Narges: Constructing and Contesting Identities in an Iranian Television Serial

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Contents

Acknowledgements iii
Note on Transliteration iv

Chapter 1: Introduction 1
Anthropology of Mass Media 2
Dramatic serials 5
Challenges & Limits of Ethnographies of Television 8
Concepts of Identity 10
Broadcasting in Iran 13
Contemporary Context of Screening of *Narges* 16
The Plot of *Narges* 19
My informants 22

Chapter 2: Gender Matters 25
Is *Narges* 'Women's' Television? 25
Patriarchal v. Matriarchal Soap Operas 32
Polygamy 36
The Development of the Gender Discourse in Iran 39
Veiling 42
The Islamic/Iranian Ideal of Womanhood 47
Conclusion 51

Chapter 3: *Islam v. Iran* 53
"Islamic" Identity in Iran 53
Islam and Broadcasting in Iran 57
Islam in Public and in Private 60
National Identity and Iran's Nuclear Ambitions 66
Conclusion 69

Chapter 4: *The Saint and the Sinner:* Narges *and its stars* 71
Narges and the Star System 73
From Princess Diana… 79
…to Paris Hilton 84
Conclusion 89

Chapter 5: Conclusion 91

Bibliography 95

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Note on Transliteration

For personal names and toponyms that are transliterated from the Persian standard English spellings are used as given in the Oxford English Dictionary unless quoting from another source or as transliterated in documents referring specifically to the actors in *Narges* or the programme itself.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Strolling through the streets of Tehran at 10.45pm between August and October 2006, the flicker of television screens in homes, shops and cafes would have caught your eye, all showing *Narges*, the summer serial. Scanning the newspapers and magazines you would have found articles scrutinising every detail of *Narges*: interviews with the stars, analyses of each of the characters, lists of '100 facts about Poupak', the lead actress. Eavesdropping on conversations in restaurants and coffee shops, you would have heard people discussing the ill-fated love affair of the young protagonists or lamenting Poupak's recent death in a car accident. *Narges* pervaded every aspect of quotidian life in Iran.

I encountered *Narges* while spending the summer in Iran at the University of Tehran. Sitting having tea and dates between Persian classes and talking to my fellow students, my friend Claire, who was staying with an Iranian family, described how the whole family would sit down together after dinner to watch the programme. Another friend, Leila, told me that her father's birthday party had ground to a halt at 10.45pm so that they could all watch *Narges*. Invited to dinner with the family of my Persian teacher from Oxford, to whom I had described my interest in *Narges*, her niece was only too delighted to ply me with tea and cake and sit me down to watch it with her after dinner. Perhaps the most striking example of the preoccupation with *Narges* was on a visit to Beheste Zahra, the vast state cemetery in which Imam Khomeini's shrine is located. Looking around the 'Poets' Corner', I noticed a crowd of about 100 people gathered around one grave, piled high with flowers and drenched with rose water. I edged closer to see what illustrious literary figure or eminent artist was

entombed therein. To my surprise, I discovered that the grave was that of Poupak Goldareh, the star of *Narges* who had been killed in a car accident a year earlier.

It was clear from these experiences that *Narges* was a cultural sensation, one that had engulfed the entire nation, garnering enormous popularity and traversing the boundaries of class, gender and age, uniting the country in televisual pleasure. *Narges* was obviously a significant presence in the lives of the Iranians I met and I felt that understanding something about the place of this serial in people's social lives and imaginations could be a productive way of exploring the ways in which identities in contemporary Iran are constructed and contested. Assessing the impact of television is difficult but by considering the different themes within *Narges* and by analysing the social context in which people relate to these themes, we can begin to explore the construction of identities in Iran today.

Anthropology of Mass Media

Mass media are a relatively new object of anthropological research. In 1993 in her early overview of the field, Debra Spitulnik wrote that there is "as yet no 'anthropology of mass media'" (1993: 293). For many years, there was a reluctance to study mass media which were seen as "almost a taboo topic for anthropology, too redolent of Western modernity for a field identified with tradition, the non-Western, and the vitality of the local" (Ginsburg et al. 2002: 3). This is no longer the case. Although regarded by some as one of the less orthodox fields of anthropology, the media are now an established object of enquiry and few would "question their importance in the contemporary process of constructing the boundaries of social identity" (Armbrust 2000: 1). The socio-cultural

significance of all forms of media to individuals and communities throughout the world is widely acknowledged, forming a key part of the "anthropology of the present" (Fox 1991). Mass media include mass-produced audiovisual media of radio, television, film and recorded music, the print media of newspapers magazines and popular literature, and the hybrid medium of the Internet (combining text, image, and audiovisual content; blurring lines between "producers" and "consumers"; both a broadcast medium and a means of personal communication). Seeing mass media as practices and processes, objects and experiences, we are compelled to try and understand its role in people's social lives and imaginations. Now ubiquitous in so many neighbourhoods of the 'global village', mass media in some form have touched almost all societies and thus are a key aspect of our analysis of the "'total social fact' of modern life" (Spitulnik 1993: 293).

That said, there is still little formal consensus on exactly *how* mass media can be either a subject or a tool of anthropological study. For a start, is there any difference between the anthropology of mass media and media or communication studies? Or is this simply another case of academics getting sniffy about labels? In her "(mild) polemic" on media and culture, Faye Ginsburg argues that the key distinction between these two disciplines is what lies at the core of their research questions: in anthropology, this consists of "people and their social relations" and "media as a social form…whether we focus on its production, modes of representation, or reception" as opposed to media texts or technology (1994: 15). Ginsburg argues that herein lies the crucial difference: whereas media studies privilege media in and of itself, anthropology seeks to highlight media in the context of its integration into "communities that are parts of nations and states, as well as transnational networks and circuits produced in the worlds of late capitalism and postcolonial cultural politics" (Ginsburg et al. 2002: 23). Ginsburg's article can arguably be read as a somewhat prickly defence of disciplinary turn: how should we draw the boundary between a "text" and a "social form"? And why should

technology be exempt from this analysis? I believe that the approach of media studies is of greater worth than perhaps Ginsburg gives it credit. In the study of the mass media, "texts", for example, a television serial, are an invaluable source that can be returned to, re-examined and reinterpreted. By integrating elements of both disciplines, I believe a more productive analysis can emerge.

For many years, research on the significance of mass media subscribed to a 'hypodermic needle' theory: the 'effects' of media were seen as direct and unidirectional. The dominant paradigm for characterizing the mass communication process was a linear model, consisting of three distinct phases: message production, message transmission and message reception (Spitulnik 1993: 295). This theory assumed that media had a direct, immediate and powerful effect on a passive audience that received and was influenced by its messages. Theorists such as Horkheimer and Adorno in the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School saw the role of mass media exclusively in terms of a one-way cultural hegemony in which people were merely passive objects of the effects of the 'culture industry', which they regarded as being "wholly narcotic or, worse, lobotomic" (Bennett 1982: 44).

This theory has now been largely discounted as simplistic and uncritical, and the notion that there is an unproblematic process through which mass media products are absorbed by individuals, like a sponge absorbing water, has been abandoned. We require a more sophisticated approach. Spitulnik argues that anthropologists have already bypassed many of the debates within media studies because anthropologists "implicitly theorize media processes, products, and uses as complex parts of social reality, and expect to locate media power and value in a more diffuse, rather than direct and causal, sense" (1993: 307). Although there is no one unified theory of how to approach the subject of mass media, the conceptual framework of those such as Walter Armbrust, of 'mass *mediation'*, has led to a more nuanced understanding of the interpretive practices of

media audiences, the diversity and heterogeneity of these practices and audiences and the polysemous nature of media 'texts'. In this way, the anthropology of mass media analyses media as cultural phenomena, contextualised in the social conditions of their production, circulation and reception.[1]

The role of mass media in constructing the 'imagined community' of the nation has been an ongoing concern within this field (e.g. Abu Lughod 2005, Salamandra 1998 & 2005).[2] In the aftermath of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1991), nationalism became an 'in' topic. Though certainly useful in mass media analysis, it risks dominating the field, to the exclusion of other, equally significant, issues. National media, though unavoidably connected to questions of *national* identity, are complex arenas for articulating other identities which, though linked to the national discourse, are not exclusively concerned with 'the nation' as the primary source of identity construction. This thesis will explore identity through three themes: the construction of gender relations; the potentially conflicting roles of Islam and Iran in constructing the 'imagined community' of the nation; and the function of the stars of *Narges*.

Dramatic serials

Dramatic serials are among the most popular forms of television programming and, as such, have been the focus of much research in the anthropology of media.[3] Viewed as a diacritic of group identity (Appadurai 1996), television serials can be a significant critical

[1] For a fuller discussion of the concept of 'mass mediation', see Walter Armbrust, ed. 2000. *Mass Mediations: New approaches to popular culture in the Middle East and beyond.* Berkeley: University of California Press.
[2] The construction of national identity has also been a significant element of mass media studies in other regions. See for example Purnima Mankekar. 1999. *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
[3]In fact, soap operas, as opposed to finite dramatic serials, have more often been the object of academic concern (e.g. Allen 1985 & 1995, Ang 1985, Geraghty 1991, Brunsdon 1995). Although there are significant differences between soap operas and serials, particularly in terms of the never-ending nature of soap operas, I believe that many of the reasons for acknowledging their usefulness and legitimacy, as a genre, for research are similar.

window through which to view society. Dramatic serials, as opposed to other television genres, can be most useful in this regard partly due to their popularity, but also because their status as fiction enables them uniquely to address questions that cannot be approached in 'serious' programs. The status of television serials as fiction permits a kind of 'plausible deniability' for audiences. Dramatic serials are just distanced enough from the discourse of an authoritarian state that people can view them as 'entertainment'; they are just distanced enough from 'serious' topics that the state can give them a degree of freedom to treat sensitive topics that might be denied to other genres.[4]

In her work on the British soap opera, *Crossroads*, Dorothy Hobson argues that popularity itself should be a central evaluative standard. This could certainly be argued in the case of *Narges*, despite the lack of any official ratings figures (which it would be wise to be sceptical of anyway). Few if any countries in the Middle East allow significant empirical research in terms of media. Many Western media researchers are dubious about such methods anyway, but the power ascribed to numbers in general by Middle Eastern governments is nonetheless striking. However, according to newspapers, magazines and the Internet, *Narges* was significantly more popular than any serial that had been screened previously or anything else shown on Iranian television at the time. This raises the question of why *Narges* was so popular. Why *did* up to 80% of the population, depending on which statistics you read, watch it? What was the source of its appeal to such a broad audience? And what are the implications of a programme reaching such a large proportion of Iran's population?

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[4] In the context of a study of *Narges*, a television serial produced by state-owned media, as opposed to studies of fully commercial serials such as *Dallas*, it is worth bearing in mind that the writers of such programmes often think of themselves as artists, and frequently have overtly expressed social ideals, a point made by Lila Abu-Lughod in her examination of Egyptian dramatic serials (2005).
It is not within the scope of this thesis to thoroughly investigate the motivations of the makers of *Narges*. I was not able to meet with them and there were very few interviews in the press. I can thus only speculate about what they sought to achieve in *Narges*. An exploration of the institutions of television and the agency and circumstances of cultural producers would be an interesting avenue for future research.

Popularity as a basis for research can be problematic. It assumes that a programme's viewers are, for whatever reason, making a conscious choice to watch. Although there are clearly many who did watch *Narges* because they actively wanted to, there were other reasons for the serial's popularity. As the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) has a monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting, they control the scheduling of each of the different IRIB channels. Several of my informants maintained that when the main serial is on, there is nothing worth watching on any of the other channels, to ensure as big an audience as possible for the serial. Furthermore, as one informant put it, what else are you going to do at 11 o'clock at night in Tehran? Iran is, after all, not noted for its glamorous and 'happening' nightlife. With nowhere to go in the evenings, for many people watching television is the default option. If this were the case, however, one would expect all serials to be as popular as *Narges* purportedly was. This was not, however, the general impression that I received from my informants or the print media and Internet coverage of the programme. *Narges* does appear to have been unusually popular and, as such, one must legitimately examine the reason for the widespread claims about the serial's popularity. *Narges'* popularity seems noteworthy for two reasons: 1) the Iranian government appears to be engineering programme scheduling in some way to ensure that as many people watch *Narges* as possible - why might this be? and 2) *Narges* had an immense and diverse audience - its appeal obviously spanned the various strata of Iranian society - why?

In a society such as Iran, dramatic serials offer an outlet for social commentary, though they rarely engage in direct political discourse. True to form, though politics is alluded to at various points in *Narges*, it offers little in the way of significant political commentary or criticism. As a programme produced by and for IRIB, the state broadcaster, *Narges* does not appear to be distanced enough from the authoritarian state discourse to either explore political issues explicitly or to allude to them indirectly.

However, it is certainly a forum for social criticism and dialogue and it is in this area that the most constructive analysis can be found.

Challenges & Limits of Ethnographies of Television

Doing research on television presents many challenges, particularly in the Middle East. When carrying out my fieldwork in Tehran, I encountered similar problems to those described by Christa Salamandra in her book, *A New Old Damascus*. Salamandra recounts the incredulity of Syrians at her focus on popular culture, asserting that popular culture "appeared an odd, unusually difficult object of investigation to Syrians, given the strong bias in Arab culture toward the classical over the vernacular" (2004: 6). I met with similar scepticism when I told people that I was researching *Narges*. This scepticism came in two forms. Either people found it puzzling as to why I would want to research a popular television serial such as *Narges*, particularly when Iranian cinema is so internationally renowned, or they could not understand why I wanted to talk to them—'ordinary' people—as opposed to media critics or journalists.

Ethnography has been described by James Clifford as "simply diverse ways of thinking and writing about culture from a standpoint of participant observation" (1988: 9). Working on this principle, some have argued that to label the work done on mass media as 'ethnography' is inaccurate because there is little actual participant observation and "actual immersion in the daily practices and social worlds of the people studied is almost nonexistent" (Spitulnik 1993: 298). There is, however, no really convincing reason as to why this should be the case. Although the act of watching television may be only a momentary pursuit in an informant's daily life, greater significance will inevitably be ascribed to certain acts of television watching, e.g. watching *Narges*, than to others

thus creating the structure and "daily practices" after which anthropologists so desperately hanker.

Perhaps the most productive approach to anthropological work on mass media is then to combine analysis of the *people* involved in this process of mass mediation with that of the media, or the 'text' itself. By doing so, one can go back and 're-read' one's sources and construct an alternative interpretation, one based on verifiable information. By refraining from privileging one source of information over the other (i.e. fieldwork among informants over the 'texts' of television) a richer exploration of the significance of this form of mass media can be accomplished. Television is difficult to write about. It requires the skills, linguistic and interpretive, that those who work on texts cultivate, but at the same time requires an ability to engage with the people who 'read' the texts.

Due to the scope of my thesis and time constraints, I could not spend as long in 'the field' as one would have wished. Ideally I would have spent months, if not years, watching *Narges* and other television serials, and more importantly, interacting with my informants *outside* the television text, and hence discussing it as part of the discourse of everyday life. I was, however, able to conduct interviews over the course of two visits with friends in Iran who had watched *Narges*. In these interviews it was inevitable that I would foreground *Narges* to an unnatural extent, but they raised diverse questions about the issues in *Narges* that provoked the strongest responses from, and seemed of most significance to my informants. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one of the most illuminating interviews I carried out was with three girls together. The interaction between the girls (as opposed to their response to my own interest in the serial) created a situation most akin to that of day-to-day life in which the programme would be discussed and scrutinized. These interviews, in conjunction with analysis of the press coverage of the serial and of the serial itself will provide a solid foundation upon which to study the questions of identity raised by *Narges*.

It is nonetheless important to recognise from the outset the limitations of this 'ethnography'. My informants could, with one exception, be described as urban elites. Although they were of a variety of ages and were both men and women, they all lived in wealthy north Tehran and were either students or worked at institutions such as the British Council. The exception to this was an older man who worked as a doorman at the British Council. They cannot, therefore, by any means be described as a representative sample of 'the Iranian populace'. Nor can they be thought of simply as representatives of the proverbial 'bounded community' that long constituted the ideal of ethnographic research. I make no pretensions to offering an exploration of identities in Iran that could apply throughout the country. To try to do so in the time-limited exercise of a Master's thesis in a country as vast and diverse as Iran would be unrealistic. By examining the process of identity formation among a small group of Iranians, I do, however, hope to draw some conclusions about the role of *Narges* in constructing identities in Iran today. I will sketch out the limits of these conclusions in what follows.

Concepts of Identity

A narrative self-consciously broadcast to an entire 'national community' inevitably requires us to define the notion of 'identity', both collective and individual, a concept which is both complex and contested. Early work on identity credited various attributes as being 'essential' characteristics of whichever group was under examination.[5]

[5] For an example of an early work of this kind on identity, see Ruth Benedict. 1947. *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. London: Secker & Warburg. Benedict's book is a "national character study" of Japan written shortly after World War II with the express aim of helping the US in its occupation of the country. See also Margaret Mead and Rhoda Métraux. 1953. *The Study of Culture at a Distance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. In this work, Mead and 120 colleagues, who were unable to do fieldwork in the countries that they were studying, used films, novels and other forms of mass media, in addition to interviews with immigrant or exiled nationals, to scrutinize the "national character" of China, Russia, Romania, England, Poland and others.

The problem with much of this work is that it considers groups, for example women, as a unit on the basis of common heritage, traditions, religious practices and ideologies. The pervading notion is one of 'sameness'. It is clear, however, that within any one group there is invariably significant diversity. Even within the boundaries of one nation, the experiences and identities of women, for example, vary enormously based on class, location, religious outlook, family and individual character.

In recent decades the concept of identity has undergone a paradigmatic relocation, moving from this emphasis on 'sameness', whether that be 'selfsameness' or sameness of the self with others, to a focus on difference and plurality in which 'identity' seems not to exist in the singular but rather in fragmented and fluid multiplicities. Much of this later work draws on poststructuralist ideas of scholars such as Jacque Derrida, whose theory of *différance* in relation to identity "points out that meaning is neither atemporal nor identical; it is continuously moving and changing" (Sökefeld 1999: 423), a key change in the theoretical approach.

