

Results of ISG-SUTA Thesis Award 2005

We are pleased to announce the results of the 2005 ISG-SUTA thesis award. The results were determined through careful examination of the candidate theses by a panel of academic experts. Each thesis was reviewed by three independent expert on dimensions of originality, quality of scholarship, and the theoretical and practical significance. The ISG-SUTA thesis award recognizes outstanding graduate theses from across the globe studying different areas of contemporary Iranian society, including management, economics, education, expatriate communities, international relations, political science, sociology, public health, development, and women's studies. This award is co-sponsored by Iranian Studies Group at MIT and the Sharif University of Technology Alumni association. Below the results of 2005 thesis award are detailed, followed by the abstracts of thesis winning the first three prizes:

First Prize (1000\$)

Sharon Parker, University of Arizona, Ph.D.

Embodied Exile: Contemporary Iranian Women Artists and the Politics of Place

Second Prize (500\$)

Reza Fallahati Ardestani, University of Victoria, M.A.

Contrastive Study of Hedging in English and Farsi Academic Discourse

Hani Abtahi-Baker, Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies, M.A.

The Rescue of Oudlajan: The Problems & Prospects of Revitalizing an Old Inner-City Neighborhood in Metropolitan Tehran

Third Prize (250\$)

Talinn Gregor, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ph.D.

Cultivat(ing) Modernities: The Society for National Heritage, Political Propaganda, & Public Architecture in Twentieth-Century Iran

Shirin Hakimzadeh, University of Oxford, M.A.

Beyond Diasporic Generations: Transnational Identity and Integration of Second-Generation Iranians in London

Shadi Sahami, University of Utah, Ph.D.

Exploring Health Disparities: Perceptions of Culturally Appropriate Health/mental Health Care Among Late-in-life Iranian Immigrants

Manata Hashemi, Cornell University, M.A.

Identity Construction in Contemporary Iranian Youth Residing Both in Iran and Abroad

Jury Recognition Letter

Sanam Vakil, Johns Hopkins, Ph.D.

Ghoncheh Tazmini, University of Kent, Ph.D.

Ben Stern, Tel Aviv University, M.A.

Shiva Sadeghi, McGill University, Ph.D.

Hamid Yeganeh, Laval University, Ph.D.

Abstracts of Theses Winning 1st to 3^{ed} prizes

Sharon Parker

Embodied Exile: Contemporary Iranian Women Artists and the Politics of Place

In my dissertation I address a gap in scholarship on contemporary Iranian women by using information obtained from a selection of Iranian and Iranian American women artists and samples of their artworks to explore gendered experiences of exile and diaspora. I argue that exile is not limited to place; rather, it can be experienced mentally and / or physically. Thus, regardless of whether or not they left Iran or stayed they share some experiences of exile in common, such as the pain and longing of *ghorbat* (the feeling of estrangement particularly in terms of exile) expressed through the bodies of work they have produced.

For each of the Iranian and Iranian-American women artists included in this study, there is a “corporeal relationship” between the artworks they construct and the narratives these contain which provide a means to understand women’s particular experiences inside and outside post-revolutionary Iran. In this regard, some of the artworks can be interpreted as descriptive of aspects of women’s changed legal status in Iran. Others reflect artistic portrayals of post-revolution estrangement, and the often accompanying feeling of *ghorbat*, resulting from dislocation and relocation, or because post-revolutionary changes in Iran, significant to women, rendered their homeland a place so changed that it was nearly unrecognizable for many who remained in the country. Thus, the political processes that have affected them individually or collectively, whether internalized or actually lived, are explicitly or implicitly described through the works discussed in this study. For example, these artists address gendered issues such as veiling, marriage practices, and women’s private presence and public absence. Indeed, the body is explicitly expressed or implied in the artworks these artists have made in response to issues of gender, religion, society, culture, politics, and war, and thus provide a means to understand various ways exile has been embodied, experienced, and visually expressed, by women. Embedded within many of these artists’ works is the particularly Iranian post revolutionary experience of *ghorbat*, and the complexity of Iranian women’s gendered experiences. While their works include Iranian cultural, religious, and historical icons and imagery, these artifacts are combined with contemporary modes of expression such as installations, photographs, collage, and performance.

