The Un-Homed Iranians in Canberra

Sanam Seghatoleslami
Master of Anthropology Thesis
The Australian National University 2013
I, Sanam Seghatoleslami, hereby declare that:

to the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except where due reference is made in the text of this thesis.

On this date February 2013

Signed Sanam Seghatoleslami
**Declaration**

This research is solely for anthropological purposes. Although there are remarks regarding the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979 and the current regime, this thesis contains no political weight and perspective. The aim of this research is to anthropologically examine the effects of change on homemaking and delineate the entailed modifications of the daily mundane emotional and bodily performances.
Acknowledgements

Many people assisted in the production of this thesis. I wish to thank them and to express my deep and sincere gratitude. I have special appreciation for all the Iranians who participated in this project and shared their private feelings and perspectives; their life-stories not only made this project ‘happen’ but also they deeply touched my heart. I wish to thank my friends and family who took the time to listen to my ideas during the past 12 months. I wish to thank Dr Simone Dennis, my supervisor, who guided me through the project, commented on a number of drafts and kept me going when I was ready to give up. Ms Leanne Pattison, my dear friend, took the hard work of copy-editing this thesis; I will remain in her debt. Special thanks to Ms JJ for reading my drafts, commenting and providing me with food for thought which enriched me with a better perspective. I wish to thank the unending support of my parents from Iran, both spiritually and financially, and for making academe such a salient part of my life. I salute them for valuing knowledge over other life achievements. My two dear sisters, who did not quite know what I was doing but rose and fell with me, accompanying me in their own unique ways, thank you. Endless thanks to my childhood friend, Tanaz Assefi, who worked hard in creating a wonderful illustration, for the cover of this thesis, which matches the argument of this project; our strong bond enabled her to connect with my thoughts from London. I acknowledge the care I received from my dear mother-in-law, in Canberra, who also gave me strength beyond imagination by setting an example of the power of will and gratitude. And last, but by no means least, I would like to acknowledge the unconditional support of my partner in pursuing my academic dream and thank him for patiently and quietly understanding my mood swings in my past two and a half years at the ANU.
# Table of Contents

Introduction .........................................................................................6

Chapter One: Methodology .................................................................17

Chapter Two: Home, Homeland, Third Iran.......................................22

Chapter Three: Performing Iranian-ness...........................................35

Chapter Four: Stagecraft.................................................................49

Chapter Five: Conclusion .................................................................64

References........................................................................................69
The Unhomed Iranians in Canberra

Introduction

The group of Iranian migrants who are the subject of this study left Iran subsequent to the 1979 Revolution. This migration was in response to the post-Revolution regime’s restrictions on societal participation, and its demands of the population to ‘perform’ a new kind of Iranian-ness in their bodily and emotional comportment. The restrictions on the public performance of emotion, the State’s insistence on particular forms of embodiment, and narrowly defined social participation style, did not allow these Iranians to feel completely at home in the Iranian State (also see Dennis & Warin 2007; Warin & Dennis 2005). Behaviour and comportment in private spaces also became subject to the ideological restructuring of the regime. This included rules about dress codes, mixed gendered interactions and the consumption of alcohol at private gatherings in homes and venues where weddings or parties might be held, and extended to the publishing of certain books and music.
While Iranians could express themselves in public when participating in one of the highly regulated celebrations still permitted by the regime, such as *Nowrooz*¹ and *Charshanmehsoori*², and while they could continue to hold mixed gendered gatherings, such as weddings, or watch satellite television behind closed doors, as long as they were not discovered doing so, many felt the kind of unhomeliness that Veness (1993) described as besetting her own informants, who were poor, disadvantaged Delawarians living in government shelters. Veness referred to these informants as the ‘unhomed’, a term she used to capture the purgatory of being neither homed nor homeless; while her informants had a place to stay, they did not have the kind of ‘home’, a physical space, a structural ‘house’ that one either owns or rents. This thesis also makes use of the notion of ‘unhomed’. However, I deployed differently from Veness in that I argue that while the Iranians I studied lived in their home State of Iran, they nevertheless felt that they were not at liberty to be ‘*themselves*’ there, in public, political or social terms, and could only act, dress and speak as they wished in private. Even here they ran the risk of being discovered in breach of the regime’s strict codes for behaviour. In this sense, they shared that purgatorial feeling that Veness tries to capture—they had somewhere to be, but not somewhere to be themselves and so, for them, it was not home.

