

Vancouver Centre of Excellence



Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

Working Paper Series

No. 01-16

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Health": Reading the Stories of Immigrant Iranian Women**

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August 2001

RIIM

Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

The Vancouver Centre is funded by grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Citizenship & Immigration Canada, Simon Fraser University, the University of British Columbia and the University of Victoria. We also wish to acknowledge the financial support of the Metropolis partner agencies:

- Health Canada
- Human Resources Development Canada
- Department of Canadian Heritage
- Department of the Solicitor General of Canada
- Status of Women Canada
- Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation
- Correctional Service of Canada
- Immigration & Refugee Board

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Narrative Mediation of Conventional and New Paradigms of “Mental Health”: Reading the Stories of Immigrant Iranian Women

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August 2001

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Abstract: The potential of storytelling to effect change and produce new knowledge is being recognized across disciplines. Two conditions are necessary for the realization of these goals: (a) reading of stories must be contextualized to include larger social and political landscapes; and (b) the questions of how stories are read and towards what end must be looked at closely. This paper explores these issues with reference to the subject of “mental health”/emotional well-being, which was chosen for two reasons: it allows us to examine the medicalization process (pathology discourse) to which racialized minorities are subject at particular moments in the process of settling in, while “mental health” presents a second demedicalized scenario reconstructed by racialized minorities through the act of storytelling. An ethnographic example of this process comes from a cohort of post-revolution Iranian women from metropolitan Vancouver. Reading their stories of well-being at a particular moment in time – a five-week session forming part of a larger study – shows that well-being/illness is essentially grounded in spaces and places where we live, work and have our being. This commonplace knowledge subdued by asymmetrical relations of power is retrieved through Iranian women’s stories of life and living told at a time where their experiences and histories are subject to erasure.

Key words: emotional well-being, ethnographic, Iranian women, medicalization, stories

Introduction: Authored and Unauthored Texts

In 1905, a year preceding the Iranian Constitutional Revolution, the country was gripped by two events: the selling of daughters by distraught peasants and the abduction of women and girls by Turkoman tribes. Both these events were related in the form of a story that was told and retold from the pulpits of the mosques, in political meetings and on the streets. Assuming the form of prose, poetry, satire and drama, the story gripped the national imagination of Iran. This story forms the subject matter of Afsaneh Najmabadi's (1998), *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*. She notes:

Known as "Hikayat-i dukhataran-i Quchan [the story of the daughters of Quchan], it was narrated in many forms and by diverse speakers and writers. Muslim preachers lamented the fate of the girls from the pulpit. Social Democratic militants used the story as a tale of the injustice of the rich and the tyranny of the rulers. The story was recited not only from the pulpit and in political leaflets. It worked as an exemplar in the burgeoning press, in a multiplicity of contexts, and through many literary forms: in dialogicals and letters of warning, in prose and poetry, in street songs and satire (ibid. 1).

The story of women's captivity gripped the imagination of the nation because its multiple retelling occurred at a time when Iran was undergoing political changes from autocratic rule towards a constitutional regime. What captured the attention of Najmabadi, an Iranian historian, and provided the rationale for writing/recuperating this tale of grievance was the fact that this story slipped into national amnesia because the women were used as ploys to advance patriarchal agendas. What was at stake was men's honour for failing to protect women; women's welfare was not the issue. Najmabadi then undertook the task of writing women into Iranian history on the grounds that their presence leads to narrating a different kind of history – one where the contradictory and contesting moments of women's everyday lives are valorized.

Writing on another front, Farraneh Milani (1992) has chronicled one and a half centuries of Iranian women's literary writings. Herself a poet and a literary scholar, she aims to capture women's struggles to counter their spatial and verbal exclusion from society and from the rich but male-oriented Iranian literature of over a thousand years. Milani's project is informed by her own dilemma of having to address women's subordinate status in her home and adopted countries of

Iran and the United States respectively. She presents two images of the veil. The first is that of silence and immobility (*sokut-o-sokun*) that excludes women from the literary field (and other spheres of society). The second concerns a sense of security and certainty that Milani grew up with despite living within the world of walls and veils. The author identifies an additional dimension of invisible veils and barriers that she encounters in her new home in the United States. She writes:

A poem [*Yasaman*] I wrote years ago best epitomizes my frantic search for bearings, for familiar boundaries. It portrays my internal turmoil at this point, as if I were running in two directions at once. One nostalgically backward for familiar walls and veils, for certainties lost... The other, frantically running sideways and forwards, to master the vertigo of open spaces, to master how to negotiate new, unfamiliar invisible walls (ibid. xii).

As an immigrant, Milani finds herself writing in a foreign language about a group of female Iranian writers who have been exiled (marginalized) in their own land; a second level of exclusion arises from the fact that her/other Iranian women's literary works are not recognized in the mainstream Anglo-American and world literature. She sees herself "as an exile writing about exiles" (ibid. 13).

Najmabadi's and Milani's works represent a growing body of literature authored by Iranian women interested in seeing how women negotiate the aesthetics of silence and come to terms with gender as well as racial "violence" and exclusion. Their second goal is to explore new territory and constitute new plots to see how women create art out of life: "the song of the mute and the dance of the immobile" (Milani:xv).

Women's refusal to maintain silence and their attempts to explore new domains can occur at multiple levels and sites. One such level is that of ordinary immigrant women telling their stories in a foreign land. But these stories are markedly different. To begin with, as unauthored texts, they are grounded in everyday local experiences informed by larger socio-political forces that exclude and marginalize women. The important issue here is that of naming and identifying these forces while simultaneously creating spaces for immigrant women's stories so that they can eventually become part of the national and social landscape of the society in question. At this level, the stories have the potential to effect social change.

In this paper, I explore the pedagogical potential of the stories of post-revolution Iranian women living in metropolitan Vancouver.¹ Our point of entry into the lives of these women is emotional well-being, a subject that is of interest for two reasons. First, among the many lenses deployed by dominant society to construct immigrant/refugee women as the Other, that of emotional well-being (mental health according to the dominant society) is salient. Female newcomers are considered to be at a greater disadvantage compared with their male counterparts and other European migrants. The source of their disadvantaged status is erroneously traced by the dominant society and its institutions to the cultures of their home countries – a strategy that masks structural factors of exclusion and racism against women (Agnew 1996; Bannerji 1995; Jiwani 2001; Razack 1998; Thobani 2000). Second, there is another side to the issue of well-being. Through their stories, female newcomers frame the issue of emotional well-being differently and in doing so bring to light broader and more inclusive parameters, as is evident from the fact that the participants in our study chose to use the term emotional well-being (read wellness/illness) as opposed to mental health (read “illness”). Women’s framing of emotional well-being in the way of a critique of the host society as well as their chalking of new paths must be contextualized to forestall appropriation of women’s stories.

Immigrant and refugee women’s stories are appropriated and homogenized differently depending on one’s vantage point. For service providers (including the media), these women are fleeing from an unremittingly oppressive society into full emancipation in the West, to use Ong’s words (1995:350). If they have not been able to achieve a sense of freedom, so the conversation goes, they have to work harder and give themselves more time. In the eyes of the policy makers and prospective employees, these women’s life experiences are of no consequence in the host land to the extent that they are erased. For health providers, female immigrants/refugees are pathological cases that require medical treatment. Historical and ethnographic works that attempt to provide more nuanced profiles, however, do not make their way into the corridors of power where decisions are made and policies formulated. One word that sums up the above perceptions is negative homogenization. In an attempt to reverse this trend, we will engage with generous contextualization. Adding contexts to women’s stories leads to a paradigm shift from victim-blaming to unmasking the system’s complicity in oppressing women.

