



## Domestic Temporalities: Sensual Patterning in Persian Migratory Landscapes

by Simone Dennis and Megan Warin

### Abstract

*When dealing with the moving worlds of migration among the Persian diaspora in Australia, memories cannot simply be removed to dusty attic boxes to be stored as an archive. Rather, this analysis takes the body and its sensory engagement with the world as a central focus, arguing that memories are crafted, tasted, smelt and touched in everyday temporalities. In the kitchens and lounges of Persian migrant women the lived past refuses to become undone from the countless revolutions of food, talk and domestic activity that are central to the patterning of memory. In this paper, we argue that these intimate practices have references beyond their domestic dimensions, for they point to a worldly movement of life writ domestically small. It is via a sensory network that the spatially and temporally disparate worlds of homeland and new homes are remembered and forgotten, and where miniature worlds call out to the movement of migration.*

### Introduction

This paper is concerned with embodied paths of patterning, memory and emotion amongst Persian<sup>1</sup> migrant women in Adelaide, in the southern part of Australia, and in Toowoomba, much farther north. Such patterning, which engages with narratives of cooking, embroidery and painting, involves domestic temporalities and the movement and activity of the body in and across spaces. Everyday domestic objects, such as *shirini* (sweets), embroidered items and miniature paintings are, after Terdiman's (1985) use of the term, material memories, for they link past and present in a continuity of lived experience in

<sup>1</sup> We recognise that Iran is a multi-ethnic state, and that complex historical and political differences exist between the land identified as Iran (which itself changed in 1935), and the people who identify with what Anderson (1983) calls "imagined communities". Iran is these women's land of origin, but they identify as Persian, and with a particular 'golden age' of literature, poetry, architecture and 'tradition' which goes beyond the fixed boundaries of geography.

place, and specifically in domestic place.

Since 2004, we have been working closely with Persian migrant women, most of whom follow the 19th century Bahá'í faith proposing a unity of all religions. In Adelaide, it was via our key informant, Safieh (who taught cooking and sewing classes for Middle Eastern women at a community centre), that we were introduced to cultural networks of Farsi-speaking Bahá'í migrants. It was in these classes, and then in people's own homes and public spaces, that we conducted ethnographic work, participating in the making of Persian sweets and biscuits, observing the delicate handwork of Persian miniature paintings, and admiring the patterned symbols in embroideries. In 2006, our fieldwork extended to the regional city of Toowoomba, in the northern Australian state of Queensland. Here, the Bahá'í women meet once a week, sometimes more often, at the large Bahá'í centre near the University of Southern Queensland, to plan events for the community, to educate their children in the ways of Bahá'í, and to catch up with one another over tea and Persian snacks.

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The women in our study had all fled Iran since the Islamic regime came to power in 1979. Whilst Bahá'í followers have had a long history of persecution in Iran (ranging from exclusion, imprisonment and execution), it was during and after the Revolution and the instilling of tighter Islamic laws that the Bahá'í experienced new levels of discrimination and violence. Under the new regime, they were denied education, stripped of title, land and business, and denied the constitutional protection granted to other religious minorities such as the Jews, the Christians and Zoroastrians (Humes & Clark, 2000, p. 27).

Over time, participants alluded to and offered fragmented accounts of this persecution: of the brutal execution of family members, torture, beatings, witnessing murders, the dissolution of families as children fled to Pakistan across deserts at night, repeated raids of homes where all books and photographs were confiscated, threats, and continued surveillance. It was not often that women spoke openly and spontaneously about these experiences. As reported in many studies that examine trauma or suffering (Daniel, 1996; Das, 2000; Harstrup, 2003; Jenkins, 1998), spoken or written language is often inadequate, and there are limits, an unshareability and an incommunicability of such pain. One informant stated: "There are things I cannot talk about, I cannot describe - how do you describe torture or burying your own family with your hands?" When stories were told, they were recounted in a monotone and with weary bodies, as if, as Scarry describes, "all the emotional edges have been eliminated" (1985). Words got "stuck in throats", "squeezed hearts" and were described as "suffocating". Participants told us that the inability to express these experiences in words explained why "Persian people are reserved, we are not able to talk ... we have to live in a different skin".

