

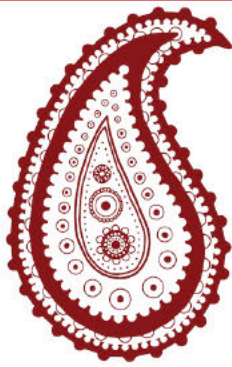
# DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE  
JOURNAL OF  
IRANIAN STUDIES



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
Department of International and Area Studies

Volume 3 (2018)



*The* UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER  
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## **From the Faculty Advisors**

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This third volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As co-editors-in-chief, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi

Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History

Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

Manata Hashemi

Farzaneh Family Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran

## **From the Editors-in-Chief**

We are so proud to present to you the third volume of the University of Oklahoma's Undergraduate Journal in Iranian Studies, *DĀNESH*. Through two editions of the journal we have seen wonderful presentations on varying regional topics, spanning the breadth of history and social strata. In the tradition of the meaning of *DĀNESH*, or knowledge, we present these articles as an offering to expand the collective dialogue on the understanding of the Iranian and Persian state. We are pleased to have worked on this edition with a group of driven authors to present an edition comprising of submissions focusing on the traditional roots of religion in Iranian society and contemporary issues that Iranians are currently facing.

This work is a collective effort among the various undergraduate students in the capacities of editing and of course producing these thought provoking articles. We would like to extend a humble thanks to our Associate Editors, without whom we would not be able to produce such a successful and professional journal. We would also like to extend a sincere thank you to Professor Manata Hashemi, who in Dr. Marashi's brief absence served as an important mentor and guidance figure for the journal. It would also be remiss of us to not extend a heartfelt thank you to the Farzaneh family, for without their continued support of the Iranian Studies program none of this would be possible. The University of Oklahoma's Libraries and Printing Services are the unsung heroes of this endeavor, as without their support we would not have the ability to make *DĀNESH* so accessible, in both our print and digital versions. Thank you also to the tireless, diligent work of our authors, who have crafted these amazing works that we are proudly sharing with you.

And finally, we are wholly indebted to the continued and unwavering support of Dr. Afshin Marashi. This work, and so much of the growth of the Iranian Studies program as a whole, would not be possible without your faith in us, and our institution. Your academic guidance, advice, and friendship have been invaluable to us.

**Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019), Editor-in-Chief

**Corey Standley** (BA 2019), Editor-in-Chief

## Exercising Agency: Contesting Cultural Imperialism in the Depiction of Muslim Women

Julia Harth\*

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In ancient times, the Silk Road brought foreign treasures and precious goods from a distant East to the people of Western Europe, instilling a fascination with the rich and mysterious ‘Orient.’ As colonialism heightened political and economic interaction between the two regions, their cultural exchange increased as well. Traders and travelers returned with items and stories reflecting both the wealth and dissemblance of Eastern society. The introduction of the unfamiliar culture materialized not only in the collection of physical objects, but also in intellectual stimulation with an emerging societal focus on evaluating these differing traditions and customs.<sup>1</sup> In their studies of the Middle East, both academics and artists attempted to capture and convey the exotic culture to Western audiences. However, the inherent power inequity implanted by colonialism sustained notions of cultural superiority in these discourses and representations.<sup>2</sup> As a facet of the imperialist portrayal of the Middle East, the conception of Muslim women’s role in society perfectly illustrates this imposition of hegemonic values. Influenced by larger attitudes of ethnocentrism, the depiction of Muslim women reflects a reduced, simplified, and exoticized interpretation of a complex and diverse reality.<sup>3</sup> Ingrained into today’s popular visual culture, these stereotypes present a

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<sup>1</sup> Gülru Necipoglu, “The Concept of Islamic Art: Inherited Discourses and New Approaches,” in *Islamic Art and the Museum: Approaches to Art and Archaeology of the Muslim World in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Benoît Junod, Georges Khalil, Stefan Weber and Gerhard Wolf (London: Saqi Books, 2012), 64.

<sup>2</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), 27.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Graham-Brown, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-1950* (London: Quartet Books, 1988), 4.

challenge to the capacity of Muslim women to assert their own authority and experience, playing into a global rhetoric of division and degradation. As such, contesting the visual representation of Muslim women as subservient objects of oppression constitutes a rejection of the imperialist narrative of cultural polarization.

In 1978, Edward Said published his highly critical analysis of the effects of colonialism on the power dynamics of global culture, titled *Orientalism*. Said explains that the structures of European governmental and economic control have resulted in a “web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, [and] dehumanizing ideology” that influences contemporary societal interactions.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, an ethnocentric attitude characterizes the Western conception of the Middle East, enabling an enforcement of a perceived cultural difference and superiority. The impact of Orientalist thinking extends into nearly all relations between the polarized East and West, including the discourse on the societal role of females and women’s rights. As European society restructured in reaction to industrialization and colonization, the position of women shifted concurrently, and feminist movements became intertwined in a larger narrative of modernization. In her article “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?,” Lila Abu-Lughod details how the evolving rights of women in European society allowed for a “rhetoric of salvation” in relation to Muslim women.<sup>5</sup> By construing females in the Middle East as oppressed and in need of liberation, the West justified colonial intervention. European missionaries traveled with the intent of educating and advancing the native populations, but simultaneously stripped them of any agency in their own social position and dismissed the local traditions and practices as inherently inferior.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, the supposed emancipation constitutes a form of particularly hypocritical cultural imperialism.

Furthermore, as Leila Ahmed reveals in *Women and Gender in Islam*, the “Western legacy of andocentrism and misogyny,” although manifested in different customs, has equally problematic implications for women, and, in many ways, introducing European values reduced the status of females

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<sup>4</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 27.

<sup>5</sup> Lila Abu-Lughod “Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others,” *American Anthropologist* 104, no. 3 (September 2002): 785, <http://org.uib.no/smi/seminars/Pensum/Abu-Lughod.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 18-23.



in Middle Eastern society.<sup>7</sup> The Qur'an states, in regard to the status of men and women, that "there is therefore no difference between them in regard to humanity, and no superiority of one over the other in works," maintaining the equality of the sexes in the eyes of God.<sup>8</sup> Islam, as a religion, thus asserts the rights of women, but the imposition of Western structures and thought effectively objectified the Muslim female body, specifically in relation to the "politics of the veil."<sup>9</sup> In Western society, the veil represents the oppression of Muslim women, suggesting their forced subservience and lack of independence. Ethnocentric discourse simplifies the experiences and beliefs of a diverse population, lumping them together as "women of cover," in the words of former United States President George W. Bush.<sup>10</sup> For many women, the veil connotes a method of preserving modesty and a sign of social and religious respectability, but much of the contemporary dialogue ignores this reality and instead reinforces cultural division.<sup>11</sup> The imperialist rhetoric thus persists in the Western characterization of Muslim women, relegating them to a position of scrutiny and judgment, rather than permitting multiple perspectives. In this manner, the international representation of Muslim women continues to reflect the Orientalism delineated by Said, subjugating their identities to the expectations of Western culture.

As a manifestation of these larger societal conceptions, the depiction of Muslim women in art embodies and illustrates this ethnocentric viewpoint. The imagery associated with Muslim women, contextualized within the accepted methods of presenting Middle Eastern heritage, is clear evidence of the imperialism that has permeated visual culture. In terms of exhibition and education, museums and galleries have historically facilitated a simplification and exoticism in relation to Islamic art through their lack of chronology, clouding of regional distinctions, and removal of intended context.<sup>12</sup> Larger institutional structures have thus enabled the perpetuation of an artistic Orientalism by failing to accurately or completely convey the complexity and diversity of Islamic visual history. In the same way that fetishizing impacts the representation of Islamic art as a genre, it also

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<sup>7</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 127-128.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>9</sup> Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?," 785.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 783.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 785.

<sup>12</sup> Necipoglu, "The Concept of Islamic Art," 57-64.

affects the portrayal of Muslim women as a population. The fascination with and romanticization of the unfamiliar East created an exoticized stereotype of the Muslim woman. Envisioned as a land of “sexual freedom and experiment,” the Orient itself became symbolized as a seductive, mysterious female.<sup>13</sup> Many Western artists, inspired by these cultural fantasies, thematically focused on the veiled woman and the harem in their works, with their depictions, in turn, influencing the societal conception of the Middle Eastern female. For example, in his 1814 oil on canvas *La Grande Odalisque* (see fig. 1), Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres addresses the subject of the female concubine, but as the disproportionately elongated body and embellished accoutrements suggest, the portrait stems more from a glamorized imagination than truthful observation. However, for Western audiences, images like the odalisque invaded the cultural consciousness, enforcing a “predetermined set of ideas and prejudices about Muslims and Islamic society.”<sup>14</sup> Subjectification in this manner relegated Middle Eastern women to the status of an object, in terms of not only supposed regional oppression, but also global study and attention.

In *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East 1860-1950*, Sarah Graham-Brown elucidates how Western depictions of Muslim women have persistently played into larger notions of Eurocentrism and Orientalism, favoring a justification of biases over illustrations of reality. Even photographs, accepted as fact in their documentary nature, remain “entangled in aesthetic and ideological codes of representation.”<sup>15</sup> As a medium, photography captures a version of truth while still reflecting the perspective and intent of the artist by presenting a particular subject, in a particular light and time, and from a particular vantage point. In today’s media, this opinionated nature of imagery evidences itself in representations of the veil. Photographs of women in various states of cover communicate messages, either implicitly or explicitly, about the status of women in Islamic society. For instance, with the photograph by Alexandra Boulat the caption reads simply: “A mother watches her children and husband bathing in the Dead Sea” (see fig. 2).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 7-9.

<sup>14</sup> Graham-Brown, *Images of Women*, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Mangez and Alexandra Boulat, “Silhouettes: Muslim Women of the Middle East and Afghanistan,” *Aperture*, no. 185 (2006): 49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24473207>.

However, in the juxtaposition of the shrouded, faceless woman with the exposed, exuberant bodies of the men and youth, the image makes a tacit statement about the subjugation of Muslim women, suggesting their status as secondary members of a patriarchal society. A single photograph thus encapsulates a much greater cultural perspective.

This synecdochization characterizes representations of Muslim women throughout global media, as Igor Zabel explains in his articles in *Art Journal* that the “figure of the ‘woman in black’ functions in the West as a general sign for the Muslim world and its allegedly incomprehensible, irrational, uncertain, and threatening nature.”<sup>17</sup> The veiled woman has transformed into the symbol of a civilizational divide, supporting and enforcing notions of the barbarity of the Middle East. In the same way that colonists used depictions of enslaved, hypersexualized women to justify their economic exploitation, contemporary political actors employ the image of the covered female body to brand military intervention as a form of social salvation. In the West, forms of veiling have developed into “visual signifiers of terrorism,” playing into the larger image-based narrative of the violence of Islam.<sup>18</sup> By publicizing a portrayal of the Middle East as a site of atrocities relating to religious extremism, Western nations, particularly the United States, rationalize and legitimize their own violence in the region. The construction of this visual rhetoric of terrorism emerged during the late 1970s with the documentation of the Iranian Revolution and Iran hostage crisis.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the highly dramatized Western media coverage of the developments reflected such a problematic bias that the students of Tehran University invited a delegation of United States citizens to the newly formed Islamic Republic in 1980, in the midst of Iran’s detention of fifty-two Americans inside the U.S. embassy. Photojournalist Randy Goodman traveled to Iran as part of this diplomatic mission, and in her lecture “Iran: Women Only” she explained the intent of the students to dispel the limited, prejudicial conceptions created by the West by introducing new imagery and information.<sup>20</sup> However, the strength

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<sup>17</sup> Igor Zabel, “Women in Black,” *Art Journal* 60, no. 4 (2001): 17, doi:10.2307/778194.

<sup>18</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs as Postcolonial Allegories,” *Signs* 34, no. 1 (2008): 125-27. doi:10.1086/588469.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Randy Goodman, “Iran: Women Only,” lecture, University of Oklahoma (Norman, Oklahoma) March 27, 2017.

of American media largely overpowered this attempt, sustaining the factious rhetoric pertaining to the two states.

Unfortunately, a divisive visual narrative now envelops the entire political relationship between East and West. As Jessica Winegar explains in “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” depictions and conceptions of Muslims tie directly into the “discourse of freedom” that segregates and subjugates Islamic society.<sup>21</sup> Today, the international media propagates Western values, asserting the validity of the democratic cause by connecting visual representations of the Middle East to messages of both imminent danger and promised liberation. The intimate and intricate connections established between the covered female figure and the threat of Islamic violence clearly evidence themselves in Alexandra Boulat’s photograph of the women’s police academy in Tehran, Iran (see fig. 3), where the subjects, clad in black chadors, demonstrate their active participation in the enforcement of Islamic law. By linking the veil to conceptions of violence, either directly (as in this image) or by implying oppression, the media has employed Muslim women as an illustration of the supposed brutality of Islam. In this sense, photojournalism has effectively enabled the dissemination of a single perspective as truth.

In contrast, much of the art produced by Middle Eastern women rejects this simplified, imperialist portrayal. For instance, the works of Iranian exile Shirin Neshat specifically address the subject of the Muslim female identity. Her series *Women of Allah* (1993-1997) employs self-portraiture as an allegorical representation and criticism of the politicized image of the Muslim woman.<sup>22</sup> The photographs depict the veiled female form, accessorized with weapons and decorated with calligraphic writing (see fig. 4). The imagery invokes the association of Islam with both the subordinate, oppressed female and the violent terrorist.<sup>23</sup> By playing into the stereotypes so ingrained in Western culture, Neshat calls the characterizations into question. The artist has explained her intent, saying “I see my works as a visual discourse on the subjects of feminism and contemporary Islam—a

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<sup>21</sup> Jessica Winegar, “The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 81, no. 3 (2008): 656, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25488228>.

<sup>22</sup> Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 127-128.

<sup>23</sup> Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 146; John B. Ravenal, “Shirin Neshat: Double Vision,” in *Reclaiming Female Agency: Feminist Art History After Postmodernism*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard (Berkeley: University of California Press: 2005), 447.

discourse that puts certain myths and realities to the test, claiming that they are far more complex than most of us have imagined.... I prefer raising questions as opposed to answering them as I am totally unable to do otherwise.”<sup>24</sup> As such, her art prompts a conversation rather than offers a solution.<sup>25</sup> Neshat invites her viewer into this dialogue, even utilizing perspective and vantage point in the video projections of her other shows to encourage conscious participation.<sup>26</sup> The effect of this awareness of observation references the status of Muslim women as an “object of spectacle” in global visual culture.<sup>27</sup>

In the same way that Neshat addresses the simplification of the Islamic female identity by embodying the associative clichés, she directs attention to the objectification of Muslim women by emphasizing its presence in her works. Additionally, she comments on the historical dynamics and underlying currents that have enabled these problematic conceptions, referencing Orientalist and imperialist ideologies in the inscribed calligraphy and simplified styling. By depicting an “affectless subject overlaid by a supplemental oriental design that is itself flat, ornamental, and ahistorical,” Neshat subverts a notion of exoticism and a narrative of modernization, contesting the traditionally presumed authority of the West.<sup>28</sup> In this sense, she intentionally targets her Western audience, attempting to dispute accepted prejudices and provoke a reflection on the impact of cultural injustice. Her work, characterized by themes of contrast and duality, including the use of black and white and the disparate perspectives of the projections, thus recognizes and negates societal dichotomies.<sup>29</sup> By identifying the perceived division between men and women, East and West, and religion and modernity, Neshat challenges their segregation, aspiring instead to acceptance of a greater fluidity. While recognizing and emphasizing the fictitious nature of these manufactured partitions and inflicted appropriations, the artist also demonstrates how they concretely affect identity. In assuming the stereotype herself, she represents the capacity of thought to influence and even determine reality.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ravenal, “Double Vision,” 447.

<sup>25</sup> Zabel, “Women in Black,” 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ravenal, “Double Vision,” 453.

<sup>27</sup> Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 136.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 144-145.

<sup>29</sup> Ravenal, “Double Vision,” 454-456; Dadi, “Shirin Neshat’s Photographs,” 129; Zabel, “Women in Black,” 22.

<sup>30</sup> Zabel, “Women in Black,” 22-25.

Neshat's work therefore exposes the effects of generalization on the individual, implicating not only Western society, but each viewer in their compliance and collaboration with the larger cultural mentality. Knowingly engaging on multiple levels and with diverse audience members, Neshat allows for different perceptions and understandings of her work, illustrating the true "ambiguities" of these forced characterizations, yet additionally demonstrating the possibility of conceptual concord.<sup>31</sup> Although highlighting the existence of cultural friction, in the unification of divergent and conflicting ideas in a single photograph she simultaneously exhibits the potential for a form of future reconciliation.

Global art, in terms of both creations and institutions, has the ability to encourage this necessary discourse rather than remain a reflection and foundation of a divisive narrative. Neshat demonstrates that imagery can challenge cultural fabrications, and the work produced by other women from the Middle East serve as further evidence, not only of the truth of Neshat's commentary on the complexity of their societal role, but also their own faculty to enact structural change. In *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society*, Mehri Honarbin-Holliday details the experience of young female artists, whose self-portraiture illustrates both a multifaceted identity and personal strength.<sup>32</sup> By exhibiting creativity and independence, the women contradict their assigned role as subjectified, exoticized objects, asserting instead the diverse realities of Muslim women, including capable, independent feminists. As a religion, Islam fundamentally supports the equality of the sexes, and any divergence from this core value stems from inherited cultural practices, not scriptural instruction.<sup>33</sup> In terms of pure doctrine, Muslim women have rights, freedoms, and a respected social position. As theologian Fatima Etemadi explains, "if you think we're more different than you because of this piece of clothing, if you think we're more hidden, you don't know Iranian women."<sup>34</sup> Western society has enforced the idea of feminist and Islamist evolutions as discordant and contradictory. However, the two movements and schools of thought coexist and interrelate, developing together to

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>32</sup> Mehri Honarbin-Holliday, *Becoming Visible in Iran: Women in Contemporary Iranian Society* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 73-91.

<sup>33</sup> Qasim Amin, "The Liberation of Women," *Two Documents in the History of Egyptian Feminism* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1992), 37.

<sup>34</sup> Mangez, "Silhouettes," 39.

influence the role of Muslim women.<sup>35</sup> In its textual and philosophical basis, Islam permits the same complexities of female identity that exist in Western society, and visual representation of this alternative conception of the religion challenges the cultural misconceptions. While self-representation, as in the works by the Iranian artists, constitutes a direct rejection of Orientalist thinking, Western depictions of Muslim women also have the capacity to dispute historical stereotypes.<sup>36</sup> For instance, in her image of a Kuwaiti woman (see fig. 5), Boulat elevates and illuminates the subject, emblazoned with designer labels, and places her husband to the side, illustrating a sense of command and power. Her composition incorporates both a strength of femininity and an emphasis on religious Islam, permitting the reconciliation of the two aspects of identity.

In terms of visually portraying another culture, accomplishing an objective depiction as an outside observer remains difficult. However, Goodman, who returned to Iran in 2015, explains that relinquishing control and embracing adaptability during the creative process, rather than adhering to a specific agenda, allows for a more holistic and honest representation.<sup>37</sup> In her experience, this openness enables constructive and transformative work. While she admits that her own perspective remains an aspect of the photograph, by recognizing its presence and intentionally minimizing its influence, she finds a way to empower her subjects, giving them some agency in their own depiction. For instance, Goodman avoids providing labels for her images. Instead of imposing her own narrative, presenting just the image permits for multiple interpretations and a diversity of perspectives, even in relation to a single work. As a result, Goodman finds that a dialogue emerges. During her shows and exhibitions, the photographer stays in the gallery, engaging in conversation with visitors. In these interactions, she has the opportunity to not only detail and expand upon her own views, but also to learn and process the additional opinions and knowledge of her audience. In this sense, the display of imagery constitutes an educational experience for both artist and viewer.

As such, art clearly has the capacity to enact change and bridge divides, but it remains equally potent as a tool of oppression and division. To challenge and counteract the historical abuse of imagery in terms of cultural imperialism, inclusive methods of visual representation must be adopted in the larger global artistic culture. In the summer of 2016, at the

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<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, *Women and Gender*, 221-225.

<sup>36</sup> Ravenal, "Double Vision," 447.

<sup>37</sup> Randy Goodman, in discussion with the author, April 2017.

National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C., the exhibition *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World* attempted this very mission, drawing on the works of contemporary female artists from the Middle East to “provide visitors with fresh perspective and encourage thoughtful discussion about how powerfully women artists reflect our world today.”<sup>38</sup> By displaying the art generated by the women of today’s Islamic society and including the photographers’ personal commentary as part of the exhibit, the show rejected the homogenization, Orientalism, and temporal erasure typical to the Western presentation of Middle Eastern art.<sup>39</sup> Rather than the typical simplification and eradication of identity, the exhibit allowed an exploration and conversation about the societal role of Muslim women. This departure from and challenge of conventional portrayals will continue to enact positive change. If the artistic community facilitates the reversal of prejudices and the establishment of cultural respect and equality, future generations of artists, photographers, and curators can inherit and sustain a tradition of inclusion and dialogue, instead of today’s division and ignorance. As a key to communicating conceptions of identity, the thoughtful and respectful creation and dissemination of imagery proves essential on the path to achieving cultural equality and reconciliation, not only in relation to Muslim women, but also on a larger global scale.

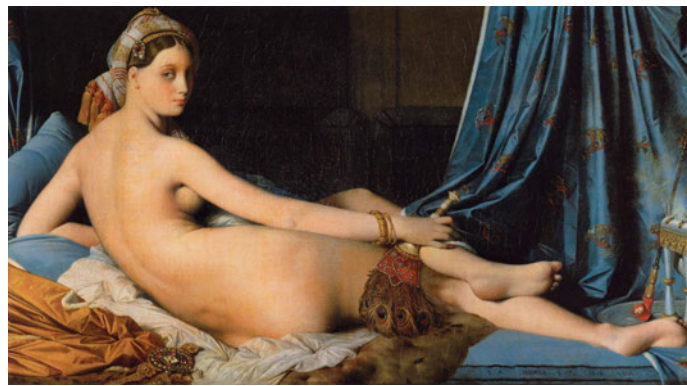


Fig. 1. *La Grande Odalisque*, an 1814 oil painting by Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (Photo via Wikipedia).

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<sup>38</sup> *She Who Tells a Story: Women Photographers from Iran and the Arab World*, audio guide transcripts, (Washington, D.C.: National Museum of Women in the Arts, April 8 - July 31, 2016): 2,  
[https://nmwa.org/sites/default/files/shared/swtas\\_audioguide\\_transcripts.pdf](https://nmwa.org/sites/default/files/shared/swtas_audioguide_transcripts.pdf)

<sup>39</sup> Winegar, *The Humanity Game*, 655-674.





Fig. 2. Photograph by Alexandra Boulat, taken in Jordan, February 2006. (Image from Mangez, “Silhouettes,” 49).



Fig. 3. Photograph by Alexandra Boulat, taken in Tehran, Iran, November 2004 (Image from Mangez, “Silhouettes,” 40).



Fig. 4. Shirin Neshat, *Rebellious Silence*, 1994.  
(Photograph by Cynthia Preston, image from Zabel,  
“Women in Black,” 21).



Fig. 5. Photograph by Caroline Boulat, taken near Damascus, Syria,  
March 2006 (Image from Mangez, “Silhouettes,” 43).

## Iran's Others through Cinema: Ethnicity and the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Iran

Jared Johnson\*

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With all the politically issues and social animosity surrounding Iran today, the Islamic Republic has become a focus for international attention and critique, especially if one might watch Fox News on any given evening—that goes for any news outlet for that matter. However, except for the ‘Iran Nuclear Deal’ or their nuclear program, how informed are the majority of Westerners on Iranian affairs or even social concerns? Unfortunately, most press following Iran seems to maintain a negative theme; however, that is not always the case. For instance, just this year in fact, an Iranian indie film, *The Salesman* (2016), was nominated and won an Oscar for ‘Best Foreign Language Film of 2017’ at America’s annual 89<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards.<sup>1</sup> The film even managed to win multiple awards across the world. Yet, *The Salesman* is not the only Iranian film to make a splash into Western culture—in 1997, Abbas Kiarostami’s *Taste of Cherry* (1996) was awarded the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and *A Separation* (2011), by the same director of *The Salesman*, also received tremendous praise throughout Western film festivals in 2012.<sup>2</sup> Thus, if these Iranian national films are increasingly becoming more popular, then what insights

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\* **Author’s Bio:** Jared Johnson is from Fairland, Oklahoma. He is majoring in Middle Eastern Studies and minoring in Arabic. He plans to graduate in May of 2018.

<sup>1</sup> “Awards: *The Salesman*,” International Movie Database: Amazon.com Company, IMDb.com, accessed April 21, 2017, [http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5186714/awards?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5186714/awards?ref_=tt_awd).

<sup>2</sup> Shahab Esfandiary, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational and Islamic Dimensions* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 75-77.

may these films yield when it comes to understanding the Islamic Republic?

These films, such as the ones mentioned above, otherwise known as 'art-house films,' have become enthralled with simple, humanist themes usually focusing on very limited characters and their individuality in a complex environment.<sup>3</sup> These art-house films predominately receive celebrated receptions, especially considering that the films' overall themes often contradict the perceived societal view of the Islamic Republic. The result is a shared bitterness and hostility between the government and the films' directors.<sup>4</sup> Further adding to the complexities of Iranian cinema, who is being depicted in these art-house films? Considering Iran's incredibly diverse population from centuries of invasions and intermingling and shifting ethnic communities, many ethnic groups such as Arabs, Armenians, Azeris (Turks), Turkmen, Jews, Kurds, Persians, and even Afghan refugees and black Africans (Afro-Iranians) all inhabit the Islamic Republic.<sup>5</sup> Because of the many ethnic minorities in Iran, in recent years Iranian cinema has taken a highly critical stance towards society's treatment of minorities and refugees, thereby challenging the notion of 'Pure Persian-ness' that is emphasized frequently in Iranian history. This idea stems from the Indo-European hypothesis that Persians, related to the Aryan race, constitute the majority in Iran where 'Persian' is privileged above all other cultural, historical, and linguistic elements, especially Semitic or Turkish ethnicities.<sup>6</sup> Then, in effect, cinema brings to light issues of human rights that Iran has continually come under pressure for.