The diverse identities that people construct and draw upon do not remain the same. Meanings are constantly renegotiated as different identities are privileged at different times and in different circumstances and transmuted because they refer to and are concerned with each other. Consequently although people may share identities—as Iranian Shi'i women for example—the significance of identities is inevitably unfixed for social actors. Although this can create an unsettling ambiguity, this sense of *différance* "continuously restructures the social world, creates new relations between humans, and opens new opportunities for action. Differences do not entail ultimate limits, because their meanings can change and can be changed, paving hitherto obstructed ways for human relations" (Sökefeld 1999: 424). In 1922 Malinowski wrote that as sociologists or

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Lila Abu-Lughod argues that the "flaws in Mead et al.'s approach are obvious now: on the one hand, they reduced and reified national and peoples by granting them the qualities of an individual personality; on the other hand, they minimized the complexity of the dynamics of media production" (2005: 8). While this may be largely true of Mead, Benedict's book arguably remains rather interesting, particularly in terms of her work on the disenfranchised individual, and the dynamic between the individual and society.

anthropologists, "we are not interested in what A or B may feel *qua* individuals…only in what they feel *qua* members of a given community (in Sökefeld 1999: 428). However, as Sökefeld argues, "what A and B feel (do, say…) as individuals and as members of society cannot be separated, because as individuals they are always members of society, engaged in an ongoing process of mutual structuration and transformation" (1999: 428). By understanding identity as a 'subject-in-process' and challenging the idea that there can ever be such as thing as a stable, universal, unified subject, we can begin to see identities in the context of "historically and culturally differentiated subject positions" (Lloyd 2005: 55), constructed across a multiplicity of discourses and within a socio-cultural context.

The scope of this thesis is such that it cannot hope to address the totality of the social worlds in which my texts are situated. However, the texts themselves inevitably structure the responses of my informants, delineating which aspects of their lives are most relevant to the question of the construction of identities. Texts such as televisions serials have to be understood not simply as "socially situated" in the abstract, but as part of what structures daily life. While *Narges* does not offer a unitary fixed meaning for everyone, it provides a point around which meanings and thus identities are constructed.

This thesis will examine the role that mass media, specifically the dramatic television serial *Narges*, play in this constructing of identities, and the interplay between these identities, in Iran today. Television is such a ubiquitous presence in contemporary Iran that it can be said to have become one of the elements that structures social relations, which is to say a part of a public culture through which (or indeed, against which) social identities emerge. Television, along with others form of mass media, has created "new environments for self-development and mobilization" (Cerulo 1997: 398) and provides an invaluable context within with to examine identity. John Thompson highlights the significance of mass media in the process of identity formation as follows:

> In receiving and appropriating media messages, individuals are also involved in a process of self-formation and self-understanding - albeit in ways that are often implicit and not recognized as such. By taking hold of messages and routinely incorporating them into our lives, we are implicitly involved in constructing a sense of self, a sense of who we are and where we are situated in space and time. We are constantly shaping and reshaping our skills and stocks of knowledge, testing our feelings and tastes and expanding the horizons of our experience. We are actively fashioning a self *by means of* the messages and meaningful content supplied by media products (among other things). This process of self-fashioning is not a sudden, once-and-for-all event. It takes place slowly, imperceptibly, from day to day and year to year. (Thompson 1995: 43)

One of the essential characteristics of television is its polysemy, the multiplicity of meanings it offers. The narratives that *Narges* offers do not resonate in the same way for all viewers and, indeed for some, do not resonate at all. It is precisely this fact, and correspondingly the ways in which these narratives are interpreted that make it an important means through which diverse identities can be explored.

Broadcasting in Iran

The media were seen as key institutions in the Pahlavi project of modernization and development. Television was first broadcast in Iran in October 1958 by a private company owned by Habibollah Sabet Pasal, the man who can arguably be said to have created the Iranian Pepsi generation, importing soft drinks and cars, as well as television. Initially, programming consisted of imported serials and films from America, which made up over 50% of broadcast time, and programmes produced domestically, which were heavily influenced by American television, such as quiz shows. However, in 1966 the government took over Sabet's television network and in October 1966 the National Iranian Television broadcast its first programme. In 1971 the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) was incorporated as a public broadcasting monopoly, run as an independent government corporation.

Mass media became the targets of political and cultural concern as opposition to the Pahlavi monarchy gathered momentum in the 1970s. The media, both 'large' and 'small' played a key role in the Iranian Revolution, the former as a symbol of the unpopular modernization programme of the Shah and the latter in terms of mobilizing the Iranian public prior to and during the Revolution. In their study of the role of 'small media' in the Iranian Revolution, Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi and Ali Mohammadi characterise the Revolution thus:

> It was a revolution in the television era, in which the mass media, far from helping to legitimize an unpopular regime, in fact revealed in a boomerang effect its lack of substance beyond a mimetic Westernization. It was a profound identity crisis in which the processes of cultural Westernization and desacralization were themselves felt to be part of the problem. (1994: xvii-xviii)

In Pahlavi Iran, with its comparatively rapid economic development but very limited political development and a non-existent civil society, the relatively open 'mediascape' soon filled with Western cultural products.

> Thus the media contributed to the deep identity crisis Iran experienced in its process of rapid but dependent development, and precipitated a traditionalist backlash to 'protect' older identities. A popular and powerful rhetoric of anti-imperialism railed against a cultural flow that Iranians perceived as motivated to further undermine their sense of self. (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 17)

Although national media is generally regarded as an influential tool for state hegemony and the new national broadcasting structure in Iran was a potentially powerful weapon for the Shah's regime, it was poorly used and rather than mustering popular support for the Shah's modernizing programme, it delegitimized the regime further as modernization become associated with Westernization and an increasingly 'foreign' general environment. This played into one of the reasons for the growing discontent in Iran, namely a resentment at the undermining of Iranian culture and the "substitution of a superficial, commercial Western product instead of a thriving, dynamic cultural sphere", exemplified in television programming (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 95).

The negative cultural effects of the mass media were an important theme in Khomeini's speeches in the run up to the Revolution. After the Revolution, however, Khomeini and his followers successfully seized control of the former regime's mass media thereby securing an invaluable tool for the propagation of their own philosophy. In fact, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi argue that the theocratic state that emerged launched a project far more hegemonic in scope than that of the ill-fated modernization project of the Pahlavi regime as they attempted to 'Islamize' Iranian culture and promote religion as the core of political and social life (1994: 163). Television effectively became an extension of the pulpit, with programming dominated by drawn-out diatribes and protracted polemics from dogmatic *mullahs*.

Since then, the 'mediascape' of Iran has evolved considerably. Private broadcasting is still forbidden in Iran giving the IRIB a fairly effective monopoly on terrestrial broadcasting. However, satellite television is becoming increasingly widespread. Although a law banning satellite dishes was introduced in 1994, many in the *Majlis* acknowledged even then that it would be impossible to enforce. Today, a satellite dish is within the means of many, even those who fall outside the highest income brackets, and despite periodic crackdowns, satellite television is becoming an evermore insistent presence in Iran, challenging the state's control over broadcasting. The role of a programme such as *Narges*, which appealed to such a broad spectrum, therefore becomes even more interesting as the 'mediascape' of Iran becomes progressively more diversified.

Contemporary Context of Screening of Narges

In the analysis of identities, it is crucial to acknowledge that we are always studying individuals, societies and nations at particular moments in their histories, which inevitably affects the framework within which these identities are constructed. Thus both the current and historical political, economic and social state of affairs in Iran is central to a nuanced understanding of the negotiation of identities today.

Iran is experiencing a key moment in its history. It is one of the most significant and powerful states in the Middle East, a position consolidated by the ongoing instability throughout the region. Its President is possibly the most ideologically driven to occupy the position since 1979. While his predecessors (Hashemi Rafsanjani, 1989-97 and Mohammed Khatami, 1997-2005) tended to follow a pragmatic policy of détente, with a slight reduction in revolutionary fervour, particularly in the international arena, Ahmadinejad has openly condemned this approach and pilloried the period since 1989 as one in which the values and morals of the revolution were debased and defiled by material corruption (Lowe & Spencer 2006: 8-9.

Iran's escalating conflict with America and Europe regarding its nuclear programme and its role in the ongoing fighting in Iraq is rarely out of the news. President Ahmadinejad has continued to strut his inflammatory stuff on the international stage, aggravating tensions that, though not dormant under Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, had eased marginally. This was not, however, the platform upon which Ahmadinejad was elected. It was his reputation as the Giuliani of Tehran and his promises to revive Iran's flagging economy and to root out corruption that brought him to favour with a large proportion of Iranians. His shortcomings in these areas and the alarming prospect that his foreign policy rhetoric may be used as justification for a US attack on Iran have weakened his position at home. This position could well be

reversed, however, should the US decide to open another disastrous front in the 'war on terror'.

There is, therefore, a distinct sense of disquiet in Iran at present, a climate that perhaps inevitably leads to a renegotiation of identities. This is also linked to the changes in demography in Iran since the Revolution. Over two thirds of the population are under 25 and have grown up knowing only the Islamic Republic. This should, theoretically, have produced a nation of ideal Islamic citizens. Yet even a cursory glance at the youth of Iran confirms that this is emphatically not the case. Dilip Hiro quotes Sadiq Zibakalam, imprisoned for his political views under the Shah: "My generation is not going to turn its back on the revolution because if we did, we would be like mothers saying goodbye to our children, we would be saying goodbye to our existence". He continues: "But the younger generation has no attachment, no feeling for the revolution. They were just babies. When I teach the revolution in my class, many of my students just look out the window and watch the clock for the lesson to end. They say, 'What about us? You had your revolution and your war. What's in it for us?' And I can't give them the answer" (in Hiro 2006: 317-8). How, then, do this generation see themselves and their country? How does this in turn affect those who lived through and fought for the revolution? Is Islam still the dominant source of identification in Iran or are there challenges to its role as such? To what extent is post-Khatami Iran is marked by a shift from an agenda of creating a religious national identity to one of establishing a national identity that is specifically Iranian?

Iran is undergoing a profound identity crisis. Through the television serial *Narges*, this thesis will examine the ways in which some Iranians are negotiating this crisis. Chapter 2 explores questions of family and gender roles. The insistence that Islam was the surest path to women's emancipation was an important aspect of the liberationist rhetoric of the Revolution. How do people conceive of this trajectory today? Is a

patriarchal vision of society outmoded or does it still resonate? *Narges* presents strong female characters. Where do they fit in the gender discourse? And to what extent does the family provide the fundamental framework for gender relations? Chapter 3 will focus on the still critical place of Islam in any discussion of identities in Iran and the potential challenge to this identity by a more specifically *Iranian* nationalism. Religion remains a critical aspect in this discussion - it is one of the strongest 'traditions' upon which people can draw. It is often interwoven with activities of everyday life and provides individuals with a sense of community, a sense of identity as an integral part of a broader collectivity of individuals who share similar beliefs or have, to a greater or lesser extent, a common history and collective fate. However, in recent years, particularly in light of the ongoing disputes about Iran's nuclear ambitions, some have argued that the emphasis in Iran has moved from an Islamic collective identity to one that focuses on the Iranian nation. This chapter will examine the way in which *Narges* deals with these two ideas. Finally, Chapter 4 will focus on the stars of *Narges*, approaching the topic from three angles. Firstly, it will examine the blurring and narrativizing of the space between the public and private domains of celebrities. This will draw on the notion of "non-reciprocal intimacy" whereby as modernity loosens sense of self and as central institutions are no longer able to grant ready-made identities to individuals, in their search for some kind of stable identity, people increasingly seek intimacy from afar and use mediated forms of communication to construct these identities, a process in which stardom is the ideal self-locating mechanism. Secondly, it will examine the place of stars in the context of a discourse of Shi'i martyrology, exploring whether celebrities have to some degree replaced religious figures and 'martyrs' in the public sphere. Finally, it will explore a recent sex tape scandal involving one of the stars of *Narges* in the light of Michael Herzfeld and Andrew Shryock's work on "cultural intimacy".

My readings of *Narges* should not be understood as concrete factual supposition: there is no final 'truth' to be unveiled. However, I believe that this thesis can contribute to the ongoing dialogues about both television drama and identity in contemporary Iran by offering certain arguments and hypotheses for debate and discussion.

The Plot of Narges

Narges revolves around two families in present-day Tehran, the Shokats and the Mohtashams, and a limited circle of their friends. The Shokats consist of Mahmoud Shokat, a prosperous but tyrannical cloth merchant, his wife, Azam, their daughters Pari and Zohreh and their husbands, Esmail and Majid, and their wayward son, Behrooz. Narges and Nasrin Mohtasham live with their ailing mother, their father having died the year before the serial opens.

Nasrin and Behrooz meet secretly, fall in love and plan to get married. Inevitably their families discover their relationship and oppose it vehemently, though on different grounds. Azam does not consider Nasrin, whom she deems a low class gold-digger, interested only in the Shokats' money and position, to be good enough for Behrooz. Narges and her mother, in contrast, do not think that Behrooz would be an appropriate husband for Nasrin in part because of his weak and immature character, describing him as a boy with "no education, no job, no life", and in part because the two families are so different, arguing that the Shokats have weak morals. At this stage, Mahmoud Shokat is blissfully unaware of his son's infatuation with Nasrin and his decision to marry her. Eventually, the two mothers and sisters decide that since Nasrin and Behrooz are determined to get married, it would be better to allow them to wed rather than face the

possibility that they might marry without their families' permission and so they arrange their wedding. All this is, however, done without Shokat's knowledge, so terrified are they all of his reaction.

Shokat does eventually discover the deception in which his family have become embroiled and is predictably furious. He comes to the wedding reception and upon seeing all his family there without his permission, explodes in rage. His anger causes Mrs Mohtasham, who has been ill for some time, to have a heart attack and she dies that night. It is at this point that the enmity between Narges and Shokat is truly cemented as she blames him for her mother's death and he condemns her as a presumptuous busybody, determined to destroy him and his family.

Meanwhile, Narges has fallen in love with her employer, engineer Ehsan Saeedi who recently divorced the materialistic, ambitious and seductive Shaghayegh. Concurrently, Azam discovers that Shokat has secretly taken a second wife, Forough whom he has been keeping in an apartment just outside Tehran. Devastated, she tells Shokat that he must divorce Forough if their marriage is to have any chance of surviving.

In an attempt to finally destroy Nasrin and Behrooz's marriage, and to settle old scores, Shokat sends Behrooz to Italy to work for his brother Ahmed. In a convoluted plan to force Ahmed to pay him a long-standing debt, Shokat asks Behrooz to (temporarily) marry his niece, Arezou, all the time hoping that Behrooz will consequently divorce Nasrin.

Meanwhile, Nasrin discovers that she is pregnant and Shokat, fearing the consequences, coerces her into having an abortion. Nasrin duly goes to an unsavoury-looking backstreet hovel for an illegal abortion where she descends into a hellish underworld, surrounded by hags and crones, determined to kill her child. Terror-stricken, she finds her way home and decides to keep the baby, telling Narges "I felt him, I felt my baby!" Behrooz, however, decides to stay in Italy where, though as an illegal

immigrant he spent his first months in some kind of refugee camp, he has now found work and freedom from his father. Nasrin divorces Behrooz and keeps the baby, bringing her up without him, with help from the newly married Narges and Ehsan.

The plot takes a certain dramatic turn when Shaghayegh is found dead with her head battered in. Suspicion falls upon Shokat who is questioned extensively by the police. Eventually it emerges that although Shokat was present when she died, it was in fact Aziz, a vengeful drug-addict whom Ehsan had fired earlier in the serial, who had dealt the fateful blow. Shokat is cleared of murder but imprisoned for two years as an accessory to the crime.

The programme then jumps forward two years to Shokat's release. Just after this, Azam receives word that Behrooz is returning from Italy. He arrives back in Iran, pale and wan, to a tearful reunion with his family. Disaster soon strikes, however, with a call from Italy to say that Arezou has been rushed to hospital. Azam tells Behrooz meaningfully: "In hospital they found out that Arezou had an illness. Do you understand Behrooz?" Though the word AIDS is never used, it is clearly implied and Behrooz is immediately taken for 'tests'. Thankfully, it transpires that Arezou was only infected with this illness after she and Behrooz were divorced and Behrooz is not in fact ill at all - his emotional problems have simply created the illusion of sickness.

The serial has an unexpectedly ambiguous ending. Shokat is ill but we do not know whether he and Azam are finally reconciled or divorced. Nasrin and Behrooz meet and have a tearful conversation about Bahar, their daughter, in which Behrooz asks Nasrin what she will tell Bahar about her father. Nasrin replies, weeping: "I will tell Bahar that her father was a fine man who wanted to do good but didn't know how to." We assume that Narges and Ehsan live happily ever after and the series ends with a shot of Nasrin and Behrooz walking down a snow-covered path into the uncharted territory of the future.

My informants

Alireza is a man in his sixties who works as a gatekeeper at the compound which houses the British Council and the British Institute for Persian Studies. He is married with four children and has lived in Tehran since he was about 30 years old though he originally comes from Saveh. He went to school but did not attend university. Alireza was in the Iranian air force under the Shah and was stationed in England. He was in the air force for about eleven years but resigned after the Revolution because he felt that there was no discipline and conditions had changed for the worse. Alizreza watched *Narges* regularly at home with his family, but not every night.

I first met Alireza in the summer of 2006. A friend who had stayed there the year before had described him, quite rightly, as a 'grizzled genius' who was very anxious to help newcomers to Iran. I used to chat with him each day as I went in and out of the compound where I was staying—he used to practise his English and I my Persian. Alireza was initially slightly reluctant to be interviewed because he felt that since he was not a film or cultural critic, his views would be of little use to my research.

Maryam is woman in her early forties who works as a librarian. She is married with two children, a 17-year-old son and a 14-year-old daughter. She has always lived in Tehran except for two or three years spent in America when she was very young and two years in Turkey when she was at university where she studied physics. Maryam tried to watch *Narges* every night. She watched the 10.45pm broadcast with her family.

I met Maryam at the library where she works—since it is a fairly small library and I was often the only person there, we chatted quite a lot and I discovered that she watched *Narges*. I interviewed her twice—once in August 2006 and again in January 2007.

Shireen is a 27-year-old single woman who works as a receptionist at the British Council. She has a BA in English Literature and studied in France for a while. She did not like the acting in *Narges* but was interested in the issues that it raised. She was not a committed viewer but watched it sporadically with her parents who watched every night.

I met Shireen at the British Council and we soon became friends. She used to take me out in Tehran and introduced me to her friends. I interviewed her twice, in August 2006 and January 2007.

Soheila is a 33-year-old woman who is married but has no children. She works at the British Council. Soheila studied theatre at university. She has always lived in Iran. Soheila used to watch *Narges* at home alone because her husband did not like the story.

Shireen introduced me to Shoheila.

Fatemeh is a single woman in her twenties and works for the Iranian Polo Federation. She has a university degree. Fatemeh always tried to watch *Narges*.

Nayereh is a single woman in her twenties who has a university degree. She did not tell me her current job. She generally tried to watch *Narges*.

I met Fatemeh and Nayereh at the Inaugural Tehran International Ladies Polo Tournament in the summer of 2006 through a mutual friend and so they were happy to meet up for coffee and a discussion about *Narges* in 2007.

Banafsheh is a divorced woman in her twenties who has a university degree. She is in the process of remarrying her former husband. She always tried to watch *Narges*.