Analytical frameworks in deconstructing the system’s operation at particular sites (courts, classrooms and workplace) have been well developed by Razack (1998) and Bannerji (1995)

¹ This chapter forms part of a larger research project on emotional well-being of Iranian women on the North Shore (05/97-06/2001); the project was funded by SHRCC and the Vancouver Centre of

among others. Citing the case of sexual/racist harassment of a black woman in a Canadian work place, Bannerji notes that this woman's case may best be understood in a context where her personal experience and the social setting of the workplace are considered as intertwined. More layered contexts, Bannerji argues, bring to light the fact that the workplace is not only a unit of economic production but a site "which is organized through known and predictable social relations, practices, cultural norms and expectations" (ibid. 130). A reading of these condensed relations of ruling, also embedded in the Canadian history of colonization, leads Bannerji to conclude that it is the interaction of social forces that produces the Black woman's experience of harassment. Structural analysis of sites where racialized women work and live have offered invaluable insights in understanding their everyday experiences of racist and sexist oppression. But these frameworks do not leave much room where women are seen as actors and producers of knowledge of value to the society in which they live. If their ideas are at all recognized, as has been the case within the discipline of anthropology, they are confined locally to the worlds they belong to (Moore 1996).

Keeping in mind the need to look at the dynamic relationship between structure and agency, I have organized this paper as follows. In the first part, I provide a profile of the veil as a point of intervention into the homogenized equation: veil = oppression. This discussion provides background information on Iranian storytellers² who related their pre- and post-migration experiences at a "women and well-being" session held under the auspices of a community organization in the Spring of 2001. In the second part, two more contexts – the political economy of health and critical pedagogy – are presented to lay the groundwork for listening to stories. These contexts pave the way for the third part where we will "read"³ Iranian women's (Zan-e Irani) stories as part of a literary movement whereby Iranian women at home and abroad/in exile have begun to tell their tales, loud and clear (Afkhami and Friedl 1994; Milani 1992). The implications of storytelling for social change are examined in the conclusion.

Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis (RIIM).

² I use this term in the generic sense. Iranian women are known to be skilled at the art of spinning tales (Milani 1992).

³ The emphasis is on critical reading, the groundwork for which is laid out in the contexts.

The Trajectory of the Veil

In her lifetime, an elderly Iranian immigrant woman has been subject to four phases of the veil: traditional veiling from the time of puberty, forceful unveiling following the Shah's 1936-1944 decree, forced re-veiling in the post-revolution era and "invisible veiling/walls" in her country of adoption in Canada. The four phases form the subject matter of this section, my goal being merely to bring into relief the effect of invisible veiling/walls (phase four) compared with more visible forms of veiling/unveiling (phases one to three).

Phases One to Three: Traditional Veiling/Forced Unveiling/Forced Re-Veiling.

Traditional veiling of women in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East has been the subject of numerous works, many of which have been authored by Middle Eastern women scholars (Leila Ahmed 1992; Farraheh Milani 1992; Fatima Mernissi 1975, 1991; Homa Hoodfar 1997, among others). Nuanced historic and socio-specific contexts are highlighted in these works. The essential idea is to show that veiling in itself does not translate into seclusion. Rather, it is the larger social, economic and ideological factors that determine women's social status. Taking a historical perspective, Ahmed (1992), for example, argues that women's veiling/segregation must be understood in the context of the tension between the legalistic politicized version of Islam and the ethical egalitarian approach embedded in the Qur'an. A different perspective is offered by anthropologist Erika Friedl (1989) in her work of two decades in an Iranian village. She notes that veiled women have had space to negotiate their presence in the male public world except that this possibility has been minimized in the capitalistic market model which has undermined women's networks and rendered them powerless. Her insights on women's "traditional" world are revealing:

...locally women are said to belong in the house, yet one sees many women out on apparently legitimate errands, often all day and far from home. A respectable woman will argue that she cannot walk even a few steps down the lane to visit a relative without being wrapped in a long veil, yet the same woman can be seen working at the public water channel, not only sans cumbersome veil but with her shirt sleeves rolled up to her elbows (ibid. 196).

The Shah's 1936 decree of forced unveiling was politically motivated. Like other male "reformers" of the time, he believed that the modernization of Iran cannot take place without women serving as markers of national identity. In a modernized country, women must be (ostensibly) seen as liberated and taking their place alongside men. But in actual fact, only a few

urban women were recipients of the “benefits” accruing from the modern projects of education and the market economy. The Shah’s second goal was directed outwards. He wanted to project a particular image for the West whose modernization model he had adopted unreservedly. The equation being that Iran was progressive because its women were unveiled. But, state-imposed changes are ambiguous. As Sullivan (1998) reminds us:

Life makes for strange bedfellows. Just as Big Oil, the United States and the Shah had no intention of producing an Islamic Revolution, so too the Islamic Revolution had no intention of producing its unintended effect: a potential that, though compromised, is realizing itself in a kind of women’s movement specific to and produced by its historical movement...(ibid. 236).

Women appropriated the state’s rhetoric of female emancipation and worked towards improving the conditions of their lives. “For the first time in their history, Iranian women found their way into the parliament, the cabinet, the armed forces, the legal profession, and a variety of fields in science and high technology” (Afkhani and Friedl 1994:11). It was women’s lobbying that led to the introduction of the Family Protection Law (1976) giving Iranian women the right to decide on matters of marriage, divorce and custody of children among other things.

In post-revolutionary Iran, women are re-veiled by law. The Family Protection Law was repealed and the new regime introduced measures that tried “to force women out of the job market in a variety of ways, including early retirement of government women employees, closing of childcare centers, segregating women and enforcing full Islamic cover (*hejab-e islami*) in offices and public places, and closing nearly 140 university fields of study to women” (Afkhani and Friedl 1994:12). Yet women continued to fight for their rights, and their struggles to some extent were bolstered by social and economic conditions. For example, the moderate gains that women had made over five decades during the Pahlavi regime could not be completely erased. As Afkhani and Friedl (ibid.) have observed, some of those rights had settled into the collective psyche of the society. Second, the downward trend in Iran’s post-revolution economy in the 1970s and 1980s made it necessary for women to stay in the job market. Third, the repeal of the Family Protection Law made way for a form of marriage considered as contractual by the Islamic Republic. Contractual marriage is an agreement between two individuals; this arrangement gives some leeway to women to negotiate more favourable conditions in their marriage contracts, such as “the condition of monogamy, the right of the woman to divorce, and the equitable division of the wealth accumulated during marriage. In general these conditions are more favorable to women than was the old Family Protection Law” (Moghadam 1994:95). Despite constraints such

as the absence of a legal requirement for husbands to make the contract egalitarian, the popularity of the contract can be attested by the fact that notary public offices have printed advanced copies of the contract (ibid. 95). Fourth, from their vantage point of increased visibility (social, symbolic, and economic) in Iranian society, women have reasserted themselves in the arts, in education and in politics. Even if the goals of freedom and equality evade them, as is also the case with women in the West, women have created an atmosphere whereby their concerns have moved from the margins into the centre of Iranian society. These accomplishments have been the result of the work of “veiled” women.

