Double Trouble: Claiming Complex British-Iranian Womanhood Through Cultural Production

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Abstract

Cultural production holds the potential for the subversion of existing cultural matrices by offering alternative modes of being. For British-Iranian women, it offers a way to challenge ethnicised norms surrounding 'Britishness' that invisibilise and denigrate transcultural positionalities as Other. While existing scholarship on Iranian diasporic cultural production recognises its role as a site for the exploration of duality and belonging, the majority is insufficient in its attendance to the specificity of second-generation creative practitioners as occupying a distinct hybrid ontological position. This thesis aims to demonstrate the subversive work of cultural production in a way that accounts for second-generation British-Iranian women's ontological specificity and experience. Building from a recognition of the double alienation British-Iranian women experience with regard both Iran and liberal feminism in the UK, it asks: How is cultural production utilised to navigate liminal positioning and advance a more complex notion of British-Iranian women's transcultural agency?

Based on the critical tools of postcolonial hybridity and decolonial authenticity, this thesis analyses two contemporary cultural productions by second-generation British-Iranian women; the short film *Taarof: A Verbal Dance,* and the singles and music video from singer Farrah's upcoming album, *ID.* Using a combination of primarily visual analysis and discourse analysis, this research demonstrates how cultural production can be mobilised for the reclamation of complex agency, subverting binarised conceptualisations of womanhood that position British-Iranian women as either patriarchally complicit or liberal feminists. It also reveals the interconnectedness of hybridity and authenticity for an analysis of the ontological positioning of second-generation women, tools that cannot be stably separated but interact in the creation of transcultural modes of being. Further research is required to comprehensively probe the impact of ontologically hybrid authenticity on second-generation cultural production and its potential for the subversion of reductive, exclusionary approaches to belonging.

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INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER 1 - IRANIAN DIASPORIC CULTURAL PRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW OF THE LITERATURE 7

1.1: Belonging and Loss Through the Generations 7
1.2: Community Formation: Intra-diasporic Exclusions and Feminist Positionings 10
1.3: The Double Alienation of British-Iranian Women: Between Religious Complicity and Liberal Feminism 12
1.4: Conclusion 15

CHAPTER 2 - HYBRIDITY, AUTHENTICITY AND THEIR DISCONTENTS: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK 16

2.1: Hybridity 16
2.2: Decolonial Critique 19
2.3: Complicating Authenticity 21

CHAPTER 3 - METHODOLOGY 24

CHAPTER 4 - TAAROF: A VERBAL DANCE 27

4.1: Setting the Stage 27
4.2: The Dance 27
4.3: Father-Daughter Dance 29
4.4: Complicating the Binary: Missing A Step 31
4.5: Transgenerational Negotiation and Belonging 33
4.6: New Choreography 35
4.7: Finale 37

CHAPTER 5 – EMBODYING HYBRID AUTHENTICITY: FARRAH 38

5.1: Overture 38
5.2: Passing 38
5.3: Facing the Music 40
5.4: Instruments of Hybridity 42
Farsi 42
Persian Rugs 43
5.5: Curtain Call 46

AUTHENTIC ONTOLOGICAL HYBRIDITY: CONCLUSION 48

BIBLIOGRAPHY 52

Introduction

"*What kind of Middle Eastern is Anna that her parents actually let her go on love island ??"*[1] Responses to British-Iranian Anna Vakili's participation in reality-tv matchmaking show *Love Island* in 2019 revealed both the UK's unfamiliarity with Iranian women's participation in the public sphere and the pervasive, ongoing equation of Middle Eastern heritage with a lack of women's agency. The unease with which the British public accepted her legitimacy appearing on the programme, and subsequent online abuse Vakili received branding her a terrorist, equally demonstrate the animosity toward the inclusion of Iranian women in the category of Britishness.[2] This typical exclusion of transcultural identities from hegemonic discursive notions of Britishness is the starting point from which I want to consider specifically British-Iranian women's active identity negotiation.

It is widely recognised that there is heightened xenophobia in Western nations toward Iranians following 9/11,[3] but this has been preceded by decades of geopolitical tensions since the revolutionary establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran and subsequent migration of many Iranians to particularly Britain and the United States.[4] From the 1979 Iranian Hostage Crisis to the 2020 assassination of Qassem Soleimani,[5] Iran and the West have been discursively constructed as dichotomous,[6] creating a sense of incompatibility between British citizenship and Iranian culture and values. Within this political context, second-generation British-Iranian women like myself are coming of age occupying a position of liminality, performing a complex identity influenced by a host of (sometimes explicitly antagonistic) cultural modes inherited from both the first generation and the wider British society within which they are socialised. Furthermore, the demands of liberal feminism impart a pressure on British-Iranian women to advocate a specific form of feminist agency that fails to account for cultural specificities but extrapolates from the experiences of White,[7] European women. Iranian women are constructed

[1] Eve Edwards, "Where is Anna Vakili from? Love Island stunner discusses Middle Eastern heritage and how she's famous in Iran!", *Reality Titbit,* June 4, 2019, https://www.realitytitbit.com/dating/love-island/where-is-anna-vakili-from-love-islands-mega-babe-discusses-middle-eastern-heritage-and-how-shes-famous-in-iran
[2] Millie Feroze, "Love Island's Anna Vakili admits she's been called a 'terrorist' by cruel online trolls", *Glamour*, September 11, 2019, https://www.glamourmagazine.co.uk/article/anna-vakili-online-bullying
[3] Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher, "Introduction" in *The Iranian Diaspora: Challenges, Negotiations, and Transformations,* ed. Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher (Austin: Texas University Press, 2018), 10.
[4] Babak Elahi and Persis M. Karim, "Introduction: Iranian Diaspora", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 2 (2011):81.
[5] Michael Safi, "Who is Qassem Suleimani? Iran farm boy who became more powerful than a president", *The Guardian,¸* Jan 3, 2020, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/03/who-is-qassem-suleimani-profile-iran
[6] Mobasher, "Introduction", 9.
[7] Throughout this thesis White will be capitalised, as part of the move towards recognising the ethnicised subject position hidden through its usage as the universal neutral norm.

as discursively synonymous with oppressed Muslim women and situated in a reductive binary between being patriarchally complicit or vocal anti-Islamic revolutionaries. My frustration with the lack of attentiveness to complex transcultural women's positionalities in British liberal feminism[8] and the mainstream designation of Iranian culture as fundamentally anti-agential has led me to consider the ways in which British-Iranian women are actively performing identities that complicate their homogenisation and binarisation.

One major way in which identity is publicly navigated and performed is through cultural production. There exists significant scholarship on first-generation Iranian creative practitioners throughout Iran and the diaspora, with cinema in particular positioned as the most popular and well-known apparatus of cultural production.[9] Although dominated by men, cinema has seen Iranian women's creativity recognised and rewarded, with films like Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* affording their filmmakers transnational acclaim through prestigious awards. As such, there is a large amount of scholarship on these productions, covering themes like exile, family and acculturation.[10] Moreover, there are a host of first-generation Iranian women engaging in contemporary art practices. Artists like Shirin Neshat, Parastou Forouhar and Shirin Aliabadi utilise their diasporic status as a springboard for critical artistic commentary, attracting international attention for their installations both in terms of the art scene itself and analytical literature.

But while considerable attention has been given to first-generation Iranian diasporic cultural producers, the second generation have not received the same degree of scholarly interest. The hugely heterogenous second generation of British-Iranian women are currently partaking in practices of cultural production, producing and re-producing specific modes of being emergent from their diaspora experience which differ from that of the first generation. In particular, the utilisation of social media as a marketing and dissemination tool marks second-generation cultural production as distinct from that of the first, moving away from a reliance on traditional institutions toward self-promotion. Through this shift, the second-generation focus lies increasingly on content that can be easily distributed, engaged with and sold through social

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[8] For a discussion on the insufficiency of White liberal feminism and international feminist issues, see *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,* ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russi and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).
[9] For an overview of the history of Iranian cinema, see *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: National Film Theatre / The British Film Institite, 1999).
[10] For examples of work on these themes with regards to *Persepolis,* see Sandor Klapcsik, "Acculturation strategies and exile in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis", *Journal of Multicultural Discourses* vol. 11, no. 1 (2016); Nancy K. Miller, "Out of the Family: Generations of Women in Marjane Satrapi's Persepolis", *Life Writing* vol. 4, no. 1 (2007); Amy Malek, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's "Persepolis" Series", *Iranian Studies* vol. 39, no. 3 (2006).

media, or advertised with relation to subscription streaming sites like Spotify. For example, musician Roxana Vilk's BBC-commissioned *Lullaby Project* has been heavily advertised through her social media profiles,[11] while artist Mariam Tafsiri's illustrations are not displayed on the walls of a gallery but showcased and sold through Instagram.[12] These modes of being span both the transnationalism of second-generation diaspora identity and the intentional centring of Iranian identity positioning, disrupting assimilation models that assume the prioritisation of hegemonic cultural modes in diaspora populations as a means for inclusion in the wider community.[13]

The claim staked in second-generation productions is shifting from justifying the first generation's inclusion into the British hegemonic cultural space, to justifying the second generation existing within it while maintaining difference. These works, through highlighting their practitioners' ontologically hybrid status as both British *and* Iranian, subvert ethnocentric attitudes denigrating Anna Vakili's legitimacy as a British woman. This specificity of diasporic subjectivity, and the resultant potential for social transformation stemming from these cultural production practices, requires a focused analysis recognising the ontological positioning of second-generation cultural producers in their enaction of transcultural modes of being. This is unattended to in existing scholarship, which subsumes the work of second-generation creative practitioners under the general umbrella of Iranian diasporic cultural production. However, it is important to further interrogate second-generation cultural production as distinct from first-generation modes, in terms of ontological positionality, content and subversiveness.

Within the inadequacy of theoretical engagement with the specific subversive cultural production of creative second-generation British-Iranian women, I turn toward them to ask: How is cultural production utilised to navigate liminal positioning and advance a more complex notion of British-Iranian women's transcultural agency? To explore this key research question, I will consider the contemporary cultural production of two second-generation British-Iranian women, to explore how they are negotiating, constructing and performing liminal identity in modern Britain. The first production is the short film *Taarof: A Verbal Dance* (2018), co-

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[11] For Roxana's Twitter and Instagram, see "Roxana Vilk (RoxanaVilk)", *Twitter*, accessed 14th July, 2020, https://twitter.com/roxanavilk?lang=en ; "Roxana Vilk (roxanavilk)", *Instagram*, accessed 14th July, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/roxanavilk/ .

[12] "Mariam Tafsiri (mariam.tafsiri)". *Instagram*, accessed 14th July, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/mariam.tafsiri/

[13] Donya Alinejad and Halleh Ghorashi, "From Bridging to Building: Discourses of Organizing Iranian Americans across Generations" in *Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora Between Solidarity and Difference,* ed. the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation in co-operation with Transparency for Iran, 2015), 70.

created and starred in by Roxy Faridany, which follows the journey of a young woman's personal reconnection with her Iranian culture after the death of her estranged father. This piece was selected for analysis because it self-consciously addresses questions of women's individual agency, calling itself "the story of one woman's battle with herself to overcome the social but also cultural limitations of what it means to be an ethnic woman growing up in today's society."[14] Secondly, I will analyse the singles and music video (2018-2020) from London-based singer Farrah's upcoming album *ID,* an amalgamation of R&B and Iranian musical influences that works to destabilise rigid binaries imposed on British-Iranian women to enact new authentically hybrid modes of being. I chose this work because it demonstrates another side of British-Iranian women's cultural production, focusing less on tensions and contingencies and more on intentional affirmative engagement with variant identity markers.

My analysis of these works is based on the interaction of two critical tools, stemming from different theoretical traditions and offering different ways of looking at (and goals for) transcultural production. The first of these is hybridity; stemming from postcolonial critique, it considers the positioning of postcolonial individuals in what Homi Bhabha coined the interactive 'third space' between cultures.[15] In this ambivalent space, relations of cultural hegemony may be complicated through the creation of transcultural modes of being, affording individuals greater agency and self-determination than is usually circumscribed by the dominant cultural matrix.[16] This concept has already been used to analyse the work of first-generation artists in the 80s and 90s in terms of their navigation between two cultures; however, this literature does not capture the specificity of second-generation experience as *ontological* hybrids. As such, I want to revitalise hybridity for the analytical context of second-generation diasporic subjectivity, with an emphasis on British-Iranian creative practitioners.