Given this societal emphasis on the perceived superiority of 'Persian-ness,' what effect has this had on cinematic representations of ethnic minorities? In turn, how have these cinematic representations influenced societal perceptions and treatment of Iranian minorities? Because Iranian cinema has become a mirror that reflects to audiences the continual discrimination and hardships that ethnic minorities and refugees in Iran face, I will explore these unsavory portrayals of minority groups in Iran

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<sup>3</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol. 4 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 175.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 175-176.

<sup>5</sup> Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 22; Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 191.

<sup>6</sup> Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 22-23; Afshin Marashi, "Modern Iran: 1500-Present," University of Oklahoma (lecture notes, Norman, OK), September 29, 2016.

such as Kurds, Afghans, Arabs, and Afro-Iranians mainly due to their increased representation in Iranian cinema. Although Iranian cinema is implicitly critiquing their mistreatment and challenging the societal emphases on the significance of 'Persian-ness' as a defining marker of Iranian identity, these cinematic critiques are in fact working, however mildly, and leading to official government and individual reforms toward these minority groups.

### **Understanding Aryanism in the Islamic Republic**

To understand the concept of 'Pure Persian-ness' and the racist and discriminatory system that it propagates, one must refer to the term 'Aryanism.' In the historical context, 'Aryan' describes a race whose origin is believed to have spawned near Central Asia, bordering the Hindu Kush on the western sector of the Himalayas, and is associated with a people of "fair complexion."<sup>7</sup> Deriving from the Indo-European Hypothesis, some Aryans allegedly spoke an Indo-Iranian language, a sublanguage of the Indo-European language family, which includes Persian or Farsi.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, due to this and the strong connection that Iranians have with Europeans linguistically and physically, Iranians have managed to maintain a "distinct identity with their Aryan past."<sup>9</sup> Two central pieces of historical Persian literature for instance, the *Shahnameh* and the *Avesta*, are construed in a way that emphasizes the ethnocentric Persian perspective, which then marginalizes non-Persians living within Iran.<sup>10</sup> In turn, "the dominant group interprets these classic texts based on contemporary notions of race, nationality, border, and nation-state; it then uses such interpretation to legitimize its privileged position."<sup>11</sup> This interpretation became extremely apparent in the twentieth century. Even after the Pahlavi era, a period of strict multiethnic suppression where the Aryan-Persian identity was brought to its zenith, the government of the Islamic Republic has continued to endorse Persian/Farsi and its Perso-Arabic script as the official language within Iran, despite the fact the millions of different ethnolinguistic Iranians do not have the access to nor ability to learn the

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<sup>7</sup> John H. Lorentz, *Historical Dictionary of Iran*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 34.

<sup>8</sup> Alireza Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 75-76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge*, 54.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

‘official’ language.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, a gap developed between ethnic Persians and non-Persians, contributing to the continued marginalization by the Islamic government. However, by the Khatami era, a glimpse of hopeful change began to rise as reformist cinema grows stronger.

### **The Iranian Kurds**

The Kurds make up one of the largest minorities in the Islamic Republic. Current estimates of Iranian Kurds number between seven and ten million, or roughly fifteen percent of the Iranian population.<sup>13</sup> Many Iranian Kurds reside near the borders of Iraq and Turkey, extending towards the Caucus region along the Zagros Mountains.<sup>14</sup> However, Iranian Kurds are not exclusive to this area in Iran. Especially since the Pahlavi era and throughout the twentieth century in general, the Kurdish people have fallen victim to many types of ethnic and religious discrimination and marginalization.<sup>15</sup> Historically, Persians’ discrimination of Kurdish minorities stems from their strong nationalistic tendencies and previous uprisings.<sup>16</sup> In 1982, the Islamic Republic quelled the last significant Kurdish revolt following the 1979 Revolution. However, the Kurds have remained under strict regulation since.<sup>17</sup> As portrayed in *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), a film by Bahman Ghobadi, the viewer is shown the harsh reality of Kurdish life near the Iran-Iraq border as three Iranian-Kurd musicians—Audeh, Barat, and their father, Mirza—traverse an incredibly rough terrain of dry desert landscapes, mountains, and snow-packed peaks during the Iran-Iraq War. The environment is desolate at times, plagued with dangerous bandits, and only occupied by Iraqi- and Iranian-Kurds who are either refugees displaced by the war or family members who are looking for loved ones amidst all the chaos. The film, although displaying several moments of comical wit, is a saddening yet powerful depiction in which these three men travel through Iranian Kurdistan to the Iraqi side of the border in an attempt to find Hanareh, Mirza’s ex-wife, who has been stranded there and endangered by Saddam Hussein’s ruthless violence. Hanareh had left Iran because she found a new lover, Mirza’s best friend,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 108-109.

<sup>13</sup> Kerim Yildiz and Tanyel B. Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 3; Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 283.

<sup>14</sup> Lorentz, *Historical Dictionary*, 182.

<sup>15</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 283.

<sup>16</sup> Yildiz and Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran*, 11.

<sup>17</sup> Lorentz, *Historical Dictionary*, 183.

and because she could no longer sing in public as a musician after the Iran's revolution in 1979.<sup>18</sup> On the journey, the three travelers encounter Iraqi jets bombing Kurdish outposts, large camps of orphaned Iraqi- and Iranian-Kurdish children, and mass graves of fellow Kurds who died mercilessly from the chemical weapons of Hussein. However, throughout the entire film, there is never any implication of Iranian support nor their presence, except for the two Persian soldiers who randomly appear and are always seemingly desperate and in need of help. The film simply depicts the Kurdish dilemma and the harsh reality in which they had to survive between two warring nations, neither of which really wanted them.

In *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), a film by Abbas Kiarostami, a media crew led by Behzad, the film's main character, travels from Tehran to a remote Kurdish village in Iranian Kurdistan. The crew, doing the bidding of a mysteriously influential female, arrives at the village to observe the burial ritual of an elderly woman who is predicted to pass away. The Kurdish community, which is scarcely populated with the elderly and women while the men perform menial labor away from home, is depicted as being extremely poor with mud-bricks and wooden limbs comprising the foundation of the entire village—a setting which is uniquely different from Tehrani standards. In fact, only one child is visible during the film, Farzad—Behzad's guide. However, returning to Behzad's purpose for being in the village, the film portrays a “morbid narrative reality: the hero of the film wants this woman to die so that he and his crew can return to their worn urban lives having amassed some great ethnographic material.”<sup>19</sup> During the film, a pivotal scene appears when Behzad, driving a teacher from the village to a nearby school, asks the teacher about his opinion on the burial ceremony. The teacher responds, “It's painful.”<sup>20</sup> He had watched his mother scar her face during the ceremonial ritual. In the film, after a person in the community dies, women will mutilate or cause harm to themselves to propel their husbands'

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<sup>18</sup> Dave Kehr, “Film in Review: *Marooned in Iraq*,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2003, accessed April 29, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/25/movies/film-in-review-marooned-in-iraq.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 126.

<sup>20</sup> *The Wind Will Carry Us*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (1999; Iran: MK2 Productions, 2000), Amazon Instant Video.

economic status or receive better employment.<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, “the severity of the mutilation depends on the power that the deceased had held in the community.”<sup>22</sup> Thus the film almost becomes this voyeuristic perspective in which Behzad, the observer, seeks out a sordid Kurdish ceremony. As though viewing a preciously foreign object, Behzad becomes an onlooker who is fascinated by these Kurdish villagers and their “exotic locales” while remaining uninterested in their past.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, with the exoticism of the Kurdish villagers’ rituals and locales, in a sense, their problems and societal issues become invisible or overlooked. Therefore, Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us* becomes a “scathing portrait. . . of a society that considers ceremony and appearance to be more important than simple human feelings.”<sup>24</sup>

In these two films, *Marooned in Iraq* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the directors are attempting to reshow the Kurds, and even women, in a different light to expose the plight they are subjected to, causing a push for social reform. For many reasons, the Kurdish condition under the Islamic Republic has never been easy. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian Kurdistan faced military strikes from both Iran and Iraq, raising the death toll of this period to approximately 45,000 civilian casualties.<sup>25</sup> Many Iranian-Kurdish refugees were sent into exile as a result. Immediately after the war, Iranian government agents even assassinated the leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDIP), who initially attempted to develop a truce negotiation with the Islamic Republic.<sup>26</sup> Following the assassination, many KDIP members and sympathizers were either imprisoned or executed.<sup>27</sup> According to the Human Rights Watch, approximately 300 Iranian-Kurdish villages were demolished from 1980-1992.<sup>28</sup> However, after the release of these two films in 1999 and 2002 (and even during Khatami’s presidency beginning in 1997), “the Iranian Kurds have experienced a

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<sup>21</sup> Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 127.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Azadeh Farahmand, “Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema,” in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 101.

<sup>24</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 256.

<sup>25</sup> Yildiz and Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran*, 42.

<sup>26</sup> Reza Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001), 39.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*



renaissance of political and social thought helped along by the wider Iranian reform movement.”<sup>29</sup> Also in the 1990s, the Kurdish identity within Iran experienced the revitalization of the Kurdish national movement through artists, writers, and activists alike.<sup>30</sup> However, they still have to maintain some limitations under the Iranian government. There is even a Kurdish radio show that is aired, along with the relatively new Kurdistan University that is now present in the Iranian-Kurdish region; however, the once promised Kurdish-language courses have yet to take effect.<sup>31</sup> Nevertheless, perhaps the most impactful symbol for Kurdish identity with Iranian reform cinema is film director Bahman Ghobadi himself—Kurdish poets, artists, and especially filmmakers have flourished since the revival of Kurdish national movement.<sup>32</sup> As a previous assistant to Abbas Kiarostami in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Ghobadi has taken off as a film producer, directing *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), *Turtles Can Also Fly* (2004), *Half Moon* (2006), and *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009).<sup>33</sup> With his influence and status as a currently world-renowned director, he now has one of the largest platforms to bring light upon Kurdish minority issues within Iran and to contribute further to developing, and possibly nurturing, the Kurdish national identity.

### **The Afghan Refugees**

Beginning in 1979, the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, ultimately displacing many Afghans from their homes and communities—nearly 3 million Afghan refugees were forced to flee into Iran, making up 90 percent of all refugees in Iran at the time.<sup>34</sup> After the Soviets abandoned their cause in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime took control of the incredibly unstable nation, which further worsened conditions for Afghans still residing there.<sup>35</sup> For many Afghan refugees, urban-industrialized cities offered better opportunities when it came to menial labor due to their lack of education and ‘per class capital.’ Therefore, many refugees would accumulate and develop ‘shantytown’ communities on the outer margins

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<sup>29</sup> Yildiz and Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran*, 107.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 107 and 114.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>33</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, 236.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>35</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 280.

surrounding the cities.<sup>36</sup> However, for many Iranians, the influx of cheap-labor Afghan workers “created massive social problems, wage deflation, and resentments among Iranians, which made the refugees worthy subjects for socially conscious filmmakers.”<sup>37</sup> In *Baran* (2001), director Majid Majidi offers a sorrowful glimpse of the plight that has surrounded Afghan refugees for nearly thirty years.<sup>38</sup> Set outside of Tehran, the film embraces the complex relationship surrounding Latif, a young Iranian construction laborer, and a mysteriously young Afghan worker named Rahmat, Najaf’s “son.” After Soltan, another Afghan worker who happens to be a close friend of Najaf, brings Rahmat into work to replace his father, it turns out that the work is simply too difficult for Rahmat to handle. Consequently, Rahmat is given Latif’s relaxed job of providing tea and food in return for Rahmat’s back-breaking one. Latif then berates and torments Rahmat until it is revealed that “Rahmat” is actually a young girl named Baran, the daughter of Najaf. It is not much longer until Latif ends up falling in love with Baran. Latif’s love for Baran enables him to develop a close, tight-knit bond with her, which transforms him into her protector.<sup>39</sup> As Latif gets closer to Baran, her past and history begin to intrigue him, which signifies the end of her invisibility to him.<sup>40</sup> Majidi’s film, therefore, “is an allegory about the need to change one’s attitudes to refugees, to racism and to sexism.”<sup>41</sup> Although Baran returns with her father to Afghanistan at the end of the film, Latif’s love for her is everlasting, which lends to the idea that “love can conquer all borders”—Majidi’s own critique of Iranian society’s inability to accept people unlike themselves, especially an exilic minority in need of support.<sup>42</sup>

Examining a different perspective brings us to Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *The Afghan Alphabet* (2002), a short documentary about several hundred Afghan children within a refugee camp located near the Iran-Afghanistan border. Most of this generation of children in the documentary has been displaced due to Taliban cruelty and the war that was being waged by the United States. *The Afghan Alphabet* is a deeply moving, incredibly sad representation of the conditions in which these young and extremely

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<sup>36</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, 234.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 281.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

innocent Afghan children had to endure while not being allowed to have a proper education; they lived in a very poor community in which they are just being taught to brush their teeth at nearly seven or ten years of age. Compared to the Iranian Kurds discussed earlier, these Afghan children were not permitted to attend Iranian school systems due to their “illegal status.”<sup>43</sup> Because many children in the documentary did not have any forms of identification, they were not allowed to be a part of any formal, educational lessons that were provided—without legal identification, they had to remain away from the lesson, listening from a distance.

However, to people like Makhmalbaf, the children of the nearly 7 million Afghan refugees without access to proper educational schooling represented an obvious problem for the Islamic Republic and a violation of basic human rights.<sup>44</sup> Both Majidi's and especially Makhmalbaf's efforts ended up paying off. According to film scholar Hamid Naficy, after *The Afghan Alphabet's* release,

The movie and its subject became controversial enough for the Iranian parliament [*majles*] to approve a bill removing the ban and mandating education for Afghani children. This is one of the rare documentaries leading to legislation improving the cause it espoused.<sup>45</sup>

Furthermore, Makhmalbaf went on to write and direct several other films dealing with the Afghan refugee dilemma, and he even wrote several public letters to President Khatami in which he criticized the government's “forced repatriation of Afghani refugees after twenty years of ‘hospitality’” and advocated for “literacy classes for refugee children.”<sup>46</sup> Makhmalbaf then went on to establish a “five- month pilot literacy class” for as many Afghan children as he could fund on his own budget from the proceeds of his film, *Kandahar* (2001); following that venture, with the help of President Khatami and support from other governmental agencies, Makhmalbaf established an elementary school in Herat, a large city in western Afghanistan near the Iranian border. In addition, he founded the Afghan Children Education Movement in 2001 and began “promoting literacy and culture in Afghanistan, including the training of film

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<sup>43</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, 234.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, 234-235.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

personnel.”<sup>47</sup> Correspondingly, in mid-2001, President Khatami even went so far as speaking out publicly against the Taliban while simultaneously announcing support for the Northern Alliance (Afghanistan's new government under Hamed Karzai) and U.S. military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Arabs and an Introduction to Afro-Iranians**

Many Iranian Arabs, especially from the Khuzestan Province, have maintained their traditional values and unique cultural practices after the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>49</sup> Although the war did not impede upon their culture, Khuzestani Arabs were left in socioeconomic turmoil due to the destruction caused by Saddam Hussein's forces—resulting in a lack of infrastructure, health care, and even “educational facilities.”<sup>50</sup> In the realm of Iranian cinema, other than *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1989), few Iranian reformist films have depicted the struggle of the Arabs under the Islamic Republic. Directed by Bahram Bayzai, *Bashu, the Little Stranger* depicts a dramatic dynamic between a young, war-inflicted child (Bashu) who was left to suffer in his loneliness after his entire family was killed in an airstrike and an independent, strong mother (Na'i) who was willing to take a chance and let the young boy enter her family, even though she has encountered enough adversity with the two children that she has already. Throughout most of the film, Bashu encounters the hardship of being ethnolinguistically and culturally different—at first, he cannot read or speak Persian. He is from Khuzestan and speaks Arabic, whereas Na'i is from northern Iran and speaks the Perso-Gilaki dialect.<sup>51</sup> *Bashu* is an anti-war film, and even today it “remains a sincere, sometimes shattering and often courageous attempt to depict the scars of war through human relationships.”<sup>52</sup> In the scene when Bashu reads in front of the other Persian children, hope becomes the theme that will push minorities past their ethnolinguistic barrier—opposite of the literacy standard of the Islamic Republic.<sup>53</sup> Also, when Na'i refers to Bashu as “charcoal” or says, “You

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 91.

<sup>49</sup> Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 69.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>51</sup> Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 127.

<sup>52</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 207 and 209.

<sup>53</sup> Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge*, 108-109.

need a bath,” the film points out a more modern idea of the Afro-Iranian identity that is currently becoming a ‘hot-topic’ in southern Khuzestan today.<sup>54</sup> Although I am not examining these Afro-Iranian films, the Afro-Iranian identity is important to mention. According to scholar Hamid Naficy, a documentary such as *Afro-Iranian Lives*

....contributes to our understanding of an important population in Iran that has rarely been examined on film. Some documentaries, such as Naser Taqvai’s *The Sorcerer’s Wind* (1970), dealt with the *zar* ceremonies of African Iranians living on the shores of Persian Gulf, but they did not delve into the history of the people and tended to exoticize them.<sup>55</sup>

As for societal reform as a result of *Bashu*, not many actions can truly be spoken of. However, in the early 2000s, President Khatami did make a point to meet with Hafez al-Assad of Syria and the Crown Prince Abdullah—two influential Arab leaders—which could point towards improved relations between Iranians and Arabs.<sup>56</sup> In 2005, newly elected President Ahmadinejad began traveling throughout Iran’s periphery, including Khuzestan, to preach about the equality of humans under Islam. He advocated for the idea that race, ethnicity, and nationality should not prevent Iranians from uniting as a whole.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion

With these few ethnolinguistic identities which I described above—Kurds, Afghans, Arabs, and Afro-Iranians—there is at least some evidence of the Islamic Republic of Iran minimizing their harsh treatment of minorities. Persian-centric nationalism has maintained a ‘heavy-handed’ or influential role in past ordeals when situations have revolved around the Kurds, Afghans, and Arabs. Except for Iranian Arabs and Afro-Iranians, minority conditions show some improvement under a dominant Perso-Iranian majority; Persian Arab conditions yield some improvement, considering the attitudes surrounding public speaking events and leading

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<sup>54</sup> *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, directed by Bahram Bayzai (1986, Iran, New York: International Home Cinema, 1990), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v2Z33tW1fU>.

<sup>55</sup> Naficy, *A Social History*, 427-428.

<sup>56</sup> Tazmini, *Khatami’s Iran*, 86.

<sup>57</sup> Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 100.

government figures, especially government reformists. As for Afro-Iranians, their condition is hard to interpret due the lack of academic evidence and its relatively new understanding. However, I do not believe Iran's many minorities are free from government marginalization and discrimination. I understand that centuries-worth of minority and ethno-cultural clashes do not disappear within two decades. Additionally, my research focused on Iranian ethnic minorities who have a larger presence in contemporary Iranian national and reformist cinema. However, Iranian cinema does not appear to be exploring the issues of other ethnic minorities such as the Azeris, Armenians, Jews, Turkmans, Lors, Baluchi, and even the ethnoreligious Zoroastrians. Just as Mohsen Makhmalbaf did for the Afghan refugees, the 'burden of representation' falls upon the world-renowned directors of Iranian national cinema to depict the 'others' currently living in Iran, not just the groups of ethnic minorities who draw specific audiences or who obtain a certain amount of international acclaim and attention. With these directors becoming a part of such a unique national cinema like the case in Iran, they have taken on the duty to depict the plight and conditions surrounding all peoples and cultures within their country.

## The Question of Women's Agency in Iranian Cinema

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Trying to pinpoint individual acts of agency within cinema can be difficult. This is especially true within Iranian cinema because agency takes different forms than viewers would assume. The term agency itself is ambiguous. It often ignores culture completely, operating on a universal Western definition that fails to encapsulate outside experiences that lead to human action. This paper seeks to explore how women are portrayed as their own agents within Iranian cinema. In order to do this, agency must be taken out of its Western context. The reason for this is that people tend to view agency through ethnocentrism, whether intentionally or not, and discount its existence in foreign works. Doing this is extremely dangerous since it marginalizes women even more by allowing the viewer to either dismiss women or to develop a savior complex, looking to rescue the "oppressed." It also provides a justification for interference that either has no basis or functions on a lack of understanding. This paper will explore the definition of agency, provide a historical overview of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and discuss several films and the individual acts of agency within them. As I will argue, throughout its post-revolutionary history Iranian cinema has portrayed women as agents in their own right. This is especially evident in films such as *Bashu the Little Stranger*, *Time for Love*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten*. Although women are depicted as agents in these films, agency manifests itself in unique ways that stand in contrast to a Western conception of the term.

### Agency

Agency is an extremely complex term and has a long history in social thought. When asked for the definition of agency, one might attribute many things to it. Words like self-hood, motivation, will, purpose, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity come to mind.<sup>1</sup> A significant

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number of the definitions of agency that exist in Western thought today emerged out of the enlightenment period.<sup>2</sup> There is a certain line of thinking, heavily influenced by John Locke, which emphasizes the capacity of humans to shape their own circumstances. This, in turn, influenced a variety of prominent scholars like Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill.<sup>3</sup> In their article, "What is Agency?" Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische argue that this line of thought has "embedded agency in an individualist and calculative conception of action that still underlies many Western accounts of freedom and progress."<sup>4</sup> The problem with this view of agency is that it does not necessarily exist within Iranian cinema. This line of thought allows the viewer to discount acts of agency that operate outside of the framework of this American dream, where one's direct actions can lead to upward mobility or a direct change in status.

Additionally, a significant number of Western feminists tend to define cinema in terms of how it falls within a patriarchal sphere.<sup>5</sup> A good example of this view is the Bechdel test that was established by Alison Bechdel in 1985. This test determines the feminist value of a film by asking several questions. The first question is whether the film has at least two female characters. The second question is whether the film has at least one scene in which the female characters talk to one another about something other than a man.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that this test dismisses any representation of women due to sexism.<sup>7</sup> While there is an inherent problem with sexism by dismissing any existence of it as non-feminist, the end result is a discounting of individual acts of agency within those films as well.

Women in Iranian cinema are often easily dismissed under these Western definitions of agency. Women in Iranian cinema are not always

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<sup>1</sup> Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What is Agency," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.103, No. 4 (1998): 962.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 964.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 964-965.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 965.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism," *New German Critique*, No. 23 (1981): 42.

<sup>6</sup> Holly Derr, "What Really Makes a Film Feminist," *The Atlantic*, November 13, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/what-really-makes-a-film-feminist/281402/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.



actors trying to shape their own circumstances. Sometimes, the circumstances are fixed and instead women act in order to exist and to survive. However, this does not discount their choices as their own agents or their presence as powerful women. Likewise, one would be hard-pressed to find an Iranian film that is not influenced by, and perhaps contributes to, patriarchal ideas.<sup>8</sup> Female characters in Iranian cinema have cleverly manipulated the sexist elements to their advantage. Examples include prostitutes, like that of the woman in *Ten*, and lovers, like Gazele in *A Time for Love*. To subsequently dismiss a film because of sexism would be to discount the experiences of the Iranian women who have to interact with it on a daily basis.

Agency in Iranian cinema is shaped by experiences and is not necessarily geared towards freedom or progress, but rather towards challenging systems while acknowledging the experiences of Iranian women. While one may find elements within a film that sexualize women, there are also elements that enhance their depiction as strong women, shaped by their experiences but not made by them.<sup>9</sup> While I do not disagree with some of the feminist critiques present in both Western and Iranian cinema, dismissing these films entirely, rather than analyzing individual acts within their cultural contexts, would be a mistake. Dismissing the film dismisses the women and contributes to the “oppression” of women that concerns so many people. Not stopping to analyze individual acts of agency within a film can further push women into the background, rendering them invisible. It is important to critique, but not to the point that any positives found within the cinematic experience are not acknowledged. Crossing this line can often render one a contributor to the problem, rather than part of its solution.

In order to understand women's agency in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, it is important to have a historical background. As previously suggested, agency cannot be separated from culture or experience. Immediately following the 1979 Iranian Revolution there was a shift in cinema, emphasizing more political, anti-Western themes. This shift was partially caused by the revolution and events such as the American Hostage

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<sup>8</sup> Minoo Derayeh, “Depiction of women in Iranian cinema, 1970s to present,” *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol 33, No. 3 (2010): 152.

<sup>9</sup> *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, directed by Bahram Beizai (1989; Iran: The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults).

crisis of 1979.<sup>10</sup> Women were also experiencing a change within cinema and, due to the Islamic Republic's forced veiling, filmmakers were struggling with how to portray women. Unfortunately, one of the easiest solutions was to leave them out all together or to relegate them to the background.<sup>11</sup> A shift was seen during this time, moving from beautiful, delicate Iranian heroines to a more rugged, unattractive heroine drawn from the peasant class.<sup>12</sup>

### Historical Context

The Iran-Iraq war began in 1980 and lasted for eight years. Cinema, most impacted by the war, served many purposes during this time. Among these was to serve as a platform for the vilification of the Iraqi enemy in order to rally citizens around the idea of a war. Another purpose was to promote patriotism, friendship, and martyrdom.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, the Iran-Iraq war affected all aspects of society, particularly the country's gender dynamic. With men away at war, women were suddenly thrust into extreme visibility, entering into the workforce and becoming breadwinners on the home front.<sup>14</sup> This can be seen in the film *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, which will be discussed later in the paper.

