becoming visible in Iran: women in contemporary Iranian society

Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, I.B.Tauris, London, 2008, 224pp., ISBN: 9781845118785, £56.00 (Hbk)

Mehri Honarbin-Holliday's *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society* is a collage of snapshots from women's lived experiences in Tehran, narrated by themselves, or observed and recounted by the author. Together, these numerous, intersecting and/or overlapping narratives connect the personal to the political and the present to the past. Even though 'their relevance to the current discussions on gender and politics is multi-fold' (p. 1), Honarbin has selected these for 'their power and expression of autonomy' (p. 1). They provide knowledge about the context, enabling the reader to contemplate 'the interrelationships between particularity and universality in existence within the global community at the beginning of the twenty-first century' (p. 1).

The book is presented in a unique form for the reader expecting an academic work; rather than chapters, it is divided into five *Texts* 'of human experience and existence' (p. 9) accompanied by a so-called *Margin*, or 'an illumination, an additional illustration' (p. 10). While the Texts tap into the main, interrelated themes of the book, the Margins gild their Text by bringing in 'undisclosed material from the field' (p. 10), ethnographic descriptions of circumstances, encounters and dialogues that occur around educational institutions or during the infamous taxi rides of Tehran. *Text One: Histories, Transitions, and Continuities* is dedicated to narratives by Akram and Naaztaab, two older Tehrani women. Here, the author provides general historical information to facilitate the reader's understanding of these women's life stories vis-à-vis Iran's transformations, with regard to women's rights, education, economic independence and their general position within family and society throughout the past century. As such, *Text One* contextualises the rest of the book.

The reader is then taken to contemporary Tehran in *Text Two: Making Meaning Acquiring Identities*. While introducing the reader to several public and private spaces of the metropolis, the author gives a detailed description of the subtle ways in which women, simultaneously, observe and transgress the Islamic Republic's codes of conduct through their appearance (dress code/ make-up/hairstyle) and interactions, along with their thoughts about the importance of education and art in identity construction. This latter trend continues in *Text Three: Presences*, where a group of young women discuss

1 The Reform Era (*Dowre Eslahat*) broadly refers to the years spanning 1997–2005, the presidency of reformist cleric Mohammad Khatami, with the support of *Eslahtalaban* (the reformists). Although part and parcel of the Islamic Republic, *Eslahat* (Reforms) constituted the major alternative (until the 2009 disputed presidential elections) that had any possibility of clearing the way for a so-called Islamic Democracy: an open society with individual liberties, freedom of expression, women's rights, political pluralism and the rule of law.

their efforts to create solid structures in their personal lives in order to challenge the existing dynamics, open up spaces within family and society, and initiate a new dialogue with male counterparts.

Text Four: Vision of a Civil Society puts forward accounts from activists of the women's movement, which describe these young women's views of civil society during the shift between the Khatami and Ahmadinejad presidencies. *Text Four* concludes by presenting the views of a group of male and female students with regard to gender inequality, expressed during a seminar at Tehran University. Two sets of contrasting life stories are juxtaposed in *Text Five: Arrivals and Departures*: on the one hand, the fragments narrated by women who stayed in Iran after the 1979 revolution and, on the other, the author's self-reflective narrative—representative of Iranian women who emigrated and live in the West. Here, the author emphasises the Reform¹ era as a time of major gains in terms of women's visibility.

By offering an alternative outlook of Muslim women in general and Iranian women in particular, *Becoming Visible* addresses Western audiences who are not familiar with Iran and other Muslim-majority contexts. Conducted during six visits from England to Tehran between 2004 and 2007, the research for *Becoming Visible* coincided with what the author describes as the West's continued imperialistic adventures in the region (i.e. Afghanistan and Iraq) coupled with a profound 'knowledge deficiency and confused imagination regarding Muslim women and their efforts to challenge and overcome socio-political discrepancies' (p. 2). The book can, hence, be seen as part of a broader, post-9/11 effort/attempt by many Western-based Middle Easterners to 'correct' the increasingly distorted image of their countries of origin in their current home(s), as well as a counter to the neo-colonial projects such countries are implicated in. Through its representation of Iranian women, *Becoming Visible* emphasises Muslim women's agency—often absent from Western mainstream representations. Even so, the book falls into the trap of reducing *Women in Contemporary Iranian Society* to a handful of Tehran-based, educated elite.

The redefinition of 'self' for the 'other' that lies at the heart of *Becoming Visible* is a way of homecoming for the diasporic subject, and often implies processes of self-reflection. However, except for brief and sporadic comments throughout and a passage at the end of the book (pp. 172–176) in *Text Five*, the author does not share her own perspective, experiences and/or positionality vis-à-vis the themes she presents in the Texts. Honarbin's overall method is descriptive rather than analytical: she does not delve into lengthy, in-depth theoretical analysis or problematise any specific among the numerous themes presented in the book. More than a conventional academic text, *Becoming Visible* reads as the travelogue of a diaspora-based Iranian woman who has carefully observed her former home (Tehran) and enthusiastically listened to stories of

those who remained. Honarbin, it seems, is rediscovering Iran (Tehran) and recounts it for others in a fluid and colourful narrative told by women in Tehran.

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