The Role of National Identity in the Development of Fīlmfārsī

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Introduction

Figure 1: A still from the film Murīd-i Haqq (God's disciple), directed by Nizām Fātimī, 1970.

The predominant concepts of nation and nationality, and consequently national art, were challenged by many thinkers across the globe throughout the twentieth century; despite this fact, the issue of how to reflect national and cultural identity in cinema remains one of the most common topics of discussion among artists, critics, and cinematic policymakers in every country. Some of the most recognized film theorists even consider the audience of artistic works to be a "temporary nation" whose cohesion results from the shared action of watching. Rick Altman, for example, refers to genre audiences as a "constellated

community": "for like a group of stars their members cohere only through repeated acts of imagination."[1]

In the 1940s and 1950s, many Iranian intellectuals considered nationality, national identity, and national art—topics often intertwined with governmental policies during that period—as signs of dependency, backwardness, and ignorance, and vehemently opposed discussing such issues. Additionally, the absence of a broad range of genre cinema in Iran, limited to just one or two genres, significantly widened the gap between the art of cinema and the concepts of the temporary nation, constellation society, and real nation. Consequently, Iranian cinema struggled for years in the quagmire of identity-less films that were little more than mere imitations of Western versions.

By examining movies in countries that have managed to relatively sideline Hollywood's dominance and create their own distinct audiences (both domestically and internationally), it can be observed that a genre approach is beneficial, both for moving towards the idea of national cinema and for conceptualizing the contours of specific national cinemas. The genre framework allows filmmakers to leverage the multiple advantages of working within familiar formats for both domestic and international audiences, thus offering greater profitability potential for international distribution to producers. Filmmakers around the world have responded to the dominance of American films by adopting Hollywood genres and localizing them based on their cultural sensibilities. For instance, one can point to Spaghetti Westerns in Italy or martial arts films in Hong Kong. In this study, we will focus specifically on the Fīlmfārsī genre in Iran. We explore how the prominent components of Iranian national identity in the period shape the development of the Fīlmfārsī genre.

Literature Review

Research examining the role of national and cultural identity

[2]Henry Tajfel & J.C. Turner, "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior," In Political psychology, ed. J.T. Jost & J. Sidanius (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 276-293.

in the formation of genres, styles, and cinematic movements is quite limited. Even historical studies on national cinema often overlook the issue of genre or address it only peripherally. Carlo Celli's National Identity in Global Cinema (2011) is one of the few distinctive studies exploring the reflection of national identity in world cinema. Celli discusses the cinema of China, Finland, France, India, Iran, Italy, Mexico, Ukraine, and the United States, skillfully mapping out the cinematic history of each country and demonstrating how commercial, mainstream films often provide a more realistic depiction of national culture than so-called art films. With a touch of ironic humor, Celli examines how the pulse of national culture is reflected in popular cinema. In the fifth chapter, after describing the historical, geographical, linguistic, and ethnic situation of Iran, the author examines the state of Iranian popular cinema before and after the 1979 Revolution to elucidate contemporary Iranian national identity, occasionally referencing the cultural background that has shaped such cinematic forms.

This current study builds upon Celli's foundational insight, yet aims to go further by focusing specifically on genre as a critical framework — not only as a site of cultural reflection but also as a mechanism through which national identity is actively constructed. By analyzing Fīlmfārsī as a local genre shaped by socio-political conditions and cultural memory, this research offers a more focused inquiry into how genre can function as both symptom and strategy of national identity formation.

National and Cultural Identity

Early theories on national identity defined it as an individual's affiliation to a country or nation, but prominent mid-twentieth-century theorists have abandoned this narrow definition, instead defining it as a person's identity or sense of belonging to one or more states or to one or more nations.[2] These broader definitions remove the restriction of affiliation to a single nation, aligning better with the new forms of contemporary societies.

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National identity might even refer to an individual's subjective feeling about a nation, regardless of their legal citizenship status. It is not tied to existing or potential geographical boundaries and includes diaspora communities or multiethnic societies with a common sense of identity, irrespective of differences. In *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1991), Benedict Anderson argues that "national identity is not an inborn trait, it is essentially socially constructed," something that individuals develop through shared social relationships with others. Its scope can encompass shared national symbols, language, history, blood and racial ties, as well as music, food, culinary styles, and other commonalities.

Social identity theory embraces this definition of national identity and suggests that conceptualizing national identity involves both self-categorization and affect. Self-categorization refers to identifying with a nation and seeing oneself as a member of that nation. Affect refers to the emotion a person has with this identification, such as a sense of belonging or emotional attachment toward one's country.[3] Simply being aware of belonging to a particular group generates positive feelings about the group and leads to a willingness to act on its behalf, even when other members of the group are not personally known.