A caveat is in order. The above discussion does not assume that gender is a master status informing the lives of women. We may note here that the discrepancy between the rich and the poor and between rural and urban women is pronounced. It is commonplace knowledge that women’s access to education and resources is shaped by their socio-economic status. While not underplaying these and other differences (ethnicity and religion), the fact is that in today’s Iran, women’s issues are at the forefront of the social, religious, economic and political life of the country. And as has been the case for centuries, these issues are debated and brought to the fore by women themselves from their different social locations. Both in the way in which women have made moderate gains and in terms of their continual struggles for equality, women form part of the national imagination of Iran.

Our discussion of the three phases concerning the trajectory of the veil has brought to light one point: women’s lives are embedded in history and social and economic conditions of the times but not along a linear path. Veiled, unveiled or re-veiled, women also respond to conditions that shape their lives and in the process effect social transformation. This commonplace knowledge needs to be reiterated because women may also find themselves in situations where they are rendered invisible and their life experiences may be subject to erasure. Such is the case with the cohort of Iranian migrants who came to Canada in the post-revolution period. Their silencing and immobility (*sokut-o-sokun*) constitutes the fourth phase of the “invisible veil/walls.”

Phase Four: Invisible Veils/Walls

The structural location of post-revolution Iranian immigrant women in Canada is no different from those of other racialized women. Discursively constructed as the “Other,” and subject to racism and sexism, these women have little opportunity to advance their cause towards the promise of gender and race-based equality enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights. A lethal weapon used for continuous ghettoization and marginalization of immigrant women is that of

racism. The impact of this destructive force has been noted at multiple levels (Bannerji 2000). Inherently, racism is a mode of exclusion, subordination and exploitation that operates in different forms governed by specific historical and social contexts. Entrenched in systems and institutions, it operates in multiple ways along the same lines as Foucault's (1979, 1980) model of power in modern societies.

Scholars Thobani (2000), Jiwani (2001) Mohanty, (1991) and Ng (1988) have differentially noted the deficiency discourse that surrounds the socially constructed category of an immigrant/third-world woman: she does not speak English, she is passive, oppressed and home-bound; she is usually found in the lower echelons of the workforce and if labeled as a refugee, she is a drain on the system. The structural location of immigrant women is that of subordination. "Their inequality is defined on the basis of economic, socio-cultural and political devaluation, all of which are underpinned by historical and contemporary social forces and institutionalized in society" (Jiwani: 2001:5). An additional factor that defines the situation of the Muslim women in the West is the veil.

In the western world, the veil is not viewed as a piece of attire with a complex trajectory, as explained above with reference to the Iranian situation. Rather, the meaning ascribed to the veil is tied to the colonial narrative of the oppression of Muslim women, the historical context of which is outlined in Leila Ahmed's (1992) work, *Women and Gender in Islam*. This author argues that the West's use of the veil as a symbol of oppression served two purposes: (a) to establish its superior status over the colonized Muslim world based on the argument that the Muslim societies' oppression of women was the outcome of its barbaric culture and religion, both of which needed to be replaced by the West's civilizing mission; (b) to appropriate the feminist discourse at home and channel it to the East (white men saving brown women from brown men, as Spivak [1988] has expressed it) in order to undermine western feminism, a discourse that unfortunately was adopted by white feminists to their disadvantage; along with their male counterparts, white women positioned themselves to save brown women from the clutches of what they perceived as the oppressive culture of the colonized. This point is reiterated by Ahmed (1992) as:

European feminists critical of the practices and beliefs of the men of their societies with respect to themselves acquiesced in and indeed promoted the European male's representations of Other men and the culture of Other men and joined in the name of feminism, in the attack on the veil and the practices generally of Muslim societies (ibid. 243).

The colonialist lens has followed Muslim women into their new homeland in the West. The “oppression” of Muslim women is invoked in the Western media, in the social service sector and in scholarship for the sole purpose of constructing them in the image of the alien Other (Hoodfar 1997). As Modood (1997) has observed in the case of Europe: “Muslims are indeed very much a part of ‘the otherness’ in the self-definition of the various peoples of the region” (ibid. 2). Under such powerful impulses the power of the colonial narrative has not declined. As Ahmed reminds us: “... that the measure of whether Muslim women were liberated or not lay in whether they veiled and whether the particular society had become “progressive” and westernized or insisted on clinging to Arab and Islamic ways” (ibid. 247).

The social construction of the immigrant Muslim women as the racialized Other constitutes the fourth phase of the trajectory of the veil. But the veil in question is not taken at a material level; structurally, it has assumed the form of invisible walls that block post-revolution Iranian women’s participation in Canadian society. The difference between the first three phases of the trajectory of the veil and the last one is as follows. In the former conditions and spaces existed for women to work towards improving their life situations, despite multiple experiences of reversal. In the fourth phase, it is the non-existence of these conditions which is the issue and it is at this fundamental level that Iranian women’s well-being has been affected.

Invisible Veils/Walls and Emotional Well-being

The correlation between visible veiling/un-veiling, invisible veiling/walls and emotional well-being may be explained along the following lines. To begin with, both forms of veiling have prevented women from developing their potential for full participation in society. But there is a difference in kind between the two forms of veiling. Despite living in a gender-segregated world with its shaded history of gains and losses, Iranian women (*Zan-e-Irani*), have had some space to negotiate the conditions of their lives as explained above. This is because, as Iranian/Middle Eastern female scholars have informed us, women have had access to mediums of expression. Here are a few examples. Milani (1992) observes that over the last one hundred and fifty years Iranian women have turned to poetry and prose “to free women’s public voices” (ibid. 1). Iranian women’s literary tradition, she argues, has had its roots in the age-old art of spinning tales. On another front, anthropologist Erika Friedl (1989) has observed the multiple and ingenious ways in which women negotiate the realities of their everyday lives; she notes that despite their dependent position in society, “they use their culture, their relationships, and their philosophy to construct their lives and the lives of those near them” (ibid. 6). In post-revolutionary Iran, women film-

makers and women's presence in the cinematic script is revealed in terms of the aesthetics of veiling (Hamid Naficy 1994). This aspect is poignantly captured in the title of Naficy's (ibid.) work: *Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema*. Women's presence in the political and moral imagination of Iranian society is also revealed in publications like *Zanan*, advocating the cause of gender equality.

The media through which women continue to struggle for their rights in Iran are totally absent on the Canadian scene. Here, Iranian women (and men) may be noticed as recipients of services as was the case with the cohort of our research participants; their presence is acknowledged negatively through stereotypes. For example, within the social service sector, the two common phrases that I came across during my four and a half years of research (May 1997-June 2001) are "they are illiterate," and "they are stupid." From the fifteen narratives that we⁴ recorded, it appears that these assumptions implicitly determined women's limited access to services. These negative perceptions have led to the creation of additional barriers in the form of invisible walls compounding Iranian women's⁵ social invisibility that essentially translates into erasure of their historical trajectories of struggles as noted above.

The absence of social arenas that allow individuals to fight for their rights as well as spheres of activities and relationships where their presence are acknowledged and their contributions recognized has an impact on one's emotional well-being. While this appears to be commonplace, the processes through which an individual's life experiences are erased are not easily understood. What are the circumstances which prompt the cohort of our research participants to say: "I am tired of life": "I have nothing to live for": "I get up in the morning feeling very sad and when I go back to bed, my sadness is there": "I live with pain everyday"? These are strong statements and their incorporation in the DSM-IV (Diagnostic Statistical Manual) mapping of mental health would render these women into "patients" in need of therapy. But this is not the route chosen by the participants. As one woman explained it: "I am looking for a long term solution. I am not going to go to the doctor and get anti-depressants for my pain and suffering." Another woman related her friend's story to make the point that the medical solution undermined their survival power of which they were acutely aware despite the ups and downs in the state of their well-being.

⁴ I was assisted by two indigenous research assistants who helped me to establish contacts and translated the majority of the scripts into English.

⁵ I would like to remind the reader that my usage of the term Iranian women only includes the cohort of women who participated in the study. I make no attempt to generalize their situation to other Iranian women living in metropolitan Vancouver.

“My friend has been very depressed. She continued to struggle. She had a list of six telephone numbers of her friends. She had memorized these numbers and she would call one friend at a time and talk to her at length. I was one of those friends. One day, her son insisted that she visit a doctor. The doctor prescribed anti-depressants. She felt better for a few months but then her depression came back. This time the doctor gave her a stronger dose. Every time she went to him, he increased her dosage. You know what has happened to her? She has stopped calling her friends. The last time I saw her, she was numb. She did not want to talk. This is what medication does to you. It takes away your power to struggle.”

Iranian women’s own understanding of emotional well-being – the existential level identified above – is not understood and taken up by the mainstream health institutions. Here, if the concerns of Iranian/immigrant women are expressed at all, it is more in the form of issues. Inaccessibility arising from language and “cultural” barriers receives primary importance followed by recognition of social determinants of health that may or may not include the impact of racism on women’s lives (Morrow and Chappell 1999). There is equal emphasis placed on immigrant women’s inability to integrate into the host society because in the words of a service provider: “They are not equipped to live here.” The factors cited are: “inability to speak English” and “cultural oppression.” For Muslim women an additional factor is her veil (read: backward and oppressed). An ESL teacher related that she had a veiled woman in her class. The teacher would not look in her direction thinking that she was unintelligent and stupid. It was only half way through the term when this woman spoke that it dawned on the teacher that she was the brightest woman in her class.

A cursory glance at the recommendations made in community reports on immigrant women (Women and Mental Health Committee 1987; Canadian Task Force on Mental Health Issues 1988; Morrow and Chappell 1999) follow a continuum: anti-racist strategies are placed at one end and culturally sensitive issues are placed at the other end. The contradictions between the two are barely recognized: the former calls for structural changes while the latter keeps the structure intact. Also included are alternative family and community-oriented systems of care practiced by immigrant communities. Ultimately and at the end of the day, the model of care (culturally sensitive or otherwise) is individualized. The onus of integrating into the host society and maintaining well-being is placed on women themselves. The individualized and politicized models denude the historical and social trajectories of women’s lives. Storytelling constitutes one avenue through which women’s complex lives may be captured within a temporal framework:

what the past has been like, what the present ought to be and how the future is envisioned. The contexts on the trajectory of the veil and the scripts on racialization of Iranian/immigrant women provides a grounding for the temporal framework as does the context of the telling and listening paradigm discussed below.

The Telling and Listening Paradigm

In the last two decades, the genre of storytelling has been given centre stage in the works of anthropologists, feminists and those engaged in the study of marginalized groups. Storytelling has come of age in the social sciences. Its value as a methodology for doing bottom-up research has been noted and recognized. But as is the case with any set of data, in its unexamined form, it can be abused and appropriated by dominant groups. Let us revisit Najmabadi's work on the story of the daughters of Quchan. As we have noted, the story's inscription into the national imagination of Iran had nothing to do with the fate of peasant girls and women; the issue rather was that the narrative provided the site for the contestation over political themes concerning the constitutional revolution. Razack (1998) provides yet another example of the appropriation of women's stories. Her critical analysis of the refugee hearing process concerning non-western women shows that unless these women frame their stories in terms of oppressed/veiled third-world women running away from the patriarchal cruelty of families, communities or nations, their stories are not heard and asylum is not granted. The victimization stories of third-world women, according to Razack, serves to perpetuate the epistemological and physical binary between the third world and the West. The construction of the third world as barbaric and cruel to its women is capitalized upon by the West, which positions itself as superior through this socially constructed and overtly simplified comparison. Overlooked here is the colonial legacy of exploitation that create asylum seekers in the first place (Razack 1998; Harrison 1997). The issue then is that unless women's stories serve to advance patriarchal and imperialist interests, they are not heard and rarely make their way into the national and the international corridors of power.

In an attempt to create a space where women's stories are valorized as genuine attempts towards reinterpreting and remaking of the worlds in which they live, narrative scholars have identified a number of critical and reflexive perspectives. Anthropologist Gelya Frank (2000) suggests that gathering information on a life story must be accompanied by "a methodology in action as a source of primary data" (2000:22). This stance, she argues, allows us to see how the biographical self is influenced by a particular cultural milieu over time as well as how it is transformed by the subject. When readers engage with the life story and its various

interpretations, new meanings are created that will reverberate in the readers' own local cultures and sometimes the dominant culture as well. Frank observes that if stories are listened to in an appropriate way they have the potential to bring about some social change.

Anthropologist Julie Cruikshank (1998) notes that one route we can follow to ensure that stories of marginalized people are heard is to analyze how translation occurs across boundaries. This focus, she argues, breathes new life into stories as it creates greater appreciation of how the stories can be retrieved and reintroduced in new contexts. The aspect of new contexts is well-summarized by Razack (1998) who notes that the stories of marginal groups reveal the world that we ought to know. In this vein, I want to suggest that listening is not a linear process; to grasp the meaning of the content and the manner in which stories are related requires second and third readings made possible through generous contextualization, elements of which I have outlined above. It is these contextualized readings that reveal the story's potential for change. The change may be brought about by the fact that stories challenge the us/them boundaries and question the validity of received knowledge. Inasmuch as they capture the world of people who have experienced pain and suffering, the stories of marginalized people are bound to suggest knowledge of a just world (Razack 1998; Dossa 2000).

Stories are also social as they reveal the complex ways in which individuals are interconnected with the world, a microcosm of which is the community/communities in struggle. Yet, in the Western world, an individual is considered to be severed from society; its liberal democracy is premised on the fact that "an individual is thought to be an autonomous, rational self, essentially unconnected to other selves and dedicated to pursuing his or her own interests" (Razack, *op.cit.*, 38).

The above discussion establishes one point: stories/narratives have the potential to effect social change provided they form part of the larger political, social, historical, cultural and literary landscapes of societies. The possibility of Iranian/immigrant women becoming part of the Canadian landscape is remote as their structural and social exclusion is intense. Yet their stories must be heard if we want to write a different kind of Canadian history: a history where women from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds have an active presence. As Trinh (1989) has expressed it: "It will take a long time, but the story must be told" (*ibid.* 119).

It is in this spirit that I present stories from the group session on emotional well-being.⁶ It was evident that women who shared their stories were looking for avenues to change the conditions of their lives even in a small way. Our listening must then be directed to the process of how we come to know about the lives of those who tell their stories and what we do to the stories once we have heard them. Each situation has its own point of entry. In the following section, I suggest an entry point from my home discipline of anthropology. I have paid close attention to moments, occurrences, and words that are otherwise dismissed as inconsequential; but at the same time my engagement with the discipline has been informed by the need to address its unrealized goal of tacit humanism (Abu-Lughod 1991), a goal that has remained suspended owing to the discipline's historical complicity with the colonizing project.

Telling Their Stories on Emotional Well-Being

A cohort of Iranian women⁷ participating in the storytelling session, did not give me the licence to assume that there was automatic friendship, goodwill and a sense of togetherness within the group. Social hierarchies are also present within subordinate groups and to assume that the Iranian women's concerns are homogenous would defeat the purpose of the session. Critical pedagogy cannot be built on unexamined assumptions such as the universal oppression of women. The challenge then is to examine the process of how women worked towards establishing a forum for expressing their concerns on emotional well-being. Two moments will illustrate this point further: "Starting Points" and "Epitomizing Narratives."

Starting Points

Ethical issues surrounding field research involving human subjects have been addressed in the academia through letters of solicitation and consent forms. Accordingly, I distributed letters and forms in Farsi (Persian) and English to members of the group. My verbal explanation of the content, for example, maintenance of confidentiality and the right to refuse and or withdraw from the research, was politely acknowledged. his top-down approach was substituted by the participants who introduced their own practice: they took the oath of confidentiality verbally and through body gesture of raising of the right hand. Furthermore, their right to withdraw from the

⁶ The work conducted within this session (Spring 2001) forms part of a larger study on the emotional well-being of Iranian women as I have noted in this paper.

⁷ The participants were six Iranian women, one mainstream coordinator, one Iranian coordinator/translator and myself.

study was converted into its opposite: the participants decided that they would all commit themselves to attending all the sessions. Ironically, trust and good will were fostered through subversion of the system (the ethics regulations/paper work); it appears that the participants had an intuitive understanding that protection of individual rights has no group-building capacity. This is in keeping with the liberal democracy model that lays emphasis on individual rights but does not advocate group rights. Charles Taylor's (1994) much-cited work on communitarian values has been critiqued by Bannerji (2000) on the grounds that it is an "elitist form of self-deception, which in the name of the community offers condescension" (ibid. 149).

When I had first approached the Iranian coordinator, it was my expectation that she would draw the participants from the research criteria that I had given to her: (a) age group 33 to 66; (b) migration over the last fifteen years and (c) lower and upper class. During my conversation with the coordinator, I learned that these criteria was not used: "I have chosen the participants who represent the concerns of the seventy Iranian women who participate in the program." This point was confirmed by one of the participants in the class: "Our stories are everyone's stories." The Iranian women were keen to present a united front knowing full well that this was one way in which they could make their stories known. Yet, the women wanted to ensure that the significance of each of their stories was maintained while not losing sight of a common landscape. An illustrative example comes from the introductions:

1. We came to Canada two and a half years ago. I have two sons, thirteen and eight years old. My husband is a medical practitioner; I am a clinical psychologist and am a certified dental assistant.
2. I am married and I live with my husband. I have two grown up children. I have been in Canada for eleven years.
3. I live with my husband and I have six children. One son lives in America. Three of my children live with me. The rest are married. We have been in Canada for four years.
4. I have two grown up children. My children do not live with me. I am here with my husband. I have been in Canada for ten years.
5. I am a widow. I have three sons and two daughters. They are all grown up and married. I am alone and often sick. I have been in Canada for eight years.

6. I have been in Canada for twenty one years. I feel like an immigrant. I have been doing voluntary work for six years. I am a retired nurse (mainstream/white coordinator).
7. I am an anthropologist from Simon Fraser University. I am doing research on the emotional well-being of Iranian women. I am originally from Uganda and I have been in Canada for thirty years (researcher).

Introductions are usually glossed over as they are considered to be a warming up exercise to facilitate discussion on more substantive issues. For the participants in our study, however, introduction together with the other strategies that we examined above may be considered as a framing device. It allows the women to establish the parameters before commencing the work of telling their stories. There are two entry points in the introductions. The first one concerns motherhood. My initial reading of the texts led me to conclude that the women chose this particular entry point because they considered the role of motherhood as critically important.

As elsewhere in the world, motherhood is also a social construct that brings to the fore dilemmas and tensions: for example between home and career life, the deskilling process that their work has been subject to globally (Mohanty 1991; Harrison 1997) and medicalization of their bodies, especially during critical periods such as birthing and aging (Ram and Jolly 1999; Lock 1995). A second reading of the introduction suggests that women were putting forward an agenda – the tension-filled role of motherhood – that mainstream women (includes the researcher) do not bring to the fore in the public sphere; consider the very different introductions of the mainstream coordinator and the researcher included above.

In choosing to foreground their role as mothers, Iranian women established a different point of entry that undermined the private/public divide and created a broader expanse within which they could relate their stores of emotional well-being. Yet, the participants did not gloss over their different experiences of motherhood. The introductions reveal different vantage points: a young mother with three occupations, mothers who lived with or away from their children and a widow. These vantage points made space for women to relate their different experiences without losing site of their common concerns as people in search of meaningful engagement with life in their country of adoption.

The number of years in Canada is another aspect commented upon in the introduction by the participants. The mention of the time period may be in response to the service providers'

assumption that the longer the newcomers are in Canada, the greater is their level of integration. This widely held notion places the onus on the individual “to settle down,” diverting the much-needed attention from issues of racism and structural barriers. In presenting the different time frames: two and a half years to eleven years, the participants are giving the message that the period of residence and integration cannot be conflated.

The “starting points” included another element: naming of emotional well-being. The entry point here is that the participants had been exposed to and had knowledge of the dominant mental health discourse. Through orientation sessions of service programs and sharing of stories such as the one cited above (depression = medication = numbness), the women had identified two issues: (a) inaccessibility of services owing to linguistic and material constraints and (b) inappropriateness of the term “mental health.” During the initial phase of my research, the participants suggested that I should not use the term mental health. “It means being crazy,” said one woman. They recommended that I use the word “emotional well-being.” They also rejected the Iranian term *narahati* which connotes “undifferentiated unpleasant emotional and physical feelings” (Pliskin 1987:47; Good 1985). In his work on Iranian immigrants in Israel, Pliskin (ibid.) notes that *narahati* refers to “a wide range of negative emotions, some of which were explained to me by Iranians in Israel as depressed, inconvenienced, nervous, anxious, troubled, uneasy, worried, upset, disappointed, bothered, not tranquil, being in a bad mood, not feeling well, restless” (ibid. 47). This definition, confirmed by two physicians, a psychologist and two service providers (all Iranians) nests within the biomedical model: it is exclusively focussed on the issue of illness and it is depoliticized. Exercising intuitive immediacy⁸ (a pragmatic as well as an in-depth understanding of the issues), the participants suggested that we use the term, *Salamat-e Ruh* instead. *Salamat* means peace and *Ruh* is translated as soul. Of interest is the fact that the participants were bent on conveying only one message: disruption of a person’s state of peace and the impact on a person’s soul are serious matters and should not be dismissed lightly. This message was conveyed to us in the form of stories, examples of which are discussed below in the form of epitomizing moments. In opting to use the term *Salamat-e Ruh*, the participants were drawing our attention to the existential dimension of living – the terms “peace” and “soul” cannot be located at a superficial level as they touch on the very being of a person. Disruption of *Salamat-e Ruh* evokes an intense struggle to maintain one’s well-being. The form of struggle that I refer to here is markedly different from the host society’s understanding expressed as: “It is all right if they have to take low-pay work even if they were professionals back at home. All

⁸ I owe this insight to Razack though my definition derives from my field work.

immigrants who come to Canada struggle” (field notes, March 2000). For Iranian women the struggle in question involves being in settings where there can engage meaningfully with life situations – a theme highlighted in women’s stories. It is at this fundamental level that the meaning of *Salamat-e Ruh* may be understood..