In addition to what is known as Persian politesse, or the "proper public face of controlled expression" (Beeman, 1988, p. 14), it was not possible to directly elicit experiences that lay outside of speech and reason. Our methodological approach was thus attuned to the body, and informed by what Ram (2000), in her studies on Indian dance in immigrant contexts, refers to as a specific phenomenological "labour of investigation" that restores us to "a sense of the past, not as 'history', but as vitally present in the bodies of actors in the present". This investigation involved understanding how small-scale activities allowed the women to digest and process the experience of radical and painful disruption of all that makes life sensuously understandable. We argue that it is domestic activities such as sewing, painting, and cooking that provide a compelling bodily and

relational milieu within which experiences and memories could be rendered meaningful in a very embodied way. It is the intimate and mundane aspects of everyday experience, or what Lefebvre (1947/1991) calls the "revolution(s) of everyday life", that "call out to" and engage with the largeness of the scale of disruption.

Thomas (2004), in reflecting on migration and displacement, argues that "the senses are the site for the negotiation between memory and forgetting, the conduit for the associations and intermeshings of family and community with the individual, and the ongoing mediations on being here and now or there and then". Senses, and the ways in which they orientate our awareness and feelings, form a dominant lens through which to view the migration experience. They are, as Thomas suggests, a hub of sociality, intersubjectivity and identity, in which experiences between homelands and newlands, between proximity and distance, are mediated.

In many ways, and not only confined to Australia, it is these collective, embodied experiences of social suffering and opposition to life in the Islamic Republic (Bauer, 2000) that define Persian exile communities. We recognise that the circumstances of identity politics are never neat, and the very terms Persian and/or Iranian are loaded with political, social, hierarchical and historical meanings. Nearly all the women in our project, however, self-identified as Persian. Sahar, a 24-year-old Bahá'í woman, firmly stated: "I am proud to be Persian. I was born in Persia. ... Persia is an historic name, it is a very cultural thing to call yourself Persian, it detaches us from 'that name'." "That name", in a post-September 11 Australian environment, refers to popular media images of what it is to be an "Iranian", and the conflation of Arab and non-Arab identities (and assumed fundamentalism). In identifying as Persian, these Bahá'í women distanced themselves from negative stereotypes and signalled national pride in a pre-Islamic dynasty associated with a Zoroastrian past. All, for example, celebrated *no-rooz* (the Persian New Year based on Zoroastrian practice), and spoke repeatedly of classic artists and texts (such as the epic "Book of Kings" *Shahnama*), thus reclaiming and reproducing a particular political identity that was pre-revolution and associated with a period of Iranian history that is represented as 'the Golden Age'.

#### **Ethnographic Maxima and Minima: Proximity and Distance**

Migratory movements were described by the women in terms of their enormity. The journeys themselves were vast, and large and disruptive things had often

happened prior to the journeys themselves. One woman described the traumatic events which led her and her husband and children to flee Iran. The largeness of the trauma led to the traversing of huge geographic distances, to the traversing of the massive gulfs separating the familiar from the strange. Marjan said:

After the Revolution, the Bahá'í were persecuted. The Pasdar came to our homes, to search them. They took our wedding pictures, so they could look at them to identify other [Bahá'í] people in them, to search them, too. They took gold. They took pottery. They took my carpet, that I made. We escaped from Iran to Pakistan using a dealer. My son was two and a half years old.

The largeness of distance wedged itself deep in the bodies of other families, too: Safieh did not see her children for fourteen years, between the time she smuggled them out of Iran and her own arrival in Australia. It lodged itself even more permanently between Safieh and her brother, who lost his life during the Revolution. It pushed itself between women and their careers; many, like Safieh and Layla, who had been teachers before the Revolution, were not so after it. It sliced time into two parts: the time before the Revolution, and the time after. It made the difference between being at home being a possibility and an impossibility, one made in flames for Layla whose house was burned to the ground. This event was the catalyst for her fleeing Iran for Turkey, where she spent fifteen months in a refugee camp with her son and daughter-in-law.

