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Multiple Identities between continuity and change The narratives of Iranian women in Exile

Halleh Ghorashi

This article is about the narratives of Iranian women exiles living in the Netherlands and the US (California) and the ways in which they position themselves in the countries they live in at present. The women who were part of this research participated in the Iranian revolution of 1979 within leftist organizations. They left Iran when the years of suppression started after 1981. My fieldwork, which took eight months in each country, was concentrated in Amsterdam in 1996 and Los Angeles in 1997. During this time I listened to the life stories of twenty women in each country. I also did several months of participant observation within the local Iranian communities to grasp the dynamics that existed in both contexts. The Iranian women interviewed for this study share many common characteristics: they entered both countries before the 1990s and most have a higher education and work in jobs related to their study. The main focus of the comparative research was to understand the impact of their new countries on the ways that they told stories of the past, present, and future.

The most striking outcome of this research was that these leftist political activists, with their relatively common pasts, position themselves completely differently in their new countries. The women in the Netherlands felt excluded and started to develop a complex relationship to the past. They felt strongly nostalgic about Iran and positioned themselves exclusively as Iranian. The women in Los Angeles, however, felt a sense of belonging in the new society and positioned themselves in a hybrid way by calling themselves as Iranian-Americans. However, both an exclusive positioning of being just Iranians and a multiple positioning of being Iranian-Americans are related to the ways that narratives of the self are told and constructed. To explain the reasons for these differences in positioning, the main focus in this paper will be on the impact of the discursive space in both countries on the ways that the narratives of these women are constructed. In this paper, the term 'discursive space' refers to discussions on migration related to national identity and the ways that it stimulates or limits multiple –read hybrid– positioning of these women. However, I shall first elaborate on some theoretical concepts essential for my argument.

The past and the present in the narrative of life

Identity, as a narrative of the self, is a dynamic process: a changing view of the self and the other that constantly acquires new meanings and forms through interactions with social contexts and within historical moments (see also Giddens 1991). This relational process of identity formation includes both the approval and the rejection of different levels of identification. In this way, context has a direct impact on the changing configuration of multiple identities within the narrative of the self. The dynamic dimension of identity is a situated change that involves certain elements of continuity. This interaction between change and continuity includes sets of practices that embrace both past and present experiences and future expectations. In this way identity "is not imposed on individuals by socialization [...] but they actively construct their identities within a given social framework ..." (Räthzel 1995: 82).

This 'given social framework' includes both the past and the present. Regarding the past social framework, Bourdieu's concept of habitus is useful. Habitus is not a mechanical, objectified past or a system of habits that controls individuals. Rather it is a set of preferred and

routine schemata, formed in the past, which obtains new forms through interaction with new settings in the present. In Bourdieu's own words:

“The habitus—embodied history, internalized as a second nature and so forgotten as history—is the active presence of the whole past of which it is the product. As such, it is what gives practices their relative autonomy with respect to external determinations of the immediate present. This autonomy is that of the past, enacted and acting, which, functioning as accumulated capital, produces history on the basis of history and so ensures the permanence in change that makes the individual agent a world within the world” (Bourdieu 1990: 56).

This ‘embodied history’ in the form of habitus gives the process of identity formation a certain amount of continuity or ‘the permanence in change.’ Another aspect of habitus is consciousness. Individuals are shaped through reactions to situations that are not always based on consciously made decisions, but also on what Bourdieu calls ‘practical consciousness.’¹ Practical consciousness refers to those actions that we don't feel a need to define or that we take for granted.

Applying the concept habitus to the concept of identity raises two points. Firstly, people do not change their identities freely. This change happens through negotiations that include both past and present settings and involves elements of change and continuity. As Stuart Hall puts it: “identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space (...) between a number of intersecting discourses” (1991: 10). Secondly, people do not always choose identity consciously. Habitus works as deeply rooted schemata that give direction to the ways people act and think.

