Between March 1996 and April 1998, I co-directed the documentary film *Divorce Iranian Style* with an independent British filmmaker, Kim Longinotto. The film was inspired by my book *Marriage on Trial*, which was based on ethnographic research on Islamic family law. Almost the whole 80-minute film takes place in a small courtroom in central Tehran. There are four main characters: Massy, who wants to divorce her inadequate husband; Ziba, an outspoken 16-year-old who proudly stands up to her 38-year-old husband and his family; Jamileh, who brings her husband to court to teach him a lesson, and Maryam, remarried and desperate to regain custody of her two daughters. This, my first exposure to filmmaking, involved me in long series of negotiations, not only with the Iranian authorities for a permit and access, but also with myself. I had to deal with personal, ethical and professional dilemmas as well as with theoretical and methodological issues of representation and the production of anthropological narratives. The film’s subject-matter inevitably entailed both exposing individuals’ private lives in a public domain and tackling women's position in Islamic law, a major issue which divides Islamists and feminists.

What follows is an account of these negotiations, exploring the problem of ethnographic representation generally, as well as the complex politics
involved in representing ‘Iran’ and ‘women in Islam’. The account is in three parts: first is an account of the 20 months of negotiations before we were able to make the film; second a description of the one-month film shoot in Tehran, during which we extended our negotiations to the people who came to court, and of how we edited the raw footage into the finished film; thirdly, I summarize the reactions of various audiences to the film – a final series of negotiations of meaning. Through these narratives, I aim to show the ways in which the reality of Iranian women’s lives portrayed in our film came to be constructed, and how it has been interpreted by viewers.

**Negotiating Access**

The idea of making a film about the working of shari’a law in a Tehran family court was born in early 1996, when a friend introduced me to Kim Longinotto, the documentary filmmaker. We discovered that we shared the same frustration with Western media stereotypes of the Muslim world. I had seen and liked Kim’s film on women in Egypt (*Hidden Faces*, 1991). She had for some time wanted to make a film in Iran, being intrigued by the contrast between images produced by current-affairs TV documentaries, and those in the work of Iranian fiction filmmakers such as Kiarostami. The former portray Iran as a country of fanatics, the latter convey a much gentler, more poetic sense of the culture and people. As she put it, ‘You wouldn’t think the documentaries and the fiction were about the same place.’ We discussed my 1980s research in Tehran family courts and I gave her a copy of *Marriage on Trial*.

The next steps were to apply to British TV commissioning editors for funding and to Iranian officials for access and a permit to film. Kim concentrated on the first, I on the second. In March 1996 we submitted through the Iranian Embassy in London a proposal to shoot a documentary film in court in Tehran. Aware of the sensitivity of the theme, we phrased the proposal carefully. We stated that our aim was to make a film that would reach a wide audience and challenge prevailing stereotypes about women and Islam. This we wanted to do by addressing a universal theme cutting across cultural and social barriers, to which ordinary people could relate emotionally as well as intellectually. Marriage, divorce and the fate of children, we argued, provide a perfect theme for such a film.

We had two main arguments. First, in order to reach a wide audience, a film should have a story, a sense of drama. Court cases inherently involve stories and drama, which would instantly capture an audience’s interest and sympathy. Stories – especially disputes – are powerful yet non-judgemental narratives; they communicate themselves, they inform and educate the audience in the human aspects of a different culture, and allow – even force – the audience to question their own prejudices and assumptions. Through such stories, audiences can gradually, without being aware of it, learn to understand and respect a different value system, which at first may have seemed remote and incomprehensible. In subtle ways, an intimate view of family disputes in another cultural context would shift the focus from cultural difference to common humanity.

Secondly, in order to challenge stereotypes successfully, and to draw the viewer into the rich and varied lives of ordinary people, the film should focus on individuals and their stories in the courts as well as in their homes. This was important, because some of the most powerful and least-questioned stereotypes of Islam and Muslims concern women and the law. In the case of Iran, for instance, many in the West understand and judge Iranian family life – and the status and position of women within it – by the accounts of writers such as Betsy Mahmoody, whose book and subsequent feature film *Not Without my Daughter* (*Brian Gilbert, 1991*) reached a wide Western audience. This story too was about families and the fate of children when marriages break down; ordinary people could easily relate directly to these universal themes, but at the same time they absorbed a one-sided picture of the complex reality of Iranian family life. That picture has remained unchallenged, simply because there is no alternative account available.

These arguments were not enough to persuade the MCIG to give permission for the film to be made. In October our application was rejected without explanation; we learned later that FCF, which is responsible for issuing film permits, found it difficult to categorize the project, and understood it to be for a ‘feature film’.

Kim and I did not give up. We were now committed to the project and were convinced of the need to tackle the topic of divorce in Iran through a film that would reach a wide audience. So we continued to lobby the Iranian embassy, attending its functions to meet visiting dignitaries and explain our project. For Kim, these meetings became a crash induction course into the official gender codes of the Islamic Republic, and it took her some time to understand and feel at ease with the embassy’s gender
protocol. The first time, she arrived at a reception wearing a red scarf tied behind her head — as she had done when filming in rural Egypt — and tried to shake hands with an Iranian diplomat to whom I was introducing her, almost chasing the poor man around the room.

In mid-November a Shi’a organization in London convened a meeting to celebrate the birth of Fatima, daughter of the Prophet; key speakers included Zahra Mostafavi and Fatemeh Hashemi, heads of two of the most influential women’s organizations in Iran, with close ties to the ruling elite. Mostafavi, daughter of Ayatollah Khomeini, was president of the Women’s Society of the Islamic Republic; Hashemi, daughter of then President Rafsanjani, was head of the Women’s Bureau in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and of the Women’s Solidarity Association of Iran. After attending the meeting, we had discussions with both women, arranged for us by the embassy.

We talked to Hashemi after she had given a press conference, in which she combined modernity and religiosity in both her appearance and her views. Kim and I were impressed by her performance and the way she handled the questions. She told me that she had heard of my research when she was in Oxford and saw the merits of our project, but that she found our choice of theme too controversial. In a polite and diplomatic manner, she made it clear to us that if we did not change our theme we would not get a permit to film; she would not welcome our attachment to her Association, nor would it be of any help to us. Nevertheless, she gave us her card and said she would invite us to a conference on women and cinema hosted by the Association the next February.

