

# **“A Man Without Country”: A Discussion of Iranian Heritage and Identity-Making**

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Evenly sandwiched between the kitchen and couch, the dining room table sat, three table mats—freshly decorated for Valentine’s Day—laying out in place of the regular, brown ones I saw in the corner. Entryways were adorned with scriptures in Farsi, picked delicately from *The Quran*, with handmade, Iranian tapestries and photo albums on surrounding surfaces. It was as though every crevice was at war with itself: a battle between two cultures prevalent in the American sayings coupled with Islamic decorations. A family lives here: the father, Hooman Sedighi, an Iranian-born citizen who came to the United States following the Iranian Revolution; the mother, Tannaz Sedighi Talebi, a first-generation American whose family originally came in search of education opportunities, before remaining in search of asylum; and finally, their son, Adam, a five year old boy, born in the U.S., who has never visited his ‘home’ country of Iran.

Spanning over five hours, our conversation focused not only on the lives the interviewees left behind, but also on those carved out before them. This concept of “immigrant identity-making”, as Tahseen Shams put it in her book *Here, There, Elsewhere*, encompassed everything from the actual fleeing of their homeland to their acclimation within the hostland, to everything in-between (ie. the ‘elsewhere’). With religion as a connecting string, I aim to demonstrate the complex relationship between idealization, cultural background and how immigrants influence the wider scope of the geopolitical tapestry (and are changed in return).

As mentioned in Espiritu’s *Homebound*, the majority of immigrants do not come to the United States with the intention of permanent residency (Espiritu, 2003). Instead, many, including both Hooman and Tannaz’s families, travel to America with the ambition of continuing their education, earning a degree, and then returning to home to serve their wider community. As Hooman explained, “the whole idea was that we were going to go [to the United States], so we could finish our education and get back [to Iran]”. He listed his past goals, such as building a

local hospital, becoming a physician to help his country, or even inheriting his father's business. It was only during the Iranian Revolution of 1978 that his family was forced to remain in the United States in fear of persecution, as he became a permanent U.S. citizen at age 13.

During the interview, he was insistent that he was not an immigrant, but instead a refugee: a defining factor of identity for many foreign-born nationals. Refugees were more likely to immigrate with their families, more likely to be accepted socially due to the in-pertinence of their stay, and usually included a wider diversity of population due to extenuating circumstances (fostering a deeper sense of community based in shared-trauma). By contrast, immigrants like Tannaz not only face a harder path to citizenship—including decades of undocumented stay—but usually do so with an absent support system, a low socio-economic status and a lack of social acceptance (Bozorgmehr, 1998, p. 7). Thus, a divide is created between Iranian immigrants and Iranian refugees, fostering a lack of panethnic formation: refugees are terrified of being perceived as free-riders or exploiters of the 'American dream', while Iranian immigrants are desperate to "distance themselves from activities that could categorize them as 'Muslim', in attempts to evade the U.S. state's punitive measures" (Shams, 2020, p. 19). While technically all falling under the same ethnic umbrella, smaller groups begin to form depending on cultural background, religious affiliation and the human desire for acceptance.

This struggle is explained by scholar Mehdi Bozorgmehr as a battle for 'internal ethnicity', as "many Iranian's associate with their Iranian co-religionists more than they do with other Iranians," causing a disconnect between their identity and home country (Bozorgmehr, 1998, p. 18). Although still connected to their homeland, immigrants and refugees alike begin to distance themselves from those with their exterior, ethnic backgrounds, instead choosing to form part of secular groups based on shared beliefs, or in most cases, shared fear of social rejection. Tannaz

herself mentioned how she attempted to still keep her Iranian roots, while simultaneously ‘Americanizing’ herself sufficient to not be grouped in with those ostracized from society (at one point, she even mentioned changing her name). She felt she related to some of her fellow Iranian’s but not others, mostly due to differing lifestyle decisions or religious beliefs.