Banafsheh is a friend of Fatemeh whom I had never met before. However, she was amused by the idea of someone doing research on *Narges* and since she had watched it regularly was eager to join us for our discussion.

Iraj is a single man in his twenties. He is studying photography but is also a part-time journalist. Iraj plays in an underground rock band that tours in Iran and abroad. He started watching *Narges* because he was interested in why the programme had such huge appeal. Iraj seemed the kind of jittery, cigarette-smoking, espresso-downing student who sees some form of conspiracy everywhere. We met for coffee during my second trip to Tehran.

Shoukoufeh is a 30-year-old married woman who works at the British Council. She is originally from Tehran and has always lived there. She has a degree in microbiology. Shokoufeh regularly watched *Narges* at home with her family. Her husband also enjoyed the programme.

Shireen introduced me to Shoukofeh.[6]

[6] In the interests of privacy, I have used pseudonyms for all my informants.

Chapter 2

Gender Matters

The question of gender must be considered from two key angles in the discussion of contemporary identities in Iranian society as constructed in and through *Narges*. Firstly, we must analyse gender in *Narges* as part of a larger genre of television programmes, that is to say, soap operas, telenovelas and ongoing family sagas that primarily deal with personal relationships and which are often dismissed as 'women's television'. Secondly, we must examine the representation and construction of gender in the programme itself: how are men and women depicted in *Narges*? How did people respond to these representations? Do these representations correspond with the lived reality of life in Iran? Or is identity constructed in opposition to these depictions? I will first address the question of whether *Narges* is part of a gendered category of programme and the role this plays in the way in which identities are constructed before moving on to its content.

Is Narges 'Women's' Television?

Soap operas in the United States are traditionally assumed to be 'women's television', not only because their day-time scheduling[7] means that a higher proportion of their viewers are women who are more likely to be at home during the day, but also because their storylines tend to revolve around the 'female' concerns of families and small

[7] *Narges* was an evening "prime time" broadcast. It had two daily screenings, at 6.00pm and then again at 10.45pm, the second of which was the most popular.

communities and the personal relationships which form their life blood: "Personal relationships are the backbone of soaps. They provide the dramatic moments - marriage, birth, divorce, death - and the more day-to-day exchanges of quarrels, alliances and dilemmas which make up the fabric of the narrative" (Geraghty 1991: 41).[8] Unlike programmes such as police dramas or thrillers, the focus in soap operas is on the ongoing consideration of personal relationships, on the slow development of these relationships rather than rapid response; on talk, not action. The responsibility for maintaining and sustaining these emotional relationships is generally understood to fall most heavily on women. The narratives of soap operas are frequently driven by female desire, and the process of "spectator identification" is often governed by the female point-of-view (Kuhn 1984: 18). As such, soap operas are seen as an implicitly gendered form of television programme, aimed at a female audience.[9]

What does this notion of 'aimed at a female audience' really mean? It presupposes a group of individuals already formed as female, recognizable through discourses which construct *a priori* gender categories. However, as Annette Kuhn argues in her discussion of soap operas and melodramas as 'Women's Genres', though soap operas may address themselves to a *social audience* of women, assuming a "pre-existent femaleness" to their viewing, "they may also be regarded as speaking to a female, or feminine, spectator. If soaps and melodramas inscribe femininity in their address, women - as well as being already formed *for* such representations - are in a sense also formed *by* them" (Kuhn 1984: 24).

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[8] While *Narges* is not strictly speaking a "soap opera", it does, in many ways, resemble one, particularly in its subject matter. The key difference between a serial like *Narges* and a soap opera is the fact that *Narges* reaches a clear and definitive conclusion. In terms of the role of gender and the family in it, I do not consider this to constitute a significant difference and thus believe that comparisons with the soap opera genre as a whole and the use of the literature on soap operas on this subject is appropriate.

[9] Although *Narges* bears all the hallmarks of a female-oriented programme, it was in fact watched by men as well, a characteristic which distinguishes it from equivalents such as *Coronation Street*. However, the theoretical literature on gendered "soap operas" in the US and Britain provides a useful framework for comparative purposes, highlighting what is distinctive about the Iranian context.

The distinction between the social audience and the spectator is a useful one when discussing the construction of gender in *Narges*. The social audience is the group of people who buy tickets at the cinema box office or who turn on the television. It is a group of people who can be canvassed, counted and categorised according to their age, sex, nationality and socio-economic status. The notion of the social audience, as opposed to the spectator, emphasizes the role of the cinema and television as social and economic institutions. Having become part of this group by committing to buying a cinema ticket or paying a television licence fee, audiences earn the right to watch films and television programmes and so to become spectators: "social audiences become spectators in the moment they engage in the processes and pleasures of meaning-making attendant on watching a film or TV programme. The anticipated pleasure of spectatorship is perhaps a necessary condition of existence of audiences. In taking part in the social act of consuming representations, a group of spectators becomes a social audience" (Kuhn 1984: 24). While *Narges* may not be aimed at a social audience that is exclusively constituted of women, I would argue that it has, however, a more significant role to play in the construction of the feminine spectator, pointing to a relatively narrow interpretation of the construction of gender and corresponding roles of men and women in both the family and society at large.

It is worth noting at this stage that *Narges* does not attempt to construct the masculine spectator in the same way as it does the feminine. It does not offer a vision of masculinity to which its social audience of men should aspire: although Narges appeared to be a sort of female role model, there is no real male equivalent in the programme. While Ehsan might potentially have been a male counterpart to Narges' exemplary figure, his character was far less developed than that of Narges, Nasrin or Shokat and so lacked the impact that their characters had. Shoukofeh commented that though Ehsan was a positive character, he was a cliché, remarking: "the religious person who wants to help

people and get married in the proper way, that's such a typical character". His character clearly did not resonate with her or inspire any strong reaction. Of my male informants, neither Alireza nor Iraj mentioned Ehsan at any point in my discussions with them, again reflecting the fact that, although he was the male character who most closely embodied any kind of 'ideal' man, he was not a strong presence in the serial. Shokat, the most complex character in the programme, offering both positive and negative qualities, could not be described as a role model, although he inspired sympathy in some of my informants.

In many ways, *Narges* does conform to the broad pattern of soap operas identified by Geraghty and Kuhn in terms of its subject matter, that is to say, personal relationships. However, *Narges* was broadcast at 10.45pm—the prime time slot. Prime time television cannot be specifically aimed at women because it cannot afford to alienate half its audience. It is clear from my informants and from the print media coverage that *Narges* succeeded in attracting an audience composed of both men and women. Although I mainly interviewed female viewers, it was evident from their interviews that they did not watch it solely with other women, but rather with their husbands and children. When I watched *Narges* at a friend's house in Iran over the summer, the whole family (with the exception of their teenage son) watched it together, including the father. Shireen described how she had become embroiled in an argument with the *father* of a friend over whether Narges was a realistic character and how much they disliked and liked her respectively, suggesting that its male viewers engaged just as actively with the characters and plotlines as its female viewers. In an article for a magazine called *Bidoun*, a chic and elitist Middle Eastern culture and arts magazine published in America, journalist Sohrab Mohebbi describes his first encounter with *Narges* in the summer of 2006:

It was around 10 pm when I asked my friend to call me a taxi. I was going to a party in central Tehran. The taxi arrived, I climbed in, and we took the long and curvy Modarres highway into the city. Traffic was impossible - it always is - and at about 11, still far from my destination, the driver leaned back and asked,

"You mind if I drop you off here?" To my confusion, he added, "I have to rush back home to catch the last bit of *Narges* on TV." I had little choice but to get out; my driver looked a bit too much like Reza Zadeh, the Iranian weightlifting world champion. I paid my fare and continued my journey on foot. On the sidewalk, I passed by a couple. The girl was practically dragging her boyfriend along to, I soon realized, a waiting television: "I hear that Behrooz gets AIDS in Italy and dies, I think it has something to do with his dirty cousin..." I stepped into a store to buy cigarettes and found ten men sitting on cardboard boxes watching a scratchy television. It was *Narges* again. I waited until the commercial break for them to hand me my pack of Bahmans, smoked a quarter of the pack while watching the last minutes of the show, and went on my way. I'd lost all hope of getting to the party.[10]

Mohebbi's experience emphasizes the fact that *Narges* was in no way an exclusively female phenomenon. If we are to believe the reports of the size of the audience of *Narges*, which put it at up to 40-50 million viewers, on a purely statistical basis, there must have been a significant number of men watching *Narges* since Iran's population of approximately 70 million is 51% male and 49% female. These statistics and my informants' accounts suggest that *Narges*, though apparently conforming to the subject matter of American "soap operas", had a broader appeal, one that transgressed traditional gender boundaries, than is traditionally associated with such programmes.

I believe that the key factor in taking *Narges* out of the domain of the 'feminine' is the powerful roles of the male characters in *Narges*, in particular, that of Mahmoud Shokat, which create a fundamentally patriarchal structure. As one of the pivotal characters in *Narges*, Mahmoud Shokat does more than any other character in the series to propel the narrative forward. Much of the diegetic development is as a result of the reactions of other characters to his actions. The principal villain, he is consistently at the forefront of the action, making business deals, sending Behrooz to Italy and generally involving himself in other people's lives. Beyond Shokat, Ehsan and Mansour lead their office's efforts to promote nuclear power: Narges and Samaneh provide crucial, but somewhat ancillary, secretarial support. Although Narges does confront Shokat on numerous occasions, Ehsan and his brother-in-law solve Shaghayeh's murder and bring her killer Aziz to justice. Narges and Nasrin's uncle provides them and their mother

[10] Sohrab Mohebbi "*Narges* and the case of Iranian docudrama." *Bidoun* - 'Rumour': Issue 9 Winter 2006/7 http://www.bidoun.com/issues/issue_9/02_all.html

with a house to live in after their father dies. Thus *all* the male characters augment the sense that it is men who drive events outside the family, while women have jurisdiction over personal relationships.

Though *Narges* offers strong female characters, it does not seek to create an inverted patriarchal structure where men are subordinate to women or one in which men and women have equal roles in all spheres of public and private life.[11] It portrays women as significant individuals with power, but in the context of the family which is set up within a patriarchal framework. The female characters are not passive, although much of the narrative drive comes from Shokat. Their sphere of influence is, however, largely limited to constructing and controlling the relationships around which the series is based.

The construction of the family in *Narges* thus further affirms the construction of gender relations along patriarchal lines.[12] *Narges* depicts two very different families: the Mohtashams who have no father figure, and the Shokats, whose father figure is domineering and authoritarian in the extreme. The family structure of the Mohtashams is almost invariably portrayed in a far more positive light. Though Nasrin and Narges argue, as do Nasrin and their mother, they communicate with each other in a far more meaningful fashion than the Shokats, and the whole family support and love each other. They appear far more capable of successfully conducting relationships, both with their immediate relations and with those outside their family. Though not one of these three women—Narges, Nasrin and their mother—is represented as overtly oppressed by the patriarchal structure of society in general or by men as individuals, they are, however,

[11] To expect *Narges* to do so is to impose the progressivist understandings of gender. Saba Mahmood's discussion of the women's 'piety movement' in Egypt questions this tendency within much poststructuralist feminist theory towards imposing the goals of 'progressive' liberation politics onto women worldwide. She argues that the question of agency must be considered in historically and culturally specific terms. The meaning and sense of agency cannot be fixed in advanced and thus what may seem to be "a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency - but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment" (Mahmood 2005: 15).

[12] It is worth noting from the outset that to attribute the patriarchal nature of *Narges* to Iranian or (perhaps) Islamic patriarchalism would be quite misleading, since patriarchy is strongly encoded in many Western examples of programmes of this genre. However, in order to analyse more conclusively the relationship between the patriarchal nature of *Narges* and the patriarchy of Iranian society, one would need to examine examples of matriarchal serials in Iranian television. This kind of analysis would require some sort of broad descriptive literature on Iranian television which, unfortunately, at present, does not exist.

searching for a male figure of authority to replace their absent father because in certain key areas they still require the help of a man. They find this firstly in the shape of their paternal uncle and later in Ehsan Saeedi, the upright and pious engineer whom Narges eventually marries.

In this, the narrative of *Narges* thus underlines the sense of the necessity in the societal structure for a strong male figure, no matter how capable the women may appear to be. It achieves this in two main ways. Firstly, though *Narges* is primarily concerned with personal relationships and family dynamics, when it does explore issues outside this framework, such as Iran's nuclear aspirations, they are dealt with by male characters, reinforcing a markedly gendered division of responsibilities. Secondly, although Narges and her family seem generally to survive comfortably without male relatives, they still require them at crucial moments. The very fact that for the most part they are able to support themselves but are still forced to turn to their uncle or Ehsan at key points, highlights, even more effectively than Shokat's unrelenting and dictatorial patriarchy, the vital role of men in the family and in society in general. It underlines their reduced cultural capital as a result of their lack of an authoritative patriarch. In doing this, *Narges* constructs a discourse of gender which reinforces the dominant patriarchy while giving women power over personal relationships—the most important thing in the programme—a vision of gender that may have been reassuring for the male viewers of *Narges* and accounted for its appeal to both men and women.

Throughout *Narges*, this patriarchal model of the family links into the generic moral of the soap opera worldwide that family, above riches, guarantees happiness. Family life is the basis of soap operas, providing a stable framework for variations in storylines and characters. This emphasis on the family does not mean that family life as represented in soap operas is uniformly happy, far from it. In most such programmes, including *Narges*, the conflicts which form the foundation of the dramatic development

are firmly centred around difficult and often traumatic family situations, conflicts between wives and husbands, brothers and sisters, parents and children. In this way, not only do these programmes establish personal life as their ideological problematic, "the development of personal life *within the family* is set up as the ideological norm. The family is regarded as the ideal cradle for human happiness. At least, it should be" (Ang 1985: 68). Family life is by no means romanticised in such programmes. The ideal of the family as safe haven from the world's troubles is constantly shattered in the diegetic development. It remains an elusive but enticing ideal to be endlessly pursued. As such, it is perhaps the most important structural feature of the soap opera genre.

Patriarchal v. Matriarchal Soap Operas

In her discussion of British and American television, *Women and soap opera: A study of prime-time soaps*, Geraghty contends that though all soap operas foreground the importance of the family, this can be done either in terms of a patriarchal or a matriarchal framework. She argues that programmes such as *Dallas* represent the patriarchal structure whereas soaps such as *Eastenders* offer a matriarchal alternative. In the patriarchal soap operas, "male characters try to take back into the family the authority which they wield at work, insisting that, because the personal and the public are intertwined, action which is valid in one sphere is equally appropriate in the other" (Geraghty 1991: 63). The patriarchal soap opera revolves around the constant battle of the patriarch to prevent unsuitable characters from entering, and thus destroying his family and his position within that family. These challenges to the family usually involve,

by extension, some additional challenge to the patriarch's business concerns, often familial in nature, thereby uniting these two key elements.

Thus the ideal position for the patriarchal figure in these programmes is as the stable, unquestioned head both of his family and his business, a position that is never secured because to do so would bring the narrative to a close. In programmes such as *Dallas* and *Dynasty*, and indeed *Narges*, much of the viewing-pleasure is derived from the contested power relations between men and women and the way in which patriarchal power is constantly challenged and reasserted in these two fields. The female characters are central to the patriarch's problems, threatening his power through family relationships and/or in the business sphere and as such, are essential to his uncertain grip on power. It is this challenge to patriarchal power that is the basis of much of the drama in these soap operas.

In contrast, matriarchal soaps are constructed around the notion of woman as the central prop of the family, sustaining it through various crises, and holding the family together rather than challenging its unity as in patriarchal soap operas. In this way, there is often a shift away from having men as the central character. The emphasis on matriarchal power does not, however, mean that these programmes necessarily undermine or even call into question the patriarchal discourse. Of programmes such as *Eastenders* and *Crossroads* Geraghty claims that the "representation of the family in British soaps does not challenge patriarchal authority but bypasses it, handing emotional and practical control to the mother" (Geraghty 1991: 83). Patriarchy remains the dominant discourse, if discreetly so.

Geraghty's typology provides an initial framework within which to analyse *Narges*. Although *Narges* does not sit entirely comfortably in either camp, incorporating elements of both patriarchal and matriarchal structures throughout the programme, its structure is primarily patriarchal. The character of Mahmoud Shokat is a powerful capitalist

patriarch who though originally from a poor background has worked his way up to become the wealthy owner of an extremely successful textile business. He is indisputably the head of his family, ruling with an iron fist, controlling the lives of his wife and children absolutely. His dominance over Pari and Zohreh is augmented by the fact he employs their husbands, Esmail and Majid, nominally putting each of them in charge of a shop but never leaving them in any doubt who has the whip hand, thus binding together his family and business. Throughout the early episodes of *Narges*, Behrooz's disinterest in the family business and his refusal to work for his father causes considerable tension. As part of the elaborate plot to induce Shokat to accept Behrooz and Nasrin's marriage, Behrooz eventually does start working for Shokat who rewards him by giving him his own shop for his birthday. Behrooz's repeated refusal to work with Shokat can be interpreted as a rejection of and rebellion against his father's authority.

Shokat's power is further challenged by the threatening introduction of a 'foreign' element into his family in the shape of Nasrin. Shokat tells Behrooz that his love affair with Nasrin is merely a pretext for Behrooz's disobedience and defiance of his father. In the aftermath of Behrooz and Nasrin's wedding and the continuous fighting between Shokat and Behrooz, Shokat observes to Majid, his son-in-law, that "for a father, nothing is more painful than being disgraced by his son in front of everyone". In conversations such as these and in the foregrounding of the conflict between Shokat and his son, the distress and trauma of the threat posed by the established patriarchy is emphasized.

The programme's interpretation of gender thus offered and privileged a patriarchal vision of Iranian society, albeit one in which patriarchal power is constantly contested. For example, although Alireza asserted that he did not like Shokat, the main reason for this was "the way that he treated his son". At no point did he mention the character's tyrannical behaviour towards his wife or daughters, or Narges and Nasrin.

The dynamic that seemed to disturb him most was that between Shokat and Behrooz - the oppression of one man by another.

Although Fatemeh and Nayereh joked that the reason that the serial was so good was that Shokat was crazy and provided the drama, they also said that Shokat was a recognizable and believable father figure, claiming that there are many fathers like him in Iran. When they actually began to analyse his character in more depth, they remarked that for most of *Narges* he was a "normal person", and at the beginning of the programme at least, he was in the right. They explained that since Shokat only had one son, it was normal that he should want the best for him in everything, especially his marriage and so naturally he would be upset if his son married a girl, who was not very beautiful or rich, without his knowledge or approval. It was only towards the end that they felt that he "went crazy". They argued that that throughout the serial, Shokat was not at fault, rather the mother of Behrooz was guilty because she helped him to marry without his father's permission, pointing out that Behrooz continued to live in his father's house even though he had married against his wishes. After these observations, Fatemeh said, half laughing, half serious: "My father, if I did something like that, he would kill me. My father has thought about my marriage all his life. If my mother helped me to get married without telling my father, yes, of course my father would kill me."