But we failed to communicate our vision to Mostafavi. Kim and I understood that we had an appointment to see her in the embassy residence, but when we arrived we found that she was holding a reception for a group of women. We felt awkward and unwelcome. We were not invited to join in, and were ushered into a separate room to wait. Mostafavi then came in with a young woman whom I supposed to be her assistant, and said there had been a misunderstanding: she had expected us earlier in the other building. I apologized for the inconvenience, and said that we had been told specifically to come at this time. I handed her the Persian text of our proposal, and asked for her help with getting a permit. I tried to make a case for our film and our approach, stressing our interest in portraying common humanity rather than difference. Kim and I were in a unique position to do this: I was an Iranian and an anthropologist and she was an experienced filmmaker; we had both lived and worked in different cultures, and could make a film that would reach a wide audience. But neither our aims nor our credentials seemed to convince her. She talked about the Qur’anic approach to anthropology — which she understood to be not the comparative study of culture but the study of human nature — and expressed her doubts about the sincerity of the Western world and its media, saying, ‘We have been stabbed so many times.’ She also told me I had lived abroad for too long, suggesting that I had lost contact with my culture. I objected strongly, defending my Muslim and Iranian identity and saying that the study of culture was my field, that I had conducted research in different parts of Iran and in Morocco, that I had been on numerous missions to various parts of Iran as a consultant with a UN organization, and that we had contacted her because we thought working with an Iranian organization could facilitate our project and would be beneficial to us all. She said she would send our proposal for appraisal to the Women’s Society she headed, and promised she would let me know the result. But we never heard from her again.

After we had left, Kim drew it to my attention that Mostafavi had let her chador slip as she spoke to us, showing us what she was wearing underneath — something I had not noticed. I was impressed by Kim’s trained eye and realized that there were many things that I took for granted and no longer noticed about my own culture; at the same time, of course, there was so much of significance that I knew and understood but Kim did not yet see. I was also becoming aware that I was not just an observer but that my debates and interactions with my compatriots were becoming a part of our project; through them, Kim was developing an insight and understanding of gender politics in Iran. If we could work together, we would be a good team.

Going to Iran: Arguing our Case

Three encouraging developments followed shortly after. We met Ayatollah Mohammad Tashkiri, head of the Organization for Islamic Culture and Communication — a body directly connected to the Office of the Supreme Leader — who had led the Iranian delegation to the 1995 Women’s Conference in Beijing. He was visiting SOAS in London for a meeting with Iran specialists; Kim and I joined in, and managed to present our project to him. To our surprise, he expressed no objection to our topic and told us to contact his Organization, which could help us with obtaining a permit.
Every day we went to talk about our project with many people, from both religious and secular women involved in debates on women’s rights in Iran – academics, lawyers, journalists – to independent filmmakers who were anti-clerical in their outlook, and officials in TV, the MCIJ and women’s organizations. To obtain our permit, we were prepared to collaborate with an Iranian film company or a women’s group. Most of them, however, wanted us to change our theme, to film a ‘politically correct’ issue which reflected a ‘positive image’ of Iran, such as marriage ceremonies, female members of parliament or mothers of martyrs. Again and again I had to defend our choice of theme, which led to some heated discussions. I could not interpret fully for Kim, who often got anxious that we were having a serious dispute.

These discussions helped us to improve our presentation of the project, and also helped me to clarify my views on the politics of representing ‘Iran’ and ‘women in the Islamic Republic’. We had to distinguish what we and, we hoped, our target audiences – saw as ‘positive’ from what many people we talked to saw as ‘negative’, with the potential of turning our project into yet another sensationalized foreign film on Iran. Images and words, we argued, can evoke different feelings in different cultures: for instance, to Western eyes a mother talking of the loss of her sons in war as martyrdom for Islam is more likely to confirm stereotypes of religious zealotry and fanaticism than to evoke the Shi’a idea of sacrifice for justice and freedom. We argued that what they saw as ‘positive’ could be ‘negative’ in Western eyes, and vice versa; that one answer was to present viewers with social reality and allow them to make up their own minds; some might react favourably, and some might not, but in the end it would give a much more ‘positive’ image of Iran than the usual films. No single film, we argued, could show the complete reality of Iranian society, but when there were many films available people could get alternative views. If we could show women, at home and in the court, holding their own ground, maintaining the family from within, this would challenge some Western stereotypes.

We had extended discussions with three production companies. The head of Kadr-e Film, who had called me in London, was away during our stay in Tehran, and instructed his deputy to finalize our agreement. But we failed to reach any kind of understanding. A retired army man with no conception of an observational documentary, he and his colleagues first tried to persuade us to change the theme, arguing that nothing positive could be said about women and law in Iran. I found myself having to
argue that the Revolution and its aftermath had empowered Iranian women by gradually opening a space for them to claim their rights within the context of Islamic law. This was obviously a view they did not share, and they took it as an argument for Islamic law and the status quo. They said that our proposal was too vague and that they would need a full script, details of our characters and locations and so on, in order to get us a permit. These of course we could not provide. We explained that an observational documentary, by definition, allows stories to present themselves to the camera, and to develop while filming; we could not define and constrain them beforehand.

Kadr-e Film told us that they had approached two quasi-governmental companies, Sima Film and Resaneh, either of which could get us a permit. Resaneh, which produces films for Iranian TV for broadcast outside Iran, had agreed to do so, but changed their mind at the last minute. Just before leaving London, I had had a call from someone in Resaneh asking for details of our project; I said we would be in Tehran the following week, and they gave me a phone number, an address and an appointment. I did not say anything of this to Kadr-e Film, as I felt unsure about their sincerity; later Kim and I decided to go and talk to Resaneh ourselves. When we arrived for our appointment, we were told that the person who had contacted us was away, and instead we were taken to see the director. But it was clearly not a good time to approach him, as he wanted nothing to do with British-made documentaries. As he put it, 'he had burned his fingers' recently with a British film, Guardians of the Ayatollahs (1996) by Phil Rees, which focused on the Basij, the conservative-supported voluntary militia. This film, broadcast by the BBC just before the 1996 Majles elections, proved highly controversial and cost one Majles representative his seat. The director gave us a long account of how Rees had seemed sympathetic but then made a really 'negative' film, breaking his agreement with those he had interviewed. We argued that our film was quite different: it was not about a political issue, nor would we interview any personalities; it was about ordinary people and the breakdown of marriage, a universal social issue. We wanted to make an observational film, not a current-affairs documentary with a political agenda; we were there to learn. But he would not listen to any of our arguments. Then I asked how we could get a permit to make our film. He told us that we must work either with Resaneh or another Iranian company, or get MCIG approval — which, given our theme, we never would. He had two suggestions: either we change our theme to something 'positive', such as working women or marriage ceremonies in different parts of the country, or we let Resaneh make the film for us. Both suggestions were unacceptable. The second was indeed strange, and Kim was too polite to say anything. But I said in Persian that Kim was a filmmaker who wanted to make her own film with me, and there was no way that anyone else could make a film for us, although we were prepared to collaborate.