The artists whose works are discussed in this study include Haleh Niazmand and Taraneh Hemami (U.S.) and Minoos Asaadi, Samila Amir-Ebrihimi, and Shirin Etehadieh (Iran). Additional artists discussed in this dissertation are Kendal Kennedy, Sonia Balassanian and Shirin Neshat (U.S.); Soumaya Sakilli and Maryam Agha (Iran). While in Iran in spring 2001, a trip made possible because of a language fellowship I received from The American Institute of Iranian Studies, I met with and interviewed a number of artists, including those in this study. I met with and interviewed Iranian – American artists, in Washington D.C., New York, Connecticut, California and Arizona. Although engaging in a close reading of the art itself, I also incorporate much of the information provided to me by each artist through our formal and informal discussions, written communications, and the descriptions they provided during our meetings of their artistic

processes such as the conception of each project and the methods and materials used to create it, and their artists' statements that accompanied the exhibition of particular works. Additionally, I draw from Iranian women's writings including scholarly works, memoirs, and poetry to frame many of the issues discussed in my dissertation.

Reza Fallahati Ardestani

Contrastive Study of Hedging in English and Farsi Academic Discourse

This study examines the distribution of forms and functions of hedging in academic research articles (RAs) in two languages (English and Farsi), three disciplines (medicine, chemistry, and psychology), and between two rhetorical sections of RAs (Introduction and Discussion).

Data consist of 24 research articles, 12 in English and 12 in Farsi. The RAs were in three disciplines: medicine, chemistry, and psychology (four RAs in English and four in Farsi from each discipline). The total number of words in the two sections in English and Farsi RAs were 25,983 and 19,872, respectively.

Data were analyzed in terms of both forms and functions of hedges. Findings showed that the English RAs were 61.3 % more hedged than Farsi RAs. Moreover, the distribution of hedging devices was shown to be different across disciplines. The English psychology and Farsi medicine RAs were found to be the most heavily hedged disciplines. The results also showed that the Discussion sections of RAs, in general, favor more hedges than the Introduction sections. The Discussion sections were also found to contain more writer-oriented hedges and fewer accuracy-oriented hedges compared to Introduction sections. The findings suggest that hedges are used differently across languages and disciplines.

Hani Abtahi-Baker

The Rescue of Oudlajan: The Problems & Prospects of Revitalizing an Old Inner-City Neighborhood in Metropolitan Tehran

Introduction

Inner cities face major challenges and changes throughout their urban life cycle. In most cases -- because of their strategic location -- inner cities have a large occupation demand, which results in high density so that space is used more efficiently. However, when inner cities depreciate, they become a non-desirable living and working environment. Economic decline, physical decay, social and neighborhood value decline, major lack of proper infrastructure, congestion and environmental problems are among notable problems of inner cities in many parts of the world. As a result, city centres are losing their role as the critical focus of the city's public realm and there are fears of the extinction of all public life. Lack of safety -- which means loss of value -- is a significant factor of depreciation of city centres. To fight this obsolescence, inner cities should be revitalized.

In opposition to the rest of Tehran where renovations are the fashionable trend, the inner city -- especially its oldest quarters -- are in an advanced state of depreciation. This

condition is doubled by the neglect of all the urban actors. This research is aiming to reveal the current condition of Oudlajan case as one of the most troubled areas in inner city Tehran and to identify the bottlenecks to its revitalization in order to define the prerequisites for its change towards betterment.

The thesis consists of six chapters: Chapter 1 is the research justification; Chapter 2 offers the theoretical framework, followed by Chapter 3 where the current specifications of Oudlajan are studied. Chapter 4 explains the urban management context of the inner city. In Chapter 5, the previous two chapters are evaluated by the tools derived from the theoretical framework. And finally, Chapter 6 concludes the thesis by testing the hypothesis and suggesting the prerequisites for inner city revitalization in Tehran.