¹ *Nowrooz*: Persian New Year, which is an ancient celebration and occurs on the first day of the Spring equinox on 20-21 March (see also Koutlaki 2010).

² *Charshanmehsoori*: literally means Red Wednesday and is an ancient festival dating back 4000s from the early Zoroastrian era. It is still celebrated the night before the last Wednesday of the year (Arab 2007).
For some Iranians, including those in this study, the disjuncture between the secretive private life people might lead behind closed doors and their public life, and the burden of having to perform State-mandated bodily and emotional conduct, as against the accustomed and familiar modes of moving, feeling and being they could engage in prior to 1979, proved problematic. The group of Iranian men and women I spent time with to produce this thesis felt this burden so keenly that they resolved to move away from Iran, where they had been born and raised, in a bid to feel more at home. For the people in this study, this meant being able to comport themselves, and being able to express feelings and thoughts beyond those mandated by the State, without fear of repercussion. That is the freedom to be themselves, without having to perform to the standards of comportment and emotional demeanour demanded by the Iranian regime. The migrants in this study, who now all live in Canberra, hoped that Australia would present such an opportunity for freedom of expression, freedom of comportment and freedom to be oneself. Thus, they, as Hage argues of other migrant communities, engaged in a kind of physical mobility that defines them as migrants because they felt that another geographical space would be a better launching pad for their ‘existential selves’ (2005: 470).

My study has revealed that Australia indeed affords Iranian migrants just these sorts of freedoms: women can choose to wear or not wear head coverings without fear of repercussion from the State; men can wear ties if they like; men and women can gather together if they so
choose without fear of being arrested, and they can read whichever books, or listen to whatever music, takes their fancy—these are all freedoms that were unavailable to them in post-Revolution Iran, which kept the people in my study from feeling ‘at home’ in Iran.

However, while the freedoms Iranians enjoy here in Australia are those extended to citizens living in the Australian democracy, living in Australia has *not* meant that these Iranian migrants are free to express themselves however they choose. They cannot, in particular, express what people in my study referred to as their Iranian-ness however they like. Indeed, many felt that there are expectations of how Iranian-ness should be performed in Australia. While these might not manifest as State decrees, and are indeed known to Iranians as expectations that ‘Australian people’ have of them, they are keenly felt, and heeded. Thus, while they may pursue private and public life as free citizens of a democracy, the migrants in my study continue, paradoxically, to feel compelled to perform within very narrowly defined parameters, in emotional and embodied terms, a modified version of Iranian-ness they perceive as suitable to the State of Australia, just as they had been required to do in Iran.

Specifically, Iranian people in my study feel it necessary to appear ‘happy and grateful’ to Australia for providing them the freedom denied them back in Iran, and to appear ‘civilised’ and ‘safe’ to Australians. This was indicated in their public performances in Australia, intended to portray the persona of ‘the good Iranian’ who is
‘happy’, not a burden, and is not a threat. Thus, while the migrants in this study were free from the performance expectations imposed on them by the regime in Iran to perform a State-mandated version of Iranian-ness, they still had to perform within narrow expectations in Australia, albeit in a different register. While they might not be at risk of arrest for appearing in public in mixed gender company, none felt they could really be their Iranian selves as they felt they wanted to be—each had to perform a variety of Iranian-ness acceptable to their Australian hosts. This led to the feeling, shared by all my informants, of not being at home, just as they had not felt at home in Iran.