The director then invited us to see the documentaries his company had made. He took us downstairs, introduced us to a young man who had worked on some of them, and returned to his office. The young man showed us some films, saying that one of their objectives was to present a positive picture of Iran to the rest of the world. Two of the films were about carpets. In one of them, a designer and his daughter were teaching the art of carpet-making to middle-class women, who were all well dressed, wearing makeup and showing their hair. Some of them were asked questions, which they answered to camera. The second was about making gabbeh, a kind of rug with no fixed pattern woven by women in some parts of Iran. The film was made following the national and international success of Makhmalbaf's film Gabbeh (1995), and was meant to provide information about how gabbeh are made. But none of the weavers spoke; the explanation was given by an 'expert' — a man — sitting at a big desk with bookshelves behind him. Kim and I asked why the women had not been allowed to speak; since they made the carpets, they could explain the process better than any man. The answer — that the women did not speak good Persian, and that the male expert was much more qualified — incensed us both, and led to a heated debate over the nature of documentary. The young man argued that the main problem with Iranian films that get to festivals abroad is that they are all about people's misery, about poverty and backwardness, whereas Resaneh wanted to show progress as well, to offer Iranians abroad a different image of their country. For instance, in a film about carpets, they would not show a child weaving, as that would give a negative impression. We said that viewers should be allowed to see the complex picture and judge for themselves; the point of documentaries is to deal with reality, the situation on the ground. It is dishonest to cut children out of a film on carpet-weaving, since this is part of the reality of the industry in Iran, as is the case in many other countries. Everyone knows that, and one should never underestimate viewers and insult their intelligence. We then spoke in detail about how we planned to make our film. At the height of our discussion the director came back and asked what we thought of the films we had seen, clearly hoping we had been impressed enough to ask him to make our film for us. I said,
in Iran, and that we were in a unique position to do so, since Kim had
made award-winning films, and I was an anthropologist with substantial
fieldwork experience and publications; she knew how to communicate with
Western audiences, and I knew about my culture and women's issues. We
could make a valuable film. This was an opportunity that the Islamic
Republic should welcome, given its bad image abroad. We had a clear vision
and were committed to our work; who else would have been so persistent?
I added that this was the last chance; Kim was an independent filmmaker
who had been working exclusively on this project for a year now, and if we
did not get a positive response, she would have to give up.

Our desperation and honesty must have impressed Taskhiri. He said he
would introduce us to a cultural institute, and we could make our film
under its auspices. This turned out to be Resaneh, which — we hadn't
known — was attached to his Organization. I said that we had already
talked to them but they were not interested. He said he would try to
persuade them, and phoned the director there and then. Their conversation
lasted for some time. From Taskhiri's responses it was evident that the
director wanted nothing to do with our film. I began to regret my lack of
tact; perhaps I should not have given him a frank opinion about his mode
of documentary-making.

Having failed to persuade Resaneh, Taskhiri wrote us two letters of
introduction: to the head of Media Affairs at the MCIG, and to the director
of the Islamic Human Rights Commission. The first was to help us get a
permit to film, the second to ask the Ministry of Justice to give us access
to the courts. His assistant made us appointments to see them.

The following day we went to see the head of Media Affairs in one of
the MCIG buildings in north Tehran. I launched into what had become a
routine explanation of our project, but he cut me short, saying we should
have applied to his department at the beginning, not to FCE, as the film
we wanted to make was 'reportage', and therefore fell within his depart-
ment's brief, which was to facilitate and supervise the work of foreign
media correspondents. I said that the embassy in London had not told us
this. He told us to make a fresh application through the embassy, asking
for it to be sent to his department, and they would issue us with a permit
to film and appropriate visas enabling us to bring our equipment. He then
sent us to talk to the head of the Foreign Media Section, who would give
us all the necessary information.

The Foreign Media Section was on the floor below. A female secretary
welcomed us, and asked us to wait in a room with a sofa and a couple of
We wanted our film to get away from the official discourse and ideology of the Islamic Republic, and to show an aspect of Iran that foreign journalists seldom see. I suppose it must have been this that made the authorities uneasy. What Kim and I saw as enchanting and positive was often not 'politically correct'. Our chosen topic of divorce was also a taboo theme that threatened to undermine a central tenet of the Islamic Republic's rhetoric. At the very core of the regime's critique of the West was that family values had broken down and divorce rates had risen, while the Islamic Republic prided itself on the stability of the family. At the same time, officials knew that Western criticism of Islamic gender rules often focused on divorce – many people thought that in Iran a man could dismiss his wife just by saying 'I divorce you' three times. I understood why they wanted us to change the theme, and why it was inconceivable to them that a film about divorce, shot in a family court, could present a positive image of Iran. At the same time, I felt strongly that it was an issue that should be addressed, as divorce laws had become the most visible yardstick, after the 'Islamic' dress code, for measuring women's emancipation or oppression in Islam. Both Western media and Islamist rhetoric treated the whole issue of family law ideologically, ignoring the complex reality on the ground. It was used as a means of 'othering', and there lay the importance of addressing it.

Back in London: Waiting for the Permit

Assured, we thought, of a MCIG permit, Kim returned to London and reported to Channel 4; she went to the embassy, told them what had happened, and submitted a new application. I stayed in Tehran to spend a few more days with my family. So we got our funding and prepared ourselves to return to Tehran in March and shoot the film before the May presidential elections, while those who had approved it were still in office. In February we went to an embassy reception celebrating the anniversary of the Revolution. There we met someone from the Foreign Media Section of the MCIG who had worked on a recent documentary about the late Shah for the BBC 'Reputations' series. When he heard the story of our difficulties in Tehran, he said he would do what he could when he got back to Tehran, but that it was still very unlikely that anybody would be willing to authorize our permit, given the reaction to Rees's film. We had also made the cardinal mistake of telling everyone
about our project, he said, so that there were now many people who would try to stop it.

His prediction was correct—we did not get a response to our new application. I kept calling and faxing the embassy in London and the MCIG in Tehran; nobody knew what had happened to our application. The embassy claimed that they had sent it via the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the MCIG, and the latter claimed that it had not yet reached them. We were confused—we did not know who to believe or what to do. It seemed quite unlikely that the permit would materialize before the presidential election of 23 May. When we wrote to Channel 4 telling them that the project had to be postponed, they asked us to return the money, which demoralized us even more. Obviously they were losing faith in us.

Following the change of government and the installation of President Khatami in August 1997, we renewed our efforts. We submitted yet another application to the MCIG, now headed by the reformist Ataollah Mohajerani. Meanwhile our Foreign Media contact followed up our application and was soon able to tell us that the MCIG had accepted it and that a ‘journalist’ visa was ready for Kim to collect at the embassy in London. This was in effect the permit that would allow us to enter Iran with filming equipment. But Sarah Jeans, the sound recordist with whom Kim had worked previously and whose name was in our application, was no longer available to work, and Kim had to find someone else. We told the person in charge in the embassy that we would be ready to start in September, and were told that this would be all right. But when September came, we were told that we must start the whole process over again. Kim’s visa had expired, as she had failed to collect it within the required three days.

We Nearly Lose Permit and Funding

We didn’t know what was going on. Our Foreign Media contact assured us that the MCIG had accepted our project and it was now up to the embassy to issue the visa. Guessing that officials in the London embassy might be deliberately frustrating our project, we tried to get someone to intervene on our behalf. Through an Iranian acquaintance, Kim and I went to see the head of the Islamic Centre England, a religious and cultural outfit representing the Office of the Supreme Leader. I presented to him the arguments we had gone through in Iran the previous winter.

He then gave us a long lecture about women’s legal rights in Islam and the philosophy behind the rules of marriage and divorce. We asked him to intervene with the embassy on our behalf. I don’t know whether he did or not, or whether we managed to convince him of the merits of our project. Each time I called the embassy, I was told that the permit had not yet reached them.