Chapter 1 – Research Justification

Chapter 1 offers a short definition of the basic issues discussed in the research and provides an introduction to the background of the research. It establishes the characteristics and problems of the area. The problem statement, hypothesis, objectives, research questions, research methodology and the scope of the research are set in this chapter as well.

The historical inner city of Tehran

The historic fabric of Iran consists of those urban settlements formed before 1920. These settlements grew organically, without any formal planning. Tehran's current city centre is a mish-mash of disparate elements without a unifying theme. There, one finds the metropolis in microcosm: commerce, industry, culture and government. Unfortunately, one also finds these settlements in varying stages of existence: thriving, barely surviving, falling apart and dying.

Original Tehran had four residential quarters. These residential quarters -- clustered around the axis of the bazaar -- were called: Sangalaj, Chal-meidan, Bazaar and Oudlajan. Oudlajan now ranks as the most neglected of the four. Once a wealthy residential neighborhood, Oudlajan is now mainly a staging area for commerce in the bazaar. For this and other reasons, Oudlajan has become a symbol of decay and neglect and has gained a reputation as a hotspot for crime. Today, Oudlajan is placed in Tehran's 12th metropolitan district.

Current Problems of the inner city of Tehran

One can list the current problems of inner city Tehran as following: Agglomeration and concentration of activities, economic decline, physical decay, residential and neighborhood value decline, social decline, environmental problems, improper access and congestion, the erosion of culture and history, and a major lack of proper infrastructure, urban facilities and services.

Problem statement of the thesis: Oudlajan is in an advanced state of dilapidation, and has been so for almost five decades. To date, countless formal plans have been made targeting it for regeneration, alas rarely have any been successfully implemented.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

This chapter aims to explain why inner cities are in their current state and what has happened to them; both in their natural deterioration process and through their history of interventions and urban dynamic trends in order to control this deterioration. The western contemporary history of urbanism is reviewed as a model, which is followed by the recent trends of inner city interventions, in Iranian theory and practices.

Further on, the concepts and reasons for inner city revitalization are illustrated. The chapter concludes by introducing applicable trends of urban development planning and effective elements for successful planning, and sustainable implementations.

Chapter 3: Studying the conditions and needs of the area

Chapter 3 attempts to study the current social, economic, physical and environmental conditions of the Oudlajan in the inner city by means of statistical data. Some of these conditions are pointed out here to further introduce the area of study:

Socio-cultural and economic conditions of the area:

- The area is facing depopulation
- The area is especially attractive for unskilled male immigrants
- The buildings are mostly rented or sublet to people who live communally
- Dynamics in the area:
 - o The varying night and day population caused by the major economic function of the area, the outbreak of drug-addiction and criminal activity distinguishes the area from the rest of the city
 - o Street vending, burglary and begging are among the district problems

Physical conditions of the area:

The urban fabric: The bazaar and Oudlajan districts have been known for having 5,000 buildings of historical and architectural merit, although no specific action is being taken to maintain them. The level of depreciation and overloading of the buildings is so high that some buildings collapse accidentally and citizens have been buried under the debris.

Authenticity: The physical and spatial characteristics of Oudlajan are distinguishable from the neighbouring urban patterns. This fabric has human scale proportions and other Iranian urban disciplines such as privacy (inward looking) and external modesty. The organically formed urban fabric serves as one unified complex.

Availability of Services: Severe lack of local services, controllable parks, sports and recreation facilities, libraries and cultural centers, etc., is noticeable in the area.

Geological and environmental conditions of the area:

Tehran suffers from mounting environmental problems such as water, air, land and noise pollution. Geologically the Tehran plain is likened to a bowl, enclosed by high mountains from one the north and hills from the south. It has been listed as one of the most polluted cities in the world.

Being located in the earthquake zone -- A Survey of the Seismic Micro- zoning of Greater Tehran in 2000 -- estimated the magnitude of damage that could be caused by the occurrence of an earthquake to be 100% demolition of the buildings of inner city Tehran.

This survey also notes there will be no access to rescue people due to the narrowness of streets and characteristics of the urban pattern of the inner city.