Their comments reflect the understanding that in a patriarchal society, any relationship that is not arranged and approved by the father is illicit. In the case of Nasrin and Behrooz, the illegitimacy of their match is further emphasized by the fact that since she has no father, Nasrin has diminished cultural capital and is thus a poor prospect as a wife. Armbrust argues that in marriage, in patriarchal societies, the "overriding principle is that a legitimate marriage brings together families first and unites individuals only as a secondary consideration" (1998a: 29). By taking Behrooz's marriage

out of Shokat's sphere of influence and privileging the desires of two individuals, Behrooz, Nasrin and Azam invert this hierarchy, thus undermining Shokat's patriarchal authority. The potential power of this transgression is mitigated by the fact that the marriage is a failure which ends in divorce, confirming the necessity of the patriarch in regulating marital relations specifically and the members of his family more generally, a position that can be applied to society as a whole.

Polygamy

One of the more notorious plot developments in *Narges* was the discovery that Shokat had secretly taken a second wife. Though it is permissible in Islam and in Iran for a man to have up to four wives, he must ask permission of his existing wife or wives before taking another. Shokat claimed that the woman, Forough, was a widow with no money and no one to support her and that he had married her out of pity. His wife, Azam, did not believe this and insisted that he divorce Forough or she would leave him. In the end, she left him anyway, her faith in him having been destroyed by this deception and betrayal. They are never properly reconciled and the serial ends with Shokat's release from prison and an uneasy and ambiguous truce between them for the sake of their family whereby the viewer is left uncertain whether or not Azam finally divorced Shokat.

This storyline provoked strong reactions in my interviewees, particularly from Maryam and Shireen. When I interviewed them both initially in the summer, it was this thread of the narrative that seemed to resonate with them the most. Maryam, who is in her forties and married, indignantly claimed that by incorporating the topic of illegal polygamy into the programme, *Narges* would teach people, especially men, to deal with

their problems "in a bad way" and to shirk their responsibilities and cheat on their waves. She believed that most Iranian men behave badly with regards their wives, behaviour which, to her mind, the law supports. In my second interview with her, she reiterated these feelings, telling me that unfortunately, taking a second wife without asking permission of the first was now becoming a custom among Iranian men. She explained that this trend was not evident in society because "it is all hidden" and is not something that people talk about openly. She did not, however, think that such conduct should be shown on television because people might mimic the reprehensible behaviour depicted.

Shireen agreed that polygamy is a taboo in Iran and is not talked about openly. However, she *did* think that it could be appropriate for a programme such as *Narges* to deal with such issues, arguing that by bringing them into such a forum (i.e. a fictional drama) people could address them in a safe context. She did not, however, like the way that the producers of *Narges* dealt with the issue of polygamy because they showed it "as a bad thing, as something disgusting". By doing so, she argued, they were achieving the opposite effect and were unconsciously leading more and more people (i.e. men) to want a second wife. She warned that its portrayal in *Narges* would lead to polygamy becoming an accepted norm that no longer provoked any indignation in society.

Alireza maintained that polygamy is an unusual phenomenon in Iran but conceded that since his religion allows men to have four wives and forty girlfriends, it does happen.[13] He insisted that he does not like men to have more than one wife and that it is not good to show this kind of behaviour in television serials since it encourages people to take more than one wife. He claimed that polygamy was more common in among villagers, particularly if the first wife is unable to conceive.

[13] I do not know exactly where Alireza got the figure of forty girlfriends. Some argue that in Iranian history, the number forty represents an abundance generally and so he may have been using it in this sense.

There is little evidence to suggest that there is a growing trend for polygamy in Iran.[14] Indeed, with the economy in dire straits, few men can afford a second wife. Their reactions to a discussion of the taboo of polygamy can be analysed in light of the concept that Michael Herzfeld describes as "cultural intimacy" which he defines as "the recognition of those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but which nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (2005: 3). In his introduction to *Off Stage/On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture*, in which he develops this notion, Andrew Shryock argues that in such a time, intimacy "is perceived against a backdrop that accentuates the experience of difference (in and beyond domestic spaces) and orients that experience toward the task of ranking, comparing, accommodating, impressing, persuading, or excluding an 'audience' of real and imaginary onlookers" (Shryock 2004: 11). Polygamy represents a practice that defines groups internally, but is intensely embarrassing if it slips beyond the control of the group into the view of external onlookers - it is an issue that one discusses only with other 'insiders'. My discussions with my informants about polygamy in *Narges* took place in the "zones of intimacy" that are neither public nor private to which Shryock refers:

> The identities that flourish in these spaces, away from (but alert to) the gaze of external observers, are frequently at odds with the types of cultural representation that predominate in the more self-consciously (and comparatively) public formats. (Shryock 2004: 12)

Maryam, Shireen and Alireza's reactions were predicated on my status as an outside observer and my presumed opinions about marriage in Iran. Fearing the world's portrayal of Iranians as polygamous religious fanatics, their remarks communicated their anxiety that I draw a distinction between them and such stereotypes. Features of gender relations in Iran, such as polygamy, that do not conform to Western, liberal, feminist

[14] Sami Zubaidi claims that under the Islamic Republic, polygamy has not been a widespread problem, arguing that the social stigma attached to it and conflicts and bitterness it engenders seem to have deterred most in a "triumph of expediency in relation to modern conditions against religious principle" (1997: 111).

ideals have often been seized upon by commentators and given a disproportionate degree of attention, relative to the reality of most people's experiences. As a result, much of the discourse around gender in Iran has been distorted, failing to reflect the reality of gender relations in contemporary Iranian society.

The Development of the Gender Discourse in Iran

The role of patriarchy and the resultant structure of gender relations in Iran are often highlighted by mainstream international media and politicians as conclusive evidence of both the oppressive 'anti-women' stance of Islam generally and the backward nature of Iran more specifically. In fact, the construction of gender and consequently the nature of gender relations in the Islamic Republic draw upon a complex and at times conflicting multiplicity of discourses which create a more nuanced dialectic than is often suggested.

In the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, many secular feminists, both inside and outside Iran, feared that women would disappear from public life, oppressed by a harsh theocracy that viewed women as second-class citizens at best and chattels for breeding an endless supply of Islamic martyrs at worst. Despite the undeniable limitations on women in contemporary Iran, this has not been the case. It is tempting to argue, as critics such as Haideh Moghissi and Nayereh Tohidi have done, that women's achievements have all been *in spite* of the Islamic Republic and in opposition to the dominant discourse of gender that it offers.[15] There is certainly an element of truth to these claims. However, with the rise of the Islamic movement in Iran came too the emergence of

[15] See for example Haideh Moghissi. 1994. *Populism and Feminism in Iran*. London: Macmillan or Nayereh Tohidi. 1994. "Modernity, Islamization, and Women in Iran" in Valentine Moghadam, ed. *Gender and National Identity: Women and Politics in Muslim Societies*. London: Zed.

> a new political sociability and the dominance of a new political discourse, within which woman stood for culture, occupying a central position. In this new Islamic political paradigm, imperialist domination of Muslim societies was seen to have been achieved not through military of economic supremacy, as earlier generations of nationalist and socialists had argued, but through the undermining of religion and culture. Woman was made to bear the burden of cultural destruction. (Najmabadi 1998: 60)

Having been forced to bear the burden of the blame for the cultural degeneration under the Pahlavi monarchies, women were to prove key to the cultural reconstruction of the new Republic.

The advent of the Islamic Republic prompted the emergence of a new discourse around gender, one that inevitably sought to disassociate itself in many ways from the constructions of gender of Pahlavi Iran. In times of revolution, women frequently become the symbol of political goals and of cultural identities. Their images assume political significance, defining and delineating political, religious and ethnic groups, thus gendering, whether explicitly or implicitly, these political and cultural projects. This tendency can be discerned in revolutionary processes worldwide, whether in Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Algeria or Iran.

In the case of Iran, the designation of woman as a cultural marker and the use of the body of woman as the location of national and ethical values can been seen in the writings of Ali Shariati, an intellectual who, though he died in 1997, is widely regarded as the 'ideologue' of the Revolution. Woman, for Shariati, represents "at once the greatest hope for and the greatest threat to revolutionary possibility" (Zohreh Sullivan 1998: 217). With this doctrine, gender became central to the construction of the Islamic political discourse upon which the Islamic Republic was founded, a discourse which in terms of gender "changed that which had been marginal, secondary, postponed, illegitimate, and discredited into that which was to be central, primary, immediate, and authentic" (Najmabadi 1998: 60). This emphasis on women's centrality to the Islamic Revolution should not, of course, be taken to be an unequivocally positive process. The

responsibility of being the symbol of a nation can be an uncomfortable burden. However, it does highlight the fact that since the Revolution, gender has been a highly contested strand of identity in Iran, one that has constantly demanded to be re-defined and negotiated anew.

Sullivan argues that immediately after the Revolution, the only acceptable woman in the Islamic state was "the Muslim woman who was the 'pillar of the family,' and who abided by all the laws laid down in the *shari'a*, who would now accept the misogynist gender coding prescribed for her by the new government's version of Islam" (1998: 233). It is important to note, nonetheless, that Khomeini and his co-revolutionaries insisted on women's political mobilization in the lead up to the Revolution and, once in power, encouraged girls' education and supported women's activities during the Iran-Iraq war (Keddie 2003: 292). Having played such an important role in the Revolution itself, women have been reluctant to renounce their political consciousness and women—middle-class women in particular—have increasingly acted to promote women's rights. Sullivan emphasises that in recent times women have not only begun to make their presence felt in politics, but also in the social, legal and wider political life of Iran through public debate in women's periodicals, through civic and social activism and through public office (Sullivan 1998: 234).

The Revolution and its aftermath created a problematic dynamic by putting women in unfamiliar roles in the extraordinary times of the Revolution but then largely expecting them to return to their familiar roles once 'normality' was restored. This trend can be traced in countless other examples of revolutionary processes, for example Algeria and Palestine. In her discussion of the role of women in the ongoing Palestinian *Intifada*, Nahla Abdo maintains that in "almost all liberation movements where women were actively involved, a general reversal of their roles became the fact of life after national liberation and the establishment of the nation state" (1994: 150). Although

Abdo's statement is contentious in its indiscriminateness, it calls attention to the uneasy relationship between women's rights and a nationalist or revolutionary agenda. In Iran, the situation was further complicated by the fact that women entered public space in spite of their adherence to conservative values but simultaneously and intriguingly to demonstrate their adherence to these same values. Thus women donned the *chador* in the Islamic Revolution in protest at the Pahlavi 'Wextoxification'[16] of Iranian society, seeking to reaffirm their authentic, Islamic, Iranian identity. The *chador* was the most obvious outward manifestation of a commitment to this ideology and the veiled woman thus became a charged symbol of the Revolution. The veil, in all its various forms, later became a central component of the political culture of the Islamic Republic as well as a significant element of the ideal of 'Islamic womanhood'.

Veiling

The veil is one of the most obvious manifestations of the debates surrounding women's identity in post-Revolution Iran. Since the Revolution, it has been compulsory for women to wear 'Islamic dress' consisting of, at the very least, a headscarf, a *manteau* or overcoat of some description and trousers or an ankle-length skirt, or alternatively an all-enveloping black *chador*. This law reversed Reza Shah's edict of 1936 in which, inspired by a trip to Turkey, women were ordered to un-veil and don Western-style clothing. This decision had been deeply unpopular among many women who saw going out

[16] The term *Gharbzadigi* which is variously translated as 'westitis' or 'westoxfication' was coined and popularized by Jalal Al-e Ahmad. He writes: I speak of being afflicted with 'westitis' the way of would speak of being afflicted with cholera. If this is not palatable, let us say it is akin to being stricken by heat or by cold. But it is not that either. It is something more on the order of being attacked by tongue worm. Have you ever seen how wheat rots? From within. The husk remains whole, but it is only an empty shell like the discarded chrysalis of a butterfly hanging from a tree. In any case, we are dealing with a sickness, a disease imported from abroad, and developed in an environment receptive to it. Let us discover the characteristics of this illness and its cause or causes and, if possible, find a cure. (quoted in Najmabadi 1998: 79)

unveiled as comparable to going out naked. The mandatory veiling of the Islamic Republic has, of course, also had many opponents. However, all too often the question of veiling in Iran has been treated in terms of the black and white progressivist politics of poststructuralist feminism whereby it is constructed solely in terms of the oppressive nature of the regime's attitudes towards women. It is, inevitably, a more complex question that this frame of reference would indicate.

It is impossible to ignore the veil in *Narges*. At no point whatsoever do any of the female characters appear in anything other than impeccable *hejab*, with not a wisp of hair showing, often in fact wearing two scarves, just to make sure. They wear the *hejab* out in the streets of Tehran, which is entirely consistent with the reality of life in Iran today. However, they also wear it at home when only with women which is not required. They wear it when they are sleeping alone, when they are sick in hospital and when they are washing their faces, either at home or in women's only bathrooms, all of which seem slightly ridiculous.

The artificial and contrived nature of the female characters' dress was duly noted by my informants, who found it both risible and laboured. Shireen explained that they have to show women wearing the *hejab* but some directors are more "delicate" that Cyrus Moghadam, who directed *Narges*, and make it seem more natural "so that you don't think, oh, this lady's going to bed in a scarf". She emphasised that although it is possible to show foreign women without the Islamic dress, for example in imported films that are shown on television, "for us [i.e. Iranian women] it is forbidden".

Shireen's reference to the differences in the portrayal of Iranian and foreign women highlights an interesting point. Though carefully chosen and strictly censored, foreign films are shown in Iran and the women in these films are rarely if ever veiled. Though many women in Iranian films *are* veiled, some are not and some of these films are screened in Iran. Iranian television broadcasts imported foreign dramas and films

and the women in these programmes are often shown unveiled. However, Iranian women in IRIB programmes are always depicted in strict Islamic dress. This re-emphasizes the designation of woman as a cultural marker and the corresponding use of the body of woman as the location of national and ethical values. That foreign women can be shown unveiled underlines the fact that Iranian women have been chosen as the location of *national* values which, in the Islamic Republic of Iran, are inevitably linked to questions of religion. In the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, the site of the 'social sickness' of the Pahlavi regime was located on women's bodies and the elimination of 'Westitis' from the culture of the new Islamic Republic translated into attacks against unveiled women and "the eventual imposition of the veil and an elaborate 'code of modesty'" (Najmabadi 1998: 60).

In doing this, however, the focus on the female body is intensified. One of the key concepts in the debate on veiling has been that of *'awra*. This literally means a weak or vulnerable spot but in the plural, *'awrat*, also means both male and female genitalia. *'Awra* is that which must be covered and protected because it is shameful to show it (Hoffman-Ladd 1987: 28). However, for a woman, *'awra* is more than simply her genitalia:

> [r]ather, Hadith insists that woman herself is *'awra*, and traditional exegetes such as al-Baydawi state that the entire body of the free woman is *'awra* - even her voice is *'awra* - and must be covered with the same care as the pudenda of men; for woman, like the concept of *'awra* itself is weak and vulnerable, and the exposure of any part of her to public view causes shame and embarrassment, not to mention the corruption of public morals. (Hoffman-Ladd 1987: 28)

This creates an interesting contradiction in the argument for why women should wear the *hejab*. On the one hand, it is to protect them and their honour, and by extension the honour of the men of their family and their whole family and ultimately their country, and on the other hand, they must veil because they pose a threat to society if they do not. This latter idea is expressed most clearly in the notion of *fitna*. In Islam,

woman is one of the most potent symbols of *fitna*, "the embodiment of destruction, the symbol of disorder, the polarization of the uncontrollable, the representative of the dangers of sexuality and its rampant disruptive potential" (Mernissi 1975: 130). Women are known as *mafatin*, the loci of *fitna*, a name that emphasizes the danger that female beauty holds for men and that paints woman as the aggressor that must be controlled and separated from man, the victim, to allow society to function as it should (Hoffman-Ladd 1987: 28). By covering the object of temptation with the *hejab*, *fitna* may be avoided. Thus the veil functions as a "'double shield', protecting women against society and protecting society against the 'inherent evil' of woman" (Grace 2004: 21).

I believe that the anxiety regarding the appearance of women and the obligation to show every woman on television as the ideal Islamic citizen reflects a sense that the definition and delineation of female identity is of greater urgency in Iran than that of male identity. The issue is less one of women *qua* women being threatening in general but of the need to safeguard the identity of Iranian women specifically. Hence foreign women can be shown unveiled because they pose no threat to the integrity of Iranian society. Seen in context of an Islamic Republic that was built in part on the consternation at Westoxification, the fear of Iranian/Islamic women becoming contaminated is understandably far more potent appointed as they were as the cultural markers of Iran.

The need to visually safeguard the Islamic ideal of woman appears so important that in *Narges* the rules regarding Islamic dress are enforced far beyond the requirements of actual Iranian society. The women in *Narges* do not dress in the way that their counterparts on the streets of Tehran really dress. Zohreh, for example, represents the middle-class urban elite. Throughout the programme she wears loose fitting, fairly shapeless *manteaus* with voluminous, tightly-folded *hejabs* that do not show a single strand of hair. Her real life equivalents, women similar to my informants, wear *hejabs* pushed so

far back on their head they are constantly in danger of losing them altogether. They wear daringly short skirts, which in Iran means mid-calf length, with knee-high boots. Their *manteaus* barely reach halfway down their thighs and are tightly-belted to show off their figures.[17] The depiction of women's dress in *Narges*, rather than reflecting the reality of women's dress today, in Tehran at least, demonstrates the Islamic ideal to which Iranian women should, in the eyes of the government, aspire.

The *hejab* and *chador* transform "the surface of Iranian women's bodies into part of the visual landscape of an Islamic city" (Varzi 2006: 124-5). These coverings have, however, also become a means by which a woman can differentiate herself from the unvarying Islamic visual landscape, as each individual interprets the laws in her own particular fashion, thus changing the appearance of the public space. The ways in which women transform the compulsory Islamic uniform mark the wearer within a framework of "social and cultural rules and types. Even in a place where political affiliation and class are supposed to be unitary, or at least appear to be that way through a dress code, women have found ways around the dress code to defy what it is supposed to represent: the deportment of good, middle-class Islamic citizens" (Varzi 2006: 125).

Under the Islamic Republic, Ziba Mir-Hosseini maintains that it is no longer enough to believe; this belief must be worn externally in the form of the *hejab* (1999: 3). Public piety began to take precedence over personal devotion and for women, the *hejab* was chosen as its most important marker. The reality of women's dress in Iran today, or at least in Tehran, is not represented in *Narges*. The attire of the female characters represents an ideal. One, however, to which none of my informants seemed to aspire.