Meanwhile Kim received a fax from Peter Moore, commissioning editor at Channel 4, saying that ‘the lustre of the project’ had gone for him and it was now ‘like a forced marriage’; he wanted us to abandon it. This was a real blow. Kim persuaded him to have faith, but this was our last chance, we must start filming immediately. So I decided to go to Tehran to present our case again to the MCIG. Kim went into hiding in her flat, as Channel 4 thought that we were both already filming in Iran.

I arrived in Tehran on 16 October. At the MCIG I soon discovered what the problem was with our application. They had learned that Kim’s most recent film, Shinjuku Boys (1996), was about women who live as men in Japan; they had decided that she was a filmmaker who dealt with ‘incorrect’ topics. I strongly defended the films Kim had made in Japan, pointing out that they had won prizes, that the Japanese themselves liked them and did not find them offensive, and that Kim was soon going there to make another film. Once again I argued our case, even suggesting that Iran has received such a bad press, so many negative documentaries have been seen on Western TV; even if ours does give a negative impression, it can’t make things worse; but at least give us a chance, we may make a worthwhile film!

The whole ambience of the Foreign Media Section had changed. There was an air of openness and debate which gave me hope. The new head was more receptive to our ideas. Unlike his predecessor, he was not hostile to our project or afraid of dealing critically with internal issues, and was less concerned with the opinions of the outside world. Later, I learned that he had been a POW in Iraq for eight years during and after the war, but he had no bitterness and was kind and open. Meanwhile, the pictures of martyrs had gone from the waiting room, and no-one now walked around in slippers. One day, as I was sitting in the waiting room, two young men appeared with a video camera, apparently to get clearance to send their film abroad. One of them was the young man with whom I had had the heated discussion in Resaneh on the nature of documentaries in February. He recognized me and said that our discussion had made him think, and that he now wanted to make films about real people who were allowed to
express themselves. He was no longer afraid to deal with reality in his films, however it might be construed by outsiders, and thought it essential to be self-critical.

Three weeks later, visas were issued for Kim and sound-recordist Christine Felce, enabling them to bring the 16mm camera and sound equipment. On Friday 7 November, Kim fetched the passports from the embassy, but discovered that the visas were valid for only one day and would expire before their flight arrived in Tehran on Monday morning. We never discovered whether this had been a genuine mistake or a deliberate attempt to sabotage our work. Kim returned at once to the embassy, who said that it would not be a problem. Then she called me; I told her that it was a problem, she would be turned back at the airport. She was desperate, and didn't know what to do. She couldn't get an answer from the embassy, which closed early on Friday, so my sister Rui, who lives in London, accompanied her there; they knocked at the door until they were let in, and finally a woman official there agreed to extend their visas for another day.

**Tehran: The Shoot**

Kim and Christine arrived on 10 November. We all stayed in my parents' house. Our team was joined by my sister Sina, who lives in Tehran, and Zaha Sa'izadeh. Sina, as 'production manager', looked after the domestic arrangements, and Zaha, as 'camera assistant', learned to change film magazines and came with us everywhere during the shoot. Zaha, then 17, was like a daughter to me, and I introduced her as such in court and elsewhere. With the aid of letters of introduction from the MCIG, Kim and Christine's visas were further extended. Then, with the help of the Public Relations Section of the Ministry of Justice, we visited several Judicial Complexes. There are 16 of these in Tehran. Each contains a number of courts dealing with cases filed by local residents. They tend to differ in nature, given that the middle classes tend to live in the north of Tehran, and the working classes in the south. This posed a problem. Our Foreign Media contact, who had appointed himself our guide, argued that we must show the diversity of the courts and the range of cases heard; we must film in courts headed by both civil and religious judges, and cover marital disputes in different socio-economic strata. But we wanted to work in a single courtroom and capture something of court life itself. We knew that in a major city like Tehran, with a population of over 10 million, no court could be representative, and we did not want to do a sociological survey on film. We wanted to focus on characters and develop storylines. We also knew that our project depended much on the goodwill of the judge and the court staff, so it was important for us to work in a court where they welcomed us, understood our project and were willing to be part of it.

Finally we settled on the Imam Khomeini Complex, the largest one, located in central Tehran near the bazaar. It housed some Ministry of Justice offices, including the Public Relations Section, as well as 33 General Courts. Two courts dealt with family disputes, both headed by clerical judges: Judge Deldar, who sat only in the morning, and Judge Mahdavi, who sat only in the afternoon. We were introduced to both judges, and both said we could film in their courtrooms.

I knew Judge Mahdavi from my fieldwork in the 1980s, when he was the head of the Special Civil Courts, which dealt with family disputes from shortly after the Revolution until 1994, when the General Courts were created. At first we filmed in his courtroom every afternoon, but we soon confined ourselves to Judge Deldar's court, which we found more interesting. As Judge Mahdavi dealt only with divorce by mutual consent - that is cases where both parties had already worked out an agreement - there was little room for negotiation. The dynamics of the cases heard were rather uniform, and couples rarely revealed the real reasons behind the breakdown of their marriage. Judge Deldar, on the other hand, dealt with all kinds of marital disputes; thus we heard a much wider range of stories and observed a more spontaneous environment. The staff in this court were also fascinating characters in their own right, especially Ms Maher, the court secretary, who had worked in the same branch for over 20 years. She was an extremely capable woman who understood our project, and she and her daughter Paniz soon became integral to the film. Judge Deldar was a pious man who ran his court with tolerance and humanity, and was so secure in his own identity and belief that he was genuinely undisturbed by the film crew. After a week, we too became part of courtroom life.

We started filming in Judge Deldar's court on 15 November, and stayed there for four weeks, resisting all pressure to go elsewhere. We had no minders, and could film what we liked, so long as the people involved agreed. To film outside in the corridors and the prayer room, we often had someone from the Public Relations Section with us, largely to facilitate our movement around the building. As an all-woman crew, we had access...
to both male and female spaces, which are typically separated by a curtain, with female spaces being relatively marginal, cramped and small. An early scene in the film shows the women’s lobby, shut off from the rest of the building by a torn curtain. Such a lobby is found at the entrance to every major government building in Iran. Women are checked – by other women of course – to ensure that they are observing the correct dress code and not wearing makeup; they have to submit to such checks before they are allowed to enter the courthouse, which is by definition male space. In the prayer scene depicted in the film, women are again separated by a curtain. Again they occupy the smaller space – appropriate as there are certainly fewer women than men working in the courts. Both these scenes could only be observed – and filmed – by a female crew.

Our project nearly came to an abrupt end on two occasions. In the second week of filming we were summoned to the MCIG and told that they had received serious objections to our film. We protested about the injustice and damage to our reputations if we had to stop filming once we had started. It was unfair to play with people’s lives in this way: Kim was an independent filmmaker, I was an academic, and we had both put our reputations on the line, investing so much in the project that there was no way we could let it go. Finally they agreed, saying, ‘You have some enemies.’ We never discovered who these enemies were, but to appease them it was suggested we should have a minder. We agreed, on condition that it was a woman. Ms Tavassoli, clad in her bright blue overcoat, began to accompany us to court; she was clearly thrilled to be part of the project and became a great ally. The problem was that she would not stop talking during the court sessions, continually engaging couples in conversation and disrupting our routine. Luckily, after a week she was recalled to the ministry, as she was needed to help with a The Conference of Islamic Heads of State that was due to start shortly.