The largeness of distance presented itself most consistently of all, at least in narrative form, in the women's stories of leaving known domestic places in Iran. In their stories, the women filled these places with fondly remembered and sometimes lost things – “my carpet”, “my wedding pictures”, “my cooking pots”, “my rose garden”, “that little window with a crack in its corner”; “the sound of ladies laughing and slurping [tea over lumps of Persian sugar]” - as well as certain kinds of foods, including “home-grown herbs” from small gardens that “everyone had filled with greens that were added to every meal, and were always on the table”. These stories of longing and desire placed the body as central, for it was in and through bodily sensations that dislocation and alienation was most profoundly felt. Others writing about migration from a phenomenological perspective similarly draw on the body as a marker of sensory displacement. Espin (1999), for example, describing leaving Cuba, suggests that “the pain of uprootedness

was most intensely activated and most disorienting in the everyday absences of familiar smells, familiar foods, familiar routines for doing the small tasks of everyday life” (p. 13). It is via bodily dwelling that we orientate ourselves and navigate in the world.

Also yearned for were the temporal rhythms of preparing and cooking food; as Marjan said, “You know, it's harder to cook here [in Australia] because it is just so time consuming to do it here in the traditional Persian way. You don't have things, ingredients and the right kinds of space, for doing that [here in Australia]”. These things, rhythms, sounds, were things that make up the patina of a domestic life to yield “my home”, “my family”, “my place”: “my Iran”.

These very familiar things were contrasted with the unfamiliar, the uncanny and lonely: “the different house shapes” and kitchenscapes of Australian domestic places; the different qualities, types and availability of herbs, spices, leafy greens and oil. The loneliness of not knowing neighbours, of not having regular visitors to feed and to serve in one's house, was opposed to the laden afternoon tables of Persian ladies, whose very position as such depended on the acquisition of fine skills in making Persian sweets (in itself described as “artwork” by participants), and the learned grace of the good hostess (see also Harbottle, 2000a, 2000b). The opportunity to serve went begging, the role of hostess slipped into that of female immigrant, in this new Australian place. Layla told of her upset, her loneliness, and the incapacity it wrought upon her, to “do nothing but cry, pray, and do the cooking”. It was in the cooking that Layla, and many other women, linked together experiences of Persian home and experiences of Australian home.

The vast distances between the Persian kitchens and the potentials they contained for the creation and maintenance of relationships in and through the crafting of food, and the emptiness of the lonely Australian lounges devoid of guests, were momentary, and they were ultimately, but not entirely, spannable. The geographic distance was writ small, focussed down to the dimensions of a dinner table: one that, in Layla's case, seated 25:

After I was in Toowoomba for two years, I took an English language course. When I came there I asked the students and staff, would they like to come over for dinner? And they said, “All of us? How can you manage? There are 25 of us!” And I said, “Do not worry. I can manage.” They all came. And they said, “Oh my God! It looks just like the best restaurant! Did you have a

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restaurant in Iran?" I was a teacher. I was busy. But I cooked, too; I am of Iran. They asked me for the recipes of what I cooked for them. That was such a good day for me as a memory, from the good food, and the faces of the people. When they went, I slept, but first I said to God: "Thank you".

Shirin's friend had moved from Iran "seven years ago", after waiting in Turkey for seventeen months for a visa. Her five children were living in Australia already; the first one had arrived 22 years earlier. Upon arrival in Australia, Shirin's friend "cried for six months". Shirin said of her friend:

She asks herself, "Why am I so sad? I came for my kids. I will adapt." In order to mix with people, she made food to give out. She even asked an engineer working out on the road in front of the house to come in and eat. She cooked in order to share her culture. She can extend her circle of people through food. This is Persian talk here, even though she has no [English] language. Her neighbour has a broken leg, and so she brings food. She can talk through food, she can heal through food. This must have been some dish, huh?! You know, if you get forced to go somewhere else, as we all have here, you aim to immediately mix with that ... you have to start somewhere, from being sad at the beginning. My aunt, she went to Holland, fifty years ago. She had no Dutch language, but she was so popular. They called her "Mother of Holland". She made sultana rice. *Kesh Mesh Polou*, it's called. She made that; it's practically all she did.