The second critical tool is authenticity. This approach to diasporic being stems from the work of decolonial scholars such as Nelson Maldonado-Torres,[17] Aníbal Quijano[18] and María Lugones,[19] and advocates the reclamation of non-Western modes of being to uncover

[14] Alannah Olivia, "TAAROF by Roxy Faridany visit https://livetree.com/i-7219", *YouTube*, October 6, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGjvrx5sT9A
[15] Homi Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 211.
[16] Homi Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996), 58.
[17] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being", *Cultural Studies* vol. 21, no. 2 (2007).
[18] Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America", *Nepantla: Views from South* vol. 1, no. 3 (2000).
[19] María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System", *Hypatia* vol. 22, no. 1 (Winter 2007).

subjugated knowledges that have been subsumed during relations of coloniality. This realignment toward authentic non-Western experience contributes to decolonisation, fighting the pervasive centring of Western epistemology as the universal norm from which other modes are deviant. This tool is pertinent because of its prioritisation of Othered modes of being, which aligns with the diasporic desire for preservation of the homeland culture. Both *Taarof* and Farrah's music enact tensions surrounding the limits of cultural embodiment and the difficulties of negotiating divergent cultures. As such, hybridity and authenticity are essential tools for my comprehensive analysis.

In chapter 1, I begin by reviewing existing scholarship on cultural production in the Iranian diaspora. I discuss the role of diasporic cultural production as a site for the exploration of the tensions of duality and belonging in multiple social configurations. I consider themes of loss and belonging, their generational divides and the potential exclusionary practices of community formation that promotes a false diasporic homogeneity. I also introduce the double alienation British-Iranian women feel in their binary construction as between religious and complicit in patriarchy, and liberal feminists, a theme which returns in the analytical chapters.

Chapter 2 introduces the two concepts undergirding my analysis of second-generation British-Iranian women's cultural production. I explain the theoretical emergence of hybridity as a condition of diaspora and its foundations in postcolonial thought. Then, I consider the theoretical shift from hybridity to authenticity, explaining the distinction between colonialism and coloniality that underpins it and its goal of decolonisation. Although hybridity and authenticity are seen to hold different foci for the diaspora, this section begins to complicate their separation, positing an interaction between them as a method for analysing second-generation cultural producers' specific articulation of transcultural identity.

Chapter 3 focuses on methodology. I explain how *Taarof* and Farrah's music were selected as the productions for analysis, alongside the choice of visual and textual analysis as my main cultural analysis methodologies. I also emphasise my usage of an intersectional feminist methodology and articulate my positioning and goals for the thesis as the foundation for my knowledge production.

Chapter 4 centres around my analysis of *Taarof: A Verbal Dance.* I argue that *Taarof* demonstrates the necessity of hybridity alongside authenticity through its depiction of lead character Nazanin. This is done by positing Nazanin's complex relationship with her father as symbolic of British-Iranian women's struggle with authenticity designated by a homeland that

has traditionally circumscribed women's agency. Furthermore, I argue that through attendance to the affective, sociocultural and gendered dimensions of belonging, *Taarof* reveals the inherited responsibility second-generation British-Iranians feel toward promoting Iranian cultural modes in a hegemonic environment that encourages assimilation. It also demonstrates the generational fracture stemming from rigid conceptualisations of authenticity. I discuss how in doing so, the film subverts reductive binarisations of competing cultural constructions of womanhood, articulating through an exploration of ta'arof a site for British-Iranian women's reclaimed authentic hybrid agency.

Finally, Chapter 5 focuses on Farrah's singles and music video. I begin by arguing that Farrah's complex positionality as a White-passing Iranian complicates distinctions between hybridity and authenticity, which interact in her relations of belonging to both the UK and the Iranian diaspora. Then, through an analysis of Farrah's musical influences, I show that her music is subversive to the binary positing British-Iranian women as either patriarchally complicit or liberal feminists, encompassing a distinct diasporic agency incorporating both the reification and destabilisation of patriarchal hierarchies. Progressing, I argue that as with *Taarof,* Farrah articulates an agency that disrupts the separation of hybridity and authenticity through the selective mobilisation of cultural symbols, using the examples of Farsi and Persian rugs. Finally, I return to the theme of binary subversion, showing how through the evocation of these critical tools, Farrah challenges reductive conceptualisations of British-Iranian womanhood, constructing a new mode of agency in favour of intentional doubleness.

To close, I briefly discuss the importance of these cultural productions as promoting a new interpretation of hybridity; one that moves away from questions of cultural negotiation toward recognition of the ontological, affective condition of hybridity that second-generation British-Iranian women are born into. I consider the ongoing potential for this kind of cultural production to subvert ethnicised ideas of British womanhood and suggest directions for further research.

Chapter 1 - Iranian Diasporic Cultural Production: An Overview of the Literature

This section will explore the role of cultural production in the Iranian diaspora as a medium by which individuals critically engage with themes of belonging and loss, community formation, and alienation. Prominent academic literature on Iranian diasporic cultural production centres overwhelmingly on the United States; particularly California, which boasts the largest Iranian population outside of the homeland itself, with estimates of between 200,000-800,000 individuals.[20] This focus is due both to the size and clustered nature of the population, making studies more viable, and its positioning as the hub of Iranian cultural production in the diaspora; entertainment industries, upon proscription under the Republic, were transplanted to Los Angeles for continued production.[21] Consequently, despite public opinion of London as the second-most important Iranian diasporic location other than LA,[22] the British-Iranian population has been relatively overlooked by most literature in favour of its American counterpart. As such, I will begin by considering US-focused scholarship, then move on to the UK context.

1.1: Belonging and Loss Through the Generations

The first way in which cultural production plays a role in the agency of diasporic Iranians is in its usage as an engagement with belonging and loss. Hamid Naficy has discussed the ethnic economy of exile television and music video production as providing means for the Iranian diasporic community in LA to recount tales of loss and express themselves politically with regard to both the home and host society.[23] These productions have a generational divide, whereby first-generation American-Iranians favour videos exploring exile, loss and aesthetic allusions to pre-revolutionary Iran,[24] whereas the second generation experiment with different themes, engaging in hybrid productions situated in the present and potentially subversive to Iranian cultural norms. For instance, Naficy mentions playful drag performed by women in

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[20] Nilou Mostofi, "Who We Are: The Perplexity of Iranian-American Identity", *The Sociological Quarterly* vol. 44, no 4 (Autumn 2003):685.
[21] Neda Maghbouleh, "'Inherited Nostalgia' Among Second-Generation Iranian Americans: A Case Study at a Southern California University", *Journal of Intercultural Studies* vol. 31, no. 2 (2010):206.
[22] Kathryn Spellman Poots and Reza Gholami, "Integration, Cultural Production, and Challenges of Identity Construction: Iranians in Great Britain" in *The Iranian Diaspora: Challenges, Negotiations, and Transformations*, ed. Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher (Austin: Texas University Press, 2018), 96.
[23] Hamid Naficy, "Identity Politics and Iranian Exile Music Video", *Iranian Studies* vol. 31, no. 1 (Winter 1998):51; Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minnesota: Minnesota University Press, 1993), 188.
[24] Mostofi, "Who We Are", 687.

music videos parodying the exploits of "tough guys", transgressing heteronormative gender binaries in ways that are unthinkable in the Islamic Republic,[25] while affirming a claim to diasporic belonging in the US.[26] Neda Maghbouleh has similarly examined the Persian-language music industry in LA, arguing that these cultural productions afford the second generation participation in collective narratives of loss, while waging claims to the homeland.[27] Analysis of this phenomenon, however, is predicated on the large colloquially-named "Tehrangeles"[28] cluster of Iranians who maintain a distinct identity of ostentatious wealth and have the means to engage in such an extensive network of cultural production. Naficy assents that the economic culture surrounding these productions dampens their subversive potential,[29] which points us to a consideration of the role of institutions in the mediation of the artist's message and intended audience. The millennial shift to self-promotion via social media may allow women to by-pass institutional channels and thus increase their subversive potential.

General scholarship on the US context has also introduced themes regarding tensions of belonging for diasporic Iranians within their host states, which impact cultural production choices. For example, sociologically researching everyday identity negotiation, Sahar Sadeghi, Nilou Mostofi and Betty Blair have all investigated the tendency toward racial and cultural concealment by diasporic Iranians to avoid discrimination in the host society.[30] For instance, Sadeghi has analysed the hesitation of first-generation American-Iranians to teach their children Farsi due to the perceived resultant acceleration of the second generation into mainstream society,[31] while Blair has detailed the adoption of Americanised names by American-Iranian women to avoid stigma. This contradicts arguments made by Ali Akbar Mahdi and Maghbouleh on the intentional, critical engagement of second-generation American-Iranians with selective markers of difference in cultural production practices as a

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[25] Naficy, "Identity Politics", 61.
[26] Halleh Ghorashi "How dual is transnational identity? A debate on dual positioning of diaspora organizations", *Culture and Organization* vol. 10, no. 2 (2004).
[27] Neda Maghbouleh, "'Inherited Nostalgia".
[28] Cameron McAuliffe, "Unsettling the Iranian Diaspora: Nation, Religion and the Conditions of Exile" in *Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora Between Solidarity and Difference,* ed. the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation in co-operation with Transparency for Iran, 2015), 36.
[29] Naficy, "Identity Politics", 61.
[30] Sahar Sadeghi, "Boundaries of Belonging: Iranian Immigrants and their Adult Children in the US and Germany" in *Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora Between Solidarity and Difference,* ed. the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation in co-operation with Transparency for Iran, 2015), 121; Mostofi, "Who We Are", 693-694; Betty Blair, "Personal name changes among Iranian immigrants in the USA", in *Iranian Refugees and Exiles Since Khomeini*, ed. A. Fathi (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1991).
[31] Sadeghi, "Boundaries of Belonging", 127.

means of constructing belonging among Iranians. [32] This tension between diasporic belonging and hegemonic assimilation, and the generational differences to approaching it, is explored further in my analysis. There is also literature on American-Iranian economic success,[33] community organisations[34] and art institutions[35] which influence relations of belonging for diasporic Iranians and thus cultural production. For space considerations, I cannot fully expand on these here; however, these contributions have influenced the way in which I have approached analysis in the proceeding chapters.

Literature on the American-Iranian context has been invaluable in building a foundation of inquiry on questions surrounding loss and belonging. However, extrapolating American-Iranian modes of being and producing to the entire Iranian diaspora disproportionately accentuates their specificity to a divergent British context. 'Britishness', the dominant discourse with which British-Iranian cultural producers must contend, differs from the US in that it does not involve subscription in the same way to abstract ideals such as freedom and meritocracy. Rather, dominated historically by class divides, more concrete norms like pub culture and sports affiliation form the foundation upon which community participation is based, creating different barriers for social entry than in America. Furthermore, although UK attitudes toward migration are generally positive,[36] 40% believe "multiculturalism has undermined British culture and that migrants do not properly integrate",[37] reflecting what Etienne Balibar following Pierre-Andre Taguieff has described as a "differentialist racism" not based on biological hierarchisation, but fundamental incommensurability of cultural differences.[38] This

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[32] Ali Akbar Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity among Second-Generation Iranians in the United States", *Iranian Studies* vol. 31, no.1 Iranians in America (Winter 1998); Neda Maghbouleh, "The Ta'arof Tournament: cultural performances of ethno-national identity at a diasporic summer camp", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* Vol. 36, No. 5 (2013)

[33] Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Eric Ketcham, "Adult Children of Professional and Entrepreneurial Immigrants: Second-Generation Iranians in the United States" in *The Iranian Diaspora: Challenges, Negotiations, and Transformations,* ed. Mohsen Mostafavi Mobasher (Austin: Texas University Press, 2018); Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Daniel Douglas, "Success(ion): Second-Generation Iranian Americans", *Iranian Studies* vol. 44, no.1 (2010).

[34] Alinejad and Ghorashi, "From Bridging to Building", 64.

[35] *Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses*, ed. Hamid Keshmirshekan (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015).

[36] Ana Gonzalez-Barrera and Phillip Connor, "Around the World, More Say Immigrants Are a Strength Than a Burden", *Pew Research Center*, March 14, 2019, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2019/03/14/around-the-world-more-say-immigrants-are-a-strength-than-a-burden/ ; Richard Wike, "Iran's Global Image Mostly Negative", *Pew Research Center*, June 18, 2015, https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2015/06/18/irans-global-image-mostly-negative/

[37] Robert Booth, "Four in 10 think British culture is undermined by multiculturalism", *The Guardian*, September 17, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/sep/17/four-in-10-people-think-multiculturalism-undermines-british-culture-immigration

[38] Etienne Balibar, "Preface", in *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities,* Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 22.

social context must be navigated by second-generation British-Iranian cultural producers when mobilising multiple cultural matrices in their creative output. With this in mind, existing literature on the American-Iranian diaspora is insufficient; recognition of the specificity of the UK's cultural matrix is required for comprehensive analysis of British-Iranian cultural production. My focus on the cultural production of two London-based women contributes to bridging this gap.