The year 1989 was a turning point in Iranian cinema. Not only did it signal the end of the Iran-Iraq war, but it also happened to be the year Ayatollah Khomeini died of a heart attack. The death of Khomeini left an opening for filmmakers to begin critiquing the government. A period of reform took place under the new supreme leader, Khomeini. The political landscape spilled over into film under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, or the MCIG. Mohammad Khatami, previously the President of the MCIG, became the President of Iran in 1997, running on a platform of inclusivity for youths and women.<sup>15</sup> Khatami's reign, starting in 1989 as head of the MCIG and then as president in 1997, led to the Golden Age of

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<sup>10</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 174, 183.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>14</sup> Elaheh Koolaei, "The Impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Social Roles of Iranian Women," *Middle East Critique* Vol. 23, No. 3 (2014): 278.

<sup>15</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), 42.

Iranian cinema. One of the films to emerge from this period was *Time for Love*, which will be discussed in detail later in the paper.

Khatami came under intense criticism in the late 1990s for the ineffectiveness of his reforms. This was punctuated by President George W. Bush's speech in 2002, when he referred to Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil." This hurt Khatami's political image because he had long been advocating for elements of democracy.<sup>16</sup> Criticism abounded from conservatives and liberals alike.<sup>17</sup> Women were also a significant part of this critique as the reforms of cinema had opened the door for women to have a voice.<sup>18</sup> It is out of this landscape that the last two films analyzed and discussed within this paper emerged, *The May Lady* and *Ten*. Both films are ultimately important representations of this social commentary and of women's agency.

### ***Bashu, the Little Stranger***

*Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1983) was a film by Bahram Beizai made directly in the middle of the Iran-Iraq war. In *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, one gets a picture of a war-torn Iran. The film opens with Bashu, an Arab Iranian, desperately running away from the bombs all around him. We know from the beginning that Bashu is alone, with flashbacks of his family following him like ghost victims of the war. Early in the film, Bashu encounters Na'i and her children. Na'i is the most important character with regards to this paper, as Na'i was a break from the regular heroine of this period, which were usually characterized by unattractiveness. In opposition to this, Na'i was very beautiful, and her beauty is even emphasized in a scene that could be seen as problematic, where the camera pans in on a close-up of her face underneath the veil. If looking at this film from a Western viewpoint, it would be easy to dismiss the movie right thereby making an argument about the sexualization and orientalizing of the female figure. However, throughout the course of the film, there are many instances where Na'i is consistently portrayed as a strong female figure with her own agency.

One prominent example of this is her decision to take Bashu into her family. While this could easily be overlooked, it is an important act of cultural agency. Normally to make a decision like this Na'i would have to

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>18</sup> Elaheh Koolaei, "The Impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Social Roles of Iranian Women," 277.

get her husband's permission despite the fact that he is away, presumably at war. The film alludes to this repeatedly, with disapproval resonating from the neighbors and a critical scene where Na'i, knowing Bashu can overhear her, reads a letter from her husband where she adds, "As for the newly arrived boy whose name is Bashu, he is welcome."<sup>19</sup> It is clear from the film that Na'i has not told her husband about the boy and that he would not be pleased that she took him in. Despite this, Na'i makes the decision to take Bashu in, an extreme act of agency.

Other examples of Na'i's agency are extremely subtle, such as every time she gets up in the morning to make sure the crops are safe or when she goes to the market and sells her wares.<sup>20</sup> It is an agency that exists because of, and in spite of, a present patriarchy. To explain this, gender roles must be examined. Men were seen as the providers and women were relegated to roles of the victim or mother figures. Na'i is a mother, and a good one, to her children and to Bashu. She is also a victim of the situation surrounding her, forced to work because of the war and to take over a "man's" role, as it were. Despite this, there is no doubt that Na'i is a strong, capable character. She handles the work effortlessly and, while Bashu helps her out later in the film, Na'i would have been fine without the presence of any male character. Agency here is not a set of human actions working to change circumstances; instead, her agency lies in the reinvention of gender in the confines of patriarchy. Overlooking these as acts of agency undermines Na'i's presence as a powerful, capable woman, effectively relegating her to the background.

### ***Time for Love***

*Time for Love* (1990) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf was released in the Golden Age of Iranian Cinema. The story follows three different scenarios with characters in fluctuation, and one of the only constant characters is the main character, Gazale, who in all three scenarios is having an affair.<sup>21</sup> In the first scenario, the brown haired man is her husband and she has an affair with the blond haired shoeshine boy. Her husband finds out and kills her lover, leading Gazale to suicide. In the second scenario, the actors for the husband and the shoeshine switch places, but the affair stays the same.

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Time for Love*, directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1990; Iran: Green Film House).

In this one, the lover kills the husband and is sentenced to death. Again, Gazale kills herself. By making Gazale promiscuous, the viewer is in danger of viewing her as an inherently problematic character, which reinforces stereotypes and patriarchal ideas. Looking deeper, Gazale's actions are the driving force within the story which is ultimately focused on the question of Gazale's happiness.

The most obvious example of this motivation is in the third scenario, when Gazale has an affair with the shoeshine boy. Her husband finds out about the affair and decides to go after the shoeshine, and in the process of the confrontation the young man gets the upper hand over the husband.<sup>22</sup> With the weapon in his hand, he gives it back to the husband saying that love was worth it. The husband, seeing the love that the boy has for Gazale, decides to pay for the wedding.<sup>23</sup> While Gazele remains unhappy afterwards, hinting towards a perceived fourth scenario, the point is made. Rather than viewing Gazele's acts as negative and vilifying Gazele, the film has a very different message.<sup>24</sup> Gazele, as an agent, is a powerful character. She follows her own desires and, rather than being condemned for them, the film portrays them as necessary for the journey to find the happiness that eludes her. If this film were examined on a surface level under a Western ideal of agency, it would be easy to dismiss Gazele as a frivolous, selfish character whose actions revolve around the men in her life. Within an Iranian context, Gazele is more complex, perhaps flawed, but ultimately strong and in charge of her own happiness.

### ***The May Lady***

*The May Lady* (1998) by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad was made in in the midst of Khatemi's critiques. It follows the main character, Forough, a very successful documentarian. Throughout the course of the film, there is a tension between Forough and her son, Mani. This conflict stems from her love and desire for her lover, whose physical presence is completely absent from the film.<sup>25</sup> Forough is portrayed as extremely capable and her own agent. Despite this, it would be shockingly easy to read the film as sexist. Her son, Mani, appears to have control over Forough. He seems to be the main obstacle between his mother and her happiness with her new lover.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *The May Lady*, Film, directed by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (1998; Iran: Mahammad Atebbai, 2000).

He does this by leaving at alternative times, forcing her to bail him out and readjust her own wants in order to satisfy his.

While Forough is conscious of Mani's wishes, her ultimate internal struggle is with the concept of physical desire on one hand, and motherhood on the other, and whether they are mutually exclusive.<sup>26</sup> One such scene that illustrates this is when Forough gives a diary filled with all her intimate thoughts to Mani.<sup>27</sup> Forough knows that Mani is hostile towards her lover yet, despite this, she chooses herself over the belligerent wants of Mani; the diary, then, is a representation of her own desires. By giving it to Mani, she is forcing him to acknowledge that she exists as more than a mother and that she has wants and desires of her own. Recognizing the giving of the diary as an act of agency is important because it juxtaposes the traditional, patriarchal narrative with a more real understanding of Forough's positionality. Forough recognizes the hostility within the situation, but consciously chooses to put herself first. This may seem trivial, and could even be missed; however, it is a distinct act of agency within the narrative. Forough abandons cultural expectations that have been set because of the dichotomy of motherhood and desire, and she ultimately chooses herself.

Forough is a strong character, despite being torn. Her choices throughout the film show a clear understanding of herself and of Mani as well. Her actions do not necessarily shape her own circumstances, because in the end she still remains in a limbo between desire for her lover and desire of perfect motherhood. However, that does not negate that at definite points she clearly makes a choice for herself, breaking through that dichotomy. Ignoring her choices is doing her a disservice and, as a byproduct, doing a disservice to Iranian women dealing with the same struggle. The tendency is to want to save them, seeing them as a victim. Forough is not a victim, and her struggle is not ours to fix.

### ***Ten***

*Ten* (2002) by Abbas Kiarostami follows Mania Akbari through a series of ten scenes. These scenes are everyday encounters with her son, a prostitute, her sister, and others. Mania is an extremely strong character and, like Forough from *The May Lady*, she was at a crossroads between motherhood and desire. One of the prominent acts of agency within the film is Mania's unapologetic happiness with her new husband, even when

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

faced with constant aggression from her son. The expectation would be for her to “value” her son’s opinion more than some carnal desire. Mania’s agency within the film is that she understands her own value and wants. At one point she states, “I did not get married again just to give you another father, he is a good companion to me - a friend.”<sup>28</sup> It is clear from this instance and others that Mania is extremely happy with her new husband, and choosing him, then, was an act of agency. She refuses to take criticism without being vocal, even deciding to lie about what her husband had done in order to gain a separation in court; she does what she knows will give her the separation she desires.<sup>29</sup> She is an unapologetic, strong character, even when she is met constantly with criticism from her son. At no point does she waver. This is an act of agency, albeit one that exists within a cultural context, where motherhood is sometimes perceived to be at odds with desire. Viewed from a purely Western perspective, one would miss this act of agency altogether.

Another important scene happens later in the film, when Mania picks up a prostitute and they strike up a conversation. Mania asks her the reason why she got into prostitution. In response the woman states, “Sex, love, sex it is a trade and it is my job and I like it...My life is easy I do not need anyone or anything.”<sup>30</sup> Choosing prostitution was not because she was a victim of circumstances, but rather an act of agency. It was a way to take control of the system and to take control of her own destiny. While the film is not necessarily advocating for prostitution, it is putting in perspective the acts of agency that are easily dismissed. Viewing this woman as a victim in need of saving is ultimately taking away the agency that she has worked to attain and, in her own words, that she likes. The whole time that Mania is questioning her, she asks the same questions that initially pop into a viewer’s head: “What about love? What about guilt?”<sup>31</sup> These questions are natural, but they are also dangerous; they discount acts of agency, even the ones that make us uncomfortable and perpetuate the savior complex.

## **Conclusion**

Acts of agency within Iranian films, and their understanding, should not be limited to a Western understanding of agency. There is a cultural element, and dismissing patriarchal or sexist ideas within films means

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<sup>28</sup> *Ten*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (2002; Iran: Zeitgeist Films, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

dismissing individual acts of agency. We saw this through the analysis of films from the post-revolutionary era. However, the bigger issue that comes from dismissing agency is that it becomes a justification for political and individual acts. In other words, these issues are being looked at through an ethnocentric lens, with cinema informing our opinions. We end up with an intrinsically-biased view of a foreign "other" that is oppressed and needs saving. Cinema is one of the few mediums that transcends national boundaries, and because of this it wields much power. Watching a film like *Ten* or *The May Lady* without a nuanced understanding can become justification for interference. It is only a small leap from watching a film like the ones discussed above to deciding that these women are oppressed and not in control of their own destiny. This leads to a Western savior complex, propelling people to step into situations where they have no understanding and arguably no right to enter in.

People have watched these films and felt the need to punish a society that pushes women to the background, not realizing that they have essentially done the same thing by failing to recognize agency in a context that was not their own. With regards to contemporary debates toward Middle Eastern women this is heard over and over, pushing a victim complex upon Middle Eastern women.<sup>32</sup> Watching cinema and discounting agency contributes to this over-arching narrative. The point of this paper is not to keep people from being critical of what they see and hear in films, as there definitely are issues that exist with the portrayal of women in Iranian Cinema. Rather, the point is to fill these critiques with an understanding of agency that extends beyond ethnocentrism and allows for understanding of the subjects themselves.

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<sup>32</sup> Leila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* Vol. 104, No. 3 (2002): 783.



## **The Value of Virtue: Depictions of Class and Morals in Iranian Cinema**

Aubrey Crynes\*

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The government of the Islamic Republic of Iran is no stranger to cinema's ability to encourage values and moral standards in a society. Since its inception, the Islamic Republic has recognized the power of cinema and, in turn, outsiders have recognized Iranian cinema as a window into a nation that is still shrouded in mystery. Even before the stringent codification of morals by Iran's post-revolutionary government, Iranian cinema offered a glimpse into what both the people and the Shah thought about the society that surrounded them. The Revolution of 1979 championed Iran's *mostazafin*, or downtrodden, and called upon the masses to lead Iran's future. But as the state began to solidify, the Islamic Republic wrote its values, both civic and moral, into its legal code. State sponsored morality is now the norm for the nation, but with roughly eighty million inhabitants, perfect adherence is not possible. The question then becomes who is best able to bypass the law? While, realistically, Iran's *nouveau riche* are the ones with the most wiggle room under the law, this is not an image a government for the downtrodden is interested in broadcasting. By observing Iranian cinema, one can see who can break the state sanctioned morality in both action and intent. The Islamic Republic of Iran allows for more moral ambiguity in depictions of its lower classes in cinema in order to create the appearance of giving voice to their struggle. This allowance is apparent when examining Iran's cinema leading up to the revolution, the evolution of cinema under the Islamic Republic, and the way the state allows depictions of moral relativism in modern Iranian cinema.

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Before moving into a more in-depth conversation about Iranian cinema, it is imperative to understand the way the state interacts with the film industry. The Islamic Republic of Iran derives a portion of its legitimacy from its theocratic governance. In order to uphold this tenet of legitimacy, Iran's government must promote an image of 'public Islamic-ness.' Essentially, because the state is inherently Islamic, the public sphere of the nation must reflect Islamic morals in everyday life. If this minimum, surface level Islamic-ness is not adhered to, the state has failed to enforce its most basic task. This means that the government of Iran is obsessed with image and public morality, which leads to legislation and censorship of everything from dress to film. This need to protect public morality led to the government creating the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) to regulate the media publicly circulated in Iran. Among other duties, the MCIG must approve every movie that is shown publicly in Iran, and if a movie does not pass MCIG screening - be it for moral failings, politically charged content, or a number of other issues - the film is then banned. This process of approval means that every movie shown in Iran, regardless of who produced, directed, or financed it, has been at least tacitly approved by the state.

### **Cinema in the Last Years of the Shah**

In the Shah's last years of rule, Iran was gripped in ever deepening economic turmoil. A society in flux, the Shah's push for urban development drew many Iranians to urban centers for the first time in the country's history. Mass movement put two immediate and tangible strains on cities: it over-crowded infrastructure and sapped a vast majority of the jobs.<sup>1</sup> The infrastructural strain caused by the influx of people brought wide spread urban poverty and social discontent as inequality widened across the nation. The Shah, in contrast, harkened by the ever-increasing price of oil, was "display[ing] the confidence of a man who knew that his country's financial resources had quadrupled in just over two months."<sup>2</sup> The money flowing into Iran tended to stay at the top, padding the pockets of its rulers and upper classes. But the money alone could not shield them from the mass migration of people into their cities looking for a better life. Nearly all new migrants were from rural areas, attracted by the "urban bias

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<sup>1</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2006), 91.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

of government agencies” that skewed the economics of the nation to heavily favor its urban population.<sup>3</sup> These urban newcomers were unfamiliar with city life and tradition, often coming from generations of pastoral village communities. This, coupled with the creation of a new class of urban poor, made these newly arrived villagers very easy to classify and ‘otherize.’ Often catching the blame for rising social ills that accompany mass demographic shifts, this new class gained notoriety not only in Persian daily life but in popular culture as well.

As Iran continued to grow, so too did its need for accessible, wide-reaching popular entertainment. Film in the last decades of the Shah’s reign became a popular medium that was not only generally affordable, but also was available for consumption regardless of education or literacy level. Due to the broad base that cinema could reach, it reflected many of the country’s popular moods to appeal to as many people as possible. The drastic structural changes Iran was facing at the time meant the population was gripped with uncertainty, feelings that played out on the cinema screens. The creation of an entirely new class, the urban poor, made them both easy targets and an object of curiosity for Iran’s citizens and its film makers. Two distinct genres arose in response to the struggles and popular enthrallment with this new class, as crime and *luti* genre films sprang up across Iran’s silver screens.<sup>4</sup>

The crime genre was neither a new innovation nor was it indigenous to Iran. Originally introduced to the public through imported films produced in the West, Iranians related to the harrowing depictions of city life which borrowed heavily from the Western model, focusing on the dark side of urban living. As political and social upheaval reigned, Iranian crime films “were reminders of the relationship between psychological factors and economic achievement” that so many of its citizens were striving for;<sup>5</sup> the prevalent theme of insecurity reflected the lives of Iranians with an ever-growing police state, economic uncertainty, and growing class tensions. The shanties and tenuous employment of the newly arrived urban classes fueled fear not only in their own lives, but also in the lives of the cities more well-to-do. Worried about the few stable job prospects and lack of access to basic tenets of life, the cities well-to-do and political elite feared that this unstable, new urban class would rise against them. Crime films

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 92.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 105.

that reflected this fear were met with huge success at the box office, despite their negative portrayal of Iran's newest social class.

While crime genres reflected a popular sense of insecurity over the country's future, *luti* films reflected the urban migrants fears and frustrations with their new lives. Many of Iran's new urban inhabitants were the first in generations of their families to leave their respective rural communities. The fear of the loss of tradition and familial ties coupled with the complications of navigating a new life of urban poverty made for a unique struggle for the new lower class. The intense alienation with their new lives promoted a mentality and ethos that found its way onto Iran's screens in the form of *luti* films.

The *luti* is a character full of contradictions. While he (the *luti* is an intrinsically male role) is supposed to embody the more traditional values of the previously rural life, he can only exist in an urban landscape. The *luti* represents the "lumpen rouge," honorable, yet backwards; vulgar, yet principled.<sup>6</sup> A populist character, the *luti* spits in the face of the rich by shunning the Westernizing forces in Iranian society while defending those in his community and the values of his traditional lifestyle. The *luti* was a proxy for other Iranian men, frustrated with their economic standing and the direction their country was headed, to see themselves as winners. While the crime genre of the same era fed off the upper classes fear of the new urban poor, the *luti* films were a chance for them to indulge in a fantasy that showed people like them, who resembled their own beliefs and backgrounds, winning for a change. The *luti*, however, was not a wholly positive role despite being the vessel of working class pride. Often reinforcing negative stereotypes of poverty (disregard for authority, backwards attempts to cling to tradition, and usually the reinforcement of patriarchal values), the *luti* films did not do much to sway the negative opinion surrounding Iran's newest urban population.<sup>7</sup> Between the crime genre and the *luti* films, the urban lower class received no praise on Iran's silver screens. However, at this time Iran was still only roughly 35% urbanized with much of its population still living throughout the countryside.<sup>8</sup> Though much less popularly depicted, Iran's rural poor did

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>8</sup> "Urban population (% of total)," The World Bank | Data, accessed April 29, 2017.

make it onto the silver screen where they received an interesting depiction in comparison to their urban counterparts.

While the popular films of the time showed urban lower classes, a different set of film makers depicted the rural poor. Iranian New Wave cinema came onto the scene at the same time popular crime and *luti* genres took off.<sup>9</sup> However, instead of appealing to the popular audience, New Wave cinema is similar to today's Art House cinema; cinema that is more theoretically and aesthetically based, but often lacks the popular appeal of a blockbuster movie. Rural life became increasingly difficult under the Shah's modernization policies with "agricultural products [priced] below their real market value."<sup>10</sup> *The Cow* (1969), a seminal work in New Wave cinema, depicts the struggle of rural farmers left out of both the rapid modernization and accumulation of wealth that was flowing towards the country's elite.<sup>11</sup> Halted upward mobility is heavily present in *The Cow*, as it depicts the curse of commodity and its failure to reduce the cycle of poverty. The characters of *The Cow*, all villagers from the same rural farming community, are shown in a sympathetic light as economic hardship and loss drive one farmer to lose his own humanity. *The Cow* met international success, "winning the prestigious critics' award at the Venice Film Festival," allowing it to be shown in Iran despite the film's politically charged content.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the crime or *luti* genres, New Wave films, and subsequently *The Cow*, were focused on highlighting structural or societal problems. While still feeding off the same fears that gripped the rest of the nation, New Wave cinema attempted to show the larger forces that caused such pervasive insecurity.

It is critical to understand the depiction of the lower classes in cinema under the Shah in order to understand the way the Islamic Republic depicts the same group. Under the Shah, depictions of the lower classes were often negative. The new urban poor were to blame for rising urban crime as well as the fear felt by the upper classes as class tensions increased and stratification became even more rigid. The *lutis* that the urban poor saw

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<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS?end=2015&locations=IR&page=3&start=1960&view=chart>.

<sup>9</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>11</sup> *The Cow*, directed by Dariush Mahrjui (1969: Iranian Ministry of Culture), film.

<sup>12</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 133.

themselves reflected in were backwards and unruly, not at all like the image of the new, modern Iranian citizen that the Shah was hoping to promote. New Wave film provided a more sympathetic depiction of Iran's poor, but was often subject to censorship for its political messages and, even when shown, often did not appeal to larger audiences.<sup>13</sup> All in all, in the last years of the Shah's reign, depictions of Iran's lower classes on its silver screens were not kind.

### **The Lower Class in a New Light: Cinema Under the Islamic Republic**

Iran had its revolution in 1979, which led to the Shah's removal and Ayatollah Khomeini's rise to power. The new Islamic Republic attempted to purge itself of the influences of both the Shah and the West, leaving the state of cinema in question. Film, of course, is not spoken of in the Qur'an nor in the Hadith, so there was no explicit religious answer for the dilemma. Cinema had become popular under the Shah, but "aware of cinema's power, the Islamic authorities could neither reject nor ignore the medium."<sup>14</sup> Instead, for the first few years, Iranian cinema became a part of the new government's larger undertaking of 're-Islamizing' the nation. For the first decade or so, with the nation embroiled in the Iran-Iraq war and with strict censorship laws in place, there was not much more than war documentaries in Iranian cinema. In 1989, with Khomeini's death and the end of the war, Iran began to see the beginnings of social liberalization, both in its streets and in its movie theaters.

With the loosening of restrictions in Iranian cinema, the subjects of films moved away from battle fields and began focusing on ordinary people. Iran's revolution was supposed to be for, and by, its *mostazafin*. Literally translated into English as "downtrodden," the *mostazafin* were Iran's lower classes, the ones who fared so poorly under the Shah both in life and in the movies of the day. Consistently since 1989, film makers have portrayed the lower classes in Iranian cinema as virtuous, heroic, and as the strongest members of the country – even if in reality they are still disenfranchised. The Islamic Republic's legitimacy comes not only from religion, but from its people as well. As a government for the downtrodden, it tried to portray them in the best light it could.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 135.

<sup>14</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State," *Middle East Report*, no. 219 (2001): 27.

One of the first break out films out of Iran was *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1989).<sup>15</sup> In this heartwarming story, a poor rural woman takes in a little boy who is fleeing the Iran-Iraq war. From the south-eastern provinces of Iran, he speaks Arabic and is dark-skinned, both of which set him apart as an ‘other’ in the northern village in which he tries to find shelter. The main character of the film, Na’i, takes in Bashu (the little boy) despite the protests of the village. Fighting back against the prejudice of the other members of her town, she cares for Bashu and raises him like her own – despite dealing with the pressures of having two other children, a husband gone looking for work, and already living on the brink of poverty before Bashu’s arrival.<sup>16</sup> Na’i tackles racism and sexism, and overcomes economic hardship throughout the film. The fact that a poor farmer is portrayed as having the moral high ground is a distinct break from pre-revolutionary depictions of the rural poor in Iranian cinema. In this depiction, the rural poor are not tragic victims of circumstance nor are they criminals with backwards morals. Rather, it depicts Na’i as a strong resilient woman, capable of caring for herself, making executive decisions in her own life, and as someone who has both a traditional lifestyle and progressive morals.<sup>17</sup> The purposeful use of a rural woman as the actor possessing these values shows a clear shift from previous depictions and shows the state acknowledging the struggles its rural citizens encounter, while lauding them as virtuous people. Even the other villagers, who originally reject Bashu on the basis of prejudice, overcome their views and accept him in the community.

To this day, cinema in the Islamic Republic continues to espouse the moral strengths of its lower classes, even if economic realities in the nation still make it difficult for them to achieve upward mobility or authority over the events of their own lives. The movie *The Guest* (2006) is neither internationally acclaimed nor particularly memorable, but as a movie produced by the Islamic Republic as a sort of romantic comedy meant for popular consumption, it provides insightful information on how the state views its *mostazafin*.<sup>18</sup> *The Guest* is a comedy of errors, involving an American woman lost in Tehran after her friend scares her and convinces

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<sup>15</sup> *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, directed by Bahram Beizai (1989; Gilan, Iran: The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults), film.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> *The Guest*, directed by Saeed Asadi (2006: Bitafilm), film.

her to run away from her rich fiancée. She is picked up by a lowly taxi driver, who works tirelessly to get her back to her fiancée, risking his own engagement in the process. Majid, the taxi driver, has been unable to marry his fiancée despite being engaged for three years because he cannot afford the wedding. The movie takes many twists and turns including Caroline, the American woman, being mistaken for someone who Majid is possibly having an affair with, as well as her nearly being duped into marrying a slimy, rich hotel owner.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the film, the poorest characters are the ones dropping everything to help Caroline, regardless if it hurts their ability to earn a livelihood or maintain relationships, while the rich are depicted as incompetent, indifferent, or downright insidious. However, the film ends with Caroline's fiancée's father offering to pay for Majid's wedding that he could not afford, a resolution only possible due to the father's mass amounts of wealth.<sup>20</sup> *The Guest* depicts the lower class as hard working and virtuous, but makes the concession that some of their problems cannot be overcome without stumbling upon large windfalls of cash. The Islamic Republic still portrays its lower classes as moral, upholding traditional Iranian values, and as kind, caring people. This depiction does acknowledge the structural difficulties they face and that being a good person is not always enough. Perhaps remaining a morally upright person is what will eventually bring a change of fortune despite economic circumstance.