Religion beliefs are highly relevant not only because of their role in the mass immigration of Iranian refugees (ie. escaping persecution), but also because of their role as an identity-forming concept (Chaichian, 1997). As scholar Mohammad Chaichian explores in his research on immigrant assimilation in the United States, over 90% of Iranians practice Shi’ism—a branch of Islam—with its religious practices having an “all-encompassing impact on every facet of Iranian culture and thought” (Chaichian, 1997, p. 614). For Iranians, religion is both their violent oppressor and unique liberator, giving them a clear yet troubled past. For the Sedighi family, it signified a loss of almost half of their family at the hands of the Khomeini regime; yet, they spoke of the revolution as a manipulation of religion, distancing it from their own teachings. In other words, it’s hard to draw the line of religion and identity due to, “the continued fragmentation and pluralization of interpretations of the Islamic message” in both contexts inside and outside of the homeland (Shams, 2020, p. 13).

In many ways, Hooman and Tannaz have looked past the troubling past of Shi’ism since religion is their only remaining connection to their homeland, as it is “a trace of how immigrants’ sense of selves stretches over territorial borders” and how “as communities of believers, religions tie together people differently than migrations from ‘here’ to ‘there do” (Shams, 2020, p. 5). For Tannaz, Shi’ism was one of the few characteristics she never considered changing in an attempt to become more “American”, defining it as a core pillar of her identity. For Hooman, it signifies a direct way to connect his son to a country he may never visit: a fact shown by Adam’s

continued references to *Mashallah* and the divine. Because religion is at the root of the human spirit, “even casual day-to-day interactions have Islamic connotations”, meaning just by existing, the Sedighi’s ‘family identity’ influences the world around them (Shams 2020, p. 10-11).

This concept of transnationalism—the idea that people, information and ideas can flow across national borders—demonstrates the constant reciprocity of influence between immigrants and their host countries (Shams, 2020). Tannaz spoke very fondly of her frequent summer-visits to Iran in the early 2000s, and how she was viewed as the “special cousin and rockstar from America,” who brought goodies and ideas of freedom to an otherwise oppressive state. Although no longer ‘from’ Iran, she still influenced the culture found there, and found empowerment in her dual-identity, “as migrants become members of the receiving state while simultaneously remaining citizens of the sending state” (Shams, 2020, p. 13). By contrast, Hooman often felt isolated in his Islamic identity, as he arrived in the U.S. too late in life but left Iran too early to ever belong. As he explained: “You’re almost like a man without a country.”

Instead of participating in transnationalism between his host and home countries, Hooman felt that his identity was influenced by transnationalism due to the perspectives of other countries, as he was judged based on the preconceived notions of ‘others’. Simply put, he believed that his “hostland viewed him in the light of conflicts of ‘elsewhere’” (Shams, 2020, p. 14). This included exogenous shocks, such as the 9/11 attack or the conflicts of other countries, which have shaped the global understanding of Muslims—however inaccurate—and thus “hav[ing] an effect on the hostland’s sociopolitical climate and to produce an immediate impact on the immigrants’ lives here in the hostland” (Shams, 2020, p. 40). Hence, this process of identity-making transforms from an individualized discovery, influenced only by an immigrant's relationships to their hostland and homeland, to instead encompass the entire global landscape.

Helping contextualize the variety of immigrant lives in relation to theories of Shams and related sociologists, this interview relates the role of religion, exogenous shocks and intention to identity-making. For Iranian immigrants, such as Tannaz and Hooman, Shi'ism serves as a connecting line back to a country that no longer exists, as their homeland, "stays static and isolated without [their] presence" (Shams, 2020, p. 71), providing them a means to show their son Adam a country he will never visit (and in many ways, a country that only exists in their minds). Because both them and Iran have changed since their immigration to the United States, their identities are formed around both the past experiences of their homeland and the present-day status of their hostland: causing an identity crisis equivalent to the clashing decorations of their home. As such, immigrants are both equally trapped and vindicated in the 'elsewhere', providing them with an individualized choice to define for themselves what it means to, as Tannaz put it, become "the best of both of these worlds".

## Work Cited

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