Emerging Transnationalism amongst Iranian Exiles in Manchester.

by

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According to Albrow (1990:9) Globalization refers to “all those processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single society; global society”. Despite the fact that some commentators still doubt the significance of globalization, most sociologists admit that the world is changing rapidly and radically. Giddens (1998) notes that globalization is now everywhere. The globalization process is not complete, it has long been in the making and its impact is in fact uneven (Cohen & Kennedy: 2000).

Time-space compression has brought people in to closer contact with each other by for example migration and tourism. Further interconnections and networks of increasingly powerful transnational actors and organizations, such as TNCs, have promoted interdependencies. Transnational and diasporic communities regardless of their drive for migration have freed themselves from the old assimilationists pressures i.e. Turks in Netherlands (Amersfoort & Doomernik).

We can no longer portray immigrant communities in terms of people who have left their home and country, because many have kept their contact through networks with multiple connections and linkages which spans international borders and identities. The country of origin and the country of residence are connected by rapid means of transport, cultural exchanges and electronic communications. People now have multiple identities and share multiple localities (Matthews: 1999). The deterritorialization and the decoupling of community and identity from place does not exclude locality but relativises and decenters it. This is not to say that there has been no reaction to globalization, in fact the very pressure to bring people together has resulted in a growing tendency for localism and nationalism in some countries.

Globalization implies that once stable cultural and social boundaries are being ruptured by a constant crosscutting tide of people, information, images, goods and capital. Communities, previously bound to fixed locations, are being de-localized and linked by ever stretching networks that spread across continents. Thus, for many, globalization entails enduring fragmentation and active participation in various transnational networks.

Transnational and Diasporic communities:

The terms transnationalism and diaspora are taken to refer to the same phenomena. Basch et al define transnationalism as;

The process by which immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement…many immigrants today build social fields that cross geographic, cultural, and political borders. Immigrants who develop and maintain multiple relationships-familial, economic, social, organisational, religious, and political-that span borders we call transmigrants. (Basch et al: 1994: 7)
The emphasis here is on the great variety of engagements between the host and home countries. Transmigrants take actions, make decisions, and forge identities that are deeply rooted in networks of relationships that tie them concurrently to two or more societies. “Transnationalism is a process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries”(Ibid:27). For Vertovec and Cohen (1999) transnationalism involves border crossing rather than sustaining borders. They argue that transnationalism is characterised by increasing disjuncture between territory, identity, territory and collective social movements because of the revolution in communication technologies and transport, which have resulted in the reconstruction of locality and place. For Vertovec (1999) transnationalism also involves movement of capital, for example transnational corporations and their activities span many borders and are responsible for globalization. Transnational communities themselves are making a great impact by sending remittances to their countries of origin. Transnationalism is also associated with cultural reproduction of life styles in the form of creolization, hybridity, and an avenue for political engagement.

According to Vertovec (1999) Diaspora is a term used to refer to any deterritorialised or transnational population, who have originated from territory different to the one they inhabit currently. Originally the term diaspora referred to Jews and Armenians, and Lebanese living outside their homelands. The term has been extended to include ethnic and racial minorities, guest workers, refugees and asylum seekers, expatriates etc. many of the characteristics of transnational communities are also true for diasporas. Although diaspora refers to a social type, it also taken to refer to a kind of consciousness. Because of discrimination and exclusion, individual diaspora experience decentered attachments and lives in between at least two different cultures.

The Networks:

Transnationalism is about forging social relations, which spans borders. At the heart of transnational social relations lies the idea of networks. Transnational networks are sustained through a variety of mechanisms. These include regular communications through the telephone, visits and correspondence, remittances, the internet, sending and receiving videos of family members and important family occasions, also general social support as well as providing advice on a number of issues.

Castells (1996) observes that new technologies are central to transnational networks and reinforce them. Some scholars have emphasised the importance of studying these networks (Portes:1981). Therefore to capture what actually social relations mean in the day to day and mundane activities, we must explore how linkages are maintained, recreated and reconstructed in different contexts as the following case study attempts to show.
Mandana gave birth to two children while she and her ex husband were living in London in late 1970’s. Soon after they went back to Iran the couple separated. Mandana got the custody of the children and as Iran was going through major social, political and economic transformations as the result of the Iranian revolution, she emigrated to England and managed to get a visa because of her British born children. She found a job working as a care assistant to support her family. After a couple of years of living in Manchester she developed relationships with a number of Iranians who provided her with much information and knowledge about immigration laws and life in general in Britain. During this time she kept in touch with her family back in Iran by writing letters and phone calls, and on some occasions she posted boxes of goods. Her family also did the same by posting for her Iranian handicrafts, sweets etc.