Many studies on national identity highlight situations at certain historical junctures where the element of national identity becomes prominent and significant. The salience of national identity is one of the important factors in nationalistic action. When a nation is confronted with external or internal enemies or natural disasters, national identity can become more pronounced. An example of this phenomenon is the heightened sense of American identity following the September 11th attacks. As Grant Lyon observes, "The post-9/11 climate created a surge in patriotism that at times bordered on nationalism."[4] Similarly, Uko-Ima emphasizes that "identity is intensified when a group perceives threats to its values, culture, or existence."[5] Overall, the contrast between "self" and "other" plays a crucial role in

[3]Henry Tajfel & J.C. Turner, "The social identity theory of intergroup behavior," In Political psychology, ed. J.T. Jost & J. Sidanius (New York: Psychology Press, 2004), 280.

[4]Grant Lyon, "Patriotism vs. Nationalism in a Post 9/11 World," Huffington Post, September 8, 2011, accessed November 17, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/patriotism-versus-nation-a_b_953251.

[5]Barrister Uko-Ima, National Identity: Pragmatic Solutions for Democratic Governance in African Nations. (Xlibris, 2014), 141.

creating and distinguishing manifestations of national identity.

It is important to note that the concept of national identity can be misused and reduced to a political and ideological category. For example, national identity in the Soviet Union was limited to socialism, and in Nazi Germany, it was reduced to National Socialism. In such cases, national identity does not align with cultural identity. However, under normal conditions, national identity and cultural identity are aligned, with minimal divergence between them. In this study, we define national identity as a form of collective identity publicly recognized and shared among the people of a country. This identity not only reflects the contemporary self-perception of the nation but is also deeply rooted in the shared historical and cultural heritage of its people. Its manifestations are often distinct and easily recognizable in social, political, and symbolic expressions.

National Cinema

The concept of "national cinema" is complex and multifaceted, with definitions that vary according to different artistic, cultural, and political perspectives. At its core, national cinema refers to the body of films produced within a specific nation-state that reflect its cultural identity, historical experiences, and social values. This notion gained significant traction in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in Europe, as part of broader discussions about the nature of cinematic internationalism and the impact of Hollywood's global dominance.

Philip Rosen offers a foundational approach to understanding national cinema. He suggests that national cinema should be viewed through three interconnected aspects: the national films or texts themselves, the relationship between them marked by shared signs, and the understanding of the nation as a concurrent entity despite these signs. Additionally, Rosen emphasizes the importance of historical and traditional signs that contribute to contemporary systems and meanings.[6] This intertextuality

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can manifest through various elements such as style, narrative, character, setting, and cultural background. Andrew Higson expands on Rosen's theory by identifying national cinema through several lenses: production (where and how films are made), content (the themes and narratives portrayed), and consumption (how and by whom the films are viewed). Higson points out that national cinema is not only about films made within a specific geographical boundary but also about how these films engage with the national audience and international markets.[7]

National cinema often arises in response to specific historical and cultural contexts. For instance, the emergence of Italian Neorealism after World War II was a direct response to the social and economic conditions in post-war Italy. These films focused on the lives of ordinary people, highlighting the struggles and resilience of the Italian populace.

The notion of national cinema often emerges as a response to dominant global forces, particularly the cultural hegemony of Hollywood. In the 1970s and 1980s, European scholars and filmmakers sought to define national cinematic identities that could assert local narratives and resist cultural homogenization. This era saw the rise of avant-garde and art cinema movements, which, despite their political and aesthetic divergences, shared a common goal of defining a national cinematic voice.[8]

Government policies and the structure of the film industry play crucial roles in shaping national cinema. Tom O'Regan emphasizes the impact of market forces, state support, and cultural exchanges in defining national cinema. He argues that national cinema is often a product of deliberate efforts by governments to promote cultural identity and heritage through subsidies, quotas, and other forms of support.[9] In countries such as France, the government has historically provided substantial support to the film industry to preserve and promote its cultural identity. The Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée (CNC) plays a pivotal role in financing and regulating French cinema, ensur-

[7]Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," In Cinema and Nation, ed. M. Hjort & S. Mackenzie (Routledge, 2000), 63-74.

[8]Thomas Elsaesser, European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood (Amsterdam University Press, 2005), 61.

[9]Tom O'Regan, Australian National Cinema (Routledge, 1996), 77-110.

ing the production of films that reflect French culture and values. This model contrasts sharply with the more market-driven approaches seen in the United States, where commercial success often dictates the nature of film production.

National cinema is a dynamic and evolving concept that encapsulates the intersection of film, culture, history, and politics. It reflects—and simultaneously shapes—a nation's identity through its cinematic output, shaped by historical contexts, government policies, and the global film industry. As globalization continues to influence cinema, the challenge for national cinemas will be to preserve their unique cultural voices while also contributing to and engaging with an increasingly interconnected world.

Local Genre

The term "local genre" may not be widely accepted among film critics, as genres are traditionally viewed as global categories rather than tied to specific regions or ethnicities. However, this study proposes a straightforward definition that makes the use of "local genre" feasible. Before the twentieth century, genres were broadly used as general categories to organize and classify a vast array of texts, playing a significant role in the classification and valuation of literature. In cinema, genres hold a central role, but their boundaries extend much further. A genre is a flexible and unstable category based on a set of conventions, including narrative conventions, which are intuitively shared between audiences and filmmakers.