The pain of sadness and loneliness and linguistic isolation is, in these examples, followed by the alleviation of sadness, which gave a little way to satisfaction, popularity and communication through food. Safieh's story included similar elements, made evident when she told us of the events that led up to her taking on large embroidery works. After her arrival in Australia, Safieh had suffered for months from what Good (1977) has described as "heart distress", a sadness-sickness, brought on by the sadness of her remembrance of the traumatic events that had led to her migration. After an exhaustive exploration had turned up no specific medical genesis of her pains, her doctor recommended she take up an activity to keep her busy. She duly embarked upon an embroidery project, an activity at which she was already very skilled, and she told us that "with every stitch you forget the sadness". Sadness was here

stitched tightly down onto the fabric, organised into careful patterns; pulled and threaded and snipped into ordered forgetfulness. Amongst more contemporary images of animals, Safieh stitched the *bota* pattern, a 'traditional' Persian pattern that represents the Cypress tree, which in turn is a metaphorical symbol for life. Safieh also used sewing to create and maintain connections with others; at the local migrant centre, she shared her sewing skills and, in and through them, stitched together relationships between herself and others.

Like the highly valued arts of cooking and embroidery, the women also produced prized Persian artwork in their migrant contexts. In and through their collective interest in producing Persian miniatures, the women in the painting group forged connections with one another over exquisitely fine-haired paint brushes, small containers of paint, and the sharing of a valued and central Persian cultural 'tradition'. Persian miniatures flourished in Iran between the 13th and 16th centuries, and gave sophisticated and ornate visual images (sometimes with gold and silver leaf) to the literary plots of epic manuscripts and poems (Kianush, 1998). Manuscript illustrations were often laboured over for months by male artists, depicting court scenes, hunts, battles and romantic couples against panoramic backgrounds.

In the painting classes we observed, which were run by an experienced and established female Persian artist, the women painted thin layers over thin layers, attended to the tiniest of details, and glued on small bejewelled birds, feathers and fabric details to lend the works a three-dimensional texture and air. The carefully attended details produced, over hours, over classes, chromatically and stylistically harmonised relationships between beautiful Persian women and the painted landscapes they inhabited. Central to these paintings were 'traditional' Persian miniature motifs of doe-eyed animals, majestic birds, flowers and musical instruments (often the *kamancheh*), all pointing to the poetic (and intimate) relationships between the senses and "nature". For the women painting these images in the class, such harmony had been violently interrupted by the circumstances under which they had left Iranian landscapes. The space between the stylized painted images and the almost opposite lived experiences of the women who produced them enabled the space between harmony with home place and the disrupted process of leaving home to be reworked, made anew and mediated.

There are interrelated and repeated patterns in the women's narrations of their cooking, sewing and painting activities, with the most prominent being the capacity of these activities to connect Persian persons

with Persian and Australian others. The capacity of commensal activity to activate powerful connections with others is well documented (see, for example, Bardenstein, 2002; Counihan & van Esterick, 1997; Feeley-Harnik, 1995; Germov & Williams, 2004; Mennel, 1991), as is the capacity of sewn or painted stories to communicate particular experiences to others (see Layton, 1981). How, though, do the specific activities of painting, cooking and sewing connect two home places, and further effect a transformation of emotion from pain to relief? The following section involves careful exploration of the relationships between the largeness of migration and the smallness of domestic things.

### The Large and the Small

One of the things that struck us when conducting this fieldwork was the intimate association that the women had with small stitches on minute areas of cloth, with tiny areas of canvas at the ends of miniature paint brushes, with small and delicate patterns pressed onto fragile spiced biscuits (*nan-e-berenji*). We were fascinated with these small associations, and we were, in particular, entranced and concerned with the question of how such small things were included in a narrative - and, more importantly, in everyday experiences - of the largeness of migratory movements.

The opposed domains of the tiny and the immense are intimately linked, inextricably intertwined, and such intermingling is made in and through the linking of the senses and places, and in and through the inclusion and continual presence of domestic material memories. Terdiman (1985) has described material memories as those things which have the meaningful past embedded within them. Material memories are identifiable as the things, as well as the relatively more impermanent sounds, smells, tastes and touches of the domestic environment, that have embedded in them memories of the habitual and corporeal activity of Persian domesticity. These include the handmade embroidery, as well as the undertaking of its making in tiny stitches, the implements for cooking biscuits, as well as the tiny floral imprints on the sweet yield, and the tiny brush strokes in miniature paintings to produce specific Persian aesthetics. These things, and the corporeal activities that happen around them and in their making, are, in essence, "wordless", for everyday domestic objects and sensual corporeal experiences are not dependent on specific and accompanying narration in order for linkages with the past to be revealed (except perhaps when they are revealed to inquiring anthropologists).