Mandana’s youngest brother Javid who is married with a child wanted to come to England as he was striving to overcome harsh economic conditions and limited opportunity and mobility that engulfed Iran during Iran/Iraq war and to seek a better future for his daughter. Mandana provided all the necessary information for them and advised them on the kinds of jobs and opportunities that are available to them should they decide to come to Britain. Mandana’s brother and his family left Iran for Germany and after a short spell, they managed to come to England in 1985 and because of the war they were granted leave to remain. They lived in Mandana’s flat for a month and she used her networks to find employment for her brother and his wife in an Iranian fast food restaurant. The couple started working hard and managed to rent a flat for themselves and bought a car and began saving money. Javid and his wife kept close touch with their family through letters and phone calls, also sent money regularly. One of Javid’s sisters in law was going through a bad patch as she and her husband were living separately and she found it hard to manage as the Iranian economy was crippled by the Iran/Iraq war, at the same time another sister in law who was already divorced wanted to come to Britain. Javid and Mandana did their best to help them by providing necessary information as well as assurance. Javid’s sisters in law and two children stayed with him and his family for two months before they managed to rent a house and moving out. While staying with Javid, he utilized his networks of friends and colleagues to find jobs for them in a take away restaurant. The sisters started working hard and began to send money for their mother as well as sending parcels for the rest of the family. They also kept close contact with them through letters and phone calls. While working Javid kept applying for different jobs without any success, he realised that like other ethnic minorities in this country he is very much disadvantaged and discriminated against, and working in a dead end job in an ethnic business would not take him much further in life. Therefore he decided that the only way out for him and his family was to become self employed and to open his own business. They had some money themselves and as new comers, they lacked job histories, credit, English business experience and culture, they could not get a loan from the bank. He sold his car and borrowed some money from his sisters in law, but that was not enough, he turned to his older brother who lives in Canada for money, his brother gave him what he needed without interest and told him not to rush in trying to pay him back. Javid found enough capital to open a restaurant for himself and he did not
have to worry about finding reliable staff as his wife and his sisters in laws as well as his nephews were ready to work for him. Javid’s middle brother has a history of heart problems, Javid and his sister made the necessary arrangements for him and sent enough money to bring him over and paid for his treatment costs. After being discharged from the hospital, Javid’s brother lived for a while with his sister and later got a job with Javid and applied for leave to remain in England. While awaiting decision from the Home office, he carried on working and sent remittances home for his wife and his two children. After he was allowed to stay he brought his family to England. Javid’s mother in law, who by now had all her three daughters living in England, was extravagantly spoiled as her daughters kept sending her money and parcels of goods and clothing, as well as airfare tickets for her to come and visit twice a year. Eventually the family decided to keep the mother in England, as she was a widow and also a pensioner, they managed to obtain her permanent visa on the ground that she had no body to care for her in Iran. She was granted a permanent visa and could enjoy getting welfare benefits. She lives with her eldest daughter and her son, their house is never lonely as the rest of the family as well as family friends constantly visit. Javid’s mother in law is keeping close contact with her son in Iran as well as her own sisters, sending them parcels of clothing as well as cosmetics for women, and has helped to pay for her sisters to come and visit her in England. She also goes to Iran twice or three times a year, makes important decisions regarding family affairs, on her return she brings presents for every body including gold and jewellery for her daughters, as well as Iranian books and novels to keep herself occupied. Last summer while she visited Iran with her daughters and their children they played an important role in arranging marriage for her grandson who was living in Iran. After the engagement they travelled back to England and returned back to Iran for the wedding party with plenty of presents for the newly weds. Less than a year after the wedding they helped the newly married couple to come to England, the young couple is awaiting the Home Office decision and is living with the grandmother and their aunt.

Javid’s family has kept in contact with some family members who are living in America, and Canada. They are also regularly in touch with their old friends who are living in Denmark and Sweden. They remember them and their children birthdays by sending presents and cards, also giving and receiving advice on issues like education for their children, how to cope with culturally sensitive issues regarding their children i.e girls having boy friends etc. Javid’s sisters in law helped one of their friends who was living in Sweden to emigrate to England, by providing her with information about life in England, as well how to invest their capital etc. Their friends came to England before emigrating to visit and to find out for themselves about the kind of business opportunities that were available to them. Javid and his family have visited Canada and took part in his brother’s wedding ceremony, they have also have travelled to America to visit their relations there.
Home Revisited:

Perhaps it is part and parcel of an appreciation of the way that individuals live in movement, transition and transgression, that its conceptualization, as ‘home’, is to be similarly paradoxical and transgressive. ‘Home’ we suggest as a working definition, ‘is where one knows oneself’- where ‘best’ means ‘most’, even if not always ‘happiest’. Here in sum, is an ambiguous and fluid but yet ubiquitous notion, apposite for charting of the ambiguities and fluidities, the migrancies and paradoxes, of identity in the world today. (Rapport & Dawson: 1998:9).

