

**Forging Identities: The Islamic Revolution and the Daughters of the Diaspora**

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## Introduction

I am my mother's revolution. This is a claim that feminist, theologian, storyteller, and advocate Prisca Dorcas Mojica Rodríguez (2021) makes in her work *For Brown Girls with Sharp Edges and Tender Hearts: A Love Letter to Women of Color*. Throughout this book, Mojica Rodríguez is vulnerable with the reader as she welcomes them to decolonize their worldview, defying white narratives by telling their own stories. Mojica Rodríguez writes this book for herself and for the Latina women like her, using her own life experiences to carve out a version of feminism that addresses the needs of her community. As an Iranian American who has struggled to find space for myself within many spheres of my life, this work resonated with me deeply.

My mother immigrated to the United States almost 30 years ago. She was born when Muhammad Reza Shah remained in power, and grew up during the Islamic Revolution (1978-1979), around the time when Ayatollah Khomeini came to lead Iran's new theocratic government. For my mother, it was the Islamic Revolution, the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) that combined to compel her departure from Iran. In search of a "better life" and in search of political, economic, and social opportunities, she made her way to the U.S.. Nevertheless, my mother carries her Iranian identity with pride. She carries what she went through with pride. Even now, in the United States, I am my mother's revolution.

The women of Iran have been in and out of the spotlight of American media. They are scrutinized for their Middle Eastern identities and portrayed as needing saving from the "repressive" nature of Islam (Abu-Lughod, 2015). The women of Iran who have migrated to the United States are also scrutinized by the Islamic Republic for moving to America, also called the

“Great Satan” (Beeman, 1986). Iranian Americans are too Iranian to be considered American, and they are too American to be considered Iranian. They exist within a gray area. To withstand this tension, Iranian American women forge new identities to meet their needs within this reality.

This master’s thesis aims to understand the ongoing legacy of the Islamic Revolution on the growing Iranian diaspora by focusing on the experiences of Iranian mothers and daughters in Michigan. In particular, I focus on how mothers and daughters together and differently face the pressure of forging new identities in diaspora. In part one, I provide the key research of this questions of this study and methodology, including how this work contributes to theories of diaspora. Next, I provide a brief history of the historical context of Iranian migration, attending in particular to the White Revolution of the Pahlavi era, the Islamic Revolution along with the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and the Iranian Hostage Crisis. After that, I provide a literature review of what already exists in this field of diaspora studies along with insights from the field of Iranian studies before diving into my findings. My findings section details what I discovered after conducting life history interviews with 10 Iranian mothers and daughters. I contend that the Islamic Revolution and experiences of living in the US have together shaped identity and strategies of survival for Iranian women living in this growing North American diaspora.

## **PART 1: Research Questions and Methodology**

This project is motivated by three research questions: How has the Islamic Revolution impacted diasporic Iranian women and in what dimensions of their lives? How has it shaped their ethnic, nation, religious, and racial identities? And how has it impacted different generations in different ways? I argue that Iranian women who migrated to Michigan following

the Islamic Revolution have created new, evolving identities shaped by a strong emphasis on family. For these women and their daughters, create these identities as a means of survival because of their personal histories and experiences with the Revolution. These impacts include rejection from the home society, rejection from the host society, and other forms of marginalization as this group arrived in the United States and were greeted with a different story from the one they had been promised (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 26). Iranians who migrated to the United States expected they were to be easily included in this Western society, but the reality differed drastically. What they label as their destiny is drastically different from what they believed their lives would look like, both within Iran and within the United States.

Ultimately, Iranian American women create these new, flexible, and fluid identities in response to not being able to identify within the categories given to them by Iran and by America. They also create new social networks, forging communities to enhance their chances to thrive within the diaspora. These networks are fostered within their own families who may have migrated with them, different communities of color, or established institutions such as the Persian House of Michigan. With this population, family is emphasized, and community is often synonymous with family.

It is against this backdrop that the relationship between mothers and daughters take shape in diaspora, revolving around family duties, often led by a mother as matriarch, willing to sacrifice everything for her children. Indeed, in the context of diaspora, mothers and daughters create reciprocal support, lifting each other up. First-generation Iranian American women forged new identities as a result of the pressures of migration and life in the United States, and they passed on these identities to second-generation Iranian American daughters and family members.

These identities, moreover, are continually evolving through their familial relationships and other external forces such as their economic, political, and social surroundings.

### *Research Methods*

As previously noted, I designed this research to focus on two groups of Iranian women living in diaspora. The first group includes those who were raised during the Islamic Revolution and migrated to the United States after the Islamic Republic was established, ultimately placing roots in Michigan. This group will be referenced as the mothers from this point forward. The second group includes the daughters of these Iranian women born after the Revolution, who either migrated with their mothers to the United States or were reunited with them later. Both groups were diverse in religious affiliation, including Baha'is, Muslims, and one woman who identified her faith as something closer to Christianity. By differentiating and comparing these populations, I assess how they have forged new identities in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution and migration to the US. Moreover, the focus on mothers and daughters reveals how this population shares histories, maintain relationships, and navigate the transmission of key values across generations.

The mothers I interviewed lived through the Islamic Revolution at various ages, and the daughters either left Iran with their mothers or were reunited with their mothers later. These women were at various stages of their lives. For example, one daughter was finishing her undergraduate studies while other daughters already had children of their own. All women were ethnically Persian, but this study covered various religious groups such as Muslims, Baha'is, and Christians. Overall, I interviewed 10 Iranian women in total, speaking in most cases to mothers and their own daughters. These interviews sometimes took place with a mother and daughter

individually and sometimes together. One mother and one daughter were paired together as they were close family friends, rather than biologically related. By interviewing pairs of mothers and daughters, I hoped to better understand the experiences of different generations. I was also able to explore why this relationship is important in experiences of migration, what holds mothers and daughters together, and what differentiates them. Finally, by focusing on mothers and daughters, I was able to focus on the granular details of the lives of my participants to chart their immigration journey rather than only their political histories. This approach was well received during my interviews as mothers and daughters shared with me how there is something special about their bond.

Throughout this text, I maintain anonymity by using pseudonyms for all of the women I interviewed. Confidentiality was particularly important because some feared persecution by the Islamic Republic. I relied on my own personal connections to find participants for this research project, utilizing my own family and friends to extend my network of Iranian American women located within Michigan. I am an Iranian American who has lived in Michigan throughout my life. My parents immigrated to the United States following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. My father immigrated during the political turmoil of the Revolution, and my mother left Iran much later, during the 1990s.

Many of those I interviewed had similar experiences and our shared identities helped create a level of trust and understanding during the interview process. Utilizing a sampling method known as convenience sampling, I focused on those Iranian American women who were comfortable speaking with me, who were geographically close to me, primarily in the Southeast Michigan area, and who had the time for our conversations. All my interlocutors felt comfortable sharing their discontent with the Islamic Republic and its governance if their

identities were to be protected. Therefore, these women only represent a specific subsection of the Iranian diaspora.

This means that this approach also had important limitations. There is a diverse array of Iranians living in Michigan, including Iranian Kurds, Azeris, and Zoroastrians. There are also conservative Muslim communities and some with differing experiences of the Islamic Revolution and/or ongoing ties to the Islamic Republic. This work therefore does not claim to be representative of the experiences of all Iranians or Iranian Americans, but instead tells the story of Iranian American mothers and daughters who left because of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in search of a better life.

For this reason, I do not claim that this study is representative of the experiences of all Iranians or Iranian Americans. The location, age, class, and political beliefs of these participants shape the findings. Nevertheless, the 10 women I spoke with provide a valuable lens to understand the experiences of women located in Michigan. In comparison to areas with higher concentrations of Iranians such as Tehrangeles or Tehronto, the population of Michigan has been historically understudied. The Iranians in Michigan are a unique population as Michigan is the home of the most populous Arab and Muslim communities, which will be looked at in greater depth later in this section.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom, FaceTime, and on the phone. Each interlocutor was provided with an overview of the questions before our sessions together. Most interviews were conducted in English, but two interlocutors felt more comfortable providing answers in Farsi and these conversations were translated after the fact. In addition, the mothers' daughters sat in on these sessions to provide any translation services that were needed during the interview. Outside those cases, the other participants scheduled individual times to speak with me, and all



participants were given the opportunity to provide feedback on the questions or experience itself. Each participant was also able to provide whatever information they felt was necessary for the project and tell their stories as they saw fit.

Most of this research was conducted via oral history interviews. An oral history interview is an interview that moves chronologically through the respondent's life, exploring, for instance, how personal and political history are interwoven and shift. Often these documents are understood as "co-creations" that analyze the relationship between an individual's life and broader historical themes (Meyer & Crothers 2007). Oral histories can be usefully interpreted in relation to other oral history archives, popular media, and popular anthologies. Given my interest how Iranian women are constituting new identities, this method has allowed me to understand how these identities shift and change through time, with regard to gender, religiosity, ethnicity, and nationality.

This research project aims to contribute to research on diaspora and migration as well as contribute to Iranian diaspora studies more specifically. These interviews ground my argument where Iranian mothers and daughters located in Michigan forge new identities together, evolving through their familial relationships along with their economic, political, and social surroundings. To lay the foundation for this work, the following section dives deeper into the historical context of this study, looking both at Iranian histories and American histories to understand how Iranian Americans exist within a complicated binary where both identities reject the other.

## **PART 2: Historical Context**

This historical context section focuses on key moments in Iran's political history, as well as its global encounters with US and Europe that illustrate some of the social and political

changes experienced by the Iranian women I spoke with. In some cases, these histories, revolutions, and their aftermath motivated their migration to the US. I focus on the Pahlavi Era and its White Revolution, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iranian Hostage Crisis to provide context to experiences of mothers and daughters in Michigan. I go so far as to argue that these moments and their consequences impact the newly forged identities of the Iranian diaspora. The events chosen for this historical context section are factors that inform the forging of identities for my participants. While I attempt objectivity within this section, these histories are inevitably politicized through the interviews I collected and based on what my participants endured. Regardless, key themes within this scope include the convergences and divergences of Islamists and Leftists, competing understandings of modernity, westernization, and gender.

*The White Revolution: Modernity, Gender, and the Veil*

The White Revolution (1963-1979) was a series of modernizing reforms in Iran launched by Muhammad Reza Pahlavi. Early reforms included women's literacy, hygiene, and suffrage (p. 203). Another primary reform during this period included the Family Protection Law of 1967. Promoted by the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI), the Family Protection Law granted women more rights within their marriage. Most importantly, it granted women the right to divorce which traditionally had only been reserved for men with uncontested authority (p. 216). Through the White Revolution, women were able to enter spaces previously reserved solely for men. As more states from the Global North entered the fold of Iranian life, women were granted more rights at quicker speeds.

In *Women with Mustaches and Men Without Beards*, Iranian historian Afsaneh Najmabadi (2005) writes that "To become modern required one's modernity be legible for the

already modern; Iran's modernity had to be recognizable by the Europeans" (p. 137). The veil, for instance, became a physical and public signifier of change in the state. During the early part of the White Revolution, the veil became a physical and public signifier for change, but some felt these reforms did not go far enough. As the ideals of gender were evolving in the 1960s, many leftists believed that Muhammad Reza Shah's reforms only scratched the surface as they were said to be only "cosmetic" and "skin-deep" (Afary, 2009, p. 198). However, the advertisement of the "modern woman" and the freedom she held served multiple purposes and can be looked back on by some members of the Iranian diaspora fondly. Mainly, it idealized the freedoms that women would be given as a result of subsequent Westernization while also increasing marketing for women as consumers (p. 198). On the surface, women's rights during the Pahlavi era seemed superficial. While that holds true, women's rights also became a multidimensional realm for Iran as a state on the global scale. Muhammad Reza Shah saw women's rights and gendered reforms as an avenue to reaching higher levels of development. This avenue was his key to reaching a level playing field with the Global North.