In film studies, there exists a relatively stable group of primary genres: comedy, melodrama, action, crime, musical, western, science fiction, and horror. These genres delineate and distinguish major narratives. Among professional cinema audiences, these main genres become more granular, creating sub-genres. For example, the spy film is a sub-genre derived from the action genre. Sometimes, main genres combine to form hybrid genres,

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like romantic-comedy or comedy-horror, each incorporating features of more than one primary genre simultaneously.

The premise of this article is that in many cases, local genres are either sub-genres or hybrid genres with unique characteristics that are less commonly found together elsewhere. In fact, through the repetition of certain distinct features in the movies produced within a specific region—and with a significant number of such works—these sub-genres or hybrid genres evolve into local genres. For instance, Japan has several local genres that are essentially sub-genres or hybrid genres: The Kaiju genre combines elements of both science fiction and horror, while the Yakuza film is a sub-genre of the crime genre. Local genres can be understood as cinematic forms that emerge from and are deeply rooted in the cultural and social contexts of a particular region. These genres reflect the unique experiences, traditions, narratives, and economic and social conditions of their place of origin, as well as interactions with global cinematic trends.

Local genres often exhibit certain recurring features that set them apart from global genres. These may include:

1. Cultural Specificity: Elements that are unique to the local culture, such as traditional customs, local settings, and culturally specific themes.
2. Narrative Conventions: Storytelling techniques and plot structures that resonate with local audiences and reflect their experiences and worldview.
3. Visual Style: Distinctive cinematographic techniques, costume designs, and mise-en-scène that align with local artistic traditions.
4. Language and Dialogue: Use of local dialects, idiomatic expressions, and culturally resonant dialogue that enhances authenticity and relatability.
5. Themes and Motifs: Recurring themes and symbols that are particularly meaningful within the local context, often addressing local issues and concerns.

While local genres are rooted in specific cultural contexts, they are not isolated from global influences. The interplay between local and global cinema can lead to the evolution of local genres, incorporating elements from international genres while retaining their unique characteristics. This dynamic process allows local genres to remain relevant and adaptive to changing social and cultural landscapes. Local genres are a testament to the diversity and richness of global cinema. They offer insights into the unique cultural identities of different regions and provide a platform for voices and stories that might otherwise remain unheard. By examining local genres, we can gain a deeper understanding of how cinema reflects and shapes the cultural and social fabric of societies worldwide.

The Role of National Identity in the Formation of Local Genres

In this section, we will briefly examine several local genres to better understand the role of national and cultural identity in their formation. To achieve this, we will first outline the general characteristics of each genre and distinguish them from Hollywood genres, considered as the dominant "other." We will also explore the relationship between these local genres and the hegemony of Hollywood cinema. Following this, we will analyze the prominent aspects of national identity during the formation of these genres to determine the social conditions that contributed to their development. Given the significance of historical influences on national identities, we will also examine the impact of artistic, historical, and cultural heritage on these film genres. This includes investigating how the cultural, literary, and artistic backgrounds, especially in relation to local dramatic arts, have influenced the themes, structures, styles, and iconography of these genres. Additionally, the influence of cinematic and non-cinematic forms from other regions will be considered. Efforts have been made to select examples of local genres from both the East and the West, showcasing a variety of genres compared to the primary and global ones.

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Martial Arts and Colonialism

The martial arts film, a hallmark of Chinese-language cinema, flourished in Hong Kong. This genre originated from Chinese folk literature, specifically wuxia novels, which depicted sword-wielding warriors, often with mystical elements. Early Chinese filmmakers in Shanghai quickly adopted this genre. By the 1920s, wuxia films, often adapted from novels, gained immense popularity. The first martial arts film, The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple (1928), set the stage for the genre, pioneering action sequences and Kung Fu on screen. The film's significance is due to its action sequences, which were regarded as innovative for their time and played a key role in establishing martial arts as a distinct cinematic genre.[10]

Figure 2: A still from the film The Burning of the Red Lotus Temple, directed by Shichuan Zhang, 1928.

Hong Kong's martial arts films are deeply rooted in Chinese cultural traditions, such as Chinese opera, storytelling, and aesthetic practices. Filmmakers blended these traditions with elements from Hollywood and Japanese cinema, crafting a distinct style with broad cross-cultural appeal. Themes of battling evil, self-sacrifice, and heroism in these films reflect Hong Kong's history of colonialism, invasion, and national struggles. This

[11]Ackbar Abbas, Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 6.

[12]Christopher Frayling, Spaghetti Westerns: Cowboys and Europeans from Karl May to Sergio Leone (Bloomsbury Academic, 2006), 68.

genre's emphasis on ancient heroic values, family loyalty, and resistance against oppression, often foreign, directly stems from Hong Kong's social conditions.