Ethnographically, this thesis examines the emotional and embodied registers of performances that the migrants felt compelled to give in Australia, and argues that the movement out of the Iranian borders has not led, simply, to the freedom that it may seem to have, on the surface. Analytically, this has implications for what ‘being at home’ means for Iranian migrants, as it was this feeling they sought in their existential and physical movement away from the Iranian State. In this thesis, I conclude that this perceived pressure to perform Iranian-ness in certain ways is at the very heart of ‘unhomeliness’, as it was experienced in the home State, and as it is experienced in the new place, Australia. While it may appear that performing Iranian-ness in Australia is very different from performing it in Iran, since the Iranian State removed the sorts of freedoms that are available to migrants in Canberra, I argue that both in Iran and Australia experiences of unhomeliness are rooted not so much in the
availability of freedoms, as they are in *being at home in one’s own body and feelings, to the point that one does not have to perform the self, but is simply and unreflexively his or herself*. Here I include the feeling of being at home among a community of ‘like’ bodies, who act relationally to one another in unreflected-upon ‘homely’ ways—if it is anything at all, perhaps feeling at home persists in not having to perform a required identity in any highly reflexive manner. This is, indeed, precisely what was lost in Iran—the old, familiar and unreflected upon ways of being Iranian, so small they remain unspoken, but so important that they together constitute what it means to be at home in one’s own skin.

It is equally what is lost in Australia; people are acutely aware of the ‘middle eastern-ness’ of Iran, and how it is perceived in Australia, especially since the events of 9/11. This thesis concludes that ironically, despite acquiring the liberties unavailable to them in Iran, the Iranian migrants I spent time with must yet give narrowly defined emotional and bodily performances in Australia. Thus, a feeling of being at home here is not accomplished for them. My thesis shows that being at home may be fruitfully examined in terms of being free to unreflexively ‘be’, in this case, Iranian, without having to carefully construct performances that will meet host (or indeed Iranian regime) expectations.

Thus, homeliness might not be accomplished by becoming at home in the story of one’s own life, as Rapport and Dawson(1998) insist, nor
might unhomeliness be brought on primarily by the sensory difference of a new place, as Thomas (1999), and Warin & Dennis (2005) argue. Indeed, disrupting the story of one’s own life might be just what is needed, if that story is one of political repression. Being involved in a new sensory regime may be just what is required, if it brings one the freedom to experience new sensory worlds hitherto closed off. My contribution to this area of anthropological inquiry, dealing with migration and identity, is that unhomeliness may be fruitfully examined instead by examining the conditions for being unreflexively at home. In my argument that Iranians have to perform a certain kind of Iranian-ness here, just as they do in Iran, lies the possibility for examining homeliness as the absence of the conscious performance of self and identity.

**Structure**

In the first chapter of this thesis I will direct the reader’s attention to the methods I used in conducting this research. I particularly elaborate on my position as a researcher investigating her own community while herself being an immigrant as well. This unique positionedness provided an insight into the Iranian conceptualisation of home that otherwise might have been missed ‘behind the mask of gratitude’, as expressions of unhomeliness to a non-Iranian researcher could have been shadowed by the effort to appear happy and grateful for living in Canberra. Being an immigrant also situated me as a ‘like’ body, as an Iranian self, like my participants. This
chapter also discusses my data, its collection and the methods I used to source it, as well as relevant details about the participants.

The second chapter of this thesis is about how home is a manifold notion for Iranians of this study. In this chapter, I expand on three facets of home-conceptualisation in an Iranian context and how these conceptualisations are interwoven to create the sense of unhomeliness that my informants experienced in Iran and in Australia. In this chapter, I argue that the unhomeliness they felt has its genesis in the rupture of social norms in Iran after the event of the 1979 Revolution. It was this rupture that caused Iranians to conceive of home in three ‘layers’: first, one’s domestic home; second, a nostalgically remembered and longed for Homeland Iran, which denotes a better time and space than here and now; third, the here and now of the ‘Third Iran’—the theocratic social order developed by the new regime.