### **Class and Moral Relativism**

Positive depictions are not the only image the Islamic Republic allows to show about its lower classes. Rather, it is one of the few groups film makers are allowed to depict breaking the Islamic Republic's strict moral code. Many film makers in Iran "structure their films to avoid scrutiny from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance," the governmental agency charged with making sure the films fit the legal proscriptions for moral conduct and contain material appropriate for popular consumption.<sup>21</sup> However, the more Iranians produce movies, the more the government allows slight concessions in the strict moral standards for films shown to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Reza J Poudesh and M. Reza Shirvani, "Issues and Paradoxes in the Development of Iranian National Cinema: An Overview,," *Iranian Studies* 41, no. 3 (2008): 333.



the public. Although the rich in the Islamic Republic are the ones who can most easily flaunt the laws, allowing that on screen would chip away at the state's position as advocates for the *mostazafin*. Therefore, in order to depict moral relativism on screen, those actions are often carried out by the lower class.

*The Lizard* (2004) is a beloved comedy and one of the Islamic Republic's most popular movies.<sup>22</sup> Even though it was banned from showing in Iran only two weeks after its initial release, "it has become Iran's best-selling film as a result of bootleg video sales."<sup>23</sup> *The Lizard* depicts a criminal who escapes prison by impersonating a clergy member. Through his time charading as a clergy member, the criminal begins to internalize what he is preaching and becomes a reformed man. Eventually he is caught and taken by the authorities (letting him go free would have been too much of an affront to the law), but he completes his moral transformation and is no longer the same criminal he was when he escaped prison.<sup>24</sup> To show a wealthy person escaping prison would only enforce the idea that those with money are immune to punishment, regardless if any moral transformation took place. Though its time in cinemas was brief, two weeks was more than enough time for the film to gain wide-spread popularity.<sup>25</sup> *The Lizard* brought conversations surrounding moral relativism and redemption into popular cinema, but only a lower-class protagonist could convey such a message. *The Lizard* is a case of a positive moral relativism. That is to say that while the protagonist's original actions are questionable, the outcome of redemption made them worth it. However, moral relativism does not work in just one direction.

Choices made from desperation are often not the right ones, though they can be the most understandable. The Islamic Republic, in an attempt to sympathize and air the struggles of its lower classes, has shown some 'social problem' films that criticize the lives the *mostazafin* still have to live under the Islamic Republic. Showing the lengths to which they are driven, *Under the Skin of the City* (2001) is a film that shows to what extremes economic desperation can drive a person, and in showing that,

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<sup>22</sup> *The Lizard*, directed by Kamal Tabriz (2004; Tehran, Iran: Faradis), film.

<sup>23</sup> Massoud Mehrabi, "A Bed and Several Dreams: A Short History of Iranian Cinema," *Cinéaste* 31, no. 3 (2006): 47.

<sup>24</sup> *The Lizard*, directed by Tabrizi.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

breaks the moral prescriptions of the Islamic Republic.<sup>26</sup> Abbas, the second oldest of four children, works to help support his family. He and his mother, Tuba, are the family's only source of income because the ailing father cannot work, the two other siblings are still in school, and the oldest sister has been married off. In an attempt to get a visa to work abroad, Abbas sells the family house to pay the travel agency. However, the visa turns out to be a scam and Abbas has no way to get his money back and has rendered his family homeless.<sup>27</sup> Increasingly desperate to earn back the money and save his family, Abbas turns to dealing drugs and is ultimately caught. His mother distracts the authorities so he can make his escape, but both he and his family are ruined.<sup>28</sup>

While dramatized, the events of the film could very easily happen to a real Iranian family. The pain and frustration brought by the economic stagnation wrought by sanctions has driven many lower-class Iranians to desperation. The motive behind Abbas's actions is one of the key reasons for the film's allowance in Iran; he did not turn to drug dealing because he found it enticing or was an addict himself, but rather was driven into the action by his lack of options. The other reason the Iranian government screened this film, despite its moral failings, is because Abbas was of the lower class. A rich person turning to drug dealing is unconscionable, and there would be no redeeming reasons for the Islamic Republic to allow the film to pass the censors. Again, it would only reinforce the reality in the country that the rich are the ones allowed to indulge in vice, knowing fully well that they have the capital to get out of punishment. But reality does not support the regime's claims of supporting its downtrodden. *Under the Skin of the City* was a way for the regime to acknowledge to its citizens that it was aware of the harsh realities they faced and allowed them to play the role of sympathetic government. The moral relativism and harsh social criticism, then, provided by *Under the Skin of the City* was only allowed through the censors because it depicted the struggles of the lower class.

Depicting the struggles of the lower class is not a free pass to depict whatever a director wants. Some actions undertaken in desperation are still beyond redemption and cannot be shown in Iran's cinemas. In the film *I am not Angry* (2014), the main character Navid faces many of the same

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<sup>26</sup> *Under the Skin of the City*, directed by Rakhshan Bani Etemad (2001; Tehran, Iran: Farabi Cinema Foundation), film.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

problems faced by other characters across Iranian cinema.<sup>29</sup> After being blacklisted, or ‘starred,’ from universities after his participation in the 2009 Green Movement, Navid finds himself with no economic prospects and at the end of his rope.<sup>30</sup> Like Majid in *The Guest*, Navid cannot afford to marry his fiancée nor secure housing after the marriage. Like Abbas in *Under the Skin of the City*, he too is desperate and pressed for time, as Navid’s fiancée’s father has decided it is time to find her a more suitable match. Angry at the political state of his nation and at his own situation, Navid snaps and kills both his fiancée and her father.<sup>31</sup> Like the main character of *The Lizard*, Navid too must face justice at the end of the film, but instead of the authorities taking him away, Navid is executed.<sup>32</sup> *I am not Angry* holds many similarities to other films that the Islamic Republic has allowed, but takes things a step too far. Navid is not just explicitly critical of his economic situation, but of his government as well. While most films in the Islamic Republic contain some sort of political bent, *I am not Angry* is too forward in naming its grievances and was “pulled from the [Fajr Film Festival] section at the last minute,” ending any hopes of Iranian movie theaters ever screening the film.<sup>33</sup> The Islamic Republic is willing to give voice to the struggles of its lower classes, but not when they explicitly name the government as the root cause of that struggle. Economic pain and desperation can allow for some fudging of the rules, but political criticism – even from the *mostazafin* – is not tolerated.

The poor of the Islamic Republic still face many of the same challenges that they did under the Shah. Unable to buy their way out of their problems, breaking the law, no matter their intent, is rarely something they can get away with. The government of the Islamic Republic is aware of these conditions and looks to show solidarity and support with its lower classes – while also trying to avoid fully acknowledging the extent of the power the wealthy have in the country. By allowing for morally ambiguous depictions of its lower classes in cinema, the Islamic Republic attempts to both acknowledge and give voice to some of the struggles the *mostazafin* face, while still painting them in a sympathetic light. Depicting someone of

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<sup>29</sup> *I Am Not Angry*, directed by Reza Dormishian (2014; Tehran, Iran), film.

<sup>30</sup> ‘Starred’ is a slang term that refers to the asterisk that appears next to a blacklisted student’s name in official university files.

<sup>31</sup> *I am not Angry*, directed by Dormashian.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Alissa Simon, "Berlin Film Review: ‘I’m Not Angry’," *Variety*, February 18, 2014, accessed May 2, 2017.

the lower class in a film will not automatically absolve whatever actions the character takes, but it can allow for a slight relaxation of the censorship surrounding a film – providing the actions are happening for the right reasons.

### **Conclusion**

World renowned, Iranian cinema is one of the nation's most successful cultural exports. Many have studied its history and discourses, and its feminist undertones or political messages, but for a nation whose government's beginnings are so firmly rooted in fighting for its lower classes, regardless of its success, not much literature exists that is solely dedicated to examining the way Iranian cinema deals with questions of class. With such a critically acclaimed body of work, Iranian cinema is prime for study, as cinema can provide a window into issues of class and its intersections across Iranian society could prove invaluable. As it stands, depictions of Iran's lower classes in cinema are both positive and complex. Moving forward from the air of fear and deep suspicion that surrounded Iran's lower class in cinematic depictions under the Shah, the Islamic Republic shows its *mostazafin* as being morally upright and an integral part of society. As the people the regime is built on, film makers can use lower classes to depict more morally ambiguous situations in film in order to acknowledge their struggle. By observing Iranian cinema, one can see who can break the state sanctioned morality in both action and intent. The Islamic Republic of Iran allows for more moral ambiguity in depictions of its lower classes in cinema to create the appearance of giving voice to their struggle. The type of struggle, of course, that revolutions are built upon.

## **The Politics of Fashion in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Sydney Warrington\*

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In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the world's only existing theocracy, the relationship between the state and society cannot exist mutually exclusive of one another, considering that the regime's legitimacy is contingent upon the religiosity of its citizens in order to maintain its national identity. Accordingly, defiance of Iran's conservative norms at the individual level is a threat to the state and must be systematically addressed in order to ensure stability; however, addressing issues of defiance in Iran is defined by a give and take relationship between the government and the people. This relationship manifests in all aspects of the Iranian experience and is most evident in the highly polarized discourse surrounding what constitutes Islamically appropriate dress for women. Upon the Islamic Revolution in 1979 under the supreme rule of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran implemented new legislation to make veiling mandatory in public for all women in Iran, legitimized by clerics' interpretations of Sharia Law, despite women's initial widespread protests against the hardline conservative rulings thrust upon them.<sup>1</sup> Due to the intrinsically linked nature of the Iranian state and its society, points of contention, such as that of the hijab and its relationship to religious authenticity, are exacerbated. Investigating the

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<sup>1</sup> Sharia Law is a legal system rooted in the interpretations of the Qur'an, hadith (accounts of the Prophet Muhammad's actions and sayings), and fatwas (the rulings of scholars).

evolution of women's fashion trends in relation to the political context is indicative of the convoluted connection between the two.

In the 21st Century, the Iranian women's fashion industry has an increasingly significant presence on the international stage. Its innovation challenged common Western perceptions of Iran's youth, which comprises roughly seventy percent of the country's eighty million people. These perceptions tend to homogenize this large demographic and consider the Iranian experience as one defined by restrictions and state-imposed piety.<sup>2</sup> The industry forces the observer to take a more nuanced look at traditional stereotypes surrounding the exoticised Iranian woman, typically painting a picture of an inferior, oppressed individual, denying her a sense of agency. On the contrary, the rise of a revolutionizing domestic fashion industry and women who are asserting their individuality in the form of vibrant personal fashion choices pushes the boundaries of the conservative laws in the Islamic Republic of Iran. This implicit opposition to the state greatly contributes to a shift in social norms among the perceivably secularizing, progressive youth that the government must seek to pacify in order to maintain legitimacy.<sup>3</sup> This claim will be substantiated by first investigating the evolution of the fashion industry in accordance with the political context in both historical and contemporary Iran. This is followed by an examination of the state's give and take strategy of managing the fashion industry's resistance. Finally, a conclusive analysis will be drawn by looking at how prominent women's fashion designers and fashion bloggers, often through the avenue of social media, are resisting state-imposed social constraints by way of non-political actions in Iran today. In conclusion, this paper will discuss the broader implications related to perceptions of modernity and how secular ideology and religious conservatism coexist in the Muslim world at large.

### **Correlation between Politics and Fashion**

Instead of investigating the legal or the social features that constitute life as a young woman living in Iran in isolation, it is important to consider the correlative effect they have on one another. This tactic permits a holistic understanding of Iranian fashion from the micro-level, the everyday lives of Iranian citizens, as well as the macro-level, the political implications and the state's complex identity. The radical shifts in

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<sup>2</sup> Maral Noori, "Youth in Iran Part 3: The Politics of Fashion," *The Iran Primer*, August 19, 2013, accessed October 3, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> Youth meaning below thirty years of age.

women's clothing over the course of the past half century are a visible implication of the broader struggle between the ideologies of hardline and reformist Islamists and the strong pro- and anti-Western sentiments. Understanding the historical context and its relationship to the progression of women's dress in Iran is crucial to examining the current and potential future impact of women's social freedoms as a result of their assertion of individuality through bold fashion statements.

The politicization of women's bodies dates back to before the revolution. A poignant illustration of this reality began in 1936 when Reza Shah Pahlavi outlawed the public donning of a hijab as part of a more comprehensive modernization program. This mandate stayed in effect until 1983 when Ayatollah Khomeini and the newly established Islamic Republic redacted this law, making appearance in public without a hijab a punishable offense, regardless of religious identification.<sup>4</sup> Reza Shah viewed Iran's resistance to westernization as a threat to his legitimacy, just as the newly established Islamic Republic viewed the persistence of secularism as a threat to its legitimacy. Both of these shifts in opinion and policy objectified the bodies of women, treating them as measures of religiosity or modernity, and subjugated women by expecting them to comply and shift their ideologies accordingly.

Reza Shah's forced "unveiling" sparked a radical response from clerics who deemed the hijab crucial to the moral legitimacy of the individual; consequently, the legislation was renounced following his resignation in 1941. Although it was no longer compulsory, veiling was socially constructed as an anti-modern, ultra-orthodox practice, which established prejudices against the hijab. These prejudices were institutionalized, often preventing women (and men with wives that continued wearing the hijab) from advancing socially and in the workplace. The education system explicitly opposed the chador,<sup>5</sup> and even higher-end hotels and restaurants would refuse service if the customer was wearing one.<sup>6</sup> The fashion industry in Iran was booming at the time of the Shah's reign and was representative of the various, wide-ranging levels of ideologies among the culture. Secular urban women often wore clothes that emulated Western

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<sup>4</sup> Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan and into the Fire," *Middle East Report* (Winter 2006), doi:10.9783/9780812200430.191.

<sup>5</sup> A chador is a large, enveloping piece of cloth that leaves only the face visible.

<sup>6</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics of Hijab in Iran: From Confinement to Choice," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 4, no. 1 (2007), doi:10.2202/1554-4419.1114.

fashion trends that were plastered throughout Iranian media as part of the modernization project, and rural or more traditional women fashioned themselves more conservatively in printed veils.<sup>7</sup>

At the start of the Revolution in 1979, many educated, middle-class women began wearing their hijab as part of a political movement against the Shah's regime to reclaim their religious identity; this was largely in response to Western cultural invasion, which they feared was on the verge of eradicating Iran's societal morality.<sup>8</sup> However, most had no intention of making mandatory veiling a characteristic of the new state. Directly after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that women in government positions were prohibited to appear in public without a hijab, and women protested fervently until the government repressed them.<sup>9</sup>

Upon the implementation of the Islamic Penal Code in 1982, veiling was legally required by all women, punishable by up to seventy-four lashes. The regime justified this ruling by claiming that the hijab was an avenue for women's empowerment by sheltering them from the gaze of inherently sinful men in the public sphere. As a result, women had greater access to higher education and a more significant presence in the workforce.<sup>10</sup> The Penal Code states that women must wear a "proper hijab," but there is no consensus among Islamic scholars as to what exactly appropriate Islamic dress constitutes, which has led to vast inconsistency in implementation, subjecting women to punishment for things as wide-ranging as using makeup to wearing too short of a manteau.<sup>11</sup>

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and specifically during Rafsanjani's presidency from 1989-1997, women began pushing the boundaries of the state-imposed hijab, and the chador became a less common clothing choice as it was increasingly considered a fundamentalist practice among

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<sup>7</sup> Elspeth Reeve, "The Fascinating Fashion Evolution of Iran's State-Imposed Modesty Garments," *The Atlantic*, July 9, 2013, accessed December 7, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Manata Hashemi, "Youth Culture in Iran" (lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics."

<sup>11</sup> "Iran: The Enforcement of Dress Codes," Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (Ottawa, 2011), <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/11/07/IRN103920.E.pdf>.



society.<sup>12</sup> As the generation after the revolution, called “the sons and daughters of Khomeini,” came of age in the 1990s, clothing trends among young women began to shift away from adhering to a loosely fitting, black hijab and began to challenge restrictions in various ways.<sup>13</sup> The regime responded by amending the law regarding dress code violations, altering the punishment from lashes to imprisonment from anywhere between ten days to two months or a fine of fifty thousand to five hundred thousand rials.<sup>14</sup>

Growing frustrations over such government restrictions on social freedoms perpetuated increasing support for the liberal, reformist political ideology, which promotes democracy, greater social freedoms, and improved relations with the West. This increased support resulted in the election of a liberal college professor, Mohammad Khatami, in 1997. The new reformist government fueled a “silent resistance,” or the act of implicitly opposing the government by not cooperating rather than using explicit tactics, such as protests or violence. Among Iranian youth, passive resistance manifested in women’s innovative clothing--bright colors, exposed hair, more form-fitting manteaus. Khatami and his administration advocated for the moral prestige of the hijab, but argued in favor of the right of the individual to choose how to wear the hijab, as opposed to forcing repressive legislation. Asymmetrical power dynamics between the religious leaders and elected officials, however, largely hindered Khatami and his allies from implementing their reformist initiatives and thwarted opposition to conservatism. For example, Khatami’s first Interior Minister, Abdollah Nuri, was tried and imprisoned for five years for his overt criticism of the restrictive policies of the state, specifically regarding mandatory veiling.<sup>15</sup>

Despite President Khatami’s campaign promises for change and the domination of Reformists in the Parliamentary elections of 2000, they were unsuccessful in accomplishing any legitimate expansion of social liberties via the state apparatus. This is attributable to their inferior political agency in comparison to the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and the ruling body of clerics who were able to successfully undermine any attempt by the elected officials to implement domestic or foreign policy reform. The Reformists’ failure to follow through on their promises caused many supporters to

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<sup>12</sup> Mir-Hosseini, “The Politics and Hermeneutics.”

<sup>13</sup> Hashemi, “Youth Culture in Iran.”

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Mir-Hosseini, “The Politics and Hermeneutics.”

perceive their ineffectiveness as betrayal by selling out to Khamenei and the hardliners, inciting mass-public frustration with the administration. As a result, a conservative presidential candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, won the election by a small margin in 2005. While leniency on enforcing the Penal Code's restrictions on social freedoms throughout the Reformists' rule fostered and increased levels of defiance amongst the youth, Ahmadinejad aggressively cracked down. He allotted a significant amount of power to and expanded the mandate of the "Morality Police" for the purpose of regulating every aspect of Iranian social life. This institution is responsible for administering warnings and "moral guidance" to regulate women's behavior in the public sphere, subsequently leading to the arrests of hundreds of women for clothing deemed too provocative.<sup>16</sup>

Upon the elections of 2009, in which Ahmadinejad sought a second term, the majority of the youth turned to his moderate opponent, Mir-Hussein Mousavi. Despite youth opposition, the incumbent president and the hardliners reclaimed power. Speculation that the election was fraudulent sparked a monumental movement termed the "Green Wave" Campaign, which was largely composed of women seeking political and social liberties. As protesters took to the streets in response to the election outcomes and Ahmadinejad's strict, state-imposed morality initiatives, the government was forced to either respond with brute force or make concessions to appease the population. It attempted to repress the campaign's proponents by way of arrests and fines, which only further perpetuated the Green Movement's support, requiring the state to reconsider their methodology and act strategically in order to avoid inciting more defiance. The regime publicly declared the movement as radical, anti-Iranian, and anti-Islamic and claimed that no compromises would be made on its behalf. However, officials were left with no other choice but to turn a blind eye to less significant issues regarding social practices that challenged the state (e.g. the secularization of women's fashion) in order to focus their efforts on combating deliberate political activism in opposition to the state. This, in turn, provided a window of opportunity for women emboldened by the Green Movement to continue pushing the dress code boundaries, sparking contemporary Iran's modern "fashion revolution."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Mir-Hosseini, "The Politics and Hermeneutics."

<sup>17</sup> Hooman Majd, "Think Again: Iran's Green Movement," *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2010, [foreignpolicy.com/2010/01/06/think-again-irans-green-movement/](http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/01/06/think-again-irans-green-movement/).

### **Current Political Economy and the Fashion Industry**

When the incumbent president, Hassan Rouhani, took office in 2013, sanctions by Western governments in response to Iran's nuclear weapons program were crippling the economy. Despite the country's massive oil revenues, the inflation rate was upwards of thirty percent, and the GDP was declining at an estimated 6.8% per annum.<sup>18</sup> Under immense pressure to follow through on his campaign promise to improve the economy, Rouhani was forced to work with the P5+1 (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China and Germany) to negotiate sanction relief in exchange for a reduction in their nuclear weapons program.<sup>19</sup> Iran's reintegration into the global economy took effect in January 2016 following the lifting of sanctions, which greatly enhanced women's ability to purchase Western clothing and export their own designs.<sup>20</sup>

In an attempt to diversify the economy, Rouhani sought to fuel the emerging fashion industry while simultaneously containing it to avoid any national security problems. As a result, previously underground fashion shows became legally permissible but, like all other public events, required gender segregation. In addition, the government allowed fashion designers and bloggers to use social media for a creative outlet and a form of advertising. However, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, composed primarily of government officials and a few representatives of the fashion industry, is responsible for monitoring illicit behavior regarding clothing. This imbues them with the ability to deem certain actions in violation of Islamic values and administer corresponding punishments, such as shutting down social media accounts or entire companies. For example, in June 2014 a well-known design institute in Tehran by the name of "Khaneh Mode," or Mode House, faced extreme scrutiny for allowing men to attend a fashion show that they were hosting in which one of the models wore a piece of clothing resembling the Iranian flag but without the religious symbols. When photos from the show began permeating the Internet, backlash from Conservatives was severe and

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<sup>18</sup> Mohammad Mostafavi-Dehzoeei, "Iran's economy under Rouhani: achievements and obstacles | Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs," *Harvard Kennedy School: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, May 17, 2017, accessed December 6, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Shima Houshyar and Behzad Sarmadi, "A Fashionable Revolution: Veiling, Morality, and Consumer Culture in Iran," *Ajam Media Collective*, January 15, 2017, accessed October 4, 2017.

eventually led authorities to shut down the institute upon the premise that their actions were both anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic.<sup>21</sup> Its director, Javid Shirazi, in response, said the following:

Since last year [2013] there's been a transformation in the framework of the permits we can get and what we can do. With the great potential this country has and the great desire young Iranians have, there is a bright future for the fashion industry in Iran, and the shutting down of Khaneh Mode is just necessary experience we need to gain to go ahead.<sup>22</sup>

This statement illustrates the motivation behind individuals in the fashion industry to risk their business endeavors by defying the norm. Shirazi's position, and that of the institute, are not inherently political. Their actions are done with the intent of creative liberty rather than overt political change, and they recognize that this must eventually lead to legislative reform for the sake of the future of Iran's fashion industry. Through the implementation of these "non-movements," Iranians are able to passively oppose the state, thus circumventing more explicit displays of protest and violence.

### **Implicit Activism Through Personal Style**

The Islamic Republic of Iran's inauspicious socioeconomic conditions throughout most of the 2000s greatly affected consumer demand. Government restrictions and the lack of economic opportunity reduced the amount of monetary capital necessary to stimulate the growth of industries in the private sector, but the state's attempt to forcefully isolate Iranians from Western culture also fueled discontentment. This had the adverse result of enhancing secular youths' desire for reintegration into the global economy and cooperation with the West, which manifested in women's progressive fashion.

Interestingly, it appears that isolation from trade relations with Western countries incentivized innovation in the fashion industry domestically, resulting in a vibrant textile industry in which fashion designers are entirely self-sufficient in their ability to sew their own designs. Therefore, sanctions encouraged women to pursue their business endeavors if they wanted new, "modern" items on the market instead of simply emulating Western styles by purchasing their goods. As influential fashion designers

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<sup>21</sup> Kay Armin Serjoie, "Iranian Fashion Pushes Boundaries in the Face of Crackdowns," *Time*, July 26, 2017, accessed February 26, 2018, <http://time.com/3012471/iran-fashion-official-crackdown/>.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

began revolutionizing the industry in tandem with Reformists' expansion of political influence, secular women in particular began finding empowerment in self-expression through the styles, colors, and patterns of their clothing, which spread like a wave across Iranian society. This new wave of inventive personal style is not purely an adoption of Western fashion trends, but rather the creation of an entirely new market for fashion-forward, Muslim women.<sup>23</sup> This is evident in the presence of female Iranian entrepreneurs in the field of fashion design, primarily concentrated in Tehran.

One example is Farnaz Abdoli, who launched her groundbreaking women's clothing company, Poosh (Persian for cloth), in 2012. On Poosh's extremely popular Facebook page, with roughly eighty-five thousand likes, the "About" page reads as follows:

Fashion is a statement, not a style. Fashion does not have to be worn casually, nor outside the runway. Fashion is fit for all sizes for all people of all ages. Fashion is an art of personal self-expression, not an excuse to be pretty, popular and charis.<sup>24</sup>

Poosh maintains a heavy emphasis on self-expression, offering pieces within every collection that accommodate the identities of women across the ideological board, from conservative to highly secular. Abdoli recognizes the multifaceted nature of the Iranian woman's identity and encourages women in Iran to be bold with their fashion choices by trying new prints, cuts, or colors that are still in line with "Islamically appropriate" dress. The company is unique in the sense that it is clothing designed by an Iranian woman for Iranian women. The designer has a university degree and was fully capable of pursuing a less restricted career abroad, but instead she decided to stay and pursue her mission of empowering women to embrace their individuality.