During the development of the martial arts genre, Hong Kong faced an identity crisis, with its people lacking independent historical status and often treated as second-class citizens. The portrayal of national and racial issues, and the depiction of heroes with a strong sense of identity arose from these national crises and found expression in popular cinema. independent historical status under British colonial rule and were often treated as second-class citizens. The portrayal of national and racial issues, and the emergence of heroes with a strong sense of cultural identity, arose from these crises and found powerful expression in popular cinema. As Ackbar Abbas notes, "What is distinctive about Hong Kong is that identity becomes an issue only when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is suddenly displaced by the experience of change."[11] Thus, Hong Kong's martial arts films, rather than merely national cinema, represent a unique ethnic cinema that not only challenged Hollywood's dominance but also significantly influenced it.

Spaghetti Westerns in Defeated Italy

The term "Spaghetti Western" refers to a subgenre of Western films predominantly made in Europe by European directors. These films often diverged from traditional American Westerns, critiquing or even demythologizing them. This divergence was partly intentional and partly due to the filmmakers' distinct cultural backgrounds.[12] Although Spaghetti Westerns may initially appear to have been created in a cultural vacuum, detached from political or social realities, closer analysis reveals their deep engagement with contemporary historical and ideological concerns. Italy, a defeated power in World War II, felt humiliated, and this sentiment is reflected in many Spaghetti Westerns set against the backdrop of the American Civil War. Italian di-

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rectors frequently used the Civil War as a metaphor for World War II. These films often depict the post-Civil War struggles of individuals trying to rebuild their lives. The protagonists are usually noble yet defeated Southerners, forced to fight corrupt Northerners or ruthless businessmen to protect their land and families.
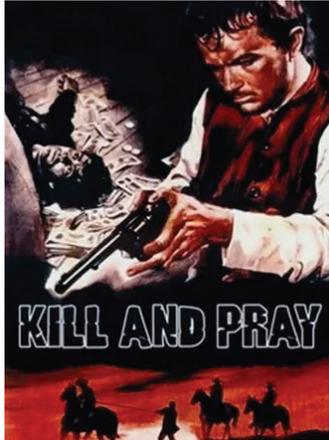

Figure 3: Poster for the film Kill and Pray, directed by Carlo Lizzani, 1967.

In The Hills Run Red (1966), directed by Carlo Lizzani, the hero, a Confederate soldier, must accept dirty jobs to survive. He accidentally kills his brother, a poignant reference to the internal conflicts Italy faced at the end of World War II. In Johnny Hamlet (1968), directed by Enzo G. Castellari, reimagines Shakespeare's Hamlet in a post-Civil War Western setting, using the returning veteran trope to explore themes of disillusionment, betrayal, and the collapse of traditional moral structures—motifs resonant with Italy's own struggle to redefine national identity in the wake of fascism. Some films carry messages of peace and brotherhood; for example, in The Fort Yuma Gold (1966), the hero strives to prevent a massacre threatened by traitors even after the war has ended. Spaghetti Westerns were also influenced by Italy's leftist politics of the time. A notable example is Kill and Pray (1967), featuring Italian director Pier Paolo Pasolini as a main character, a priest

advocating liberation theology. Additionally, Italy's unification and the consequent rise of the Mafia, with its distrust of authorities and self-reliance, were contemporary Italian issues reflected in these films. In A Bullet for the General (1967), a family is brutally murdered by five men, who later become respectable citizens controlling local authorities, showcasing this distrust. The plight of Italian immigrants in America and the depiction of Native Americans as victims, rather than savages (as in American Westerns), highlighted issues of the Italian diaspora and historical injustice. The Price of Power (1969) serves as a political allegory about John F. Kennedy's assassination, tackling underlying racism in America by portraying the killing of a U.S. president in Texas by Southern white supremacists who frame an innocent African American.

Thus, Spaghetti Westerns were not only a unique cinematic genre but also a reflection of Italy's complex national identity, grappling with its historical traumas, political upheavals, and cultural legacy.

Figure 4: A still from the film The Price of Power, directed by Tonino Valerii, 1969.

Masala and the Colorful Identity of India

Indian cinema, especially Bollywood, stands as one of the

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world's most popular film industries, captivating audiences both domestically and globally, particularly in South Asia. The term "Bollywood" was coined in the 1970s, during the establishment of commercial film conventions in Bombay (Mumbai). This era marked the creation of the masala genre by Nasir Hussain and Salim-Javed: a vibrant blend of action, comedy, romance, drama, melodrama, and musicals.[13] Their film Yaadon Ki Baaraat (1973) is heralded as the first masala film and a landmark in Bollywood's history. While the roots of masala can be traced back to the 1950s with films such as Parasakthi (1952) and Enga Veettu Pillai (1965), it was in the 1970s with movies like Sholay (1975) and Amar Akbar Anthony (1977) that the genre's stylistic framework and popularity were solidified.

Masala films often address pressing social and cultural issues in Indian society, such as poverty, women's rights and gender equality, the clash between tradition and modernity, internal political conflicts, ethnic tensions, and relations with neighboring countries. Laxmii (2020), directed by Raghava Lawrence, for example, humorously tackles gender identity and the transgender community in India, while Bajrangi Bhaijaan (2015), directed by Meghna Gulzar, delves into religious conflicts and the political divide between India and Pakistan. Similarly, Raazi (2018) addresses the enmity between India and Pakistan.