[17] In this, it is interesting to note that Iran appears to be doing the exact opposite of what the vast majority of Egyptian media does. In Egyptian audio-visual culture (and even in official newspapers) a society that is 80-90 percent veiled by choice is shown as aggressively unveiled. Contradictory though these two representations may seem, in fact, they are both doing the same thing. They are simply promoting opposing ideals, Egypt seeking to portray its modern, national identity and denying the growing role of Islamism, Iran trying to enforce its Islamic identity, ignoring the ways in which its citizens flout its laws regarding clothing and the resistance to theocracy that this denotes.

The visual depiction of the ideal Iranian woman reveals a deeper concern with the ideal of Islamic and Iranian womanhood more generally.

The Islamic/Iranian Ideal of Womanhood

In her discussion of the redefinition of women's domesticity in Iran in the nineteenth century, Afsaneh Najmabadi refers to a book of parables written in 1876 by Mahmud ibn Yusuf called *Ta'dib al-atfal* [Children's Manners] which outlined good and bad character traits. Najmabadi describes these parables as being "thoroughly gendered" since those stories that feature little boys teach lessons about which characteristics are desirable for little boys, and those that feature little girls present the proper characteristics for little girls. The book contains the following story:

> A frivolous little girl, Kawkab, is disliked by everyone because she is undisciplined and shameless, laughs a great deal for no reason, opens her mouth in front of people and makes awful noises, runs around and pays no attention to others, does not greet people properly, talks nonsense, eavesdrops on others' conversations, and so forth. In contrast, the four-year-old exemplary girl, Khawrshid Khanum, is impeccably obedient and well-mannered. Everyone likes her; she gets up in the morning with her parents without a fuss, dresses herself up, cleans herself, performs her ablutions, and prays. She spends her whole day doing only good things, plays by herself contentedly, does not bother adults, does not meddle, is already in a Qur'anic school and can read the Qur'an and other texts, and does nothing without her mother's permission. The tale ends happily: Kawkab, despite her many defects, is a very smart girl and decides to become friends with Khawrshid Khanum and to learn everything from her. Kawkab reforms and becomes well liked. (in Najmabadi 1998: 97-8)

Despite the 120-year time difference in the two tales, the opposition set up between these two girls, Kawkab and Khawrshid Khanum, seems in many ways to mirror that established between Nasrin and Narges. Narges represents the ideal woman in every way. She respects her mother, seeking, and more importantly, heeding her advice. When her mother tells her that Ehsan is not an appropriate husband because he is divorced, she takes this to heart and abandons her hopes of marrying him even though

she is very much in love with him. Narges performs her prayers daily and reads the Qur'an on a regular basis, all the time wearing a white *chador*. In contrast to Nasrin, at the end of the serial Narges has married Ehsan, the man she loves (who turns out to have been entirely blameless in his divorce), lives in a comfortable apartment and has an interesting job. In contrast, Nasrin is headstrong, wilful and disobedient. She is shameless in her relationship with Behrooz, ignoring her mother and sister's concerns about his suitability as a husband. She lies and deceives her family, causing them, and ultimately herself, great unhappiness. She does not pray and does not wear the *chador*. She endures numerous trials and tribulations throughout the programme: she is forced to divorce her good-for-nothing husband and bring up their young daughter alone, with little means of support, living in the basement of Narges and Ehsan's house because she cannot afford a house of her own. However, by the end of the series Nasrin *has* come to realise the error of her ways and is trying to reform herself. We see her praying and wearing a *chador*. Although she is divorced, Nasrin is shown to be a loving and devoted mother, seeking work to support her daughter. She learns to live within her means and surrenders her dreams of wealth and privilege. Nasrin acknowledges all that Narges has done for her and tells Narges that she has always felt guilty in her presence, an implicit admission of Narges' moral superiority. Just as the parable of Kawkab and Khawrshid Khanum, an example of the popular culture of pre-Revolution Iran, demonstrates the qualities that the 'ideal' woman should aspire to, so too does *Narges*, its contemporary parallel. The programme makers present Narges as the feminine ideal and Nasrin as the salutary figure in need of reform and improvement. Just as Kawkab decides to learn from Khawrshid Khanum how to behave, so too does Nasrin.

Significantly, it was Nasrin who inspired the most sympathy among my informants. Shoukofeh remarked that she was a typical young girl who found herself in a difficult situation. Fatemeh, Nayereh and Banafsheh all agreed that she was a very

realistic, "regular" girl whose own actions created her problems and who was more realistic than Narges who was wiser than any human could ever be. Shireen too felt that Nasrin was more realistic than Narges. She argued that while Nasrin may have been crazy, she was more understandable. While Narges provides an ideal to which viewers can aspire, Nasrin offers the possibility of redemption and salvation to all.

There is, however, no guarantee that the viewers will interpret the construction of femininity offered by the producers as the ideal. It is crucial to make the distinction between "the subject positions that a text constructs, and the social subject who may or may not take these positions up" (Brunsdon 1995: 32). The fact that *Narges* offers a particular construction of a feminine gender paradigm and, by extension, men and women's roles in the family and in society, does not guarantee that the viewers will interpret them as such. Even then, this construction may well conflict with the way in which they understand gender within their own lives.

The general consensus among my informants on Narges' character was overwhelmingly positive. Shoukofeh said that she liked her because she felt a great sense of responsibility towards her family and she was very strong, straightforward and frank. She felt that Narges was a realistic character. Maryam told me that Narges seemed very kind, that she thought about others at all times and always sought to help them. She argued that Narges was a very positive character who could never be a negative person and that this was the main difference between her and Nasrin. Maryam also commented favourably on the fact that Narges sought her mother's advice on her relationship with Ehsan, in contrast to Nasrin's subterfuge in her relationship with Behrooz, and followed it, recognising that her mother was wiser in these things than she could be. Fatemeh and Nayereh thought that Narges was an excellent role model for Nasrin, not least because she could accurately predict each and every consequence of Nasrin's bad decisions. They noted approvingly her sense of responsibility towards her family and Nasrin in particular.

The emphasis in my informants' comments was on Narges' devotion to her family and her concern for others. The fact that she went out to work was seen through the lens of this devotion. Rather than being viewed as a positive step for Narges in and of itself, her work was directly linked to her relationship to her family: it was good *because* it allowed her to support her family.

The only person who said anything negative about Narges was Shireen. Shireen was not an avid fan of *Narges*, but she quite often watched it with her mother and had developed strong opinions about the programme and its characters. In contrast to my other informants, she complained that Narges was an extremely unrealistic character since no one could be that kind and good all the time. She felt that she was an implausible paragon of virtue and wished that the producers had introduced some flaws into Narges' character to make her more believable. In her criticisms of the characterisation of Narges, however, Shireen did not dispute that she *was* a positive character. She did not challenge the construction of what the desirable traits for women should be. The qualities displayed in Narges of loving one's family and privileging that above all other things, of respecting the advice of and acquiescing to the wishes of one's older and/or male relatives were still seen as positive traits: they were simply presented in excess in Narges. Despite her criticisms, she still interpreted the character of Narges as a representation of the (Islamic) ideal of womanhood.

Maryam, Shoukofeh, Fatemeh, Nayereh and Banafsheh all felt that the programme makers considered female role models to be more important than male role models, which was why there was no real male version of Narges (i.e. the ideal man). Although Ehsan could in many ways be seen to provide this character since he is appropriately pious, responsible and kind, his character is far less prominent than those of Narges, Nasrin or Shokat and considerably less complex or interesting. I would argue that this is because the significance attributed to women as cultural markers during the

Revolution endures. As vanguards of the Islamic Republic, the representation of the Islamic and Iranian ideal of womanhood is more important than its male equivalent.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that it takes it name from its central female character, *Narges* offers a picture of gender relations that is, at heart, patriarchal. It does this both through its structure and through its content. Although "soap operas" are generally categorized as being "women's television", *Narges* was popular amongst both men and women. I suggest that this was because the interpretation of gender that it offered reaffirmed the predominance of men in controlling the world beyond the home while allocating women jurisdiction over the sphere of the personal. Although the female characters of *Narges* are rarely shown as being truly *oppressed* by men, the scope of their influence is limited. Their dependence on men is further emphasized by the fact that even the strong female characters who largely seem to survive without any permanent or authoritative male figure in their lives, are as a result portrayed at crucial moments as lacking in essential cultural capital. The challenges to patriarchal power are, however, what provide the narrative drive throughout *Narges*.

While emphasizing the centrality of a patriarchal framework, *Narges* simultaneously underlined the importance of women as the location of the national and moral values of Iran. This is stressed visually by the depiction of the female characters in Islamic dress that far surpasses that of women on the actual streets of Tehran in its piety. The sartorial representation of the Islamic ideal is transposed to the character of Narges who embodies the model of Iranian (and Islamic) womanhood, one to which presumably

each of my (female) informants should aspire. Though my informants did not identify with her as a character, they recognised Narges as the 'ideal woman' in many ways, finding fault only in the fact that this level of perfection was unattainable. Thus in its portrayal of gender relations, *Narges* largely upholds the dominant patriarchy, familiar to my informants.

Chapter 3

Islam v. Iran

It is impossible to discuss the construction of identities in Iran without considering the role of Islam. In her book on youth and media in Iran, Roxanne Varzi argues that post-Khatami Iran is marked by a shift from an agenda of creating a religious national identity to one of establishing a national identity that is specifically Iranian. Varzi has an important point to make about the changing role of Islam in constructing Iranian identity, particularly in terms of the distinction between Islam as a private and personal faith and Islam as a public ideology shaping all aspects of people's lives and acting as the cornerstone of a sense of national identity. However, the notion that a specifically Iranian nationalism has overtaken Islam as the basis of collective identity in Iran should be approached with a certain degree of caution.

"Islamic" Identity in Iran

Islam has consistently been one of the central tenets of Iranian identity, both in terms of individuals and in creating what the 'imagined community' of Iran as a nation. The exact nature of the role of Islam in the construction of these identities has, however, been dynamic and variable. The biggest shift came with the Islamic Revolution of 1978/9, the

point at which Islam moved beyond the personal and cultural sphere and became the language in which the political grievances of the Iranian people were articulated.[18]

The Islamic Revolution revealed a profound identity crisis in Iran in which the Pahlavi processes of "cultural Westernization and desacralization were themselves felt to be part of the problem" (Sreberny & Mohammadi 1994: xviii). The Pahlavi monarchy had undertaken a rapid but uneven project of modernization which was imposed on a reluctant population. This process, which involved development that was heavily dependent on the West in conjunction with a highly repressive regime, seemed to threaten 'traditional' identities, most conspicuously that of Islam.

Islam came to Iran in the eighth century, and Shi'ism has dominated the country since its establishment as the state religion by the Safavids in the sixteenth century. The orthodox approaches to modernization, as instituted by Reza Shah Pahlavi and Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi,

> failed to comprehend and thus underestimated the power of traditional cultural, particularly religiously derived identities. The cultural crisis that contemporary modernization brings was also underestimated. While traditional allegiances may be fragmenting forces, they may also become powerful influences for national cohesion; a so-called primordial identity might actually share boundaries with the nation state identity and be a more popular basis of collective identity than the latter, as Shi'ism came to challenge the modernizing rhetorical of monarchical Iran. (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 11)

Islam served well as an example of a local cultural identity that had not been contaminated by foreign cultural values, and as such could be appropriated as a powerful basis for a national identity.

Talal Asad argues that a religious tradition, such as the "Twelver"[19] Shi'ism practised in Iran, is not a static object of transmission but rather a set of arguments

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[18] The slippage in terminology between the 'Iranian' and the 'Islamic' Revolution is indicative of the struggle around identity and 'naming the community' that was central to the revolutionary process. This identity crisis "was not a simple conflict between modernity and tradition but between a highly dependent and dictatorial process of modernization and a retraditionalizing rhetoric based on indigenous culture in which competing communicative structures offered different definitions and visions of the national community". (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 4)

[19] "Twelvers" are Shi'i Muslims who believe in twelve Imams, as distinct from Ismaili and Zaidi Shi'i Muslims, who believe in a different number of Imams or a different path of succession. "Twelver" Shi'is believe that the Twelfth Imam is in occultation and until his return as saviour, "the community awaits, suffering under the political rule of the

constructed over time (Al-Asad 1993). It can be called upon as an identity but as such must continue to be socially constructed. Though religion is often designated as a 'traditional' identity, as Juan Cole argues convincingly, a 'tradition' is always a dynamic and fluid social construct and "what is 'traditional' in a modern setting is in reality a core of earlier texts or doctrines wrapped in an unacknowledged set of innovations" (2002: 189). He maintains that an understanding of the adherence to Shi'ism as a primordial identity is of little value. Rather, it must be seen as a "socially constructed one into which individuals are mobilized in every generation or which they adopt for their own reasons" (Cole 2002: 2).

Islam was not simply a random element of 'traditional' culture chosen to serve as the basis for popular mobilization in the Revolution. Religion provided a nexus of authority, popular cultural practices and experimental solidarity which succeeded in mobilizing a previously non-participatory people (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 34).[20] In contemporary Iran, where that authority is increasingly questioned, stressing the importance of Islam in *Narges* appeared to be an attempt to remind Iranians of its significance in constructing their collective identity. As will become evident from my informants' responses to the depiction of Islam in *Narges*, this seemed to conflict with the role they saw for Islam in constructing their identities.

Although Islam did not face serious competition from any other religions in Iran as a source of shared identity, it was confronted by more modern ideologies such as nationalism and class analysis. None of these, however, had the "rootedness or emotional resonance" in Iran to which Islam could lay claim (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 36). However, a unified and unifying rhetoric was adopted for the Iranian Revolution that offered a community-binding discourse of religious identity

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unjust" (Gilsenan 1982: 56). Approximately 80% of Shi'i Muslims are Twelvers and they make up the largest Shi'i school of thought.

[20] Consequently Islam can be seen as what Pierre Bourdieu describes as a *habitus*—people's daily lived practices, which create ties of meaning and shared experience to form the basis of shared identities. Or as he writes in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, "structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" (1977: 72).

which, when coupled with the social authority of its articulators, was an ideology difficult to challenge or resist. The Pahlavi regime, even with the power of the state-run mass media behind it to broadcast its message, failed to make its modernist project of Iranian national identity a sufficiently strong collective identity to counter one that was seen as authentic and indigenous.

The motivations for the Revolution in Iran were many and complex, and it would be wrong to credit religion as the sole driving factor behind the uprising.[21] However, the dominant identity invoked by Khomeini to counter the toxic effects of the Pahlavi regime was that of the Islamic faithful, the community of believers, the best known and most intensely experienced 'imagined community' in Iran. In the time leading up to the Revolution, religion was "an inclusive language that reverberated basic, known, and valued identities that were widely shared, as Islamic beliefs and rituals provided the collective framework for the daily life of most Iranians" (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 107). However, the way people experienced this shared identity changed with the Revolution, as religious and political leaders reshaped Islam in Iran from being a relatively private religion to a public and politicized cultural identity. Religious identity changed "from being a taken-for-granted element to becoming a self-conscious and highly politicized identity, one competing against others" (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 192). This is true even more so today than in the first years of the Revolution. *Narges* was a means by which to reassert this identity in a form that, such was its popularity, could potentially impact upon the whole population.

[21] In fact, a majority of the revolutionaries were not religiously driven Khomeinists. They included bazaar artisans, shopkeepers, middle class intellectuals, teachers and left-leaning workers. The clerical networks and their supporters among the lower middle class did, however, play an extremely significant part in the Revolution and after the Shah's overthrow, it was they who had the organizational skills and ideological vision to take control of the state and create the theocracy they desired (Cole 2002: 12). Furthermore, it is certainly the case that the undermining of Iranian culture, and the substitution of what was seen as a superficial, commercial Western substitution for a dynamic cultural sphere in which Islam was central were key factors in the unrest that had developed in Iran. The loss of religious morality and thus indigenous identity were critical elements in Khomeini's populist rhetoric.

The "poisonous" effects of Pahlavi-era mass media were an explicit theme in the revolutionary discourse, as Khomeini claimed that the regime's media had been used to "drug people into acquiescence" and to suffocate indigenous Iranian culture (quoted in Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 96). The Iranian Revolution took place in a television era and the mass media, far from legitimizing an increasingly unpopular regime, as old-fashioned modernization theory of the kind displayed in works such as Daniel Lerner's *The Passing of Traditional Society: Modernizing the Middle East* (1958) might have predicted, in fact served only to reveal its lack of substance "beyond a mimetic Westernization" (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: xvii). In contrast, the mass media were destined to be major ideological weapons in the efforts of the post-Revolution regime to enforce the Islamization of Iran and emphasize and strengthen Islamic national identity. The National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) established under Mohammad Reza Shah was replaced by the Voice and Vision of the Islamic Republic (VIRT). The two core ideas which formed the criteria for television content were *Islam Rastin*, or 'pure Islam' and the notion of 'neither East nor West'. Much of the programming was directly religious in content, moralizing and didactic in tone and tedious in style. By transposing the modes of oral communication widespread in Iran, the mass media of the Islamic Republic very effectively supported and extended the pre-existing social legitimacy of the religious authorities, having failed to create such legitimacy for the Pahlavis.

Since the first years of the Islamic Republic, however, broadcasting in Iran has changed considerably. Religious programming still forms a significant part of the output of the IRIB but far less than previously. After the end of the Iran-Iraq war in September 1988, direct propaganda and religious broadcasting gave way to peacetime scheduling,

featuring serials such as *Tanzavaran* which pokes fun at Iranians in exile, didactic programmes which teach basic social skills and slap-stick comedy such as the Iranian version of *You've Been Framed*. 98% of the Iranian populace have access to at least terrestrial television broadcasts, and so the potential reach (and perhaps influence) of these television programmes is enormous.[22] A production such as *Narges* which an alleged 78% of the population watched can reach far greater numbers of people than any individual or newspaper.

Furthermore, the appeal (and thus potential impact) of *Narges* was almost certainly greater than that of the undisguised propaganda of the early years of the Islamic Republic. In their account of the use of media in Iran just after the Revolution, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi relate the words of the chief of news broadcasting describing the dilemmas facing news broadcasters after the Revolution. He admitted that if they were to use "direct methods of propaganda" in the news broadcasts, they might have a negative impact; "if we use Western methods, we might have a better impact. Most people in charge of our communication system are not familiar with this medium and don't know the methods that other countries, especially in the West, use" (1994: 184). His words articulate the notion that when ideological hegemony reveals itself in too heavy-handed a manner, it will inevitably create resistance.[23] Western media methods were seen to work better because their value orientations are presumed to be subtler, less readily perceived, and therefore more readily accepted as 'objective truth' rather than being seen as propaganda. Although under the Pahlavis the media had contributed to the deep identity crisis Iran experienced as a result of their rapid modernization project, and had precipitated a traditionalist backlash to 'protect' older 'traditional' identities, media were nonetheless to prove essential tools as the leaders of the Revolution sought

[22] With thanks to William Ward for bringing these statistics to my attention.
[23] This has been the logic of recent American "public diplomacy" initiatives. For further discussion of this see, for example, William A. Rugh, ed. 2006. *American encounters with Arabs: the "soft power" of US diplomacy in the Middle East.* Westport, CT: Praeger Security International.

to establish an 'Islamic state'. The government soon realised that radio and television are "far more subtle carriers of ideology than a state propaganda unit, because they infiltrate private space with an illusion of being value free, yet establish very powerful mythologies." (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi 1994: 15).