In order to show the impact of the embodied past on the narrative of the self, I focus on the element of continuity on two levels: political and cultural/social habitus of the past. By political habitus, I mean the impact of leftist political ideals on the ways that the story of life at present is constructed. By cultural/social habitus, I refer to the actual presence of the cultural and social elements such as cultural rituals and social gatherings of the past in the present context. Before explaining the impact of these two forms of habitus, I will first focus on the background of the women in this research.

The women of this research

The women of this study were involved in leftist political organizations during the Iranian revolution of 1979. These activities became illegal two years after the revolution. Their political identity took dominance during the first years of revolution, and they faced many cruelties during the years of suppression starting in 1981. During the interviews, the painful experiences of the years of suppression colored most of the stories of the past. Some even stressed the experience of losing their sense of home while in Iran and felt that they had become refugees in their own homeland.

Based on their political past, these women developed common characteristics. Their involvement within leftist political organizations and their experiences during the years of freedom and the years of suppression changed these women in four significant ways:

- 1) Political revolutionary training made these women fighters. They learned that they could not expect anything without fighting for it. This attitude towards life was an important driving force for these women to settle in a new country. During and after the years of suppression the women learned that they could trust no one but themselves. They could no longer be ‘made’ happy by a life offered to them, either by society, their families, or their husbands. They became resolved to take their lives into their own hands.
- 2) The women could no longer be satisfied with a simple life bereft of higher ideals. One woman said, “There is no way back, when you have experienced the complexities in life and had higher ideals, you cannot go back and accept a simple life by just having a beautiful

house, cooking, and raising the children”. For many, new ideals have replaced old political ideals. What almost all of them have in common is the wish to make at least a small contribution to changing the world.

- 3) The women’s view of internationalism reflected the impact of old socialist ideas. Women active in leftist organizations who were focused on internationalist ideals criticize nationalist notions of homeland. Although the political issues related to internationalism have changed for many, the impact of understanding ‘the world as the homeland’ has not vanished completely. Some even mentioned the term when I asked them about their homeland. This view may contribute to the openness toward a new start in a new country.
- 4) Revolutionary training in self-critique sessions in addition to the painful experiences of the past made these women very self-critical. They did not automatically see their cultural background as something that should be preserved. They were open to change, and they were relatively more open to reflect on their social background than the average Iranian. For this reason, these women were relatively more open toward change in general, which eases interactions with a new culture.

The above-mentioned characteristics of Iranian women political activists are essential for different reasons. First of all the old social idea of internationalism forms a strong potential for these women to have a trans-nationalist rather than nationalist point of view. Thus, it can be said that potentially it would be easier for these women to position themselves in the multiplicity of cultures and not hang onto a nostalgic, and essentialist view of Iranian culture as something static and unchangeable. Second, the fighting character of these women makes survival in the new country easier for them than for others. They have survived the most horrifying situations in their own country and are ready to face new difficulties. And finally, the experience of self-critique creates the possibility of becoming self-reflexive and open towards new cultures. In this way different elements of the past experiences of these women form strong potentials for survival in a new country. However the findings of the research show that it is not so much the past experiences but the interplay of this past with the new context that becomes essential in the process of identity formation of these women.

The present: experiences in two countries

From the beginning of the 1980s Iranians came to the Netherlands as political refugees. Now there are up to 30,000 Iranians living in the Netherlands. The political, cultural, and social activities of Iranians are limited in the Netherlands. Iranian gatherings are incidental; one cannot speak of a strong Iranian community in the Netherlands. The opposite is true in California. In the area of Los Angeles that is referred to as Irangleles the largest number of Iranians living outside of Iran exist. This contributes in different ways to a large Iranian network and attendant activities. The estimation of the number of Iranians in LA varies. The number is estimated to be around 200,000, somewhere between the official numbers of 100,000 (by the census of 1990, Bozorgmehr et. al: 1996: 376, note 15), and the numbers released by the media (between 200,000 to 300,000 in mid 1980s, Bozorgmehr et. al 1993: 73). Iranians in L.A. generally arrived as immigrants with money, education, and the skills necessary to obtain good jobs. They did not “enter the US economy as an ethnic underclass but as a sort of transnational elite, requiring minor adjustments but not massive retraining” (Naficy 1993: 6).