Critical pedagogy requires us to pay close attention to the ground-clearing activity that the speakers engage in to create a new and more expanded space where they can tell the stories of their lives without having to use the parameters of dominant society as a reference point. It is with this point in mind that I have included the starting points – the framing activity – of the participants. In the above section, I have attempted to show that in creating an expanded space (as opposed to the confined parameters of the medical model of mental health), the participants/storytellers have located themselves to tell two intertwined stories: (a) of their own lives, collectively and individually in terms of who they are⁹ (b) and that of the dominant society’s exclusionary practices, an aspect that is brought to the fore in the form of conversational storytelling. Iranian women’s talk on emotional well-being expressed through the medium of *Salamat-e Ruh* go beyond the biomedical model’s adoption of the “social determinants of health.” The stories bring to light the pain as well as the survival power of women the telling of which may best be captured at a particular moment of epitomizing stories. The moment in question is women’s conversations (W) with representatives (R) of the dominant system.¹⁰

W Why can I not get work in Canada?

R You can’t find work because you do not know our language?

W I am not sure whether this is correct. I have taken English in school and I am taking lessons here. If I am given the opportunity, I can learn quickly.

R It is up to you. You first learn the language before you can even expect to find work.. Do you speak English at home?

W How can I do this? It is my responsibility to make sure that my children learn Farsi. Home is the only place were they can do this.

R Well, it is up to you. You have to make hard choices in a new country.

W My friend speaks very good English. How come she cannot find work?

⁹ Iranian anthropologist Erika Fridel has argues that this is an important question for women who are otherwise rendered socially invisible.

¹⁰ I have reconstructed this recurring conversation from my field notes.

- R Well it is because she does not have the Canadian experience.
- W How can she get Canadian experience when no one hires her?
- R Ask her to do voluntary work.
- W Voluntary work can take years and years but it does not help us to get a job.
- R You have to work harder. Other immigrants have made it and you will too. How about you listening to my story? It says all. I cannot tell the whole story, it is too painful. Do you have a moment to listen to our stories?

Epitomizing Narratives

Epitomizing narratives refers to situations that highlight both the impact of socio-economic factors as well as human agency. This perspective, which is embedded in the act of storytelling and for which I have made a contextualized case above, will guide my reading of the following stories.¹¹

Zahra, a journalist by profession spoke first. She said that she is a good listener and therefore a lot of women had confided in her with their life stories. She expressed her desire to share a sad story that was the story of “every Iranian woman.” When she spoke, tears rolled down her eyes and she said: “I cannot continue. It is too painful.”

The storytelling session began on the note of silence. But this gesture must not be dismissed as of no consequence. Anthropologist Visweswaran (1994) suggests that “we should be attentive to silence as a marker of women’s agency;” women’s refusal to speak should make us investigate when and why women do talk (ibid. 51). The intensity of Zahra’s pain could not be put into words but it alerts us to another medium of communication that may also include the element of paradox as Susan Gal (1991), also an anthropologist, has argued. Silence can be both a symbol of passivity and powerlessness as well as a form of political protest. In the latter case, one’s refusal to speak is a strategic defence against the powerful (ibid. 175). Zahra’s silence incorporates an additional dimension of *testimonio*, “concerned not so much with the life of a ‘problematic hero’ ...as with the problematic collective social situation in which the narrator

¹¹ Owing to limitations of space, I have focused on stories that highlight the theme of work.

lives” (Beverley 1992:95). We may note, that the participants’¹² efforts to present a front of solidarity takes place at the more intricate level of silence – a strategy made possible through the groundwork laid at the beginning of the session – “Starting Points.” Zahra’s unspoken story is taken up by a second narrator, Simin. Simin began her story on the note of *Salamte-e Ruh*. She said that her state of well-being has been affected by two things: separation from her children and not being able to work in Canada.

Simin is a mother of four children, three of whom live in the United States and one resides in Germany. This situation is painful for her as is revealed in her words: “I am all alone with my husband.” But she did not plan it this way. The sole reason why she left Iran was:

“There is nothing left in Iran for me. My children came to Canada and so I joined them.” Her children went where the jobs were – a step they were compelled to take as there was no work for them in Canada despite the fact that they are all professionals. Simin said that it was a long and difficult process for her to get landed immigrant status and she did not want to go through the same cycle to join her children in yet another foreign country. This is because, as Thobani (2000) has shown, women’s applications are processed through the family class of dependency compared with the independent class allocated to men. Women’s secondary status translates into a slower and more arduous process; hence Simin’s reluctance to go through this process a second time.

A second factor at work is the market economic model. Rooted in colonial capitalism, this model shortchanges racialized minorities, people in the non-western world and most severely the women (Harrison 1997; Tinker 1997). Hierarchical structuring of labour compounds this situation: the market economic model requires the labour of younger and educated individuals. Aging women, especially racialized women, fall by the wayside (Dossa 1999). Simin explained that her separation from the children would not be so painful if she was gainfully occupied. She desires the opportunity to learn English and work in her area of expertise, a hairdresser and beyond that an advocate of women’s rights. But none of these are within her reach and it is this void – “when I get up in the morning, I have nothing to look forward to” – that she identifies as the source of disruption of *Salamat-e Ruh*. It is at this juncture that she tells her story of what work meant to her in Iran and how lack of meaningful work is undermining her sense of well-being. To being with, Simin presents herself as a very active woman.

¹² To break the monotony of using one term I have used Iranian women, speakers, storytellers and participants interchangeably.

I was the executive director of a hairdressing salon and beauty salon. I was called upon to act as an examiner of hair dressing graduates. As the director of women's association, I sat in the parliament. My work made it necessary for me to travel. I was very, very busy. I have a lot of pictures of myself. My sister, she stayed at home and cooked *ghormeh sabji* [Iranian delicacy]. I very much regret that I do not know English. I could have continued to work as a hairdresser. I can tell what color of hair would be suitable for each person and what style would suit her best. Now I feel nobody. My life is useless. I feel tired.

At this point, we may make one observation: Simin gives a relatively longer account of her life accomplishments compared with her "symptoms" of a disrupted state of well-being. This is because Simin's interest in telling her story is to emphasize one point: the importance of being meaningfully occupied. Simin conveys the message that her accomplishments have not occurred as a matter of course. She compares her life with her sister (her only sibling) who decided to cook *ghormeh sabji* – meaning, stay at home. *Ghormeh sabji* is made of finely chopped vegetables, meat and beans and takes many hours to prepare; it is specially cooked for guests, underpinning the idea of cultivating social ties. In bringing into sharper relief her public life, Simin does not undermine her sister's domestic work.

In providing details of her work such as acting as an examiner, travelling and having her pictures taken – activities that she said she undertook voluntarily to advance women's causes – she brings to light the fact that these are special accomplishments for a woman whose domestic responsibilities are equally demanding. She related that she would stay up until late at night to take care of housework. Farrokhzad¹³ (cf. Milani 1992) captures the agony of Iranian women compelled to choose between "careers" and motherhood:

Every morning from behind the bars
 My child's eyes smile at me
 As I begin happily to sing,
 His kissing lips near mine.

O God! If I need to fly out one day
 From behind those lonesome bars
 How will I answer this child's crying eyes?
 Let me be, a captive bird am I.