A programme such as *Narges* continues in this vein and, as an enormously popular entertainment show, provides an even subtler means by which to disseminate the ideals of the IRIB, and consequently and inevitably, those of the Islamic Republic than the religious polemics broadcast in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution. Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi argue that the Islamic Republic created a new generation of television producers that have been trained and socialised into acceptable modes of Islamic representations. It is impossible to judge solely on the basis of the serial itself whether the producers of *Narges* are regime acolytes who genuinely yearn to propagate the official line, or whether they are simply compelled to do so as the only way to get their programmes on television. In both my interviews with Shireen, she assured me that often directors of televisions programmes and films cannot get funding for their productions if they do not have a sufficiently strong religious element to them. She went on to say that any television programme or film that has been made by a 'religious' director, will always include numerous scenes of the characters praying or reading the Qur'an and the women will almost always be shown cloaked in a *chador*. I have no way of knowing whether this is true or merely Shireen's perception (or estimation of what she wanted a foreigner to hear) of how television production functions in Iran. I would not be surprised if this were the case. My interpretation of the way in which Islam is presented in *Narges* is nonetheless based substantially on my own evaluation of the programme and what the producers *appear* to be saying. It is entirely possible that given free rein these are not the messages that they would have chosen to communicate. They

are, however, the messages that were authorized, and on them that my informants' reactions, and thus my analysis, were based.

Islam in Public and in Private

The Iran of today is not the revolutionary Iran of 1978/9. The zeal that fired the overthrow of the Shah has largely dissipated. The Islamic Revolution can in some ways be seen to have failed, succeeding in its central goal of removing Shah from power but disappointing many in its failure to implement the regime of democracy and tolerance that its participants dreamed about. This should not lead to the assumption that Iran's people have become secularized, or that Islam is no longer a potent force in the construction of identities. It should, however, prompt a re-evaluation of the role of Islam in private, in contrast with religion in the public sphere. Programmes such as *Narges* facilitate this in two ways. Firstly, *Narges* gives a sense of the role that the regime *hopes* that Islam plays in Iranians' lives; and secondly, it created a forum for reactions to this depiction of religion and its relation to the reality of life in Iran today.

Roxanne Varzi uses the term "secular" to describe the gradual shift in the perception of Islam since the Revolution, a word that has misleading connotations of irreligiosity, of the profane and the purely temporal. Though her word choice is perhaps unfortunate, the context in which she uses it reveals an interesting and useful point about the attitudes of Iranians—in particular, young Iranians who have grown up exclusively under the Islamic Republic. Varzi argues that "the main characteristic of secular youths is not that they are religious but that they do not want public law to be interpreted through religious edicts. Indeed, they wish not to live in a religious republic but prefer to

live in a society in which there is a separation of church and state." (Varzi 2006: 13) Varzi argues that for many in Iran today, "it is no longer necessary to show their belief or to propagate it by joining the masses and thus religion has left the public sphere and has become privatized" (2006: 197). She continues, "as young people demand more autonomy, the survival of clerical rule will depend on the importance that youths place on the Islamic component of their identity" (ibid.). This becomes a particularly interesting argument in the context of *Narges* which depicted a version of Islam that was in many ways private and personal, but did so within a programme that was very much part of public culture.

Varzi's argument resonates with the reactions of some of my informants to the portrayal of religion in *Narges*, particularly that of Shireen. I first met Shireen in July 2006. We soon made friends and she would allow me to practise my faltering Persian on her while depressing me with her flawless English. We kept in touch by email and upon my return in January 2007 she effectively became my social secretary, dragging me off to whichever party she was going to each night. These were parties lit by a single candle—whether for atmosphere or for fear the police would hear and raid the apartment, I never really discovered. The music was often so loud that the speakers would leap off the table, propelled by the thumping bass. People routinely drank large quantities of bootleg whiskey and vodka, dancing the night away to a mixture of Justine Timberlake, Kylie Minogue and whichever Iranian pop and techno music they had managed to acquire. Shireen caroused enthusiastically at these occasions before slipping back into her *manteau* and headscarf and going home to the apartment where she lived with her parents.

I describe these parties to set Shireen's views on Islam in some kind of context. These parties provided an alternative public space in which the rigid injunctions against alcohol, Western music or dancing with men did not apply. Although I am sure that Shireen would describe herself as a Muslim, she certainly conforms to Varzi's description

and experience of the so-called "secular" youth of Iran. It is with this in mind that Shireen's views on Islam as represented in *Narges* must be analysed.

I interviewed Shireen twice: the first time was in August 2006 when I first encountered *Narges*, and the second was in January 2007 when I returned to Tehran to carry out the bulk of my fieldwork for this thesis. In both interviews, her strongest reaction was to my questions regarding the representation of Islam in the programme. In the initial interview, Shireen informed me:

> People are prejudiced in their religion in Iran. Villagers would not accept it (i.e. *Narges*) if they see her with her head uncovered or if she doesn't pray enough. On TV they should show 'we are Muslims, we are religious, this is part of our traditions, our customs'. I don't like it. It's a private thing - people don't need to show off with praying, to show off that they believe in God, that they have a religion. It's all about pretending on our television. Everyone knows that we are an Islamic country but they still want to show off. They [i.e. the government] want to do it - not us. The majority, when they see Narges, as the star, praying, they appreciate this. They [i.e. the programme makers] do this on purpose to make people think about their beliefs, as a kind of spur.

In the second interview, she returned to this theme.

> It is something personal. If you are a religious person, if you believe in something, it's for you, for yourself. It's in your heart and you do whatever you think is right or wrong. This is not something to be talked about or shown on television. Maybe for some people its necessary to teach them something about religion, to get them familiarised. But I think for us, for Iranians, reading all the time about religion, hearing about it all the time, everything is about religion, our whole culture is mixed with religion, you get to a point when you're exploding and you think, that's enough. For me, that's enough. I don't want to hear about religion all the time.

Shireen's comments about the portrayal of Islam were revealing about her perception of Islam and its role in Iranian society. I believe that her remarks were, in part, a reaction to the notion often bruited abroad that Iran is a regressive and medieval theocracy. By distancing herself from the politicized Islam that has defined Iran in the eyes of the world since the Revolution, she sought to disassociate herself from a regime with which she did not wish to be identified. Shireen's insistence on her desire for religion to be a private matter that should be entirely separate from the public sphere seemed tailored to local perceptions of outsiders' attitudes towards Iran. It can be viewed as the reverse of Herzfeld's notion of "cultural intimacy", that is "the recognition

of those aspects of cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but which nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality" (2005:3). Herzfeld argues that cultural intimacy can take the form of

> ostentatious displays of those alleged national traits—American folksiness, British 'muddling through,' Greek mercantile craftiness and sexual predation, or Israeli bluntness, to name just a few—that offer citizens a sense of defiant national pride in the face of a more formal or official morality and, sometimes, of official disapproval as well. These are the self-stereotypes that insiders express ostensibly at their own collective expense. (2005: 3)

In this case, Shireen's reaction was based on a reversal of this paradigm, one that rested on a sensitivity towards foreigners thinking that all Iranians are religious fanatics, hell-bent on exporting the Islamic Revolution to the rest of the world.

In his discussion of Herzfeld's notion of cultural intimacy with relation to public culture, Andrew Shryock argues that cultural intimacy "internalizes and renders essential the presence of an outside observer whose disapproval matters, whose judgments can be predicted, and (most important of all) whose opinion is vital in determining what value 'common sociality' can have" (2004: 10). I was that external observer for Shireen whose opinion, even it was an imagined opinion, mattered. As such, my very presence as a resident outsider contributed to the identities that flourish between the public and private spheres, "away from (but alert to) the gaze of external observers" which "are frequently at odds with the types of cultural representation that predominate more self-consciously (and comparatively) public formats" (Shryock 2004: 12). Shireen's attitude towards religion also displayed an element of class prejudice. As part of an urban, middle-class elite she was disparaging about the "villagers" whom she seemed to see as somewhat backward, overly religious and ill-educated. I believe that this too stems from the way in which she wanted me, as an external observer, to view her. She may well have thought the people whom she was describing were "prejudiced" in their understanding

and practice of Islam, but more important to her was that I not judge *her* to be similarly prejudiced.

Iraj also bemoaned the scenes of prayer that occurred "in every episode" of *Narges* before shrugging his shoulders and sighing, "Oh well, that's Iran". It was interesting to hear him say this because in fact the scenes of Narges praying occurred much less frequently than his remarks implied. I can see two possible reasons for Iraj's, presumably unintentional, exaggeration. One is that the scenes of Narges praying are so unusual that they dominate his memory of the serial. This seems unlikely because while Iranian television may have changed since the Revolution, it is certainly not unusual to see someone praying on television. Alternatively, and far more plausibly, his reaction derived from a position similar to Shireen's whereby my position as external observer in some way shaped his response on this topic. Iraj's reaction was predicated on the assumption that *I* thought that there was too much religion in *Narges*, that I felt that it was saturated with a religiosity to which he did not subscribe. By dismissing the depiction of Islam in *Narges* with the words "that's Iran", he, like Shireen, sought to distance himself from this perceived religiosity and establish an identity distinct from this by forestalling my presumed assumptions about him and his religious stance.

Shireen and Iraj's attitudes can be seen as part of what academics such as Varzi describe as a developing trend in Iran, particularly among younger people, towards a desire to de-emphasize Islam's role in the public sphere. That this is a complex and difficult goal is demonstrated in and through *Narges*. The fact that Islam was so clearly portrayed in *Narges*—something that formed at least for a limited time a very significant part of public culture—demonstrates the extent to which this has not yet happened. *Narges* showed the private observance of Islam (Narges praying alone in her bedroom), but it did so as part of the public sphere, which is to say a television programme broadcast throughout the whole of Iran. Those producing the television programmes, or

those determining which programmes are shown, continue to give Islam a prominent place within them. However, the manner in which the producers of *Narges* depicted religion practice, entirely based around personal devotion, suggests a tacit and hesitant acknowledgment of the growing desire for a greater separation of religion and state.

The desire to limit Islam's role in the public sphere has, however, inevitably affected its capacity to serve as the unifying ideology of the nation of Iran. In light of this, Varzi posits that in recent years there has been a greater focus on the construction of a specifically Iranian national identity as opposed to the generation of ideal Islamic citizens for whom Islam is the ultimate identity. Although I believe that this is a valid argument, the distinction between an Islamic identity and an Iranian identity is not as precise as Varzi's argument suggests, since Iranian national identity has always been bound up with Islam. The fact that Iran, in contrast to most other countries in the Middle East, is overwhelming Shi'i, combined with its Persian, as opposed to Arab, heritage, has resulted in a construction of national identity in which religion plays a critical part, a feature which has become more obvious since the Revolution.

Iranian Islam (its brand of Shi'ism) reinforces Iranian nationalism, confronting as it does a predominantly Sunni Arab world and Turkey, leading to a dualism of nation-state concepts mingled with Islamic forms which are not revivals of traditional structures but rather quite novel creations. As such, the emphasis on the Iranian nation as the vanguard of the Islamic Revolution has been crucial for the last 28 years. Zubaida contends that the project of the Islamic Republic "is to Islamize state, society and culture… Secularization has not been reversed, but disguised behind imposed symbols and empty rhetoric" (1997: 105). In this way, religion is brought into all forms of public discourse, "rival justifications, denunciations, and claims to legitimacy are made with appeal to religious formulae" (Zubaida 1997: 111). With this in mind, Varzi's claim that the emphasis in post-Khatami Iran has been on building a distinctly Iranian national

identity as opposed to an Islamic one becomes less straightforward since it implies that the two concepts are easily divisible when they are clearly not.

National Identity and Iran's Nuclear Ambitions

Varzi is, however, right to contend that the assertion of a truly *national* identity, predicated on the Iranian nation-state, has become increasingly important in recent times, perhaps to compensate for the increasing contestation of the role of Islam. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the debate on Iran's right to nuclear power.[24] Its nuclear programme is now the principal source of conflict between Iran and the international community, in particular the United States. As such, Iran's right to nuclear power has also proved to be perhaps the most effective rallying cry for Ahmedinejad's regime. Ahmedinejad has disappointed his voters on many of his electoral pledges and as a result his popularity has dwindled considerably. However, each time the American administration or the United Nations denounces Iran's attempts to develop nuclear power, for what it claims are entirely peaceful purposes, the Iranian President experiences a surge in his approval ratings. Iran's right to develop nuclear technology has come to symbolise its national sovereignty and independence and is thus linked to its sense of national identity. As other countries, notably America, have opposed Iran's nuclear programme, it has come to represent an important focus for the 'imagined community' of the nation.

[24] Iran has had nuclear ambitions since the 1960s when Mohammad Reza Shah obtained nuclear technology from the Americans and began building nuclear reactor at Bushehr. After the Revolution, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) declared its intent to aid Iran in its development of nuclear power. The IAEA was, however, forced to withdraw this support under pressure from the United States. Between 1984 and 1988 the Bushehr nuclear reactors were badly damaged by Iraqi air strikes, bringing the Iranian nuclear programme to a standstill. In light of the economic sanctions imposed by the United States, few were willing to come to Iran's aid 1990 when it tried to re-build the reactors. It was not, however, until August 2002 and the revelation by Alireza Jafarzadeh, an Iranian dissident, that Iran had two, previously unknown, nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak, that the issue became one of international urgency.

Given the incessant debate around the subject, it is perhaps unsurprising that the nuclear issue made an appearance in *Narges*. The issue of nuclear power was somewhat clumsily injected into the narrative. Ehsan and his colleague Mansour are in charge of a project to explore Iran's energy needs and how to meet them. They write reports and give presentations on topics such as "How to save energy". Mansour visits some kind of pre-Revolution energy plant where he explains to the men working there that America helped Iran to build factories such as these and then siphoned off the benefits. He tells them proudly that after the Revolution, the Americans thought that the Iranians would not be able to run it buy themselves but that they proved them wrong and successfully took charge of the power plant.[25] He then goes on to state: "The success of getting nuclear energy by young Iranian scientists is our national pride" before adding "now it is time for the East to rise - we need a scientific movement". These scenes were diegetically completely unnecessary and those in the power plant were utterly incongruous.

All my informants had picked up on this obviously calculated introduction of the nuclear issue, although only two, Maryam and Iraj, specifically remembered Mansour's speech, and their reactions were remarkably uniform. They all saw it as wholly artificial, a ploy on behalf of the government to promote its own agenda. When commenting on Mansour's nuclear sermon, Maryam said: "It [i.e. the speech] didn't suit the serial - it was just a kind of advertisement. They just wanted to tell this to people to make them wise. It's very boring for everyone. Everyone said: 'What's that? It does not relate to any of the other parts of the serial.' Everybody knew that it was just a kind of advertisement." Soheila too described the portrayal of the nuclear issue as "somehow like advertising. Whenever I watched those parts where they were trying to explain how gas and energy

[25] The portrayal of sheer competence as a rhetoric against colonialism is reminiscent of the 1996 Egyptian film *Nasser 56* (a depiction of the nationalization of the Suez canal and ensuing Tripartite Aggression). Much of the narrative simply sought to demonstrate that Egyptians were competent to run the canal, despite the strident claims of foreigners to the contrary.

are produced and how we must take care about consuming gas, I didn't like those parts. It was a TV programme. It was a story that tried to entertain people." Fatemeh, Nayereh and Banafsheh did not remember Mansour's homily either but explained this by saying: "It's not important for us - we didn't listen. We didn't listen to the message."

Of all my informants, Alireza had the most positive reaction to the issue itself, although his reaction to its appearance in *Narges* was similar to that of the others:

> Having nuclear power for a country, it doesn't matter which country, is useful. I don't know if it is economical but it affects your [i.e. the country's] development. But it is not necessary in a TV serial. If they have done this, they want to trigger the population's thought to support the government in its opinion and in what it is faced with. The government needs support from the people so it is doing this. The government controls what is put in TV serials. They control it - they are trying to do this but they are not qualified to do it. They are not qualified in anything.

Despite the fact that the nuclear issue appears to unite the nation, my informants resented its inclusion in what they essentially saw as a piece of entertainment. Iran has long had a popular and powerful rhetoric of anti-imperialism which has railed against both foreign intervention in Iranian political affairs and against the cultural penetration that Iranians have often understood as motivated to undermine their sense of self. It is in the context of this anti-imperial discourse that Iran's nuclear ambitions were presented in *Narges*. This did not, however, appear to resonate with my informants. They interpreted this aspect of the storyline as inappropriate and unwelcome propaganda. Although it is ostensibly a popular issue behind which the entire country can rally, the sense from my informants was one of weariness and cynicism regarding their government's motives. Mansour's lecture and his counsel at the plant about the benefits of nuclear energy did not inspire the nationalist sentiment that seemed to be the programme's intention. While Alireza recognised the potential value of nuclear energy, even he resented its intrusion into the recreational realm.

Thus while people may well believe that Iran has the right to pursue its nuclear ambitions, and the government may strive to unite the population around this issue in

terms of opposition to what is presented as the imperial determination of America and others to infringe upon Iran's sovereignty, in *Narges* at least, the subject did not inspire the desired reaction. Just as Shireen resented the explicit portrayal of religion, so too did the others resent the inclusion of a story line that prominently and overtly promoted the government's agenda on nuclear power. In a country in which the government constantly invades people's lives and in which society is highly politicized, the encroachment of politics into what was regarded as purely entertainment was unpopular. I believe that as with the response to the portrayal of Islam, this reflects a desire for a more clearly delineated boundary between the public and private spheres.

Conclusion

The portrayal of Islam in *Narges* provoked the strongest reactions from Shireen and Iraj who, of my informants, most closely conform to Varzi's notion of the "secular youths" of contemporary Iran. Their responses, which do not indicate a renunciation of Islam in a personal sense or a repudiation of it as a religious system for their private lives, suggest a growing sense of doubt of its role in the public sphere. The Islam depicted in *Narges* was solely that of the private sphere but a television programme, by its nature, brings its subject matter into the public domain, thus blurring the boundary between the two. Just as Islam has been continually rearticulated throughout history as a strand of Iranian identity, people such as Iraj and Shireen, who have lived their whole lives under the Islamic regime but did not participate in its creation, are now seeking to renegotiate its role in their lives.