During the White Revolution there was thus a pairing in understanding of modernity and understandings of gender and gender reform, including the image of the "modern", or Westernized, woman. It idealized the freedoms that women would be given as a result of subsequent Westernization while also increasing marketing for women as consumers (Afary, 2009, p. 198). These modernization reforms also included cultural secularization that was institutionalized through the classroom. This was done as the Aryan Iranian history became mandated within the classroom and reinforced notions of Whiteness and Westernizations for the general Iranian public. (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 25). In modern day dialogues, the premise of these reforms is polarizing amongst Iranians. Some even look at the White Revolution fondly

after living in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, including some of my participants. Mant grew up during a time where women were uplifted regardless of the underlying motives, and it is easy for them to point towards religiosity as the culprit of how their lives ended up this way. Either way, the White Revolution prompted dissent from leftists and Islamists as the two groups intersected, eventually leading to the Islamic Revolution.

### *Women and the Islamic Revolution of 1979*

The Islamic Revolution overthrew Muhammad Reza Shah and brought Ayatollah Khomeini into power in 1979, establishing the Islamic Republic of Iran. The theocratic regime gained strength as it backtracked different reforms enacted under the Shah. However, the Revolution itself is complex with its contradictions towards the treatment of Iranian people, specifically Iranian women. The Islamic Revolution's aftermath was even more complicated: women's rights that had been established under the White Revolution, for instance, suffered in the new regime.

Women held prominent roles in the Islamic Revolution, utilizing their gender as a powerful symbol during the movement. Veiled women who participated in street protests became icons of the Revolution, using the hijab to symbolize a rejection of the Shah's regime. Many hoped that, following the Revolution, the monarchy would be overthrown, and the women of Iran would be given a real democracy that would listen to them and other constituents. While this project does not detail the ruling and subsequent Western-intelligence-backed coup of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, the women of the Islamic Revolution worked to return to the rule of their people and for their people. They aimed to undo the damage done by Western involvement. However, this goal was not realized (Hoodfar, 2008, p. 3). The women of Iran were

left with disappointment following the establishment of the Islamic Republic regardless of their involvement in the movement. Hoodfar and Sadeghi (2009) state that “Although all political parties were eager to capitalize on women’s votes, they were reluctant to announce specific programmes of gender reform as part of their platforms.” (p. 216).

Women had historically been made into Iran’s markers of identity and objects of social, economic, and legal policies with major resources directed to their implementation (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010, p. 886). Their large-scale participation in the Revolution and the transformation of the veil into a revolutionary symbol highlighted their importance on political frontiers during Pahlavi regime. Similarly, their importance was recognized by Ayatollah Khomeini who called for women to take the streets in support of the Islamic Republic. His support of women’s public participation, however, was politically expedient rather than a sign of an orientation toward women’s rights (Hoodfar & Sadr, 2010, p. 891).

Ayatollah Khomeini deprived Iranian women of the civil rights they previously had earned in several arenas. For instance, they were “required by the new religious order to be at the disposal of their husbands at all times” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 232). In the legal sphere, statements by women had to be corroborated by men as they were believed to be lying when bringing evidence into the courtroom and making them liable to punishment for slander (Maranlou, 2014, p. 80-1). However, perhaps the most drastic reversal in women’s rights occurred when Ayatollah Khomeini declared the Family Protection Law “un-Islamic.” According to Janet Afary, an Iranian activist and researcher, the regime defined women’s status in relation to her male relatives which encouraged male domination in both the family and authoritarian relations (Afary, 2009, p. 277-8). Women’s primary functions were “childbearing, child-rearing, and housework” (Afary, 2009, p. 278). Elevating the status of women was a leading initiative of the

Pahlavi era as a means of modernization. Ayatollah Khomeini then made the reversal of said initiative a goal to return to Islamic values and for a more conservative state. The laws Ayatollah Khomeini enacted regarding the familial sphere went farther than reversing the Shah's legislation and took extreme measures to maintain conservative gender roles, including reinstating male guardianship regarding a woman's life, including permission for marriage, education, employment, and travel (Afary, 2009, p. 278).

All aspects of Iranian life shifted, starting at education and carrying through to the simple social interactions occurring on a daily basis. Compulsory hijab became mandatory in public, co-ed classes were banned, and partial segregation was enacted in public spaces such as restaurants and buses. Women were also restricted in areas of employment, and state-sponsored daycare centers were closed to discourage their attempts to get the lower-level jobs that they were confined to. Regulations on appearance such as the hijab, makeup, and public expressions of affection resulted in harsher, more violent punishments that could be seen publicly on any street (Afary, 2009, p. 279-80).

However, it is important to note that both the Pahlavis and the Islamic Republic utilized women as a tool to portray their agendas regardless of the drastic differences between them. Activist and feminist scholar Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi (2021) writes that women's bodies are molded into consuming objects that require radical change by both the Westernized culture in the Pahlavi era or by the Islamist ideologies within the Islamic Republic of Iran (p. 15). She states that, "In many instances, women were encouraged to accept the novel reshaping of their bodies and the overhauling of their interests and identities as prerequisites for their entrance into a 'better life'" (p. 16). The promises of these regimes were designed to appeal to women. Women were critical actors in both Iranian movements. Ayatollah Khomeini recognized this as

he came into power and utilized them to achieve his goals. While they were physical markers for his movement, they were also the physical markers for implementation of religion. While women were seen as valuable social actors, the Revolution harmed them before granting the rights they desired and were promised. The Islamic Revolution overall marked the shift in my participants' destiny. Their social, political, and economic livelihoods took an unexpected, drastic turn, ultimately leading to their departure and the forging of new identities.

### *The Iranian Hostage Crisis*

The strengthening and increasingly oppressive rule of the Islamic Republic of Iran prompted a widespread migration movement. This specifically led to the migration of between one hundred thousand and two hundred thousand Iranians migrating to the United States following the Islamic Revolution. Upon their arrival in the United States, Iranians experienced new levels of racialized hostility, discrimination, and bias that juxtaposed their ideas of the American Dream. The Iranian Hostage Crisis erupting in the homeland shaped the response to the Iranian presence within the United States. Fifty-two American diplomats and citizens were held hostage as Iranian university students took control of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, leading to public backlash and media panic from Americans towards Iranians who either temporarily or permanently came to reside in the United States (Maghbouleh, 2017, p. 26). The Iranian Hostage Crisis is critical in this study and is a pivotal experience for Iranian Americans in the diaspora. It set the United States and Iran apart as enemies, and these tensions bled into the most intimate parts of their lives.

The Iranian Hostage Crisis can be viewed as a part of the Islamic Revolution. It aligns with the deep rooted socioeconomic and religious issues that sparked the movement in

overthrowing the repressive government (Wolf, 2006, p. 27). The Crisis itself and the taking of the American hostages for 444 days served as a symbol of the Revolution. It became a rallying cry for the Iranian people to vent their anger towards the United States and their influence on their country. Nonetheless, the Iranian Hostage Crisis became a critical juncture in global history, generating tension from the West and towards the West (p. 27). American media played a heavy role in shaping this aggression and straight-forward Othering of the Iranian population: “The message was clear: Americans are individuals; they are not” (Longmuir, 2005, p. 109). The Iranian Hostage Crisis further enabled hostile relations between the United States and Iran that were now acceptable in the public space. As this form of xenophobia became the reality in America, this formed the experience of Iranian migrants that has lasted throughout the past almost fifty years.

Neda Maghbouleh (2017) writes in relation to the Iranian Hostage Crisis that “Less than twelve months after being officially and legally whitened in the United States, a critical mass of Iranian migrants were swiftly and sometimes violently excluded from the white body politic” (p. 26). The animosity from Americans towards Iranians extended beyond the revolutionaries involved in the hostage crisis and was aimed at ordinary Iranians living in the United States, with messaging such as “Deport all Iranians, get the hell out of my country” (p. 27). This hostile rhetoric not only underscored the broader implications of the Crisis, but also highlighted a troubling chapter in the lives of Iranian-Americans, revealing the stark challenges of navigating prejudice in the aftermath of this period in international relations. The experiences of Iranian migrants during this time emphasizes the complexity of identity, assimilation, and the intersection of geopolitics with the daily lives of individuals striving for acceptance in a new



land. While fighting for acceptance or even just space to exist, Iranian American mothers and daughters began to forge their own identities to survive in the host society.

Overall, this section provided the historical context needed to understand the tense relationship between Iran and the United States. It provides a holistic picture behind the contemporary era of Iran, looking at who was there before the Islamic Revolution and why there was such a rapid change in rejection of Westernization. It also shows how the United States intervened in Iran, and how the Iranian Hostage Crisis became an inevitable consequence to American involvement. These historical moments shaped the twists and turns my interlocutors endured throughout their lives, trying to find a new version of home as they Iran. The next section then looks at the literature available regarding gender in Iran, migration, and the Iranian diaspora amongst other themes. This literature review serves multiple purposes, ultimately providing a foundation for this project and justification for my interventions into the realm of diaspora studies.

### **PART 3: Theoretical Framework & Literature Review**

To conceptualize this project on the Iranian diaspora, I begin by referencing four key scholars and theories of diaspora and of the Iranian diaspora in particular that form my central theoretical framework. Pnia Werbner's approach to migration, home, and diaspora, as well as "moral completeness" is my starting point because it provides a way to understand the life of the immigrant and the life of the immigrant's family. I then reference Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher and Persis M. Karim to frame the experiences of migrants specifically within the Iranian context, demonstrating the lack of belonging they may feel in varying degrees of their lives. Lastly, I work with Neda Maghbouleh's conceptions of racial identity in relation to the Iranian national,

ethnic, and religious identities to understand the complexities behind the perception of Iranian Americans. Her book, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*, helps me understand the diasporic longing to belong in the host society these women were promised prior to their migration. All together, these pieces allow us to understand the ways the difficulties of migration take form and span across generations.

In particular, Pnia Werbner's on migration and transnational studies is central to how I framed this project. In "Mothers and Daughters," Werbner (2013) addresses how migration disrupts many aspects of the migrant's life by looking at the idea of the home. She argues that many intimacies are shattered by migration where the "community of space" and vivid, ongoing face-to-face relations are lost and unable to be regained due to the irreversible nature of time (p. 42). She furthers this by discussing time and double consciousness in relationship to one another, stating that "Time has wrought changes in the diaspora's system of relevancies and priorities, its intimate daily routines and priorities, and hence time is irreversible, as Schütz recognised: you can never return home." (p. 55).

This reality generates a sense of double consciousness, where the migrant both belongs and does not belong, raising further issues about identity and home (p. 55). Werbner discusses how the diaspora undergoes changes in its way of life and priorities over time. Individuals in the diaspora simultaneously feel connected and disconnected due to this double consciousness. I use this piece to demonstrate how the time following the Islamic Revolution also shaped the livelihoods of the mothers and daughters located in Michigan within their homes and outside of them. They lead to realities that these women never expected, and their ideas of home were taken from them when the Islamic Republic was established, prior to their migration. Werbner recognizes the double consciousness that immigrants and their children experience through the

lens of W.E.B. DuBois, where migrants are subjected to seeing themselves through the eyes of others and are subjected to a sense of being split, as shared with returning migrants (2013, “Migration and Transnational Studies”, p. 107). With Werbner’s understanding that memory and lived experiences must be reconciled in the host country, I interact with my participants to identify the experiences of their past and experiences of their present as they migrated to the United States following the Islamic Revolution. As Iran has undergone rapid changes due to and since the Revolution, their exposure to double consciousness is heightened. I use this piece to perceive their feelings of belonging and rejection from both American and Iranian societies.

Werbner also acknowledges the experiential force she calls the illusion of simultaneity whereas migrants with transnational families can impact the migrant’s sense of self and subjectivity. With resources like Telegram and Instagram available at the palm of their hands, a migrant’s connectivity to their homeland is strengthened (p. 108). Most of the participants I spoke with emphasized their ties to Iran in this current moment, including kinship ties and general connections to the community in their original neighborhoods, regardless of tense international relations and intermittent Internet shutdowns. The illusion of simultaneity works to discern how the migrant’s experience is influenced by the homeland through these questions. Their ideas of their identity are subjected to the illusion of simultaneity as they are subjected to outlying forces from different areas of the world. In my research, I recognize that the Islamic Revolution – and the social, economic, and political ramifications that came with it – is the reason why many Iranian mothers and daughters migrated permanently to other areas of the world, even when they may not be the most welcoming to their arrival. The Revolution’s various spheres of livelihood constantly affects their double consciousness in the United States while shaping who they are, the perceptions of those around them, and the perceptions of themselves.

Continuing, several Iranian scholars have specifically recognized the impact of the Islamic Revolution on the Iranian diaspora within the United States. I frame the Iranian diaspora experience as a distinct migration experience due to contemporary events that influence the way Iranian Americans are treated by their home society and host society. Mobasher (2018) argues that the migration of Iranians reveals the Iranian experience as it “[S]hows the impact of global political forces and diplomatic tensions between home and host societies as well as the historical changes and structural transformation in both on integration, ethnic identity formation, and cultural (re)construction of the diasporic groups and the ways they respond to host discrimination and prejudice” (p. 4). Persis M. Karim (2008) also acknowledges the experiences of Iranians themselves following the Revolution through her definition of a secondary exile, where migrants experience a secondary exile within their newly established host society. She explains how the secondary exile prevented Iranians from expressing their experience of loss and alienation from Iran. Instead of receiving compassion and genuine interest, Iranians faced barriers built of misunderstandings and misrepresentations (p. 115).

These two scholars describe the feelings of Iranians who migrated from Iran to the Global North and specifically to the United States due to their personal histories and the histories of their homeland. While the decisions to migrate vary, they are all conceptualized to have this feeling of secondary exile due to the barriers between these nation-states as they manifest within their daily lives and the people around them. This means that their feelings are also impacted by their experiences within the United States, evolving throughout their journey following the tension of the Islamic Revolution. Their personal histories were shaped by the histories of Iran, including the histories of colonial influence. Their personal histories were also shaped by the experiences of their migration and the reality of their lives in the United States, no matter how

happy or sad they may be. This serves to frame the narratives of my participants through extraordinary examples they provide along with the examples of their everyday lives and identities.

The final piece of scholarship I used to create my theoretical framework is Neda Maghbouleh's (2017) *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race*. This work explores the experiences of Iranian Americans and their complex racial identities that have been designed by the white, Christian majority in the United States, whereas Iranian Americans are categorized as "white" while also experiencing racialization and discrimination. Maghbouleh argues that understanding Iranian American lives only through the lens of ethnicity, religion, or nationality misses the whole picture of the Iranian diaspora and risks naturalizing Iranians to whiteness when they exist outside its limits (p. 4). This piece frames the experiences of Iranian Americans in their entirety, capturing the complex aspects of living almost in a gray area as they are racialized through their experiences as an Other through ethnicity, nationality, and religion. These identities play into one another, creating questions of belonging and community in two countries that don't feel entirely whole for this population.

Throughout her book, Maghbouleh showcases how racialization and assimilation correlate with one another. She argues that while the case of Iranian Americans complicates the accepted understanding of whiteness, it also enhances our understanding of the dynamic interaction between top-down and bottom-up processes of racialization. This also challenges the enduring assumptions about the assimilation of immigrant groups into the broader fabric of American society (p. 5). *The Limits of Whiteness* is part of a growing movement to integrate the study of immigration with the study of race and ultimately the study of assimilation and racialization. Maghbouleh writes that "Research in this stream recognizes immigration as a site

of racial struggle and accounts for US nativism as a battleground where ‘in-between’ groups are browned” (p. 6). Assimilation and whiteness are often found to be synonymous with one another. However, the Iranian American experience contradicts this preconceived notion. Iranian Americans are promised whiteness while they endure circumstances that insinuate they are anything but. These circumstances include covert experiences of othering through microaggressions, and they include overt expressions of hatred and aggression that can come from their own neighbors. This book overall works to capture the complexity of the Iranian diaspora and the disconnect Iranian Americans experience from their host and home societies. I use this understanding of race to showcase how marginalization informs the Iranian American understanding of the other facets of their identity.

*Additional Literature: Understanding Iranian American Identity*

The rest of the scholarship utilized in this project covers multiple themes, spanning from gender relations in Iran, migration from Iran to the United States, and the power of memory and nostalgia for the Iranian diaspora. This literature review provides a foundation for this master’s thesis and justifies the need to expand upon the scholarship that is available regarding the Iranian diaspora. Attention is drawn to the need for a nuanced understanding of the mothers and daughters in the Iranian diaspora, specifically located in Michigan, and the role that existing literature plays in informing this current study. The structured approach to the literature review not only facilitates a systematic exploration of key themes, but also sets the stage for the subsequent detailed analysis. Overall, this literature review administers the space for the study itself, the data that was collected, and potential contributions to the field of diaspora studies.

This literature review begins with literature surrounding gender within Iran and outside of the state as it exists in the diaspora. Kristin Soraya Batmanghelichi (2020) wrote her novel *Revolutionary Bodies: Technologies of Gender, Sex, and Self in Contemporary* to connect the historical era into contemporary Iran, demonstrating how the establishment of the Islamic Republic reconfigured the desires and interests of women and men in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution (p. 18). Sanaz Fotouhi's (2015) novel *The Literature of the Iranian Diaspora: Meaning and Identity since the Islamic Revolution* also focuses on the Revolution as a critical historical moment for the diaspora, whereas the gendered reforms informed the future of the state and their feelings of belonging. The chapter titled "Mothers and Daughters – Writing 'Beyond the Homeland'" examines the implications of the mother-daughter relationship showcased in diasporic literature written in English as safe spaces for expression (p. 142). These pieces serve to contextualize the impacts of gender on the Iranian diaspora regardless of where they are located in the world. I use these pieces of scholarship to establish a foundation for the implications of gender as a potential motivating force for migration. Gender here intersects with the social, political, and economic spheres of Iranian livelihood, especially in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution.

These experiences and feelings of disjuncture due to gender and other identities can be characterized in different forms of expression from the Iranian diaspora. This is a primary focus of Babak Elahi's (2006) article titled "Translating the Self: Language and Identity in Iranian-American Women's Memoirs". Elahi concentrates on the notion of language and identity in exile and migration as showcased through poetry. Three research questions motivate his piece: How do Iranians in America speak or write the displaced self? To what extent are our identities liminal, and to what extent is the liminality a function of language? Is losing accents tantamount

to becoming hyphenated Americans rather than Iranian exiles? (p. 462). This piece frames language and specifically language differences to represent the lack of belonging Iranian American women may feel. I use Elahi's research questions to help frame the questions of this project while using a different methodology to reach my findings. I argue that other aspects of identity, such as community and family values along with more Western markers of identity, take the forefront in explaining the dichotomy of being Iranian and being American.

I also reference sociological accounts of gender roles and gender relations that Iranians underwent following their migration to the United States primarily with two sources. This includes Ali Akbar Mahdi's (2002) article "Perceptions of Gender Roles Among Female Iranian Immigrants in the United States" which was written one year following 9/11. The purpose of this article was also to expand the existing literature at the time period. To do this, Mahdi focused on how Iranian immigrant women understand their gender roles within the family and society (p. 190). He wrote that "Migration has been a source of autonomy for these women, providing them with better opportunities for education, employment, personal freedom and even divorce from difficult marriages." (p. 212). These ideas of education, employment, personal freedom, and freedom within their families are ones referenced by many of the women I spoke with throughout this process.

The other piece I use, by Nayereh Tohidi (1993), is titled "Iranian Women and Gender Relations in Los Angeles" documented the Iranian diaspora located in California also in conversation with gender and migration through survey data. Tohidi charted the positive experiences of women in migration following the Islamic Revolution. This included the sense of freedom, new opportunities and options, increased access to education, and a move towards egalitarian conjugal roles in their families. The women she worked with also recounted their



negative experiences, such as grief over the loss of the homeland, loved ones, socioeconomic status, and the social and emotional support of the kinship network (p. 175). Both pieces highlight the positive changes that these women were exposed to following their migration. However, I argue that these experiences have shifted and been complicated as we have moved further from 9/11, the War on Terror, and the Trump administration. My work therefore aims to capture the complexity of the Iranian American identity and experience within the contemporary period through racialization and other forms of marginalization that have become more overt within their daily lives.

Scholarship by sociocultural anthropologist Amy Malek works to showcase these complexities. In her 2015 piece titled “Claiming Space: Documenting Second-Generation Iranian Americans in Los Angeles, Malek analyzed images in a photo documentary project that focuses on the Tehrangeles population and also conducts interviews with second-generation Iranian Americans. She offers two arguments drawn from this data, abiding by the two-world theory that implies a black-and-white conflict between the new and old homeland. She suggests that the study of representation and belonging in diaspora should not only be attentive to questions of race and ethnicity, but also the critical intersections of generation, place, and class (p. 17).

Malek’s 2019 piece titled “Paradoxes of Dual Nationality: Geopolitical Constraints on Multiple Citizenship in the Iranian Diaspora” takes on a more international relations approach, demonstrating how limitations on a greater scale bleeds into the daily lives of Iranian Americans. She argues that despite theorists’ emphasis on enhanced access offered by multiple citizenships to security, mobility, and rights, dual nationals of targeted countries such as Iran instead are subjected to greater insecurity, immobility, and disruption of rights (p. 532-3). Malek claims that “Iranian dual citizens have been especially caught up in this environment of heightened

securitization, leading to curtailment of rights in both of their countries” (p. 545). These two pieces support my theories of disconnect within the homeland and the host society, preventing the diaspora from achieving a holistic sense of belonging. The environments specifically of Iran and the United States force the diaspora to exist in a gray area where neither identity fully suits themselves or their needs anymore, calling for forged identities instead.

This research specifically frames first-generation Iranians in the diaspora as those who lived through the Islamic Revolution and second-generation Iranians who were either born in the United States or migrated with their parents who endured the Revolution. Questions of belonging and identity become even more complicated for the second-generation of the diaspora. Mahdi’s (1998) article “Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Iranians in the United States centers on the transfer of Iranian culture to the second-generation Iranians in the United States. In his conclusion, Mahdi writes that “Since second-generation Iranians in the United States live among people with values different from those of the idealized culture, and since they are often suffering from an interaction deficit with their fellow Iranians, thus not practicing and reinforcing the norms and values of the idealized culture, they must discover for themselves what it means to be an Iranian, a Muslim, or an Iranian-American” (p. 93). While this piece does not comprehensively discuss all aspects of identity that are recognized in American culture, it showcases the way a collective identity evolves within a diaspora. The shifts redefine what each aspect of identity means for the migrant and their family, forging new identities to allow them to make sense of their lives in the host society and the home society.

Neda Maghbouleh (2010) theorizes these forged identities through what she calls inherited nostalgia in her piece “‘Inherited Nostalgia’ among Second-Generation Iranian Americans: A Case Study at a Southern California University.”. She centers nostalgia as a

relational, multi-generational, and ultimately inherited social form of expression and communication to explain how second-generation identities are developed (p. 204). Inherited nostalgia describes relational expressions of longing and belonging, once again questioning the two-worlds thesis through the Iranian-American second generation's dedication to the first generation's home culture (p. 214). Forged identities are created through communication and memory regardless of how the Iranian diaspora is more pocketed throughout the United States and the world. While their ideas of moral completeness may vary depending on location, these pieces aim to showcase the nuances of being Iranian American in two states that reject the other half of their dual identity.

To provide a foundation that understands the Iranian American experience specific to Michigan, I utilize Camron Amin's (2022) "Professional Transnationalism and Iranian-American Im/mobility in Michigan." Amin uses interviews conducted through the Michigan Iranian-American Oral History Project (MIAOHP) to interact with Iranian-Americans in Michigan who migrated to the United States between 1955 and 1979 (p. 184). Throughout this piece, Amin shares how each participant articulated their desire to enjoy mobility between their Iranian culture and their American culture. Establishments such as the Persian House of Michigan, or *Chaneh Michigan*, allowed local Iranian Americans to create socioeconomic mobility and success, yet Amin identifies that in these narratives "The tension between being 'Iranian American' versus being a Persian-speaking Iranian in America is unresolved" (p. 197).