1.2: Community Formation: Intra-Diasporic Exclusions and Feminist Positionings

Another role of Iranian diasporic cultural production lies in its potential to create a sense of diasporic community, while potentially excluding various Iranians from it. For the purposes of this thesis, I am classing media as a form of cultural production, due to its role as both a product and a reproducer/subverter of hegemonic discursive frameworks. Reza Gholami has analysed the media's role in the construction of a specifically non-Islamic British-Iranian diasporic community. He has shown how both international and local media (magazines, radio stations etc) have foregrounded a self-proclaimed secular identity (actually translating to anti-Islamiosity) through the intentional inattention to specifically Islamic cultural holidays and mocking of Islam as "irrelevant, alien and adversarial."[39] Further distinctions made between Persian and Iranian identity and aesthetics serve to reiterate this divergence in the imaginary between a high-culture Persia unfettered by religion, and a backwards Iran tyrannized by Islam. This selective interpretation omits Persia's historically prevalent religiosity and stigmatizes British-Iranian Muslims by positing the subject position of a "true Iranian" as "having a sort of freedom to which Islam is essentially opposed."[40] When combined with other scholarship like that of Mohsen Mobasher, which considers the prevalence of diasporic Iranian Muslims concealing their religious identity due to anti-Islamic sentiments espoused by diasporic Iranian constitutional monarchists,[41] a nuanced understanding of the kinds of community fragmentation resulting from this selective secularism can be achieved. Attentiveness to the intra-diasporic exclusionary practices of insular community construction is essential in the analysis of cultural production, particularly in diasporas with significant heterogeneity like Iran. Gholami and Mobasher's work stands out in this regard; whereas other scholarship, such as

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[39] Reza Gholami, *Secularism and Identity: Non-Islamiosity in the Iranian Diaspora* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2015), 129.
[40] Poots and Gholami, "Integration, Cultural Production, and Challenges of Identity Construction", 107.
[41] Mohsen Mobasher, "Cultural Trauma and Ethnic Identity Formation Among Iranian Immigrants in the United States", American Behavioural Scientist vol. 50, no. 1 (September 2006):104-111.

that by Mostofi[42]and Jafari and Goulding,[43] recognises the distinction between Iranian and Persian cultural signification and non-Islamic centring in diasporic Iranian identity construction, it is rare to comprehensively probe the intra-group inequalities resulting from this marginalisation.

Taking a more gendered analysis, Annabelle Sreberny has pointed to the tendency among British-Iranian women "to see local broadcast media as the best vehicle for constructing a sense of Iranian community",[44] revealing that "it was women who most vigorously asked for local media […] that staged discussions precisely about the dilemmas of life in diaspora and the complex pulls of longing and belonging that all experienced."[45] This recognises the potential of cultural production to engage with the spectrum of affect occurring for the heterogenous Iranian diaspora, from exacerbating feelings of dislocation and temporariness to encouraging the maintenance of a "deterritorialized Iranian cultural identity as well as engagement with the fatherland".[46] Indeed, the specifically affective dimensions of belonging have been largely unattended to in academic discussions, centring instead the way that belonging is represented or relates to loss of culture, language and identity.[47] I will highlight the cognisance of affects of guilt and shame as part of my analysis alongside the sociocultural and gendered dimensions of community belonging in *Taarof.* This works to begin to account for the role of affect in the diaspora experience and navigation of liminality by second-generation British-Iranian women.

Community-construction has proved difficult in the UK, where instead of a single Iranian 'community', there are many local groupings centred around particular ethnic, linguistic and politico-cultural stratifications. Therefore, following Sreberny, one may locate the role of British-Iranian cultural production in shifting the construction of community away from an ostracising pseudo-authentic homogeneity based on anti-Islamiosity and intra-group exclusion, toward the productive recognition of difference *within* British-Iranian women, as opposed to merely between them and the wider British community. This must not be constructed as an

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[42] Mostofi, "Who We Are", 668.
[43] Aliakbar Jafari and Christina Goulding, "'We are not terrorists!' UK-based Iranians, consumption practices and the 'torn self'", *Consumption Markets & Culture* vol. 11, no. 2 (June 2008):86
[44] Annabelle Sreberny, "Media and Diasporic Consciousness: An Exploration Among Iranians in London" in *Ethnic Minorities and the Media: Changing Cultural Boundaries*, ed. Simon Cottle (Maidenhead and Philadelphia: Open University Press, 2000), 188.
[45] Sreberny, "Media and Diasporic Consciousness", 189.
[46] Ibid., 193.
[47] Examples of scholarship attending to belonging in terms of these themes include Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990); Kobena Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation", *Third Text* vol. 4, no. 10 (1990).

idealistic, uncritical celebration of cultural difference, but actual recognition of the contingencies, inequalities and intra-group antagonisms experienced by the heterogenous second generation engaging with womanhood in dual cultures.[48] In the vein of Avtar Brah's call to recognise the "*positionality* of different racisms with respect to one another",[49] it also opens a space for debate and action regarding inequalities amongst British-Iranian women and between them and other diasporic groups, which are obscured in the homogenising practices of fractured community insularity and British discursive coloniality. All concerns surrounding the family, career and community (to name a few) are shaped by gendered hierarchical relations between the women themselves, the wider diaspora, the home/host states, and other identity markers such as race, sexuality and class. It is imperative to consider the fundamentally dynamic relations of identity construction and cultural production in a space of interaction between cultures, and thus a gendered, intersectional analysis will form the basis of this thesis. As the collective memory of the revolution becomes less potent and interaction with the homeland becomes generationally more symbolic, the consumption of media which acknowledges as opposed to invisibilises intra-group difference may supersede to form the foundation for greater solidarity and political mobilisation of British-Iranian women attentive to their constitution as a heterogenous group. [50]

1.3: The Double Alienation of British-Iranian Women: Between Religious Complicity and Liberal Feminism

There is a scarcity of resources looking at specifically second-generation British-Iranian women's cultural production, and the gendered dynamics of feminist articulation of oneself in the liminal space between disparate patriarchal societies. My analysis will build on existing scholarship that although not focusing specifically on cultural production, attends to the impact of interacting patriarchies on women's agency. This work has revealed the double alienation experienced by Iranian women, from both Iran and liberal feminism in the host state. For example, Judith Albrecht has argued that the iconisation of chador-clad pious women as national symbols of Iranian womanhood during the revolution has resulted in a dominating "prevalent religious symbolism" necessarily navigated during diasporic Iranian women's

[48] Annie E. Coombes and Avtar Brah, "Introduction: the conundrum of 'mixing'" in *Hybridity and Its Discontents*, ed. Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes (London: Routledge, 2000), 1.
[49] Avtar Brah, ""Difference, diversity and differentiation" in in *'Race', Culture and Difference*, ed. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 133 (emphasis in original).
[50] Annabelle Sreberny, "The Role of Media in the Cultural Practices of Diasporic Communities" in *Differing Diversities: A Transversal Study on the Theme of Cultural Policy and Cultural Diversity* by Tony Bennett (Stasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2001), 164.

identity construction, erasing and alienating women who do not espouse specifically religious embodiments of womanhood.[51] Furthermore, Western colonial discourses that posit women's bodies as the site of cultural transformation associate liberty with bodily exposure, which mingles with the exoticisation of the Orientalised Other to become a fetishised obsession with unveiling. In British media, Iranian culture is portrayed as fundamentally anti-feminist; colonial echoes of "saving brown women from brown men" mingle uncomfortably with transnational feminist solidarity campaigns that recognise the persecution of women in Iran while failing to account for their complicity in the essentialist construction of Iranian women as traditional and lacking in agency.[52] This further alienates British-Iranian women, forced into a binary position as either Iran-condemning revolutionaries or complicit in their own oppression.[53] Albrecht has discussed some strategies employed by women to avoid being constrained by the liberal feminist/complicit religious binary, such as self-identifying as Persian, emphasising similarities between Iranian and European socialisation and talking about Iranian women in a "grey zone" beyond the dichotomy.[54]

Progressing, through distinguishing between generations in terms of "efforts of Iranian women to speak and act in ways that contradict the images produced by the Islamic Republic as well as by the West",[55] Albrecht's scholarship begins to uncover the ambivalences between first- and second-generation women regarding critical embodiment of both Iranian and British cultural modes. In terms of the first generation, one of the most influential figures addressing diasporic Iranian women's double alienation through cultural production is artist Shirin Neshat, whose work has explored complex duality, subverting binaries to account for themes such as "the repressed status of women in Iran *and* their power, as women and as Muslims."[56] Her feminist production engages with issues of gendered hierarchisation, separation and communal identity through the use of visually engaging double screens.[57] She also tackles the liminal space of diaspora as a site of complex identity negotiation through intensely personal

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[51] Judith Albrecht, "'How to be an Iranian Woman in the 21st Century?' Female Identities in the Diaspora" in *Identity and Exile: The Iranian Diaspora between Solidarity and Difference*, ed. the Heinrich Böll Foundation (Berlin: Heinrich Böll Foundation in co-operation with Transparency for Iran, 2015), 47.
[52] Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 296; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 54-55.
[53] Jafari and Goulding, "We are not terrorists", 84-5.
[54] Albrecht, "How to be an Iranian Woman", 51.
[55] Ibid, 60.
[56] Scott MacDonald and Shirin Neshat, "Between Two Worlds: An Interview With Shirin Neshat", *Feminist Studies* vol. 30, no. 3 (Fall 2004):621, emphasis in original.
[57] Wendy Meryem K Shaw, "Ambiguity and audience in the films of Shirin Neshat", *Third Text* vol. 15, no. 57 (2008):45.

production such as *Soliloquy* (1999), which mobilises the double screen to juxtapose two simultaneous and parallel lives of Neshat's duality.[58] In this piece, one screen follows her through a Middle Eastern street to a mosque where she joins other women in some kind of ceremony, while the other depicts her discovery of a Christian religious service in an urban landscape. The utilisation of ambiguous audience situatedness underscores the interpretative complexity of Neshat's work, troubling easy differentiation between privilege and oppression. Moreover, Scott MacDonald has argued that through the immersive soundscape, the spectator "echoes and embodies Neshat's psychic position, caught between her past and her present, and between her fear of losing her individuality within a traditional Islamic definition of womanhood and her feelings of separation and isolation within a modern Christian-based society."[59] The role of cultural production in the subversion of this doubly alienating binary is a central tenet of my analysis, in which I further explore themes of ambiguity in the creation of a distinct diasporic women's agency.

Scholarship on first-generation Iranian diasporic cultural producers such as Neshat reveals the role of cultural production as a critical enaction of women's agency through cultural discourses of double alienation. However, the political context from which this generation has enacted agency (primarily in the 90s) differs from that for the second generation, for whom the 9/11 attacks and Axis of Evil designation occurred as children.[60] Therefore, whereas first-generation British-Iranians witnessed the rapid deterioration of Western conceptions of Iran, most second-generation British-Iranians grew up with this demonisation entrenched in the national consciousness.[61] This mediates access to cultural identity markers for British-Iranian women who want to practice authentic Iranian cultural modes but through schooling are reaching adulthood socialised in a framework comprised disproportionately of British identity constructors, and may not speak Farsi or have ever visited Iran. Attentiveness to the resultant specificity of second-generation cultural production is relevant not only to the content-analysis of the products themselves, but also the contemporary transformative potential that they hold with regards challenging hegemonic binary discourses of transcultural womanhood. Consequently, my analysis will build from existing literature on cultural production to examine how second-generation women subvert reductive binary constructions of British-Iranian womanhood by utilising cultural production as a site of individual resistance and expressive

[58] Alana Traficante, "Shirin Neshat, Soliloquy", *The Senses and Society* vol. 10, no. 3 (2015):391.
[59] MacDonald, "Between Two Worlds", 624.
[60] Age adapted from Bozorgmehr and Ketcham, "Adult Children of Professional and Entrepreneurial Immigrants, 36.
[61] Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity", 87.

agency. The act of public cultural production is political in itself and has socially transformative potential, for it necessarily interacts with hegemonic discursive frameworks which position its makers and content as deviant or not. Therefore, the consumption of production articulating the heterogeneity of British-Iranian women's lived experience "and outlook on identity, spirituality and aesthetics"[62] has the potential to transform the hegemonic imaginary by destabilising reductive, binarised modes of thinking.

1.4: Conclusion

Iranian diasporic cultural production can be seen as a means by which Iranians experiment with themes of liminal belonging, loss and community. For British-Iranian women, cultural production forms a site for critical agency and subversion of binarised hegemonic discourses that impose a double alienation on women through reductive conceptualisations of British and Iranian womanhood. Through mainstream exposure to the ambivalences experienced by second-generation British-Iranian women navigating multiple patriarchal systems discursively constructed as antagonistic, cultural production subverts differentialist, ethicised selectivity. As such, it may form a basis for community formation that conceptualises British womanhood as incorporating cultural difference in all its authentic complexity. If we continue to introduce authentic transcultural modes of being into the mainstream, their increased legitimacy is socially transformative, so that eventually stories of heterogeneity, hybridity, doubleness, and the struggle for authenticity become (as Kobena Mercer articulated about the Black British experience), "not the other story after all but the story of England in the modern world". [63]

[62] Fereshteh Daftari, "Introducing Art from the Middle East and its Diaspora into Western Institutions: Benefits and Dilemmas" *in Contemporary Art from the Middle East: Regional Interactions with Global Art Discourses,* ed. Hamid Keshmirshekan (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2015), 197.
[63] Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle: New Positions in Black Cultural Studies* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 1994), 26.