The inclusion of Iran's nuclear ambitions in *Narges* as a means by which to present a distinct sense of nationalism suggests an attempt on the part of the programme's producers to find another theme around which to build a collective public identity, that of resistance to the perceived imperialism of the West. This message did not, however, seem to resonate with my informants. Rather they considered these sections to be unnecessary and awkward intrusions of government policy into their private recreation. These responses should be seen in the context of a sensitivity to the perceptions of an external observer, but their reactions to both themes suggest a preoccupation with the demarcation of the public and private spheres that is, at present, in Iran, indistinct at best.

Chapter 4

The Saint and the Sinner: Narges *and its stars*

Browsing any one of the many news-stands on the streets of Tehran over the summer, the plethora of magazines and newspapers that featured *Narges*, offering a veritable smorgasbord of tabloid tittle-tattle, further attested to its popularity and impact. These publications offered interviews with the stars, the stars' own analyses of and reactions to the characters in *Narges*, speculation about plot developments and responses to the death of Poupak Goldareh. Several months after it concluded, the story broke of a sex tape featuring one of the stars of *Narges*, Zahra Amira Ebrahimi. The story received considerable coverage on the Internet and a certain amount in the international press. The Iranian media also reported the story, although they did so somewhat obliquely.[26] *Narges'* stars are a key component in the analysis of its role in the construction of identities around it.

As in any film, soap opera or television series, the stars of *Narges* played a crucial part in its success. Only one, however, Hassan Pourshirazi who played Shokat, was a significant star before *Narges*. Though Poupak Goldareh had featured in several television serials and films, such as *Khane-e Daria* (The House of the Sea), prior to this, it was *Narges* and her death halfway through filming it that established her status as a true star. The celebrity of the others, such as Mehdi Solouki (Behrooz), Atefeh Nouri (Nasrin) and Setareh Eskandari (Narges II), materialized as a result of their roles in

[26] I was not in Iran at the time that the scandal broke and so was unable to follow the coverage in the Iranian press but supposedly it was reported. However, the Iranian newspapers apparently avoided referring directly to the affair but rather talked about it in general terms, leaving out the details of those involved.

Narges. The emergence of these stars and the construction of their celebrity are essential elements in the construction of identities in and through *Narges*.

Horkheimer and Adorno argue in "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" that "modern entertainment and media corporations use stardom and celebrity to pacify the masses. Essentially, they believe that the culture industries use stars as vehicles mainly to create false hopes of upward social mobility and meaningful social change among audience members" (Hinerman 2001: 194). This pessimistic view of popular culture, the media and stardom dominated critical theory after the end of World War II with critics arguing that the "consequences of such superficiality and sensationalism include the failure of proper moral judgements, and generally reveal a global breakdown in authority and virtue" (Hinerman 2001: 195).

In conjunction with the broader re-evaluation of the role of popular culture and mass media in society, recent work has led to new conceptualizations of stardom. Though there are still those who regard stardom and celebrities in a very negative light, a more nuanced approach to this phenomenon has emerged. As the very nature of stardom and celebrity has altered, so too has our understanding of it. While it is clear that fame is not unique to the contemporary world—'celebrities' in one form or another have always existed—what *has* changed is "the manner by which symbolic forms are produced and the contexts in which they are consumed" (Hinerman 2001: 197). As pointed as out earlier with relation to the nature of television and its use in examining the construction of identities, any analysis of stars must focus on "their structured polysemy, that is, the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced" (Dyer 1998: 3).

This chapter will begin by examining the ways in which the stars of *Narges* were treated in the press as well as my informants' reactions to and opinions of those in the

serial. It will then go on to examine the cases of two of the stars of *Narges* to consider two aspects of stardom in Iran more specifically: firstly, the role of Shi'i martyrology in the reactions to stars in Iran with relation to Poupak Goldareh; and secondly, the question of scandal and Iranian celebrity with relation to Zahra Amir Ebrahimi.

Narges *and the Star System*

Though many of the theoretical aspects of the discourse of stardom apply to stars of all forms—film stars, pop stars, sports stars—it is important to note at the outset that the stars of *Narges* are stars of a dramatic television serial comparable to a soap opera. They are, therefore, quite different from other stars in certain respects. Marshall contends that whereas the film celebrity "plays with aura through the construction of distance, the television celebrity is configured around conceptions of familiarity" (Marshall 1997: 119). He goes on to argue that the film celebrity maintains an aura of distinction, whereas that of the television star is continually disrupted and therefore lessened. The reasons for this disruption are, in his view, threefold: the domestic, as opposed to cinematic, nature of television viewing; the close affinity of the television celebrity with the organization and perpetration of consumer capitalism; and the fracturing of continuity and integrity of character that occurs as a result of the punctuation of programmes with advertisements (1997: 121).

Marshall's study is, however, exclusively concerned with celebrity in the Western world, specifically in the United States. I would argue that in Iran the status of television stars is somewhat different. Iranian cinema is renowned the world over. However, many of the films that receive such critical acclaim internationally are never shown in

Iran. A limited number of Iranian films and carefully chosen and censored foreign imports are screened in cinemas to a limited audience. Iranians' exposure to film stars, both foreign and domestic, is far more restricted, therefore, than that of audiences in countries such as America.

In contrast, approximately 98% of households in Iran own a television set and so the population's awareness of and familiarity with television stars is much greater than that of their cinematic counterparts. Any sense, therefore, that their glamour or "aura of distinction" might be eroded by the domestic context in which they are generally viewed, is countermanded by their powerful and all-pervasive presence in the print media and their constant appearance on television. Although *Narges* was broken up by commercial breaks, this does not appear to be a significant factor in deconstructing the stars' celebrity status. It afforded time for those watching to talk about what had happened in the section before the break and to speculate about what might happen next. Looking through the magazines that I bought in Iran when *Narges* was being broadcast, its stars appeared on the front covers with far greater regularity than any Iranian or international film stars, and the occurrence of articles about or interviews with them was far higher.

The meaning of stardom in Iranian serials perhaps more closely mirrors that of American daytime "soap operas" than any other form of Western television. In his chapter ""I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV": Characters, actors and acting in television soap opera", Jeremy Butler agues that daytime soap opera has no true "star system". Rather there is a "feeble system of media texts, a circumscribed intertextuality" in which individual actors are "more or less equally prominent/obscure in the multitudinous narrative lines" (1995: 147). There is no sense of a 'star vehicle' and thus "while the cinema sells narrative images of stars, the soap opera sells solely the characters as the narrative, thus de-emphasizing the importance of actors as performers or 'stars'" (Butler 1995: 147). This is largely true in *Narges* - no single actor in the serial had the

celebrity cachet to carry the programme alone and *Narges* was in no way a 'star vehicle' that showcased any one single actor.

Butler points out that in press coverage of soap operas it is assumed that "no soap opera 'star' is significant enough to be recognized wholly outside of the context of his/her character" and so the *character* is publicized as much as the actor. When it comes to interviews with soap opera stars, interviewers always ask how he or she compares with his or her character. This is, of course, often true of interviews with film stars as well but, as Butler argues:

> the soap opera actor differs because he/she has little or no star image outside of the character he/she plays. The intertextuality of the film star - his/her appearance in promotion, publicity, previous films, previous interviews/reviews - cannot be presumed for the soap opera star. Each magazine article must first *create* a soap actor's star image - his/her image outside of the context of the character he/she plays - and, having first separated image and character, must then compare/contrast that star image with that character. (1995: 148)

This holds true for the media's treatment of *Narges* in which the emphasis is placed on the correlation between the actors as individuals and the characters that they play. The relationship between the actors and their characters in *Narges* is an important framework within to explore the way in which identities are constructed.

As audiences engage repeatedly with stars as sense of what John Thompson describes as "non-reciprocal intimacy" develops whereby fans feel that they know 'what a star is really like', despite the fact that this knowledge is based on a flow of entirely one-way communication. As a result of this modern media stars "have two distinct personae: a public, external persona (made up of physical appearances and images), and a private, internal persona (made up of the star's 'real' feelings, thoughts, and private concerns). A major fascination for fans is the blurring and narrativizing of the space between the public and private domains of celebrity" (Hinerman 2001: 207). The ambiguity that lurks around this public/private nexus raises questions of 'authenticity' and how the relationship between the star and the characters they play is understood.

In his book, *Stars*, Richard Dyer argues that this relationship between stars and the characters they portray and the way in which the star image is used to construct these characters can be seen in terms of three 'fits': selective, perfect or problematic. If it is selective, a situation develops whereby "from the structured polysemy of the star's image certain meanings are selected in accord with the overriding conception of the character" (1998: 127). Alternatively, if it is a perfect fit "all the aspects of a star's image fit with all the traits of a character" (Dyer 1998: 129). Finally if there is a problematic fit, the character of the star is diametrically opposed to their onscreen persona (Dyer 1998: 129-30). The relationships between the stars of *Narges* and their characters offer examples of all three of these categories: the relationship between Mehdi Solouki and Behrooz is a selective fit, that between Poupak Goldareh and the character of Narges forms a perfect fit, and the relationships between Atafeh Nouri and Hassan Pourshirazi and Nasrin and Mahmoud Shokat respectively are shown as highly problematic fits.

Butler argues that although one rarely reads of instances in which the soap opera press reports that an actor's life (i.e. his/her public image) departs totally from that of the character, this happens most frequently when actors are playing villains and "do not wish to be associated with their character's actions" (1995: 150). This is certainly true in the case of Hassan Pourshirazi. The character of Shokat is depicted as a dictatorial patriarch who thinks nothing of betraying his family by taking a second wife without consulting Azam, his first wife and the mother of his children. Although patriarchy still has an important role in family life and in male-female relations in Iran, it is clear from the interviews with Pourshirazi that he is keen to distance himself from the more unpleasant aspects of the character of Shokat. In one interview with Pourshirazi, he argues that the character of Shokat "is not negative, he is necessary", stressing the fact that the plot would not hold together without his character. In doing this, he does not defend Shokat's actions; he emphasizes their justification in terms of the diegetic framework. In

this way, he is able to perverse the distance between his 'real' personality and that of the character that he plays in *Narges*, while drawing attention to the necessity of his character.

Nasrin, though perhaps not meant to be an object of such vilification as Shokat, certainly does not constitute any kind of role model or ideal for emulation. Many of her actions are highly reprehensible. She deceives her family, embarks upon an illicit love affair and almost has an abortion, and consequently the actress Atafeh Nouri appears eager to disassociate herself from Nasrin's character. In an article entitled "Atafeh Nouri bears no resemblance to Nasrin", the differences between the actress and the character that she plays are emphasized. According to the article, Nouri specializes in playing unbalanced young girls, to whom she is in no way similar, particularly highlighting the fact that, in contrast to the actress, the character of Nasrin has no morals. In another interview she underlines the fact that she is playing a role that is antithetical to her own character but pleads with the viewers not to judge Nasrin because she will change. When the interviewer asks: "You are completely the opposite of Nasrin so how did you get close to the character?", Nouri responds that "it was very hard at first", presumably because they are such polar opposites, but that she worked hard at getting inside the character.

Mehdi Solouki as Behrooz embodies the selective fit. In one article he implores the readers to be patient with Behrooz because eventually "he will grow up", claiming that at times he too decides things overly quickly, as Behrooz does. Here he identifies with the character, excusing his bad behaviour with the defence that he is young. In this way, he seems to be trying to redeem Behrooz with his own character. However, in a different interview with Mehdi Solouki, he declares that "marriage is the most important decision of your life", clearly differentiating himself from the headstrong and rebellious character that he plays in *Narges*.

In Poupak Goldareh we find an example of the perfect fit. From the print media coverage of *Narges*, it is clear that Goldareh was invested with all the qualities that were so admired in Narges - purity, holiness, selflessness and kindness and Goldareh's untimely death in a car accident only served to augment the perception of these qualities. Immediately before the final episode in which Goldareh appeared, a short programme devoted to the actress was screened in which her colleagues and friends paid tribute to her. In this, they emphasized Goldareh's total immersion in the character of Narges, quoting a note she wrote in which she declared: "My love is Narges and her family. I am living with them. I live and breathe for the sake of Narges". Hamid Zendegani, who played Majid, reminisced: "When I watch the serial and I see Poupak's expression, especially when she's praying, I remember my own expression when I was in the hospital praying for her recovery. I had seen her praying at home before. She wanted to talk to God with sincerity". Through these kinds of recollections, the similarities between Goldareh and Narges are stressed and the perfect fit is emphasized. This is further stressed when Cyrus Moghaddam, the director, explains that when casting *Narges*, he chose Goldareh because he felt that she "was the character that I had imagined".

The selective/perfect/problematic typology emphasizes the way in which stardom can be used by individuals as a "stabilizing anchor" for the construction of identities in a world in which "modernity has loosened our sense of self" (Hinerman 2001: 209). It is in stardom, Hinerman maintains, that "we meet, non-reciprocally, the 'faces' who help us to form our social and personal identities" (ibid.). The emphasis on the perfect fit between Poupak Goldareh and Narges serves to highlight the 'ideal' of the Islamic citizen to which the viewers of *Narges* should aspire. In contrast, Hassan Pourshirazi's attempts to distance himself from the character he played functions to underline the undesirable nature of Shokat's character. By stressing the similarities between the 'real' Goldareh and Narges, and the disparities between Solouki and

Behrooz, Nouri and Nasrin and Pourshirazi and Shokat, the mediated discourse surrounding these stars is instrumental in the creation of the 'ideals' that act as anchors in the construction of identities.

From Princess Diana…

Poupak Goldareh played the role of Narges for the first 37 episodes of the serial. At this point during filming, she was involved in a car crash in northern Tehran which resulted in her falling into a coma. After lying in a coma for eight months, she died. Filming of Narges was suspended for several months in the hope that Goldareh would recover sufficiently to continue in her role. However, as it became clear that this was unlikely to happen, the programme's producers began searching for a replacement. This they found in the form of Setareh Eskandari who played Narges for the remaining 32 episodes.

The reaction to the death of Poupak Goldareh was one of the first indicators to me of the significance of *Narges* in Iran. On a visit to Beheste Zahra, the national cemetery in Tehran in which Imam Khomeini's tomb is located, I noticed a large crowd of people gathered around a grave in the 'Poets' Corner'. The crowd seemed too big and too diverse to belong to a single family and so I edged closer to see whose grave it was. The gravestone was piled high with red and yellow flowers and the fragrance of the rose water splashed over the stone enveloped the mourners like a cloud. In fact, there were so many flowers covering the grave that I was unable to see the name of its occupant. Fortunately, at this point an Iranian friend who had accompanied me to the cemetery asked one of those standing on the periphery of the crowd whose grave they were visiting. The woman informed her that it was that of Poupak Goldareh, the star of

Narges who had been so tragically killed the year before and that many people liked to visit her grave.

Even in today's celebrity-obsessed world, this 'pilgrimage' of significant numbers of people to the grave of the recently dead television star seems noteworthy. This kind of response to the death of a celebrity is reminiscent of the reactions in Britain to the death of Princess Diana in 1997, a similar figure as an attractive young woman believed to have died before her time. The grief in these cases is not based on the loss of a loved one with whom one has been intimately, or even superficially, acquainted. It is the loss of a public figure whose image and character are filtered through, and to a large extent created by, the media. Though not a phenomenon unique to Iran, the Iranian public outpouring of grief for Goldareh, a figure known solely through mediated experiences, can be better understood if analysed against the background of Iranian Shi'ism in which the notion of the martyr is a key factor.

Yann Richard argues that in Shi'ism, the dead are not simply honoured; death and martyrdom form a focal point of Shi'i devotions (1995: 1). In the aftermath of the Revolution and with the onset of the Iran-Iraq war, martyrdom became a driving force behind nation-state formation in the early years of the Islamic Republic. In the period immediately following the Revolution, as Khomeini and the religious Right sought to consolidate their power, "the new Islamic cultural producers of the state began to construct an Islamic republic with a very specific emphasis on the mystical notion of bi-khodi, self-annihilation, and *shahadat*, martyrdom, that had been carried over from the revolution days and was fast becoming a precursor to Islamic citizenship" (Varzi 2006: 6). Martyrdom was thus woven into the very fabric of the Islamic Republic.

Walking the streets of Tehran today, the evidence of this emphasis on martyrdom is immediately apparent. Christopher de Bellaigue describes asking for directions to a friend's house on Martyr Khoshbakht Alley: "Well, you go down Martyr

Abbasian Street, turn right into Martyr Araki Street, and then turn left immediately after the Martyr Paki General Hospital…" (2004: 45). Iran's highways and byways map the transformation of Tehran into an Islamic revolutionary space where martyrdom became state policy. Not only do the streets commemorate martyr upon martyr, their likenesses adorn buildings everywhere in the form of posters and murals, gazing down upon the city as its citizens go about their daily business. These pictures are essential to discourse of martyrdom: "Martyrdom is meaningless without memorialization, and memorialization is not possible without a photograph" (Varzi` 2006: 62). They play a key role in bringing death into everyday life by introducing these images into the lives of people who never knew or ever saw the dead martyr. In this way, martyrdom has become a 'mediated experience' in Iran, its presence seeping into the lived reality of daily life, but without the necessity of first-hand experience.

The discourse of martyrdom is thus not confined to distant memories or religious rituals; it has a far more immediate presence. David Pinault emphasizes this sense of immediacy in the experience of martyrdom among Shi'is in Hyderabad. When observing the remembrance of the martyrdom of Hussein at Karbala, he writes that "Husain's death is no historical datum from the remote past" (1992: 169) - it is lived every year at Ashura. From the accounts of writers such as Christopher de Bellaigue, it is clear that the martyrdom of Hussein also has great resonance for Iranian Shi'is, beyond mere historical commemoration.[27] However, by using martyrdom as one of the key tropes in the creation of the Islamic republic, Khomeini "allowed the people to experience martyrdom outside of its historic moment" (Varzi 2006: 82) and enabled it to permeate through all levels of the new Islamic Republic.

With this dissemination of martyrdom as one of the markers of identity within Iranian society came too a related sense of 'saintliness'. Yann Richard refers only to

[27] See Christopher de Bellaigue. 2004. *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs*. London: HarperCollins.

Khomeini in his discussion of 'saintliness' but I would argue that the responses to Goldareh's death seem to indicate that she too had been imbued with a comparable aura of piety, righteousness and holiness which conform very closely to the way in which martyrs are treated in Iran.[28] Clearly Goldareh was not literally a martyr. She did not die in the cause of Islam or in defence of the Islamic Republic of Islam. She was not killed for her beliefs. She did not give her life for others. However, the omnipresence of the discourse of martyrdom in Iranian society creates a framework in she appeared to be treated in a manner that at least resonates with the treatment of martyrs. The integration of Goldareh, who not only was not a martyr in the literal sense but also was an actress, a profession that potentially embodies so many qualities so contrary with the notion of the martyr, into this discourse is remarkable.