Overall, the MIAOHP interviews displayed here reveals the connections and perseverance of the networks that encouraged movement between the United States and Iran in the late Pahlavi era that then survived the Islamic Revolution and bolstered intercultural intimacy in transnational, trans-diasporic, and local contexts (p. 202). This piece provides a great

foundation for my work. It interacts with a different sector of the Iranian diaspora population that I study within this context, shaping the insights I have gained from my participants. With my research, I hope to contribute further literature on the Iranian diaspora as it expands further and further from the Islamic Revolution. By paying attention to both mothers and daughters in this regard, I reveal the intimate consequences of their migration and how it has shaped their identity formation in Michigan.

The final two pieces of literature revolve around memory in Iran itself. The first is Behrouzan's (2017) *Prozak Diaries: Psychiatry and Generational Memory in Iran*, which details the role of mental health and memory during a nation-state's redesign. Behrouzan conducts interviews for her methodology to analyze generational identities and their ensuing labels. She states that they "[A]nchor themselves in the affective memories of childhood; for instance, in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War or the cultural transformations that followed the 1979 Revolution." (p. 29). She analyzes individual reflections and nostalgias as moment-fragments that shape cultural imageries amongst people along with psychological sensibilities that are infused into more tangible experiences of daily life.

As the first generation who lived through the Islamic Revolution have grown older and raised their own children, they experience feelings of guilt raising their children in its aftermath. One of Behrouzan's interlocutors recognized this, saying that the guilt lingers for not having known what her daughter knows today due to a typical and global intergenerational tension (p. 168). This source serves as a strong example of methodology as it covers a generational study within Iran itself. Behrouzan's findings provide a foundation to my own study as I study a similar phenomenon amongst this similar group located in a different area of the world. The

Iranian experience due to the Revolution will parallel the Iranian American experience and will take form in a new light due to their migration.

Lastly, Narges Bajoghli's (2019) *Iran Reframed: Anxieties of Power in the Islamic Republic* explores the complexities of power dynamics within the Islamic Republic of Iran. The book delves into the anxieties that the Iranian government experiences, particularly in relation to media and cultural production. While this work focuses on interviews with Basijis, members of the volunteer paramilitary units in Iran and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), it provides insights as to how diasporic media is viewed within the Islamic Republic as it is banned and censored (p. 41). Basijis also recall how raising children and specifically daughters have challenged their political, social, and cultural views: "Almost all of them talked incessantly about their daughters' achievements and how much they resented the societal restrictions on women in Iran. They lamented the fact that they had supported a system that restricted women's advancement in society in the first decade of the revolution." (p. 48). This piece of scholarship showcases the alienation Iranian Americans may feel as a result. It also provides examples of the role parenthood plays in the Iranian identity, and how that can complicate or strengthen one's connection to being Iranian. While this piece does not entirely align with my work, it showcases the importance of parenthood in fostering the idea of the Iranian child's idea of themselves, branching into the daughters of the Iranian diaspora.

In conclusion, the key findings of this literature review showcase how the Iranian American's identity has been influenced by the home society and host society. Within the home society, the Iranian American woman endured gendered legislation that informed her existence within the state following the establishment of the Islamic Revolution. Within the host society, the Iranian American women endured forms of othering that informed their experiences of

migration and resettlement. This included racialization and marginalization due to the tense relationship between Iran and the United States. This points to one of my key research questions: how Iranian American identity is forged within the diaspora and how these identities are move beyond local understandings of ethnicity, nationality, race, and religion. The following sections will then delve into the participant group and the findings of this study.

#### **PART 4: Findings**

The data collected from these interviews will be presented in the following section, which I categorized by four key common themes. Therefore, this section is organized topically. Each theme I identify is broken down into subcategories that aim to provide further details to contextualize and analyze the answers given to me by my participants. The themes I have created are as follows: Why We Left: Experiences of Shifting Gender and Societal Expectations under the Islamic Republic, Rejection of the Islamic Republic, Life in Michigan: Evolving Norms and Values, and To be a Mother and To be a Daughter. These themes intend to showcase an almost chronological representation of these Iranian women and their migration stories. Each theme provides different insights to the lives of these women in their home and host societies, ultimately representing the forged identities they created to not only survive in their current realities, but also thrive. This research serves to bring a platform to these forged identities and illuminate how Iranian women within the diaspora find meaning within their lives. While their lives have taken unexpected terms due to the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath, they forged new versions of themselves and spaces where they can fit.

These themes intend to explore the realities of migration, including how migration can be a point of trauma for these women and focusing on the mental health aspects of their journeys as

a primary finding. Within the themes themselves, sometimes mothers and daughters are spoken about within pairs. At other times, different mothers are grouped together, and different daughters are grouped together to show the consistency behind their experiences. The women I spoke to overall highlighted their dissatisfaction and rejection of the Islamic Republic, which I will go into greater detail later within this section. This rejection is not representative of all Iranian Americans but showcases a branch of responses to the trauma and aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. As a whole, these findings reveal how identity formation takes place within the home and between mothers and daughters, sharing their stories and learning from one another from the host society and into the home society.

### ***I. Why We Left: Experiences of Shifting Gender and Societal Expectations under the Islamic Republic***

The first section explores how the mothers and daughters I interviewed understood the shifting gender and societal expectations that occurred within 1979 with the creation of the Islamic Republic. I begin with a subtheme called Political Changes as a Catalyst for Immigration before diving further into other economic consequences and gender experiences that led to these women leaving Iran as the Islamic Republic maintained its control.

#### *Political Changes as a Catalyst for Immigration*

Maryam is a mother who immigrated to the United States from Iran in November of 2010. Her warmth is palpable over the phone, laughing with her daughter on a rainy Sunday morning and telling me my Farsi is beautiful when I introduce myself to her. She radiates joy, even when we are not together in person, and I'm yet to have a face to my name for her. She tells

me how people from Kerman are the kindest out there after I share that my father is from Kerman as well. It is apparent from the beginning that she saw it important to maintain her optimistic character regardless of what happened in her life, starting from when she was a teenager in the Islamic Revolution. “Everything changed,” she tells me, “The hijab, freedom was limited, politics... We were young, we were teenagers, we all had to become very careful. As a teenager, I was more sensitive to the change. Things were more controlled by the government.”

Mina, who is a mother that immigrated to the United States around the same time, openly recalled the Revolution with greater disdain. She became more comfortable throughout our conversation, learning that she could stop qualifying her own answers and second-guessing her English skills. She knew to tell her story without question marks behind it. She recognized how her life completely shifted due to the political ramifications of Ayatollah Khomeini coming to power: “My family had a long, very nice plan for me, going to an international college. But after the Revolution, our life was turned upside down. I couldn’t do anything that was planned. It was a disaster. I don’t call it [a] Revolution, I say chaos.” Both mothers cite the Revolution as a critical juncture in their livelihoods and the livelihood of their homeland. These political changes serve as the foundation, where the Islamic Revolution and its aftermath trickled into different spheres of life. The shifts in legislation and the complete overturn of the monarchy led to societal expectations to follow what the Islamic Republic deemed as religiously correct. These shifts in political situations therefore were felt by the daughters of Iranian women who were born after the Revolution as well.

For example, Mina’s daughter Sara immigrated with her mother when she was still a child. When we spoke about her adjusting to American culture, she told me that she felt lost and needed to look towards her mom for guidance and to survive this move: “It was very confusing



coming from such an Islamic country and being so used to having the enforced hijab and different kinds of religious aspects pushed onto you since you were a young kid. Coming to the U.S. and having so much freedom, I was definitely very lost as a kid.” Forough, who also immigrated to the United States during her teenage years, spoke about the limitations she felt growing up under the Islamic Republic in regard to her education: “I think controlling the knowledge that was given, and not a lot was available, you know. Especially if you were in the suburbs, and you weren’t in a major city, you didn’t have much access to say a library. And if you’re a woman, or a young girl...you’re not able to travel alone. There was this cultural aspect of you’re not going anywhere unchaperoned.”

The political legacies of the Islamic Revolution have continued through the lives of these women, influencing them in the moment and in the aftermath of their migration to the United States. The mothers witnessed the shift within their living moment, feeling their lives change forever without knowing how much would be different. The daughters saw the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution as the political situations continued within the same vein under the Islamic Republic’s jurisdiction in multiple areas of their lives, especially within their education. The political legacy of the Revolution set the tone for the societal expectations of the Islamic Republic as it took shape. This bled into both the economic consequences of the Islamic Revolution and physical representations of gender expectations that my interlocutors expressed in the following two subtopics.

### *Economic Changes*

Maryam made sure to let me know how lucky her family was to end up where they did, from her children recovering from a horrible accident in their youth, to winning the immigration

lottery that enabled herself, her husband, and two of her four children to migrate to the United States and land in Michigan. She expressed how she missed her country and missed her home, but she also expressed how it looked different from what she had known by the time she was able to leave: “Things we could buy every day, we couldn’t afford anymore. The economy – people were working really hard, and they couldn’t afford normal living.” Negar, a mother who identified herself as Baha’i, made sure to tell me the already-harsh economic consequences of the Revolution that became even more severe for her religious group. She did what she could to tell their story, saying that “Most of the people in Iran don’t know about what the Baha’is went through. They couldn’t have stores that sold food. They couldn’t teach in schools. The Baha’is that were teaching had been dismissed. People that owned small grocery stores had to shut down. And many of them went to jail. And their land had been taken away from them.”

Another mother, Bahar, came from a well-off family in Tehran that had a rich legacy within the nation-state prior to the Islamic Revolution. She told me how her father was a colonel in Muhammad Reza Shah’s army. She also told me how her grandfather was a devout *mullah*, one who studied Islam in Niger. In spite of that, her life had taken a drastic turn when her father retired after the Revolution due to the lack of job security and physical safety within his field: “He wasn’t even 40 years old. He’d say he couldn’t work with the *mullahs*. It shifted my life because we had everything money-wise in such good shape. But when he retired, his income got cut in half. It affected the whole way we were living.” Her mother hadn’t been working when her father retired, and she was the youngest in her family. She was a child when the Revolution took place, with memories of the red backpack that was stolen from her with the excuse of Westernization and the dangers her father faced because of his work. She viewed the economic

effects through the lens of her mother, father, brother, and sister. As a child, she knew from what she saw and what she was told that things were changing for forever.

While many of the women I spoke to did not identify the Islamic Revolution as the direct cause for their migration, they often followed the trail of what happened because of the Revolution and why that motivated them to leave. The Islamic Revolution is a point of trauma for all the mothers I spoke to, which is something I will go into further detail about later on. This trauma led to them and their families to be rattled, and to be taken from stability that they once had known. Like Mina expressed, her family's plan to send her to an international college was one she was looking forward to. The plan was one that would set her up for success that she could rely on for the rest of her life, for the sake of herself, her husband, and her daughter that were yet to be a part of the future. However, due to the upheaval of the Islamic Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War, many families were left without the financial foundation they once had and that they crucially needed. They could not succeed where they were, so they took charge of making changes such as migration for just the possibility to live a better life.

### *The Veil and the Physical Representations of Gender Expectations*

While I hesitated to speak about the hijab as a focal point of this research due to the racist legacies of Western feminism and the way it is interpreted as a form of oppression, its appearance in these conversations was inevitable. Following the death of Jina "Mahsa" Amini in September of 2022 due to "improper" veiling, the hijab has been more prevalent in the minds of the public and in the minds of my interlocutors. For them, it was the first physical representation of the Islamic Revolution that can be recognized by everyone in the world, including their new neighbors in the United States. However, other forms of physical expression were brought up by

both mothers and daughters. For them, the overall way they presented themselves was under persecution, and things that are seemingly as small as their nails and the makeup they wore were prominent enough to mention as they recalled their lives after the Revolution.

When we reached the end of our conversation and Bahar was looking back at her journey from the perspective of an Iranian who has lived in the United States for 28 years, she told me that “I just want everyone to appreciate the freedom they have here [in America]. We couldn’t even use nail polish. We couldn’t use mascara. We couldn’t put any makeup on. They were checking our nails every day. School was bad, college was a bit better, but still.” Negar shared similar sentiments from when she visited Iran once after she had relocated following the Revolution: “When I was there, I had to put the scarf [hijab] on and not look at people. When I was in the institutions to take care of my paperwork, I had to put a chador on. Outside every institution you went to, there was someone to look at your appearance. If you have nail polish or lipstick on, you have to take it off. You have to wash your face, put gloves on, and they give you a chador to wear.” While Bahar and Negar do not share the same religious ideology and the impact of veiling carried different weights for them, their experiences directly parallel each other.

The significance of this is that two women, in completely separate conversations from each other and with different religious backgrounds, found these experiences impactful enough to share them with me in the setting of our interview. This part of their stories was important enough that they wanted myself and a greater audience to know what they went through. The physical representations of the Islamic Republic showed how Iranian women felt the loss of the lives they once knew. These restraints on their physical appearance represented that their freedom and their status took on a different role from what it was before, one of lesser value in

the eyes of the Islamic Republic. What they knew to be true in their political, economic, and social lives took form all the way down to the way they looked and the way they dressed. While the hijab is highly contested within the realm of both media and academia, this meaning holds true to many Iranian women who grew up during and after the Revolution. The shifting gendered expectations signified the rejection of the Islamic Republic in multiple avenues of their lives, social, political, and economic. Thus, leading to their migration in one way or another. These commonalities will continue to be shown within the next theme of these findings.

## ***II. Rejection of the Islamic Republic***

Ultimately, because of these political, economic, social, and gender concerns, many of these women rejected the Islamic Republic and migrated to the United States. However, they continued to have a nostalgia for the homeland and the Iranian people. This section identifies the Rejection of the Islamic Republic as a multifaceted issue, understanding the nuances behind supporting the citizens of Iran and voicing dissent along with the tensions behind religiosity while grappling with the theocracy.

### *Supporting the People and Not the Government*

I identified the Rejection of the Islamic Republic as a multifaceted issue that my participants presented. All the women I spoke to found it important to express their dissatisfaction with the state of the Islamic Republic. While they were upset with the regime, they maintained their love for the homeland and its people. They made it clear to me that they carry both truths with them almost every day of their lives. These realities made up who they are

within the current day, within their contemporary lives in the United States about 50 years removed from the Islamic Revolution.

I could hear Maryam's smile over the phone while she told me "I love showing our culture to people. Showing that the people of Iran are good," she says before emphasizing "The government is bad, but the people are good." When she was in Iran, she was a nurse. However, she now is a chef here in Michigan. There is no regret in her voice at this career change, and she does not tell me if this was an active choice she made or if it was a consequence to her new reality in the United States. Instead, she explains how she uses food to stay connected to her culture and to share it with everyone around her. Her daughter, Leila, shared the same sentiments with me even as she's classified within a different generation from Maryam: "I'm just so proud to be Iranian, even though I know the government is not doing the right thing...But the people are so lovely, the society, our country is so lovely. And I don't know, I'm just so grateful that I'm Persian." This sentiment is engrained in the way Maryam raised Leila, and is something they built as they adjusted to their host society in Michigan. One can imagine the conversations they had with each other and with the people around them about the very topic. It provides a foundation for their lives now, forging new identities and comforting themselves about the realities they now face.

"I have a Persian home," Noor, a mother, declared to me, flipping her FaceTime camera around to show me the carpets and artwork that resemble what I have grown up within my own home, almost a mirror to a Persian safe space that existed in my own history. Her and her daughter, Zahra, are taking time out of their hectic schedules to speak with me, between working and Noor's current chemo treatments as she battles breast cancer for the second time. They're the first family I spoke to for this research, and I express to both how grateful I am to them for their

time. Noor shows me how speaking about her life story and where she came from is a priority to her. She is Iranian, and she is making the most of her life within the United States, regardless of what she has gone through and what she is currently going through. She says with conviction, “I try to be close to my neighbors, and all of them like me. I want to show them Persian culture. Iranian culture. The Iranian people are different from the government.”

I believe that for these women, differentiating between the people and the government of Iran serves multiple purposes. While it serves as a comfort to them, allowing them to remember their homeland fondly when looking back makes them encounter the trauma of the Islamic Revolution, it also serves as a defense mechanism that is repeated in Iran as well. As discussed within the historical context section, tensions between the United States and Iran have been prevalent since the 1979 Revolution and result in mutual demonization (Beeman, 1986). Iranian Americans feel the responsibility to convince their American neighbors that they don’t agree with the Islamic regime that has been reigning following the Revolution. Iranian Americans are constantly combatting the narratives that began with the Iranian hostage crisis and that were only exacerbated by the War on Terror. Stating that they support the Iranian people and not the government is for them, but it is also for the safety of their existence within this host society.

*“Islam was its First Martyr”: Corrupted Religion*

Forugh is a daughter who immigrated to the United States 26 years ago when she was 14 years old. I have known her my entire life and have been able to rely on her personally and professionally. She describes herself as a person of the world, telling me that she has never understood many of the arbitrary borders and boundaries we all follow. Our conversation shows me how she approaches life with a wisdom she’s learned from the poets and storytellers she

interacts with. She provides me with poignant insights, giving words and phrases that encompass some of the core aspects of this research. While we talk about the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution through her experiences and the experiences of her mother, she explains to me that “I think the Islamic Revolution did much to damage Islam. In fact, as my mom would quote a cleric back then: ‘Islam was its first martyr’. Because they did so much to tarnish Islam that it just seemed like so many facets of the religion were irrelevant.”

Forugh is candid about her connection to religion as a Muslim and how her family is devout. In the past, I have sat with her and her mother, experiencing it first-hand. Her mother still veils in the United States, and Forugh herself chooses to wear more conservative clothing rather than adhering to religious dress overtly. This was something I was curious about as a child, but it became something we could talk about as I got older. She describes the way her interactions with religion changed during the aftermath of the Revolution: “There was a lot of guilt infused that really made you almost turn away from the religion or from the culture. Because it was not free enough for you to choose to step into it however you wanted.” The desire to explore religion, yet also the rejection of religion was a natural response from almost all of my participants. Religion became a space where they saw it a priority to emphasize a freedom to choose, which will be explored as its own subtopic within this section. Religion in the Islamic Republic became a place of turmoil, which then became a source of turmoil in the personal lives of these women. Islam was its first martyr.

Sara shared that she had many of the same conversations with Mina. As she was one of my younger participants, many of the points she shared directly correlated with my own experiences as an Iranian American. “We talked about how religion plays such a big role in the country,” she explained, “and if it’s either the religion or just the government forcing the religion



on the people as a way to control them.” As the Revolution was motivated by a religious movement, it could be easy for Iranians to point at religion and state that it's the problem. It would be a human response, connecting religion to the trauma that came from a religiously-backed Revolution. However, Forugh and Sara brought forward the critical thinking that Iranian Americans share regarding the Islamic Revolution. Mothers and daughters speak to each other and discuss the nuances behind the role of religion in Iran. Rather than damning an entire religion, they look at the situation and attempt to understand what religion means to them, what religion means to the people of Iran, and what religion means to the Islamic Republic. A lot of work gets done in conversations with the family. For the sake of this research, I label it as identity formation. For the sake of these families, I understand that these conversations are less scientific, asking questions about how things ended up this way, asking how they ended up being who they are now. These families are always living in the backdrop of the Revolution, effecting the relationship with religion for these women.

The rejection of religion became a reality for both Muslims and Baha'is. Bahar explained that as more religious legislation was enforced within the political sphere that those who identified as Muslims felt the need to avoid anything that was associated with the religion, trying to “avoid the rules” in a way. Negar also described her dissociation from the Baha'i faith as religious persecution continued to run rampant in Iran, stating “I found my own power to decide what happens to me as an individual. I wasn't part of any religion. I didn't want religion to exist. I was very angry with God. I would say, if God was there, why are all these things happening?” Religion became something not only the government looked at under a microscope, but it became something that Iranian women who endured the Revolution examined in their own lives. Negar found comfort in being Baha'i again after she migrated to the United States and changed

her life, and Bahar emphasized that she practices Islam now in a way that she sees fit, ultimately striving to be good. Islam was the theocracy's first martyr, and religion became one of the most apparent realms where the lives of Iranian and Iranian American lives shifted. It became natural to reject religion before discovering new ways to interact with it, if that was something my interlocutors chose to do.

### *Migration*

Migration became a last resort for many of the mothers who migrated to the United States. While they chose to migrate themselves, it still represented a form of exile as they left and what they knew of their homeland became more of a memory than a reality. Noor is blunt with me as she says "If I could, I wouldn't come to America. I would stay in Iran and just visit my kids here. But I don't want to stay there and live under that government." Mina shares the same sentiment, speaking with a sense of longing that is apparent in her voice, "I wish there was no reason to immigrate, to migrate to another country. Because if everything was okay," she started before seemingly going down a different path than what she was originally thinking of, "I didn't want to move. To put everything behind us to come here and start again, from the beginning."

It doesn't feel fair to state that life handed these women a different set of cards from what they had been promised. Instead, it completely shuffled the deck with possibilities they had never entertained before. These effects trickled down to their daughters, and the daughters can see it clear as day. Forugh and I talk about this in relation to both her parents, including her father who passed away a few years ago while they had already been living in the United States. She carries her sadness and grief with her gracefully as she shares with me: "When my father passed, the one

thing that hit me so strongly, because he was a very well-known person in Iran. And you know, had he passed in Iran, there would be just so many people who knew him that would come. So, when he passed, there was this strong thought in me that 40-some-years-ago, one person entered our country, Ayatollah Khomeini, and ever since, the fate of millions of Iranians changed drastically.”

The Iran these women knew changed prior to their decision to migrate. Iran, who and what it stood for, became a memory following the Islamic Revolution. Iranian women watched as everything transformed around them. They saw how promises from the new regime were being broken. The illusion of simultaneity started while they were still in the homeland. The rejection of the Islamic Republic connected to their migration as it became one of the final steps to sealing their home society into a memory they could never see again, different from what they would return to in the future to visit their families or to get their affairs in order. The Islamic Revolution was a point of trauma that connected to their migration, another traumatic journey that they had to endure and led to them creating forged identities, which will be explained throughout the following themes.

### ***III. Life in Michigan: Evolving Norms and Values***

This section explores how ongoing historical events and trauma continued to impact mothers and daughters in Michigan after their migration. While these women face physical changes such as their physical location and the clothes they wear, their ideals also change as they experience new people and as the world goes on around them. Here, I chart the evolving norms and values of the Iranian diaspora, beginning with discussions on mental health and understanding how identities are forged in the face of challenges within the host society.

*Discussions on Mental Health and Trauma*

Migration itself can be a form of trauma that all these women had to tolerate, where the conflict between Iran and the United States has made migrants feel physically and psychologically cut off by the Islamic Republic while also being rejected from American society and culture (Karim, 2008, p. 112). For Iranian Americans, the discussions regarding their mental health took form prior to their migration, citing back to the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. According to Behrouzan (2017), the memory of those who endured the Iran-Iraq War and came of age during what she described as a remarkably gendered and unstable historical moment throughout the 1980s are characterized with the residue of childhood anxiety (p. 174).

The mothers I spoke to were transparent while articulating what they had gone through during the time of the Revolution, whether it was something they experienced directly or something they felt through the wounds of their families. They were candid about these experiences because of the times they grew up through, either as young girls who grew into women or as women who had to carry a slew of experiences they never could have imagined. Throughout generations and the critical historical moments that Iranians have had to withstand, they have become more open to discussing how they were impacted mentally overall. The feelings of fear and anxiety became something they did not have to doubt. Iranian women who migrated to the United States then interacted more with Western discussions on mental health, perhaps applying them to their own life stories to make sense of it themselves.

Bahar is someone who has never shied away from talking about mental health. She is transparent about her experiences and how she feels that everyone should be able to get the support they need to take care of themselves. If this comes from her many years working as a

pharmacist in the United States, she doesn't say. Regardless, she cites the Iran and Iraq war as a major point for the mental health crises her family braved: "The war between Iran and Iraq, and I believe from the bottom of my heart, my brother is still suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder). It affected him a lot, and it was hard, very hard, especially between Iran and Iraq. They (Iraq) were bombing Tehran all the time; we had anxiety all the time. It was a tough time. I believe my dad had depression; my mom had depression. And a lot of them, even my dad and my brother, their mental health wasn't treated the way it should be. Because they didn't know any better."

Negar speaks about her father to me as well. While her and her whole family was Baha'i, her father was a general and doctor in the army of the Shah. Throughout his career, she tells me he kept his head down to avoid persecution. Being the daughter of an army general should have meant great accolades and success for her family, but they remained humble for their safety even prior to the Revolution. When the Islamic Republic took power, Negar's father was brought in for an interrogation where he had to deny his Baha'i faith verbally and in writing. "It took something from him that he never talked about," she tells me. Bahar and Negar's stories once again parallel each other. They were born and raised in Tehran, their fathers held high ranks in the Shah's army prior to the Revolution, and their fathers both left after enduring multifaceted levels of violence in the aftermath of the Revolution. Like I stated earlier, their religious backgrounds carry different weight here, where Negar and her family were under greater risks for harm. However, Bahar's experience shows us that every Iranian was at risk of violence at the hands of the Islamic Republic. The violence from this trauma took greater tolls on their identity than they could have ever expected, impacting how their forged identities look now in the present.

Mina opens up to me about the anxiety she feels that is residual from her life in Iran. “So, living in a country with that situation made me a kind of anxious person. I mean, being scared of everything, not talking in public,” she explained “We used to have two different kinds of life. Life in public was different from our private lives. I was scared to talk freely with my colleague or someone I wasn’t sure about – about politics or something. I was scared and I couldn’t trust others.” The persecution that came from the Islamic Republic in all aspects of their lives meant that Iranian women carried themselves with tense shoulders in their new host society. The relationship between Iran and America made them weary of what they would face upon arrival. The experience they had in Iran broke the trust a citizen should be able to have with their government. While a citizen doesn’t have to completely agree with everything going on in their place of residence, they should be able to voice contempt without persecution. Iranian women were subject to violence regardless of what they said or did. The ability to voice contempt was taken from them, and they felt the turmoil resonating through their physical and mental wellbeing.

*Living through Conflict: Arab Solidarity and the Iran-Iraq War*

The Iran-Iraq War is a complicated historical juncture in the Middle East. The conflict between both states, enhanced by United States military support towards Iraq, created tension amongst these two MENA communities (Sumiyatun et al., 2022, p. 247). Bahar shared her own inner turmoil about the issue, telling me how she hated when other Americans assumed she was Iraqi because of how the war impacted her life and how she had to hear the bombs from above as a young girl. Maryam also explained her experience living through the conflict, saying that “We couldn’t sleep comfortably. We couldn’t sleep at all at night. Because of the Iran-Iraq War, there

were sirens, bombings. We were scared.” Even as ordinary citizens, Iranian women underwent the trauma of the Iran-Iraq War, hiding in basements and listening to stories from their elders to shield them from the noise of the war right outside while also being shielded from the physical fallout itself. This trauma did not suddenly dissipate when these women left Iran. The fear and toll it took on all aspects of their wellbeing continued to create the sense of unease as they existed in their new host society.

The case of Iranian Americans in Michigan raises many questions regarding Dearborn, Michigan as home to the largest Muslim population in the United States. Dearborn also has the largest Arab population of the United States, encompassing about 40% of the Arab population located in the country. When speaking with the daughter interlocutors, I asked them what other minority populations in the United States they found solidarity with. I expected their answers to fall in line with the categories of race that are found in the census, but many expressed solidarity with the Arab community here. “Definitely Arabs, I would say, I think Arab people like Iraqis, or just similar Middle Easterners, I’d say I’ve connected mostly with,” Sara claimed with no hesitation when I had asked her. The mothers and daughters here provide a distinct example of how the norms and values of this diasporic population shifted over time. A group that once many Iranians candidly expressed contempt towards is one that the following generation found support in. The imaginary borders of their national identities don’t hold them back from coming together, especially within this host society that can be known to misrecognize them.

### *Finding and Sharing the Freedom to Choose*

When Negar and I are speaking, it feels like we are drinking tea together in her home. She speaks with the kind of care I can imagine she shares with her own daughters and her

granddaughter, giving guidance and wisdom to me whenever she sees the chance. When we talk about religion, she speaks with a stern, motherly conviction. “You should search for yourself, if you never searched for your spirituality. Anything that your parents tell you to do is just phony. It’s artificial unless you search for it,” she says before repeating, “You should search for this and your spirit.” Many of the mothers I spoke with used religion as a way to emphasize the importance they found behind having the freedom to choose. They felt that the freedom to choose whatever path they had desired was taken from them, due to the political, social, and economic ramifications of the Islamic Revolution. When raising their children, regardless of their gender identity, passing on the freedom to choose became a priority.

This is something that resonated with the daughters I spoke with. While we rounded out our conversations, I asked them what they learned from their mothers that they would pass onto their daughters, either theoretically or literally. “Well, I would definitely give them the freedom to choose their ideas, their paths, and to choose what would make sense to them in life. I’m really grateful to my mom for how she did that for me,” Forugh said. Sara echoed the same sentiment, stating that “I would want my kids to also be able to be who they are. Just like my mom did, not forcing religion on me or any specific things because her mother went through it. She never forced those on me. So I would like my kids to figure out what they want to practice, who they want to be with, how they want to dress. Just like my mom did for me.”

One can only imagine how the ideas about freedom to choose in relation to religion and other aspects of life would look like if the Islamic Revolution didn’t happen. One can only imagine what commonly shared values would look like if the Islamic Revolution didn’t happen. When this unexpected reality occurred, when migration became the only viable solution for many of these women, what they once believed took a different form. As they evolved into their



new lives, their norms and values evolved with them, becoming something their daughters carried with them proudly. These evolving norms and values created a foundation for the lives of these Iranian mothers and daughters while they adjusted to life in the United States. The following theme looks at their lives in the United States through the lens of concepts such as race, misrecognition, and other labels these women may hold that ultimately lend themselves to what I argue to be their evolving identities.

### *Forging New Identities*

“I have my roots in Iran, I cannot deny it,” Mina stated when we talked about what it means to be an Iranian in America and ultimately in Michigan. Questions around identity were the crux of this project, seeking to find out how Iranian Americans identify themselves in a society where it felt like I had no place as an Iranian American. In conversations about what it meant to me and what it meant to be the daughter of immigrant parents, I would tell anyone that I felt too American to be Iranian and too Iranian to be American. Mabhbouleh (2017) names these feelings through Mia Tuan’s concept of the “forever foreigner”, where no degree of citizenship, legal whiteness, occupational and educational success, assimilatory efforts, or self-identification as American can render Middle Easterners as fully white (p. 36-7).

Iranian women are continuously forging identities within their daily lives, following the Islamic Revolution and spanning generations. This is how they, as a migrant populations, in this case Iranian Americans, make sense of the divisive space they exist in within their host society. To forge an identity means to create space for oneself where the space may not exist for them without this active effort. Forging identities is done to allow migrants to find social ties that are

needed for living a meaningful life in their host society, leading to other lasting effects that can trickle into their political and economic lives as well.

Throughout our conversation, Mina is honest with me about the grief and sadness she felt, as many of the women did, having to live through the Islamic Revolution and ultimately leaving Iran. However, she has an undeniable sense of hope regardless of what has happened to her and the adjustments she made to her destiny. “I don’t have good memories from that time that happened. But you know, at the end of the day, this is the nature of humans, that we can adjust with everything,” she said, “So we adjusted, and we lived. I lived like my family members would, but it was not a perfect life that we tried to pretend we were living. It was not something we predicted.” With her answer, Mina summarized what it meant to forge an identity, to adjust and to live with this new reality. In the grand scheme of the history between the United States and Iran, the women I spoke with are still existing with fresh wounds from the Islamic Revolution and migration. While the Revolution happened over forty years ago and caused migration to boom, the diaspora is still young and growing as these Iranian women continue to build families in the aftermath of their journey. Though the wounds of the Revolution have aged for those who experienced it in real time, the scars are still there and need tending to with forged identities.

Mina’s daughter, Sara, cites her mother as a reminder for what it means to be Iranian. She also cites her mother as a motivating force to forging her own identity in the United States, reminding her to be open to the way her own identity might take shape as time goes on here in Michigan: “She makes sure to definitely have me remember where I came from and what we were so used to growing up in Iran. She brought that with her here and practiced those things with me. But also, she made me realize that okay, we are in America, and there are a lot of other

things you need to keep in mind and so on.” Iranian mothers who migrated to the United States understood that while raising children here, specifically daughters, they had to teach them what it means to be Iranian within an American context. Their thoughts, lessons, and conversations may not have overtly expressed that, but they fostered forged identities through their familial roles, which will be discussed in depth within the next theme. Whether planned or unplanned, this understanding was critical for Iranian mothers and daughters to live what they could only hope to be a comfortable life in a once unknown host society.

### *Race, Ethnicity, Nationality, and Misrecognition*

An interesting aspect of my conversations with these women is the lack of overt claims about racial, ethnic, and national identity. I hypothesize that there are numerous reasons for this. One being that thinking about racial, ethnic, and national identities are often thought of with a Western perspective, informing my understanding of it and assumption that it would play an undisguised role in the need for forged identities. I also believe that the hesitancy to lay any claim on racial, ethnic, and national identities stems from the lack of recognition from the white, American majority. The lack of recognition, which will be referenced as misrecognition from this point forward, is a tool often utilized by the white majority to continue to control what they view as the subordinate other, often a minority group (Taylor, 1994, p. 24). I argue that the perception of the identities of many Iranians and Iranian Americans in Michigan are shaped by misrecognition, and that language of misrecognition is taught to them to dismiss their own experiences and factors into their feelings of feeling lost within the host society.

Negar felt the burden of this in both Iran and America as a Baha’i, voicing the consequences of misrecognition without entirely having the word for it. She spoke with a sense

of regret, almost as if this misrecognition was her own fault and responsibility. Speaking about it in her American context, she said, “When you live somewhere, doesn’t matter how long, your eyes, the color of your hair, your face, the way you dress, the color you choose, how you walk, how you talk, your accent, the tone of your voice – this makes you separated from other people...Unfortunately, when I was in my own country, I was different too, because I was Baha’i. It seems to me that I have nowhere in this world, a place to be myself. That’s it.” Negar was not shy to tell me how alone she felt, especially in the United States. While she may not have been able to name her experiences as ones of a marginalized racial, ethnic, or national identity, she knew her feelings of exclusion to be true without any question about it. In a host society that has been known to reject Iranians and renders Iranians to exist within a racial hinge that Maghbouleh recognizes, Iranian women at least do not have to question the way these moments of misrecognition make them feel and how they shape who they are within the United States.

Negar also spoke about how in the United States, as a single mother, she didn’t have nearly enough time to focus on being Iranian, something that now needed exerted effort rather than coming natural to her in Iran. Her daughter Nima recognized this as well. Nima was someone I was immediately able to relate to. While she ultimately resided in Florida, we spent parts of our interview laughing together about how we are often mistaken for being Mexican before it feels like people realize that Iranians can exist in the United States, too. She shares with me how she feels like she doesn’t have space in the Iranian community as well because of how there wasn’t as much time to exist within it with her mother supporting their family by herself and with the lack of an established community around her. “When I go into big Iranian communities now, I just always remember my mom being like ‘Oh remember, you have to carry

yourself this way, because you're Iranian," she said, "Sometimes, I just don't know how to act." Regardless of her willingness to speak to me, Nima has a hard time feeling valid as an Iranian. In a way, to fit into the United States, she adopts the misrecognition of herself. However, when her daughter comes into the room during our interview, she takes a break from our conversation to ask "What is it, *azizam*?" She employed the Persian word for "my dear," bringing the expression that her mother used for her into the present. Nima uses misrecognition towards herself as she navigates life in the United States. Nonetheless, she subconsciously shows who she is and how being Iranian will always be a part of her.

Nima provides a unique perspective to misrecognition and double consciousness that is different from the rest of my interlocutors. She expressed the most discomfort identifying as Iranian. She said she carries both identities of being an Iranian and American, yet she felt more comfortable and inclined towards calling herself an American. The feelings she spoke to resonated with Werbner's (2013, "Migration and Transnational Studies") questions of moral completeness as they resonate with double consciousness. Immigrants are striving for moral completeness and forging identities along the way. Werbner writes "The idealized, 'whole' self cannot be recaptured but it haunts the migrants just as the space of diaspora is 'haunted' by another place left behind....At the same time migrants are unwilling to admit their 'shame' in their country, a country that failed to sustain them and compelled them to leave." (p. 116). The division between the host and home society is ingrained into the immigrant on the most personal levels. Nima showed how she felt haunted by Iran when she could not access her community and hold onto her ideas of the homeland. The divide exists within her regardless of how she thrives in the United States now.

However, when speaking with my Iranian daughters population, I asked them if they had been made to feel ashamed of their Iranian heritage and if they had been able to feel pride at the same time. Almost all of them had no hesitation to shut down notions of shame, expressing their pride first and foremost regardless of what they went through. Zahra told me that, “I’m not ashamed. I was not ashamed to be Iranian. But then at the same time, I was hesitant to say that I am Iranian. I used a lot of different words, I’d say I was Persian rather than saying I was Iranian, because the worldview was different for Iranians back then.” Even though Zahra qualifies herself here, her sense of pride outweighs everything else that influences what it means to be Persian versus what it means to be Iranian. This pride was inherited from her mother Noor, who told me how while she appreciates her life in America, she does not stand for the same things the state does: “I do not approve of their politics for the Middle East. America, England, Russia. They are one of the reasons our country ended up like that. We were powerful.”

While the daughters emphasized the pride they felt rather than any sense of shame, some daughters such as Sara were cognizant of the ways being Iranian made them different. She explained that “I had to adjust to lots of bullying here in America. I just didn’t know a lot of things coming here, since we didn’t have those things in Iran. Like going to school with both guys and girls, that was a big adjustment. I had to find myself, asking my parents a lot of questions and being confused overall.” These daughters looked towards their mothers to find their pride, and Sara showed how she looked towards her parents again to answer these questions of where they belong, why everything was new, and how come she was different now. Many daughters didn’t overtly name these instances of bullying and misrecognition, but they shared stories that related to them. For example, Nima shared being called an outsider and running home from school with her sisters. These situations happened and had real effects on my

participants, whether they recognized it themselves or not. When these things happened however, most daughters chose to share with their mothers so they could support each other and guide each other as they adjusted to this American host society. These daughters did not think they would protect their mothers by hiding these things, but they instead saw that protection could mean confiding with each other to create a foundation to help them endure.

Education was a common space for this marginalization that these women, both mothers and daughters, were able to recognize. Bahar was one of the women that appeared more vulnerable to the comments that others had made towards herself and her family: “When my son was in middle school, the kids were telling him ‘Oh sorry about your cousin’ when they killed Osama bin Laden. Sometimes because people don’t have enough education about the Middle East, it’s hard, and sometimes you just don’t want to argue with them.” A lot of the women I spoke with expressed that when they came to the United States, their neighbors had taken to them kindly, and that they weren’t overtly given a hard time through their own definitions of it, including Bahar. The examples of kindness they shared and the examples of discrimination they shared can both be true at the same time. One does not take away from the other, and the reality of the situation does not shift.

Maghbouleh (2017) shares the perception of whiteness for Iranians and their families within the first chapter of her book. She writes that “Iranian American youth describe a profound conflict between the white identities asserted within their families and the stigmatized racialization they (and their families) actually experience in the world outside their home” (p. 52). The examples of covert discrimination and overt hatred are ones that can be cited where Iranians are browned, treated like another at the hands of the white, American majority. The ideas of racialization came whenever it was seen fit for the majority, expressed through the terms

of racial hinges. These experiences were isolating, and my interlocutors saw this throughout their lives.

The Iranian mothers and daughters I spoke to were also able to recognize how this experience has maybe shifted over time because of the political climate following the 2016 election. For example, Bahar often recalled how times were different now in comparison to when she first migrated. However, my participants still shared moments with me that fell under my definitions of misrecognition, microaggressions, and straightforward aggression from before this era. Daughters shared the same sentiments, such as Forugh, who said she felt welcomed in school by her teachers, but also recognized that “I was the only Iranian kid I knew in my school at the time. And most of the kids didn’t really know the difference between Iran and Iraq. Most of them believed that the country was a total desert and that we traveled by camel. I did feel quite a bit lonely because I hardly had any friends.”

Misrecognition is difficult to talk about. Misrecognition is valuable as it gives a name to the experiences of Iranian Americans that is almost taken by them by the lack of a MENA category given to the community. However, misrecognition is also uncomfortable because it forces these women to revisit these moments and understand them in a different light. It doesn’t bring me any joy to label these instances of prejudice and racism, but it gives space for these forged identities to breathe. Rather, it gives Iranian Americans permission and validation to forge these identities and to create where they belong as they see fit. While racial, national, and ethnic identities weren’t the first labels to leave these women’s mouths when we spoke, these are the realities that they face as Iranians located in Michigan. These realities serve as further justifications for their forged identities, which allow them to live fruitful lives with forged communities that will be explored in the following theme.



#### ***IV. To Be a Mother and To Be a Daughter***

This final section discusses the relationship between mothers and daughters at greater lengths. It understands how mothers forge identities and daughters forge identities both together and separately. On one hand, these identities are separate from each other. On the other hand, they are built together through the bond between mothers and daughters as they navigate the diaspora together. After exploring these kinship ties, this section concludes by looking at what survival means for my participants, and what it means for them to thrive within these contexts.

##### *Community and Family*

When my parents immigrated to the United States, they did so on their own. The only family I have here in Michigan is my immediate family, with the majority of my extended family still in Iran. Instead, I grew up with the community we could find around us, including Forugh. Forugh, who stepped up almost as a maternal figure in times of need. Whether we called upon her for a family emergency when a relative in Iran was sick, or both my parents had been working and unable to take me to a dentist appointment, Forugh was there. She became family. My interlocutors shared these same sentiments, often equating the idea of community with the idea of family. While some immigrated with greater populations of their extended families and some immigrated with just a select few members of their immediate family, these Iranian women shared a sense of longing for their family in the homeland. They shared the ways they relied on their family and whether they could do that still in Michigan, or if it was something missing entirely. Regardless, they highlighted that a critical part for them forging identities was to find their new community.

Forough described the sense of community in Iran as something “tribal”, where the sense of duty to one’s family is inherited and enforced through each generation. She compared it to the independence of American culture, where things such as money are not shared and where children did not seek as much outward approval from their parents. She shared that this is something she often reflected on with her own mother, missing the warmth they felt from their family in times of need no matter how big or small. “You know, my mom continuously said: ‘I remember my aunt, just her back was hurting. And like forty people surrounded her and everybody kept asking – what should I bring you?’” she tells me, “And now she’s like, in this day and age, if you fall ill, there’s not a single person around you, who has the time, who has the energy, or who has the resources really, to be present with you in the same sense that we had when we were growing up.”

Mina spoke to me as a mother about how she found it necessary to find her place within a community in Michigan, whether it had been a Persian community or not: “I had to adjust myself within this community. I started to go to libraries, to meet new people. And – I had some education in Iran, but it was not easy to follow the same major and I needed to get another degree here. I just wanted to be involved in the community, seeing new people, talking to them. I started working. I like to work, and I thought maybe it’s a good way to meet new people, learn from them. I always like to learn from them.” Adjusting to American culture became necessary for survival for Mina. She found it necessary to grow herself as a person and support her family, emotionally and monetarily. She also found it necessary for survival as survival transformed into channeling things she enjoyed to lead a meaningful life in the diaspora. She had to navigate different paths from what she expected. Firstly, feeling the need to migrate for a better life, and secondly, having to embark on a different vocational path due to differences in Iranian education

and American education. Despite everything, she saw her role as a mother in establishing herself and her community for her family, and specifically for her daughter.

Noor joined Zahra in the United States after Zahra had migrated to Michigan first. The two of them are close, as Zahra revealed to her mom the hardships she endured while she was here on her own. Noor's journey has been difficult and is not over as she is in treatment for her health. Regardless, her values as a mother and in her community in the United States are unwavering. She spoke to me about bonding with her neighbors and forging a place here, but she emphasized her role in the United States now and how it strengthened what she understands being a mother is: "Because my kids left, I don't have any attachment to Iran anymore. Because of my kids, they are the most important thing in my life." Noor's identity as a mother takes precedence over her identity as an Iranian. Regardless of the fact she has been Iranian longer than she has been a mother, her children are her priority. She is Iranian, she carries that within herself and within her home through physical representations of the culture and mental representations of the culture. However, through her expression here, her roots are no longer in Iran. Her roots are her children, and she goes wherever they go.

Motherhood is a critical part of being Iranian for these women. Noor's example shows us how she transfers over her ideals as an Iranian mother as she migrated to the United States. Overall, the mothers carry their labels as the matriarch with pride, and the daughters confirm the value of motherhood, willing to do anything for their mothers as a way to say thank you for the sacrifices they made. This subtopic within the To Be a Mother and To Be a Daughter theme has demonstrated how family ideals bled into the Iranian American definition of community. Therefore, the next subtopic demonstrates how Iranian mothers and daughters are forever linked

in these family values. Mothers and daughters of the Iranian diaspora support each other to survive in this unexpected reality in the United States and in Michigan.

### *The Cycle*

Each of my interlocutors shared to them how special Iranian mothers are. *Mehraban* means to be lovely and to be kind, but it takes on greater meaning from my participants who feel indebted to the kindness given to them by their mothers, including the population I have designated as Iranian mothers thus far. Every mother was once a daughter. While they feel indebted, they also know that the love their mothers showed them is something their mothers would never ask them to pay back. The Iranian daughters I spoke to, who all made clear that they identified as both Iranian and American at varying degrees, have been raised with these sentiments and use it to shape their roles as daughters. By looking at mothers and daughters together, I have aimed to capture how these groups are forever linked in their formation, viewing what it means to be a mother and what it means to be a daughter through the values of the Iranian homeland. While these Iranian women have been forging their own identities whilst in Michigan, they have used the concepts of motherhood to serve as the foundation for who they are and who they want to be.

Mina explained the cycle mothers and daughters go through together candidly to me, maybe without even realizing it. While we spoke on the phone, I imagined the hand gestures she must have used while describing this and while specifically describing what being a mother has meant to her both in Iran and the United States. “Okay, you know that Iranian moms, they’re sacrificing themselves to their kids, to their family,” she said, “So I think that I have to be like them. I have to do everything for my family. And this is something I learned from my mom, and

she learned from her mom.” Motherhood for her was learned amongst generations, something she saw within her own mother and her own grandmother. Therefore, the conception of motherhood began with Mina in Iran as a child. She repeated this cycle with Sara, raising her in Iran as a young girl before migrating while Sara was on the verge of becoming a teenager. The years they spent together and separate in Iran shaped the foundation of their Iranian identities as mothers and as daughters.

“Iranian moms are doing everything for their kids. Their love is unconditional. And I always felt that growing up,” Leila told me, her voice strong and unwavering as she speaks this assertion into the air. She voiced the feelings of many of my interlocutors clearly, demonstrating how Iranian mothers use all the power they have towards the success of their children, consciously and unconsciously. Forugh speaks to the unconscious side of things, contextualizing what it means for her to be Iranian: “Inherently, I feel like she has passed on a lot of what I do admire about the culture. Maybe non intentionally, maybe unconsciously, but inherently, I think, just in the way that she’s lived her life. Through the way she’s hospitable, and how she’s always putting a smile on things, even when things are hard. You know, she’s brought forward her father’s faith, strength, and grace to carry onto me.” When telling her mother’s story, she presents her mother as the backbone of their family, caring for her own children, two sisters-in-law, mother-in-law and her husband. The way she paints the picture of her mother, it feels that the pride of being a mother came before the pride of being Iranian. The daughters therefore show their love for their mothers, putting their pride as daughters before their pride as Iranians as well.