Amongst the Iranians that I interviewed Iran was a home away from home. A place when one started from and once one intended to return to, but the home world of those men and women who once lived it has changed enormously, for them life at home is no longer the same as before. They have stepped in to another social world, their experiences have turned into memories of what life was like before. They felt that England would be the country of their hopes and aspirations, it provided refuge and safety, freedom, and a stable environment, for their children.

“I went to Iran last year and had a fantastic time; I was very emotional from the time I boarded the plane. I visited the Four Corners of my country, managed to visit friends and relatives who did their best to make me feel at home. Things have changed enormously, and people are different too, I got lost in my own city, which I knew once like the back of my hand. Truly nowhere is like Iran, I recommend everybody to go and visit, it is good to go for couple of months like going on holiday, and to come back before the realities of life sets in. If I was single, I would have liked to go and stay, at least I would be working in a decent and respectable job, but I think I have passed it, my children are doing fine here, England is their home”.

“I will be lying if I told you that I am not nostalgic about Iran, I would like to go and visit my family and friends and breath its air, and view its most beautiful landscapes, but I don’t think I can live there again. I have spent more than half of my life in England, married to a loyal and caring English lady and I am used to living in between the two cultures”.

Schutz once remarked that:

The homecomer hopes in vain to re-establish the old intimate we-relations, with the home group as recurrent ones. Analyses of the equivocal concepts ‘home’ and ‘primary relations’, from the point of view of the man left behind, as well as of the absent one, reveal that separation interrupts the community of space and time which the other has experienced as a unique individuality. Both sides, instead, build up a system of pseudo –types of the other which is hard to remove and never can be removed entirely because the homecomer, as well as the
welcomer, has changed (Schutz:1945:369).

Basch et al (1992) argue that within their network of social relations, transmigrants create fluid and multiple identities that are deeply-seated both in their society of origin and in the host societies. Although it has been noted that some migrants identify more with one country than the other, it seems that the majority retain several identities which tie them at once to more than one space and location.

“I was born in Iran in to a Christian family, as you know we are Armenians whom centuries ago our ancestors emigrated to Iran. I am very much Iranian as for centuries the Iranian ways of life and culture has greatly influenced the Armenian culture, I am also Armenian because this represents our culture, our religion and our first language, I also identify with Armenia, this is where our origin lies. I worked for a while in Armenia, the country was poor, and they really did not think of us as pure Armenians, because we spoke the language with a different dialect, and years of living in Iran have greatly influenced our customs and traditions. In Iran we tried to have the best of two worlds. I am also British because I live in England with my family, this is the place that we have settled and is our home, I am also a Christian and I identify with all Christians”.

“I am Iranian because I was born there, because I grew up there, because my family all live there, I speak the language, I know her history and her landscape, but I am a Kurd, so I am different, our language is different, we have our own customs, traditions, music, dance, and dress. I identify with the Kurdish people who are scattered mainly in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and in smaller numbers all over the world. I wear Kurdish clothes at home and in social functions, because its part of you that you don’t want to let go. I watch the Iranian satellite T.V to catch up with what is going on, watch Iranian films and videos as well as British and American films. I like to know what is happening in Iran, and her politics, I also use the Internet, you have to constantly move in and out of different worlds and you have to take advantage of different cultures. I am also a Muslim and belong to Islamic nation, I am also British because I live in Britain and because I hold a British passport, and when I travel abroad I am definitely British”.

It is in the interplay of these various experiences that the identities become fragmented and multiple, it is at the heart of the displacement and the constant reflection, moving back and forward, juggling with various cultures that ones identity is negotiated and becomes context specific as Hall (1995:10) observes:

Diaspora refers to the scattering and dispersal of people who will never literally be able to return to the places from which they came; who have to make some difficult settlement with the new, often oppressive cultures with which they were forced into contact, and who have succeeded in remaking themselves and fashioning new kinds of cultural identity by, consciously or unconsciously,
drawing on more than one cultural repertoire.

In conclusion, caught in the ever-expanding globalizing trends, the Iranians in exile are emerging as transnational immigrants as they are caught within webs of social relations which spans many boundaries, and they draw upon these networks to create multiple and fluid identities. While some identify very strongly with Iran, others maintain many different national and ethnic identities. Where an individual is living has also an impact on how they define their identity, which aspects they tend to emphasize, and in some case play down. Therefore the situational and context bound nature of their identities acts as a source of cultural capital. Identity construction and reconstruction for the displaced no longer was closely associated with Iran, thus for many Iranians return to a full life no longer necessarily means a return to Iran. It may be a question of how to articulate new meanings and identities out of the dialectics of the past and the present. Having realized the enormity of their new world, Iranians can not return to unreflexive and taken for granted Iranianness. Once they are caught within different cultures, they can never return untouched to the certainty (if that ever existed) of their traditional beliefs and ways of life.
Bibliography:


