressive regime fuels her appreciation of freedom and democracy and links her sympathies to emerging constituencies'.¹⁴

Thirdly, the women's views of internationalism reflect the impact of old socialist ideas. Women active in leftist organizations, who were focused on internationalist ideals, criticize nationalist notions of homeland. They were focused on internationalist ideals. However the political issues related to internationalism have changed for many. The impact of seeing 'the world as the homeland' has not vanished completely. Some even mentioned the term, when I asked them about their homeland. This view also can contribute to the openness toward a new start in a new country.

Fourthly, revolutionary training in self-critique sessions, in addition to the painful experiences of the past, made these women rather self-critical. They do not automatically take their cultural backgrounds as something that should be preserved. They are open to change, and they are relatively more open to reflection on their social backgrounds than the average Iranian. For this reason, these women are relatively more open towards change in general, which eases interactions with the new culture.

The above-mentioned characteristics of female Iranian political activists make them different from Iranian women migrants in general. The main difference between female Iranian political activists and other Iranian women is that these female activists question patriarchal ideas regarding women's roles in the family in Iran. This process began before their exile; they had already begun to re-evaluate their gender-based positions in Iran. However, legal limitations in Iran did not leave much room for them to act on their gender awareness to change their living conditions.⁵ Once in exile, they acquired this room, so they grasped the opportunity. This can be seen by the diverse activities of these women on the issues of human, women and children's rights, besides other activities inside and outside of the Iranian community. Many of the women's organisations organize diverse programmes and lectures in Persian to inform Iranian women about their rights, their opportunities and their sexuality. The new space in exile leads to an explosion of the accumulated awareness of these women regarding their gender. This is not the case for all Iranian women who migrate. Many of them believe in traditional gender roles in the families. This does not mean that this group does not fight for their rights. Their fight, however, is a different fight, which is not the focus of this study.

As mentioned above, the existence of a large Iranian community in Los Angeles contributes in different ways to the sense of belonging of Iranians living in the area. However, 'home' has different meanings for various groups of Iranians in Los Angeles. During my participation in different gatherings and my conversation with Iranians, I realized that for many Iranians the recreation of the old rituals and ceremonies is very important. For others, the existence of an Iran outside Iran with a similar diversity has become the reason for a sense of belonging. A large and diverse Iranian community in Los Angeles makes it possible for these women 'to find their kind of people' as they told me. For the women of this study, the notion of home is much more layered and somewhat contradictory. The same community that contributes to their sense of belonging could also limit their actions as women because of reinforcement of traditional gender ideas. Besides this, the political background of these women makes them sceptical if not resentful of cultural activities with connections to the previous regime in Iran. In fact, most of the women remain aloof from those cultural activities. Most of them did not watch or listen to Iranian television and radio. The ones who did were very selective in doing so. They listened mostly to the news about Iran and Iranian gatherings in California. But what these women praised the most was the possibility of activism within different Iranian intellectual and women's organizations. For these women, the variety of choices in LA seemed to be more essential than the known environment of pre-revolutionary Iran. Nevertheless, this same environment, given implicit and indirect approval, helps them to feel a sense of belonging on a latent level. The whole setting of Iran outside of Iran, the 'embodied history' called 'Iranegels', could serve as a familiar environment, similar to the places where they grew up and could stimulate their sense of belonging in the new context. Also, it seems that the diversity that 'Iranegels' offers the women make it possible for them to transcend the limitations they face from the community. Besides, the fact that the community is based in California and not in Iran makes it possible for these women to see 'Iranegels' as one of the available social resources, but not the only one. The following narratives make these points clear.

From Sahar's story it is clear that she remained aloof from aspects that dominate the Iranian community, but that her ideas changed when she was able to find people she enjoyed being in contact with. She is 43 years old, and has lived in the United States with her husband and children for about 11 years.

In the beginning I saw Iranians driving their cars and being busy with their own jobs. When I entered any group they just talked about work and money, as if there was nothing else to talk about except of being successful and having more money. This was really shocking for me. [How do you think now? – HG] I do not think like this at all. And also I have been able to find the people I like to have contact with [She refers here to her Iranian contacts – HG]. Now, I like it here very much. [Do you see this place as your home at this moment? – HG] Yes, but I miss Iran, also. [What do you miss? – HG] I do not know, I miss my family and my friends, the part of my life that has been there. The best part of my life has been there. For years I saw things as temporary, and I thought that this was not the place that I wanted to live. But now I do not have this feeling at all. Now I think that now I am living here and I like it here very much. I enjoy my possibilities. [Do not you feel a stranger in this society? –

HG] Not at all. [Do you enjoy Iranian activities and programmes here? HG] No, I do not watch television and I feel that I do not belong to the Iranian community in general. The Iranian community here is somewhat traditional, it is the same as in Iran, you have traditional people there as well. From the beginning I was in search of people that I like. All my life I was interested in my contacts [she means here Iranian contacts – HG], and the first years in which I did not have them it was difficult, but now that I've found them I feel great.

Sahar's story shows perfectly how she resents some elements of the dominant Iranian, reinvented culture in Los Angeles (such as displays of wealth and success), besides the recreated traditional elements. She even mentions that she sometimes feels that she does not belong to this Iranian recreated culture. However, the same recreated little Iran has enabled her to find Iranians whom she likes and with whom she feels comfortable. Thus, having the space in LA to make her own selection within the recreated Iranian culture makes it possible for Sahar to feel at home in Los Angeles, a feeling that has been grown with the passing of time. The same kind of resentment is present in Sadaf's story when she talks about the Iranian community in Los Angeles:

The Iranian community is very mixed here. The majority is traditional and businesslike with a merchant mentality. Iranian radio and television make me so tired that I do not listen to or watch them. [Did you watch in the beginning? – HG] No. I think I never was interested. Those media remind me of the traditional ideas in Iran. No I never liked it. But the advantage of Los Angeles is that you kind of find your own type. When I came to Los Angeles, an Iranian woman's organization helped me a lot. I found out that I am not that different. In the beginning I felt so different from the rest of Iranians here. A friend always told me: 'You do not fit in any category.' I thought to myself, why am I like this? I felt that I had a kind of problem and felt very lonely. When I went to that women's organization, I liked it so much, that meeting gave me so much energy that I cannot forget. The meetings gave me bonding with some of the members of that organization.

The diversity of Iranians in Los Angeles makes it possible for these women to find the kind of Iranian people they feel comfortable with. Thus, the existence of an extensive Iranian community in itself is not enough for their sense of belonging. The diversity of the group, which would include intellectuals, leftist, human rights activists along side monarchists, traditional and commercial Iranians, for example, is more important in finding people with whom one feels a sense of belonging. What remains is that the traditional ideas regarding women are persistent in Los Angeles, as is the strong social control within the community. However, the impact of patriarchal ideas on the lives of the women of this study is different, compared to the impact of the same ideas in Iran. This is because, in Los Angeles, they have at least two multiple spaces to interact with, the Iranian and the American one, each with its own diversities. For these women, the availability of these two types of multiple social resources offers opportunities, and they can use both spaces interchangeably. This makes life in the new country more favourable than in Iran. Also, the existence of Iranian traditional culture in Los Angeles influences the

ways the past is constructed. It is almost impossible for the women living in Los Angeles to be too selective about their memories because the past in many ways is recreated in the present. This helps them remember the shortcomings of their own culture. The constant presence of the past does not allow for unrealistic nostalgia. Yet, in some ways they can be selective in the way they position themselves in this recreated past in the present 'Irangeles'. The presence of both the positive and the negative aspects of the past in Los Angeles give the women a chance to remember what the past meant for them, as women. This 'past in the present' gives these women an opportunity to explore new opportunities and to feel secure in life instead of developing strong nostalgic feelings towards the past by creating the past in their minds.

Conclusion

The emergence of 'Irangeles' in California is a perfect example of how the intersection of the past and the present results in a newly constructed space called home. The sense of belonging to this new space contributes to hybrid positioning of being both Iranian and American at the same time. This form of hybridity is not so much about the mixture of cultures as shown above but about linking the Iranian cultural identity to the American national identity. In the process of making this link of culture to nation, both Iranian culture and American identity transform through which a space is created for a new hyphenated identity and a hybrid positioning within an American context: Iranian-American identity. This hybrid positioning also goes beyond the assumed exclusive link of the Iranian culture with the national border of Iran as 'the country of origin'. The little Iran in California thus exemplifies a re-territorialized locality and, for that matter, a hybrid, cultural community as the consequence of immigration and globalization. Previously, I quoted Hall (1992) in seeing modern nations as cultural hybrids and Young (1995) in considering heterogeneity and diversity as the identity of modern society. Through my research findings, I have shown how both utterances are true in the case of the United States, especially in California. The United States, as an immigration country in general and California as a strong heterogeneous state in particular, provides a perfect context for the Iranian community to flourish. However, it is through the interplay of the context with the specific background of certain groups of immigrants that newly constructed local spaces are reinvented, in which hybrid positioning emerges. In this way, 'Irangeles' is one of many newly created spaces by immigrants that could be considered as a localized reaction to the processes of globalization. It is in this space that global movements and local needs coincide and it is this process that makes modern nations diverse, heterogeneous and hybrid.

It was in Los Angeles that a little Iran is recreated, an Iran that is different from the homeland Iran that Iranians left behind coming to the United States. 'Irangeles' is different from present Iran because it is constructed on the memories of the Iran before the revolution. In this chapter I have explored the various

meanings that, even though contradictory, this new space called home has for the Iranian women whom I interviewed. These women were activists in the Iranian revolution of 1979 and, because of their past experiences, very aware of their rights as women. The existence of a home abroad contributes to the sense of inclusion of these women in the new society. 'Irangeles' works as a safety net that replaces old networks and offers Iranians support in their lives in California. Also, the re-creation of the past in the present creates a familiar environment for these women, which indirectly could contribute to their sense of belonging. However, the other side of the coin is that the re-creation of the past in the present also means the re-creation of traditional ideas on gender roles in 'Irangeles'. This negative re-creation of the past influences the life of Iranian women of this study, but not that significantly. They are able to transcend the impact of these traditional ideas in some ways. Firstly, by emphasizing that 'Irangeles' offers diversity through which they can find people they like. Secondly, contrary to Iran, 'Irangeles' is one of the available social resources they have in California. This means that they have the space to distance themselves from 'Irangeles' when they feel limited by it. The re-creation of Iran in Los Angeles also means 'the presence of the past' in the new context, with all its positive and negative impacts. This 'past in the present' makes it easier for these women to let go of strong feelings of nostalgia common among exiles. They are then able to focus on their present achievements and the opportunities offered by that new context. This emphasis on the present instead of the past makes it also possible to consider their new country as 'home', by including the elements of the past in the present, by calling themselves Iranian-Americans or being American in an Iranian way.

Notes

- 1 See, for example, the title of the book edited by R. Kelly and J. Friedlander in 1993, *Irangeles: Iranians in Los Angeles*.
- 2 For detailed information on the religious diversity and ceremonies of Iranians in L.A., see Kelly and Friedlander, 1993.
- 3 The term community refers mainly to collective activities organized by Iranians in L.A. I am aware that community, especially in the case of ethnic minorities, is a contested concept. It leads to equation of community with culture, through which culture becomes reified (Baumann, 1996, p. 10).
- 4 For more information, see the following website: <http://www.saraamir.org/bio.html>.
- 5 For further studies on women's position after the revolution, see the following: on compulsory veiling, Gerami, 1994; V.M. Moghadam, 1993; on legal rights, Afshar, 1987; Nashat, 1983; Reeves, 1989; Tabari, 1982; Sanasarian, 1982.

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