Many theoreticians have argued for the intermingling

of person and world. Abram (1996) has pointed to the calls that things make back to people, imbuing things with a life and activity that is vested in them through the interrelative capacity of the human senses. Here, things - such as cooking pots whose contents nourished those who supped from them over years - come to be involved, for they themselves contain the immediacy of the only-just lived past (that which, for example, occurred at breakfast, which involved the pot, as well as the embroidered table cloth), as well as the deepness of the much older past (those past generations who ate from the pot, over the cloth). Pot and cloth will be there at the next sitting of breakfast too, and so they are involved both then-ly and now-ly, both in the past and in the present, in the constancy of lived domesticity. In these materials of domestic memory, past and future are reconciled in the relationship between things in their times and places. Pots and cloths, in and through their containment of the past and their involvement in the domestic future, also impose patterns of movement on those who dwell in their midst at least as much as they reflect those patterns of movement. These are the things of domestic memory, and they stand out importantly when migrants leave familiar sensual worlds and enter new ones.

In his phenomenologically-hermeneutically informed view, Gadamer (1960/1975) understood intermingling in terms of a living language, noting that displaced people go out in sounds, hoping that the things of the world will call back in a known language. His view is useful for describing the in-betweenness of the products and the practices of the Persian art class, where Persian miniatures are painted in Adelaide; for understanding the dual domesticities lived in an Australian house with all its importations and dressings of the Persian house, and the making of florally embossed biscuits and Persian cloths. Gadamer argues specifically for the existence of an aesthetic experience that involves an interplay between the subjectivity of the work of art, for example, and the subjectivity of the spectator. Here, an artwork can never stand as a straightforwardly simple perceptual object in the mind of the distanced spectator. Instead, the work itself is also a subject, capable of expressing itself, and is involved in a complex interplay between the poles of subject and object, its status becoming fluid as a result of its position as an experience of the spectator. The spectator, too, experiences this fluidity, as she is changed by the experience of the art. Experience itself lends fluidity to what meanings might be made of the art, for art is always influenced by our own historical situation. Here, the influence of one's own historical situatedness is privileged in the making of present meaning. This historical influence vests itself in

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language; people call out with the preconceptions that make understanding possible, and the calls that come back to them may not reference these preconceptions (1960/1975, p. 263). It is this world of in-between, of fluidity, that the Persian women migrants with whom we worked made sense of, translating their migratory experiences in specifically sensual ways.

Making and being among the things of Persian domestic worlds in Australia - the dish *Kesh Mesh Polou*, the hanging of carefully detailed Persian miniatures on the lounge room wall, creating the smellscapes of simmering oiled 'traditional' food, and the slurpy soundscapes of sipping sugary tea - is not simply or only about copying the remnants of home in a new place, a new house. Engaging with material memories of these kinds is involved in effecting a translation, a transformation of emotion from pain to relief; from prior physically felt sadness sickness to stitching sadness tightly to fabric.

### Small, Large, In Between

We have argued elsewhere that the sensual consumption of domesticscapes reinforces relationships between persons and farther-flung places, thus reconciling and intertwining home and away, remembering and forgetting, past and future (see Warin & Dennis, 2005). Specifically, in domestic space, Safieh grounds her body at once in the past and in the present, in and through her sewing activity, to simultaneously stay in Persia and be in Australia. Her sensuous body here occupies a similar position, as do her material memories of Persia: her table cloths, her large and intricate framed tapestries, are material memories located in a position "from Persia, in Australia", where their capacity to hold memories of the past, but also to make new memories on the strength of the old ones, and in reference to them, forms the means by which they reach out to span the hugeness of distance that otherwise separates Iran from Australia. It is the ongoing sensual engagement that constitutes the basis for negotiating the processes of remembering and forgetting (which are not here understood to be oppositional processes, but which are understood to be linked into the constancy of one process of being, in this case, migrant). The senses here are the fluid in-between of bodies and world, forming the means by which humans encounter the world.