Once in a new country, all the women interviewed started to build a new life. These women, who were robbed of their future in their homeland, hoped to build a better life and a secure future in their new country. The stories of the past of these women were, in general, quite similar. The years of temporary freedom between 1979-1981 were narrated as years of empowerment and high ideals. Also, the years of suppression after 1981 were narrated as years

of horror and disempowerment. The impression the stories left behind was that the power of politics of those years in Iran was so dominant that it overshadowed the differences among the women. In spite of the differences in their particular experiences, they were all as easily overwhelmed by the power of freedom as they were soon enough harshly disillusioned by the power of suppression.

As mentioned above, in spite of their relatively similar narratives of the past, the positioning in the present countries was strikingly different between the Netherlands and the US. The women in the Netherlands felt like strangers and were afraid of the future. “What is going to become of us here? We will never find our place here, but is there any place for us left in Iran?” Their sense of non-belonging in the Netherlands does not mean that they are not part of the society. The contrary is the case: they speak the language and are active participants within society. But why did they feel like strangers there, and why were they afraid of the future? The women in Los Angeles have similarly contributed as active participants in their new society. The big difference is that they felt that they belonged in their new country. They felt at home in Los Angeles and were not afraid of the future. “If I have been able to gain so much within the ten years I am living here, then I will achieve even more in twenty years. Why should I be afraid of the future then?” To explore the differences between the two countries I have elaborated on a combination of factors that involve levels of experience, structure, and discourse (see Ghorashi 2003). In the following part of this paper, I limit myself to the differences between the discursive spaces of both countries.

Discourses on migration and national identity in the Netherlands

The first contacts of Iranian women with Dutch people were generally positive. Openness and eagerness to become part of this society was one of the points almost all of the activists mentioned. A practical sign of women’s eagerness for a new start is that most of them learned Dutch in less than a year and went on to pursue studies in a variety of fields. This positive feeling toward Dutch society was eventually replaced with frustration. Despite their attempts to become part of the society, the women started to feel a kind of uprootedness. The disappointments began when they wanted to be accepted and treated as equals but, instead, continued to get treated as strangers. This experience of being excluded, of being made ‘the other’ was in many ways similar to those of other migrant women in the Netherlands (Essed 1995, Lutz and Moors 1989 and Lutz 1991).

The process of othering

The process of othering in the Netherlands has to do with the ways that images of ‘the other’ are constructed and acted upon.² In order to understand this process of othering, I will explore the link between approaches toward migration and the feeling of otherness. In the Netherlands, migration is generally perceived as temporary rather than permanent. The discourse on migration in the Netherlands is dominated by the arrival of so-called ‘guest workers’ in the late 1950s. Postwar economic growth and the need for unskilled labor forced the Dutch government to look beyond its borders, fostering labor contracts first with Italy and Spain and later with Turkey and Morocco (Wilterdink 1998: 58). In the 1980s the Dutch government shifted its policy regarding guest workers when it realized that this “temporary” migration had gained a more permanent character. (Entzinger 1998: 68). The status of this group changed to ‘(im)migrant’ (Lutz 1997: 99). In spite of this legal shift, the general image of temporary migration related to these ex-‘guest workers’ did not change. In the 1980s, the arrival of refugees, the major new migrant groups in the Netherlands, reinforced the temporary image of migration. In guest worker migration it was the

legal status that made the idea of return strongly present. For political exiles, it is the impact of political ideals related to the wish to return to the homeland that plays a considerable role. This is especially true during the first years of stay. Despite differences in the motivations of both groups, return remains an essential part of both. This is not the case when migration is motivated by a choice to settle in a particular place. The key notion of return in guest workers or exile migration represents a strong bond with the past, giving both groups a distinctive temporary character.