Chapter 2 - Hybridity, Authenticity and Their Discontents: Theoretical Framework

2.1: Hybridity

My analysis of British-Iranian women's cultural production rests on two prominent strands of thought related to transcultural identity construction. The first of these is hybridity; a concept which came into use in the epistemological currents of postcolonial critique in the 80s and 90s attending to the complexities of multiple cultural attachments in individual identity formation as a condition of diaspora.[64] Debates centring around assimilation of diasporic groups into the hegemonic culture were proving insufficient to account for the agency of postcolonial individuals in the enaction of specific modes of being that could not be easily traced back to one cultural matrix. In the UK, this centred around the cultural production of first-generation migrants and Black British diaspora communities, whose intentional mobilisation of multiple variant cultural identity markers formed a bricolage arguing for "consciousness of the collision of cultures and histories that constitute our very conditions of existence."[65] Hybridity thus emerged as a framework for theorising the dynamic interaction of cultures in individual identity and cultural production, accounting for new modes of being created in the liminal space of cultural clash.

The elongated interaction of disparate cultures from which hybridity emerges links to the specificity of diaspora as a form of migration. There exists lively debate around various definitions of the term diaspora and their associated religious and cultural connotations (stemming from a foundation of the Jewish diaspora). To avoid conceptual rigidity, I will be using Robin Cohen's contemporary interpretable definition, which recognises the heterogeneity of diasporas by comprising a list of characteristics that communities incorporate to differing degrees. These include: a desire for return to the homeland (or more helpfully, as Brah has argued a "homing desire"[66]); sustained group kinship; a collective memory regarding their homeland; beliefs that their host nation will never fully accept them; commitment to the homeland's maintenance/reconstruction; and importance of continuing relations with the homeland as defining ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity.[67] In contrast to

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[64] Nikos Papastergiadis, "Hybridity and Ambivalence: Places and Flows in Contemporary Art and Culture", *Theory, Culture & Society* vol. 22, no 4 (2005):40.
[65] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle*, 63.
[66] Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora,* 177.
[67] Robin Cohen building on William Safran, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction (2nd Edition)* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 6.

assimilation models, diasporas are distinguished from other migrant groups through their sustained centring of the homeland in individual and group identity construction. This centring results in a range of associated affects, such as grief for the lost homeland and guilt related to the potentially insufficient embodiment and preservation of the home culture, which I will explore in my analysis. Diasporas comprise "a 'triadic relationship" between a globally scattered self-identified ethnic group, the host states/territories of settlement, and the home states/territories from where they originate.[68] Dynamic relationships between these actors continue over long-term residence spanning multiple generations, with the establishment of communities over time enabling the immediacy of the material considerations of migration to be displaced by questions of cultural interaction and identity. It is within this temporal specificity that my analysis is situated: the Iranian diasporic community as well-established in the UK, enabled to forego material considerations for cultural production. We must recognise that this is facilitated by the relative economic prosperity of the Iranian diasporic population as incorporating "a combination of affluent and skilled exiles and former college students",[69] resulting in large numbers of the population retaining their economic mobility upon migration (a key source of pride in Iranian community identity)[70]. This general lack of economic anxiety for British-Iranians is not afforded to the same extent to other diasporas of generally low socioeconomic status in the UK.[71] Nevertheless, it is this context from which hybridity's theoretical usage comes into play.

Hybridity is subject to critical, analytical comment in terms of specific contemporary meaning, metaphor and semantic clarity, as well as the ability of individuals to disrupt the history of White racial supremacy embedded in the word.[72] However invigorating these debates may be, due to space restrictions I cannot elaborate on them here. Rather, although not strictly definitional, hybridity as I will use it refers to the creation of new transcultural forms which emerge in the "Third Space" – a term coined by Homi Bhabha to describe the contact zone between two cultures, whereby discursive doubleness "opens up a space of negotiation where power is *unequal* but its articulation may be *equivocal*" and "negotiation is neither assimilation nor collaboration."[73] Individuals existing in the Third Space thus engage in translational

[68] Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.
[69] Mostofi, "Who We Are", A692.
[70] Alinejad and Ghorashi, "From Bridging to Building", 63.
[71] Joseph Rowntree Foundation, "Poverty rates among ethnic groups in Great Britain", April 30, 2007, https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poverty-rates-among-ethnic-groups-great-britain
[72] Lola Young, "Hybridity's discontents: rereading science and 'race'" in *Hybridity and Its Discontents*, ed. Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes (London: Routledge, 2000), 158-9.
[73] Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between", 58 (emphasis in original).

practices of hybridity to construct new independent borderline identities. Reconfiguration of one social order's ideals through internalisation by different people both reveals "the disruptive and exclusionary structures of global culture"[74] and challenges the naturalised stability of the dominant culture's hegemony.[75] The ambiguity of negotiative outcomes resists tendencies towards binarisation of cultures and opens a space for individual agency and "ways of surviving, and thriving"[76] when confronted with competing cultural identity formations. Thus, hybridity's strength lies in this applicability to different contexts, describing complex processes of cultural articulation. Furthermore, conceptualising hybridity as a process of negotiation (as opposed to metaphoric interpretations which connote a state)[77] aligns with Stuart Hall's assertion of "identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."[78] It accounts for an understanding of individual identity-formation as plural and dynamic, reacting to changes in hegemonic relationality between cultures as well as specificity attending to markers like gender, race and class. While hybridity has been utilised primarily to understand the potentially productive outcomes of cultural interaction and negotiation in the liminal space, in my analysis hybridity's potency lies in its applicability to the second-generation British-Iranian cultural producers' ontological condition of hybridity. That is, the ontological fact of being born into a diaspora necessarily places second-generation British-Iranian women in a condition of hybridity that results in distinct transcultural modes of being. This expansion subtly rearticulates hybridity for the specificity of second-generation diasporic experience.

Emerging from botany, hybridity initially referred to the interbreeding of two plants unintended for cross-pollination.[79] This negative association led to hybridity being used as a justification for the prevention of racial inter-breeding, ensuring purity of dominant racial groups.[80] Thus, the reclamation and resignification of the term hybridity from a shameful to a prideful interpellation, positing liminality as a source of strength and nuance, serves to subvert hierarchisations based on purity that stigmatise mixed families. It also rejects the rhetoric of

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[74] Papastergiadis, "Hybridity and Ambivalence", 43.
[75] Nikos Papastergiadis, "The Limits of Cultural Translation" in *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2005), 335.
[76] Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle,* 5.
[77] David Parker, *Through Different Eyes: The Cultural Identity of Young Chinese People in Britain, (*Aldershot: Avebury, 1995), 26.
[78] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 222.
[79] Coombes and Brah, "Introduction", 2.
[80] Young, "Hybridity's discontents", 157; Ann Phoenix and Charlie Owen, "From miscegenation to hybridity: mixed relationships and mixed parentage in profile" in *Hybridity and Its Discontents*, ed. Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes (London: Routledge, 2000), 3.

neoliberal multiculturalism which promotes a tolerance of cultural diversity while reiterating the immutability of the dominant culture as a transparent norm and relegating antiracism to an issue tangential "to the main business of the political system."[81]

Crucially, hybridity is based on a postcolonial context, whereby historically drastically unequal power relations between colonisers and colonised continue to structure cultural interaction in the UK. Iran and the UK do not have a postcolonial relationship, and we must recognise the differences in power dynamics in which this historical context positions British-Iranians, especially in relation to other Asian countries like India (a historical specificity from which Bhabha speaks). However, the pervasive coloniality of Eurocentric differentialist racism and knowledge production serves to eradicate cultural and social difference; although Iranian culture has not been forcefully subsumed as in processes of colonialism, the naturalised dominance of Western cultural forms delegitimises and denigrates all Othered modes of being. In light of this, hybridity can be mobilised in order to understand British-Iranian identity formation and cultural production.

2.2: Decolonial Critique

Although questions of hybridity continue to be relevant, the political context within which it emerged in the 80s has developed. Thus, we can see a resultant shift away from considerations of transcultural production toward "recovering or reconstituting an authentic non-Western subject"[82] and their epistemologies in order to combat the pervasive coloniality of knowledge. [83] This is implicit in trends seen in young people toward a reclamation of pride surrounding marginalised identities, particularly on social media where identity presentation can be carefully curated.[84]

The decolonial project, founded in South America, is based on the distinction between coloniality and colonialism. Nelson Maldonado-Torres articulates the distinction between coloniality and formal political and economic relations of colonialism in that it:

[81] Paul Gilroy, "The end of anti-racism" in *'Race', Culture and Difference*, ed. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 51.
[82] Marco Vieira, "The decolonial subject and the problem of non-Western authenticity", *Postcolonial Studies* vol. 22, no. 2 (2019):151.
[83] Breny Mendoza, "Coloniality of Gender and Power: From Postcoloniality to Decoloniality" in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, ed. Lisa Disch and Mary Hawkesworth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 115.
[84] Although it is difficult to find academic literature on this movement, only a brief Instagram search into 3 hashtags displaying pride surrounding Iranian identities (#proudtobeiranianamerican, #persianbritish and #persianandproud) leads to over 3000 posts.

"[R]efers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations […] It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience."[85]

As such, the decolonial project emphasises challenging the totalising coloniality of Eurocentric imperialism and knowledge-production that denigrates non-Western epistemologies as primitive. Anibal Quijano's notion of the coloniality of power recognised it as incorporating two axes: "the codification of the differences between conquerors and conquered in the idea of 'race' […] that placed some in a natural situation of inferiority to the others" and "the constitution of a new structure of control of labour and its resources […] together around and upon the basis of capital and the world market."[86] This recognises the role of capitalism in coloniality's insidious de-legitimisation of Other epistemologies through the erasure of difference under the guise of equal rights and opportunities as 'global citizens'. Neoliberal homogenisation strips communities of their ability to organise around pertinent issues of discrimination, distribution and social justice by assuming a level playing field dominated by questions of accumulation and consumption and positing effective engagement in capitalism as the hallmark of modern citizenship. Cultural differences are subsumed under the rhetoric of the transnational power of capital as the defining feature of modernity, masking "ethnocentric norms, values and interests"[87] that structure socioeconomic hierarchies affecting the ability of individuals to participate equally in society.[88] Maria Lugones expanded these axes to include the modern gender system, positing "gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing",[89] intricately bound with race and heteronormativity. The totalising effect of these processes has shaped the subjectivities of individuals, resulting in the ontological anxiety of internalised inferiority and peripheral positionalities by non-Western subjects.[90]

[85] Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Being", 243.
[86] Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America", 533.
[87] Bhabha, "The Third Space", 208.
[88] Mendoza, "Coloniality of Gender and Power", 115.
[89] Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial / Modern Gender System", 186.
[90] Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 128.

Epistemological decolonisation invites scholars to "undo the damage inflicted by coloniality by affirming other modes of knowledge and uncolonised forms of (inter-)subjectivity."[91] This affirmation can take many different modes, from "simply (re-)existing through offering other imaginaries, visions and knowledges that emerge from the fissures of domination to more active forms of insurgency against what is perceived as 'the colonial matrix of power.'"[92] Alternative to postcolonial thinking, this approach assumes that authentic marginalised voices and knowledge *can* be recovered and are not necessarily destined to be consistently distorted by processes of representation. Instead, through choosing to reject interaction with or supremacy of Western modes, we may subvert colonial languages that position the Other as an object, rather than a subject, of knowledge.[93] Moreover, this decolonial reclamation, although seen as 'pre-modern', is not a sense of *going back* (this temporal framing would reiterate colonial binarisms between the West/modernity and the Other/backward), but rather challenges a particular Eurocentric hegemonic discourse of modernity as post-Enlightenment rationality undergirded by imperialism. The reclamation of subjugated knowledges challenges the failure to concede that Whiteness (and "Englishness" in the UK)[94] is a racialised/ethnicised position and not the universal norm from which all other modes are deviant. [95] In this way, decolonisation is not an end in itself but "an intermediate step towards complex and inclusive *transmodernity*" that overcomes the "pitfalls of modernity/coloniality".[96]

2.3: Complicating Authenticity

Despite the anticolonial benefits of such a realignment project, this search for authenticity may fall prey to the advocation of an essentialised version of culture, inadvertently homogenising the divergent experiences of diasporic communities while, as María Luisa Femenías argues, failing to recognise the "sub-altern position of women, *as if* men and women [have] the same status."[97] This essentialisation of both West and non-West paradoxically reiterates binary

[91] Vieira, "The decolonial subject", 153.
[92] Vieira, "The decolonial subject", 155.
[93] Céline Leboeuf, "'What are you?' Addressing Racial Ambiguity", *Critical Philosophy of Race* vol. 8, no 1-2 (2020):19.
[94] Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" in *'Race', Culture and Difference,* ed. James Donald and Ali Rattansi (London: Sage Publications, 1992), 252.
[95] Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), 2.
[96] Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'Secularism and Religion in the Modern/Colonial World System: From Secular Postcoloniality to Postsecular Transmodernity', in *Coloniality at Large, Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate,* ed. Mabel Morana, Enrique Dussel and Carlos A Jauregui (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 383, emphasis in original.
[97] María Luisa Femenías , "From Women's Movements to Feminist Theories (and Vice Versa)" in *Theories of the Flesh: Latinx and Latin American Feminisms, Transformation, and Resistance*, ed. Andrea J. Pitts, Mariana Ortega, and José Medina (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 44, emphasis in original.

notions of the incommensurability of cultures, the foundation for Britain's surreptitious neoracism. [98] Furthermore, in a British-Iranian community with diverse religious, ethnolinguistic and cultural factions, who decides what authenticity looks like, and how might this serve to erase others? The epistemological authenticity of one stratification may differ markedly to that of another, resulting in exclusions of the kind revealed in Gholami's analysis of non-Islamic tendencies in the British-Iranian community, alienating Muslim women by marking them as ignorant. Therefore, in an attempt to overcome the exclusionary practices of coloniality, this search for authenticity may merely shift the boundaries to legitimate some while invisibilising others.