The company uses Facebook as its main source of advertising as the government prohibits public advertisements from representing women's bodies; however, social media has provided a loophole for Iranian fashion designers to advertise their designs, and for individuals to showcase their

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<sup>23</sup> Alice Curci, "An Iranian fashion revolution?" *Your Middle East*, July 19, 2013, accessed October 3, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> "About: Poosh," Facebook, accessed February 28, 2018, [https://www.facebook.com/pg/POOSHdesign/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/pg/POOSHdesign/about/?ref=page_internal).

personal style, through fashion blogging and social media apps such as Instagram.<sup>25</sup>

A study done in 2015 examining social media trends in Tehran found that three of the top trending search words, primarily via Instagram, were “fashion,” “design,” and “style,” and it discovered that women’s clothing companies and fashion bloggers had some of the most significant web traffic. This popularity has greatly contributed to the increasingly significant presence of Iran’s fashion industry on the international stage.<sup>26</sup> Iran’s many fashion icons, all of which are upper or middle class, set a standard of appearance toward which young women strive. Instagram bloggers such as @fashionsandwichbybahar, who is a fashion, beauty, and lifestyle blogger with a following of one hundred fifty-three thousand, can have real cultural influence.<sup>27</sup> She endorses high-end makeup products and brand-name labels, encouraging young women in Iran to attain her expensive style, even if it requires living beyond their financial means. Since the concept of dignity is central to the Iranian experience, and appearance is crucial to maintaining it, women are given the responsibility of lofty stylistic goals.<sup>28</sup> Opportunities to engender a more complex social understanding such as those stated above allows an increased potential for social mobility, through “marrying up” and generating a new self-representation.

Lower class Iranians are frustrated with their economic constraints, which prevent them from living lifestyles comparable to the hyper-wealthy elites that often flaunt their wealth via social media and have significantly more freedom of expression as a result of their class and connections. Another popular Iranian Instagram account that exemplifies this phenomenon and demonstrates the desires of many wealthy secularists is “the Rich Kids of Tehran.” With one hundred twenty-two thousand followers, the bio of the account reads “Stuff They Don’t Want To See

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<sup>25</sup> Curci, “An Iranian fashion revolution?”

<sup>26</sup> Julie Tomlin, “Social media gives women a voice in Iran,” *The Guardian*, September 22, 2011, accessed October 4, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> “fashionsandwichbybahar,” Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/fashionsandwichbybahar/>.

<sup>28</sup> Manata Hashemi, “Waithood and Face: Morality and Mobility Among Lower-Class Youth in Iran.” *Qualitative Sociology* 38, no. 3 (July 12, 2015): 261-83. doi:10.1007/s11133-015-9306-3.

About Iran.”<sup>29</sup> Assuming “they” is referring to both the conservatives in Iran as well as Western perceptions of what life in Iran looks like, the account intends to combat these narratives by representing the diverse realities experienced by upper-class Iranian youth in Tehran. The account’s posts highlight the youths’ convoluted, layered identity due to the state’s attempts to promote piety and enforce their perceptions of morality by showing the lavish lifestyle of the ultra-rich, including photos of women in bikinis and fashion forward women in loosely hanging hijabs.<sup>30</sup>

### **Broader Implications**

Using the body as an indicator of all individuals’ experiences within the given country’s civil society can be problematic. For example, in the case of young Iranian women, it is ultimately up to the observer to decide whether resistance to ultra-conservative attire simply represents a change in social norms as individuals seek to express their creativity and individuality, or if their actions are methodical and indicate a shift in political ideology away from religious fundamentalism and toward Western ideas of modernity with the intention of inciting policy reform. The answer is rarely as simple as it might seem. It is necessary to exercise caution when analyzing fashion in Iran in particular, in order to avoid objectifying women’s bodies by using their clothing and their self-representation via social media as a method of measuring modernity, gauging adherence to religious ideology, or speculating political intent, which is a common tendency when investigating Muslim women at large.

The discourse surrounding women’s dress in the Islamic Republic of Iran contributes to broader discussions regarding the relationship between secular and conservative ideology, contemporary feminism, and perceptions of modernity in Iran as well as in the Muslim world as a whole. The progression of women’s fashion throughout Iran’s history not only serves as a visual representation of the evolution of a complicated political context, but also speaks volumes to the ability of these women to adapt and continue to be agents of change and not simply subjects at the will of authorities in an often repressive state. Looking to the future of Iran, the government will continue to adapt along with its people, using a populist approach to appease them while simultaneously restricting social liberties

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<sup>29</sup> “therichkidsoftehran,” Instagram,  
<https://www.instagram.com/therichkidsoftehran/>.

<sup>30</sup> Roxanne Varzi, *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

in order to protect the religious integrity of the state as they have historically. However, unlike the past, young Iranian women who are empowered by their education, their renewed entrepreneurship opportunities, and their presence in the public sphere will continue to reject the norms formed by their parents' generation and tirelessly seek new avenues by which they can challenge the notion that the parameters of the female body are to be set by the state rather than by the individual.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan."



## **The Evolution of Gender Equality in Modern Iran**

Lindsey Eisenmann\*

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Earlier this fall in Iran, there was a bit of uproar as the Iranian football team faced Syria in Iran. While women were initially able to purchase tickets, they were barred from entering the game and left outside to watch as Syrian women were welcomed into the stadium.<sup>1</sup> This treatment was due to the ongoing law in Iran that does not allow women to be present at male sports games, an attempt to protect both women and Islamic law.<sup>2</sup> It is a law that is often used to criticize the apparent gender inequality in the Islamic Republic. However, shortly after the women were rejected from entering the stadium, many returned in order to protest and give a voice to themselves and the issues of gender segregation in Iran. There are various inequalities present in any government, but with some it may be more obvious, giving other nations a feeling of obligation to speak out about another government's shortcomings. However, it is essential to not focus only on the ways in which the Islamic Republic of Iran goes about suppressing women, as in doing so one would completely ignore all the ways in which women have fought over the decades to be heard, and it also overlooks the steps that the regime has taken for women in the recent years.

The Islamic Republic has retained its legitimacy by developing a give and take relationship with its citizens and loosening its grip on Iranians in certain areas in an attempt to maintain order. It has succeeded thus far in this attempt, as the regime has slowly given more freedoms to women and

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\* **Author's Bio:** Lindsey Eisenmann is majoring in International Studies. She plans to graduate in May of 2018.

<sup>1</sup> Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iranian MPs speak out as women are barred from World Cup qualifier," *The Guardian*, September 6, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Golnaz Esfaniari, "Iranian Women Angered as Syrian Female Fans Allowed into Soccer Match," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, September 6, 2017.

occasionally turns a blind eye to what the regime deems to be unlawful acts. Despite the apparent gender inequalities and repression of women that developed as a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran has given way to an era marked by the increasing education of women who are more present and active in the public realm. Women's increasing agency is slowly changing their lives and noteworthy actions taken by the regime are working toward more significant and lasting changes for women in the future.

### **Gender Roles in Iran**

Masoud Kazemzadeh claims that gender has never been more prominent of an issue than in post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>3</sup> The strict female gender role, though not exclusive to Iran, has played into the discrimination and repression of women in Iranian society. After the 1979 revolution, when Iran was taken over by an Islamic regime, the image of and rules regarding women were drastically changed as the new government began defining gender roles in a way that aligns with institutionalized Islam. The government propagated the image of women as mothers and men as economic bread-winners in Iranian society, especially in the realm of education.<sup>4</sup> Women were given a very strict role in society, one that was both politically and socially enforced. Muslim women were portrayed only as “a mother and a housewife,” and that is the image that was most often depicted in mass media and schoolbooks.<sup>5</sup> Motherhood is a beautiful and significant part of womanhood, but it should neither be required nor seen as a woman's sole purpose. Placing this expectation on women not only keeps them from using their gifts and talents in society and the work force, but it also deems a whole portion of society who is incapable or unwilling to have children as worthless and without purpose. Iranian women have been given a set Islamic role that they are to play in society, and anything outside of that box is considered

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<sup>3</sup> Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism, Feminism, and Gender Inequality in Iran Under Khomeini* (University Press of America, 2002), 17.

<sup>4</sup> Goli M. Rezai-Rashti, “Exploring Women's Experience of Higher Education and the Changing Nature of Gender Relations in Iran,” in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund (New York: Routledge, 2011), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Azadeh Kian, “Gendering Shi'ism in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund, (New York: Routledge, 2011), 24.

undesirable and looked down upon. But this view has neither left women powerless nor has it made the regime unwilling to enact any change.

### **Veiling**

In the preamble of the constitution, the goal of the Islamic Republic is stated to be “the removal of women (from being objects) or (becoming a tool of labor) in the service of consumerism and exploitation and regaining the vital and honorable duty of motherhood in rearing religious children.”<sup>6</sup> The attempt to rid women of being seen solely as sex objects is a necessary step toward gender equality, but the way in which the regime initially enforced this step led to stronger gender divides and aided in the subjugation and oppression of women. Instead of enforcing restrictions on men that would keep them from treating women as objects, women became forced to hide behind the veil, and gender segregation became a part of public and everyday life. In post-revolutionary Iran, the government enforced veiling to protect women from sexual harassment. However, rather than attempting to curb sexism against women, it aimed at ridding women of their sexuality in order to protect men from female sexuality.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the implication of mandatory veiling was that society still saw women as a means for satisfying men’s sexual desires. But many women in Iran have been able to use this mandatory veiling as a way to assert themselves in the public sphere and express their individuality and creativity through it.

Popular media in the West often uses the veil to present Iranian women as passive victims of an oppressive regime, but it is clear that Iranian women are actively asserting themselves and enacting change. Despite the often negative view of mandatory veiling, the enforcement of the veil can be seen as a trigger for the growing presence of women in the public space. Imposing the hijab has actually allowed more women to participate publicly and freely because the public space became viewed as safe from male harassment and unwanted attention.<sup>8</sup> Many young women are even using more covering forms of veiling, such as the chador, not only as a way

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<sup>6</sup> Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Valentine M. Moghadam, “Gender and Revolutionary Transformation: Iran 1979 and East Central Europe 1989, in *Gender & Society* 9, no. 3 (June 1995): 342.

<sup>8</sup> Kazemzadeh, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, 46.

to be present in public, but also to shield themselves from the male gaze.<sup>9</sup> But for less conservative women, veiling has become a way in which many young women are able to express their own autonomy and individuality. Some of these women do so by finding “subtler ways of getting around the dress code,” such as wearing the hijab looser, shorter, or adding color to their scarves and letting their hair peek out.<sup>10</sup> This is also an example of a way in which law enforcement has turned a blind eye to certain unlawful acts, as it is still not legal for women to show their hair, yet many young women are getting away with it more frequently now in Iran.

### **Rising Female Presence in the Public Sphere**

With a rising female presence in the public sphere, the 1979 revolution gave way to a growth in literacy rates and a greater presence of young women who challenge gender norms and assert themselves in public. As a result of the growing autonomy of women in public arenas, women are statistically receiving higher education levels and are more likely to end up in the workforce after schooling than they were under the monarchy prior to the revolution.<sup>11</sup> Iranian youth have become much of the driving force in this rise of education. The youth population in Iran has skyrocketed since the revolution, with “60 percent of Iran’s 80 million people under 30 years old.”<sup>12</sup> This means that the Iranian youth potentially have the strongest influence on society and hold the power to enact change in terms of issues such as gender equality. Not only is there a large presence of youth, but the literacy rates among the current youth population in Iran are up to 98 percent.<sup>13</sup> This has the potential to change the future of Iranian society, as both men and women will have the opportunity to use their education to impact Iran.

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<sup>9</sup> Norma Claire Moruzzi and Fatemah Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan, into the Fire: Young Iranian Women Today,” in *Middle East Report* 241 (Winter 2006): 25.

<sup>10</sup> Haleh Esfandiari, *Reconstructed Lives: Women and Iran’s Islamic Revolution*, (Washington, D.C.: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Louise Halper, “Authority, Modernity, and Gender-Relevant Legislation in Iran,” in *Gender in Contemporary Iran: Pushing the Boundaries*, ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Eric Hooglund (New York: Routledge, 2011), 11.

<sup>12</sup> “The Youth,” *The Iran Primer*, accessed February 22, <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/youth>.

<sup>13</sup> “Iran: Education,” UNICEF, accessed February 22, <https://data.unicef.org/country/irn/#>.

Despite this rise in education rates, though, Iranian women still face many challenges both in the public and private sphere. Gender inequalities are still very prevalent in Iranian society, making it difficult for women to assert themselves in the work force and the political realm. However, the youth segment is highly literate and the admission of women into universities in Iran has risen to over 60 percent of total undergraduates with women present in a variety of fields, such as the sciences and medicine.<sup>14</sup> These facts give evidence to a change in how Iranians view designated gender roles, as it is clearly becoming more socially acceptable for women to take on a different role than only the role of a mother. Women also receive an education equal to their male counterparts and even work in arenas typically designated for men. This rise in education rates among women, despite the presence of explicit gender inequalities, begs the question of how this came to be. Since the revolution, the regime has attempted to make the ideal Islamic woman, a woman who not only fits the women-as-mothers gender role, but one who is also “socialized, politicized, and Islamized.”<sup>15</sup> This desire has led to a more accepting outlook on women receiving an education, and consequently an increase in the opportunities that are available for women to receive this education. As the government and society evolves in how they view the roles of women, the presence of women in all occupations will similarly expand as a result.

Despite this rise in education, women still face many challenges in making it in the workforce. Though the rates of women in the workforce have risen since the revolution, there is still a very low percentage of women in the private sector. The 2006 Iranian census revealed that women make up only 15 percent of those employed in the formal sector.<sup>16</sup> Although this does not give any indication to what percentage of women take part in informal work, it does suggest that despite a rise in education, women still face many difficulties in actually being hired in the formal sector. Similarly, in the United States the percentage of women in higher ranking offices are drastically lower than men, with women occupying less

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<sup>14</sup> Rezai-Rashti, “Exploring Women’s Experience,” 52.

<sup>15</sup> Golnar Mehran, “The Paradox of Tradition and Modernity in Female Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” in *Comparative Education Review* 47, no. 3 (August 2003): 270.

<sup>16</sup> “Where Are Iran’s Working Women?,” Middle East Institute, January 29, 2009.

than 15 percent of executive offices.<sup>17</sup> This seems to be an almost universal bias, making it evident that this is an issue not exclusive to Iran. Consequently, it cannot be written off as an effect of Iran's revolutionary ideology. The overall treatment of women since the Revolution and their lower class status in society are surely factors in the making of hostile workplace environments.

In spite of the current low rates of women in the workforce, the rise in education for women has the potential to shape the future of women's political presence in Iran. With women attaining higher education levels and becoming more present in universities than men, they have the potential to work their way up in the job sphere. In the future, this could increase the possibility of women becoming a part of the decision-making process, which could in turn lead to the breakdown of other systematic gender inequalities.<sup>18</sup> Although the number is still low, women are also more present in the political realm now than ever before, which means in the future women could greatly shape governmental decisions and the overall experiences of women in Iranian society.<sup>19</sup> For example, the current Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani, has taken measures to appoint more females into government offices. Iran has seen the appointment of the first Foreign Ministry spokeswoman, and the appointment of three female governors.<sup>20</sup> Steps are being taken not only by women in society, but also by the government in an effort to break down different barriers for women. As with many other nations, the Iranian government has a long way to go with gender equality. Importantly, though, they have not remained stagnant or refused to change their thoughts on the standing of women in Iran. The gender roles placed upon women have slowly developed from women's roles being designated to motherhood, to women being seen as an instrument to benefit society.<sup>21</sup>

## **Women and the Dating Culture**

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<sup>17</sup> Bryce Covert, "Women With the Same Qualifications as Men Get Passed Over for Promotion," *Think Progress* December 22, 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition," 271.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Maysam Bizaer, "Iranian Labor Market on Path to Gender Transformation," August 22, 2017, <http://www.iran-bn.com/2017/08/22/iranian-labour-market-on-path-to-gender-transformation/3/>.

<sup>21</sup> Mehran, "The Paradox of Tradition," 283.

As youth in Iran have been challenging gender roles and norms, there has also been a rise in youth dating culture, in spite of the gender segregation laws present in Iran. Iranian boys and girls are meeting not only in private parties and underground music concerts, but also in more open places such as parks, malls, and restaurants.<sup>22</sup> There is also a rise in public displays of affection, particularly among the youth, which older generations would have seen as abhorrent.<sup>23</sup> This dating culture is significant particularly for lower class women, as it creates possibilities for upwards social and economic mobility that were not previously available. Despite this small opportunity women have to move up the social ladder, the rise in sexual freedom among the youth has proven to be more beneficial for the males than for the females of Iran. There still remains a double standard which holds young women to higher standards than men when it comes to their sexuality. In Iranian culture, there is a constant double standard across all social lines in which a woman's virginity is held at a higher value than a man's.<sup>24</sup> This has led to many young women doing anything they can, even paying to repair their hymen if they can afford it, in an attempt to prove their virginity.<sup>25</sup> While promiscuity among men is often accepted or overlooked by their families, women face more scrutiny in regards to their sexual behavior.<sup>26</sup> Along with having more severe consequences for sexual behavior, women also suffer from the sexual harassment of men, as their increased presence in the public sphere often means having to deal with unsolicited sexual attention.<sup>27</sup> This sexual culture reveals that gender inequality is less a result of government action (although that does play into this issue) and more of a symptom of deep social inequalities. Again, though, this inequality is not exclusive to Iran. It plagues other societies as well, including American culture. Although there are no laws in the United States condemning female sexual activity outside of marriage, there is an overall culture of writing off male sexual

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<sup>22</sup> Asef Bayat, "Muslim Youth and the Claim to Youthfulness," in *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, ed. Linda Herrera and Asef Bayat (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 35.

<sup>23</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan," 26.

<sup>24</sup> Zuzanna Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspiration and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran," *Iranian Studies* 46, Issue 6 (2013), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, "Out of the Frying Pan," 26.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

activity as normal while portraying women as sex objects, then shaming them when they are just as sexually active as men. This type of thinking has infiltrated all areas of American culture and, because of how ingrained it is, laws and government action cannot displace it. When it comes to Iran, it is easy to only place blame on Islam and the Iranian government, when much of the gender inequality runs much deeper than the government and has developed into a deeply ingrained bias.

With the development of a youth dating culture, the sexual culture in Iran is becoming more apparent. In an attempt to legitimize unlawful sexual encounters, President Rafsanjani in the 1990s publicly advocated “temporary marriages,” in which a man and a woman seeking sex could temporarily marry so that the act was not deemed unlawful.<sup>28</sup> These temporary marriages quickly proved to be more beneficial for men than women, as men would often use them to solicit prostitution.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, temporary marriages typically take advantage of women from lower socioeconomic classes. Women from the same class as the man would possibly be capable of demanding a higher price or a full marriage contract, whereas women from a lower class would have less power.<sup>30</sup> Some lower class women have used temporary marriages to wealthier men in an attempt to one day move up the social ladder, but this practice can quickly result in the sexual exploitation of the woman involved.<sup>31</sup> This attempt to enjoy casual sex while remaining Islamic is often seen as nothing more than “religiously sanctioned prostitution.”<sup>32</sup> Women are not on the benefitting end of this institution, and they leave lower class women vulnerable to lustful men taking advantage of them.

### **Steps Toward Equality for Women**

Regardless of their growing presence in the public sphere, women still suffer many work-based, sexual, and social inequalities. In order to provide more social freedoms for women and an escape from male harassment, the regime has developed ways in which they can give women some autonomy in the public sphere while still remaining in accordance with Islamic law. One of the more visible ways in which they have accomplished this is through the creation of women only parks. At the start of the Islamic

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<sup>28</sup> Bayat, “Muslim Youth,” 35.

<sup>29</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan,” 24.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Olszewska, “Classy Kids,” 13.

<sup>32</sup> Moruzzi and Sadeghi, “Out of the Frying Pan,” 25.



Republic, leisure sports were considered un-Islamic and, for women in particular, they were seen as immoral.<sup>33</sup> The government often prohibited women from leisure and physical exercise, as their main duty was to become good Muslim mothers, and it became particularly difficult for women to get officials to speak out on what was seen as such a taboo topic.<sup>34</sup> In the early 1990s, after an unsuccessful attempt to create the first women only park, parks throughout Tehran began providing spaces for women to take part in exercise classes.<sup>35</sup> However, it was not until 2004, after studies which revealed the poor health conditions among female youth in Tehran, that the idea of women only parks were once again placed under consideration.<sup>36</sup> The regime began creating new women only parks, which would allow women to remove their veils and dress however they wanted while enjoying the outdoors and partaking in outdoor activities alongside other women in their community.<sup>37</sup> Though the regime once viewed female exercise as a “western cultural invasion,” these female parks have been a huge success for the overall health of women.<sup>38</sup> As Shahrokni states, this creation of women only parks marks the start of the government making a switch from prohibitive to productive measures in its way of governing, particularly toward the female population in Iran.<sup>39</sup> Women are increasingly becoming seen as an integral part of society and, as a result, are gaining many freedoms and opportunities that were formerly unavailable. It would be easy to simply look at all the areas in which women are still suffering as a result of gender inequality in Iran, but systematic inequality is not something that is fixed overnight. Women in Iran over the decades have been fighting for their voices to be heard, and they have slowly enacted change as the regime has willingly taken various steps to improve the conditions of women.

Although these women only parks have provided an “Islamic” way for women to enjoy exercise and the outdoors, free from harassment and veiling, some women have seen these parks as an insult to Iranian women

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<sup>33</sup> Nazanin Shahrokni, “The Mothers Paradise: Women-Only Parks and the Dynamics of State Power in the Islamic Republic of Iran, in *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 10, no. 3 (Fall 2014).

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

and believe they do more harm than good. A piece by *The Guardian* interviewed an Iranian women about these women only parks and raised the idea that women should not simply be given a reservation, and that this will damage men and women as they will never learn how to interact with each other in a healthy manner.<sup>40</sup> This is an important point, considering these women only parks are simply another means of gender segregation. It further enforces gender barriers in Iran: instead of making current parks more accessible to women, the government has simply found another way in which they can continue to segregate men and women. However, this argument overlooks the fact that significant change takes years of progress, and it neglects to acknowledge the change that has already occurred in the Islamic Republic. Focusing only on the negatives of this new addition would be to ignore how women have fought for their freedoms and succeeded in accomplishing their goal for these parks. These new women only parks can have a great effect on the overall health of women in Iran, and gives them a place to be freed of the veil and from male harassment. In terms of gender segregation, change must occur in order for youth to learn how to interact with the opposite sex in a healthy and appropriate manner, but these women only parks are a necessary step towards further change, and they are a success for women in terms of their health and enjoyment of outdoor activities.

### **Conclusion**

In examining apparent gender inequalities in a culture that is different from one's own, it is necessary to deconstruct both cultures and analyze how they reflect a bigger issue. It is easy to view the Islamic Republic's ideology as the driving force of this apparent gender inequality, but social factors play just as much, if not more, of a role in the perpetuation of any form of inequality. Removing the influence of the government, the social inequalities that women in Iran face are in some ways similar to those seen in the United States. Laws that segregate genders, and enforce restrictions directly on women, are a very tangible and more extreme representation of the challenges women in Iran face. But even in the presence of equal laws and "freedom" for women, an attitude of male superiority is still present and it has driven gender inequality for centuries in not just Iran, but societies all around the world, including Western societies. The equal gender laws present in the West have allowed them to shame Eastern

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<sup>40</sup> Renate van der Zee, "We hate the headscarf": can women find freedom in Tehran's female-only parks?," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2017.

societies without the same laws in place, furthering the divide between the East and the West and creating a false idea that the West is a place of freedom and equality for all. It is easy for the West, and more specifically the United States, to paint Iran as evil by blaming the Islamic Republic, but many of the social barriers women in Iran face are similar to experiences of women in the United States.

Gender in the Islamic Republic is a complex topic, and it is something that is continually changing. Although the West often views Iran and Islam as causing the oppression of women, this way of thinking assumes that the West has accomplished gender equality, which is not true. It also neglects to identify the ways the regime has influenced some of the successes of women in Iran. In order to maintain its legitimacy and remain an Islamic state, the Islamic Republic must consider its citizens' requests and assess how it can further evolve to meet the needs of the people, while still remaining Islamic and keeping its non-westernized image. Though there are still many measures that need to be taken to break down the patriarchal regime and encourage the inclusivity of all people, the Islamic Republic is not remaining stagnant and unwilling to change. The regime has been willing to analyze different laws, including the ones that deemed female exercise un-Islamic and unnecessary, in order to meet the needs of the people.

## Minor in Iranian Studies

The Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies is pleased to announce the OU Board of Regents approved the establishment of a Minor in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. The minor is administered through the OU College of International Studies and the Department of International and Area Studies. Students wishing to petition for the minor must satisfy the listed requirements. Please contact the advisers below for more information about the minor's requirements and procedures.

### More information

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The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER  
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

### Requirements for the Minor in Iranian Studies:

The minor in Iranian Studies consists of a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework, nine of which must be at the upper-division level. The credit hours are divided into required courses and elective courses as listed below:

### Required Courses

All students petitioning for the minor in Iranian Studies must complete:

IAS 2003 Understanding Global Community (3 hours)  
PERS 2113 Third Semester Persian (3 hours)

### Elective Courses

Nine (9) additional upper-division hours from the list of three-credit-hour courses below. At least three of the hours must be taken in the Department of International and Area Studies. Other courses not listed below may also be approved for the minor, if they include significant Iran-related content and are approved by the faculty advisers.