The host country's expectations of migration as temporary can create mixed feelings toward the migrant when the process of migration changes to a more permanent one. The idea that migrants should return, which implies that they are seen as guests, was especially high during the 1970s, when the name 'guest workers' was used both by the migrants themselves and the host country. In the 1980s when the term 'guest workers' changed to (im)migrants, this did not signal a change in the understanding of return and its link to migration. At the end of the 1990s, the debates among politicians and in the media were concentrated around the return of those refugees refused legal status. Efforts were exerted to stimulate the repatriation of first- and second-generation immigrants to their countries in 2000 (van het Loo et al. 2001: 59). The recent concentration of debates on return points to a new form of linking migration to return: an understanding of migration that excludes any kind of integration. The image of migration as a temporary state of being focuses on the past and not on the present, exerting an enormous effect on political refugees with the primary wish to return. The context of a temporary vision of migration keeps political refugees from facing the reality that return is not always possible, and that their political and emotional ties with the homeland may take on new forms. After refugees live for several years in a host country, their ties with the homeland can change, and their stay can take on a more permanent character. However, nostalgic feelings toward the homeland can and do emerge when the process of migration is considered temporary within the host society.

Considering migrants as guests means that they do not belong in the society. The construction of otherness is embedded in the ideology of certain images and practices of 'who belongs' and 'who does not belong', and with the construction of certain images of nation that exclude migrants. The migrant as 'other' is "constructed as not belonging to the nation and yet living inside it" (Räthzel 1995: 165). In this way, this temporary discourse of migration has a close link to the discourses around national identity. The general assumption about the Dutch is that they are not nationally oriented. As Prins puts it, "[t]he essential trait of Dutch identity is assumed to be its non-identity, its fluidity, its openness to 'others'" (Prins 1997: 120). She continues,

"However, this modest mode of speech has a reverse. For by assuming that Dutchness is an unmarked category, a subject position that does not strike the eye because it does not differ from modern culture in general, it turns out to coincide with what is considered the norm or normal. Hence, everything not-Dutch gets marked as 'other', as different from that norm" (Prins 1997: 126).

Also, my research has shown that in contradiction to the United States, the Dutch notion of national identity is exclusive and thick.³ By the thickness of national identity, I mean a common understanding of Dutchness based on color, 'roots', and certain codes of behavior that exclude difference. These codes of behavior are in many ways related to a Calvinist background with its expectations for expressing certain behaviors.⁴ This thick notion of national identity leads to a process of exclusion and sets up a dichotomous relationship between us 'the Dutch' and them 'the others'. The consequence is that people from different backgrounds who are born in the Netherlands, or who have lived most of their lives there and have Dutch nationality are not included as 'one of us'. This process of exclusion means that not all Dutch citizens are included as belonging to the group. The only group included is the one whose members fit within the thick notion of Dutchness, which implies at the very least being white and Christian (Wekker 1995: 78). This thick notion of Dutchness is closely linked to the protection of 'the self', which

leads to the belief that ‘the other’ is by definition an outsider and a threat. This process of othering creates a homogeneous idea of Dutchness that excludes difference and does not include people with different backgrounds. This thick notion of Dutchness also makes the existence of hyphenated identities linked to multiple positioning in cultural difference virtually impossible. Therefore, identification within the Dutch context is limited to strict notions of Dutch and non-Dutch, which do not leave space to maneuver among cultural diversity or hybrid positioning. Even when migrants became a part of society through their contacts with the Dutch and their achievements in study and work, they still did not see themselves included as Dutch citizens.

The perception of migration as a temporary phenomenon, a thick notion of Dutchness that stimulates us-them dichotomies, combined with a negative image of Middle Eastern migrants in general and women in particular (see for more on these issues Essed 1991, Ghorashi 2003, Lutz et al. 1995, Rätzzel 1995, Wekker 1995) make Iranian women strangers in Dutch society. Repetition of these processes of exclusion, either through media or in daily contacts, has a profound impact on deepening this sense of otherness among Iranian women. This process has also been reinforced by another factor, i.e. that Iranians in the Netherlands do not form a strong community, so in this way the Iranian network cannot serve as an alternative social resource for these women (see Ghorashi 2003).

