

Vancouver Centre of Excellence



Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis

Working Paper Series

No. 02-09

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Border-Crossing Stories of Iranian Women**

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March 2002

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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**Modernization and Global Restructuring of Women's Work:
Border-Crossing Stories of Iranian Women***

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* Funding for this project was provided by SSHRC and the Vancouver Centre for Excellence on Research on Immigration and Integration in the Metropolis (RIIM). I would like to express my gratitude to Nadia for sharing her story with me and to the three anonymous reviewers for their valuable comments. I wish to thank Sunera Thobani for inviting me to the conference on Asian Connections where this paper was first presented and David Ley, Co-director of RIIM, for his continuing support.

Abstract: Using a paradigmatic framework of structure and civil voices, this paper responds to the question posed by an Iranian female in Canada: Why she is not able to find work in her professional area of expertise. The structural (race/gender/class) paradigm suggests a correlation between the ghettoization of Iranian/immigrant women into dead-end work and global restructuring of women's work the impact of which is localized. The civil-voices paradigm provides a broader context where Iranian women's lives are seen as part of the modernization project in Iran and elsewhere. Both paradigms bring home the need to interrogate the larger structures of domination as these come to light in the border-crossing stories of women.

Key Words: Stories, labour force, modernity, gender, border crossing.

Introduction

In the Spring of 1997, I joined an advisory committee whose mandate was to introduce diversity issues within the North Shore health system in North Vancouver, British Columbia. My reason for joining the committee was to get a sense of the field site where I was going to spend a couple of years looking at the relationship between narratives and emotional well-being within the Iranian community. During the first meeting, I met Nadia, an Iranian woman in her late forties who had joined the committee for a different reason. Nadia had been in Canada for six years and was looking for work in her professional area of oncology and for her joining a health committee seemed to be a logical step. During my subsequent meetings with Nadia, I learnt that other than her vigorous search for work, she was seeking answers to one particular question: Why is it so difficult for an English-speaking Iranian professional to work in Canada? She noted that the Canadian embassy had told her and her husband (an engineer) that “there would be no problems in them getting work in Canada.” In this paper I give a long answer to her question. I show that the answer cannot merely be linear; it must necessarily emerge from the particular genre of storytelling with its multi-faceted potential for capturing the voices of the participants at many levels. Nadia had her own reason for sharing her story with the reader: she wanted people to recognize her humanity, an issue that arises in a situation when one’s basic rights to work and to live with dignity are denied.

As I began to think through the story Nadia related to me over a period of fourteen months, the analytical paradigm of “intersectionality” came to mind; the script of this well-established paradigm requires us to examine the interactive oppression of “race,” gender and class. But this is not the whole story and can never be if we want to pay close attention to the lived realities of people. A race/gender/class paradigm is limiting as it is grounded in the divisive Cartesian epistemology that invariably focuses on one category to the exclusion of others. Literature on race/ethnicity does not as a matter of course include gender issues and likewise a focus on gender does not always take into account the class status of women. Furthermore this paradigm leans heavily towards a victimization of individuals with little room for human agency. My intent here is not to undermine the value of this interdisciplinary paradigm in unmasking oppressive systems of power but to take one more step towards capturing the lived reality of women as this comes to light in the stories of women.

The scenario of “the myriad/small voices in civil society” (Guha 1980) suggests how individuals shape and are shaped by larger social, political and economic structures. I argue that it is within this latter context that the impact of the race/gender/class paradigm on the lives of women can fully be understood. Both the scenarios – intersectionality and small voices – respond to Nadia’s question as to why she is not able to find work in Canada; the small voices paradigm will help us (the

readers) to understand who Nadia is in terms of historical and social trajectories. It is at this level that we can understand Nadia's stature as a person and not as a socially constructed immigrant woman destined to fit into a ghettoized labour force. In keeping with the format that Nadia used to tell her story this chapter is divided into two parts. Part one deals with Nadia's experiences of erasure of her profession upon migration to Canada, analytically explained in terms of the race/gender/class paradigm. Part two profiles the landscape of her life in terms of her lived reality in Iran – the scenes of the small voices that Nadia herself brings to the fore to highlight her historical trajectory in terms of who she is as a woman, an aspect that she highlights in relation to her life in Iran. The implications of the intricate relationship between the two paradigms are explored in the conclusion to reveal the importance of the workings of the larger system without losing sight of the lived reality of women.

The Intersectionality Paradigm: “Why can I not work in Canada?”

A cogent analysis of immigrant women and waged work in Canada comes from the work of Roxana Ng. In her 1988 study, Ng argues that the state plays a key role in placing immigrant women in the lower rungs of the labour force hierarchy. The state's task is accomplished by two means: it establishes a gendered and racialized hierarchical structure and it works through community agencies that it funds. The latter then act as agents of the state, channelling immigrant women into low-paid work.

Writing in the late 1990s, Joanne Lee (1999) comments on more recent developments. Like Ng, Lee examines the workings of community/social agencies operating under the changed climate of fiscal restraints. Faced with the demands made by the global market economy for debt reduction and mitigation of corporate taxes, the government has downsized the social service sector. As is invariably the case, those at the margins are affected the most and such has been the case with female immigrants working in the “not-for-profit, community-based, multi-ethnic, and ethno-specific organizations and groups, as well as branches and divisions of mainstream institutions such as schools and hospitals,” (ibid: 97). Lee shows that the state uses gender and race categories to simultaneously marginalize the settlement sector and within it the immigrant female settlement workers. Within this marginalized under-funded sector, the workers' opportunities for career advancement are eroded. Moreover, the funding crunch creates a situation where the boundary between volunteer and paid work becomes porous. Immigrant female workers' extra unpaid work is justified along the lines of the well-known script: immigrant women need to do voluntary work to gain Canadian experience. The institutionalization of volunteerism is paradoxical: “While these strategies offer opportunities to immigrant and refugee women to use their skills in the community,

they also limit and channel these skills,” (ibid: 100). Their ghettoized status, I argue, is sustained by racialized (it is all right for women of colour to work for nothing) and feminized (women are inclined by nature to undertake social service work) discourses.