Although the masala genre emerged in the 1970s, it was shaped by several earlier influences. Ancient Indian literature, with its subplots and layered narratives, significantly informed the storytelling. The ancient Sanskrit drama, characterized by its stylization and emphasis on dramatic spectacle, combined music, dance, and gesture into a vibrant artistic unit, influencing the masala genre. Traditional regional Indian theater forms such as Jatra in Bengal, Ramlila in Uttar Pradesh, and Terukuttu in Tamil Nadu, which gained prominence after the decline of Sanskrit theater, also left their mark. Additionally, Parsi theater, which blended realism and fantasy with music, dance, and melodrama, contributed significantly to the genre's development.

Hollywood also had a notable influence on the masala genre, especially with its popular musicals from the 1920s onwards. However, Indian filmmakers diverged from their Hollywood counterparts by naturally integrating song and dance into their narratives, reflecting a strong tradition of storytelling through music and movement. While Hollywood filmmakers often concealed the constructed nature of their works to emphasize realism, Indian filmmakers embraced and highlighted the creative and fantastical elements of cinema, showing how these artistic creations intersected with everyday life in intricate and fascinating ways.

Anime and Post-War Japanese Identity

Anime, a distinct form of animation in Japan, includes both hand-drawn and computer-generated works. While "anime" outside Japan refers specifically to Japanese animation, within Japan it denotes all animation types. While originating as far back as 1917, a notable artistic style emerged in the 1960s with Osamu Tezuka's works, which expanded the genre to attract a vast domestic audience. Anime often adapts Japanese comics (manga), light novels, or video games, and is categorized into numerous subgenres targeting a wide audience. Japan's tradition of colorful, moving entertainment figures dates back to utsushi-e shows, a form of nineteenth-century magic lantern shows, and earlier forms of story-based entertainment like Emakimono and kagee (Japanese shadow play). These forms, along with Kamishibai, Bunraku puppet theater, and ukiyo-e prints, are considered the predecessors of Japanese animation.

Anime features limited motion animation, flat expression, temporal suspension, and thematic range, with historical characters and intricate narratives. Its unique design style includes large, oval eyes, defined lines, bright colors, and reduced lip movement. According to cultural anthropologist Rachel Thorn, Japanese audiences do not perceive the large, stylized eyes of anime characters as indicative of Western identity. "Big eyes don't

mean Western," she explains, "they mean expressive."[14] Rather than reading these features as indicative of race or nationality, viewers interpret them as expressive tools that convey emotion and character type, thus locating meaning within cultural codes specific to Japanese animation rather than external ethnic associations. A distinguishing factor of anime is its potential for visceral content. Once the perception of animation as solely for children is set aside, themes of violence, suffering, sexuality, pain, and death become evident as storytelling elements used as effectively as in other media.

[14]Rachel Thorn, "Do Manga Characters Look 'White'?," matt-thorn.com, 2005, accessed July 17, 2011, http://www. matt-thorn.com/mangagaku/ faceoftheother.html.

Figure 5: A still from the anime Attack on Titan, directed by Tetsurō Araki, Masashi Koizuka, Yuichiro Hayashi, 2013-2023.

World War II frequently appears in anime, reflecting Japan's experience as a defeated nation. Much like the Spaghetti Westerns—where Italy's postwar identity crisis and fractured nationalism were projected onto stylized narratives of violence and betrayal—postwar Japanese animation often channels themes of loss, recovery, and national ambiguity through allegory and science fiction. These narratives allow anime to explore collective trauma while avoiding direct confrontation with wartime culpability. War anime often portrays collective amnesia, emphasizing the evils of war while ignoring Japanese wartime mistakes. For example, Attack on Titan (2013-2023) incorpo-

rates WWII themes and Holocaust imagery, exploring war's impact on youth and the rationale behind fighting. Beyond war, anime addresses social issues, including sexual minority rights and youth issues, often through a teenage protagonist. One Piece (1999), for instance, features a character who uses male pronouns despite being born female. These works consistently address contemporary political and social issues in Japan, intertwining national identity with cultural heritage and current concerns, such as cultural differences, racial issues, regional crises, and international relations.

Figure 6: Poster for the anime Attack on Titan, directed by Tetsurō Araki, Masashi Koizuka, Yuichiro Hayashi, 2013-2023.