Once Iranians become part of this process of othering, they contribute by seeing the Dutch as the others. They start to develop stereotypical ideas about the Dutch as being cold, distanced, and stingy. They also start to see the Netherlands as an undesirable country. The space these women enjoyed in order to improve themselves becomes marginalized once they start to stress negative images such as bad weather or the coldness of the Dutch. The more Iranians experience being othered, the more this stereotyping of the Dutch increases. Thus, Iranians are not just passive participants in the process of othering in the Netherlands, but in some ways they are active contributors. This limits interactions between Iranians and Dutch people and deepens their sense of not belonging.

The past becomes present

The main impact of the process of othering on Iranians living in the Netherlands is that they start to develop nostalgic feelings towards the past. The selective images of the past are based on a static construction of Iranian culture as warm and caring in contrast to the construction of Dutch culture as cold and distanced. When one cannot feel at home in the new context, one tries to create an imaginary homeland that is ‘there’, ‘back home’. A selection of memories gives content to this illusionary feeling. This leads people to believe that there will be a ‘home’ outside the place that one lives at present, a ‘misplaced home’ that makes the possibilities of settlement and feeling comfortable in a new context very difficult, if not impossible. In this way, these women who have been ‘internationalists’ in Iran, start to feel as nationalists by constructing an image of Iran as the only place they can belong to. Leila’s story shows this contradictory aspect of being an internationalist and nationalist at the same time beautifully. She said:

“I am not a nationalist person who puts emphasis on Iranian identity. I do not believe in nationalism. I think that I can live in this society as a person, not so much as an Iranian, ... I do not want to emphasize my Iranian side, and I do not want to show that I am not Iranian either. I am a person living in a society by chance, I am an Iranian living in Dutch society”.

Leila is someone who explicitly mentions that she is not a nationalist, but on another occasion, when she talks about her life in the Netherlands and her possibilities, she refers to Iran as her *place*: an approach which is quite nationalistic.

“The most important problem I have here is that as a migrant I have no certain future. You do not have the same rights in this country, you cannot find a job, and you cannot be sure about

your future financially. [...] You become tired of this situation. Even if I feel that I have adapted myself to the new situation here, I sometimes feel that I , how can I say it, ... I feel that my roots are there [Iran]. I think then that some day I will go back, because I prefer to live in my place [Iran], everybody likes to live in their own country”.

Sara expresses her view in a different way:

“We [she and her partner] are always busy with plans for the future. I have many ideals, but they are changing all the time. I always want to go to Iran. I always wish to go back and live in Iran, but this is really a kind of dream, and I know it. [Why do you want to go back to Iran and live there?] I think that I belong there. Whatever I do, I remain a foreigner here. Maybe I thought five years ago like: ‘Ah, I will remain a foreigner all my life here, they will never let us inside their circles’. But now I do not want to become Dutch. Do you understand me? I am happy that I have become so conscious about myself. I realize now that I am a person who has traveled and migrated and has come here and stayed. But the main reason that I want to go to Iran is that I cannot forget about the past. Unfortunately, I cannot put it in a closet and lock it. When I smell a flower, then tears rush into my eyes. I remember the past, but a past that does not exist anymore. I see that there is no yard, no flowerpot, no space to live, but I want to be there. My existence relates to there”.

For these women the sense of home is directly related to the past and consists of contradictory feelings. They realize that their dreams for a home relate to memories of a past that does not exist anymore. Despite their achievements in the present, they cling to the past for a sense of belonging. The painful aspect is that the past is an unrealistic dream and they know it. Their uprooted feelings in the new country overshadow their success and achievements. Their feelings of being strangers in the Netherlands create a situation in which they start to search for their roots in Iran, the place where they lost their roots. In this way the new context has dissolved the transnational approach toward the homeland that they had before they entered the Netherlands. The embodied political past of these women would make a transnational, hybrid choice in multiplicity of cultures (in the form of Iranian-Dutch) more visible than a national, monocultural choice for a country which made them refugees both inside and outside. This is one of the points of inconsistency in their narratives. In addition, the lack of Iranian cultural and social activities in the Netherlands, does not make it possible for these women to make a place for their cultural/social habitus in the new country and to make it part of their narrative in a realistic way. This lack of the elements of the cultural past in the present, combined with uprooted feelings in the Netherlands contributes to a disruption between the past habitus and the present life. This then fuels nostalgic feelings that lead to feelings of emptiness and discomfort, by living ‘here’ but feeling at home ‘there.’ In this way, there are at least two levels of discontinuity in the narrative of Iranian women in the Netherlands: one on the level of political habitus and the other on the level of cultural/social habitus.