Then, towards the end of our filming, we were summoned to the Public Relations Section of the Ministry of Justice and informed that, because of the security requirements of this conference, no film crew was being allowed in Judicial Complexes anywhere in Tehran. The argument seemed rather far-fetched, and after Judge Deldar talked to the head of the complex we were allowed to film for one more week. This last week was extremely tense: every day we arrived in court we thought it might be the last. But by this time we felt that we had enough material for our film.

The Court, the People and the Film Crew

The courtroom was about 6 metres long by 4 metres wide. In one of the shorter walls was a large window, in the other, the main door opened onto the corridor. Along one long wall was seating for petitioners and a second door, leading to the court office and archives; opposite sat the judge at his desk. Other desks, including Ms Maher’s, stretched as far as the main door. The film crew occupied the space in front of the window. Kim put the camera on a tripod next to the judge, with me standing next to her, facing the door and the petitioners. Sometimes she moved the camera by hand to film outside the courtroom or in the office. Christine placed a microphone stand on the judge’s desk and used a boom for the petitioners, often moving around the room.

The presence of an all-woman crew changed the gender balance in the courtroom, and undoubtedly gave several women petitioners courage. Likewise, I believe the mixed nationalities of the crew helped to transcend the insider–outsider divide. The camera was another link, between the court and the outside world as well as between public and private. We meticulously observed the dress code, and kept ourselves in the background when the court was in session. We sought to keep the focus on the proceedings and the protagonists, and to avoid drawing attention to ourselves. We never talked to each other except when I had to interpret remarks
addressed to Kim. I did not explain to Kim what was being said or done when we were filming or when a case was in progress, saving such explanations for later in the corridor or when there was nobody else in the room. I often had to decide what to film and what not to film, touching Kim whenever I wanted her to start or stop filming. At times we became like one person. Sometimes when I was outside the room dealing with crises such as the ones mentioned earlier, Kim had to make these decisions herself. When we went through the unedited rushes in London, I was amazed how often Kim had sensed exactly when to zoom in to close-up when something crucial was being said.

Although I had never been on a shoot before, I found Kim's approach highly sympathetic: there were no fixed ideas or script, and stories were allowed to develop in front of the camera. This made me feel at ease; it was just like doing anthropological fieldwork, but with a film crew. In the first week, we filmed any case whose parties allowed it, but as the days passed and certain people kept coming back to court, we filmed less, concentrating on the development of stories we had already started filming. We had a rough idea of what we wanted to film, with certain priorities: stories with resolutions, a variety of legal issues, people from different classes, striking personalities and drama. One of our main fears was that we might not be able to follow any case in its entirety, so that we would end with only bits of cases.

The Camera and Our Main Characters

We never filmed without consent. Every morning, early, I went through Ms. Mahir's book to confirm what cases were due to be heard that day; before each new case, I approached the parties concerned in the corridor, explained who we were and what our film was about and asked whether they would agree to participate. Some agreed, others refused. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most women welcomed the project and wanted to be filmed. Some who had agreed at first changed their minds later and stopped us filming them. Some, like Maryam – one of our main characters – refused at first, then came round later. When we first saw Maryam, in the corridor in the first week of filming, both Kim and I were keen to have her in the film; she had a presence, a strong character and seemed very straightforward, and above all her case involved custody, a topic we desperately wanted to cover. But when I approached her, she adamantly refused to be filmed. Then one day in our second week, when the judge was out, I was sitting on a bench in the corridor, discussing as usual women's legal rights with women petitioners. That day our discussion turned on how women themselves allowed gender inequalities in the law to continue. I said that nothing would change for women unless they did something themselves; women must ask for our rights; they won't be handed to us on a plate; we should speak out, make our voices heard, but we don't because we're ashamed of making public something we think should be private. Maryam was there; she didn't say anything, but next day, when she saw me in the corridor, she said: 'now I want to be in your film.' From then on, she accepted us as friends and confided in us, and we became her only allies in the court.

We met Masu – the woman seeking a divorce on the grounds of her husband's failure to father a child – in the first week, and talked to her outside the courtroom. She too was at first reluctant to be part of the film, but later she agreed and we followed her story. She too became a close friend: we filmed in her home, though we didn't use the footage.

We first met our other two main characters in the courtroom. Jamileh, having quarrelled with her husband, had him jailed overnight and brought to court the following day. Such 'penal cases' (da'ani-ye kef furnish), are referred to the family court by the police, and require no prior appointment, so we had no opportunity to explain our project and ask permission to film. However, this problem was resolved spontaneously, as Jamileh turned to the camera and opened her heart to us. She was fun, had a sense of humour and was open with her own feelings.

Ziba, too, the 16-year-old who desperately wanted a divorce and to go back to school, we first met with her husband Bahman in the courtroom. There was no time to explain: I signalled to them, can we film? Both nodded. Later, we got to know them well, and they asked us to attend the arbitration session in Ziba's house. I believe that our presence there gave Ziba the courage to speak out and stand her ground. She showed herself to be incredibly articulate for a 16-year-old from any culture.

From my previous fieldwork, I had learned that marriage as constructed in law is very different from marriage as lived by ordinary people, that women can turn even the most patriarchal elements of Islamic law to their advantage to achieve their personal marital aims, and that marriage has a more egalitarian structure in practice than in law. I knew that most marital disputes that make their way to court never come to a judicial decision, and that all of them are conducted at two levels: the legal and the social
(personal). Petitioners — mainly women — treat the court as a forum for negotiating the terms of marriage or divorce, using the law as a means of exerting pressure on their partners to concede their demands. Generally, cases that appear in court fall into two categories: those where the marriage has already broken down, and those where it has not yet failed but is under strain. In the first category, women come to court to negotiate the terms of a divorce settlement, to retrieve something of their investment in the marriage, in terms of youth, work, emotions, love, trust and above all their children. In the second, they come to renegotiate the terms of the relationship, to reach a new balance.

We wanted to convey these subtleties in our film, but we had no idea if people would trust us enough to indicate what they really wanted. It was easy to observe and take notes, but to capture such things on film was a different matter. In the event, women did indeed share their strategies with us, and through us with the audience. I believe this happened because they came to see us as their allies, felt that they could be themselves in front of camera and saw no need to hide their real motives for bringing the case to court.

Outside the sessions, both in the courtroom and in the corridor, I talked about our project, explaining how we wanted to make a film that foreign audiences could relate to, to bridge the gap in understanding and to show how Iranian Muslim women — like women in other parts of the world — do the best they can to make sense of the world around them and to better their lives. Because of my knowledge of the law, women often asked me for advice about their cases — just as they had when I did fieldwork in the courts a decade earlier. This time I felt happier dropping my mask as an anthropologist, and becoming another Iranian woman who had myself been through divorce. I was open about my own position, my views about the law, and my own divorce experiences, and I often engaged in heated discussions with both men and women about the merits of our film. Some — mostly men — were opposed to the film, suggesting that nothing good could come out of filming marital disputes, which show only the worst aspects of Iranian life. One of these was a trainee judge, who tried unsuccessfully to convince Judge Deldar to stop our work. I continued to argue the matter with him to the very last day of filming: Ms Maher always took my side.