Phoenix of the East: The Resilient Soul of Iranian Identity

Iranian identity is a multifaceted concept shaped by the country's complex history, diverse cultures, languages, religions, and longstanding traditions. It encapsulates a sense of pride in a civilization that has contributed significantly to art, science, and philosophy. This identity is not monolithic; while unified by shared history and cultural heritage, Iranian identity includes diverse ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups. The Persian language and its literature, with seminal works such as Firdawsī's Shāhnāmah, play a crucial role in shaping this identity, serving

as cultural touchstones that connect Iranians to their past.[15]

During the reigns of Rizā Shah (1925-1941) and Muhammad Rizā Shah Pahlavī (1941-1979), Iranian identity underwent significant transformations as the nation grappled with modernity, nationalism, and tradition. Rizā Shah's era was marked by a forceful push towards modernization and secularization. He sought to construct a cohesive national identity by emphasizing pre-Islamic Persian heritage, sidelining the influence of Islamic culture in public life. This period saw the introduction of Western-style education, the establishment of a secular legal system, and the promotion of Persian nationalism.[16] Rizā Shah's policies aimed at centralizing power and creating a uniform national identity; they also included measures such as banning the hijab and encouraging Western dress codes. These actions were part of a broader attempt to align Iran with the West and diminish the influence of traditional and religious authorities.[17] However, these reforms often met with resistance from various segments of society who felt alienated by the rapid changes.

Muhammad Rizā Shah continued his father's policies but faced different challenges. His White Revolution in the 1960s aimed to further modernize the country through land reforms, industrialization, and social reforms, including women's suffrage. These changes were designed to curb the influence of the traditional landowning class and religious leaders while fostering a sense of national pride and progress. However, the Shah's authoritarian rule and close ties with the West fueled discontent among various societal groups, including the clergy, intellectuals, and the rural population. Under Mohammad Rizā Shah, the notion of national identity became increasingly complex and contested. The regime's portrayal of Iran as a beacon of modernity and progress clashed with the reality of widespread social inequality and political repression. The Shah's vision of a "Great Civilization" was built on the glorification of Iran's ancient past, particularly the Achaemenid Empire, and a future of rapid modernization and economic development.[18] This

[15]Ehsan Yarshater, "The Persian Presence in the Islamic World," In The Persian Presence in the Islamic World, ed. Richard G. Hovannisian & Georges Sabagh (Cambridge University Press, 1998), 28.

[16]Nikki R. Keddie, Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution (Yale University Press, 2006), 97.

[17]Ervand Abrahamian, Iran Between Two Revolutions (Princeton University Press, 1982), 105.

[18]Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, Mission for My Country (McGraw-Hill, 1960).

imagined identity was heavily propagated through state media, education, and grandiose celebrations such as the 2,500th anniversary of the Persian Empire in 1971.

Despite these efforts, many Iranians felt disconnected from the official narrative. The disconnect was particularly stark between the cosmopolitan elite who embraced Western lifestyles and the majority of the population who maintained traditional ways of life. This period also saw the rise of political and cultural movements that sought to reclaim Iranian identity back from what they perceived as Western cultural imperialism and the erosion of Islamic values. Religious leaders capitalized on this discontent, framing their opposition to the Shah as a return to authentic Iranian and Islamic values. This alternative vision of national identity emphasized social justice, independence from foreign influence, and a commitment to Islamic principles, ultimately leading to the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

The evolution of Iranian national identity during the Pahlavī era reflects the tensions between tradition and modernity, nationalism and religious values, and Western influence and indigenous culture. Rizā Shah's and Mohammad Rizā Shah's efforts to craft a unified national identity were both ambitious and contentious, leaving a legacy of cultural pride and societal division. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for appreciating the complex nature of Iranian identity and its enduring impact on the country's contemporary socio-political landscape.

Fīlmfārsī and the Lost Identity

The term Fīlmfārsī, widely used by Iranian film critics, refers to commercial films that are typically regarded as simplistic, repetitive, and culturally shallow. However, if we can look for national and cultural identity within the commercial genres of foreign cinema, then Fīlmfārsī should not be an exception. While the wave of criticism against this genre was led by critics such as Hūshang Kāvūsī, who coined the term Fīlmfārsī, some of his

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contemporaries held a more flexible view towards this genre. Among them was Parvīz Dāvā'i, who believed that "Fīlm-fārsī must contain something of Iranian identity that, despite its technical weaknesses and expressive deficiencies, appeals to the common people and is attractive to them."[19] Davā'i argued that, regardless of critical dismissal, Fīlmfārsī has played a significant and lasting role in the lives of many Iranians. The widespread audience of Fīlmfārsī suggests that the public saw something in it that was not only absent in foreign films but also rarely found in other contemporary cinema or the so-called New Wave.

To an unfamiliar audience, Fīlmfārsī represents a genre that emerged in Iran during the mid-twentieth century, characterized by its unique blend of melodrama, romance, and action, often infused with musical interludes. These films were typically produced on modest budgets and aimed at mass entertainment, rather than artistic innovation. One hallmark of Fīlmfārsī is its formulaic storytelling, where predictable plots and stereotypical characters dominate the narrative. The protagonist often embodies exaggerated virtues or vices, making the moral dichotomy clear and straightforward. The stories in Fīlmfārsī frequently revolve around themes of love, betrayal, social justice, and revenge, set against the backdrop of contemporary Iranian society. The settings range from urban to rural landscapes, depicting a spectrum of Iranian life, albeit in a simplified manner. Despite the criticism for their lack of originality, these films capture the socio-cultural zeitgeist of their time, resonating with the daily lives and struggles of the ordinary Iranian.