In this stanza, Farrokhzad lays out the issues facing women who aspire to be poets/career women: if she does not pay attention to her vocational aspirations, she deprives herself of the opportunity to be someone in the public world; but if she pursues her career, she is unable to fulfill societal expectations where a woman is no more than a daughter, a sister, a wife or a mother. What Simin has lost is not only a hard-built career but her accomplishment of building a bridge – however fragile – between two worlds that are otherwise incompatible for women.

The crucial point made in Simin's story is that the very edifice on which women struggled to meet the competing demands of work and home life is no longer in place. In Canada, "there is nothing for me to do," she explained. It is at this fundamental level – the non existence of opportunities to set and reach goals – that she grounds her state of *Salamat-e Ruh*.

Salamat-e Ruh is a term that first and foremost suggests the idea of well-being. Its corollary *salaam* (peace) is used in everyday greetings within Iran and the Muslim world. Recognition of its state of disruption points to the fact that one's being is affected at its core – an experience that triggers a person's survival power: Simin is quick to point out her ways of coping with the situation: "I talk to myself, I talk to my friends and I talk to God." She said that what keeps her going was the idea of visiting her children. "The thought that I would be visiting my children in the United States or my son in Germany is important to me." She continued: "Many times, I look at the pictures and think about my life – how filled it was with meaning." This form of reconstruction of meaning is the focus of Gay Becker's (1997) work: *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*. Gay's research subjects engage in discursive reality, which is considered as a form of self-healing. But Simin goes further and related a practical step that she had undertaken with the hope that it would free her from the feeling of suffocation resulting from her lack of knowledge on English. She registered herself in an English language program.

I was determined to learn English. I registered myself in what I thought was a good program. I soon realized that the program would not work for me. I noticed that the teacher was discriminating. For her there were two kinds of students: those who were rich and those who were on welfare. She [the teacher] identified the rich ones through their tape recorders and \$50 dictionaries. The teacher did not pay much attention to me and she was going very fast. I would go to class, open my book and at the end of the day close it without writing anything. I

¹³ Although Farrokhzad wrote in the early part of the twentieth century, the concerns that she articulates are relevant today for women in the North and the South.

almost had a nervous breakdown. I could not go to classes for two weeks. When I went back, it was just before Christmas. I took a gift for the teacher. She accepted my gift. At the end of the day she told me that I could no longer come to class as I had missed too much. The actual reason was that they had found another rich student.

Upon reflecting on this experience, Simin said: “This incident happened four and a half years ago. Four and a half years have passed and now if I were to start again, my capacity to learn is less.” She suggested that her life would have been a little different. “If I had the opportunity to learn English, I would not have to look for people who can telephone for me to find out why I had not received credit from the hydro company.” (She is making reference to the B.C. Hydro rebate given to consumers in British Columbia in January, 2001). Simin’s relation of details brings into relief the contours of the everyday world that in the case of marginalized people need to be problematized to reveal the operation of a whole range of socio-economic forces (Bannerji 1995:131). Simin does not need someone else to structurally analyze her situation; she has done this herself through the medium of storytelling.

In her story, Simin highlighted two issues: language and work. Framing these issues in the form of a story as opposed to making mere statements brings home the lived reality of people whose life situations are subject to erasure upon migration as noted above. Simin does not say “I am a hairdresser,” the sentence that she would be compelled to use if she was sitting in front of an employment counselor – perhaps an immigrant women’s agency as shown in the work of Roxana Ng (1988). Here her credentials would most likely be converted into a dead-end job and more recently into dead-end volunteer work, required in the cash-strapped service sector. “I have worked hard all my life and I have always been an active woman,” says Simin as she nears the end of her story. To ensure that these words are not glossed over, Simin uses metaphors and images drawn from the Iranian literary tradition: “I ran like a stream” she says describing her work in the form of rivulets that she translated as water irrigating dry lands. These images echo the work of well-known Iranian poets such as Jalaludin Rumi: “Wherever is flowing water there is greenery...”

Be moaning and moist-eyed like the water-wheel, that green herbs may spring up
from the courtyard of your soul. (tr. Nicholson 1968, verse 820, Vol. 2, p.46).¹⁴

¹⁴ Just as there were great male Iranian poets, writes Milani, so were there literary writers among women. Ordinary women also formed part of this tradition. In my field work, I observed free flow of images, metaphor and stories related by ordinary women to emphasize and elaborate on their life experiences.

The contraries of rivulets and dry lands (Simin) and moaning and springing of green herbs (Rumi) bring to light two points: (a) struggle as the existential level that Simin refers to in her story is part of one's being – *Salamat-e Ruh* (b) and the images and other media of expression lead to recovering of understanding of life that has been lost in the political economy framework of power where a person's agency is only measured in terms of her ability to fight the system but not necessarily transform it and point to other ways of being – a theme that forms part of my larger project.

It is evident that Simin has established a clear focus around which she frames her story. Her sole purpose is to present in contrasting terms her work in Iran around which she had built her life the lack of opportunities for any kind of gainful employment (including non-waged work) in Canada. Simin is well aware of her linguistic "limitations" that she tries to correct to no avail. Although she starts her narrative with two "things that bother me," separation from children and not being able to work in Canada, it is the latter aspect that she addresses more vehemently. Perhaps this is the area where she thinks she has greater control. "I want to do something with my life. I am looking for a long term solution," were the words that echoed at various points in her story. Also, she knows that this is an area of concern to her co-peers who take her story further.

Nuri, a younger woman began her story by categorically stating that she has three professions: "I am a clinical psychologist, a dental hygienist as well as a computer typist." She then explained that she had updated her language skills in Canada and "yet, I am not getting a job. I tried everywhere and there is no place for me. My husband is a medical practitioner. He took his board exams and is fluent in English. After sending one hundred applications, he found part-time (two days a week) work in a medical clinic. Myself, I am doing voluntary work in hospitals and schools." Responding to the question on the possible value of voluntary work for learning English, she said: "No. I have no opportunity to learn the language. I work with senile elderly people or very small children." Nuri then recalled how one of the service providers had suggested that she should do voluntary work at a daycare centre. The service provider told her: "Don't worry if you think your English is not good. You can hold babies."

Nuri's story is intense with a single focus that subverts the dominant society's framing of the job situation of Iranian women: they cannot find work because they cannot speak English. By emphasizing her three qualifications and her husband's profession, upgraded to meet the Canadian requirements, Nuri strategically positions herself to speak with authority. Her talk on her voluntary position brings home the structural vulnerability of racialized women. It is primarily women who are channeled into an exploitative voluntary sector that has emerged as a

result of the state's downsizing of the service sector (Lee 2000). Of interest is the fact that Nuri leaves it to the reader to read further into the service provider's suggestion that she "... hold babies." Nuri's decision not to elaborate – whether she responded to or followed the service provider's suggestion – and maintain silence can be explained with reference to Gumperz's observation (cf. Gal 1991) that the use of speech and silence "are strategic actions, created in responses to cultural and institutional contexts" (ibid. 176). The institutional and cultural contexts are well laid out by Bannerji (1995) who states that Canada's ethnicized immigration history has governed hierarchical organization of the workplace on the ground of "race," gender and class. Racialized women are normatively expected to hold dead-end and vulnerable jobs. When the latter are not available, these women end up having no jobs, as was the case with Nuri. But Nuri is not a passive observer. Her narrative strategy of the end-note of silence evokes responses from other women in the group.

The fourth speaker related her story of secondary migration. She had lived in Sweden for five years before coming to Canada. While in Sweden she learned the language and then trained and worked as a cook. "In Canada, no one would hire me. One day I went to a Swedish reception. I met someone there who offered me a job in his restaurant. Is it not strange that in Canada, it is people from another country who gave me a job?"