The fact that I took an active role in these discussions, speaking my mind and talking about my own divorces, broke down the barriers and made women feel at ease with the camera. The informality of the court also allowed people to talk to us. When shooting, we always stood together — I with my face at the same level as the camera — and were treated as one person. Kim, too, was open and did not hide her feelings, making it clear where her sympathies lay — though she could not follow the details. Many times during the proceedings she was moved to tears.

In effect, the people in the film took the opportunity to tell their stories and were able to play an active role in making the film. They made the film with us. This is reflected in the way they addressed the camera. Occasionally, as when Massy tells us why she wants a divorce, this was prompted by a question from me. More often, the women took the initiative and started telling us about their dispute — as when Jamileh shared with us her real reason for bringing her husband to court. At times, they ignored the camera and continued what they were doing — as when Ziba felt relaxed enough to continue blackmailing her husband into agreeing to a divorce. At times, we were drawn into the proceedings as witnesses — as when the judge asked us whether we had seen Maryam tearing up the court order during a fight with her ex-husband outside the courtroom. Note his question: ‘What did you see when you were outside?’ Maryam had told us she had done it, in effect confessing to an act that could bring her five days in prison for contempt of court; but when he asked us, the judge was looking for a face-saving formula to release Maryam from custody. Our response was legally accurate: we had not actually seen the act. But we were on Maryam’s side, and even if we had seen the act we would have refused to be witnesses — just as those who did see the fight refused Maryam’s ex-husband’s demand that they testify against her.

At times what was said to the camera was a continuation of an off-camera conversation started when the judge was out — or in the corridor in our casual chat. Some of the best sequences in the film came about this way, for instance when Ms Maher’s little girl, Paniz, pretends to be a judge. The origin of that particular scene sums up the way the narrative of the film came to be constructed. At first, whenever the judge was out of the room, Paniz would ask me to tell Kim to film her. So as not to hurt her feelings, we pretended to film, but she soon found out that when Kim was really filming the camera’s red light was on. She confronted me: I apologized for deceiving her and explained what our film was about and why we could not film her whenever she wanted. Paniz made no further demands, but it was obvious that she wanted to be filmed. Then one day during the last week, as we were filming the judge leaving the room, Paniz chose her moment. Her mother was not in court, and as soon as the judge
had left, she ran to his seat and started a mock trial. She clearly understood what the film was about and found a role in it for herself. Kim responded by filming Paniz as she presided over an imaginary case. It was sobering for me to realize how important it was to be honest and share our aims with everyone. This was the only time I had not been honest in the course of our project, though I had done it with good reason.

Another incident confirmed how far both our approach and gender shaped the film’s narrative. Judge Deldar was open and welcoming and his courtroom was in the same building as the Public Relations Office of the ministry, so it was a convenient location for journalists reporting on family disputes, who joined us several times during our four-week shoot. Badri Mofidi, from the newspaper Salam, came every Thursday, and twice we found ourselves sharing the courtroom with an all-male crew from radio and TV. We did not find Ms Mofidi’s presence in court disruptive, but we could not film while the male journalists were present. One reason, of course, was that their equipment got in the way. But the main reason was their approach and their gender. The radio man, who was collecting material for a programme called Seda-ye Ebrat (The Voice of Warning/Lesson), implying learning from mistakes, was only interested in interviewing the judge. Whenever he asked questions of women, he was trying to make a moral point. The six-man TV crew – who were filming footage for a programme on aspects of life in Tehran – occupied the entire courtroom. They talked to the judge and were also keen to film court proceedings, but no-one would consent to be filmed. Eventually they asked me to help them get people’s consent. Their presence was disrupting both court routine and our work, so in order to get them out of the courtroom I tried to persuade women to talk to them, but no-one would agree. Finally, Maryam came to our help. She put on my glasses to disguise herself, and turning her profile to the camera she told them why she had come to court.

Editing in London: Structuring the Narrative

Back in London, we assembled the rushes, some 16 hours of film. It was already clear to us who the main characters were likely to be. We found we had usable material on 17 cases. For the first six weeks, Kim, Moby Longinotto – assistant editor – and I worked to produce a rough cut of each of our cases. Then Batry Vince joined us as editor. The first cut, three hours long, included 10 cases. Many agonizing decisions had to be faced in order to whittle the 10 down to the final six – only four of them fully developed – in the film. It was heartbreaking to have to abandon some very moving stories.

While sorting through this material, we tried to focus on commonalities rather than on the exotic and the different, to remind the viewer that marriage is a difficult institution, that breakdowns can be painful, that societies and individuals deal with this in different ways, and that there is no perfect solution. We also wanted to show what it is like inside a Tehran law court, and to give glimpses into the lives of ordinary people. Above all, we wanted to let the women speak, to show them as individuals going through a difficult phase in their lives and to communicate the pain – and the humour – involved in the breakdown of marriage. Although clearly some contextual information was essential, we were anxious not to overcrowd the film with facts and figures or to tell viewers what to think, but to let them to draw their own conclusions.

To help viewers understand our position and how the narrative of the film took shape, we did not cut out interventions or my questions and comments. We were aware that this might be unsettling to an audience used to films where the director is entirely hidden, but it was important for us to be honest with our audience in the same way that we were honest with people in the film. We did not want to hide anything, we wanted viewers to see how we were part of the proceedings, how we did not keep an observational distance from the people we were filming. We hoped viewers would come to understand how the film was constructed, how the camera was a catalyst for the narrative and made a link between public and private, insider and outsider.

It was difficult to choose a title for the film. The problem with Marriage on Trial was that it did not mention the film’s location. Divorce Iranian Style was suggested by Peter Moore, who saw it as a nice play on Pietro Germi’s well-known 1962 comedy, Divorce Italian Style. Although Kim and I thought it trivialized our film, we could not come up with anything better.

Reactions to the Film

The completed 78-minute film was premiered at the Edinburgh International Film Festival in August 1998, and screened in numerous other festivals in 1998 and 1999, winning several awards. It had cinema runs in
the US and UK, and was widely reviewed in the media. The first British TV broadcast was in Channel 4's 'True Stories' in August 1999, but a 55-minute version, cut by us for Channel 4 International, had already been broadcast elsewhere, including on the Franco–German Arte channel, which can be seen in Iran by those with satellite dishes.