What I have presented above are not merely case examples but representations of a growing body of work on the power/knowledge nexus (Bannerji 1995, Jiwani 2000, Thobani 1999, Razack 1998, Dua & Robertson 1999, Aylward 1999 among others). The focus here is to explain the structural locations of immigrant women in relation to a set of social relations and practices that have led to their social marginalization. This body of work, I argue, must be examined in relation to the lived reality of women. Forming part of the political economy of migration and global capitalism, the intersectionality paradigm has dominated the field to the extent that immigrant women’s agency in negotiating their life situations in their countries of adoption has received less systematic and theoretical attention except in the form of add-on dimensions such as resistance strategies. For example, Bannerji’s (ibid.) fine and thorough analysis of the sexual harassment of a Canadian black woman has no conceptual space to understand this woman’s perception of the situation. Could she have offered special insights for social change? What kind of embodied knowledge does she have on the racist-sexist organization of the economy and the workplace?

My second example comes from Stevenson’s (1999)¹ work on First Nations Women. This author argues that the collaborative hegemony of the church and the state has undermined these women’s status and autonomy. It is only towards the end (the last two paragraphs) that we learn that First Nations communities did indeed resist total subjugation through healing and spiritual vitalization. How were the latter sustained? What analytical frameworks could explain the working of civil/small voices? (They are “small” because they are not heard). The tension between the paradigm of intersectionality and that of civil voices requires more sustained attention if we are to avoid polarizing the lives of immigrant women: they are either victims of the system or alternatively they are in control of their lives. Below I explore the potential of storytelling in an attempt to bridge the gap between the two paradigms. I show that the stories of marginalized people include both elements: structure and human agency.

Nadia’s story occupies a critical juncture: it is the story of a displaced life that is also gendered.² This means looking at epitomizing moments of who she is and what her life has been like

¹ Stevenson’s and Bannerji’s works are included as a way recognizing their scholarship; it must be noted that the structure-agency debate is not a disciplinary divide but part of the Cartesian framework.

² Nadia’s story forms part of the larger project on displacement and emotional well-being of Iranian women in Metropolis Vancouver.

prior to and upon migration to Canada. Iranian poet and writer, Faraneh Milani (1992), exemplifies the complex lives of displaced women:

I was immersed in discontinuities; engulfed in geographical, cultural and temporal exile. Neither the daughter of my mother nor the mother of my daughter, I felt suspended between the twentieth century A.D. and fourteenth century Hegira. The gap between my mother and my daughter, products of different cultural experiences, values, systems of signs, dreams and nightmares, had caused a disturbing disruption in the matrilineal chain of my identity. I lived surrounded by a past that was breaking up around me with violent rapidity, (ibid: xi-xii).

Nadia's narrative concerning who she is, how she came to Canada, her search for work and how she fared as a daughter to a mother living in Iran and a mother to a daughter (and a son) living in Canada, highlights the issues set out by Milani. Nadia's identity of who she is/was/could have been verges on her desire to work in her area of expertise as an oncologist.³ I begin with one defining moment of border crossing into a new land.

Border Crossing

On August 11th 1992, Nadia, accompanied by her husband and their two children – a girl and a boy aged seventeen and fifteen respectively – landed at Vancouver International Airport. Upon her⁴ arrival, she was confronted with a scenario of two lanes: domestic and international. Being her first trip to Canada, Nadia went into the international lane further demarcated into two sections: “Residents” and “Visitors.” Nadia followed the visitors’ lane clutching her immigrant landed status papers. As I have noted elsewhere (2000), residents with Canadian passports are asked standard questions by the uniformed immigration officials: “How long have you been outside the country?” “Which places did you visit?” “What did you purchase?” These seemingly benign questions carry the weight of legislation in terms of who can (re)enter the country and under what conditions. As Kumar (2000) has observed, the immigration officer takes the passport/papers as a book: “Under the fluorescent light, he reads the entries made in an unfamiliar hand under the categories that are all too familiar. He examines the seals, the stamps, and the signatures on them,” (ibid: 3). A ritual is set in place: the immigration officer asks questions and listens to the responses paying attention to the

³ Names of people, places and occupations have been changed to maintain the identity of the research participants. Other changes have been made to accommodate Nadia's suggestions on confidentiality.

⁴ I have maintained the protagonist status of the speaker in conformity with the way in which Nadia presented herself.

clothes and the accent. If the responses match the officer's reading of the passport/papers, the turnstile works in favour of the immigrants.

Interrogation to which new immigrants are subjected forms part of the constitution of "hegemonic moments" where migrants are defined not as people coming from another part of the world but in relation to powerful frames of race, gender and class. It is these socially constructed categories that gives rise to the phenomenon of policing the borders – borders so powerful that they may and often do assume symbolic and social forms when the person in question is from the non-western world (Razack 1998).

Maybe it was due to Nadia's class status of being a professional, like her husband, that the interrogation of her life as a Muslim/Iranian woman did not begin at the time of the border crossing but soon after. More importantly, it did not take place on a face-to-face level but indirectly through the system.

First Moments

We came to Vancouver because a friend had informed us that this was a good place. We stayed for a few days in a motel and then rented an apartment at Mountview [an apartment complex where several Iranian families live]. My first crisis was to learn that my husband would not be able to work in Vancouver. For an engineer, it is not easy to work in the city. He had to go to a small town. I stayed with the children. I did not want my children to live around other Iranian families. We moved to another part... Once I settled the children in school, I started looking for work. But I was not successful. I was told I did not have the Canadian experience. I do not think anyone ever bothered to read my resume.

For the first three months, Nadia phoned any and every place where she thought she had a chance for a job. After that she joined a three-week job finding class and

... that gave me information about resources and contact persons. I prepared my resume and a covering letter and I applied to many places for a job but no success. I got a volunteer research job at one place and then one day an advertisement in the North Shore News about computer course caught my eye. I applied for that and I went through interviews and I was accepted. Before I got this chance, I had to change my resume and "hide" my qualifications. It was a nine months full time course. I learnt different computer program and through that I was able to find a part-time job in a senior's organisation. In that office, I worked hard. I experienced

discrimination and racism a lot. Emotionally, it affected me so much so that last December it gave me almost a nervous breakdown and I quit that job. I was able to get another part-time job in a larger centre right away and I worked there for a year. I really enjoyed working there. But it was not a full time job. The staff were really nice people, very supportive and I had great time there. I still have close relationship with staff who recommended me to a recreation centre for women.

As discussed above, Ng (1988) documents the process through which immigrant women are produced as a labour market category through the daily work of a community employment agency. She highlights a paradox: the agency that was set up to advance the interests of immigrant women ends up working for the state whose agenda is to produce immigrant women as a “commodity” for the labour market. Nadia did not go to an employment agency for immigrant women but she was not spared the ghettoization of racialized women in the Canadian labour force. Gender/race-specific training programs were already in place and carried out the work of the agency-model outlined in Ng’s work. Let us look more closely at this aspect.

To begin with, the training program subtly channeled Nadia into the marginalized service-sector work slot targeted for immigrant women; this occurrence took place at the cost of erasing Nadia’s professional qualifications (“I had to change my resume to “hide” my qualifications”). The very fact that she could not get into a training program in her area of expertise, let alone waged work, is testimony to the fact of closing the professional door so that logically she can only move into vulnerable low-paid work. Second, Nadia was slotted into the niche created in response to the tight fiscal economic climate of the nineties: part-time non-benefits work in a marginal cash-strapped service organization. Consider the following scenario.

Since 1980s, the Canadian state has been part of the global Structural Adjustment Program that has led to severe budget cuts in the social service sector. The effects of this restructuring on the already-marginalized immigrant and also social service sector are pronounced. As Agnew (1996) and Lee (1999) have argued, the budget cuts have not only limited the capacity of service providers to offer much-needed programs to those who need them the most, but it has had a negative impact on the working conditions of the largely female immigrant settlement and social service workers. The latter are compelled to engage in overtime volunteer work. Without their volunteer work the existing but fragile programs could come to an end that would result in the loss of already low-paid jobs. Also, immigrant women hang on to whatever they have (part time and volunteer work) with the hope that they will find better paying and more stable work. This is the promise implied in the much-used/abused expression: “You do not have Canadian experience.” However, the prospect of finding

better employment is negligible as racialized women are systemically positioned to move within a lateral space with very limited opportunities.

In Nadia's case, when she resigned from her first job with a social service organization, she found herself working with women. The subtext of this position is that there are a sizable number of Iranian consumers and volunteers involved in the program as Iranians form the largest ethnic/religious minority on the North Shore. Nadia's work in the social service sector then was timely from the point of view of service organizations: she would and did attract more Iranian consumers as well as Iranian volunteers. As most of them were not fluent in English, Nadia brought in the added asset of being bilingual. She was not paid extra wages for the two-way translation that she did for both the parties: the English speaking coordinator of the program and mainstream consumers, and the Farsi speaking consumers and volunteers. Nadia was in fact "used" on some occasions. She related that when it came to subsidizing the program for low-income individuals, the coordinator turned to her to determine if the Iranian applicants were genuine.

Nadia's placement in the social service sector did not even come close to the deficiency/dysfunctional discourse applied to immigrant women: they do not speak English, they do not have the Canadian experience, they are docile, and their qualifications are not on a par with Canadian standards. Nadia is a highly qualified medical professional who studied at a good university in Iran and is fluent in English. Before joining the service sector, Nadia had applied for further studies in her field of expertise at a university in British Columbia. Her application was not considered owing to "medical training strictures." Nadia's interrogation of "who she is" with its implicit message of "why she has come to Canada" began at the workplace and not at the time of border crossing. Within the framework of the intersectionality paradigm, this would be Nadia's whole story: a professional immigrant woman is subtly channeled into the ghettoized slot. Her waged/voluntary work fits well into the Canadian immigration policy geared to meet the labour market and voluntary-based needs of Canadian society. In the present-day fiscal climate of restraint, the labour market absorbs the low-paid work of immigrant women which translates into work on three fronts: the labour force, the volunteer force and the domestic sphere.

In the process of looking for work and later working part time, Nadia looked after her two children in a new country where she virtually fell into the category of "a single headed household," although she is married. Other than mentioning the difficulties of being a "single parent" out of force of circumstances, Nadia does not dwell on this part of her life in the narrative. Her primary focus was captured in the recurring statements variously expressed: "I worked hard for my career." "I am a professional woman." "My life time work has been taken away from me."

At the particular juncture of what is commonly referred to as “the downward mobility of immigrant women,” Nadia talks about her life back at home. Her decision to share this part of her life with the reader shows that she did not accept the system’s racial and gender-specific definition of work as all encompassing. My reading of Nadia’s recall of events suggests that they were selected to act as a point of intervention into the race/gender/class paradigm. The civil-voice script that Nadia highlights is: “I am more than a socially constructed immigrant woman.” I present these events in the form of scenes within the canvas of life, an apt metaphor for understanding a lived life with its nuances and contradictions.