IAS 3223 Modern Iran  
IAS 3403 History of US-Iranian Relations  
IAS 3413 Iran and Islam to 1800  
IAS 3493 Iran Since 1979  
IAS 3763 Women and Gender in the Middle East  
IAS 3683 Poverty and Inequality in the Middle East  
IAS 3753 Youth Culture in Contemporary Iran  
FMS 3843 Topics in National Cinema: Iranian Cinema  
ARCH: Survey of Middle Eastern Architecture

## Ritual Impurity and Decline of the Safavid Dynasty

Caleb Ball\*

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The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the rise of the Safavid dynasty and the establishment of Iran as a stronghold of Shi'a Islam.<sup>1</sup> The body of research on these two centuries of Persian history provides us with a fairly coherent view of the status of religious minorities and their social and economic interactions with Shi'is. The focus of this work will be limited to the concept of *najes*, or ritual impurity, its application in Shi'a religious law, and its effect on the lives of the *ahl al-kitab* – People of the Book.<sup>2</sup> I will argue that the application of taboos and restrictive religious laws governing interactions between the *ummah* and *dhimmi* populations was unique, or at least original, to the Safavid period, and the relationship between Muslim rulers and *dhimmi* populations in Iran would never again be the same. The Safavid *ulama*'s focus on this element of Shi'a Sharia had a profound impact on the daily lives of Jews in particular, barring them from particular areas of Islamic society and placing restrictions on their behavior, dress, and economic activity. Manifestations of religious intolerance became more widespread in the advancing years of the Dynasty, which I will argue further weakened Safavid authority and contributed in part to its disintegration. The interpretation and application

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<sup>1</sup> Homa Katouzian, *The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran* (Yale University Press, 2010), 112.

<sup>2</sup> Roger Savory, "Relations between the Safavid State and Its Non-Muslim Minorities," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 14, no. 4 (October 2003): 235–458.

of religious law in avoidance of *najes* during the Safavid dynasty was not monolithic, and under each Safavid ruler its emphasis was different. We will explore why this concept came in or out of focus, why the Safavids were unique in their stance on the subject during their time, and how this ideology affected the populations and behavior of religious minorities at different points of Safavid rule.

Safavid Iran was religiously diverse in the early years, but by most accounts the latter portion was one of the darkest periods for minorities in Iran's history. The most salient religious minorities were Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and even Sufis and Sunnis, whose interpretation of Islam was at this point distinct from Shi'a doctrine. As a whole, the Safavids were not known for their kindness towards or acceptance of other religious groups, whether Muslim or *ahl al-kitab*, and many scholars have defined the Safavid period as one of large-scale forced conversion to Twelver Shi'ism, beginning with the reign of Isma'il I. Violent conversion efforts were focused primarily on Sunnis, who were seen as *kafirs* by Shi'ites, an epithet in this context meaning "unbelievers" or "one who covers the truth" of true Islam.<sup>3</sup> Many would argue that the Safavid period gives one of the few examples of true forced conversion in Islamic history.<sup>4</sup>

For non-Muslims, the pressure to convert was not so dire in the beginning, and some *dhimmi* populations were even embraced by the Safavid monarchy, albeit for their own economic expediency.<sup>5</sup> The general attitude towards Jews during the period ranged from oppression with instances of prosperity to rather severe persecution. Jewish economic activity was not allowed to make up a large portion of the Safavid economy, as the majority of occupations available to Jews were those which Muslims could not fill due to restrictive religious law. According to Jean Chardin, as well as many other accounts, most Jews found themselves forced to take up the lowest and least lucrative professions in the economy, including dyeing, scavenging, entertaining as minstrels, and cleaning excrement pits.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ignác Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* (Princeton University Press, 1981), 168.

<sup>4</sup> Mehrdad Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Bahai Faith* (I.B. Tauris, 2011), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Savory, "Relations between the Safavid State," 454.

<sup>6</sup> Vera Basch Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour of Peril and Heroism* (The American Academy for Jewish Research, 1987), 150-151; Daniel Tsadik, *Between*

The position of Zoroastrians was somewhat parallel with that of the Jews, ranging from periods of simple segregation to full-on conversion “by sword.” Zoroastrians, like other *dhimmis*, were expected to stay in their quarter and maintain a distance from Muslims but, by the midpoint of the dynasty, Zoroastrians were no longer free to practice their religion. The desecration of their sacred fires and destruction of their properties was a constant threat, but sadly their persecution would only worsen in the Qajar period.<sup>7</sup>

The most prosperous religious minority of the Safavid period was without a doubt the Armenian populace, although they were at times “despoiled” of their wealth.<sup>8</sup> Armenian Christians were particularly favored by Abbas I, who relocated (initially) 3,000 Armenians from Julfa, Azerbaijan to the newly designated quarter of Isfahan south of the River Zayandeh, called New Julfa.<sup>9</sup> While forcible relocation is always a form of oppression, the Armenians of New Julfa flourished economically, and possessed more religious freedoms than any other *dhimmi*.<sup>10</sup> The Armenians had strong trade relations in the silk market, which was demanded more than any other commodity at the time. Abbas sought to capitalize on these traders and artisans, and engineered this resettlement in hopes of generating more economic activity in his new capital.<sup>11</sup> The tolerance afforded to Christians was contemporary with the first major attempts of European espionage and discrete influence in Iran, as well as increasing hostilities between the Safavids and the Ottomans, who at the time were actively persecuting Christians and Shi‘is.<sup>12</sup>

The final religious minority whose general experience I will give brief summary are the other Muslims within Safavid Iran, consisting primarily of Sufis and Sunnis. While the Safaviyyah Sufi order was instrumental in

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*Foreigners and Shi‘is: Nineteenth-Century Iran and Its Jewish Minority* (Stanford University Press, 2007), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Aptin Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 100.

<sup>8</sup> Moreen, *Iranian Jewry’s Hour*, 139-140.

<sup>9</sup> David Morgan, *Medieval Persia 1040-1797*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), 135; Kiyarad, “Zemmi Merchants,” 160.

<sup>10</sup> Habib Levy and Hooshang Ebrami, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora* (Mazda Publishers, 1999), 256.

<sup>11</sup> Katouzian, *The Persians*, 125; Sarah Kiyarad, “Thou Shalt Not Enter the Bazaar on Rainy Days! Zemmi Merchants in Safavid Isfahan: Shi‘ite Feqh Meeting Social Reality,” *Journal of Persianate Studies* 10, no. 2 (2017): 160.

<sup>12</sup> Katouzian, *The Persians*, 115.

the Safavid's Dynasty's origins, Sufis were later persecuted and this treatment only worsened over time.<sup>13</sup> After the Safavids adopted Twelver Shi'ism, mystical Sufism was seen as a real threat to the desired ubiquity of Shia adherents, and Isma'il began his violent reign by launching a fierce attack on the rival Sufi orders within Iran, although Isma'il's bloodshed seems to be intended for intimidation rather than extirpation.<sup>14</sup> Some scholars have asserted that Isma'il proclaimed Shi'ism as the official religion of Iran for political expediency, as his charismatic rise to power was augmented by the dynamic ideology of his radical Shi'i followers, who viewed the newly proclaimed shah as a god-king – a topic that will surely be discussed later.<sup>15</sup>

### Non-Muslim Treatment

While overall oppressive and rather harsh, the treatment of non-Muslims was not consistent, and each Safavid ruler held a different set of opinions and biases which shaped their tolerances and management of non-Shi'is; although, overall attitudes of the shahs became more conservative as the dynasty matured.<sup>16</sup> Isma'il, for instance, was concerned with establishing Safavid dominance of the region, and any threat to that dominance was eliminated. The casualties of this transitional period can be designated as a byproduct of revolutionary war, but the extent to which pain, including torture, was inflicted *en masse* was certainly not requisite.<sup>17</sup> After the dust of revolution settled, the young Safavid monarch Tahmasp calmed the animosity directed towards religious minorities and focused his efforts on diplomacy with Turkey, suppressing tribal conflict among the Qizilbash military and the vitrification of Twelver belief within the dynasty.<sup>18</sup> Tahmasp continued to rule over the dynasty his father began for 52 years, one of longest individual reigns Iran has seen. He was concerned with reducing Sunni numbers in a more humanitarian fashion, through the production and dissemination of Twelver propaganda, the elimination of art forms which did not “praise Ali” and the Twelve Imams,” and the

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<sup>13</sup> Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Colin Paul Mitchell, *The Practice of Politics in Safavid Iran: Power, Religion and Rhetoric* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2009), 24-25.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 117-118; Katouzian, *The Persians*, 114.

<sup>16</sup> Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 39.

<sup>17</sup> Katouzian, *The Persians*, 115.

<sup>18</sup> Rosemary Stanfield-Johnson, *Ritual Cursing in Iran Theology, Politics and the Public in Safavid Persia* (Tauris Academic Studies, 2015), 125-126.



institution of other orthodox social restrictions, rather than through acts of fratricide.<sup>19</sup>

Tahmasp's son's fourteen-month reign as Isma'il II is only worth mentioning because of his surprising attempt to retreat from Shi'i orthodoxy. Perhaps an attempt at filial retaliation against his outwardly pious Shi'ite father, or one at undermining the strengthening Shia clerical jurists, it nevertheless failed to gain traction amongst the *ummah*. His confidence that the *ummah* was still malleable in their adherence to Shi'i doctrine brings into question the practical and theological differences between the two factions.

Followers of Shi'ism and Sunnism adhere to very similar foundational beliefs, diverging in only a handful of significant cases. The foremost distinction between the two sects is their acceptance, or lack thereof, of the successor to the Prophet Muhammad as the "Leader of Faithful," *amir al-mu'minin*.<sup>20</sup> Sunnis accepted Abū Bakr as not only the practical, but the rightful successor to Muhammad, whereas Shi'is believe that Ali', Muhammad's brother-in-law and trusted companion, was designated as caliph and subsequently slighted by Abū Bakr after Muhammad's death. Succession to the caliphate is not the only disagreement between Sunnis and Shi'is, but the scope of this work extends only to the difference in interpretation and application of Quranic law regarding ritual impurity. Put simply, most Sunnis do consider *kafirs* as *polluted*, but their view differs from that of Shi'is in that they do not consider *kafirs* as *polluting*, except in the transmission of their saliva. Sunnism was of course the state religion of the Ottoman Empire, and by contrast to *dhimmi* subjugation under the Safavids, Ottoman *dhimmis* benefitted from the religious and social freedoms of the *millet* system.<sup>21</sup>

Shia religious law of the Safavid period was conspicuously more harsh and inflexible towards adherents of differing faiths than other interpretations of Islamic law. The scripture which justifies the rather intolerant posture of Shi'is towards non-Muslims is Qur'an 9:28, which states among other things that "unbelievers are unclean" and must not be allowed to near the Sacred Mosque.<sup>22</sup> The word "unclean" is expressed by the Arabic word *najes*, the exact meaning of which Shia jurists would

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 126.

<sup>20</sup> Katouzian, *The Persians*, 64, & 69.

<sup>21</sup> Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey*, 3rd ed. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 335.

<sup>22</sup> Qur'an 9:28.

focus much energy on defining and specifying in Shia *fiqh*, or understanding of Islamic law.<sup>23</sup> *Najes*, which can also be described as ritual impurity, affects the otherwise spiritually pure state of pious Muslims, known as *tahara*, and can be imparted unto Muslims through contact with things and people who are deemed *najesa*. Non-Muslims are among the ten things considered unclean in this ideology, and the most brief instances of contact with non-Muslims or articles they have handled can render a Shi'i *najes*. The following are considered *najes* by Shi'is: the bodily substance of a non-Muslim, excrement, things associated with death including carrion and carrion eaters, blood, menstruation, the milk of an animal deemed *najes*, wine and other spirits, the meat and byproducts of an animal which was either slaughtered by a non-Muslim or was slaughtered without proper Islamic ritual, *zabiha* (a drinking vessel used by a non-Muslim), and especially any liquid that has been in contact with a non-Muslim, or anything that liquid touches.<sup>24</sup> Safavid Shi'is were particularly concerned with the cleanliness and ritual propriety of their foods, but much more so than the usual adherence to a *halal* diet by other Muslims. As mentioned, livestock slaughtered by *kafirs* was considered *najes* and thus *haram* for Shi'is.

The opportunity for non-Muslims to participate in trade was extremely limited, as foodstuffs and almost all organic goods handled by *kafirs* were rendered permanently *najes* with exemptions only for articles which could be purified through washing, such as cloth, which perhaps was a factor in the continual financial success of Armenian silk traders. Food cooked by Jews and Christians was also considered *haram*, despite Qur'an 5:5, which states that the foods of the *ahl-kitab* are lawful for Muslims to consume. The verse goes on to even say that Muslims may lawfully wed chaste *ahl kitabi* women, who would be considered incurably *najes* by Safavid jurisprudence. As the initiator of scholarship on this subject, Goldziher, phrased it, the Shi'i interpretation of verse 9:28 "had no use for the orthodox Sunni mitigation of certain narrow-minded old conceptions" referring to the Sunni adherence to more liberal mandates such as verse 5:5.<sup>25</sup>

According to Shia belief, Muslim men are naturally and perpetually *tahir*, until they choose to be or are inadvertently made unclean, whereas women will naturally become ritually impure during menstruation, and

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<sup>23</sup> Kiyanrad, "Zemmi Merchants," 159.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>25</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 213.

contact with a menstruating woman would render a Muslim *najes*, according to many Shi‘i jurists. Liquid was considered to be the primary medium of defilement, and somewhat ironically, liquid was also the medium for purification. According to *fiqh*, a Muslim must perform ritual cleansing – *wudu* for ablution of mild offenses or *ghusl* for more absolute cases of *najes* – to regain their spiritual purity, which involved for most Shia schools of thought very specific techniques of passing water over parts of the body, which must be performed correctly before prayer or handling the Qur’an. The transmutable quality of water fostered an obsession with the potential for spiritual contamination, which culminated in the establishment of rain laws. These laws were aimed primarily at Jews but were also applicable to other non-Muslims, stating that they would not be permitted to leave their homes during rain or snowfall, “because the drops from their clothes and shoes could render Muslims *najes*.”<sup>26</sup>

### **An Examination of Jewish Position in Safavid Iran**

The prohibition of Jews from the bazaars and even outdoors during rainfall speaks to the lowly position of the minority in Safavid Iran, and the extent to which *najes* avoidance jurisprudence shaped the daily lives of *dhimmi*s. Several of the oppressive effects of this ideology have already been mentioned, such as the extremely narrow window of economic opportunity for *kafirs*, which restricted most non-Muslims, aside from Christian Armenians, to very low average levels of income, and kept them in an enduring state of poverty. *Najes* avoidance law forged a strong barrier which curtailed almost all social interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims. This barrier was reinforced by regulations instated by Muhammad Taqi Majlesi and his son, Muhammad Bakir Majlesi – referred to henceforth as Majlesi, who is considered the most powerful Shia ‘ālim, certainly of his time.<sup>27</sup> Such regulations included the mandate that all Jews must wear distinguishing garb, usually drab clothing with a colored patch, and the consequences for noncompliance were severe.<sup>28</sup> Many Jews tired of this extreme oppression and were encouraged, and in some cases compelled, to overcome the great barrier by converting to Islam. Jews who were coerced into conversion were called *anusim*, although many of these converts practiced Islam outwardly while retaining their

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<sup>26</sup> Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology*, 172; Kiyarad, "Zemmi Merchants," 171-172.

<sup>27</sup> Levy and Ebrami, *Comprehensive History*, 293-295.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

Jewish identity and belief, a practice known as crypto-Judaism.<sup>29</sup> As the Safavid Dynasty carried on, the Jewish population declined due to the increasing number of *anusim* and hardships faced by the intact Jewish community. The conversion of non-Muslims to Islam was accelerated by the Safavid Law of Apostasy which stated that a convert to Islam could assert legal claim to the lineage of property of their non-Muslim family.<sup>30</sup> Along with increasing the rate of conversion, the inheritance law worsened the already meager position of Jews, having had their property or inheritance usurped from them.<sup>31</sup> As some have noted this had a profound effect on the affluent Armenian community as well.<sup>32</sup> The Jewish population was also irregularly reduced by sporadic force conversions under several shahs, a salient instance being the forced conversion of the entire Jewish population of Isfahan under Abbas I.<sup>33</sup> Most of these retained their Jewish identities, which they openly reclaimed after the death of Abbas I, until 21 years later, when Abbas II ordered the conversion of every Jew in Iran. The *anusim* of this wave of forced conversion were so desperate to have their freedom of religion, they were extorted to financial destruction in efforts to purchase their freedom, according to the *Kitabi Anusi* – the Book of a Forced Convert, written by Babai ibn Lutf and studied by Vera Moreen.<sup>34</sup> These forced conversions were in contradiction of Sharia law, and eventually the ruling elite came to realize that the remaining Jewish community would sooner die than relinquish their religion and communal loyalties.<sup>35</sup>

Another way that the effects of Safavid purity laws shaped the lives of Jews in particular can be observed by the lack of contributions to the development of *Halakha*, or Jewish religious law. This had been contributed to the extreme poverty faced by most Jews of the period, and is highlighted by the preoccupation of their European, particularly Eastern European, contemporaries with Talmudic and legal studies. Talmudic and Torah studies is a hugely important aspect of Judaism, and was long before the Safavid period, so it is telling that at a time when European Jewish

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<sup>29</sup> Khanbaghi. *The Fire*, 106.

<sup>30</sup> Laurence D. Loeb, *Outcaste: Jewish Life in Southern Iran* (Gordon and Breach, 1977), 17.

<sup>31</sup> Levy and Ebrami, *Comprehensive History*, 282-283.

<sup>32</sup> Kiyarad, "Zemmi Merchants," 176-177.

<sup>33</sup> Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 42.

<sup>34</sup> Moreen, *Iranian Jewry's Hour*, 152.

<sup>35</sup> Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 43.

education systems were flourishing the Persian Jews were experiencing a “cultural stagnation.”<sup>36</sup> Apparently there were no community members wealthy enough to be inclined to support Jewish educational institutions or scholars of traditional studies.<sup>37</sup> Although there may have been, we have no evidence of the existence of a Jewish educational system in Safavid Iran, or any references to the religious education of Jewish children and adults, so it is likely that the general level of religious education from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century was very low.<sup>38</sup> In this vitally important aspect of Jewish life, Safavid purity law certainly had a shaping, prohibitive effect.

### **The Importance of *Najes* Avoidance**

Why was *najes* avoidance such an important element of *fiqh* for Safavid Shi‘is? The relatively extreme interpretation of Qur’an 9:28 by Shia *ulama* marks a conspicuous divergence between Sunni and Shia *fiqh*, and I would postulate that this conflict in opinion was shaped over time by the Ottoman/Safavid conflict. The Safavids sought to distance themselves as much as possible from Sunnism, and perhaps more relevantly, from the Ottomans. It is much easier to forge and reinforce an identity through division and an “us versus them” ideology, the framework of which was already set up in the Sunni/Shi‘i dichotomy. The ostracization of non-Muslims fits directly into this “us/them” framework, which empowered the individual Shi‘i identity and was further reinforced through substantiation of this discrimination in the scripture. Some scholars have also observed this aspect of Shi‘ism as “a binary conception of humanity” which puts Muslims and non-Muslims in opposing camps.<sup>39</sup> It would be impetuous to assume that the Ottoman/Safavid conflict had a foundational effect on purity law, because much of the “classical” Shi‘i components of *najes* avoidance had been formed by the eleventh century, far before the Ottoman Empire or Safavid Dynasty existed.<sup>40</sup> Rather, the discord between the neighboring governments may have had a *shaping* effect on the application of this ideology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

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<sup>36</sup> Moreen, *Iranian Jewry’s Hour*, 155.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>39</sup> David Freidenreich, “The Implications of Unbelief: Tracing the Emergence of Distinctively Shi‘i Notions Regarding the Food and Impurity of Non-Muslims,” *Islamic Law and Society* 18, no. 1 (January 2011): 64.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 55.

Some scholars have asserted that *najes* avoidance jurisprudence became so important to the Safavids due to a parallel ideology in Zoroastrianism. While not recognized by most modern Zoroastrians, ancient purity rules have been documented that instruct reverent Zoroastrians to not come into contact with non-Zoroastrians in order to avoid being polluted by them. The instructions go on to say that one must not accept food from a non-Zoroastrian, including honey and butter specifically, but that “polluted” fruit may be first washed and then consumed.<sup>41</sup> According to this purity law, if one does come into contact with a non-Zoroastrian, they must “purify [them]self with [consecrated] bull’s urine (*nirang*).”<sup>42</sup> We can see clear parallels between this spiritual law and Shi‘i *najes* avoidance jurisprudence, however it would be hasty to read too much into this parallel relationship in terms of influence. While Persian ideology could have strengthened the acceptance of *najes* avoidance law for Zoroastrian converts to Shi‘ism, the general knowledge of this element of Zoroastrianism was likely very low in Safavid Iran. The purity rules seem to have been part of an intentional revival of unwritten Zoroastrian belief in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, emanating mostly from India. Considering that this discourse occurred virtually simultaneously with Safavid ideological consolidation, it is highly unlikely that any influence was exchanged between the two inward-looking religious groups at a time when interfaith dialogue was at an extreme low. However, it is possible that Zoroastrian converts in the early centuries brought Zoroastrian conceptions of ritual purity with them after conversion to Shi‘i Islam. The experience of religious minorities in the Safavid period was unique not solely because of the Shi‘i interpretation of Quranic instruction, known in Islam as *ijtihad*, but more so because of the official and practical application of *ijtihad* by Safavid religious leadership. The reliance on *ijtihad* for societal structuring and regulation is one of the major aspects of the Safavid Dynasty which sets it apart from Sunni caliphates and even other Shi‘i imamat.<sup>43</sup> The importance placed on *ijtihad* stems from the Twelver ambition to deduce what the Hidden Imam would have decided on particular legal cases, which can only be achieved by the most

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<sup>41</sup> James Hastings, John Alexander Selbie, and Louis Herbert Gray, *Encyclopædia of Religion and Ethics: Fiction-Hyksos* (T. & T. Clark, 1914), 153-154.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>43</sup> Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 156.

knowledgeable members of the *ulama*.<sup>44</sup> While many Shi‘is from centuries earlier had accepted purity laws in terms of impure foods and inherently polluted substances, the earlier view was concerned primarily with the ritual of slaughter, *zabihah*, and specifically the invocation of the name of God before the act.<sup>45</sup> In fact most Shi‘is, including Imami jurist Ibn Babawayh and the foremost Isma‘ili jurist al-Nu‘man ibn Muhammad, followed the fifth imam, Muhammad al-Baqir’s ruling that the invocation of God’s name guaranteed purity of butchered meat, regardless of the butcher’s religious belief. It was not until the eleventh century that the first systematic Imami legal treatise by al-Shaykh al-Mufid provided that non-Muslims are “categorically unfit to invoke God’s name,” and thus the meat butchered by a non-Muslim is unfit for consumption.<sup>46</sup> This view aligns much better with the Safavid view, but it was still far from the *ijtihad* that anything a non-Muslim touches is just as impure as *haram* meat.

Although the Imami position on the purity of non-Muslims had been formed by the eleventh century, it would not be until well into the Safavid Dynasty that the unique experience of religious minorities would find institutional authority by the acceptance of this element of *fiqh* by ordinary citizens of the empire. Up to this loosely-identifiable point, the ritual purity of non-Muslims was only a real concern for the *ulama*, and therefore rather distanced from impacting the daily lives of non-Muslims. The power wielded by the highest echelon of religious authority, known as the *mujtahids*, was derived from the acceptance of their authority and their *ijtihad* by the *umma*. The overall acceptance of *mujtahid* religious authority by ordinary Shi‘is is what confronted the daily lives of religious minority with the perception of them by jurists of the seventeenth century, although some have argued that the full embrace of *mujtahids* as *fuqahā’* – absolute experts in *fiqh* – was not complete until the triumph of Usulis in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup> However, many scholars agree that the consolidation of *mujtahid* political power had occurred by the end of the seventeenth century with the rise of Sheikh Mohammad Baqer Majlesi, the most powerful of all Safavid *ulama*.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shii Islam: the History and Doctrines of Twelver Shiism* (Yale University Press, 1985), 186.

<sup>45</sup> Freidenreich, "The Implications of Unbelief," 70.

<sup>46</sup> Freidenreich, "The Implications of Unbelief," 65-66.

<sup>47</sup> Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, 186; Katouzian, *The Persians*, 147.

<sup>48</sup> Katouzian, *The Persians*, 129.

Majlesi's rise to power and his intolerant stance towards non-Muslims as well as Sufis and Sunnis played a key role in defining the Safavid period, and played a major role in the fall of the dynasty. Never before had purity law been applied so ubiquitously to non-Muslims and with such political organization. The force of religious conformity increased drastically with the rise of the *mujtahids*, whose political power was legitimated by Shi'ism.<sup>49</sup> The political objectives of these religious leaders aligned conveniently with the religious intolerance evident in their *ijtihad*, and they were successful in oppressing non-Shi'i religious groups, except perhaps the resilient Sunni strongholds which had persisted in Afghanistan.<sup>50</sup> For the sake of clarity, it was not that the *ulama* had amassed control out of secular political agendas, rather the *ulama* viewed the shah's state as "usurping the kingdom of God," which could legitimately be ruled by none other than the infallible Imam, of whom the next best substitute was *ijtihad*. There was likely no real distinction between religion and politics at this time, so the reference to political power represents the modern conception of politics, without cynical connotations.<sup>51</sup> Eventually, the Afghan Sunnis tired of the anti-Sunni policy of the Safavid government and began to revolt. The tribal Afghan revolts sparked unrest throughout the Caucasus and the Khorasan province, which would last until the foreshadowed demise of the dynasty in 1722.<sup>52</sup> Many have suggested that the political power of the clerical aristocracy increased to fill the vacuum created by inadequate shah leadership, gaining traction during the "incompetent" leadership of Shah Suleyman I. This clerical aristocracy reached their apex in authority during the reign of Sultan Husayn, who by most accounts was little more than a figurehead under the control of Majlesi.<sup>53</sup>

## Conclusion

With the *mujtahid* consolidation of power and increased intolerance of religious minorities came a decline in the economic activity of non-Muslims, which further weakened the economy of the failing dynasty. Aside from the political authority shift of the late seventeenth century, the

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<sup>49</sup> Amanat, *Jewish Identities*, 37, & 44.