Progressing, dissociation from Western influence has different consequences for individuals living in Iran and those in the diaspora. Working through a different political context, Ofelia Schutte has articulated the disparity in experience between the Community and Diasporic peregrina in South America regarding the ease and desire to undertake the decolonial turn's rejection of Western knowledge and culture.[99] The Diasporic peregrina recognises "neither modernity nor Europe, any more than any other epoch or world region, is sewn unto one homogeneous cloth" and "starts from a place beyond the dualisms of the One and the Not-One, or the Self and the Other, including the Other within the Self", complicating the relationship between the hegemon and the marginal.[100] For second-generation British-Iranian women who grew up in the UK, particularly those with only one Iranian parent, a denial of Western culture may feel equally like a denial of part of the self, which must be negotiated in order to be satisfactory. They may not speak Farsi or have ever visited Iran, and therefore have to rely more unreservedly on the example of others and symbolic interaction with Iranian culture to achieve authenticity, as opposed to their parents who possess a distinct schema of what Iran means.[101] But even reliance on first-generational guidance regarding Iran hinges on their belongingness to the "unbounded fantasy space"[102] of an imagined homeland which remains divorced from the ever-changing social realities of those actually living there.

Moreover, Marco Vieira questions whether this kind of decoupling is even possible, arguing that the pervasive construction of subjectivities through coloniality means that each individual

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[98] Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation", 62.

[98] Gholami, *Secularism and Identity*, 62.

[99] Ofelia Schutte, "Border Zones, In-Between Spaces, and Turns: On Lugones, the Coloniality of Gender, and the Diasporic Peregrina", *Critical Philosophy of Race* vol. 8, no 1-2 (2020):102.

[100] Schutte, "Border Zones", 114-5.

[101] Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity", 92.

[102] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 170.

denigrated through its processes is necessarily a hybrid of West and non-West. The ambiguity and variety in the formative Western elements of individuals' subjectivities need to be recognised as co-constitutive with non-Western elements, making the goal of comprehensive delinking unrealistic and unhelpful.[103] Rather, he argues for a focus on "'decolonisation of being' as the necessary psychological practice of re-signifying the erased subject of coloniality, which can assume many hybrid configurations"[104]. These selective processes of retrieval of pre-colonial ways of being are consequently an imagined device for "imbuing postcolonial subjects with a stable and coherent self-identification",[105] as opposed to fixed modes of signification which may be sought for in purified conceptualisations. Thus, Hall's recognition of the complexity of turning inward for Black cinematic narratives is poignant for considering Iran's diverse diaspora: "Who has not known, at this moment, the surge of an overwhelming nostalgia for lost origins, for 'times past'? And yet, this 'return to the beginning' […] can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery".[106] In this way, it is the *individual's* specific interaction with the symbolic homeland which may be seen to exact a notion of authenticity, which like hybridity remains equivocal and intensely personal. A commitment to this reconfiguration may form the basis of community for British-Iranian women, as opposed to essentialist understandings of a common experience predicated on cultural homogeneity. It is thus from the interaction of these two strands of thought regarding transcultural identity formation and production that I will analyse the ambivalent navigation, agency and socially transformative potential of British-Iranian women's cultural production.

[103] Vieira, "The decolonial subject", 161.
[104] Ibid., 152.
[105] Ibid., 159.
[106] Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", 236.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

In order to explore enactions of critical agency by British-Iranian second-generation women, I will analyse two cultural productions: the short film *Taarof: A Verbal Dance*, and the singles and music video from Farrah's upcoming album *ID*. These productions engage in different ways with binary subversion and notions of hybridity and authenticity; *Taarof* explores the affective, sociocultural and gendered dimensions of belonging and complex relationality with the homeland, whereas Farrah's music demonstrates the impact of Whiteness and the mobilisation of symbolic interaction on public negotiation of British and Iranian conceptualisations of womanhood.

When selecting cultural productions to analyse, I wanted to find productions that were self-consciously situated in the liminal third space between British and Iranian cultures. I was also interested in the self-promotion of cultural productions that mobilise social media as a tool of advertising and funding. To find these, I looked at the Instagram hashtags #britishiranian, #britishiranianart, and #britishiranianartist, leading me to Farrah's page and a post promoting *Taarof*. The public nature of these self-designations means that these cultural productions are intentionally framed in a manner that encourages their interpretation as contextual pieces; thereby, their consumption may subvert reductive mainstream discourses that force British-Iranian women into binaries between complicit and revolutionaries. There is a deficit of cultural production actively framing itself in this liminal position, particularly by women, who tend to be invisibilised when considering the Iranian diasporic community as a whole. Therefore, I recognise that my analysis is inevitably partial;[107] I will not try and make claims about what *all* British-Iranian women engaging in cultural production are doing, but rather the kinds of things that have been and *may* be done in the future.

I will use qualitative cultural analysis to approach these two articulations of British-Iranian women's agency, primarily focusing on discourse and visual analysis to uncover prominent themes throughout. Both are forms of textual analysis, an approach which involves analysing the "codes, terms, ideologies, discourses and individuals"[108] present in a production in order to discern "latent meaning, but also implicit patterns, assumptions and omissions of a text."[109] In this method, 'text' in the poststructuralist sense is not limited to the written word; "Since

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[107] Michelle Phillipov, "In Defense of Textual Analysis", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* vol. 30, no. 3 (2013):211.

[108] Aeron Davis, "Investigating Cultural Producers" in Research Methods for Cultural Studies, ed. Michael Pickering and Gabrielle Griffin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 56.

[109] Elfriede Fürsich, "In Defense of Textual Analysis", *Journalism Studies* vol. 10, no. 2 (2009):241.

culture and language are contained in all forms of social interaction, so texts for analysis can be found in a range of media forms and social settings."[110] Thus, although *Taarof* and Farrah's music are not self-designated political pieces, extrapolations can be made from their implicit texts. To investigate the content, I will utilise the aforementioned tension between hybridity and decolonial approaches to transcultural production and other literature on the Iranian diaspora to inform my analysis. This focus on visuality and discourse stems from a postfeminist, poststructuralist recognition of the salience of discourse in (re)producing the lived realities of individuals, both in terms of hegemonic discursive matrices delineating appropriate action and potential subversive resistance through cultural production.[111] My focus on this methodology as opposed to interviewing producers relates to the inaccessibility consumers have to the artists themselves and the intentionality behind their production. Part of the productive ambivalence of cultural production is the breadth of interpretation it can achieve, intentional and otherwise; it is this ambiguous content and interpretation that I wish to explore. This is also why I chose cultural productions that are intentionally positioned as British-Iranian and available in the public domain for consumption; they present "a distinctive discursive moment between encoding and decoding that asks for special scholarly engagement."[112]

Throughout my analysis, I mobilise an intersectional approach that is attentive to the complex interplay of multiple intersecting axes of oppression impacting individuals and their cultural production. This term, rooted in Black feminist thought, intervenes in "cumulative approaches"[113] to conceptualising identity and marginalisation that "obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination."[114] I will consider not just the role of discrimination but also that of privilege; British-Iranian women occupy various positionings with regard religion, race, class and sexuality, which need to be analysed in line with their cultural production. This is particularly when considering Farrah's music – whereas *Taarof* articulates the agency of a character, Farrah is necessarily marketing herself alongside her music and thus her positionality is more actively connected to her production. An intersectional analysis is essential in addressing the nuances of cultural production for heterogenous groups like British-Iranians, both in terms of the hierarchies allowing certain

[110] Davis, "Investigating Cultural Producers", 57.
[111] Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference: Or, the Uses of Poststructuralist Theory for Feminism" *Feminist Studies* vol. 14, no. 1 (Spring 1988):35.
[112] Fürsich, "In Defense of Textual Analysis", 238.
[113] Jennifer C. Nash, 're-thinking intersectionality', *Feminist Review* Vol. 89 (2008):6.
[114] Kimberlé Crenshaw, 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics', University of Chicago Legal Forum, Vol. 1989, p.140.

individuals more space for artistic licence and recognising the positionalities which are still being erased.

Feminist scholarship practice recognises that all knowledge is subjective, due to the inability of researchers to comprehensively dissociate themselves from their social and political positionality in processes of analytical interpretation.[115] However, this is not a disadvantage to feminist scholarship in comparison with positivist approaches, but rather a critical recognition that "only partial perspective promises objective vision",[116] impelling individuals to take accountability for the knowledge that they produce. Therefore, I acknowledge my positionality as a second-generation, White-passing British-Iranian woman and consumer of these forms of cultural production, an orientation that has given rise to an interest in themes of British-Iranian women's subversive agency and negotiated identity performance. I am also invested in the upheaval of the current ethnicised positioning of 'Britishness' that denigrates migrant cultures as inferior and encourages reductive binarisation of women's positionalities. I intend that this thesis contributes in some way to dismantling these hierarchies, by mobilising the subjugated knowledge of liminal women's cultural production to reveal the constructedness (and thus fragility) of the dominant discourse. Moreover, because identity is not stable, there cannot be causal relationships between identity and knowledge.[117] Hence, I acknowledge that my positioning as a British-Iranian woman does not guarantee my non-complicity in reifying reductive conceptualisations of British-Iranian womanhood. The analytical conclusions I produce related to these productions are strictly my own interpretation. Therefore, those who are more intricately involved with the production of these cultural forms may exhort a different understanding of the agency and identity performance embedded within them, which I do not mean to undermine, but merely supplement.

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[115] Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", *Feminist Studies* vol. 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988):589.
[116] Haraway, "Situated Knowledges", 583.
[117] Louisa Allen, "Queer(y)ing the Straight Researcher: The Relationship(?) between Researcher Identity and Anti-Normative Knowledge", *Feminism & Psychology* vol. 22, no. 2 (2010):152.

Chapter 4 - Taarof: A Verbal Dance

4.1: Setting the Stage

Taarof: A Verbal Dance is a 2018 short film co-created and starred in by second-generation British-Iranian Roxy Faridany. It follows 26-year-old Nazanin, a British-Iranian woman who, upon the death of her father, is reunited with her estranged Iranian family at his funeral in London, who attempt to persuade her to re-enter the family fold.[118] She confronts her family's prescriptions of authentic Iranian womanhood as embodying femininity and restraint, rejecting them to claim a hybrid agency and self-determination surrounding forgiveness of her "once beloved father."[119] On the film's website, *Taarof* describes itself as the story "of being an outsider even within your own culture, of finding one's own identity and of living one's truth [...] no matter what cultural expectations we may have put on us by those around us."[120] It screened at various film festivals and won Best Women Short in the Independent Short Awards 2018.[121] In this section, I demonstrate that through its treatment of Nazanin's relationship with the fatherland, *Taarof* complicates tensions between postcolonial hybridity and decolonial authenticity, situating itself between these two trajectories. Progressing, I argue that *Taarof* enacts a critical intervention into the rigid binary imposed upon British-Iranian women as either religiously complicit in patriarchy or liberal feminist revolutionaries through Nazanin's agential growth. It does this by attending to the affective, sociocultural and gendered dimensions of belonging and insecure authentic embodiment of Iranian womanhood for second-generation ontological hybrids, while exposing the transgenerational differences of Nazanin and her aunts. As such, *Taarof* offers a critical reclamation of agency for second-generation British-Iranian women to enact a new mode of being unconstrained by reductive binaries.

4.2: The Dance

Comprehensive analysis of *Taarof* relies on an understanding of the symbolic force surrounding Nazanin's interaction with the film's namesake, and as such, ta'arof itself must be defined. Stemming from Zoroastrian citizenship and considered to be the "most 'authentically' Iranian custom," ta'arof is a collaborative "ritualized system of formal politeness materialized

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[118] Alannah Olivia, *Taarof: A Verbal Dance* (London: Feracity Films, 2018), Short Film.
[119] Taarof: A Verbal Dance, "The Story", 2018, https://taarofshortfilm.com/about-1/
[120] Taarof: A Verbal Dance, "About the film", 2018, https://taarofshortfilm.com/about-the-film
[121] Independent Shorts Awards, "Gold Awards: September 2018", *Independent Shorts Awards,* September 2018, https://independentshortsawards.com/gold-awards-september-2018/

through verbal and non-verbal acts of mutual deference".[122] As Tara Bahrampour describes, its hyper-politeness involves:

> *"Both parties insisting they are not worthy of the other [and] is in constant play in Iranian society - people refuse to walk through a door first, cabdrivers refuse to accept payment as passengers beg them to, hosts must offer pastries even if guests don't want them, and guests must say they don't want them even if they do."*[123]

Comfortability with ta'arof indicates intimacy with Iranian society and is thus a hallmark of belonging to the imagined community for second-generation British-Iranians. The subversive nature of *Taarof* in depicting Nazanin's double alienation in relation to both her Iranian identity and the condemning demands of liberal feminism, and her subsequent reclamation of agency, stems from her failure to engage adequately with this cornerstone of Iranian social etiquette.