The film has not been publicly screened in Iran.\textsuperscript{10} We entered it for the Fajr Festival in February 1999, but it was not accepted, on the grounds that there was not enough time to get the written consent of those filmed, a requirement because the film dealt with private issues. As it happens, all the main characters had already signed a written consent, required by Channel 4, but I decided not to pursue the matter as I feared the film might become part of the current struggle between reformists and conservatives. We had been given a permit to film by Khatami's reformist government, so the conservative papers could have used the film as a means of condemning the policies of the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, who was about to be impeached by the conservative-dominated parliament. However, the film was known, not only by those who regularly attend festivals abroad, but also by ordinary people: there were reports on it by the BBC and Voice of America Persian-language programmes, both of which have many listeners in Iran.\textsuperscript{11}

Reactions to the film were highly varied, revealing not only the differing ways in which audiences related to our narrative but also the complexity of the politics of identity and gender. Most film critics, both Iranian and foreign, were enthusiastic. We felt that they had understood the film and that we had achieved our main goal, which was to challenge simplistic ideas of Iran as a country of fanatics and of Muslim women as helpless victims without any agency. The film had helped to humanize Iranians, who have been demonized in the West since the Revolution. Almost all Western reviewers commented on this point, some devoting a whole page to the film and the issues it raised, such as in the London Evening Standard, whose reviewer ends as follows:

Five years ago in Beyond the Clouds, Phil Agland dispelled the hoary myth of oriental inscrutability by showing us that the everyday hopes and fears of the Chinese are little different from our own. Last night Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini accomplished something similar for Iran... showed that there is more in an Islamic society to admire than fear. More engrossing than a soap, it humanized a people who've too often been demonized by the media.\textsuperscript{12}

Reviews in the Iranian press — both outside and inside Iran — were also positive and encouraging. Two reviews in Zanan — a woman's magazine with a feminist agenda, aligned with the reformists — treat the film as an expose of women's suffering through the legal biases of the law. Shahla Lahiji, criticizing the Fajr Festival for not screening the film, wrote:

These authorities — who at first, with such understanding, broad-mindedness and free thinking, allowed the filmmakers' camera to document only a fragment of the tearful scenes of the civil life of women in law and in the family courts — why and how and according to what logic have they prevented the other men and women of this country from watching this documentary in a socially responsible manner? What are they afraid of?

If the inadequacy of the present laws is ruining women's lives, we will get nowhere by hiding it. Although nowhere in the film do the filmmakers sit in judgment, ugliness and injustices show themselves from corners of the scenes. Covering them up is not the solution. People in other lands have seen this work and have talked about it. Permission to show this film in Iran would give us the opportunity to declare to the world: 'We recognize the suffering and we intend to deal with it.'\textsuperscript{13}

An Iranian film journal carried a positive and insightful feature with a number of articles on Divorce Iranian Style.\textsuperscript{14} Using the film as a way of examining the conditions of documentary-making in Iran and abroad, Pirous Kalantari begins:

After seeing Divorce Iranian Style once, probably the most salient question is: how could a foreign film crew — with such ease — be given such a free hand to make a film in Iran about such a sensitive (why is it sensitive?) issue? Is such a course equally open and accessible for an Iranian filmmaker too?\textsuperscript{15}

Two other articles focus on the role of the camera and how people used it to tell their own stories, thus making their own film. There are also three translated articles: one from the London daily newspaper The Independent soon after the film's premiere in Edinburgh, an interview with Kim and me conducted when the film was shown in the US and my own earlier account of how we went about making the film.

The same kind of consensus, however, did not exist among ordinary viewers of the film. Whenever the film was shown in Europe and the US, I found a wide gap between the responses of Iranian and non-Iranian audiences. Non-Iranian audiences liked the film and could relate to it at a personal level, and some said that they could identify with the characters, admired their courage and drew parallels with their own divorces.

The response of Iranians abroad has been much more mixed. Academics and second-generation Iranians generally reacted positively to the film and shared our own reading of it, others either found it offensive
to 'Iranian values' or used it to make a political point. After a screening, Iranians in the audience seldom spoke, and when they did it was often to protest that the film gave a distorted image of the reality of women's life in Iran and was not representative. After the broadcast on Channel 4, some people phoned Radio Pars – the Persian-language radio programme in London – to express their anger and dissatisfaction with the film.

In Europe and the US, Iranians who objected to the film fall into three categories. First are those who identify politically with elements of the Iranian opposition abroad: they saw the film as propaganda for the Islamic Republic. The film, they argued, does not show the reality of women's oppression in Iran, and trivializes their suffering under Islamic law. In short, they find the film politically incorrect, as it does not expose the injustices and inhumanity of the Islamic regime: the judge is too nice and women are too strong.

Second are non-political Iranian expatriates, largely middle-class in background, who said that the film made them feel ashamed in front of foreigners. It should never have been shown abroad, they contended, as foreigners do not understand the complexity of the Iranian situation and think that all Iranians are 'backward'. They objected that the film did not include 'educated and cultured couples' and only showed 'shabby places', 'backward customs' and 'low-class people'.

These two groups questioned our motives in making the film. While the first group implied we had been manipulated by the Islamic Republic, the second saw a 'British hand' behind the film. During question and answer sessions following screenings of the film, we were often asked why the Islamic Republic allowed us to film, why British TV gave us money to make a film about divorce in Iran, why they were interested in such a subject, what our real motives were and what we wanted to say with such a film. Both groups agreed that the problem with the film was that it was not representative, and gave a distorted picture of reality, though they clearly disagreed as to the nature of that reality.

A third group of people, between these two extremes, not only dismissed conspiracy theories but also took issue with objections that the film is not representative. They saw the film as an indictment of Islamic law and the Islamic Republic. Parto Noori'ala – a writer living in Los Angeles – eloquently expressed this view.

No doubt these women [in the film] are not representative of those who have been crippled by the crazy blows of their husband. Nor do they represent unaware and incapacitated women who, out of fear of their family or society

or in order to stay with their children, tolerate the suffering of living with an unwanted man. Likewise, their husbands do not represent the many biased and aggressive Iranian men, nor is Judge Deldar representative of all judges in Iran. It is not strange, therefore, that some viewers, in a hasty evaluation, accuse this film of being made to order [i.e. by the Islamic Republic] to give a kind face to the courts of the Islamic Republic and to show an unreal picture of Iranian women's fate. On the other hand, some see the film as showing the brave women who fight for their rights and obtain them.

Though conceding that, as filmmakers who made a film in Iran, we could not show the 'reality', Noori'ala seems to be suggesting that it was we who manipulated the authorities and that the film reveals the cruelty of the religious system:

It is natural that a film that is allowed by the Islamic regime cannot display the atrocities and great problems that Iranian women face. Likewise, the viewer cannot expect such a film to show the real faces of clerical judges in the judiciary in Iran nor the usual behaviour of its employees. But the intelligent directors of the film, without resorting to slogans or overemphasizing a point, with skill and awareness, through simple images, in an unexaggerated language, with humour, succeed in unveiling the darkest and most oppressive family laws in the Islamic Republic which are based on religious laws.

She ends her review with a political point:

This film once again reminds us that obtaining women's rights and securing social justice, equality, and protection against encroachments of cultural, religious, ideological traditions everywhere in the world are only possible when civil laws replace and correct religious laws, traditional and existing beliefs in society.

Conclusion

What do my own experiences of and audience reactions to Divorce Iranian Style tell us about the reality portrayed in documentaries about Iranian women in particular and Iran in general? In other words, how do these narratives relate and speak to each other?

