



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Voices from Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women  
(review)

Mary Elaine Hegland

Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, Volume  
24, Number 1, 2004, pp. 286-289 (Review)

Published by Duke University Press



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/181209>

ring; to the tradition, the culture to which they belong?" (251). In the interview with Ranger, Palmberg discusses his research on "deconstructing African and European images of Africa and African history" (252), although he did not originally "set out to deconstruct" (252). While there is no index, a sixteen-page selected bibliography annotated by Petra Smitmanis along with information about the authors is included.

The fifteen articles, two interviews, and bibliography can be useful to scholars in a wide variety of fields, such as history, political science, art, music, literature, and philosophy. They could also be helpful and thought-provoking to readers outside academe, who might want to re-think the way they portray Africans in their discourse and images, and question Africa as it is presented to them in various media. Aside from a dozen typos that appear throughout the book, the articles maintain the reader's interest. *Encounter Images* is a strong contribution to multi-disciplinary, multi-faceted approaches to postcolonial analyses of the way Western consciousness represents Africans and Africa, and as the foreword so aptly states, "This book gives a topical input to the debate through the questions it raises and the simplifications it rejects" (5).

Mary McCullough

**Mahnaz Kousha.** *Voices from Iran: The Changing Lives of Iranian Women*. Syracuse, N. Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002. Pp. x, 244.

*Voices from Iran* presents remarkable close-up pictures of fifteen Iranian women. Clearly a remarkable woman herself with a fascinating personal history, Mahnaz Kousha was among the masses of Iranian students to travel abroad for undergraduate and graduate study in the 1970s. She left Iran several months before the dramatic marches, demonstrations, and strikes leading to the 1978-1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Islamic Republic of Iran. Not until fourteen years after her departure was she able to return to Iran. Because of such a long stay in the U.S., Kousha had lost touch with many Iranian friends and acquaintances and had also become a different person herself. She brought back to Iran the viewpoint of an outsider in some ways, her training in American/European sociology, and comparative knowledge of American women and gender dynamics based on experience and reading. Kousha's book benefits from her years, in effect, of participant observation in an Iranian family and society until her graduation from an Iranian university. After that, her close communication with family and relatives in Iran and interaction with other Iranians and Iranian Americans in the U. S. continued to provide knowledge and insight.

To interview Iranian women, Kousha sought the assistance of her sisters still living in Iran. They found women willing to allow their conversations with the author to be taped during her visits to Iran in 1995 and 1997. Although of Iranian background, she was a stranger coming from America who had not previously, and would not again, meet with the interviewee. Because of this, Kousha believes, the women felt more at ease with her and were willing to reveal personal attitudes and experiences they might not want to share with people with whom they had ongoing relationships.

Clearly, Kousha has pondered a problem familiar to anthropologists: how does one convey cultural patterns without over-generalizing? How does a scholar discuss a culture or society without losing sight of the individuals who transmit, construct, contest, and reconstruct cultural and social patterns? How do we investigate social and cultural dynamics and trends while still attending to the people who act out the dynamics—making them discernible—and who both promote and resist the trends? Although, as she points out, most studies of Iran have taken a macro approach, Kousha has chosen to begin at the micro level: the level of individual women and their lives and words. One of the trends in social science is to focus on individuals and case studies, formulating an explication of patterns and dynamics from on-the-ground data rather than fitting data to a pre-formed model or theory. This approach has the further benefit of revealing to a greater degree the actual data the scholar is using in analysis, thus allowing examination of the fit between data and conclusions.

In her introductory discussion, Kousha foregrounds concerns additional to these methodological issues. Aware of the Western tendency to see women of Muslim societies through one "lens" only, "that of passivity and subjugation at the hands of men," (21) the author wants to introduce the variations in Iranian women's experiences. While Kousha acknowledges the emergence of patterns from her data, she also points out that the difference and complexity of women's particular experiences "renders facile generalizations meaningless," (21). Her work shows the fluidity and change over time of these Iranian women's attitudes and situations. Her research questions Iranians' own assumptions about their family relationships (22, 23). Kousha is careful to caution about the limits of her research; she is not speaking about all Iranian women but drawing her data from fifteen main cases of women living in Tehran. One small point, however, confused me: the back cover text describes the fifteen interviewees as having come "from cities and towns throughout Iran." In the book, however, nothing indicates that the women had immigrated from other settlements to Tehran.

Kousha draws attention to her own situation as both insider and outsider. Like all scholars, even "native" so-

cial scientists, the author must realize and negotiate her own position regarding her research. Although now a woman who bridges two countries, she grew up pondering the same questions she raises in her book. She does not claim "objectivity." Rather, the women's stories, she reports, stayed with her for days after the interviews. In studies where the author focuses on a limited number of individuals in order to glean understanding about certain areas or issues, how to organize and structure case studies with commentary and analysis is also a challenge. Kousha decided to provide introductions to each woman in an early chapter, summarizing personal data, life histories, personalities, attitudes, and coping tactics. In subsequent chapters, she pulls the words and perspectives of the fifteen women together to investigate issues of marriage, family relations, work, and gender.

In the chapters on "Ties That Bind" and "Cherished Bonds," the author looks at problematic, constraining mother-daughter relations as well as relations that are supportive and nurturing. Typically, Iranian mothers are depicted as self-sacrificing and devoted to their children. In turn, Iranians, both female and male, remain close and devoted to their mothers, it is popularly assumed. But Kousha reveals the darker side of some mother-daughter relationships. The women, eager to discuss these relationships, depicted their "complex and emotionally charged" natures (22). As primary care-takers, mothers pass on their roles, consciously and unconsciously, to daughters, often recreating practices and relationships which may be detrimental in some ways to their daughters' lives. Sometimes, the very isolation and powerlessness which mothers experience in their marital relationship pushes them to seek out companionship and support from children, often the oldest daughters, Kousha found. When mothers confide in daughters about their misery and complain about husbands, the daughters' childhood ends abruptly, and they are torn between conflicting loyalties to father and mother. This sharing of mothers' experiences with marital powerlessness may result in daughters' negative attitudes towards fathers, marriage, and men in general.

The interviewees' mothers were born between the early 1920s and the late 1930s and their marriages were arranged by parents. "The mothers typically married at a young age, moved to a new house that they most often shared with the husband's relatives, were considerably younger than their husbands, and were expected to abide by cultural perceptions about appropriate gender roles. These factors led to unequal life-long marital relationships" (51). Often these mothers felt overwhelmed. Two interviewees talked about how they had supported their mothers, even helping with strategies to deal with the father. They became like parents to their mothers, they said. When mothers share marital difficulties with

children, it may alienate children from their fathers, strengthening the mother's role as intermediary and communication gate-keeper. Such a relationship gave the mothers, otherwise relatively powerless, some power in dealing with their husbands. Mothers and then their daughters may learn to blame men for all family problems.

Two interviewees felt stifled by socially and emotionally dependent mothers. Their mothers' great expectations prevented them from achieving the privacy and personal lives they desired. Several daughters struggled to attain independence in the face of their mothers' desires for continued enmeshment. Kousha understands her informants' mothers: "As long as good mothers are defined as being those who see their own lives as entirely secondary to those of their children, women continue to see and experience their lives through their children... After a lifelong investment in one's own children, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to expect women to step back, to let the child grow away and establish a separate sense of identity" (75).

Whereas several informants felt controlled by mothers, other women appreciated their mothers' sustained support and close interaction. Several felt strengthened by their parents' happy marital relationships or by the respect the father had gained for the mother over years of marriage.

Kousha also explores a variety of father-daughter relationships. The interviewees report that some fathers supported their daughters and loved them even more than sons. Other fathers, devoting themselves to their own work, relegated responsibility for children entirely to the mother, or even left psychological scars on their daughters. Some of the women saw their fathers as controlling their every action, as a negative or even destructive force against which they had to struggle. Several, seeing the example of a mother afraid to assert herself against the father, became introverted and unable to negotiate for rights in their own marriages.

Some fathers, concerned about the plight of divorced female relatives, encouraged their daughters to pursue an education. Interestingly, although fathers wanted different worlds for their daughters, hoping for their careers, economic independence, and positive marital relationships, they did not extend such aspirations to their own wives. "Most of the daughters saw their fathers as supreme authority figures at home, never seeing their mothers daring to challenge them...they [the men] expected their wives to be accepting and accommodating, ever catering to their needs" (95). Likewise, it seems to emerge from Kousha's interviews, women were sometimes better able to understand and empathize with their fathers' gendered vantage points than those of their husbands'. Some daughters later began to realize the social pressures on both of their parents, and to under-

stand how both, mother *and* father, were victimized by cultural attitudes and social conditions. Zhaleh, for example, "saw the loneliness the fathers may experience in their socially constructed tyrannical towers...[My father] 'could tell us about his unfulfilled dreams or my mother's shortcomings. But he never did,'" (70). Although some women could see the impact of patriarchy on their parents' lives, others, not able to apply this perspective, continued to be traumatized by their parents' or their own marital relationships.

Even a positive parental marital relationship and father-daughter relationship did not guarantee women a happy marriage of their own. A woman might be surprised to find that a husband did not live up to her father's example of a thoughtful and supportive male. Often the women married because of parental pressure or the desire to break away from families of origin to start an independent life. None of the women—or their husbands—had the opportunity to really get to know the future spouse before marriage. In most cases, the bride had not been thinking about or wishing to become married. Some of the women agreed to a proposal for no particular reason, or to satisfy parental choice. One of the women reneged on her resignation to her mother's choice, a relative, when her mother discovered him to be a drug addict. Because he had given his word, however, her father ruled that the marriage should proceed. Mariam paid dearly for her refusal to marry this man. Family and relatives accused her of shaming her family and neighborhood. Her father pulled her out of high school; she was never able to earn her diploma. The father blamed the mother for everything. He kicked Mariam, her mother, and the other seven children out of the house until an uncle reconciled them.

Although, for good reasons, the women generally did not think of divorcing husbands, several said they appreciated the periods when their husbands were away. Only two of the women said they would marry the same man if they had it to do over again. The author concludes, "In the end, from the women's stories about their lives, their marriages, and their families, it is the sense of loss that emerges most powerfully—losses inherent in marriage and missed opportunities—unfulfilled dreams, unattainable love, and frustrations and failures associated with marriage" (141-142)." Perhaps one informant's words voice the feelings of the others, Kousha suggests. For Minoo, "an ideal marriage was a relationship between equal partners... Discussing the notion of hierarchy and dominance in all human relationships, Minoo called into question the dominant mode of interaction between men and women, between husbands and wives" (142). Some Iranian women, Kousha's findings indicate, have examined their lives and been dissatisfied. They want something different.

In her final chapter, "Women's Words: 'I Want to Be

Me'," Kousha looks at women's specific problems and how they handle them. Through their gendered experiences, these women had come to examine the different worth which society, religion, law, and family accorded to a woman versus that accorded to a man. As a result, whether they kept silent, blamed men or women, or rebelled against dominant values, these women became critical. According to Kousha, women's critical stance has become a "flood" inundating all areas of Iranian society and she conveys their exciting push to attain greater public and personal satisfaction. As Tara said, "[W]omen and their concerns have gained tremendous significance. It is like a flood. The flood is roaring; its pace is horrendous. Nothing can stop this tide...[W]omen have started to demand their rights and they will get them" (227). Several of the women saw the younger generation as agents of change. Tara further stated, "This generation has seen women playing an active role and has accepted that. Women of this generation believe that if they want something they have to struggle for it. The real energy and power is in the hands of this generation... I see success in tomorrow's children and today's youth. My eighteen-year-old daughter feels she has nothing less than the species called male" (228-9).

My own observations during two recent trips to Iran corroborate Kousha's picture of women's emerging power. Iranian women are fighting for improved rights and opportunities on many fronts: parliament, laws, sports, dress code, election politics, Islamic education and organizations, reinterpretation of religious sources, relations with family members and spouses, education, careers, and business, to mention a few. Sometimes seeing males as less clever and industrious, some young women are finding their own enterprising ways of earning money. Now females are postponing marriage and deciding on fewer children.

When extended family and sex-segregated life styles decline and the nuclear family and marital relationship gain social, economic, and emotional significance, women may come to question their position as enablers in the marriage relationship. However, during social transformation, women do not automatically gain the new rights and opportunities that would be possible under new structures. They have to struggle for them and Kousha has brought us a gripping story of Iranian women's struggles. Many readers, I suspect, of whatever cultural background, will appreciate Kousha's informed discussion about gender dynamics. Located as she is, between the U. S. and Iran, Kousha is a pathfinder for investigating some common marriage and family relation patterns cross-culturally as well as understanding cultural, regional, class, time period, life phase, and individual variations.

Unfortunately, women's studies texts tend to attract

mainly a female audience. For males, Iranian or otherwise, Kousha's book should be required reading. The volume will provide them with the opportunity to better understand women's situations in marriage, family, and society. Kousha poignantly conveys the painful isolation of those women whose husbands see them as a means to their own comfort and fulfillment, rather than as individuals with their own needs and aspirations—who would appreciate receiving the same considerations which they give their husbands.

Heretofore, in-depth qualitative material about Iranian women's everyday lives in the home, family relationships, marriage, and work has been scarce. Mahnaz Kousha has made significant strides to address this gap. This publication proclaims her to be an insightful and mature scholar. As an Iranian American, Kousha enjoys a background rich in Iranian cultural and social understanding. The study also gains from her native language ability and understanding of Iranian history and gender dynamics. The author's highly accessible writing style makes for a good read. Her personal and conversational tone will appeal to students and the reading public.

Mary Elaine Hegland

**Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Amina Mama, Henning Melber, and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, *Identity and Beyond: Rethinking Africanity*. Upsala, Sweden: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2001. Pp. 33.**

This slim volume brings together the three plenary sessions presented at the Nordic Africa Days 2001; they are briefly introduced by Henning Melber, Research Director of the Nordic Africa Institute. The speakers were Amina Mama (Gender Studies, University of Cape Town), Souleymane Bachir Diagne (Philosophy, Cheikh Anta Diop University, Senegal), and Francis B. Nyamnjoh, (Sociology, University of Botswana). The conference organizers invited participants to "devise new approaches for inter-disciplinary debate on power and ideology, culture and meaning, poverty and prosperity" (5). Under the general theme "Beyond Identities—Rethinking Power in Africa," the speakers specified that their interest was in identity *politics* in order to "highlight questions of power in arguments, which often present themselves as revolving around 'natural' modes of identification," with the goal of "steer[ing] Africanist scholarship away from a debilitating focus on identities ... through enhanced sensitivity to complex African life-worlds and to the ever-shifting disguises of power in them" (5). In *Bodies that Matter*, Judith Butler warns:

When the articulation of coherent identity becomes its own policy, then the policing of identity takes the place of a politics in which identity works dynamically in the service of a broader cultural struggle toward

the rearticulation and empowerment of groups that seeks to overcome the dynamic of repudiation and exclusion by which "coherent subjects" are constituted.<sup>3</sup>

That the organizers' directives to move away from this debilitating kind of focus on identities remain difficult to heed is perhaps already announced in the title of this discussion paper, published as *Identity and Beyond: Rethinking Africanity*, with the notable omission of the word "power" that figured in the conference title.

Melber's introduction also signals that "discussion paper" may be a misnomer. He keeps reiterating that the papers represent "a wide range of views and convictions," "differing views," and very "different elaborations" of the concepts of both identity and Africanity rather than entering into direct discussion with one another (6). One might have expected Nyamnjoh to offer a more synthetic response to the two previous papers, not in order to reduce the complexity of the issues raised, but rather to outline possible points of dialogue between disciplines or, on the contrary, to comment on points of resistance inhibiting dialogic between disciplines. Henning also does not attempt to find ways of articulating the papers of Mama and Diagne but instead enters a plea for a humanistic ethics of relation to the other. Despite the caveats expressed here at the outset, the papers do offer the reader much to contemplate when revisiting the concept of identity both in general and in the African context.

In "Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts," Mama displays an ambivalent attitude towards the idea of thinking "beyond" identity. She sees African peoples on a quest for an ever-elusive sense of an identity that they have not yet managed to secure while also dealing with colonial efforts to tell Africans who they were (9). Although she acknowledges the multiplicity of identities that intersect in each of us, Mama quickly moves the debate to other terms: integrity and security. She suggests that what we group under the rubric of "identity politics" is actually "about popular struggles for material redistribution and justice," and that we therefore do need to take matters of identity very seriously, "not just as some kind of psychological artefact or cultural consumable, but as a matter of profound political, economic and military strategy and counter-strategy" (13). Mama concludes that "[W]e need to profoundly rethink identity if we are to begin to comprehend the meaning of power" (13). Mama also demonstrates the centrality of gender as a category of analysis while pointing out important occlusions of this category in the influential works of scholars such as Fanon, Bhabha, Appiah, Mamdani, and others. Her examples range from the centrality of gender dynamics to nationalist and racist projects and the gendered implementation of civil and customary legal systems to the feminization of pov