FIGURE 1: TA'AROF (STILL FROM TAAROF)

In *Taarof*, Nazanin's three aunts are locked in a ta'arof battle over the last maamoul at the wake; all eyes are upon it, and yet despite the encouragement of the most senior of them, and their obvious desire, the other two continually refuse it. Nazanin arrives and upon first invitation to eat, picks up the maamoul. The audience is introduced to the symbolic force of this transgression by the aunts' reaction, who portray both an audible gasp and expressions of

[122] Maghbouleh, "The Ta'arof Tournament", 823.
[123] Tara Bahrampour, *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (Berkley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 1.

horror. It is through this interaction (or lack thereof) with ta'arof that the main dialogue of the film is contextualised, and the audience is compelled to consider the culturally transformative agency of second-generation women.

4.3: Father-Daughter Dance

From the outset, *Taarof* complicates the distinction between postcolonial hybridity and decolonial authenticity through its attendance to a salient constructing factor of the Iranian diasporic community: the narrative of the loss of the homeland. In this section, I show that *Taarof* intervenes in the demands of imposed authenticity for women related to the idealised homeland, by exposing the associated acceptance by women of toxic patriarchal structures. This stems from positing the loss of Nazanin's father as symbolising the Iranian diasporic loss of the homeland, incurring complex grief for second-generation British-Iranian women who must contend with both its idealisation by the first generation and its denigration as anti-feminist by British media.

A collective narrative of loss is central to the self-conceptualisation of diaspora populations.[124] Crucially, as Poots and Gholami remind us, the grieved homeland "does not correspond to a concrete historical entity found in a specific time and place in Iranian history. It is imagined in the sense that it is selective, abstract, idealized and partially reinvented."[125] It is from this imagined homeland that notions of authentic Iranian modes of being are constructed and reproduced. The situatedness of the imagined homeland is introduced in *Taarof*'s opening scene, in which Nazanin and her sister Banu are pictured as children reciting a ghazal by beloved medieval Iranian poet Hafez, [126] immediately positing an engagement with the familiar notion of the imagined homeland in the romanticised grandeur of a pre-Revolutionary ancient Persian Empire.[127] This is then jarringly juxtaposed with a funeral scene in the dankness of grey London, the bleakness connoting an absence as opposed to the active occupancy of the British cultural space. This distinction foregrounds immediate recognition of the disparity between the idealised authenticity envisioned by (primarily first-generation) British-Iranians and the reality of cultural disconnect in the diaspora. It is thus a specific two-fold loss of authenticity for British-Iranians that is articulated: not just of the physical imagined homeland

[124] Poots and Gholami, "Integration, Cultural Production, and Challenges of Identity Construction", 104-105.
[125] Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity", 91.
[126] A ghazal is a specific kind of poem made up of a series of couplets traditionally surrounding themes of loss and separation. It is very popular in Persian poetry, greatly due to Hafez's usage of it.
[127] Donya Alinejad, *The Internet and Formations of Iranian American-ness: Next Generation Diaspora* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 69-70; Alinejad and Ghorashi, "From Bridging to Building", 64; Gholami, "Secularism and Identity", 157.

FIGURE 2: THE FUNERAL (STILL FROM TAAROF)

(no longer unproblematically accessible for even those still residing in Iran), but also of the erasure of Iranian modes through residence in a divergent hegemonic culture.[128]

Taarof forms a critical site of inquiry into the embodiment of a designated authentic Iranian womanhood through its treatment of Nazanin's relationship with her late father. Nazanin's alienation from her father(land) is revealed through a dream-sequence in which young Nazanin's night-time screams for her father go unnoticed as he attends to Banu. The level of neglect is not clear; we are left to imagine the extent to which Nazanin is emotionally and psychologically damaged by the ongoing disregard. However, in *Taarof's* main wake scene*,* the trauma incurred by the first generation's demands of authentic Iranian womanhood as incorporating quiet compliance is posited by Nazanin's aunts as an unfortunate misunderstanding to be easily reconciled for the benefit of all. The implored lines "we know how much your father loved you, although you may not have known it yourself" and "we must let go of energy that doesn't serve us" work to promote this notion of enforced reconciliation despite obvious detriment for Nazanin.[129] The theme of the dysfunctional father-daughter relationship reflects the analysis of Farzaneh Hemmasi that toxicity is "writ large in Iranians' self-sabotaging acceptance (or selection) of abusive patriarchs as national leaders",[130] who, be it Pahlavi or Khomeini, forcibly dictate the conduct of women to fit their political agenda. Designating that "Hafez will bring you back to your culture",[131] the first-generation aunts act

[128] Mobasher, "Cultural Trauma", 113.
[129] Olivia, *Taarof.*
[130] Farzaneh Hemmasi, "Iran's daughter and mother Iran: Googoosh and diasporic nostalgia for the Pahlavi modern," *Popular Music* vol. 36, no. 2(2017):167.
[131] Olivia, *Taarof.*

as gatekeepers, reiterating an imposed notion of authenticity that emphasises romanticised attachment to the lost fatherland at the expense of women's agency. From this, appropriate grief involves engaging in the (re-)construction of an authenticity which may be passed down via inherited nostalgia for the imagined timeless homeland, as opposed to the interrogation of structures which position women as inferior.

Nazanin thus grapples with a notion of Iranian womanhood that is imposed by the first-generation aunts from the idealised notion of the homeland. Through revealing that the unequivocal embodiment of this imposed construction may have detrimental consequences for British-Iranian women, *Taarof* complicates a decolonial goal of authenticity that does not account for personal ambivalent hybridity. As such, it situates itself between postcolonial and decolonial critiques, recognising the necessity of both for the fulfilment of diasporic women's agency. It offers second-generation British-Iranian women an interventionary role in the re-articulation of the Iranian cultural matrix surrounding this selective authenticity, opening a conversation about the detrimental exclusionary practices of designated embodiment for second-generation British-Iranian women. Thus, the transformative work of *Taarof* begins.

4.4: Complicating the Binary: Missing A Step

Alongside complicating the tension between hybridity and authenticity, *Taarof* works to subvert the reductive binary imposed on British-Iranian women designating them as either liberal feminists or piously complicit in patriarchy. The principal way in which *Taarof* is transformative to this binary relates to its treatment of the affective, sociocultural and gendered dimensions of navigating hybridity and belonging, including the guilt and shame second-generation British-Iranian women feel surrounding notions of being 'Iranian enough' in British society. This tendency has been discussed briefly in both academia and cultural production but not elaborated; for example, in a BBC documentary exploring British-Iranian identity, second-generation musician Roxana Vilk comments:

> *"The images so often played out on the news mean that […] I've often felt under pressure to be a sort of ambassador for Iran and show there's more to my country. But with this role comes responsibility, and guilt when I don't quite get it right. Little things, like I can't cook Iranian food, and my Farsi isn't perfect, make me constantly feel guilty."*[132]

[132] Roxana Vilk, *Iranian Enough? My Search for Identity* (London: BBC, 2014), Documentary.

Likewise, Ali Akbar Mahdi has noted that American-Iranians who have experienced difficulties "reaching a happy medium between [the] divergent demands" of wider American and Iranian diasporic society "are often haunted by feelings of betrayal, shame, and ostracism [which] have serious consequences for the growth and development of the personalities of Iranian youth".[133]

Guilt and shame are intricately related to one another and to how second-generation British-Iranians interact with the rest of the diaspora, the UK and Iran, reflecting what Paul Gilroy has identified as "the problems of racialised ontology and identity – the tension between being and becoming".[134] As Donald L. Nathanson describes, they are similar affects, whereby while "guilt refers to punishment for wrongdoing, for violation of some sort of rule or internal law [...] shame implies that some quality of the self has been brought into question."[135] As such, experiences of guilt and shame reflect perceived insufficiencies in the individual relating to their actions and identity, revealing what is at stake in the failure to practice cultural norms authentically for the preservation of the idealised homeland. In *Taarof* the focus lies on shame, the potency of which relies on a real or imagined gaze; in particular, the gaze of the rest of the Iranian diasporic community has the power to ascribe insufficiency of self to second-generation British-Iranian women. This insufficiency relates to the failure to live up to ideal Iranian norms, positing the perpetrator as defective and in need of reconciliation. In this sense, shame "exposes breaches in the borders between self and other",[136] whereby second-generation Iranians enacting a personal hybridity can be established as 'not Iranian enough' by other members of the diaspora. This is particularly the first generation, who from historically closer contact with the homeland typically prescribe to a cultural matrix more distinctly saturated with modes of being imported from Iran.[137]

In *Taarof*, Nazanin's shameful transgression of norms relates to gendered expectations surrounding behaviour and familial obligation. Upon reunion at the wake, her ostracised position is subtly reiterated through the aunts' shift in language from Farsi when speaking to one another, to English when addressing Nazanin, designating her as more British than Iranian. Through this, Nazanin is interpellated as defective, reminded of the collectivist ideals that she

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[133] Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity", 89.

[134] Paul Gilroy, "'Cheer the Weary Traveller': W. E. B. Du Bois, Germany, and the Politics of (Dis)placement" in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Paul Gilroy (London and New York: Verso Books, 1993), 116.

[135] Donald L. Nathanson, "A Timetable for Shame" in *The Many Faces of Shame,* ed. Donald L. Nathanson (New York: Guilford Publications, 1987), 4.

[136] Elspeth Probyn, "Everyday Shame", *Cultural Studies* vol. 18, no. 2-3 (2004):328.

[137] Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity", 88; Alinejad, "The Internet and Formations of Iranian-American-ness", 83.

FIGURE 1: INTERPELLATION (STILL FROM TAAROF)

is failing to fulfil. She stands locked in the exposing gaze of her three aunts, the designators of authentic Iranian womanhood and the gateway to her belonging. The aunts, witnessing Nazanin's failure to engage adequately with ta'arof, designate her character as incorporating rude selfishness, the highest transgression against everyday Iranian communitarian social morality and feminine restraint. Crucially, this transgression breaches gendered norms of conduct that encourage women's obedience and contentment as ideal traits.[138] Alarmed by her failure, the aunts assure Nazanin "we can teach you how to become one of us again" and proceed to prescribe appropriate behaviour, encouraging her to "reclaim [her] essential softness" while warning that "there is nothing less attractive than forced femininity."[139] This designation of Nazanin as hard and unfeminine constructs a notion of British liberal feminists as associated with unappealing masculinity and centres value in her appeal to a potential partner, re-inscribing heteronormative home-focused roles on Nazanin and reflecting the Iranian social positioning of women as responsible for the "moral health" of society.[140] This interaction defines the binary that *Taarof* goes on to destabilise, which I analyse in the final section.

4.5: Transgenerational Negotiation and Belonging

Nazanin's shame upon the gaze of her aunts aptly demonstrates the disjuncture between first- and second-generation British-Iranian women as they navigate hybrid transcultural existence

[138] Maryam Rafatjah, "Changing Gender Stereotypes in Iran", *International Journal of Women's Research* vol. 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012):58.
[139] Olivia, *Taarof.*
[140] Reza Arjmand and Maryam Ziari, "Sexuality and concealment among Iranian young women", *Sexualities* vol. 0 no. 0 (2018):2.

and identity-formation. The drive toward authenticity as rigidly dictated by the first generation erodes the hybrid agency of the second generation in terms of which gendered aspects of Iranian culture they want to engage with. Whereas the first generation encountered a shame related to the association of Iranian-ness with the Hostage Crisis that discouraged mobilisation of Iranian identity markers, the second generation face a shame around not mobilising enough.[141] This shift reflects the imposed responsibility second-generation British-Iranians feel toward the preservation of authentic Iranian culture in in a hegemonic society that marks Other modes of being as inferior. Mainstream representations of Iranians as anti-Western fanatics instil a duty in the diaspora to dispel fears and promote an authentic legacy of Iran that may be passed down through generations, ensuring enduring connection to the lost homeland. Failure to fulfil this responsibility manifests as guilt, for unproblematised assimilation into British culture precludes an erosion of Iranian modes as opposed to enacting an articulation against the differentialist notion of cultural incommensurability.