The senses, understood in this way, mediate between person and world, and between all manner of other binaries, including that between remembering and forgetting. For these Persian women, the doing of small things in, among, and even through the domestic materials of memory in Australia meant

engaging with, or 'calling out to' new things - new oils for cooking, new slippery paints for producing Persian miniatures, new spices for old biscuits, and new threads for stitching - and having them call back. The calls back might sometimes have been more than a little unfamiliar, and might sometimes have meant that new kinaesthetic habits had to be acquired to, for example, tension a heavier, coarser embroidery thread; it sometimes might have meant tastes had to be more accommodating; it sometimes meant that new temporal cooking rhythms had to be learned. The resultant strangeness of taste, and the weight of yarn, might have effected what Kleinman (1982) has shown to be sensual contraction in other ethnographic circumstances, where what is newly sensually apprehended in a new place is so distressing that it is best to go deaf, go numb, and taste nothing. It is best not to sensually call out, and it is best not to listen to the alien emissions that strange things make. Another possibility, one that occurred in the lives of these migrant women, was that newness became incorporated into oldness to yield new-old Persian-Australian things and experiences.

In this new-oldness, or old newness, lies the potential for memory to be made, unmade, remade, and/or forgotten. In the very act of a mobile and never completely effected transubstantiation, in which Persian food prepared in Australia is never completely relegatable to one site nor the other, old sensual experiences of taste, smell, stitch and brush stroke are sufficiently flexible to stretch to the accommodation of new ones. Remembering sadness involves remembering it in a place and time; memories are, as Radstone (2005) argues, "always mediated". At the smallest, the body remembers the practices of home, its practices and habits of hand, and the new ingredients of oil, cotton and paint incorporate Australian sensual newness into the differently spiced biscuit and the embroidery stitched with glossier threads. Remembering sadness involves remembering it in a place and time two decades ago, and many miles from it, but it nevertheless involves that habited body that still knows, unreflexively and at the smallest level, what it was like to be embodied in Iran, and what it took to produce the materials of home place that bore witness to the sad events: "that rug saw it all", said one woman of her prized example, which she had made herself. The sad is thus here-now, *and* there-then, persisting in the aroma of little Persian biscuits, and in the rug that saw it all. These biscuits and rugs are now involved in a new sensorium, where they not only hold the sad of the past, but hold also the potential of making new domestic memories.

The evocation of memory, and the opportunity to

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forget, might be usefully understood to be based on the present sensual network in which a person is currently suspended: a present which involves in its current the past, persisting in the habits of hand, and in the domestic house and its material things and sensescapes, and the future, in which sadness is about to be reduced by way of its fixedness to cloth, but

where it might spring unexpectedly forth in the smells of burning and home-cooked foods. Remembering and forgetting loom large and squat small in the sensual web of being, and they are responsive to sensual opportunity: they subsist and persist in the smallest of domestic activities and the largest of migratory movements.

### About the Authors



Dr Simone Dennis is an anthropologist trained in the discipline at the University of Adelaide, and currently teaches anthropology at the University of Southern Queensland. She is also a regular consultant to the Department for Aboriginal Affairs and Reconciliation in South Australia, for which she undertakes cultural heritage work. She has served for eighteen months as an advisory editor for the US based journal *Popular Culture Review*. Her research interests revolve around human engagements with place and with the institutions of social power in and through everyday means. Her most recent book in this area is entitled *Police Beat: The Emotional Power of Music in Police Work* (2007). Dr Dennis's most recent ethnographic work took place among the people of Christmas Island (Indian Ocean, Australia) and centrally involved themes of migration, border control, and the ways in which asylum seekers and past and present island residents make sense of place and the new governmental cartography of borders via sensual means.



Dr Megan Warin is a medical anthropologist at Durham University (UK) whose teaching and research interests coalesce around the embodiment of food and memory, migration, and theory in medical anthropology. In addition to gender studies and anthropology, Dr Warin has worked in a number of disciplines in Australian universities, including psychiatry and public health, and has conducted research into schizophrenia (including the Australian arm of a larger cross-cultural study with the Iban of Borneo), the phenomenology of anorexia (in Vancouver, Edinburgh and Adelaide), and gender and class difference in obesity in an Australian context. Recent ethnographic work examines theories of suffering and emotion amongst Persian migrants in Australia and North East England.

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