In short, the sense of uprootedness in the Netherlands brings women like Leila and Sara to search for their roots somewhere else. In this way, they distance themselves from any kind of identification with Dutchness as part of the narrative of their selves. As a result, what prevails in the stories of Iranian women in the Netherlands is that they are not able to articulate the actual relationship between their past and their present in order to create a coherent story of their selves. A disrupted sense of time and place results in a narrative of the self, which excludes multiple identifications with the past culture (Iran) and the present culture (the Netherlands).

Irangleles: a better home abroad?

The Iranian community⁵ in Los Angeles is in many ways a re-creation of the years before the revolution, an Iran outside Iran. For many Iranians who were brought up during the time of the Shah, Irangleles feels more like Iran than the Islamic Iran after the revolution. The whole setting of Iran outside of Iran, or 'Irangleles', can serve as a familiar environment, similar to the place where they grew up. This can stimulate their sense of belonging. Feeling at home has not merely to do with conscious choices that people make but also with surroundings where they could feel at ease: a known surrounding which is linked to the embodied past in the form of cultural/social habitus. The existence of the past in the present in Los Angeles has partly contributed to the fact that Iranian women of this study see themselves as part of American society. Conflicting ideas about there and here combined with the emotional bond to Iran are also present for women living in California, but these double feelings do not keep them from feeling at home in LA. Iranian women in LA have access to two available social resources, American and Iranian. They interact within American society but their main contacts are with Iranians. In this sense they are not so much affected by the ways Americans treat them. Experienced discrimination toward Iranian women in LA seems to be dealt with as minor and is not taken seriously. Neda makes a very interesting remark on this issue.

"I have contacts with people who are anti-Iranian. [...] But I never felt that my progress has been blocked by those incidents. [Who are you in the eyes of Americans?] In the eyes of most of them I think I am a normal person, and also some would look at me and feel proud. They see me as someone who came from abroad and had the possibility to improve her position. I have also seen redneck people, but they are everywhere, also in Iran. When I lived in Texas, they left a letter behind my door; I do not know who did it, but it said something like, 'Go back home' which was very strange for me. [...] I think that the way we look at things influences the way we see reality. It is our description of reality that constructs reality. There can be racism, but we should think of dealing with a society that is different from ours. One way is closing the door on ourselves and the whole time interpreting the way others treat us because we are from a different background. The other way is to just go on and then maybe you do not feel the racist encounters toward you. I did not feel them because I have never looked at it in that way; I never thought that because I am a woman or a foreigner I am limited in doing things".

Neda's positive attitude is not only related to the existence of Iranian social resource in Los Angeles but has also partly to do with the discourses on migration and national identity in the US. Those are explained in the next section.

The United States: Distance from the 'melting pot'

By the end of twentieth century, the diversity among new migrants in the United States contributed to a change in the historical approach to immigration that was based on the assimilation theory (Waldinger and Bozorgmehr 1996: 17). Many new migrants entering the United States had higher education and specialized skills and were prepared to claim a place higher up on the ladder of the host society rather than starting on the bottom rung. These new kinds of immigrants have challenged rather than adapted to their new society. Because of their high profile, they consider their migration a starting point of communication and negotiation within the new society. For the most part, their compatible background enables them to start a new life within the host society with only minor adjustments required to language and diplomas received from their homeland. They do not see themselves as inferior; on the contrary, they see themselves as people who have a lot to offer and are not ready to disregard their backgrounds.