<sup>50</sup> Morgan, *Medieval Persia*, 146-148; Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 116.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.



most important factor in the demise of the Safavid Dynasty was the alienation and antagonization of its non-Shi‘i subjects. Ritual purity law defined the social experience of non-Muslims under Safavid rule, particularly true for Jews in the latter half of the dynasty. This experience was not a positive one, and served to further entrench non-Muslims in their respective religious identities while dividing Safavid society, much to the chagrin of Safavid conversionists. With a fragmented populace and characteristically weak leadership in the last half century of the dynasty, an opportunistic outside threat would be all that was needed to bring the Shah to his knees, which was inadvertently facilitated by the fanatical anti-Sunni policy of Majlesi.<sup>54</sup> From the economic bludgeoning of its Jewish and Christian subjects to the rousing of militarily capable Sunni Afghan tribes, religious intolerance shaped the loyalties and animosities of the people, and thus the circumstances under which the Safavids fell.

Not only was the Safavid dynasty typified by religious intolerance, but the interpretation of Qur’an 9:28 as a proof-text for the ostracization of non-Muslims during this period would go on to shape the whole of Twelver Shi‘ism and the perception of the religion by the rest of the world. This was the first time that the concept of *najes* would be applied in a political sense to the entire population, affecting almost every arena of Safavid life by strictly defining the heterogeneous relationship between Shi‘is and non-Muslims. Never before had the perception of non-Muslims as communicable sources of pollution been implemented in the rule of law. The implementation and acceptance of the purity laws were the responsibility of the *ulama* and, more specifically, the powerful *mujtahids* who rose to power near equal that of the shah, such as Majlesi. The longstanding relationship between Muslim rulers and *dhimmis* would never again be the same in Iran, because the intermediary “controlling hand” of the shah had failed to intercede on communal affairs and uphold the legal protection afforded to *dhimmis*.<sup>55</sup> The Safavid period has gone down in history as an exceptional period in both Islamic and Iranian history, with the unique interpretation of *najes* avoidance and the establishment of Twelver Shi‘ism as the state religion, shaping both Shi‘i ideology and the life experiences of non-Muslims. In the end, the obsession with *najes* and the oppression of non-Shi‘is played a significant role in the dynasty’s fall and over half a century of decentralized state control.

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<sup>54</sup> Momen, *An Introduction to Shi‘i Islam*, 116.

<sup>55</sup> Savory, “Relations between the Safavid State,” 455.

## Minor in Iranian Studies

The Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies is pleased to announce the OU Board of Regents approved the establishment of a Minor in Iranian Studies at the University of Oklahoma. The minor is administered through the OU College of International Studies and the Department of International and Area Studies. Students wishing to petition for the minor must satisfy the listed requirements. Please contact the advisers below for more information about the minor's requirements and procedures.

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The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER  
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

### Requirements for the Minor in Iranian Studies:

The minor in Iranian Studies consists of a minimum of 15 credit hours of coursework, nine of which must be at the upper-division level. The credit hours are divided into required courses and elective courses as listed below:

### Required Courses

All students petitioning for the minor in Iranian Studies must complete:

IAS 2003 Understanding Global Community (3 hours)  
PERS 2113 Third Semester Persian (3 hours)

### Elective Courses

Nine (9) additional upper-division hours from the list of three-credit-hour courses below. At least three of the hours must be taken in the Department of International and Area Studies. Other courses not listed below may also be approved for the minor, if they include significant Iran-related content and are approved by the faculty advisers.

IAS 3223 Modern Iran  
IAS 3403 History of US-Iranian Relations  
IAS 3413 Iran and Islam to 1800  
IAS 3493 Iran Since 1979  
IAS 3763 Women and Gender in the Middle East  
IAS 3683 Poverty and Inequality in the Middle East  
IAS 3753 Youth Culture in Contemporary Iran  
FMS 3843 Topics in National Cinema: Iranian Cinema  
ARCH: Survey of Middle Eastern Architecture

## Ideology and Reality: Afghans in Iran

Daniel McAbee \*

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is a revolutionary state which derives its legitimacy on the basis of revolutionary pan-Islamism. Despite this, as the memory of the revolution recedes into the past, Iranian nationalism and commitment to the revolutionary pan-Islamic ideal is fading. As time elapsed, the foundations of the government shifted from those core pan-Islamic beliefs to a more centralized protectorate state, illustrating how the government moved away from the idealism and more towards the traditional roles of the state. Despite the generally repressive nature of the state, some Iranians, especially directors, are able to use film to critique state actions and ideology for goals. An excellent example of cinematography as a social and political critique is Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2001), a film which highlights the discrepancy between theory and praxis by Iran and the Iranian people, and calls on Iran to act on the idea of Islamic charity and solidarity.

The Islamic Revolution, according to official state ideology, is not Iranian nor Shiite, but a pan-Islamic revolution.<sup>1</sup> The revolutionary goal is to Islamize all aspects of life, from politics to society, and even the individual.<sup>2</sup> Ostensibly, then, the position of an individual in the society of the Revolution is dependent not on their ethnic or sectarian identity, but on their individual commitment to the Revolution.<sup>3</sup> The ultimate ideological goal of the Revolution is the destruction of the Westphalian nation-state

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\* **Author's Bio:** Daniel McAbee is double majoring in History and Middle Eastern Studies. He plans to graduate in May of 2019.

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Paul, "Iranian Nation and Iranian-Islamic Revolutionary Ideology," *Die Welt Des Islams*, New Series 39, no. 2 (1999): 189.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

and the reunion of all of Islam in one political entity.<sup>4</sup> One Iranian official went as far as to say that at the time of Islamic reunification, the government would support making Arabic the central language of the polity given the special status of Arabic within Islam.<sup>5</sup> In fact, official state policy immediately after the Islamic Revolution was to make Arabic compulsory in primary and secondary education.<sup>6</sup>

Officially, the Iranian state's ideological focus is more on religious differences than ethnic ones. While recognition is given to the distinctiveness of Sunnis and Shia', Sunnis are not afforded a similar minority religious status as Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews.<sup>7</sup> This is done in part due to the ideological position of the Revolution as a pan-Islamic movement rather than a distinctly Shia' movement – if the state gave Sunnis a minority religious status this could be seen as a tacit statement of the Revolution being specifically Shia', instead of simply having a Shia' background, a fact which the state does grudgingly admit.<sup>8</sup> With this in mind, the state's discussion of ethnic minorities is more understandable as in order for this Revolution to be an Islamic one, it ought to overlook ethnicity. However, regardless of the lofty goals of the Revolution's most idealistic supporters, the modern reality of ethnic nationalism prevents the state from overlooking ethnicity entirely. To deal with this reality, the state discussion of ethnic minorities takes on a religious flavor, as many of the non-Iranian Muslim minorities are Sunni, which allows the state to shift discussion to questions of Sunni versus Shia', rather than Iranian versus non-Iranian.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the government's pretenses, ethnicity does matter in the Islamic Republic. Most starkly, the president must be an Iranian citizen of Iranian descent.<sup>10</sup> While nationalism in Iran predates the Islamic Republic, it is possible to understand the development of nationalism within the revolutionary state as being in some ways responsive to events and conditions experienced by the revolutionary state. Three factors are readily identifiable as contributing to this development: The Iraqi invasion of Iran, the rebellion of a variety of ethnic minorities during the turbulent period

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 196-197.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

after the deposition of the Shah, and the failure of the Revolution to effectively spread beyond Iran. The Islamic Republic couched the war against Iraq as being one not against the Iraqi people, who are themselves oppressed, but against an “unbeliever,” Saddam Hussein.<sup>11</sup> The appeal was neither Iranian nor Shiite, but one of struggle against the West and those who could be considered lackeys of the West.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, an outside attack then required a national response to this which served as a unifier. At the same time, it was used to clearly indicate who sufficiently supported the Revolution to help it against outside invasion, and who was not, which is to say that it underscored that the Revolution would be limited to Iran. The rebelliousness of independence-minded minorities encouraged their later repression, and the fact that the Revolution did not spread forced the state to accept the limits of the Revolution and the need to begin to act in its national interest.<sup>13</sup>

It is in this ideological context that the Afghan presence, and the varied responses of the Iranian state and society, makes sense. However, before understanding the position of Afghans in the Iranian context, it is necessary to understand the Afghan perspective. The Afghan presence in Iran is not a recent phenomenon and it represents a continuation of the mobility which characterizes so much of life in this region, not only in the modern world, but for much of the past.<sup>14</sup> This region receives relatively little rainfall, preventing large-scale agriculture and promoting pastoralism, which in turn encourages demographic mobility.<sup>15</sup> People in this region always have, and continue to, migrate seasonally for pastoral purposes or seasonal jobs.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, as an important cultural cross-roads, political boundaries historically shifted rather frequently, further encouraging disparate social groupings. With these factors in mind, as well as the fact that boundaries of modern states were more derivative of 19<sup>th</sup> century power struggles than organic national movements, modern political boundaries do not reflect

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 201-202.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 202.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>14</sup> Fariba Adelkhah and Zuzanna Olszewska, "The Iranian Afghans," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 139.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Alessandro Monsutti, "Migration as a Rite of Passage: Young Afghans Building Masculinity and Adulthood in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 167.

ethnic, linguistic, or religious boundaries.<sup>17</sup> All of this is to say that movement between the states of Iran and Afghanistan do not represent an aberration, but rather, a continuity of historic patterns.

### Revolutionary Roots

Though the movement of Afghans between Afghanistan and Iran in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries is a modern iteration of a historical trend of regional mobility, it does occur in its own set of circumstances which makes it distinct and unique. In the context of habitual movement, there were three noticeable bumps that largely coincided with political events in Afghanistan, which also affected the policy of Iran towards the Afghans.<sup>18</sup> The first began in 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan; the second followed the Soviet withdrawal; and the last occurred with the ascendancy of the Taliban and then the US invasion in the late 1990's.<sup>19</sup> While it would be disingenuous to exclusively tie the policy of Iran towards Afghans to these events, they do provide useful, convenient points to delineate general shifts in Iranian responses to Afghans.

The first bump, caused in large part by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, coincided with the 1979 Revolution in Iran and the subsequent creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.<sup>20</sup> The Islamic Republic rhetorically adopted the second Islamic Declaration of Human Rights and gave the Afghans the title of *mohajerin*, which essentially means "involuntary religious migrants."<sup>21</sup> This designation gave Afghans the best possible refugee status, as it is based on the Prophet's fleeing of Makkah for Medina, due to religious persecution.<sup>22</sup> This period is best summarized through a statement by the Supreme Leader of the time, Grand Ayatollah

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<sup>17</sup> Diane Tober, "My Body Is Broken like My Country: Identity, Nation, and Repatriation among Afghan Refugees in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 284.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 266-267.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 266.

<sup>21</sup> Michelle Langford, "Negotiating the Sacred Body in Iranian Cinema(s): National, Physical and Cinematic Embodiment in Majid Majidi's *Baran* (2002)," In *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, ed. Coleman Elizabeth Burns and Fernandes-Dias Maria Suzette (ANU Press, 2008): 163; Ashraf Zahedi, "Transnational Marriages, Gendered Citizenship, and the Dilemma of Iranian Women Married to Afghan Men," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 231.

<sup>22</sup> Adelkhan, "The Iranian Afghans," 151.

Khomeini: “Islam has no borders.”<sup>23</sup> Afghans were welcomed in, fleeing the invasion of an atheist state, and were afforded much support and respect.<sup>24</sup>

The Soviets withdrew in 1989 and the Communist regime in Afghanistan collapsed in 1992.<sup>25</sup> A civil war followed, with militias drawn up largely along ethnic lines.<sup>26</sup> The Iranian sentiment towards Afghans in this period was marked by increasing animosity as the withdrawal of Soviet forces made the struggle an intra-*Ummah* conflict, which significantly decreased the appeal of supporting Afghans. Additionally, following the conclusion of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988, the Iranian state’s focus shifted towards reconstruction and discouraged spending on refugees.<sup>27</sup> It is at this time that Afghans lost their status of *mohajerin*, and are instead given the status of *panahandegan*.<sup>28</sup> While they are still classified as refugees, this new term is somewhat pejorative and connotes impoverishment, and during this period repatriations begin.<sup>29</sup> Though the repatriation program at this time is officially voluntary, Iran’s means are largely coercive as many Afghans living in Iran did not wish to return to Afghanistan.<sup>30</sup>

### **Alienated Afghans**

The final increase in refugees occurred in the late 1990’s during the ascendancy of the Taliban and during the aftermath of the US invasion. While many Dari-speakers fled to Iran as a result of ethnic issues, this influx was further exacerbated as the predominately Pashtun Taliban began to gain power and oppress other groups, especially the Hazara.<sup>31</sup> By 2002, Afghans were no longer considered *panahandegan*, but simply migrants.<sup>32</sup> This finally stripped away the majority of their access to certain Iranian

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Zahedi, “Transnational Marriages,” 231.

<sup>25</sup> Monsutti, “Migration as Rite of Passage,” 170.

<sup>26</sup> Tober, “My Body is Broken,” 267.

<sup>27</sup> Zahedi, “Transnational Marriages,” 231.

<sup>28</sup> Langford, “Negotiating the Sacred Body,” 164.

<sup>29</sup> Adelkhan, “The Iranian Afghans,” 141.

<sup>30</sup> Tober, “My Body is Broken,” 275 & 279.

<sup>31</sup> Alireza Nader, Ali G. Scotten, Ahmad Idrees Rahmani, Robert Stewart, & Leila Mahnad, “Iran and Afghans: A Complicated Relationship,” *Iran’s Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown*, RAND Corporation (2014): 9.

<sup>32</sup> Tober, “My Body is Broken,” 274.

social services and eased the deportation process.<sup>33</sup> Deportations were already significantly on the rise before then, with Iran deporting 100,000 undocumented Afghans in 1999 alone.<sup>34</sup>

Afghan presence in Iran, as mentioned before, is a historical phenomenon which has much to do with the nature of the region, rather than being the result of popular responses to recent events. The reasons for individual Afghans coming to Iran are equally grey, complex, and varied. Many of the Afghans in Iran were fleeing oppression, the exact nature of which depends on the time in which they fled, be it during the Soviet invasion, during the civil war following the withdrawal of Soviet forces, or in the ascendancy and then collapse of the Taliban regime.<sup>35</sup> Some Afghans came to Iran for specifically economic purposes. As previously mentioned, labor-inspired migration, which often takes the form of habitual, seasonal movements, is a notable feature of the region as a whole. Given the developmental and economic disparity between Iran and Afghanistan, it is unsurprising that some Afghans, particularly young men, would travel to Iran to earn wages to repatriate home.<sup>36</sup> In some communities, particularly the Hazara, this has become something of a rite of passage as it gives young men autonomy and freedom away from family life.<sup>37</sup> Pilgrimage to shrines and other religiously significant sites in Iran also encourages Afghans, both Sunni and Shia', to travel to Iran, sometimes for extended periods of time.<sup>38</sup> This habitual border crossing, as well as frequent intermarriage, has created a gray-zone around the border in which the identity of many residents is neither distinctly Iranian nor Afghan.<sup>39</sup>

The Iranian state's response to Afghan nationals at times contrasts rather sharply with their professed ideological position of uniting all of Islam and supporting the oppressed. While for a period of time Iran was willing to take in Afghans, after the end of Taliban rule the Iranian state began to sharply move against Afghans in Iran. The state reclassified Afghans in Iran from refugees to migrants, eliminating much of their access to health services, social services, free vaccination, family planning,

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Adolkhan, "The Iranian Afghans," 142.

<sup>35</sup> Tober, "My Body is Broken," 274.

<sup>36</sup> Monsutti, "Migration as Rite of Passage," 168.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>38</sup> Adolkhan, "The Iranian Afghans," 151.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 154.



and education.<sup>40</sup> While initially Afghans were not significantly coerced into deportation, this eventually began to change in the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> While the political and economic events previously discussed certainly influenced and inspired the state backlash to the Afghan presence, public opinion also affected policy towards Afghans. Popular feelings towards Afghans in Iran were equally complex; however, some general trends can be noted. Following Revolution, as can be expected, the majority of the Iranian population were somewhat influenced by the fervor of the Revolution and were largely willing to allow in Afghans.<sup>42</sup> As time continued on, public opinion of Afghans began to deteriorate. In general, working class Iranians, who felt that their job prospects and wages were threatened by Afghans who were generally willing to work more for less pay, began to disapprove of Afghans, while opinion among more affluent Iranians, who believe they benefit by having access to larger cheap labor pool, has not deteriorated as much.<sup>43</sup> This is not to say that the whole of the Iranian working class hates Afghans, as opinion varies greatly depending on location, and even those Iranians who do not like Afghans agree that Afghans do have a hard life and have things more difficult in Iran than Iranian nationals themselves.<sup>44</sup>

### **Film as a Medium of Exchange**

In response to this backlash, there have been attempts to reorient the Iranian state and people back to a more compassionate disposition towards Afghans in Iran. One film in particular, *Baran*, provides an interesting insight into this attempt. In the film, the director, Majid Majidi, provides an embodiment of the Islamic values of love and charity for one's fellow Muslim in the form of Lateef.<sup>45</sup> Lateef is an adolescent who works at a construction site running errands and performing various tasks for the employees and site manager and he can be understood as representing the common Iranian. While he is by no means affluent, his job is comparatively comfortable. After one of the Afghan employees is no-

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<sup>40</sup> Tober, "My Body is Broken," 274.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Zahedi, "Transnational Marriages," 231.

<sup>43</sup> Zahra Moughari, "The Effects of Afghan Immigrants on the Iranian Labour Market," *Iranian Economic Review* 13, no. 20 (2007), 58.; Tober, "My Body is Broken," 275.

<sup>44</sup> Tober, "My Body is Broken," 274-275.

<sup>45</sup> Langford, "Negotiating the Sacred Body," 264.

longer able to work due to a workplace injury, his “son,” introduced as Rahmat, is brought in to work in his stead to provide for their family. After Rahmat is found unsuited for the physically demanding task assigned, Rahmat is given Lateef’s job and Lateef is given Rahmat’s job. The initial hate that Lateef feels towards Rahmat is replaced by romance as Lateef discretely learns that Rahmat is actually a girl named Baran. Lateef follows Baran around and sees the condition of the Afghans. Due to his love for Baran, he collects his wages and gives them all to a friend of Baran’s family, who keeps the money for himself. Next, Lateef purchases a pair of crutches for Baran’s father and leaves them at the door of the house after he hears that Baran’s uncle is dead and his family is now homeless. Finally, Lateef sells his identity card on the black market for funds to give to Baran’s family, stating that it is the back wages owed to her father. The family then leaves the next day for Afghanistan, and while Baran and Lateef come into close proximity of each other, they never touch and she leaves with her family.<sup>46</sup>

When approaching *Baran* as not merely a love story, but as a political film, it becomes a powerful film that is a testament to the creative spirit of Iranian filmmakers who operate in an environment where an artistic misstep may result in criminal punishment. Lateef, who frequently fights with the other construction workers, initially meets Baran as “Rahmat,” a male rival who steals his job and thus injures his livelihood. This tale of male being revealed as female can be understood as an allegory of coming to know a person. Initially, the Afghan is viewed as a male: the public face of a rival who can steal your livelihood. However, through time and interaction, one might view the Afghan as woman: one who is not deserving of fear or enmity and is representative of the private, “true” face of someone. This individual is acting on circumstances out of their control and should not be admonished for doing what they must to survive, even if it harms you.

After the site manager is forced to let go of all of his Afghan employees following state pressure, Lateef begins to follow Baran around, to learn about her. In doing so, Lateef sees the conditions of the Afghans, but he does not interact with them. While the lack of interaction between Baran and Lateef could very well be done to avoid morality issues with censors, it can also be understood as Majidi suggesting that after one comes to see Afghans not as rivals, but as humans, one should seek to understand the

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<sup>46</sup> *Baran*. Directed by Majid Majidi. Montreal: Alliance Atlantis, 2001. Digital.

Afghans through observation and on their own terms. In doing so, one will see that their condition is pitiable and will be further inspired to acts of charity, compassion, and understanding.

Lateef's charitable actions can also be understood as analogies for state and societal responses to Afghans. Lateef humiliates himself by begging to his boss, simply so that he can get the money which the site manager has been keeping for him. By then giving all of his money to Sultan, a friend of Baran's father, Lateef has totally impoverished himself, and when Sultan runs away with the money Lateef's reaction is telling. Rather than wash his hands of the whole affair and of Baran, Lateef is largely unfazed, and continues to help the family. This can be understood in the context of the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights' statement of the inalienable right of Islam, which is itself based on the Qur'anic principle that the people of Medina were good because when they took in the Prophet, they "prefer[ed] the fugitives above themselves though poverty become their lot."<sup>47</sup> Lateef's selling of his identity card furthers not only the idea that those who can act charitably should, but hints at the topic of identity. What Majidi is condemning is the growing sense of nationalism and preference for one's own nation over one's fellow Muslim. What *Baran* shows, though, is that this loss of earthly identity will not result in a void, a sort of ultimate sacrifice given for the other, but that it will be replaced. While Majidi does not fully articulate with what will replace it, he hints that it is a fresh perspective on life with Lateef's gaze at Baran's footprint and the falling rain. Majidi shows through Lateef that even if an individual, or a nation, impoverishes itself materially through assistance to their fellow Muslim, they will come out spiritually enriched.

Afghan presence in Iran is a historic phenomenon, and the sharp distinction between inhabitants of the territory of modern-day Iran and modern-day Afghanistan are relatively recent. In the wake of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian state and society were open to assisting the people of Afghanistan, whose country was and still is being torn apart by war and internal conflict. As Afghanistan continued to hemorrhage people, and as events transpired in Iran, state and social commitment to the lofty, pan-Islamic ideals of the Revolution faded, especially in the face of growing Iranian nationalism. Despite this, and in the face of repression and censorship, Iranian filmmakers make use of state rhetoric to condemn state repression of Afghans. By providing his message in the personable story of

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<sup>47</sup> Langford, "Negotiating the Sacred Body," 163.

a lover chasing his beloved, Majid Majidi conjures up not only the ideals of the 1979 Revolution, but the multitudes of cultural and historical connections that they share. This appeal to their shared history brings to mind the broader reach which Iranian culture used to have in the region, and even serves to bring to mind that Afghans existed under Iranian imperial auspices. By utilizing the prevailing motifs of early 21<sup>st</sup> century Iran, Majid Majidi creates a compelling call to Iran and Iranians to rise above the conflict and assist their Afghan brothers and sisters.

## **Zoroastrians: Becoming a Minority in Their Homeland**

Travis Kepler\*

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It is arguable that no other religion has had more direct and indirect influence on humankind than that of the ancient Zoroastrian faith. This religion, which was the firstborn of the revealed world-religions, existed long before it entered recorded history and has ancient, roots in the Bronze Age, reaching as far back as 1500 B.C.E.<sup>1</sup> According to some ancient Greek sources, it could have even originated several thousand years before that.<sup>2</sup> Zoroastrianism has had a large impact on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as some influence on Buddhism and Gnostic traditions. It even held the status of state religion for three prestigious Iranian empires, spanning well over a millennium.<sup>3</sup> Yet today, many people in the West have never heard of Zoroastrianism. Pockets of Zoroastrians remain in India and Iran, along with even smaller communities sprinkled across the world, but the total number of Zoroastrians left on Earth is estimated to be fewer than 120,000.<sup>4</sup> James Darmesteter has said of the faith: “There has

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Routledge, 1979), 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World’s Religions* (Oneworld, 2004), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 1-2.

<sup>4</sup> M.T. Stepaniants, “The Encounter of Zoroastrianism with Islam,” *Philosophy East and West* Vol. 52 no. 2 (2002): 159.

been no other great belief in the world that ever left such poor and meager monuments of its past splendor.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the primary religion now associated with Zoroastrian’s homeland of Persia is Islam, particularly Shi’ism. How did this happen? If Zoroastrianism was already so old and entrenched by the time the Arabs invaded Persia, why did it fade away over the next few centuries while Islam grew and other minority religions endured? This paper will address these questions and more by taking a look at the Zoroastrians from the 8<sup>th</sup> through the 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, their relations with the Muslims of that time, how they reacted to Muslim rule, and what factors may have led them to convert, flee, or die fighting for their ancestral religion.

### Setting the Scene

The final years of the Sassanian Empire were far from its finest. The Sassanian monarchy had been losing power to the military and the local nobility since the death of its last powerful king, Khosrow Anushirvan. The Empire was frequently funding war, and as a result the middle and lower classes were suffering severely.<sup>6</sup> The state religion of Zoroastrianism, which had long relied heavily on government support to sustain itself, had largely lost touch with the needs of Persians, some of whom were already leaving the state’s religion in favor of Manichaeism, Judaism, Christianity, or other religions before the Arabs arrived with Islam.<sup>7</sup> Such facts have led many western scholars to suppose that Zoroastrianism was close to dying on its own and all it required was a conquering people to come with a new religion to crush the ancient, mummified faith into dust.<sup>8</sup> However, these interpretations are largely based on preconceptions, as we already know the results of the Arab-Islamic invasion. Even in its weakened state, Sassanian Persia was still massively wealthy, and Zoroastrianism continued to dominate all of the Sassanian minority religions, securing the loyalty of the citizenry, rich and poor.<sup>9</sup> The religion provided its followers with a purpose for life, ways of achieving their goals, rules for personal conduct, hope, and strength. However, it was laden with archaic doctrine and priests who continuously charged citizens for their religious services. Zoroastrianism

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Janet Kestenberg Amighi, *The Zoroastrians of Iran: Conversion, Assimilation, or Persistence* (AMS Press, 1990), 58.

<sup>7</sup> Foltz, *Spirituality*, 37.