The Canvas of Life

Experiences of disruption are accompanied by attempts to recreate a new life – a process accomplished by giving depth and context to one’s life story. Gay Becker’s (1997) work, *Disrupted Lives: How People Create Meaning in a Chaotic World*, exemplifies this narrative moment. Citing the case of Mrs. Zabor – an eight-two year old Hungarian refugee – this author notes how through skillful use of painting this woman recreates “... her personal history, the canvas of her life. Small and fragile looking, her expressive hands move in the air as she moves from one picture to the next, in a continuous process of life reconstruction...”(ibid: 2).

Becker observes that the scenes from Mrs. Zabor’s life are dreams and memories from which she draws clues for self-knowledge. In the process, she develops a viewpoint of what her whole life is about. This metaphoric process, Becker argues, is one avenue through which people attempt to create continuity following a period of disruption. Current events are then understood as part of tradition.

Nadia identifies a different point of intervention. She does not focus on the aspect of making sense of her life in Canada. She understands this too well. Her mission is to convey to the reader the structural violence that she experiences – violence that arises from deprivation of the opportunity to work that translates into taking away one’s dignity and sense of worth. As we have noted, Nadia’s profession is erased leaving her no choice but to work in a low dead-end part-time job in a recreation sector. This form of downward mobility to its lowest level makes it necessary for Nadia to let the reader know that her becoming an oncologist – a rare profession for a woman – was not a one-dimensional achievement. Nadia is keen to let the reader know about the larger struggles of her life – struggles that formed part of the discourse on modernity and gender. It is for this reason that Nadia takes the reader to the starting point: the place of her birth, which constitutes the first scene on the canvas of her life.

Scene One: Place of Birth

I was born in a city called Riyat that is located in the x part of Iran where the weather is very hot in summer and humidity is high, too. This makes breathing extremely difficult, as there is no air conditioner.

Descriptions of birthplaces have served as entry points into the life worlds of people. Nadia's description suggests two readings. At one level she wants to educate the Canadian people about Iran knowing full well that they know next to nothing about her country of birth, its way of life, its culture, literary tradition and history – let alone the fine scholarship produced by women over the last one hundred and fifty years. To compound the situation, Nadia (including other Iranian women) is concerned about the presence and circulation of distorted script among the media, the lay people and within the social service sector. The parameters of the script are: Iranian people are uncivilized, backward and oppressive to their women (the Orientalist discourse). In giving a name to her place of birth, Nadia offers “a lesson in geography” – a sense and a feel of where she is from. Simultaneously, she introduces the reader to a second theme that on the surface refers to a lack – the absence of air conditioner, a symbol of modernization. It is important to note that Nadia does not explain this lack in terms of the Western master narrative of underdevelopment. She focuses on asymmetrical relations of power as evident in her comment: “It is only in the oil refineries where the Europeans worked that air conditioners were available.”

Nadia is well aware of the uneven state-initiated modernization of Iran: the urban centres “benefited” from the modern infrastructure of schools, hospitals, and communication systems. In contrast, the rural areas were increasingly defined to represent the opposite image of the urban: “undeveloped and backward.” Middle Eastern and Iranian feminist scholars have emphasized the point that the state's project of modernizing has never been free of ruptures, gaps and contradictions. Sullivan's (1998) example on the literary campaign for rural women is particularly illustrative.

Sullivan draws our attention to the irony of making village girls sleep on the bunk beds in English-style boarding schools. The girls occupying the top of the bunk beds were tied with *chador* (cloth for veiling that the Shah had outlawed in 1934) to prevent them from falling:

The image of the women bound to her bed with the veil in the larger cause of progressive rights and freedoms, a paradox of modernity captures the simultaneity of modernity and its underside, of the forces of reason and their bondage, of the necessary reconstruction of identity and the loss of community; it bears witness to modernity as its own gravedigger (ibid: 224).

As a woman from a rural area, Nadia's life was positioned within this contradictory trajectory. How she meandered her way through the project of modernity and gender with its emancipatory and regulatory impulses is the theme that runs through her story on: "How I became a professional woman." In other words, what does it take for a woman to acquire the highest possible education in a situation where the prevailing Middle Eastern and western discourses suggest that "a woman's place is in the house"? In the case of Iran (and elsewhere) we may note that women's identity is ideologically equated with mothers, wives, daughters and sisters; *zan*, the Iranian term for a woman, is translated as "wife." A caveat is in order.

Gender roles in Iran and the Middle East are complex. There is no one point of entry into the subject as this term - referred to as "the woman question" - encompasses a host of issues such as veiling and unveiling of women, family life, women's waged and non-waged work, polygamy and monogamy, sexuality and reproduction, women's culture and networks and women's own points of articulation with a modern state (Joseph & Slyomovics 2001; Nashat & Tucker 1999; Keddie & Baron 1991; Abu-Lughod 1998). Complex configurations suggested by gender and sexuality and their operation in socially layered settings like the Middle East constitute fertile soil for anthropologists concerned with minute details of everyday life. Friedl's research (1989, 1991) over two decades on women in an Iranian village is illustrative.

Friedl notes that on-the-ground operation of gender roles is hard to delineate. This is the case even in rural settings which "presumably offer relatively few roles and retain gender-role patterns longer than complex, fast-changing urban centers" (1992:195). This author notes that although women's economic role is perceived to be domestic they do work outside, for example in the vineyards and in the farms. Likewise the popular concept of public and private is of little use. Women are said to belong in the house "yet many women are out on legitimate errands for the whole day and far from home" (ibid: 196). But Friedl observes that modernization has in fact worked against advancing the cause of rural Iranian women as it has undermined women-centered social ties and solidarity. Ironically, women have the vote in a political system that governs their lives from a distant urban centre; the same vote has taken away their decision-making power that they had exercised locally in pre-modern times when they had greater access to public spaces and sources of information.

Nadia's account of her mother's life also captures the complex phenomenon where women's designated space in the house (construed as confined and bound) was not the whole story. For illustration, let us have a closer look at scene two.

Scene Two: The World My Mother Gave Me

Addressing the theme of a conference, “the world my mother gave me,” Himani Bannerji (2001:2) observes that “our mothers are/were not in a position to give us much of the world, which mostly lay beyond their reach. Yet, they did leave us with an inheritance of a longing for the out-of-reach world.” Women’s need to occupy a wider space of activity and movement in history, Bannerji notes, may be achieved generationally where women are simultaneously mothers and daughters. “This does not have to be, perhaps often is not, a conscious decision, but lived movements of and through history, of women designing, re-writing their ‘selves,’ embodying the stories of being and becoming.”

While Nadia was preparing herself for school/outside life, she does not dismiss her mother’s interior world of home as insignificant. She considers it as an integral part of her story of being and becoming.

My father used to work in the refinery company and my mother was a housewife and remained at home to take care of six children. She married my father when she was twelve years old and my father was forty years old at the time, a big age difference.

Nadia’s pragmatic point of interjection into the popular discourse of early marriage equals oppression is worthy of note. She observes that her mother was an orphan and as such marriage gave her the opportunity to enter into a role-filled (wife and later a mother) relationship as opposed to depending on her uncle for support. Within a short period of time, her mother became a widow.

I was twelve years old when my father retired and my mother insisted that we move to another city, Quay. She insisted because she wanted to live close to her uncle who at that time was living in Quay. We moved to Quay and after a month my father became ill and passed away. My thirty-year-old mother was left with six young children and some savings at the bank and monthly pension of my father. We bought a house to live in and we had a simple condition of living. At that time I was in high school.

Nadia expressed admiration for her mother (an illiterate woman) for taking on the responsibility of raising six children (three sisters and three brothers) on her father’s pension. She does not frame this event as something that her mother coped with in the absence of any other choice. She portrays her mother as someone who took charge of the house with realistic expectations that they were going to have “a simple condition of life.” This observation draws our attention to the fact

that the household must also be considered as a unit of analysis in its own right. Only then, as Hoodfar (1997) has argued, can we recognize women's economic behaviour.

Nadia's appreciation of her mother's resistance to what is commonly referred to as the biomedical appropriation of women's bodies is revealed in her retelling of how her mother refused to go to the near-by English hospital for the birth of her fourth child. The reason that she gave was "I did not want to leave my children alone." The broader context here is that of refusal to give up the home space that according to Nadia was not confined to a mother/father/children (nuclear family) unit, but was opened up into more intricate areas. Nadia explained that the nature of these spaces cannot be explained away and need to be experienced. This aspect was brought home to me when I visited Iran in August 1999. Having spent several afternoons with women in their homes, I noted numerous activities that took place within "the home space": visits from neighbours and kin, making of cottage-industry crafts, exchanging information on health, discussion of news from abroad (the Iranian diaspora), airing of political and economic ideas, sizing up women's rights issues and subverting state-imposed gender-segregated restrictions. Two examples of the latter are: subverting gender-segregated boundaries that made it possible for teen-aged boys and girls to swim in the public/private town-house pool and, second, enabling them to party together.

In making an informed choice not to go to the hospital, Nadia's mother had a sense of disempowerment that women experienced in realms controlled by male colonizers. Fahmy's (1998) example of Egypt is illustrative. She observes that Mehmed Ali Pasha's School of Midwives established in the nineteenth century was ostensibly meant to "liberate" women. Women doctors were, in actual fact, given low positions from which they policed other women's sexuality. They were entrusted with the task of verifying women's virginity. There is a general consensus that biomedicine has not always worked in favour of women. Rather than outright rejections, however, its benefits (new technologies and practice) are cautiously adopted by women based on their pragmatic and social concerns. For our purposes, it is important to note that Nadia does not present her mother as passive and unknowledgeable although she is illiterate.

Nadia's anecdote concerning her grandmother is equally revealing. In response to the Shah's 1936 decree of mass unveiling of women, Nadia related: "My grandmother went to the bath house at night with other women so that they would not be caught by the Shah's police." Again, the grandmother's refusal to unveil may be explained by women's experiential knowledge that a top-down approach does not bring about fundamental changes, attested by the fact that the women are unveiled in post-revolution Iran. Milani (1992) brings to light a second dimension:

This forced unveiling inflicted pain and terror upon those women who were not willing or ready to unveil. To them, the veil was a source of respect, virtue, protection and pride. It was a symbol of passage from childhood to adulthood... They sought to undermine its banishment with all the ingenuity they could muster, (ibid: 35).

The above examples reveal a subtext to “The world my mother gave me.” Let us for a moment consider Afshane Najmabadi’s (1998) insights. This Iranian scholar suggests that the project to educate women – an uneven project in terms of the sharp urban/rural divide - formed part of the state agenda of building the nation. Women’s education was promoted for two reasons: they would raise disciplined male citizens and in addition educated (“unveiled”) women would help to subvert the western colonial narrative. The driving impulse for the former is: “from educated women would arise a whole educated nation,” (ibid: 102). The contours of the latter are as follows.

Middle Eastern scholars have argued that the West has created a particular kind of discourse where the East is conceived to be backward, inferior and frozen in time; the power of this discourse has gained momentum because of its entrenchment in institutions that continually construct the East as the Other. The colonial narrative has always been gendered and hence the image of women is deployed to further show the backwardness of the East following the erroneous argument: Eastern societies are oppressive to women and therefore they are barbaric; omitted is the fact that women in the West may not be more liberated and may continue to occupy subordinate positions despite feminist interventions.

Iranian male reformists such as Ali Shariati (1971 cf. Nazmabadi 1998) undertook the task to counter Western discourse on Orientalism. Invoking the figure of Fatima (the daughter of the Prophet Mohammed), he attempted to address two issues: to counter the “westoxicated” image of women that the Shah had promoted as an antidote to the West’s perception of the East as backward and to resolve the “problem of how women could enter modernity and remake themselves as neither western nor traditional” (Sullivan 1998:217).

Shariati advocated women’s liberation for political ends. He advanced the argument that a woman who is excluded from literacy, education, culture and civilization cannot be expected to raise future generations devoted to the goal of nation building. His reconfiguration of the image of Fatima is illustrative. To begin with, Shariati deemphasized Fatima’s traditional image of being the daughter of the Prophet Muhammed, the wife of Imam Ali and the mother of Hassan, Husain and Zainub (the Shi’a tradition reveres these individuals). The new image of Fatima as reflected in the

title of the book: *Fatima is Fatima* embodies revolutionary zeal – a quality desired at the time when the national struggle in Iran was both counter-monarchical as well as counter-western. In another work, *One Followed by an Eternity of Zeros*, Shahriati notes that Iran has fallen prey to “colonialism” that has denigrated Islam and Muslim women. The new gendered self then, according to Shariati, must be “a productive force in the service of nationalism deployed against the de-territorizing imperatives of western global capital” (Najmabadi 1998:220).

The anecdotal information that Nadia has shared with the reader shows that the world that she inherited from the women folk was complex. We need to emphasize this point because our exclusive focus on the public realm precludes exploration of how it articulates with the private but gendered world of home and vice versa. Nadia’s mother’s struggle to prevent the appropriation of the home space by the larger public male/colonizing world is reminiscent of Partha Chatterjee’s argument.

In a study on Bengal, Chatterjee (1993) documents the working of a cultural process of division between the outer/public and the inner/private worlds. Men’s occupation of the former in the way of emulation of the West without total surrender, he argues, is only made possible because of women’s private-sphere role in maintaining cultural authenticity. What is left out in this schema is that women are also active players in the public spaces of education and waged work - spaces from which they struggle for their rights as citizens. It is at this level that we can appreciate Nadia’s endeavor to become a professional woman. Nadia’s account in scene three brings this point into relief.

Scene Three: Occupying the Exterior/Interior Spaces

I was able to pass the university exam and that was a big success for me. I went to the best university in Iran. It was a high-rank university in the Middle East. It was a good university and all the instruction was in English. That was the first time that I had to leave home and started my own life. It was seven hours drive from my home city.

Nadia’s birth in 1953 took place in the midst of major changes in the lives of Iranian women. The Shah’s agenda of “catching up to the West” led to the formulation of democratic representation where “the woman’s question” loomed large. During the Constitutional Revolution (1906-1911), the Shah introduced a number of measures that made it possible for some women to attend school and undertake waged work. The Shah’s attempts to emancipate women were half hearted and the desired effect of transforming women’s lives for the better never took root (Afkhami & Friedl 1994). Furthermore, the changes brought in women’s lives under the banner of modernity contained

ambiguities: they were at once emancipatory and regulatory (Abu-Lughod 1998). The emancipatory aspect is revealed by the fact that women were now allowed to obtain formal education and a career. It was regulatory in the sense that educated women were desirable from the point of view of rearing children “scientifically” and “rationally” – axioms that amounted to raising disciplined citizens who would promote the state’s interests as noted above.

The above context suggests that Nadia’s attendance at the university cannot be reduced just to the issue of obtaining a career. Her schooling involved larger concerns of women’s emancipation and the project of modernity entangled in ambiguities of constraint and emancipation. As she relates her story of success and accomplishments, the presence of the disciplinary life of regimentation (“the dark underside of modernity”) was also felt. The regimentation included the lives of her children as well.

I worked hard and received a scholarship in the first year. In the second year, I applied for a student job at university and I got a job at a lab at my university. It was just enough for my food and other expenses. When I was in the fourth year of university I met my husband. After a few meetings, I figured out that he was the ideal man. After introducing him to my mother and my family I got engaged. And we got married after two years. One year after, I gave birth to my daughter and eighteen months later my son was born.

We moved to Tehran for continuing education and he attended an engineering school and I attended a medical program at my university. The university had a centre to look after the children of the staff and I was so lucky that I have a very nice place to put my children while I was at school. Every morning we had to take them to that centre and on my way back home in the afternoon, I picked them up. Come home, prepare meal and do cleaning and pack again for morning and got the kids to bed and then study till late night while the kids were sleeping. It was really hard. No complaint at all. I was working toward my goals I got them. I finished school and then I got an excellent job at a university after a bit of competition and passing through the exams, interviews and all kinds of stuff. I was proud that I was the first in my family and also in my husband’s family that a woman reach to that position. I enjoyed my work, working hard. I had a good reputation at the hospital and I did so well that I was promoted to a higher position just before I came to Canada.

My husband and I made our life. We worked hard, made money and buy a nice house and decorated it the way we would like. Of course it took us ten to eleven years to build it.

Scene IV: Occupying the Interior/Exterior Space (continued)

In this scene, the interior space in question is Nadia's natal home. It was only in my subsequent conversations that Nadia talked about her visits to her home. She stated that when she was single and later with her family after marriage, she visited her mother's house weekly or biweekly. She described these visits and other special occasions (birthdays, New Year, mother's day) to be therapeutic in that they made her hard life at the university tolerable. It was within the space of the home (her mother and her siblings, Nadia's siblings and their families and also neighbours) that Nadia experienced another mode of time captured in the work of the cinematic critique Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989):

A mother continues to bathe her child amidst the group; two men go on playing a game they have started; a woman finishes braiding another woman's hair. These activities do not prevent their listening or intervening when necessary," (ibid: 1). In such a situation, Trinh states, "time and space are not something entirely exterior to oneself, something that one has, keeps, saves, wastes, or loses," (ibid: 1-2).

These visits are continuous. "Its (in)finity subverts every notion of completeness and its frame remains a non-totalizable one," says Trinh Min-ha. Nadia's visits to her home are comparable to a story that "circulates like a gift; an empty gift which anybody can lay claim to by filling it to taste, yet can never truly possess. A gift built on multiplicity. One that stays inexhaustible within its own limits. Its departures and arrival. Its quietness" (ibid: 2).

Home as a site where social relationships were nurtured and knowledge of life was acquired included another dimension that has been subjugated and under-researched. The dimension in question is the household economy or the cash and non-cash producing activities of women. One of the few works that takes the household as an analytical unit for study comes from anthropologist, Homa Hoodfar (1997). In her ethnographic research on low-income households in urban Egypt, this author notes how women and men respond to and cope with social and economic changes, including the structural adjustment policies. These policies are a response to the workings of the global economy compelling governments to downsize social service programs to the detriment of ordinary people. Two other illustrative examples come from the works of anthropologists Friedl (1991) and Abu-Lughod (1998) working in rural areas in Iran and Egypt respectively.

Drawing upon a twenty-year study of a rural community in southwestern Iran, Friedl shows how women work through and negotiate systems of power. She attributes women's relative freedom to their involvement in non-capitalistic economic activities, which necessarily subverts the public-private divide.

...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 girl is taken out of school after the third grade because it is not right for her to be among strangers, but the next day she is working in an outpost camp in the mountains, in full view of women, men, relatives, and strangers alike (ibid: 196).

Working with the Awlad 'Ali Bedouin Egypt, Abu-Lughod (1998) brings to light a pre-modern scenario where women were not subjugated to the power of the state. She notes that same-sex socialization among kin-based units frees women from male surveillance. Women's networks, she observes, provides a milieu for raising children in a way that does not lead to a "molding of characters of their children, making them industrious, or exposing them to proper stimulation and experience" (ibid: 260). Here child rearing is one of the many things that women do; they are then not compelled to raise children as future citizens of a proud nation. Women's roles as wives and mothers are determined not through their dedication to their husbands or to the task of raising children but through their involvement with the affairs of their kin and of the women's community. A significant issue highlighted here is that of the blurring of boundaries between the public and the private. Women's work in the kin-based arena is as public as men's work "outside the home." In the light of this research, Abu-Lughod critiques the male-inspired reform program of the Egyptian, Amin, that she considers a plan to convert women into "good bourgeois wives and mothers in a world where state and class ties would override those of kin, capitalist organization would divide the world into the distinct sphere of private and public, and women would be subjected to husbands and children, cut off from their kin and other women," (ibid: 261).

As a woman embodying the contradictions of modernity, Nadia's home visits may be read in the context of subjugated knowledge that women continue to acquire because they refuse to forego the times when "The Story Began Long Ago..." These times are created by women themselves out of elements that are both new and old. Within the framework of non-linear "story time," issues are aired and new information exchanged: a person's visit abroad, a health issue, child rearing, women's economic activities and so on.

In the above section we have looked at two sets of data. Discursive data is the mainstay of the first set. Posing as “feminists,” a couple of western educated male Iranian writers advocated the cause of women. While the discourses they formulated appear to be emancipatory (unveiling of women, advocating women’s right to education, making a case for abolition of polygamy), Middle Eastern feminist critiques have identified a hidden agenda at work. Bought over by the colonialist discourse, which essentially blamed the “backwardness” (colonial social construct) of women to Islamic tradition, writers like Qassim Amin called upon Muslim women to follow their sisters in the West and join the march towards modernity (conceived as the opposite of tradition.) Writers who appeared on the scene at a later stage of the postcolonial era were more interested in identifying an “authentic” and reworked indigenous tradition. Hence reformists like Shariati called upon women to rediscover the revolutionary and egalitarian spirit of Islam where women are active players in the public sphere (read, in advancing national concerns). The male “feminists,” whether working for the colonial regime or the nationalistic regime, did not fundamentally have women’s interests at heart.

The second set of data that we have examined derives from ethnographic studies whose credibility arises from participatory research over a period of time. This body of work reveals that women in fact are not total victims; their exercise of agency is determined by the specific social, historical and political situations.

Studies of women’s lives in urban centres along the same tenor are scarce. It appears that once women move into the urban market sphere their lives reach a point of closure from the point of view of exercising agency. They are presented in the literature in terms of being engulfed by the market sphere and their home lives are barely mentioned except in terms of their appropriation by the state. On the other hand, the complexities and nuances captured in the studies of women in rural areas in Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East seem not to have made their way into the urban landscape. It is with this context in mind, that I have endeavored to include Nadia’s account of her home visits that she did not elaborate upon but considered to be vital. Her unwillingness to talk about this part of life may be due to her sense that it is a subjugated area that is barely talked about in feminist literature and that the vocabulary to talk about women’s lives in the domestic sphere has not been sufficiently developed as Devault (1990) has rightly observed.

In her narrative, Nadia presents herself as a person who has worked through the larger discourse on modernity and gender. Her profile of her career life includes the home life of her mother, grandmother and her home visits. While this may appear as ordinary, there is a layered context in place. The context concerns the agency of the individual. Nadia’s life can then be read as part of the gendered discourse on modernity and nationhood. In her new homeland in Canada, this discourse has

not even assumed a faint shape: immigrant women's lives do not form part of the social and national imagination of the state.