While Iranians regard their domestic home as their private space where they can be free to express their selves existentially, Homeland Iran, their vatan, is related to the land, history, and the ancient past of Iran, a realm that is less ‘real’, in that it cannot be experienced now, owing to the political and social conditions ushered in by the regime, but strongly felt and understood. The Third Iran that was articulated through this project, was referred to as the Iran which emerged and came to life after the Revolution and the constitution of the theocratic regime. This Third Iran imposed new social orders and
enforced specific ideological standards, in emotional and bodily terms, which created an alien, unfamiliar Iran in which people were compelled by the State to give performances of proper, State-mandated Iranian-ness which led the people in my study to feel very much not at home in Iran.

The third chapter of the thesis examines the impact this specific and multilayered conceptualisation of home has on Iranians’ daily, mundane performances. This chapter is about expressing Iranian-ness, emotionally and bodily, in the shadow of the Revolution in Iran, and in the shadow of perceived Australian expectations of the good and grateful migrant. As will become clear throughout the thesis, a sense of being at home is accomplished for my informants when these shadows disappear, and when one can simply ‘be’ without planning and adjusting for a watchful audience. The Iranians in this study were always aware of their performances and took great care to appear and to express themselves properly, as they thought they must, in Canberra as they went about the most mundane and unreflexive actions of social life here.

In Iran, they had to design their performances in accordance with the regime ideological requirements to be safe. In Australia, they feel forced to calculate each move to portray the good Iranian, who is happy and far from the Iranian middle-eastern typified image. This is also related to feeling safe—to fitting in, to being not cast out, even to avoid harm that might come from appearing to be a threat, in a post-
9/11 world. The Iranians of this study performed to impress their audiences. They modified their Iranian-ness to build a positive ‘self’ for the perusal of others, to shake off their otherness, carefully watchful of their speech, appearance and demeanour. This continuous reflexivity, I argue, is not at all dissimilar to what my informants had to do in Iran. In Australia, just as in Iran, having to perform an acceptable version of oneself all the time creates the state of unhomeliness, a state where one is not home-less, not without shelter, but yet not at home in one’s own body, talk, and behaviour. While we all have to deliver acceptable performances in one way or another— at work, at a dinner party, in public contexts of all kinds—it seems that there is a difference between being in public and performing in public. The first may become unreflexive—you know how to behave and simply do. Iranians in my study perform. Thus, they dwell in the purgatorial space between having a place to call home, but not actually being able to feel at home there.

Clearly this is contra to Rapport and Dawson’s (1998) claim that one feels at home when one knows oneself the best. In order to deliver compelling performances to their ever-watchful audiences, Iranians in this study had to know themselves very well indeed. This knowledge was essential for re-designing themselves to appear and to be recognised in a particular way—that is, to be ‘good’, happy and grateful, and so to be accepted by their Australian audiences.
In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I will discuss how unhomeliness is embodied. Just as for the theatrical stage, Iranian performances of the good and grateful migrant came to life on different stages, and in and through the use of particular sorts of language, as well as in wardrobe and makeup, and props. Familiarity with these crafts of the stage—customs, language and communicative skills—was key to delivering the right performance. My informants thought unfamiliarity with language and other communication skills caused uncompelling performances revealing ‘the other’.

I bring this thesis to a conclusion by suggesting that home is where you know your lines, but you don’t know that you know them or that you are delivering them. The ‘knowing’ happens unreflexively. Being at home persists when one does not have to perform the self, but can unreflexively be the self. The thesis concludes that this was not possible in Iran or in Australia. The Iranians in my study take conscious care to design, modify and plan their performance as Iranians in both contexts, to protect themselves in Iran and to ‘be’ suitable in Australia. The Iranians of this study are so aware of the fact that they must give good performances that they relinquish feeling at home.