<sup>8</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 143.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 141-143.

was in need of the reviving breeze of reformation, but what came first were the Arabs with the religion of Muhammad.<sup>10</sup>

With the onset of the Arab-Islamic conquest of Persia in 633 C.E., the Sassanian Empire fell quickly. Only a decade later, Arab forces had already reached the northern and easternmost reaches of the Empire, and by 654 C.E. all the major cities to the east had fallen to the Arabs.<sup>11</sup> Despite these radical changes, there was no rapid transition from Zoroastrianism to Islam. Islam, like Zoroastrianism, was primarily an ethnic religion at the time and the Arabs were not nearly as interested in converting people as they were in securing financial gains, which they obtained through the taxation of non-Muslims.<sup>12</sup> The Arabs, who separated themselves from the Persians by living in garrison towns, allowed the Persians to largely maintain their governing system and only a minority of Persians, such as the military class, lost their religious freedom.<sup>13</sup> Worried that too much change to the existing system might hurt their steady flow of tax collections, the conquering Muslims allowed the same Persian families who had held governmental positions under the Sassanian monarchy to remain in office, assuming that they submitted to Muslim rule.<sup>14</sup>

Even in this early period, during which the Arabs took measures to disrupt the existing system as little as possible, some of the more remote areas refused to stop fighting and rural revolts were common across Persia, though they were small and localized in nature.<sup>15</sup> In fact, many regions, especially in the east, would remain volatile or semi-autonomous for centuries to come.<sup>16</sup> As a whole, however, Persia was firmly under Arab dominion and the ways in which Persians in different areas reacted to this would eventually lead to vastly different outcomes in Muslim-Zoroastrian relations and patterns of conversion, which will be further expanded. To

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 143-144.

<sup>11</sup> Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 59.

<sup>12</sup> Apton Khanbaghi, "De-Zoroastrianization and Islamization: The Two Phases of Iran's Religious Transition, 747-837 CE," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* Vol. 29 no. 2 (2009): 202; Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation: Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian Society* (Columbia University Press, 1997), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Khanbaghi, "De-Zoroastrianization," 202.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 167.

<sup>16</sup> Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 60.

begin, this question must be addressed: why did Zoroastrians begin converting to Islam at all, if the majority of them were not being forced?

### **Early Muslim-Zoroastrian Interactions**

The main change that the Arabs instituted in Persian society was that of dividing the community into different categories based on whether they were “People of the Book,” “People without a Book,” or non-Arab converts, later called clients.<sup>17</sup> The “People of the Book” category was a group of protected minorities which, according to the Koran, is supposed to include Jews, Christians, and Sabians. With fewer scriptures than other religions and a monotheistic faith, and no adherence to the Islamic tenants, the Zoroastrians found themselves part of the “People without a Book” group. This simplified their options under the expanding Arabs to death or conversion to Islam.<sup>18</sup> However, given the facts that the Arabs needed the Zoroastrians to run the bureaucracy and that the Zoroastrian population greatly outnumbered that of the Arabs, they decided to include the Persian population in the first group.<sup>19</sup> Not coincidentally, this decision also meant that the huge Zoroastrian population would be subject not only to the land tax, but the *jizya* head tax.<sup>20</sup> One might think that poorer Zoroastrians with weaker ties to their religion would have quickly converted in order to avoid these extra taxes. However, while Islamic law says that all Muslims are equal, the Arabs had not completely forgiven the duality of the Zoroastrian religion and, at least under the Umayyad Caliphate, Persian converts did not attain this equal status.<sup>21</sup>

That is not to say there were no financial incentives to convert, especially for high-ranking officials who could see the Arabs preferred to employ Muslims where they could. The Caliphate may have seen Islam as an Arab religion and its subjects as a means to becoming rich, but there were many individual Muslims who were eager to grow the ranks of their religion.<sup>22</sup> Early on, Muslim holy men were able to convert some Persians by convincing them of the parallels between the two religions. Occasionally some Muslims with power, such as the Arab commander

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>18</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 146.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 62-63.

<sup>20</sup> Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 62-63; A. Christian Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran* (Lexington Books, 2010), 79.

<sup>21</sup> Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 62-63.

<sup>22</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 147.



Qutaiba ibn Muslim, would even offer small amounts of money to any Zoroastrians who would begin attending Islamic prayers.<sup>23</sup> Though other examples of financial incentive appear in the record, they are uncommon and any large-scale conversions based on economic opportunity lacked concrete evidence.<sup>24</sup> That said, there were plenty of other reasons to convert. For enslaved Persians, it was often the opportunity for freedom that drew them to Islam. Others came to it because of how familiar it seemed, as the young religion had borrowed several elements from Zoroastrianism, and still others saw the mere fact that the Sassanians had been defeated by the Arabs as evidence of the divine power that lay behind Islam.<sup>25</sup> If none of these things were tempting enough, the devotional life of a Muslim was far simpler than that of a Zoroastrian. A new convert would find himself freed from the priests he had previously been bound to and laws concerning the purity of women were much easier to cope with in Islam.<sup>26</sup> All of this is taking for granted the fact that conversion was even an option, as most religions of the time were ethnically based and traditionally didn't accept converts.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the many reasons why a Zoroastrian in early Islamic Persia might have considered conversion, very few actually did so in the early years. This contradicts many Muslim sources saying that Zoroastrians converted quickly and easily; however, the fact that the Arab population was between one-tenth and one-fifth of the number of Persians and that the two groups often refused to live together, most Zoroastrians probably knew very little about Islam early on.<sup>28</sup> Even for those who did, Islam presented a completely different, monotheistic version of looking at the world for a dualist Zoroastrian. Islam also came with a foreign tongue and many customs that were completely alien to Persians, such as circumcision, rules

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.; Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, 48-49.

<sup>24</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, "Conversion to Islam," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam*, edited by David Orrin Morgan and Anthony Reid, 529-538, 670-671. Vol. 3, *The Early Islamic World Eleventh to Eighteenth Centuries*, (Cambridge University Press, 2010), 530.

<sup>25</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 148.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>27</sup> Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 174.

<sup>28</sup> Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 44; Richard W. Bulliet, "Conversion Stories in Early Islam," in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibrān Bikhāzi (P.I.M.S., 1990), 132.

governing which meats were clean and unclean, and abstention from wine.<sup>29</sup>

However, with the opening of the 8<sup>th</sup> century, the Umayyads changed the language of the administration from Persian to Arabic.<sup>30</sup> This was a blow to Zoroastrianism, and Persians who had already voluntarily converted and learned Islam's sacred language now had a huge advantage. As more government positions were filled with Muslim converts and Zoroastrians were squeezed out, the next blow was already on its way. The translation of the great Persian epics into Arabic not only undermined the uniqueness of Zoroastrianism's links with Persia's glorious past, but it also allowed Islamic civilization to absorb knowledge of this celebrated history into its common fabric, thus permitting Persian Muslims to claim their connections to Persian history without coming across as anti-Islamic.<sup>31</sup> This encouraged even more upper-class Zoroastrians, who were already under more pressure than the lower classes, to convert. Seeing the damage that was being done, some Zoroastrians tried bribing Persian Muslims to stop their translations, though the offers were refused.<sup>32</sup> Further damage was done by Persian Muslims as they started attaching themselves to Islamic history with stories of people such as Salman al-Farsi and the fictitious Sassanian princess, Shahrbanu.<sup>33</sup>

At this point, the rate of conversion began to pick up drastically for much of Persia. The increasing number of converts led to the caliphate's ability to pass more and more laws to increase Arabization. By 741 C.E. the Umayyads felt that they no longer needed any Zoroastrians in the government, so they decreed that non-Muslims be excluded from such positions.<sup>34</sup> This decree, of course, led to further conversions by government officials who did not wish to lose their livelihoods. Many of these conversions, however, were discovered to have been faked and the offending Zoroastrian administrators were executed.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, propagandists for the house of 'Abbas, who were rivals of the widely-

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<sup>29</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 149.

<sup>30</sup> Khanbaghi, "De-Zoroastrianization," 203.

<sup>31</sup> C.E. Bosworth, "The Heritage of Rulership in Early Islamic Iran and the Search for Dynastic Connections with the Past," *Iran* Vol. 11 (1973): 55-56.

<sup>32</sup> Apton Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star, and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran* (I.B. Tauris, 2006), 19.

<sup>33</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 151.

<sup>34</sup> Khanbaghi, *Fire, Star, Cross*, 19; Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 65.

<sup>35</sup> Khanbaghi, *Fire, Star, Cross*, 19.

despised Umayyads, were fostering the growing Shi'ite movement, relying heavily on Persian Muslim supporters, and they soon gained enough power to seize the caliphate.<sup>36</sup> Once in power, the 'Abbasids often showed favor to Persian Muslims and the disadvantages for Persians who did not convert were increasingly obvious.<sup>37</sup> Though it took time, this contributed to the continued increase in conversions, as shown by the graph from Bulliet's study (see appendix of this paper, p.109).<sup>38</sup> Under the 'Abbasids, the Zoroastrian literary culture would flourish like it never had, but the Zoroastrians themselves would also begin to face the harshest persecution that they ever had.<sup>39</sup>

### Reasons for Conversion

So far, we have seen many of the reasons that medieval Persians may have had for converting from Zoroastrianism to Islam, but there are still the patterns of conversion to discuss. This subject includes different kinds of patterns, both overall and regional. Generally, Persians converting to Islam came in three different phases: military, urban, and rural.<sup>40</sup> The military phase was primarily during the years of the Arab conquest and there were very few converts. As previously noted, few Zoroastrians were forced to convert during these years and most were allowed to keep their religion if they submitted to Arab rule and paid their taxes.<sup>41</sup> While there was at least one story in which a Persian commander was so awed by the invading Muslims and their religion that he requested their permission to join them, this tale probably does more to show the sorts of didactic messages Muslims were passing around than it conveys reality.<sup>42</sup> The second phase of conversion deals mostly with the city-dwellers of medieval Persia, wherein conversion began in earnest. On the whole, Muslims were vastly outnumbered by the Zoroastrians during the late 7<sup>th</sup> to mid-8<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, populations were not distributed evenly, and Muslims tended to congregate in cities. This inflated their population ratio in urban areas and led to greater impacts which, coupled with other factors, increased

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<sup>36</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 151.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History* (Harvard UP, 1979), 23.

<sup>39</sup> Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, 51; Foltz, *Spirituality*, 37.

<sup>40</sup> Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 106.

<sup>41</sup> Foltz, *Spirituality*, 37.

<sup>42</sup> Bulliet, "Conversion Stories," 124.

conversion rates.<sup>43</sup> These events spanned the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and into the 10<sup>th</sup> century.

The third and final phase was the widespread acceptance of Islam in Persian villages and rural communities across Persia. As can be expected, Islam bled out of the urban areas as people moved around and as missionaries continued to proselytize. Initially, villages would only have a minority of Muslims in them and they would often live separately from the Zoroastrians, but as more conversions occurred on an individual or small group basis, communities would eventually reach a critical mass of Muslims and the religious reorientation of the area would be ensured and then spread further.<sup>44</sup> Conversion during this time was less a matter of belief and more a matter of social behavior. To succumb to the growing power of Islam through conversion was often considered a symbolic death in the Zoroastrian community and, as a result, some Zoroastrians would follow one another in conversion in order to remain a part of the same community. Many of these converts did not know much about Islam and would end up mixing bits and pieces of it with their former religion.<sup>45</sup> This led to religious identity ambiguity, where Persians would use whichever identity best suited them, given the social situation at hand.<sup>46</sup> By the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, this massive wave of conversions was tapering off and the small remaining Zoroastrian communities were even more cohesive and capable of fending off Muslim missionaries, despite conversions continuing through the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>47</sup>

It should be kept in mind that these were overall patterns, as there were more specific regional patterns of conversion that took place across Iran. In areas forming the southeastern and western territorial boundaries of Persia, namely communities in present day Iraq, Khuzistan, Azerbaijan, and Sistan, Muslims and Zoroastrians were readily able to coexist in relative harmony.<sup>48</sup> It had only taken a few major battles before the inhabitants of these areas had surrendered to the invading Arabs and there had not been excessive violations of the pacts made thereafter by either side. As a result, there were fewer bitter memories to cause the opposing sides to hate each other and they began to intermingle in civic centers such as Ardabil,

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<sup>43</sup> Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 107.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Bulliet, "Conversion Stories," 128-129.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*; Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 45.

Ctesiphon, Tabriz, and Jalula'. The two religious communities in these provinces even banded together against external threats like the Turks and the Mongols. With all of this in mind, it should be no surprise that these places later saw the fairly peaceful conversion of the Persians, as Muslims became closer to Zoroastrians and were able to convince them of Islam's ascendancy.<sup>49</sup>

### **Patterns of Conversion**

The regions that included Fars, Khurasan, the Jibal, and Kirman were a very different story.<sup>50</sup> These areas were the historical centers of Zoroastrian society and they likely had plenty to remind them of the Sassanian glory days. Additionally, the people in these regions had been much less willing to submit to Muslim rule during the initial invasion and had fought long and bitter wars. Muslim leaders had punished them for this, which only led to more hatred and large-scale insurrections—which, in turn, caused the extermination of large swathes of the population and the enslavement of many survivors. Remaining Zoroastrians in these parts of Persia were consequently very unsupportive and distrustful of Muslim immigrants. Nevertheless, immigrants continued to come and the ongoing tensions and struggles for power led to much lower rates of cooperation and cohabitation than in the west and southeast.<sup>51</sup>

The third and final grouping for general, regional patterns of interactions between the invading Arab-Muslims and the Persian Zoroastrians is that of Transoxiana and the Caspian areas of Tabaristan and Daylam. Like in the second group of regions that included Fars and Kirman, "Muslims and Zoroastrians in these regions held a mutual distaste for cohabitation and long-lasting enmity as a result of brutal military clashes."<sup>52</sup> The Persians native to these areas, like the land itself, were very inhospitable to Arab settlers and regularly attacked them. However, tempestuous as these regions were, they simply did not reach the vast amounts of conflict as the old Sassanian centers of power did and they were able to achieve cooperation with Muslims sooner.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 45.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

### Zoroastrians Under the ‘Abbasids

Now, having discussed both reasons for conversion and the patterns in which it arose, we can return to the Zoroastrians where we left them: under the ‘Abbasids. This was a hectic period for Zoroastrianism as it at once found its literature booming, its members either converting to Islam or facing persecution, and a restructuring in the face of dwindling numbers of qualified priests. All of this was happening with a backdrop of political turmoil as audacious leaders arose within Persian society and tried to use the social and religious disorientation to enforce their own ideologies.

Though the ‘Abbasids were Arab, the succession of the ‘Abbasid Caliphate in 750 C.E. was largely thanks to Persians and it marked the Persian conquest of Islam.<sup>54</sup> The ‘Abbasids removed many of the discriminations that had previously been in place against converts, granted governorships to Persian Muslims, and even allowed local Persian dynasties to form.<sup>55</sup> However, they also turned out to be deadly enemies for Zoroastrianism. The Islamic clergy under the ‘Abbasids, who were largely Persian, began persecuting heretics zealously.<sup>56</sup> These efforts were primarily focused against Muslim sectarians at first, but they culminated in a harsher climate for non-Muslims and Persians who were suspected to have been false converts, as Ibn Muqaffa found out when he was killed for allegedly practicing Zoroastrianism in secret.<sup>57</sup>

By the 9<sup>th</sup> century, animosity against Zoroastrians had reached the point that their temples and sacred fire-shrines were being destroyed and they feared losing their status as a protected minority altogether.<sup>58</sup> As a reaction to this, Zoroastrians began transcribing and codifying holy books, the first of which stemmed from ancient oral traditions and were originally written down to defend the religion against Christianity and Manichaeism.<sup>59</sup> In the face of this new threat posed by Islam, scholars arose who began supplementing their religion with philosophy, reinterpreting some scripture in order to be more in line with Islam, and composing important works that exist to today.<sup>60</sup> The purpose of these written works spanned everything from personal letters and answers to questions about Zoroastrianism to

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<sup>54</sup> Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 66-67.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 151.

<sup>57</sup> Khanbaghi, *Fire, Star, Cross*, 20.

<sup>58</sup> Stepaniants, “Encounter of Zoroastrianism,” 166.

<sup>59</sup> Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, 51; Foltz, *Spirituality*, 37.

<sup>60</sup> Crone, *Native Prophets*, 376; Van Gorder, *Christianity in Persia*, 79.

recordings of the proper rituals, purity codes, religious laws, and daily observances.<sup>61</sup> Examples include a book by a Zoroastrian leader named Manushchihir, entitled “Religious Judgements,” a book by a layman, the “Doubt-dispelling Exposition,” and the largest extant Pahlavi work “Acts of the Religion.”<sup>62</sup> It is obvious that Zoroastrianism was facing pressure to appear more like the Abrahamic faiths at this time, as writers reworked anecdotes to synchronize prophetic literature and even drew parallels between the life stories of Muhammad and Zarathustra.<sup>63</sup>

The Zoroastrian writings of this time also serve to give valuable insight as to the changing outlook of those who still clung to their ancestral faith. Along with the Muslims, they had begun to realize that both Arabs and Islam were in their lands to stay and the literature reflects this with attempts to restructure memory and apocalyptic narratives that rationalize the “grievous calamity” that had befallen them.<sup>64</sup> From the Muslim point of view, all was right in the universe and God had granted them victory and dominion over their adversaries. As previously mentioned, some Zoroastrians shared the view that Muslim victory over the Sassanians meant God favored the Muslims and they consequently converted. Those who did not convert were left to make sense of a reality in which their gods had apparently either been defeated or had deserted them, leaving them to suffer at the hands of a people whom they had for so long viewed as nomadic savages.<sup>65</sup> Some of them handled this by altering collective memories of the past, claiming that Muslim victories over Zoroastrians had not only been unavoidable, but they had actually been foretold and prophesized. The Zoroastrians, they said, had always been doomed to become subordinates to the Muslims, and the fact that the time had finally come was not necessarily something to be upset about; it was simply a signal that this world was coming to an end.<sup>66</sup>

The Zoroastrians certainly had reason for such despondency, as they faced increasing persecution through the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Despite the efforts of Zoroastrian scholars, many Muslims did not consider the now shrinking Zoroastrian population to be “People of the Book,” instead

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<sup>61</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 154-155.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 64-65.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

labelling them nonbelievers, fire-worshippers, and infidels.<sup>67</sup> Muslims would often attack them in public and torture dogs, a semi-sacred animal in Zoroastrianism, in front of them as a form of provocation.<sup>68</sup> Zoroastrians were mandated by law to dress differently than Muslims, usually by wearing yellow, and were forced to paint an image of Satan on their doorposts.<sup>69</sup> Not even their property was safe, as Muslims were known for taking it on tenuous legal grounds. There were elaborate rules in place for how the collection of the *jizya* tax should take place, whose point it was to humiliate the payer and exalt the collector during the process.<sup>70</sup>

It was also during this period that Zoroastrians began using “dakhmas,” which were simple, stone-surfaced tower structures whose purpose was to continue the Zoroastrian tradition of leaving the dead exposed to the elements without the corpses being in full view or easily accessible to Muslims.<sup>71</sup> Muslims even found a way to use this against the Zoroastrians, as they began to climb up into these towers and use them to perform the calls to prayer.<sup>72</sup> Perhaps one of the more egregious acts against Zoroastrianism occurred in 861 C.E., when Caliph Mutawakkil felled a tree that, legend had it, was planted by Zoroaster himself and was deeply venerated by his followers.<sup>73</sup>

It is worth noting, however, that many of the laws passed against Zoroastrians were not uniformly enforced and none of this is to say that the Zoroastrians were innocent in this regard or that persecution was a one-sided affair. Over the entire course of the first few centuries of Muslim rule in Persia, but most commonly early on or in areas such as Fars where Zoroastrian power was much more lasting, Zoroastrians persecuted Muslims as well. Until the 10<sup>th</sup> century, Muslims in Transoxiana often faced attacks on their way to mosques to worship. Religious riots were constantly breaking out, but as time went on and Muslims gained the upper hand in the population, they had an increasingly easy time in crushing the Zoroastrians.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Stepaniants, “Encounter of Zoroastrianism,” 166.

<sup>68</sup> Foltz, *Spirituality*, 38.

<sup>69</sup> Amighi, *Zoroastrians of Iran*, 68.

<sup>70</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, 146.

<sup>71</sup> Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, 157-158.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 43.



## **Conclusion**

Up to this point, we have seen much as to the patterns of Zoroastrian conversion and the factors that may have prompted them to do so, along with how they treated and acted towards Muslims. But what impact was all of this having on the religion of Zoroastrianism itself? We have already discussed how much of the Zoroastrian literature that sprung forth in the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries became rationalizing and apocalyptic in nature and how the religion bended to appeal to the Abrahamic faiths; however, the nature of the religion was also changed in other ways.

As the urban Zoroastrians began turning to Islam and deserting their old faith, Zoroastrianism lost its economic base.<sup>75</sup> Though the *magi* pled with their former constituents, telling them that charity ensured their salvation, many of them had a hard-enough time meeting the demands of Muslim taxation and had no extra money to spare. This created deflation in the price for Zoroastrian religious services as priests strove to compete with one another for the remaining market, with many forced to find additional work as farmers or traders, while others deserted priesthood altogether, urging their sons to find more profitable professions.<sup>76</sup> As a result of declining religious vocational studies, Zoroastrianism was forced to change its authority structures and to redistribute responsibility. Unqualified members of the religious hierarchy were raised in status by the chief high priest and certain less important rituals were pushed aside, but efforts to keep the temples running were often in vain. Many urban priestly schools, such as ones in Isfahan, Istakhr, Arrajan, and Firuzabad, were soon forced to completely halt operations. However, many rural *magi* and their fire temples were able to receive enough financial support to endure late into the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>77</sup>

It is fascinating to read about millennia of Persian history and see the massively powerful Zoroastrian faith, the seeds of which grew into many of the world's largest and most widely adhered-to religions, seem to wink out of existence. It is easy to read Muslim sources of the time and believe that it all happened so quickly, that Islam was superior or that Zoroastrianism was so old and weak that Zoroastrians readily left their ancestral faith to the annals of history. However, while four centuries may be the blink of an eye on the grander scale of human existence, conversions are not done by entire races or countries; they are done by individuals who

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 99.

have needs and desires, experience crises, and feel the pressures of real life impacting their decisions. The fading away of Zoroastrianism while other minority religions in Islamic Persia persisted should not be taken as a sign that Zoroastrians were in any way inferior to or more passive than the Christians or Jews of the time.<sup>78</sup> Instead, one should question the Zoroastrians' sudden changes of fortune and consider the numerous reasons that life might have been improved by conversion in the given situation. One should also remember that not all were willing to give up their beliefs. Some fought to the bitter end for their faith and still others fled, most notably the Zoroastrians who made their way to the Gujarat region of India in 936 C.E., where they would come to be known as the "Parsees" and can still be found to this day.<sup>79</sup> Certainly, the number of Zoroastrians left is a far cry from the religion's glory days and many people will never know just how much their lives have been impacted by this ancient faith, but it has made its impact nonetheless, and the fire never quite went out.

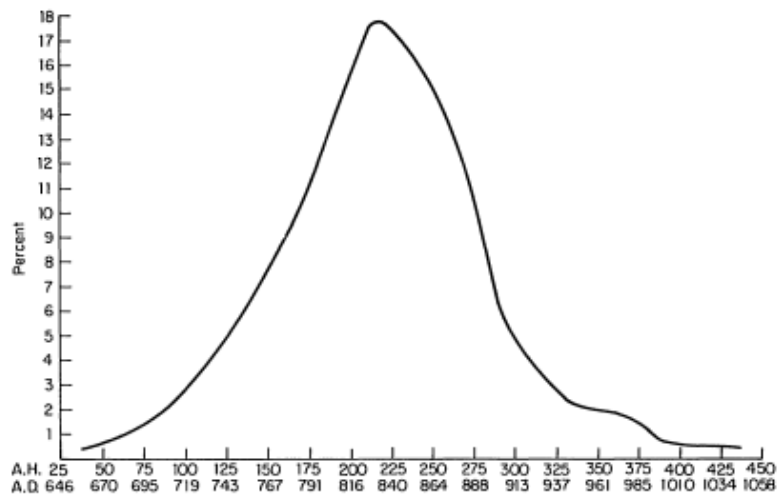
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<sup>78</sup> Khanbaghi, *Fire, Star, Cross*, 21.

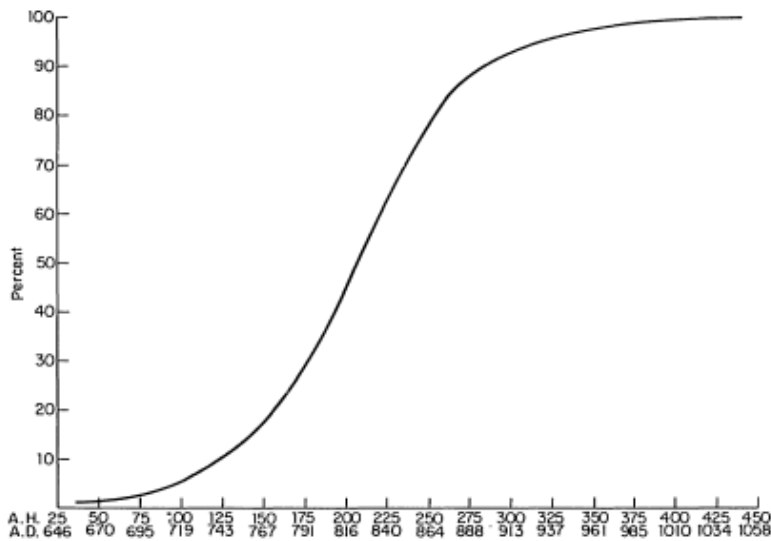
<sup>79</sup> Foltz, *Spirituality*, 38.

Appendix:

**The Curve of Conversion in Iran**



**Graph 2. Bell curve of Iranian conversion.**



**Graph 3. Cumulative S-curve of Iranian conversion.**