Disinterest in the first generation's designated terms of engagement marks ontologically hybrid second-generation defectors as too Westernized and inauthentic, a stigmatisation that damages relationships between British-Iranian women as they vie for diasporic belonging. Nazanin's resentment of Banu's greater comfortability with Iranian culture is evident from the film's beginning, during the recital of the Hafez poem. Nazanin's pride at her solo recital extinguishes upon the arrival of her younger, more enthusiastic sister, who throughout *Taarof* epitomizes the embodiment of first-generation dictated authentic Iranian womanhood, and experiences greater belonging. Through this relationship, the audience is exposed to how insecurity can turn to rivalry among the second generation as women outperform one another. But fulfilment is necessarily contingent on guidance from other British-Iranians; second-generation embodiment of the first generation's specific Iranian authenticity inevitably requires higher levels of intentionality when they are primarily socialised in a British cultural matrix. Thus, this ability to enact authenticity is precluded by a coherent community and access to "the objectified elements of [Iranian] culture",[142] penalising women like Nazanin for their familial dislocation. This contingency reflects the aforementioned risk in exacting an essentialist notion of non-Western authenticity that fails to account for inter-generational heterogeneity, creating a downward spiral of exclusion from which second-generation women may be unable to escape. Instead of accepting this fate, *Taarof* advocates a socially transformative reclamation of

[141] Mobasher, "Cultural Trauma" , 249.
[142] Mahdi, "Ethnic Identity", 22

second-generation British-Iranian women's ontologically hybrid transcultural agency, to counteract exclusionary stagnation resultant from strict enforcement of distinct cultural modes.

4.6: New Choreography

It is through Nazanin's critical reclamation of hybrid authentic agency that *Taarof* subverts the binary between liberal feminist and pious complicit women. This reaches the climax in the penultimate scene, in which Nazanin rearticulates ta'arof on her own terms. Whereas Sarah Ahmed has argued that the experience of shame foregrounds the alignment of the individual's moral ideals with the society in which they have transgressed them,[143] Nazanin critically realigns her ideals away from those imposed on her by her aunts. After an invitation to re-inscribe Iranian patriarchal gendered norms in the phrase "you will be proud to be one of us, *just like your father*,"[144] Nazanin's imagined child self suddenly appears and shoots them in turn, the colours of the Iranian flag grotesquely bursting from their bodies as their representative, authoritative power is obliterated.

FIGURE 2: RECLAMATION (STILL FROM TAAROF)

Back in the room, Banu enters and the aunts signal for Nazanin to redeem herself by engaging in ta'arof with her sister, offering her the maamoul. Instead of acquiescing and signalling that she is prepared to re-enter the family fold on their terms, Nazanin breaks the maamoul in two, offering half to Banu. They both eat simultaneously and Nazanin begins to laugh, eyes fixed on the disappointed aunts. This literal break from their imposed matrix of authenticity signals

[143] Sara Ahmed, "Shame Before Others" in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion,* Sara Ahmed (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 106.
[144] Olivia, *Taarof.*

a reclamation and re-articulation of the constraining demands of Iranian femininity, visible maamoul in Nazanin's ajar mouth as she rejoices unrestrained. It also rearticulates the demands of Western liberal feminism, not rejecting the Iranian drive to deference (easily condemned as anti-agential) but mobilising a new personal hybrid authenticity, the formation of which cannot be easily attributed to elements of either cultural positioning. Therefore, through this climactic scene, *Taarof* promotes subversive reclamation by the second generation of the gendered structures of authenticity that foreground the experiences of the first generation, productively transforming them to occupy new modes of being. This enaction of a hybrid ontology does not involve the totalised rejection of either Iranian or British modes of being, breaking the binary for an active re-articulation more appropriate to the lives of the second generation.

We also see through the reunification of Nazanin and Banu engaging with the new mode a hint toward greater solidarity between British-Iranian women who recognise the diversity of hybrid engagement with Iranian and British norms as a necessary heterogeneity as opposed to a threat to cultural authenticity. After this reclamation, the audience witnesses Nazanin back at her father's grave, reciting the Hafez poem and embracing her grief (and ironically her return to the fatherland through Hafez) in a way that is authentically personal and not performative. Thus, *Taarof* demonstrates the personally productive outcomes of affording second-generation British-Iranian women the agency to construct a personal authenticity predicated on Iranian cultural traditions, but not bound by them. The homeland in this way becomes a springboard for transcultural innovation, not stifling but invigorating women's agency.

This subversive interpretation of ta'arof relinquishes stable structural control, productively engaging in community creation and moulding something personal through the deliberate partial mobilisation of a cultural norm. The possibility of ta'arof being this reconfigured norm is discussed by Maghbouleh, who analyses its usage in a second-generation American-Iranian summer camp game as a form of agency and community creation.[145] Thus, *Taarof's* depiction of Nazanin's reclaimed agency reflects changes that are already occurring in the Iranian diaspora within the second-generation, claiming a greater level of autonomy in the cultural sphere in the creation of hybrid forms of authenticity. The value of individual construction of these new forms may equally be passed down in a mutually constitutive relationship through the generations for the preservation of a dynamic imagined Iran, fulfilling inherited responsibility.

[145] Maghbouleh, "The Ta'arof Tournament".

4.7: Finale

Through the positioning of lead character Nazanin in relation to her father, *Taarof* complicates the relationship between the critical tools of postcolonial hybridity and decolonial authenticity, revealing the necessity of both for second-generation British-Iranian women's liminal agency. It assists in equipping British-Iranian women with the analytical tools to engage productively with notions of authenticity by exposing the tension between the idealised homeland and the acceptance of patriarchy, moving beyond rigid, imposed conceptualisations for individual fulfilment. Moreover, *Taarof* subverts reductive modes of thinking that impose binaries on British-Iranian women as embodying either complicity in patriarchy, or specifically liberal feminism. Through attentiveness to the affective, sociocultural and gendered dimensions of hybrid embodiment and diasporic belonging, and Nazanin's re-articulation of ta'arof into a personal authenticity, *Taarof* enacts a critical intervention into these categories to provide a new mode of being actively empowering contemporary British-Iranian women.

Chapter 5 – Embodying Hybrid Authenticity: Farrah

5.1: Overture

In this chapter I discuss the work of Farrah Shekarchi-Khanghahi, a second-generation British-Iranian singer based in London. As of July 2020, she has released six singles and one music video in the genre R&B/Soul associated with DMY Recordings, an independent label championing the music of primarily people of colour.[146] This chapter begins by attending to the application of postcolonial hybridity and decolonial authenticity on Farrah's complex embodiment as a White-passing British-Iranian woman, which affords her privileges while situating her in a position of liminality. Progressing, through analysis of Farrah's musical influences, I argue that her works are subversive to the binary subjecting British-Iranian women to reductive categorisations of womanhood as either religious and complicit in patriarchy, or liberal feminists, embodying a distinct agency that resists binaries and incorporates multiple intersecting cultural locations. Finally, I show how through symbolic interaction with Farsi and Persian rugs, Farrah works to disrupt the separation of hybridity and authenticity, evoking both critical tools to challenge stable conceptualisations of binary British-Iranian womanhood.

5.2: Passing

Before discussing Farrah's intervention into the binary imposed on British-Iranian women, we must first consider the interaction of hybridity and authenticity in Farrah's racial 'passing', and the impact of this on her ability to intentionally embody Iranian-ness in a dominant culture that posits Whiteness at the top of the racial hierarchy. In opposition to Roxy Faridany, Farrah visually epitomises an attractive White woman, with blonde hair and blue eyes that render her Iranian heritage virtually indecipherable. This 'passing' means that subordinating processes of racialisation and colourism that mark darker-skinned Iranians as Other based on visual cues are significantly less likely to impact Farrah in the same way, who as a second-generation British-Iranian also has no Iranian accent to expose her. The power of Whiteness in allowing Iranians to pass as ethnically unmarked has been explored by Nilou Mostofi, who discussed the tendency of Iranian-Americans to cosmetically alter their bodies through surgery, contact lenses and hair-dying to escape discrimination, arguing "for Iranian-Americans, the 'whiter' the body, the more attractive the appearance, and the greater the ability for assimilation of the public face, which translates to success."[147]

[146] On their Instagram, https://www.instagram.com/dmyartists/?hl=en you can see all the artists currently represented – there are only 5, and Farrah is the only white person and only woman.
[147] Mostofi, "Who We Are", 694.

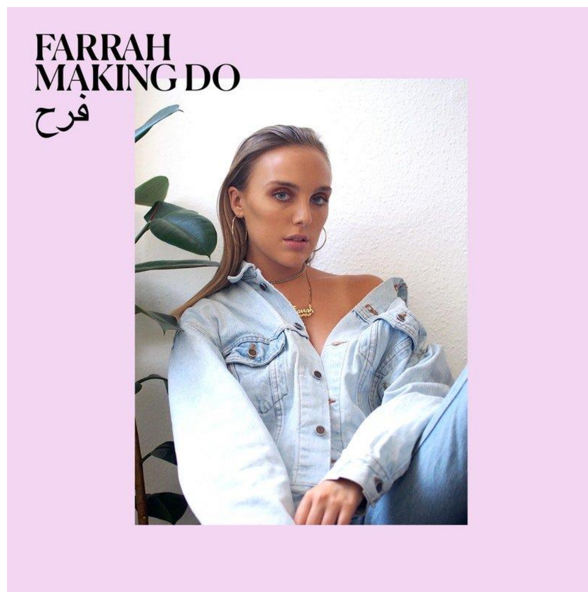

FIGURE 3: FARRAH'S MAKING DO SINGLE ALBUM COVER

This fulfilment of dominant White beauty standards unafforded to other British-Iranian women assists Farrah in the intentional performance of a hybrid identity without it being deemed threatening or deviant. In her sociological analysis of Iranian diasporic groups in the US and Germany, Sadeghi argues that "being 'unmarked' aids belonging, one's ethnic culture is considered an asset, or at least something that does not hinder one's ability to belong."[148] For Farrah, public performance of Iranian identity markers can be mobilised for self-promotion as she chooses, equally deploying a British identity to avoid being framed as British-Iranian and subsequently contending with the label's burden of representation.[149] This is further facilitated through the foregoing of her surname in her artistic persona, which would invariably mark her as not simply 'British' in the ethnicised sense; notably, the only media outlet to report Farrah's full name is *Kayhan Life*, a London-based magazine focusing on the global Iranian community.[150] However, this passing is not always beneficial; the obverse effect of existing on the margins of Whiteness has been examined by Maghbouleh, who contends that the specific racialisation of White-passing Iranians means that they exist in a discriminatory limbo, whereby claims regarding discriminatory practices become complicated through the supposed negation of visible racial difference as a factor.[151] Moreover, Margaret Hunter has discussed the tendency in ethnic communities to view darker-skinned people of colour as more ethnically authentic, causing feelings of illegitimacy for lighter-skinned individuals.[152] In this sense, Farrah's Whiteness both helps and hinders her belonging; it grants greater access to the dominant cultural matrix, while impeding claims to authentic Iranian identity (and the resultant marketable exoticisation

[148] Sadeghi, "Boundaries of Belonging," 121.
[149] Mercer, "Black Art and the Burden of Representation", 62.
[150] Kayhan Life, "Kayhan Life", *Linkedin,* accessed June 14, 2020, https://www.linkedin.com/company/kayhanlife/
[151] For this and a detailed discussion of the racialisation of diasporic Iranians in the US, see Neda Maghbouleh, *The Limits of Whiteness: Iranian Americans and the Everyday Politics of Race* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).
[152] Margaret Hunter, "The Persistent Problem of Colorism: Skin Tone, Status, and Inequality", *Sociology Compass* vol. 1, no. 1 (2002):8.

favoured in the music business). Farrah must simultaneously remind people that she is Iranian to claim authenticity to the diaspora, while downplaying it to claim belonging to the UK. However, this notwithstanding, the fact of passing generally grants her greater agency in the selectivity of intentional hybrid identity performance in her cultural production.

Farrah's cisgender heterosexual positioning further serves to situate her as non-threatening to the dominant discursive matrix. This non-threatening position can be employed as a tool for subversion, allowing Farrah to introduce socially transformative ideas into the mainstream without obstruction. Then upon exposure, her passing serves to "destabilize the regime of White male privilege" by revealing "both the performative dimensions of identity and the unreliability of visual regimes of recognition built on scientific notions of race, sex and biology."[153] As Elaine Ginsberg has noted, "when 'race' is no longer visible, it is no longer intelligible: if 'white' can be 'black,' what is white?"[154] Therefore, passing can be utilised by cultural producers like Farrah who exist at the limits of Whiteness to contribute to decolonisation and introduce divergent claims to British womanhood as unproblematically equated with White bodies.

Iranian diasporic cultural production is dominated by first-generation middle-aged men;[155] Farrah's music thus contributes to the expansion of the representative matrix to include invisibilised transcultural modes. Of course, Farrah's heterosexual positioning means that Iranian queer voices are not being directly elevated through her mainstream success, while her Whiteness means that browner British-Iranian bodies who do not fulfil these beauty standards are not being represented. Yet, however idealistic the notion may be, one may hope that this opening up of a socially transformative liminal creative space may in turn serve to amplify other marginalised voices. Farrah is only one small step; if she reaches mainstream success, she will be in a position to uplift other voices and further subvert cultural norms surrounding the invisible universal positioning of heteronormative White Britishness.