Chapter 4: Urban Management context of the Inner City

This chapter introduces the driving forces, instruments, policies, regulations, the urban actors and agencies of transformation of Tehran related to the inner city. It explains a summarized history of urbanism and inner city transformation in Iran. Elaborates how Tehran and its inner city have developed and changed through its history and states the driving forces in shaping the inner city.

In this chapter the urban management context of Tehran and its history of changes are illustrated; a question is raised whether there are specific managing concerns for the inner city or not and reveals the true agents of transformation and the level of participation of private – public and people in the process. The chapter concludes by elaborating previous plans of intervention in relation to inner city Tehran and comparing them with variables derived from the theoretical framework.

Chapter 5: Analysis

In this chapter the information and facts given in previous chapters on the needs of the area, the history of interventions, the urban management context and the regulatory framework in inner city Tehran will be assessed; along with the applicability of approaches for revitalization of Oudlajan. This evaluation will further answer the research questions.

Evaluation of the current needs of the area

As mentioned previously, due to hazardous environmental conditions and the fact that that Oudlajan has been unmaintained for two centuries, has left the area in complete physical, economic, functional and spatial depreciation. Oudlajan is in emergency need of upgrading. If this neglect continues, not only the last remaining part of historic Tehran's unique traditional urban fabric will collapse, a major economic opportunity adjacent to the Bazaar will be lost. Plus, because of the level of depreciation and overloading of the buildings, more lives will be in risk.

Evaluation of the regulatory framework

The regulatory framework is not efficient. Some of the short fallings are noted below:

- Lack of maintenance policies
- Limiting land regulations
- Lack of regulations to limit the speculative real estate market
- Lack of conformity of regulations
- Lack of transparency
- Between the lines illegalities and informalities
- Lack of coordination between regulation setters

Why urban regeneration plans fail in Tehran

Lack of optimality, “re-inventing the wheel”

- Need-based vs. supply-based planning
- Unsustainable use of resources
- Lack of non-governmental participation
- Lack of conformity of the plans
- Overlapping of responsibilities
- Planning without realistic evaluation of resources
- Lack of planning maintenance (evaluation and follow-up)
- Context of the plans

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Chapter 6 tests the hypothesis, proposing the conclusions and recommendations toward the betterment of Oudlajan and suggests prerequisites for revitalization of inner city Tehran. Since the topic and the main objective of the thesis is finding the bottlenecks to revitalization of Oudlajan in the inner city of Tehran.

Talinn Gregor

Cultivat(ing) Modernities: The Society for National Heritage, Political Propaganda, & Public Architecture in Twentieth-Century Iran

Beginning in 1922, under the auspices of the Pahlavi dynasty of Iran, the tombs of selected historical figures were systematically destroyed to make way for modern mausoleums erected as metaphors for an ‘Aryan’ nation in its process of revival. Initiated during the reign of Reza Shah (1921-41) most of the projects were implemented under his son, Mohammad-Reza Shah (1941-79). The monuments were ideologically inscribed commemorations of the leading politicians and scholars of the 1920s and 1930s. This dissertation offers a critical analysis of the political underpinnings, pedagogical aims, and aesthetic ends of official architectural culture in 20th century Iran as these were constructed under the management of the Society for National Heritage (SNH). During its fifty-eight-year existence, SNH constructed thirty-eight mausoleums, carried out over sixty preservation projects, and created a national museum as well as a public library in Tehran. The cultural and ideological scope of SNH’s undertakings was unprecedented in the history of Iran and was bolstered by its publications, lectures, exhibitions, and contribution to the tourist trade.

I selected six of the monuments sponsored by SNH for close examination: the tomb complex of poet Ferdawsi (1926-34) in Tus authored by French archeologist André Godard; the tomb-garden of Sufi poet Hafez (1936-38) in Shiraz designed by French architect Maxim Siroux, the burial complex of scientist Avicenna (1945-52) in Hamadan proposed by Iranian architect Houshang Seyhoun; the mausoleum of Nader Shah (1955-59) in Mashhad also the work of Seyhoun; the tomb of poet Omar Khayyam (1956-62) in Nishapur a collaboration between Seyhoun and Mohsen Forughi; and the double-tombs of American Art Historians Arthur Pope and Phyllis Ackerman (1969-72) in Isfahan designed by Forughi. My aim is to examine the ‘scientific’ process to which the monuments in question were subjected – a process whose method was highly consistent. The burial place of historical figures that suited the national agenda were selected,