The newspaper coverage of *Narges* included numerous articles about Goldareh. Obviously there could be no interviews with the star and so instead they included interviews with her co-stars discussing their feelings about her, interviews with her husband and her parents and articles consisting of letters that members of the public had written about her. These articles had headlines such as: "Poupak has become and must remain a legend", "Poupak came to me in my dreams clad in a white *chador*" and "Poupak Goldareh had a soaring beauty" and there were numerous entitled "Memories of Poupak". The article headed "Poupak came to me in my dreams in a white *chador*" was an interview with Setareh Eskandari, the actress who replaced Poupak, in which she discussed her feelings about taking over the role of Narges in the circumstances. Eskandari explained that she had sought Goldareh's permission before accepting the part. She went to the hospital where Goldareh lay in a coma, poured out her heart to her and some days later Goldareh appeared to her in her sleep, wearing a white *chador*, to give

[28] The Shi'i sense of 'saintliness' also resonates with concepts of *baraka* (broadly speaking the free gift of blessing by God) shared by Sunnis or indeed a wider sense of Islamic charisma.

her blessing to Eskandari's taking the role.[29] Eskandari explains to the interviewer that Goldareh continued to appear to her in her dreams and approved of Eskandari playing Narges in the remaining episodes. The final questions in the interview were: "How would you like to die?" and "What would you like to be written on your gravestone?", questions which do not crop up with great frequency in *Teen Magazine* or *Just Seventeen*. Eskandari answered that she would prefer to die in a meteor collision, so that everyone would die together and no one would suffer alone. She did not specify exactly what she would like as her epitaph but said that she would like those who visited her grave to bring a little lantern to create a portal of light through which she could look back onto the happy, crowded world of the living.

Eskandari's references to Goldareh's appearance in her dreams confer upon her a life beyond the grave. Her own answer about looking back to the world of the living seems to confirm her belief in some kind of afterlife where Goldareh presumably now resides. Paradise is an essential trope in the discourse of martyrdom and Eskandari's allusions to Goldareh's contact from beyond the grave reaffirm her presence there.

When talking to Maryam about why Goldareh had become so popular and why there appeared to have been such a strong public reaction to her death, her immediate response was to tell me: "When somebody dies, they become more popular. This is the custom in Iran. Maybe it happens more in Iran than in other countries because they don't do anything for people when they are alive. After they die, they try to talk about them all the time." Similarly, Fatemeh and Nayereh, two girls in their twenties, told me firmly that Goldareh's death was really the only reason that she had become so popular and famous: were she alive today, they insisted, she would not be such a celebrity. Their

[29] In his description of the days preceding the Revolution, Michael Fischer describes how men went into the streets dressed in white shrouds "signifying their willingness to be martyred" (2003: 204). The image of Poupak in a white *chador* therefore not only invokes a sense of holiness and purity, but also has clear associations with the revolutionary discourse of martyrdom.

reactions suggest that Goldareh's fame was largely a result of her untimely death, death itself conferring her stardom upon her.

In their remarks, they all sound at least quasi-cynical about the martyr complex—not, presumably, the sort of attitude encouraged by the government. Perhaps the all-pervasiveness of the discourse of martyrdom has rendered it a less compelling narrative. The notion of reverse "cultural intimacy" will be discussed a greater length in the next section but it is worth noting at this stage. Martyrdom is strongly inscribed in the world's perception of Iran, largely as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, but my informants' remarks suggest a weariness with this image of Iran, an image from which they seek to distance themselves. The press, and *Narges* itself, presented Poupak Goldareh and her death in such as way as to confer the image of the martyr upon her, perhaps in an attempt to revitalise a discourse that though undoubtedly still powerful, is, in relation to the state, less influential than previously. Their reactions represent a desire, replicated in their reactions to a sex tape scandal involving one of the actresses in *Narges*, to disassociate themselves from the official public culture of the Islamic Republic in the eyes of me, an external observer.

…*to Paris Hilton*

Shortly after the final episode of *Narges* was broadcast, a private film of the 25-year old actress Zahra Amir Ebrahimi, who played Zohre Shokat in *Narges*, having sex was widely distributed throughout Iran. The film was available on the Internet, on pirated DVDs and on mobile phones. The twenty-minute sex tape was made two years ago and shows Ebrahimi and her then fiancé at the flat they used to share. Ebrahimi has denied that she

is the woman in the tape, claiming that it was made by her vengeful ex-fiancé who wishes to destroy her career. In an interview with British newspaper, *The Guardian*, she said: "I watched the film after I heard about the fuss from colleagues and the girl in it is not me. I admit there are some similarities to the character I played in *Narges*. It is possible to use studio make-up to have a person look like me. I have some knowledge of montage techniques and I know you can create a new face by distorting the features of another person".[30]

Ebrahimi was interrogated at length by the police after they were alerted to the film's existence. She has not yet been charged but the investigations into the affair continue. Her ex-fiancé, an assistant film producer who has been referred to publicly as Mr X, is in custody after being extradited from Armenia. He will face up to three years in jail and a £6,000 fine if he is convicted of making and distributing the film, which contravenes Iran's indecency laws. Tehran's chief prosecutor, Saeed Mortazavi, has ordered the police to conduct a special investigation and is apparently seeking the death sentence for those convicted of circulating the tape and others like it. According to an article in *Der Speigel*, Iran's attorney-general, Ghorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi, is now involved in the investigation and has demanded death by stoning, a controversial punishment in Iran, for Ebrahimi herself. Dorri-Najafabadi is apparently arguing that the film promotes prostitution, an increasing problem throughout Iran, and which, if she were to be convicted, can carry a penalty of up to 99 lashes.

In her interview with *The Guardian*, Ebrahimi, who comes from a religious family, said that the most difficult aspect of the affair was being accused of immorality in a religious society. "According to the moral norms of Iranian society, it is very damaging for this film to be distributed under my name," she said. "If you look at my professional resume, you will see that I have taken part in mainly spiritual or religious films and

[30] Robert Tait. http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1954553,00.html 22 November 2006. Viewed 03 March 2007.

programmes."[31] In contrast to stars such as Paris Hilton, whose careers have thrived on such scandals, Ebrahimi's career has been devastated by the allegations. According to several of my informants, at least two serials in which she starred have been cancelled as a result of the tape and she seems unlikely to be cast in many productions for the foreseeable future.

I was not able to obtain a copy of the tape while in Iran but it has been made widely available on the Internet.[32] Though the quality of the film is reasonable, it is not possible to tell definitively whether or not it is actually Ebrahimi in the tape. The significance of the affair lies not, however, in the veracity of the tape itself but rather in my informants' belief that they 'knew' that these events had happened and the corresponding responses they gave based on this 'knowledge'.

Many of the articles covering this story in the Western press have referred to the "outrage in Iran" at the tape[33] and the "social ostracism" that she faces in the context of Iran's strict moral code.[34] The reactions of my informants were, however, apparently more ambivalent. Though there was little doubt in their minds that her career was now on the rocks, they stressed that any disapproval or indignation that they felt was centred not on the fact that Ebrahimi had engaged in a sexual relationship outside marriage but rather that the tape had entered the public sphere. The outrage of the authorities at the moral transgression did not appear to be mirrored by my informants.

Shryock's reworking of Herzfeld's notion of "cultural intimacy" again provides a productive framework within which to understand the responses of my informants. In his original discussion of cultural intimacy, Herzfeld stresses the centrality of "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common

[31] Robert Tait. http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1954553,00.html.
[32] See for example http://www.uselessjunk.com/article_full.php?id=13264
[33] Richard Creasy. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=415903&in_page_id=1770
[34] Robert Tait. http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1954553,00.html

sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation", drawing attention to the fact that cultural intimacy may at any moment "erupt into public life" (2005: 3). Herzfeld argues that embarrassment and an uncomfortable self-recognition are the key markers to cultural intimacy, sentiments which describe "the collective representation of intimacy. The less literally face-to-face the society we inhabit, the more obviously cultural idioms become simulacra of social relations" (2005: 6). This becomes increasingly relevant in a world in which mass media are absolutely central to all forms of self-representation. Shryock's re-interpretation of cultural intimacy in the context of mass media is predicated on a world in which *everyone* is involved in projects of self-representation and uses it to address such things as constructs of abomination, 'public secrets' and sensitivities to what outsiders may be thinking or saying.

This notion of a sensitivity to the perceived opinions of an external observer such as myself is key to understanding the responses of my informants to the sex tape. Maryam maintained that it was a very private relationship which should have remained between Ebrahimi and her boyfriend. When we discussed the tape, it was the production and wide distribution of the tape that she emphasised as being against the "Islamic law of an Islamic country", rather than the relationship itself, noting that it was "very bad news, very big news in Iran because it is not our custom and it is against our law in Iran". Similarly, Shoukofeh, a 30-year old married woman with no children, appeared very sympathetic towards Ebrahimi, referring to her as "that poor girl" and commenting that many girls have sex with their boyfriends, she was just unfortunate enough to have been taped doing so. Shireen said that it was a "personal film" that had been taped for personal reasons and that Ebrahimi could not have known that her boyfriend would release it to the public.

Alireza, a man in his sixties argued that if neither were married, there was nothing wrong. In fact, he insisted that if they were both single and liked each other, then it was not simply having sex, it could be making love and that this would be to their mutual benefit since it would satisfy their desire for sex which humans need. However, he acknowledged that in his religion (i.e. Islam), "this is prohibited, it is not allowed" and that in Iran it is "bad and illegal".

Soheila commented that this was not the first time that a tape of this kind had been made in Iran. She said that these sorts of things had been happening for a while in Iranian society but that this was the first time that such a tape's existence had been publicly acknowledged, and it was only in the instance of Zahra Amir Ebrahimi that the authorities decided to do something about it because they were so shocked by it. This apparent acknowledgement, and the emphasis in the press that the Tehran's chief prosecutor and the Attorney General have been involved in the investigation into the tape, suggest a desire to make an example of this case. In an atmosphere in which the regime is increasingly concerned about Western influence on Iran's youth, attempts on the part of the authorities to shore up Iran's moral foundations are not surprising.[35]

Maryam, Alireza, Soheila and Shireen's insistence of their tolerant attitude towards Ebrahimi's sexual activities seems very much tailored to local perceptions of outsiders' attitudes toward Iran. In this sense, it can be seen as a kind of a *reverse* cultural intimacy, one that is predicated on a sensitivity towards foreigners constructing Iran solely in terms of a brittle Islamic morality. In the case of someone such as Soheila or Shireen, cosmopolitan young women working at the British Council, these might well be exactly the types of stereotype that would embarrasses them, an embarrassment which might possibly inform their discussion of sexuality with me, an outsider. Their reactions

[35] My informants' (and my) 'knowledge' of the investigation is based purely on hearsay and articles in the press. The 'investigation' might thus be something that is 'known' on the same level that it is 'known' that it was Ebrahimi in the tape. Whether or not it is actually in process, and indeed whether or not the tape is genuine, the 'investigation' would work just as well as a justification for a renewed focus on the morals of Iran's youth.

seemed designed to dissociate themselves from the official culture of the Islamic Republic, not simply in terms of a dichotomy based on a 'censorious regime' and a 'tolerant public' but official culture in a more general public sense, inextricably linked to outsiders' perceptions of Iran.

Conclusion

The stars of *Narges* were crucial to the programme's success. The unexpected death of the main star, Poupak Goldareh, during filming, though undeniably tragic, was clearly instrumental in cementing the serial's popularity. The scandal of Zahra Amir Ebrahimi's alleged sex tape ensured the longevity of *Narges* in the minds of the Iranian public. Though only one of the actors in *Narges*, Hassan Pourshirazi, was a star in his own right before the programme rose to prominence, the extensive press coverage of each one of them highlights their role in generating its appeal.

Richard Dyer's typology of the perfect/selective/problematic fit between stars and the characters that they play provides a means by which to analyze their role in the construction of identities. The extensive mediated discourse around stars leads to a sense of what John Thompson labels "non-reciprocal intimacy", an intimacy based on the one-way communication of media coverage of these stars, a feeling that fans 'know' the stars. This provides a point of stability around which to secure identities. By setting themselves up in opposition to the negative qualities of the characters that they played and pointing out the analogies between the characters' virtues and their own, they were established as ideals, role models, examples for the viewers of *Narges*.

This was especially true of Poupak Goldareh, in part because her character, Narges, represented the Islamic ideal in the fictional world of *Narges*, but also because, as a result of her death mid-way through filming the programme, she was treated in a way that is reminiscent of the way in which martyrs are treated in Iran. Her death and the role that she played in *Narges* simultaneously fed off each other to create this impression, building upon the discourse of martyrdom that was woven into the Islamic Republic in its early years. This was a remarkable development in light of the fact that Goldareh was an actress who did not really conform to the conventions of martyrdom, except in the fact that she was dead. Though my informants acknowledged the role of her death in Goldareh's stardom, their responses suggest a certain scepticism about these attempts to present her as a martyr. I believe that their reaction was predicated on a kind of reverse cultural intimacy through which they sought to distance themselves from what they understood the dominant views of Iran to be.

This sense of reverse cultural intimacy was mirrored in the responses to the sex tape scandal involving Zahra Amir Ebrahimi. Although the press coverage of this story emphasized the outrage that it had generated in Iran, my informants seemed keen to disabuse me of this notion. While acknowledging that it *had* caused widespread disapproval and indignation in Iran, their comments seemed intended to distance themselves from the discourse of rigid Islamic morality with which, in their minds, Iran was associated.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Iran is a country in flux. Though the Islamic Republic does not look in any danger of crumbling in the near future, the regime's project of creating a nation of ideal Islamic citizens is faltering. Modernity, which despite what many of its critics would argue, has been a powerful force in the Islamic Republic, inevitably leads to a re-examining of identities. As the familiar centralising institutions around which people have constructed their identities change or fall away, identities must be reconstructed and renegotiated. As the frame of reference or circumstances change, so must familiar identities be rearticulated.

In many ways, television would seem to be the natural medium for reinforcing those identities constructed by the state and for imposing the state's political and social agendas. In a country such as Iran, where the government controls 'public culture' very tightly, this would be a reasonable assumption. *Narges* lacks anything approaching political criticism (which may in itself be the political agenda that the government wishes to advance), but it does offer much in terms of social commentary. Although *Narges* is ostensibly set in contemporary Tehran, there are few, if any, markers to set it in any kind of context. In a discussion of the programme on a chat show broadcast after the final episode, a film critic bemoaned the lack of any social indicators, complaining that *Narges* offered only a group of individuals, driven purely by their own actions, insulated from any sense of the outside world and with nothing to distinguish the time, place or circumstances in which the story was set. He makes a valid point but one cannot help but wonder if this was not in fact intentional on the part of the producers. By creating

an ahistorical, decontextualized framework for *Narges*, its makers were able to present its characters as timeless ideals for its viewers to emulate. It produces a series of encounters, between a programme that seeks to shape and inspire and those who are the intended objects of this influence, that mould identities. This thesis has explored these identities through three themes: the construction of gender relations; the roles of Islam and Iran in constructing the 'imagined community' of the nation; and the function of the stars of *Narges*.

Through both its diegetic framework and its subject matter, *Narges* offers a view of gender relations that is primarily patriarchal. Though *Narges* provides strong female characters that challenge the patriarchy realized largely through the figure of Shokat, as a whole, it enforces this paradigm. By structuring a narrative in which the male characters dominated all references to the world beyond the immediate familial order, *Narges* restricted women's jurisdiction to the domain of the personal thereby limiting their sphere of influence.

Thus confined in their actions to the private sphere, the main female figures in *Narges* represent both the Islamic ideal (Narges) to which viewers should aspire and the individual in need of redemption (Nasrin) whose story reassures viewers that salvation is open to all. The portrayal of Narges as the Islamic ideal accentuates the symbolic capital of women as vanguards of the Islamic Revolution—markers of Iran's religious and cultural purity—whose position must be preserved if the Islamic Republic itself is to endure. Although the privileging of women as symbolic markers of the nation underlines their significance, if we understand the nation not as an ideological entity but rather as something akin to a family or a religious entity, then their role is kept within these bounds: "when women are used as icons of the nation, they often become captive to patriarchal structures and ideologies" (Joseph 1996: 6), and thus the reproduction of patriarchy in *Narges* served to reinforce its role in structuring gender relations.

This delimitation of the gender roles illustrates the broader concern running through my research of a preoccupation with the demarcation of the public and private spheres, perhaps inevitable in a country such as Iran due to the predominance of a collective public identity founded on strict rules governing social behaviour which contrasts significantly with the private identities that develop beyond the rigid guidelines of the state. This theme was reflected in my informants' responses to both the depiction of Islam in *Narges* and to the more explicitly nationalist nuclear storyline. Roxanne Varzi's thesis that there is a growing inclination in Iran towards the restriction of Islam to the private realm resonates with the reactions of my informants. That they responded similarly to the introduction of an overly political theme, i.e. Iran's nuclear programme, suggests a comparable weariness with the incursion of the public sphere in the form of politics into their private lives.

Their responses indicate a deep unease with the collective public identity constructed through the 'official culture' of the Islamic Republic. This can be seen as a sort of reverse "cultural intimacy" through which my informants sought to distance themselves from the perceptions of Iran that they imagined outsider observers such as myself to have. Their wariness of the efforts to integrate Poupak Goldareh into a wider discourse of martyrdom and their insistence on their lack of censure of Zahra Amir Ebrahimi further point to a desire to challenge the public identities of Iranians constructed through the discourse of the Islamic Republic.

Almost thirty years after the Revolution and the profound identity crisis in Iran that both heralded and accompanied it, the ambiguity surrounding the construction of identity persists. The question is further complicated by a new generation who have grown up entirely under the Islamic Republic but who have had far more contact with world beyond Iran, interacting with numerous other cultures and different versions of

modernity, leading to "hybrid/hyphenated identities, often further compounded by ancestral, linguistic and religious differences in Iran" (Tapper 2002: 20).

The government's continued attempts to impose an official public culture and identity upon its citizens are met with a sense of disquiet. This has not manifested itself in any kind of large-scale transformation of Iranian society or the rejection of the Islamic Revolution, nor, on the basis of the popularity of *Narges*, a programme which sought to disseminate this official public culture and the sanctioned identities that attend it, does this seem likely in the immediate future. However, a rearticulation of identity, a renegotiation of the boundaries between the state and its citizens, seems to be emerging, the end result of which remains, as yet, unclear.

The classical Persian story of the Simurgh chronicles the journey of a group of birds. They are searching for the mythical bird Simurgh, the embodiment of wisdom. After a long quest, they realize that the knowledge that they have been seeking in distant places lies within. Iran today is embarking on just such an odyssey in the search to find itself, though the path ahead is unclear and the destination uncertain.

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