The least effect of this new migration to the United States has been that it has forced a more differentiated view on migration to the foreground, and has pushed the assimilation standpoint off to the side. It has also forced an image of difference within the United States in which diverse migrant communities have been considered as part and parcel of American society.⁶

The second important factor that contributes to this differentiated notion on immigration has to do with the ways in which discourses on American national identity are constructed. These discourses are partially related to what Behdad calls “an ambivalent concept of the nation-state” in which “[d]isplacement is the precondition for the formation of national consciousness in the United States. [...] In short, exile and displacement are not the opposite of nationalism, but the necessary prerequisite to imagining a national community in America” (1997: 156 and 158). Following Behdad’s argument, the concepts of displacement and immigration are an essential part of national discourse in the United States. Yet, the approach toward immigration is ambivalent. On the one hand, displacement is part of a national discourse, as America has often been called a dreamland for migrants, a place in which they are offered equal opportunities. On the other side, there exists a strong sense of protecting the national boundary against immigrants (van der Veer 1995: 2). Thus, it is not so much the immigration policies in the United States that make America an ‘immigrant country’ but rather this ambivalent concept of national identity that creates space for difference as it allows those displaced and exiled to be part of “imagining a national community in America.” In other words, the ambivalent notion of national discourse in the United States has made it possible for the displaced to claim their part of the pie within the national discourse about Americanness.

The third important factor to consider, related to the inclusion of difference within the US national identity, is the history of the civil rights movement. In particular, the extensive and long-lasting struggle of African Americans in the United States has made an important contribution toward the heterogeneity of national identity. This movement not only emphasized and safeguarded their difference in the search for their ‘roots,’ but it also exerted a strong claim for their Americanness. Based on the above-mentioned arguments, the new type of migrants, the ambivalent notion of national discourse, and the civil right movement in the United States have resulted in a heterogeneous—read thin— notion of national identity in which there is room for thick particularities. American national discourse allows thick cultural differences within its understanding of a thin notion of national identity. It is possible to be considered American—both by oneself as well as by others—within the diversity of physical appearances, languages, and cultural backgrounds. Thus, the notion of American identity is like an umbrella that includes different particularities. Even more meaningful to this research is that the thickness of particularities and the thinness of the general national identity give room for experiencing and expressing multiple national/cultural identities. The heterogeneous basis for national identity makes the definition of “a good American citizen” not one that is exclusive and related only to white, Christian Americans. The inclusion of difference within American national identity allows one, for example, to feel both American and Iranian.⁷ This sense of inclusion next to the existence of a known Iranian surrounding in LA makes it possible for Iranians to feel at home in America and keeps them from developing strong nostalgic feelings towards Iran. This becomes clear in Sadaf’s response when I asked her how she misses Iran:

“The memories. I know that when I go back to Iran many things will shock me. [...] Before, I missed Iran more, but not now. [Here has become your home, in some way?] Yes, I feel that. [You told me that you don’t feel as a stranger here, didn’t you?] I don’t feel like a stranger in my daily life, but there are incidents at my work and my school when I feel like a stranger, but in general I am very happy and do not feel like a foreigner”.

The impact of this sense of belonging in California is essential in the narrative of life of the women interviewed. In contrast to the discontinuity in the narratives in the Netherlands, the

narratives in California show continuity both on the level of political and cultural/social habitus. The existence of the space for diversity in California makes it possible for these women with a past political habitus of internationalism to position themselves transnationally and in multiplicity of cultures. They consider themselves Iranian-Americans and have considered America their home: a home that includes the Iranian culture. The recreation of an Iran outside Iran has been essential for feelings of belonging in the new context. When there exists elements of the past such as cultural rituals and social gatherings, there is little need for nostalgia. In this way, this little Iran in California serves as a bridge between the past memories and the present context: a bridge that creates certain continuity in the narrative of life of these women. This sense of continuity manifests itself in the ways that multiple identities of both Iranian and Americanness of these women are situated in a rather coherent narrative of their selves. In this way, the new context contributes to the configuration of multiple – Iranian-American – identities of these women within their narrative of the self, where the present and the past are mediated by hybrid positioning.