Although the influence of Indian and Egyptian cinema on Fīlm-fārsī is often discussed, these influences likely pertain to the later periods of Fīlmfārsī, as the genre predates the commercial cinemas of these countries. The influence of Hollywood's romantic comedy genre and, in later years, martial arts and Western films, especially in the characterization of male heroes, is also evident.

[19]Parvīz Dāvā'i, "Gunāh-i Nābakhshūdanī-i Fīlmfārsī [The Unforgiven Sin of Fīlmfārsī]," Sitārah-yi Sīnimā. 666 (1969).

The visual style of Fīlmfārsī often includes vibrant colors, dynamic camera work, and dramatic lighting, which, while technically rudimentary, contributed to their distinctive appeal. Action sequences, although sometimes clumsily choreographed, were a staple, providing a sense of excitement and suspense. The musical segments, inspired by traditional Persian music and contemporary Western tunes, added an emotional layer, making the films more engaging for the audience.

One of the defining features of Fīlmfārsī is its dialogue, which is typically theatrical and laden with moralistic overtones. This style of speech helped to elevate the ordinary and dramatize the narrative, making the films accessible and emotionally potent. The language used often mirrored the everyday vernacular, ensuring that the audience could relate to the characters and their predicaments. Furthermore, Fīlmfārsī films were notable for their portrayal of gender roles and social hierarchies. Women in these films were often depicted in binary roles – virtuous heroines or seductive villains – reflecting the societal attitudes of the time. Men, on the other hand, were portrayed as either noble saviors or corrupt antagonists, embodying the struggle between good and evil.

Despite the critical disdain, Fīlmfārsī films were incredibly popular, filling cinemas across Iran and creating a significant cultural footprint. They provided a form of escapism and acted as a mirror to the societal values and issues of the era. The genre's ability to draw large audiences demonstrated its connection to the cultural identity and everyday experiences of the Iranian public. Put simply, Fīlmfārsī, with all its superficiality and flaws, spoke to the hearts of many Iranians, offering stories that were familiar, accessible, and emotionally resonant. The genre was also shaped by Iranian popular culture and the preferences of the public, as it combines aspects of romantic comedy, occasionally musical elements, and often includes action scenes reminiscent of martial arts films. Despite valid criticisms—ranging from superficial and repetitive themes to

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technical flaws in directing and editing—Fīlmfārsī continues to evoke nostalgia, suggesting a deep-rooted connection with the Iranian public.

During the formative and popularization periods of Fīlmfārsī, Iranian society was entangled in a crisis of identity encompassing various aspects such as nationality, religion, modernity, and, of course, art. As a result, the genre often mirrored these tensions, serving both as a product and a reflection of its time. In the early years of cinema in Iran, as seen in works like Hājī Āqā Āktur-i Sīnimā (Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor, 1933), cinema aligned with modernization. However, in the years following the occupation of Iran and the resumption of cinema after a hiatus, films such as Sharm-sār (Ashamed, 1950) advocated for the simple rural life, a pure existence where an idealized Iranian identity could be found. This thematic turn was not merely nostalgic but indicative of an emerging desire to locate a "pure" and idealized Iranian identity in contrast to the perceived disorientation of modern urban life.

Figure 7: A scene from Hājī Āqā Āktur-i Sīnimā (Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor), directed by Ovanes Ohanian, 1933. This is the only surviving film from Iran's silent cinema era, offering a glimpse into the country's evolving political and social landscape, transitioning from tradition to modernity.

Fīlmfārsī consistently depicted the political and social concerns of the masses, often offering simplistic and unrealistic solutions

to these issues. In the post-coup d'état atmosphere of 1953, with the increasing prominence of political parties and particularly imported ideologies that solely criticized the masses and deemed the Iranian people incorrigible, Fīlmfārsī works such as Lāt-i Javānmard (The Noble Rogue, 1958) by Majīd Muhsinī clung to religious symbolism. This film, aside from highlighting the significance of religion in the daily lives of people, mocked the well-dressed advocates of Western culture. A year after the White Revolution, the same filmmaker blended Shia Islam with the nationalism promoted during the period. In Parastū-hā Bih Lānah Bāz Mīgardand (Swallows Return to Their Nest, 1963), Muhsinī condemned blind Westernization and the abandonment of national and cultural identity. If religion is considered a key element of national and cultural identity, as illustrated in the previous examples, Fīlmfārsī always served as a platform for expressing religious beliefs and even the superstitions of the people. In Sālār-i Mardān (The Champion of Men, 1968), the image of Imam ʿAlī appears in every corner of the protagonist's home, seemingly guiding him in his decisions. In Murīd-i Haqq (God's disciple, 1970), the hero faces a dilemma between love and duty, which can only be resolved by a pilgrimage to the shrine of Imam Rizā.

Figure 8: A scene from Murīd-i Haqq (God's disciple), directed by Nizām Fātimī, 1970. The protagonist is confronted with a dilemma between love and duty, a conflict that can only be resolved through religion and tradition.