located, and eliminated. After the confiscation of the corpse for autopsy, a modern building was erected on the original site, after which the relics were interred as part of an official royal inauguration. While ordinary Iranians were excluded from witnessing these events, state-run media covered each ceremony in detail. The main result of this process was that historical figures were given a physical place to inhabit in form of modern tombs. Their physiognomic particularities were reconstructed based on skull and bone examinations. This in turn, served to produce each figure's life-size sculpture and color portrait. The modified biography and persona of these men were circulated among the masses by means of photographs, stamps, post-cards, and coins. Each fragment endlessly authenticated the implicit totality of the image invented by SNH. At the end, the visual dissemination of these images made the rhetoric on the Iranian 'Aryan' type seem credible.

The significance of SNH's architectural ventures lies in the way they penetrated most aspects of Iranian society's modernizing project. Despite their simplicity, the monuments themselves incorporated a complex range of modern practices. Architecture became a vital aspect of public instruction. Autopsies of remains stood as proof of the racial superiority of the nation while the adjoining museums validated the logic of its display. The revival of pre-Islamic icons and prototypes was incorporated into centuries old Islamic practices. The construction process harbored technically sophisticated documentation, categorization, and ordering of the national domain. Each monument's presence instigated superficial revitalization of cities that had been unimportant to Iranian history. Pilgrimage became tourism. Furthermore, these projects provided a platform for western scholars like André Godard, Ernest Herzfeld, and Arthur Pope to negotiate their conflicting personal and colonial ambitions. The discourse on Iranian architecture occasioned quarrels over techniques of preservation, authenticity of heritage, and ownership of archaeological sites. In sum, these landmarks created novel ways to map modern space, time, identity, and power, in that they not only reflected but affected sociopolitical developments in modern Iran.

The central questions that emerged from the SNH's conceptualization of a monumental past were as follows. How is architecture used as a site of power and resistance in a politically charged society? Why is architecture-as-representation so central to the making of coercive narratives about modern identities and civil order? Finally, how do these shifting uses of the landmark leave their imprint on architectural form, function, and meaning? My point was to analyze how architecture both endorses political discourse and, by contrast, sustains social resistance. The case of Iranian monuments was particularly intriguing to consider along these lines, both because they had not been studied previously and because of the unique historical conditions that mark Iranian sociopolitical history in the 20th century. Consider that in a matter of eight decades, Iran continually remade its political "realities": from the Shi'a Qajar dynasty to the Constitutional Revolution in 1906; from a totalitarian military monarchy under Reza Shah to a nationalist prime minister in 1951; and from the popular revolution of 1979 to the highly post-modern Islamic Republic. Throughout these moments of political upheaval, SNH's monuments have become the subject of contradictory ideological trends all the while maintaining their specific architectural qualities. In order to understand the formal and political complexities that surround my six examples, I paid particular attention to the historical contexts that reveal how in each case, a myth of lineage and

national identity was constructed as well as how a political elite conceived of the architectural forms it fabricated. Only then can we address, how, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the artifacts outlived their authors to trigger alternative meanings.

Shirin Hakimzadeh

Beyond Diasporic Generations: Transnational Identity and Integration of Second-Generation Iranians in London

Early migration research predicted that migrants would sever social formations spanning nation-states as they became integrated into the countries that received them. In other words, transnational practices and integration were viewed as diametrically opposed to one another. However, with the intensification of global interconnectedness, international migration can no longer be seen as a one-way process. Events, communities, and lives are increasingly linked across borders and these interconnections are not limited to the first generation of migrants, but rather prevail into the second generation. As such, this paper explores the integration and identity formation of second-generation Iranians in London within a theoretical framework characterized by cultural complexity, the changing character of diaspora, and a sporadic and varied engagement with transnationalism. Integration and transnationalism are viewed as co-existent and overlapping processes, though not necessarily complimentary or competitive.