The above story contains a paradox: that of job exclusion by her country of adoption and inclusion by a foreign country within the home base of her adopted country. "It is like your guest taking care of a family member," she said. She found this paradox intriguing because: "I came to Canada as a landed immigrant. My application was accepted just because I am a cook. I was told at the embassy that cooks are required in Canada."

A fifth speaker related a generational story. She began her story with the words: "Everyone is saying that things will be better for our children. We have to struggle so that our children will have a better life. But listen to the story of my daughter." This speaker then related that her daughter had a hard time during the revolution. "To heal her spirit, she turned to Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and decided to wear the veil. She went to school in Canada and her first job was at the restaurant. They gave her kitchen work for only one reason: she wears the veil."

A young Iranian Canadian-educated female working in a restaurant kitchen because of her veil (her mother's reading of the situation) says it all. Other than subverting the dominant discourse that storytellers are exposed to everyday in their lives – "you cannot work in Canada because you do not know the language and you do not have Canadian qualifications" – this story is a poignant reminder of the structural vulnerability and racism that has disrupted the emotional

well-being of the Iranian women who participated in our study. In their own ways, each speaker subverts the dominant dysfunctional discourse on immigrant women: they cannot work (except in the lower labour market slots) because they do not have the right qualifications.

Iranian women's stories in Canada are told at a time when their counterparts in Iran are raising their voices and telling their tales through film, writing and other modes that are available to them. "Even those who portray themselves as victims of society – conforming, enduring, suffering – are gaining a significant victory in being able to plead their own cases and make their stories heard in their own words. They are survivors, the ultimate rebels, irrepressible, vocal, and articulate" (Milani 1992:234).

Conclusion: Producing Knowledge through Storytelling

We began this paper by taking note of the work of Iranian women scholars who, like women in the West, have been engaged in reversing centuries of female oppression. The issue is that their works have remained on the margins and are only taken note of if the subject of inquiry concerns Muslim/non-Muslim women in the Middle East. Middle Eastern women scholars are not seen as producers of knowledge despite the grounding of their works within specific disciplines: history, anthropology, interdisciplinary feminist scholarship, sociology and visual arts. On the anthropological front, Henrietta Moore (1996) has captured this trend: "...local people produce local theories and such theories are, almost by definition, not comparative ones. The implicit assumption was therefore that the theories of non-western peoples have no scope outside their context"(ibid.2). The issue of the dominance of western theorizing about other people discursively confined to their own locales (the orientalist discourse) deserves attention and must be addressed if we want to seriously engage in struggles against racist oppression, gender inequality and exploitative practices of global capitalism – subjects on which non-western scholars have a lot to contribute as they write from experiential knowledge bridging the gap between theory and activism.

In this paper, I have attempted to show that activist scholarship is not confined to the literary field of writing. The stories that marginalized women (and men) tell about their everyday experiences have much to contribute towards establishing new paradigms in the ways of looking at the world. The potential of storytelling to effect paradigm shifts has long been recognized in the East and the West. In Iran, the home country of my research participants, thirteenth century poet, scholar and mystic, Jalal al-Din Rumi wrote the *Mathnavi* (25,000 verses) and *Diwani*

Shams Tabrizi (40,000 verses) using the genre of storytelling. In the West, Mikhail Bakhtin (1984 tr.), Walter Benjamin (1969) and Harold Innis (1950) worked in their own respective domains to show the value of storytelling and oral tradition for social action.¹⁵ There exists a marked difference between scholarly texts and ordinary women telling their stories. The literary works do not have a strong experiential content and in fact depend on local people's experiences to give them life, forestalling a situation where such works can remain frozen. This life-giving process has its source in the larger social, economic and political situations that shape the lives of people and in turn are shaped by them. It is within this framework that I have tried to place the stories of Iranian women who took part in our study.

My first task, therefore, was to provide contexts to the stories. In the first two sections, "The Veil" and "Invisible Walls," the context delineated is that of the racialization of immigrant Iranian women rendering them structurally vulnerable – a situation that impacts on their state of well-being. I have argued that this latter subject is of interest to us for two reasons: societal marginalization in the form of displacement and exclusion is explained away by members of the dominant society in terms of pathology – the script of deficiency discourse on immigrant women (they cannot find work because they do not have the qualifications; a second script is that of culture).¹⁶ It is these factors, so the argument goes, that affect their mental health in a negative way. More recent works have begun to identify issues of racism together with the need for the delivery of more inclusive health services (for example Almeida 1996; Hays and Hays 2001). But the suggested strategies remain locked within the biomedical model of care that does not address structural and social issues, not to mention the fact that it is an "illness" rather than a wellness model.

Iranian participants in our study had an intuitive understanding of these issues. In their stories they did not bring to the fore their experiences of *naharati* (depression). Yet the majority of the participants acknowledged that they had been treated medically for depression by their doctors. The period of depression identified was from three months to one year with the sole exception of one woman who said that she was chronically depressed. Diagnosis and therapy were not the topics that the participants dwelled on; some of the women talked about coping strategies grounded in everyday life activities. The stories, as the women explained, were essentially on *Salamat-e Ruh* which, as we have noted, is premised on the model of wellness: *Salaam* is a positive word connoting the idea of good will towards others; *Ruh* stands for soul –

¹⁵ I am indebted to J. Cruikshank (1998) for information on the last two authors.

the core of one's being. In framing their stories around this term, the women had established a different terrain for telling their stories. The terrain in question was not necessarily that of other people living in their own world; the terrain, in fact, included fundamental issues that the reader/listener can attend to. The issues at stake were those of entitlements: every human being has the right to work and be meaningfully occupied in her day-to-day living. The participants made this point through telling stories of what life was like in the past (Iran), what the present is or ought to be and what the future could hold for them. The latter aspect was posed as a question as their future – the way they envisioned it – was not in the making. Through ground-clearing activity initiated by the women (the starting points) and telling of epitomizing narratives (highlighting structure and agency), the women had created space to tell their stories in a manner that should evoke the attention of the researcher/reader/listener. It is towards this end that our section on critical pedagogy (the telling and listening paradigm) is directed.

Within the limited scope of this paper, the point that I have highlighted in relation to the question of producing knowledge through storytelling is that the issue of emotional well-being (mental health in the dominant parlance) does not exclusively belong to the clinics nor can it be framed as “social determinants of health;” the latter is of immense value in broadening parameters of biomedicine but its laundry-list format can only lead to fragmentary solutions if it is at all freed from mere rhetoric. Through storytelling, the women have gently directed the issue of emotional well-being to where it belongs: at the multiple sites where people live, work, learn and socially interact. It is logical to assume that knowledge on health, well-being and other concerns that we share as human beings should be produced in spaces of social interaction.

This understanding that is embedded in the stories – of which I have included only a few – has been lost as it is in the corridors of power (policy makers, funding agencies, the state's infrastructure) where decisions are made away from people's experiential knowledge on health and life. Storytelling is one medium through which the process of retrieval of knowledge in the way of fresh perspectives and alternative insights can begin. This is not a new argument. Anthropologists have long recognized that talk and narrative/storied conversations across cultures can lead to the construction of a more humane and inclusive knowledge base. This project has yet to be realized.

¹⁶ The cultural script concerns the “inability” of immigrant women to adapt in the host society as they come from cultures that are backward and oppressive.

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