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The content origins of Fīlmfārsī are deeply rooted in Iran's historical past, the social and political landscape, religion, modernity, and, of course, the contemporary Iranian interpretation of these elements, alongside classic Iranian art and literature. The influence of traditional narrative styles and character development taken from epic stories, as well as traditional forms of Iranian theater such as Taʿziyah and Rūhawzī, are clearly visible in many of these works. One of the most prominent influences of epic literature and Taʿziyah on Fīlmfārsī can be observed in the portrayal of heroes and anti-heroes in these films. These are one-dimensional characters without dramatic complexity, symbolizing good or evil, whose manner of dress and speech would be familiar to the audience, eliminating the need for introduction.

Many critics argue that Fīlmfārsī lacks dramatic character development, insisting that its characters are flat and archetypal. Yet these very archetypes—though devoid of psychological depth—possess a striking consistency that resonated with audiences and contributed to the genre's popularity. One of the primary factors behind the commercial success of Fīlmfārsī is the heroic aspect of the films. The main characters in these films are brave, honorable, powerful, and often poor men who fall in love with a beautiful, witty, and usually wealthy girl trapped by a corrupt, dishonorable, ugly, anti-hero, often the owner of a cabaret. The hero, through numerous struggles and with the help of a friend or devotee who entertains the audience with acrobatics and sometimes an exaggerated fake accent, restores justice and wins the girl's heart as a reward. These heroic characters are sometimes played repeatedly by a single actor, transforming them from conventional characters into archetypes, such as the famous hero known as Mahdī Mishkī or Pāshnah Talā (Mahdī in Black or Golden Heel), depicted in several films. The Fīlmfārsī hero always sides with tradition and seeks salvation in religion. These characters represent a modern social group of Iranian men known as Kulāh'makhmalī, who dressed in suits and velvet hats (Kulāh-i makhmalī) but never wore ties. These

heroes can be seen as a revival of the forgotten national identity of a disillusioned nation.

Figure 9: Poster for the film Pāshnah Talā (Golden Heel), directed by Nizām Fātimī, 1975. The character Mahdī, dressed in black, is one of the most iconic archetypal figures in Iranian cinema. He represents a modern social group from the Pahlavī era known as the Kulāh'makhmalī (velvet-hatted).

There is a significant correlation between the social changes in Iran and the content of Fīlmfārsī films. Despite all their clichés, superficiality, and vulgarity, these films embody the ancient national and cultural identity of Iran. As previously mentioned, Fīlmfārsī films were not particularly aligned with the modernization and development goals of the Pahlavī regime. In fact, in their superficial style, they were very traditionalist, opposing Western influence and aligning instead with the perspectives of their primary audience, the traditional middle class.

Conclusion

The study of a wide range of local genres in both Eastern and Western countries reveal significant aspects of the generic mechanisms that can be utilized in filmmaking. Local genres comprise a broad array of sub or hybrid genres that, while adhering to the main features of global genres, incorporate elements of the local region's national and cultural identity. These distinctive features, rarely seen elsewhere, are crucial in their

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evolution as independent genres. Productions within these local genres often aim to compete with foreign products, particularly Hollywood cinema, by addressing national concerns and local issues absent in Hollywood films. By consistently featuring structure and content that resonates with local audiences, these genres have gradually garnered dedicated followers both domestically and internationally, serving as a showcase for expressing national and cultural identity.

The examination of selected local genres reveals that their developmental trajectories follow similar patterns across nations. One recurring element is the prominence of national identity, often shaped by historical experiences such as war, colonialism, cultural domination, and the tension between tradition and modernity. These forces give rise to a symbolic confrontation between "self" and "other"—where the "self" represents an idealized, often reimagined national or cultural identity, and the "other" is constructed as a threat or point of contrast, whether external (e.g., colonial powers, enemy nations) or internal (e.g., modernity, social deviance). This dialectic becomes a central narrative engine in many national cinemas, particularly in genres that emerge in moments of social and political upheaval. Consequently, filmmakers turn to their national and cultural heritage to find a sense of cultural identity that has been lost, tarnished, or subdue, and, relying on this heritage, create works that differ from dominant cinematic genres. These works, addressing the concerns of the people in their own voice, resonate with the general populace of that region and even find fans beyond their geographical boundaries. Over time, they become an integral part of the national identity. Local genres, by representing national identity, gaining popularity, and revitalizing the domestic film industry, play a crucial role in shaping the concept of national cinema.

Fīlmfārsī, a genre that emerged and flourished in Iran between the 1950s and late 1970s, epitomizes this phenomenon. Despite criticisms regarding its superficiality and formulaic nature,

Fīlmfārsī encapsulates the social and cultural struggles of its time, reflecting a unique blend of tradition and modernity. The heroes of Fīlmfārsī, embodying virtues like bravery, integrity, and justice, resonate deeply with the traditional values of Iranian society, even as they navigate the complexities of modern life. This genre, much like other local genres, underscores the importance of national identity in cinema and demonstrates how local storytelling can achieve broad appeal and cultural significance.

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