Within the analytical framework of this paper, the political economic perspective of the race/gender/class paradigm cannot be considered as the full story. This observation needs to be made as accounts of immigrant women's work ends on this note. The second paradigm of civil/small voices informs us that for Nadia coming to Canada did not only lead to the erasure of her professional life but also the nuances and contexts of the larger project of modernity and gender where Nadia was an active player.

Conclusion

Let me conclude by recapitulating the main points of this paper. First, I have attempted to respond to Nadia's question: "Why is it hard for a professional non-western woman to find work in Canada?" The race/class/gender paradigm has provided part of the answer. As interactive/ intersectional mode of oppression, these socially constructed categories have brought into relief ways and means through which non-white professional women are generally channelled into low paying jobs. Here we may note that legislative attempts to remedy labour market inequalities in Canada - the Employment Equity Act/Bill C62 - did not substantively include women of colour compared with "visible minority" men and white women (Boyd: 1992). Nadia's story brings to light how the process of exclusion of women of colour from professional work is affected. Through her narrative, Nadia shows how her search for work in her area of expertise in fact channelled her into ghettoized dead-end jobs. Immigrant women's work in this sector is desirable as it serves multiple ends: it fills in the gaps created by the downsizing of the social service sector; it keeps immigrant women in their place as they are not expected to "fill the professional social space, but that of manual and industrial labour or the lower levels of white collar jobs" (Bannerji 1995:134); and it provides cheap labour to fuel the capitalist and increasingly global market economy.

In the process of relating her experiences of structural exclusion, Nadia brings to the fore a second story of gender and modernity as it unfolds in her country of origin. This second story is explicated by Abu-Lughod (1998) with reference to three points. First is the way in which women are incorporated into the political agenda of the state and global capitalism, discursively as well as materially. The discursive aspect comes into play in the way in which women and their bodies (veiling/unveiling and other forms of surveillance) "have become potent symbols of identity and visions of society and the nation" (ibid: 1998:3). Materially, non-western women's low-paid work

advances capitalist interests, nationally and globally (Ong 1987; Harrison 1997). Second is the way in which women themselves participate in the project on modernity and gender. The issue concerns the way in which women themselves maneuver and work through the contradictions of modernity. Nadia's narrative on how she became a professional/oncologist in itself serves to put a damper on more linear understandings of women's careers. The third dimension concerns the imperialist presence of the West in the Middle East and other non-western parts of the world. As Middle East scholars (for example, Fahmy 1998, Keddie 1991, Nazmabadi 1998) have explained it, the gendered script of veiled women equated with oppression by Islam served the western world very well. The west took it upon itself to replace the "oppressive Islamic order" with the liberal western one claiming that they were saving "brown women from brown men" to use Spivak's (1988) words.

Non-western states did not remain passive given symbolic and material violence inflicted by colonizing projects. Ironically, their response to the west resulted in further oppression of women. As the Iranian scholar Sullivan (1998) has expressed it:

In Iran's conflicted efforts to construct national, revolutionary, and Islamic modernities the figure of the "woman" has repeatedly been constituted as the overdetermined sign of an essentialized totality, as a metaphor for a besieged nation, an embattled self, a delicate interiority, the uncontrollable other, the "unpierced pearl" to be bought and protected, or the sacred interior (ibid: 228)

Women's interiority is encapsulated in the symbol of the veil: the Shah's stance of alliance with the West led to forced unveiling of women; the anti-western stance of the Islamic Republic of Iran led to forceful re-veiling of women. In Milani's words: "Forcefully unveiled, they personify the modernization of the nation. Compulsorily veiled, they embody the reinstatement of the Islamic order" (cf. Sullivan: 228).

The three points of women being potent symbols of identity for society, women as active agents in the discourse on gender and modernity, and the Western script on gender politics are present in Nadia's narrative. The discursive and empirical appropriation of immigrant women's bodies – the race/class/gender paradigm – helps us to understand why Nadia is not able to find work in her area of expertise. This is not the end point for Nadia. Exercising agency, she introduces the reader to the wider arena where modernity as a gendered process (Abu-Lughod's framework) is brought into relief in relation to the scenes in the canvas of life as discussed above. These "scenes" convey the ambiguous project of modernity: for women it is both emancipatory and constraining. Nadia's acquisition of professional education took place in a milieu of negotiation: "the dark underside of

modernity” is juxtaposed/worked into the openness of the home space. In crossing the border with this story, Nadia implicates the colonial/western narrative of women/Muslim women as backward and oppressed.

The analytical framework of the two paradigms has allowed us to take the leap from reification of the text towards making of the text. In doing so we have endeavored to treat human agency in the context of a lived life embedded in the larger social and political contexts. It is at this level that we can “talk about women as historical subjects and in terms of their historical experiences” (Ong 1987: xiii). The emphasis on gendered agency – life in the making and the possibility of it being nipped at the bud – points to the fact that the most important form of action take place at the margins – the small/civil voices. As Ortner (1994: 391) has aptly expressed it: it is these forms of action that brings into relief the shape of any given system. This aspect was brought home to during our last meeting when Nadia said: “When I first came to Canada, I was full of hopes and dreams. I had worked hard in Iran and I was willing to do that here too. Now I have just stopped dreaming. I have stopped trying.” Not having a space to express her agency in her new homeland, Nadia resorts to telling her story through the civil-voices paradigm to ensure that she is not cast as a victim. Insights from the two paradigms position us to give a politicized and humane (not faceless) response to Nadia’s question as to why she and other immigrant women are not able to work in their areas of expertise in Canada. It is between the spaces of the two paradigms that we can vigorously interrogate and challenge the exclusionary practices of the Canadian labour force and the gendered project of modernity where women continue to find themselves on the margins. It is from these very spaces that women tell their stories to effect change.

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