

# 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  
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

***DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies***

Published under the auspices of:  
The OU Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies,  
the Department of International and Area Studies, and  
the College of International Studies at  
the University of Oklahoma

Volume 3 (2018)

*Editors-in-Chief:*  
Corey Standley  
Kayleigh Kuyon

*Associate Editors:*  
Caleb Ball  
Jesse Hare  
Jessamine Nazari  
Michael Pugh  
Ciera Stafford  
Sydney Warrington

*Faculty Advisors:*  
Afshin Marashi  
Manata Hashemi

© 2018, University of Oklahoma. *Dānesh* is a peer-reviewed undergraduate journal published annually by students at the University of Oklahoma's College of International Studies. Correspondence should be addressed to OU Iranian Studies Program, Department of International and Area Studies, 729 Elm Ave, Farzaneh Hall, Room 304, Norman, OK 73019.

Email: [amarashi@ou.edu](mailto:amarashi@ou.edu).

Weblink: <https://commons.shareok.org/handle/11244.46/57>

***DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies***  
Volume 3 (2018)

From the Faculty Advisors	iv
From the Editors-in-Chief	v

***ARTICLES***

Exercising Agency: Contesting Cultural Imperialism in the Depiction of Muslim Women <b>Julia Harth</b>	1
Iran's Others through Cinema: Ethnicity and the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Iran <b>Jared Johnson</b>	13
The Question of Women's Agency in Iranian Cinema <b>Alexis Walker</b>	25
The Value of Virtue: Depictions of Class and Morals in Iranian Cinema <b>Aubrey Crynes</b>	35
The Politics of Fashion in the Islamic Republic of Iran <b>Sydney Warrington</b>	47
The Evolution of Gender Equality in Modern Iran <b>Lindsey Eisenmann</b>	59
Ritual Impurity and the Decline of the Safavid Dynasty <b>Caleb Ball</b>	71
Ideology and Reality: Afghans in Iran <b>Daniel McAbee</b>	85
Zoroastrians: Becoming a Minority in Their Homeland <b>Travis Kepler</b>	95

## **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

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

Aubrey Crynes\*

© University of Oklahoma

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.

---

\* **Author's Bio:** Aubrey Crynes is a junior majoring in International Security Studies with a minor in Iranian Studies. She will graduate in May 2019.

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

---

<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

---

<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

---

<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

---

<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.

---

<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

---

<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

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Reza J Poudeh 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,

---

<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

---

<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

---

<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.