First, in making Divorce Iranian Style, I had to confront my own multiple identities and find myself in the uncannily familiar situation of shifting perspectives and self-redefinition. When I started the project, I was writing a book on gender issues in the Islamic Republic, based on extended discussions in 1995 with clerics in Qom. With them, I had had to justify my feminist stance, while in making this film I wanted to
honour the Muslim and Iranian aspects of my identity. I came to realize that the problem was also inside me. I could not integrate the multiple discourses and representations of women in Iran, nor could I synthesize my own identities and positions. I disagreed equally with Iranian and Western stereotypes of ‘women in Islam’, images that did not reflect a complex reality. As a feminist, an Iranian and a Muslim, I objected to how women were treated in law and wanted to change it. But my objections were not the same as those implied in Western media discourses or those aired by feminists after the Revolution: I saw women in Iran not as victims but as pioneers in a legal system caught between religious tradition and modernity. It was in the course of negotiating permission for the film and working with Kim that I reconciled these conflicting identities. Her unconditional acceptance, and her desire to understand and give voice to the women in the film, freed me from the need either to rebel against or to justify to foreigners my Muslim and Iranian identities. In this way, the film became part of the debate on women’s rights in Iran with which I had been passionately involved since the early 1990s.

Secondly, the fact that much of my account concerns the process of getting a permit to film in Iran is inevitable, given the subject matter and the political and ideological circumstances. As one reviewer said: ‘What is perhaps most impressive about “Divorce Iranian Style” is that it was made at all ... the filmmakers’ negotiations with authorities came to resemble those of the women they sought to document.’ Evidently, the Iranian authorities had very a different understanding from our own of the notion of documentary film and of what kind of ‘reality’ is suitable for filming.

We tried to show that there are different voices in Iran. The one most often heard is the legal voice: authoritarian, patriarchal and increasingly out of touch with people’s aspirations and experiences. But there is also an egalitarian voice in everyday life, seldom heard by outsiders. This is the voice of women, and we wanted it to be heard. We wanted to show the anachronistic nature of the law, and how social change is daily chipping away at its monolithic authority. This is not the ‘reality’ the Iranian authorities wanted to be shown. Had it not been for the change in MCIG policy under President Khatami, I believe that the permit promised us by the previous government would never have materialized. Our chosen theme was a reality denied by their ideological discourse and thus harmful to the Islamic Republic’s image abroad. The MCIG’s concern for the image of Iran in Western media was so overwhelming that it could not allow a film to look critically at society, because it could be construed as

a kind of betrayal of the Islamic Republic’s ideals. But this defensive position in turn reproduces the ‘bad image’ the authorities fear. The matter was made more complex by the failure of our project to fit into their accepted categories: it was not a current affairs documentary, nor were its makers complete outsiders. Khatami’s election brought a shift in government discourse and policies, so we were given the opportunity to make the film we wanted – to try to show ‘reality’ as seen by women going through divorce. The women who agreed to be in the film realized that they had an opportunity to have their voices heard. Like us, they seized it and they made the film with us.

Thirdly, we were struck by the similarity of the reactions of Iranian officials and production companies with whom we had negotiated to those of many Iranians abroad who saw the film. All objected that it did not represent the reality of women’s life in Iran, arguing that it gave foreigners a distorted and wrong image of Iranian culture and society. For educated and sophisticated diaspora Iranians, in its portrayal of ‘illiterate and uneducated women’, the film shattered the picture of Iranian culture that they were trying to build in their host communities. Islamic officials believed that the film undermined the image of the strong family that is the foundation of the Islamic system by showing women fighting for release from unwanted marriages. Though the two objections are informed by different ideologies and political tendencies, they are both rooted in a fear of being judged and misunderstood by the ‘other’ – the West. While each group is happy to criticize the West – or each other – neither easily accepts any criticism of itself. Interestingly, the core objection of both groups was to the subject matter. They believed that making a film on divorce amounts to washing dirty linen in public, making public something that belongs in the private domain.

Finally, these narratives tell us how a documentary that crosses the boundaries between insider/outsider and public/private can become a mirror in which viewers can see reflected aspects of their own culture and identities. The reality that documentaries portray – or are perceived to portray – cannot be separated from our gaze, our relationship with our own culture and how we want to be seen by the ‘other’. The negative reactions of many Iranians abroad speak of their ambivalence towards both their own culture and that of their host country. After all, mirrors simply reflect, but reality is in the eye of the beholder.
Notes on Chapter 9

1. A shortened version of this chapter was presented in a panel on Iranian cinema organized by the Society for Iranian Studies at the Middle East Studies Association annual meetings in November 1999 in Washington DC. I am grateful to the Society for Iranian Studies for making my participation possible.


3. By calling the people featured in the film 'characters' I do not mean to imply that they were actors; they were not – though of course, anyone who brings a case to court has to 'act', to put on a performance; and our characters were no exceptions.

4. Wearing red, exposing one's neck and shaking hands with men have been proscribed public actions for females since the Revolution.

5. This is a reaction to dress codes in the pre-revolutionary era, when officials were attired in the latest Western fashions. It has also come to be seen as a sign of piety, to indicate that they treat the office as a mosque.

6. She had accompanied me during my 1995 fieldwork in Qom, as I have described in the preface to Islam and Gender: The Religious Debate in Contemporary Iran (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999).

7. We got on well with her and exchanged views and information. Women were happy to talk to her and she covered some of the cases we were following, including Ziba's, without mentioning names.

8. We freighted the film back to London for developing, seeing none of it until our return. This requirement was one reason it took so long to get our permit.

9. Some Iranian viewers claimed the whole film was staged: it was obvious, they said, as women were looking at and talking to someone behind the camera. Surprisingly, the same comment was made by an Indian filmmaker who saw the film at the Yamagata Documentary Film Festival; see The Hindu Online (www.indiawire.com), Friday 12 November 1999.

10. As of summer 2000. There have been some private, film club and university screenings.

11. It seems too that by 1999 video copies of the film were in circulation in Iran and the US, advertised and sold on websites without the knowledge of our distributors.


15. 'Zanani agah na rowshanfekr', ibid., p. 28.

16. Jane Howard, a British writer, and Homa Hoodfar, an Iranian anthropologist, both saw the film in Tehran with a mixed Iranian and foreign audience and

17. Though I had spoken on Radio Pars a week earlier, to alert Iranians in London (who often do not read the English press) to the broadcast of the film, I declined to take part in the phone-in afterwards, fearing that the competitors – Mr Hossein Qavimi – and others would use the film as means of attacking Islam and the Islamic Republic and thus drag me into a futile political discussion which I was trying to avoid. My refusal angered Mr Qavimi, who read a paraphrased text of my message to him, strongly rejecting the idea that his programme was political or used offensive language about Islam. But the content and nature of the phone-in justified my fears.

18. I draw from notes after question and answer sessions following screenings of the film in the US, UK, Denmark, France, Germany, Belgium, Greece and Austria.


20. Islam and Gender, see note 6 above.