Conclusion

As I explained above, the experience and expression of multiplicity or hybridity in relation to the processes of identity formation has to do with the discursive spaces available in the new context. I argue that different factors such as civil rights movements, diversity of new immigrants, and the ambivalence of the national discourse in relation to displacement and exile in the United States have forced a rather heterogeneous approach toward the national identity to the foreground. Within this new approach multiple positioning in cultural difference becomes possible. This heterogeneous definition of national identity creates a thin notion of Americanness in which there is space for thick particularities (in this case, people with varied backgrounds and cultures). This discursive space in the US has given the women of this study the chance to find a place for their ‘embodied past’ in the form of political and social/cultural habitus in the present. They have been able to position themselves multiply by calling themselves Iranian-Americans and transnationally by not relating home to their ‘roots.’ Their home is where they feel a sense of belonging and home is now the US. It is in the US that the women who participated in this study have been able to build a new life. In this way, the narrative of life of these women includes both the past and the present in its multiplicity through which the elements of continuity and change are visible. For this reason, these women have been able to create a reflexive project in which a coherent view of the self is constructed through the intersecting discourses of the past and the present.

In the Netherlands, however, national identity is seen as homogeneous, related to a thick notion of Dutchness that includes white Dutch and excludes cultural difference (migrants). This homogeneous definition of Dutchness does not represent the diversity of the Netherlands and excludes migrants’ share of Dutchness. I argued that a national discourse that excludes diversity of cultural backgrounds takes away the space for hybridity or multiple positioning in cultures. The temporary notion of migration together with dichotomous distinctions of us and them make the Iranian women who participated in this study and who are active participants in the Dutch society, feel like strangers or unwelcome guests. Thus, these Iranian women, even with potential transnational tendencies, feel excluded and cling to the past to feel some sense of belonging. The impact of this sense of othering is strong in the narrative of the self of these women. In their narratives, they are not able to articulate the multiplicity of their past (Iranian) and present (Iranian-Dutch) national/cultural identities. Their past does not have a ‘real’ place in the present but an imaginary one. In this way, they feel caught between the past, ‘there,’ and the present,

'here.' They are thus captured between time and space, which results in a contradictory monocultural and national positioning in the present.

In sum, the acknowledgment of hybrid – multiple identities such as Iranian-American in relation to the narrative of the self in which the past and the present are productively linked depends on a sense of social inclusion. The process of social inclusion in California gives the women the chance to move between two different places and times. They are then able to bring 'the past' and 'there' closer to 'the present', 'here' by positioning themselves in multiple ways and allowing this multiplicity to be part of the narrative of their selves. For the Iranian women in the Netherlands, on the other hand, their state of being temporally and spatially split disrupts the construction of a hybrid identity in relation to the narrative of their selves.

Notes

1. See also Jenkins 1992.
2. For more on this issue see Verkuyten et al. 1995, van Dijk 1993, and Essed 1991.
3. In distinguishing between the heterogeneous (thin) and homogenous (thick) definitions of national identity having to do with the acceptance or the rejection of diversity within a national discourse, I am inspired by Rawls' (1971, 1980) definitions of thin/thick universality/particularity in relation to pluralism. For an elaborate study on this issue see Griffioen and Mauw (1993).
4. For more on Calvinistic background see Ghorashi 2003, chapter 8.
5. The term community refers mainly to collective activities organized by Iranians in L.A. I am aware that community, especially in case of ethnic minorities, is a contested concept. It leads to equation of community to culture through which culture becomes reified (Baumann 1996: 10). With this term I refer mainly to the existence of certain kind of networks and social and cultural activities that are in many ways constructed and imagined (Anderson 1983).
6. It is important to keep in mind that certain regional differences impact the way the differences are accepted. California is one of the states of the United States where the differences are most visible and where acceptance is much higher, as will be discussed later.
7. In her research on the political involvement of Iranian Americans in the United States, Tahmasebi (1997: 44) shows that the majority of her respondents identified themselves as Iranian American. See also the intriguing collection of writings by Iranian Americans in Karim and Khorrami 1999.

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