Sara not only speaks with her clear love in her heart for her mother, but also with clear empathy. Sara and Mina have endured their migration journey together as mother and daughter. Their relationship has spanned continents, growing together through new experiences and

shifting forged identities. I ask Sara about her experiences and if she's shared them with her mother. Not only does she tell me yes, but she shares with me why. She said, "When I don't share them, my mom feels like she's experiencing these things alone. Because she came here as a 40-something year-old woman, she's had a way harder time adjusting here than I did. Like, sometimes she thinks I don't have those issues anymore, but when I do bring them up, she feels more validated." Iranian mothers and daughters create a support system amongst themselves that is systemic to their relationship. To be a mother is to have once been a daughter, understanding the way motherhood has taken shape and spanned generations. To be a daughter is to potentially be a mother one day, carrying the lessons they have learned for those to come, including untraditional routes of motherhood roles. The experiences of the host society do not dissuade from only these realities, enabling them further as they lay the foundation for mothers and daughters to forge identities together with the foundation of their kinship ties. This foundation lays the groundwork for their survival in their host society, meaning more than merely getting by.

### *What Does Survival Mean?*

These interviews were difficult for myself as well as my interlocutors. It was difficult for my interlocutors, looking back at the hardships they endured and the ways their lives took completely unexpected turns. It was difficult for me, hearing these stories, seeing my own family in them, and feeling for what these Iranian women had to brave to get where they are now. Seeing what they had gone through and where they are now showed what they had to do to adjust to the context of the US. So, what is the difference between surviving and thriving? I argue here that survival is more than staying afloat. Instead, survival is where new identities and

created communities meet, allowing these Iranian women to thrive within their circumstances and live meaningful lives. Thus, survival here serves to recognize the success Iranian women and daughters have had in the host society regardless of what the majority tells them, or what they may feel about the way their lives turned out. Creating their lives as they are now should be something that is celebrated, which is what I intend to do here.

I decided to end my interviews by asking the mothers I spoke to in what ways they were grateful for the way their lives have worked out up until this point. This is a conscious decision I made with the understanding that these women may have felt like they had once again lived through the trauma they shared with me, whether it be from the Revolution itself or from their immigration journey. While they had gone through some unthinkable things, I found it important for them to look back on what they accomplished, whether it be big or small. When speaking to these mothers, the most important thing they looked back on with pride was how their children and how their daughters specifically turned out. When I asked Mina this question, she took a second to think about it before saying to me, “I thought ‘Maybe I don’t know how long we are going to be alive in the world. So let’s do the rest of our lives in a different situation, different conditions, and maybe I can prepare a better life for my daughter.’” Every interlocutor I spoke to made sure to emphasize how Iranian mothers were special, doing anything for their children. Mina’s survival meant to thrive in the United States for the sake of Sara, to show that anything can still be possible regardless of what they and the homeland went through.

Bahar expresses this sentiment directly, pride clear in her voice. The love she has for her children is palpable as she told me, “I’m grateful for how my kids turned out. I came here to raise a good family. Good kids. And I did it. I’m proud of my son and my daughter. And it doesn’t matter how bad it was, how I went through what I went through. I did it. And I’m

thankful.” Bahar shared that life hasn’t been easy, taking twists and turns whilst in Iran and America that were absolutely unexpected, but she is strong in her conviction that she survived. Bahar and her husband migrated to the United States at different times, and she had only been in the United States for a year when she first became pregnant. She never imagined migrating when she was just a girl, and she had to find herself in this host society while finding herself as a mother as well. While being a mother was important to her Iranian identity, she also became a mother while becoming an American. While in the United States, she made the most of her situation to allow herself to live a meaningful life. To her, creating a meaningful life in the United States was necessary to allow her children to thrive as much as they possibly could within the host society they were born into.

However, all mothers, Iranian or not, carry regrets with them. The grass is always greener on the other side, and they always think of things they could have done differently when raising their children. Negar shared with me that she carried this burden with her, the weight possibly heavier since she was a single mother and had no one else to share the responsibilities of her children with. However, her daughters make it abundantly clear to her that they are thankful regardless of what she may think. “Every time I tell them I’m sorry for the things I didn’t do while raising them, my older daughter says ‘Mom, don’t say that. We are very thankful for everything. What you did for us,’” Negar explained. When the Iranian mothers I spoke to don’t see what they have accomplished and feel disappointed in themselves, the Iranian daughters work to combat those notions. They uplift their mothers and celebrate their survival, saying “Look at me, I am the example that you made it and you succeeded.” Part of the support the Iranian daughters offer in the familial cycle discussed earlier is seeing what their mothers can’t,



and telling them that they did more than just get by. Telling them that they have thrived thus far, allowing them to carry a pride that the host society tries to take from them sometimes.

I decided to end my interviews with the daughters I spoke to by asking them how they feel about the future of the Iranian American diaspora and their role in it. This question is tricky for my participants because of the smaller Iranian population in Michigan, which is something that these daughters recognized on their own. However, that did not take away from the possibilities these daughters saw. Most poignantly, Forugh saw her role in the Iranian diaspora as a teacher to those growing up beside her and after her, emphasizing that the Iranian heritage is something that cannot be shaken regardless of their access to a community or their involvement in their own culture inside their homes. “That’s a very rich and wonderful heritage that they can draw from. I believe that it’s a part of them whether they realize it or not. I feel sort of on a spiritual level that it is essential to them,” she said, “So, you know, as an Iranian American, if the right window arises, I would like to be in a place to offer them some of my experiences, you know, whatever I may have in the way of our culture and heritage.” I grew up with Forugh by my side, she was there with my mother in the hospital when I was born. While she tried to minimize the work she had already done, I can attest to her succeeding in this role of uplifting our community. Her guidance and support serves as a foundation where all Iranian Americans she knows can survive in Michigan, thriving as who they are. They can survive, thriving regardless of carrying both identities that can be known to reject each other.

### *Summary*

To summarize, there have been four key themes expressed throughout this section: Why We Left: Experiences of Shifting Gender and Societal Expectations under the Islamic Republic, Rejection of the Islamic Republic, Life in Michigan: Evolving Norms and Values, and To be a

Mother and To be a Daughter. These themes have provided a look into the lives of the Iranian mothers and daughters I spoke to, taking the reader through the timeline of their lives before hammering down on the broader societal themes, discussing their roles within their families and the greater community along with what survival has meant for them with this unexpected hand of cards they had been given. These findings serve to showcase the forged identities Iranian and Iranian American women create to survive in their host societies, meaning how they live meaningful lives regardless of how their life took various unexpected turns. These forged identities are intended to recognize their autonomy in situations where they may not feel like they have any or where they feel like they may not belong, allowing them to create their own lives and spaces where they see fit.

## **Conclusion**

All in all, I have argued that Iranian mothers and daughters, now located in Michigan, have forged new identities as a means of survival within the United States and in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution. They experienced the trauma of the Islamic Revolution directly and generationally. They also experienced the disillusionment of the American Dream while they tried to find their roots in this new society, and they feel the consequences now within their day-to-day life. Their destiny has taken drastic turns they never expected, and they forged new identities as a tool to survive and ultimately thrive within these new contexts, finding new spaces outside the categories given to them by Iran and America.

This project offers multiple insights into Iranian diaspora studies. Firstly, one of the most revelatory findings that I gathered from my participants was the connection between immigration and mental health. The connection between immigration and mental health is not a new

assertion, it is one that has been studied and represented through many different cases. However, the discussions regarding mental health and trauma were ones that I had not expected to appear within our conversations. Orkideh Behrouzan's (2017) *Prozak Diaries: Psychiatry and Generational Memory in Iran* focuses specifically on the idea of how in Iran, conversations about mental health became normalized within Iranian culture due to the generations who grew up following the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War. Part of this work then is to represent how these aspects of Iranian culture followed my interlocutors and how it impacted them in the United States. They openly shared what they endured and how it affected their lives, either directly referencing its impact on their mental health or alluding to it throughout our discussions. This intervention therefore continues conversations of Iranian mental health as it crosses borders and can unite different populations.

The next intervention revolves around my study of mothers and daughters of the Iranian diaspora. Through this study, I hoped to showcase the ways in which Iranian mothers and daughters represent these newly crafted identities based on my conversations with my participants. What is important about mothers and daughters in understanding immigration? What is holding mothers and daughters together? What is different about them? When talking about my research before beginning the formal interview project, any Iranian I spoke to had an immediate reaction to the idea of studying Iranian mothers and daughters. They shared with me how there is something unique about them, about the bond between mothers and daughters. The conceptions of Iranian families that my interlocutors showed to me emphasized the importance of the matriarch, willing to sacrifice everything for her children. Throughout this study, I characterize the link between mothers and daughters as they create a cycle of support for each other through the Iranian values in their forged identities. They are forever intertwined, and they

provide a framework for immigration that understands why Iranian women immigrate and what they will do throughout these processes for their families.

Continuing, this project works to expand the existing literature on the Iranian diaspora, covering a relationship between mothers and daughters that has gone understudied thus far along with the Iranian American population located in Michigan. Iranian Americans in Michigan have less scholarship recorded about them in comparison to other locations in the Global North. The case of Michigan is unique due to the large Muslim and Arab populations located in the state, making up the greatest population of these groups in the United States. This intervention captures the nuances of being Iranian American, especially within Michigan, where these identities can be more pronounced due to the area and populations within it. It aims to understand how they strive for moral completeness while also making the most of the situation at hand, finding ways to lead meaningful lives regardless of what led them to this point.

Lastly, while this project recognizes the political history of the Islamic Revolution as the inciting moment that sparked the migration of these women across generations, it also intends to use the stories of their lives and the identities they forge to assess where they started and where they have ended. This is where I intervene and explore how forging identities is critical for these women to survive and thrive. To expand, I argue that survival entails more than the bare minimum of making ends meet. The concept of forging identities is intended to recognize and uplift how Iranian mothers and daughters do what they can with what they've been given and arguably thrive within their current circumstance, regardless of the acceptance or rejection from home and host societies. Mothers and daughters forge identities that are different from one another due to different life experiences, but they can be born from one another. The mother

learns from the daughter, and the daughter learns from the mother. They are both doing the work to forge identities for the sake of themselves and for the sake of each other.

Forging identities for Iranian American women includes creating new social networks, forging communities to enhance the ways they can live meaningful lives within the borders they exist. Iranian American women have fostered ideas of community that are synonymous with their ideas of family and kinship. Thus, it subsequently creates more space for the relationship between mothers and daughters to take shape. While the identity of the mother looks different from the identity of the daughter, the duties of the mother and daughter revolve around each other and the duties to their kin. Mothers and daughters are intrinsically linked together, upholding each other where other aspects of their livelihood fall short. The women I spoke to hardly spoke of any tensions between their other halves. They may not have shared the same consensus on everything mentioned in these conversations, but they spoke with a love and fondness that was inherent within each other. According to my interlocutors, Iranian mothers are special. Iranian mothers were once Iranian daughters, so these beliefs are born into them, and daughters are capable to carry the mother during the times when she can't carry on her own. I know that I would do anything to support my own mother just to thank her for what she's done for me.

This master's thesis is a love letter to the Iranian women in Michigan, to those I know, to those I met through this project, and to those I may never meet. It's a love letter for my own mother, my aunt, and my cousins who are separated by continents, time zones, and Internet shutdowns. It's a love letter for all the Iranian women, located in the homeland or in the diaspora. To be a woman and to be Iranian is a revolutionary act itself. Existing with both these identities threatens the balance set by the United States and the Islamic Republic. The women of

Iran have been constant advocates for change throughout history, standing against what they deem is wrong. The Iranian women who have left their homeland continue this work within different means, and this work includes raising their daughters with the ideals they see fit for their survival and meaningful lives. I am my mother's revolution, and us daughters will continue the tradition of this cycle in our own ways, constantly forging new paths ahead.

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