A historical perspective reveals that the immigration of Iranians to London before and after the 1979 revolution can be organized into three major waves which, despite some degree of overlap, help us to better conceptualize the diaspora. The migratory waves correspond to members' social characteristics as well as *diasporic generation*, or the particular circumstances of their migration history. While studies frequently emphasize the spatial dimension of diaspora, the generational perspective encouraged through the notion of a diasporic generation brings attention to the temporal aspect as well. By looking at the Iranian diaspora in generational terms, it becomes possible to explore how the migration experience of the first generation has affected the second generation's patterns of social interaction, including their adaptation to the host society, and ties to Iran.

The liminal condition of the second generation is explored through comparison with anthropologist Victor Turner's concept of the tripartite nature of rites of passage. The process of migration, much like rites of passage, begins with separation, involves a period of liminality, and concludes with integration. Having undergone the separation stage metaphorically through their parents, the second generation is born into the liminal stage. They qualify as liminars because of their structural freedom to build themselves anew – to re-evaluate their own history, their homeland, their host country, and then to locate their present position and identity within that. Placed on the borderline separating the home from the host cultures, the second-generation liminar is potentially outside the structural force fields of both social systems, and can thus be in a position to question, subvert, modify, or adopt both. Through return trips, symbolic transnationalism in the form of ritualized hospitality, and other modes of cross-border relationship, there is strong evidence to suggest the maintenance of transnational ties into the second generation.

Therefore, instead of limiting the potential pathways of the second generation solely according to the patterns of their parent's generation, the study utilizes in-depth interviews and a focus-group discussion with members of the Iranian second generation in order to classify this particular group according to three ideal types of social categories. This includes youth who are 1) *westoxified*, those who emphasize their Britishness and often distance themselves from other members of the second generation, 2) *cultural innovators*, those who do not distance themselves from their compatriots and actively try to integrate both the British and Iranian part of their upbringing, and 3) *ghettoized*, those who distance themselves from the host society and emphasize their Iranian-ness. Just as transnational activities do not remain constant across the life cycle, but rather ebb and flow at different stages, so too are the varied trajectories displayed by these second-generation Iranians susceptible to change.

The integration of these youth may initially have been limited by the boundaries set by the diasporic generation to which their parents belonged, but as they now move into young adulthood these second-generation individuals must be analyzed in terms of their own attempts to work out their aspirations for social mobility through the complementary strategies of transnationalism and integration. These young people develop a sense of self that is indelibly shaped by personal, family, and organizational connections back home and across the diaspora. At the same time their identity formation is a product of racial, ethnic, and national categories that are themselves produced transnationally. Their acute awareness of happenings both here and there requires researchers to focus on the relationship between transnationalism and integration when studying the second generation in its various locales: the homeland and the host state.

Acknowledging that host country and enduring homeland ties are not incompatible, second generation identity formation is concluded to be a dialectical process during which features of both liminality and incorporation may co-exist. The interplay of integration and transnationalism reveals that second-generation Iranians in London are not only conflicted sites of struggle but also of creativity; striving to forge new identities and ways of belonging in their multiple worlds.

Shadi Sahami

Exploring Health Disparities: Perceptions of Culturally Appropriate Health/mental Health Care Among Late-in-life Iranian Immigrants

This paper looks at the need for provision of culturally appropriate health and mental health services for late in- life immigrants. The paper looks specifically at Iranian immigrants who migrated to the United States after the age of 50.

This is a qualitative study, which aims to deepen the understanding of the specific health and mental health needs of the late in-life Iranian immigrants and the importance of providing culturally appropriate care for this population.

As the face of American society changes rapidly and becomes more diverse, so should the approach to the provision of care services. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, one-third of all U.S. citizens are members of a minority group. Over 19 million people, or 1 in every 13 residents in the United States are foreign-born.

Immigrants, particularly those who migrated at the later stage of life have health and mental health needs that are different from those of the native born population. Research has identified the process of migration as a mental health risk factor. It is argued that migration effects life and health on every level.

Although immigrants in the United States are expected to acculturate and perhaps even assimilate, the reality for the late in life immigrants is quite different. Many never become a part of the mainstream American culture. They never obtain a grasp of the English language, remain in desperate dependence of their children or other family members, live in isolation and feel alienated. Although many are in desperate need for mental health care, they are among those who least utilize the services.

During the last two decades, more than three million Iranians have immigrated to other countries. It is estimated that 2 million of them live in the United States. It is hard to give the exact number of people from Iran living in the United States because the Census Bureau counts them as “white”. This large but invisible population has received very little attention in the literature particularly in the Social Work literature.

There has been no systematic effort made to explore their subjective views of health and mental health and hence no provision of culturally appropriate care. Many of late in life immigrants suffer in silence and see their life as a sacrifice for their children. It is not likely that we hear any complaints from this population no matter how great their suffering, as this population feels no sense of entitlement, is suspicious of authority and is basically just grateful to be in the United States. This study aims to give voice to this otherwise silent population, and addresses their health and mental health concerns in a culturally appropriate/specific manner which may help contribute to their healing.

Manata Hashemi

Identity Construction in Contemporary Iranian Youth Residing Both in Iran and Abroad

This study is an attempt at unraveling the knots that comprise Iran and its people and to understanding how the intricate process of identity construction relates on a grander scale to the socio-political situation in Iran and speaks to the national collective consciousness.

The “products of the Revolution”, as the youth of Iran are fondly referred to, are an important starting point in understanding the roles that individual identity and collective consciousness play in the process of nation-building. The youth are also significant for they also allow us to comprehend the dual influence of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the youth and determine the youth’s influence on the state. During the eight year long Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) which was one of the bloodiest and most brutal wars in history, the new clerical government urged its constituency to reproduce. The masses listened and today, Iran is host to a population where more than two-thirds of

its inhabitants are under the age of thirty. These “children of the Revolution” were born during the Republic’s formative years. Many, if not all, of these young people have no knowledge of life under the Pahlavi regime. Some were infants at the time of the Islamic Republic’s inception and left Iran with their parents to live abroad. Yet others left the country only recently as university students in order to gain better economic, political, and social freedoms. There is a necessarily a dichotomous relationship between these two groups of youth—those that were raised abroad with no first-hand experience of the Republic and the unimagined Iran and those who remained behind to live through its aftermath and have a concrete, tangible perception of Iran and its current situations.

It is this very duality that leads investigators to question the “essence” of cultural identity and if there is even such a thing as an “essential” cultural identity. Language and being the “other” in both Iranian and American settings has contributed to creating an insider/outsider dichotomy among the two subgroups of Iranian youth. How these two groups of ethnic Iranians, separated from each other for the majority of their lives, view each other and themselves all within the context of their new environment is at the heart of this research investigation. It is my aim in this study to show how identity among Iranian youth is both constructed and structured socially. It is defined in the context of communication and interaction among members of one’s own as well as other ethnic groups both in real, tangible spaces and in virtual reality.

While historical and theoretical literature on Iran, assimilation experiences, exile culture, ethnicity, and identity all served as invaluable resources in contextualizing my interviews and providing a framework for the voices of my informants, the qualitative research approaches of in-depth interviewing and ethnographic observations of informal Iranian gatherings provided me with the best lens in viewing and understanding the youth’s real-life challenges and experiences. My research has led me to discover a general sense of displacement among the Iranians that I have encountered – a feeling of belonging somewhere in the margins, not completely fitting in with either Iranian or American cultures. Not only does this sense of being the other define these informants’ experiences as a diasporic community abroad, but it is also integral in their own self-concept and construction of identity. The layers that comprise an individual’s identity are not only constructed through one’s own image of oneself, but are also constructed in one’s interaction with others. Perhaps the greatest challenge that diasporic communities have to face in locating themselves is not forgetting, according to the words of one of my informants, “where they are from.” For those that have recently arrived here, this remembering is a means to *maintaining* their Iranianess. For those that have been living in America for most, if not all, of their lives, this remembering is their way of *choosing* to validate the Iranian side of their identity. No one ethnic group is homogenous and each contains within it both dominant voices and voices that have been silenced out or excluded. In order to fully understand the intricacies of cultural identity, we must attend to both.