5.3: Facing the Music

As previously mentioned, British-Iranian women experience the imposition of a reductive binarisation of available subject positions by the hegemonic discursive framework, situating them as either complicit in patriarchy or liberal feminists. This results in a double alienation

[153] Catherine Squires and Daniel Brouwer, "In/discernible bodies: The politics of passing in dominant and marginal media", *Critical Studies in Media Communication* vol. 19, no. 3 (2002):285-286.
[154] Elaine Ginsberg, "Introduction: The Politics of Passing" in *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, ed. Elaine K. Ginsberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 8.
[155] Alinejad, "The Internet and Makings of Iranian-American-ness", 7.

toward both devoutly religious and Eurocentric liberal feminist interpretations of womanhood. In this section I will introduce the theme of binary subversion in Farrah's music through an analysis of her musical influences, arguing that her incorporation of both Iranian and Western elements results in the embodiment of a transformative hybrid agency.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, women cannot perform solo to mixed-gender crowds except under circumscribed conditions.[156] This possibility for exception is creatively utilised by women who take advantage of loopholes, such as the difficulty of controlling unofficial performance spaces, to enable their continued creativity.[157] With this context in mind, Farrah's choice of song as the medium by which to express herself is already contested, and hence political. This reveals the transcultural force of diaspora production, the liminal space enabling Farrah to utilise the more unrestrictive political climate of the UK while aligning her with the struggle for agency of women in Iran.

Farrah has cited a mix of influences, from Christina Aguilera to the classical Iranian violinist Homayoun Khorram, with her music incorporating a distinct mash-up of classic dance beats and Iranian instrumentalisation.[158] Citing beloved pre-Revolution Iran pop singer Googoosh as an influence is particularly salient, since, as Maghbouleh has noted, following "her de facto house arrest and ban after the 1979 Revolution, she became a secular, diasporic symbol of the repression of women."[159] Googoosh is frequently cited as "the embodiment of a lost 'golden' era of Iranian history"[160] whose strong nostalgic emotionality forms a bridge enabling transgenerational reiteration of the idealised homeland. But despite Googoosh's positioning in the imaginary as emblematic of a past modernity and greater agency for women, Farzaneh Hemmasi has discussed the contradictory narrative of Googoosh as equally one of self-conscious victimhood at the hands of men, both in her personal life and by state leaders.[161] Thus, the ambivalence of relations of women's agency, production and role in the national imaginary offers a site of reclamation for artists like Farrah who occupy a more ambiguous cultural positioning. In a sense, Farrah's production represents British-Iranian women achieving what Googoosh could not; agency subversive to patriarchal constraint. The

[156] Wendy S. DeBano, "Enveloping Music in Gender, Nation, and Islam: Women's Music Festivals in PostRevolutionary Iran", *Iranian Studies* vol. 38, no. 3, Music and Society in Iran (September 2005):442.
[157] Hemmasi, "Iran's Daughter and Mother Iran", 165.
[158] Natasha Phillips, "British-Iranian R&B Artist Farrah Releases Hot Debut Track: Interview", *Kayhan Life*, September 17, 2018, https://kayhanlife.com/culture/art/british-iranian-rb-artist-farrah-releases-hot-debut-track-interview/
[159] Maghbouleh, "Inherited Nostalgia", 214.
[160] Hemmasi, "Iran's Daughter and mother Iran", 159.
[161] Hemmasi, "Iran's Daughter and mother Iran".

interaction of this symbolism with Farrah's cited influences of Western musical icons of women's liberation and sexual agency, like Destiny's Child, create a hybrid mode of being where authenticity can be read as the distillation of feminist notions of self-realisation present in both the West and pre-Revolutionary Iran. In this way, Farrah situates herself between two poles of the binary, subverting the naturalised separation of Iranian and Western women in a new mode that accounts for the interplay between patriarchal reproduction and agency. I will return to this theme of binary subversion in the next section when considering Farrah's usage of symbolic interaction with Iranian identity markers.

5.4: Instruments of Hybridity

This section will consider the ways in which Farrah's symbolic mobilisation of Iranian identity markers complicates the distinction between postcolonial hybridity and decolonial authenticity. I will use the examples of Farsi and Persian rugs to demonstrate how Farrah's intentional performance of identity foregrounds a non-Western mode of being that forms a distinct amalgamation of the two critical tools. Finally, I will return to the question of binary subversion, applying the insights garnered through my analysis of hybridity and authenticity to show how Farrah's diasporic agency challenges rigid conceptualisations of womanhood.

Farsi

A salient way in which diasporic individuals make claims to authenticity is through the intentional usage of their home state language. From the outset of consumption individuals encounter Farsi, for the album covers of Farrah's singles include her name in its script alongside and sometimes in place of English. Furthermore, in song *Making Do,* listeners are instantly exposed to Farrah's intentional use of this Iranian identity marker by the sound of her father's voice opening the song, saying "Farrah, Salam,"[162] then returning at the song's close, saying "Khodahafez" and wishing farewell. This usage of her father's voice performs a dual function: firstly, as a distinct interpellation from the fatherland into Iranian-ness through the most authentic of symbolic interactions, language. Additionally, coupled with this rooting is the juxtaposition of unintelligible Farsi with Farrah's Whiteness, presenting a hybridity that subverts stable notions of Britishness by rupturing the association of authentic British music with totalized aural decipherability. This is poignant when considering Britain's animosity toward Middle Eastern sounding languages as associated with Islamic domestic terrorism, an uncomfortability that is provoked in song *Under Pressure* which opens with a brief vocalising

[162] Farrah, *Making Do* (London: DMY Recordings, 2018), Song.

soundscape conveying Islamic prayer.[163] Rejection of this associating fear of Islam and socially enforced English language hegemony on diaspora populations enacts a critical reclamation of authentic subjugated epistemologies that recognises the intimacy of Persian culture with that of Islam, while subverting the two-worlds notion that modern Iran and the West are diametrically opposed.

Persian Rugs

Alongside identity markers such as language, interaction with symbolic objects as a tool for authenticity by Iranians has been considered by Aliakbar Jafari and Christina Goulding, who argue that "objects and images may act as a silent language that can communicate notions of self and identity."[164] Throughout Farrah's visual presentation, she utilises the image of the Persian rug, the most well-known (and exoticised) historical export of Persian culture, as a signifier for authentic Iranian identity.[165] This claim to pre-modern Iranian authenticity merges with British cultural markers to create a mode of being that incorporates the critical tools of both post and decolonial lines of thought to critique the coherent subject of British womanhood.

For example, in the music video to Farrah's most recent single *ID,* the strategic positioning of the Persian rug as the literal backdrop for the video situates Farrah's positionality as unequivocally Iranian, providing the contextualisation for consumer interpretation. As the song begins, a distinctive Persian flute line merges with an 808 dance beat and the audience sees Farrah striding toward four Persian rugs hanging from the ceiling and spread on the floor, very dimly lit from above.[166] This initial impression disrupts easy visual situating by evoking an image of an Oriental exotic treasure-trove while at the same time placing the viewer indisputably in a London warehouse. This location is furthered by thoroughly London-centred opening lyrics, "5PM don't work for you, drop my plans, still in zone 2", referencing the city's public transport zones. Much like the introductory juxtaposition of imagined luxury past and modern reality in *Taarof,* this opening immediately forms a distinct hybrid of multiple temporalities, class associations, musical genres and geographies. This tool at once situates the

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[163] Farrah, *Under Pressure* (London: DMY Recordings, 2019), Song.
[164] Jafari and Goulding, "'We are not terrorists!", 86.
[165] For a discussion on the Western preoccupation with Persian rug authenticity, see Patricia L. Baker, "Twentieth-century Myth-making: Persian Tribal Rugs", *Journal of Design History* vol. 10, no. 4, Craft, Culture and Identity (1997):363-374.
[166] Farrah, *ID (Official Video)*, directed by Xiao-Wei Lu (London: DMY Recordings, 2020), Music Video, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NAfWGdqXC6g

listener in the liminal space with Farrah and critiques the stability of discourses presenting the UK and Iran as necessarily dichotomous.

As *ID* reaches the climax of its first chorus, the lighting on Farrah and the rugs is brightened and we see her defiantly stare out to the line "If I can't be, how you want me, fit that ID, *what do we do?*" This conspicuous reference to Farrah's Iranian identity challenges the consumer to

FIGURE 4: SCREENSHOT OF FARRAH'S ID MUSIC VIDEO

recalibrate their notions of Britishness to account for the hybrid articulation on screen. Her multiple positioning dissolves the imagined distance between the Self and Other envisioned in Orientalist modes of thinking that posit Middle Eastern women as oppressed, alien objects of allure, to be spoken for but not listened to.[167] As such, through ID's visuality, Farrah embodies *and* mocks the reductive exotic sexualisation of the Orientalised gaze while mobilising identity markers that position herself as authentically belonging to the Iranian diasporic community. By doing this, Farrah situates herself within and between the two patriarchal societies, challenging the fixity of their discordance while criticising the objectification of women as common to both.

As with *Taarof's* centring of Hafez, Farrah's symbolic usage of Persian rugs aligns with the diaspora's preoccupation with situating Iranian identity in an era of Persian empire.[168] As Alinejad and Ghorashi have contended, this selectivity distances diasporic Iranians from the

[167] Maryam Khalid, "Gender, orientalism and representations of the 'Other' in the War on Terror", *Global Change, Peace & Security: formerly Pacifica Review: Peace, Security & Global Change* vol. 23, no. 1 (2011):15-29.
[168] Alinejad, "The Internet and Makings of Iranian-American-ness", 70.

negativity associated with the current Islamic regime, while promoting a positive discourse of "strength, wealth and power."[169] However, we should not read Farrah's mobilisation of a pre-Revolutionary Iranian authenticity as incongruous with her aforementioned Islamic allusions. It is more helpful to recognise that regardless of the Iranian diasporic tendency toward condemnation of Iran's current regime, both the imagined ancient Persia *and* Islam are now irrevocably part of Iran's rich history. This entanglement is demonstrated further when considering that the Persian rugs displayed for the backdrop of *ID*, upon closer inspection, contain no fauna and as such may be considered Islamic. As such, Farrah's search for authenticity manifests itself in a hybridity that not only incorporates disparate elements of the home and host culture, but also different configurations of Iranian-ness itself in the reclamation of non-Western modes.

Moreover, the 2016 Iranian imprisonment of British-Iranian charity worker Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Britain's failure to extradite her grimly displayed to women the stakes of perceived transgression of the Republic's regime.[170] Many women openly opposing the current government of Iran are unable to return for fear of prosecution. The transnational character of diasporic cultural production means that Farrah's music is inevitably accessible in Iran. Therefore, subtle choices in Farrah's self-presentation during her *ID* video, like the Islamic rugs, can be interpreted as an attempt to navigate both a hybrid agency and the possibility of return without disruption. Furthermore, although Farrah is presented in a sexualised way throughout *ID*, her attire is generally loose-fitting and conservative in comparison to R&B video trends. Despite our lack of access to the reasoning behind these choices, I interpret them as Farrah's "effort to negotiate a sense of cultural history with present-day circumstances."[171] In this way, Farrah's subversive negotiation between binaries involves the unapologetic reproduction of some patriarchal hierarchies alongside a critical reclamation of agency ungranted to Orientalised women in the dominant discursive matrix, embodying both simultaneously. It equally foregrounds the interaction between historical and contemporary Iran in the imagination of second-generation cultural producers as they mediate between

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[169] Alinejad and Ghorashi, "From Bridging to Building", 64.
[170] Zaghari-Ratcliffe was accused of plotting against the Iranian government and sentenced to 5 years in prison. She has been temporarily released as of March 2020 due to fears of the Coronavirus being spread among detainees.
[171] Maghbouleh, "Inherited Nostalgia", 207.

various iterations of Iran and Britain in the third space, moving away from a totalising politicised occupation with Islam toward an agency of simply being.[172]

Toward the end of *ID*, Farrah is pictured sitting atop a pile of rolled up rugs, donning an urban

Figure 5: Screenshot of Farrah's ID Music Video

outfit culturally associated with American R&B legends such as Gwen Stefani and TLC. This explicit recognition of the navigation of Western and Iranian influences culminates with Farrah's dual embodiment of both: literally atop her foundation of Iranian heritage and selectively draped in the garb of fierce American women. In this moment she comes full circle, subverting reductive binaries through a bricolage of transcultural authentic agency. Crucially, Farrah's music, while consumed by the Iranian diaspora, is not made with this group in mind; rather, her goal is to break into the mainstream British music scene. Therefore, her cultural production may subvert hegemonic binarised, ethnicised conceptualisations of British womanhood by introducing embodiment by a woman who is equally British and Iranian, not existing between two worlds but experimenting with multiple subject positions to create a new mode of hybrid authenticity.

5.5: Curtain Call

Farrah's music and visual presentation can be seen to enact a critical intervention into liberal feminist binary constructions of womanhood which position Iranian diasporic women as either religious and complicit in their own oppression, or revolutionary condemners of the totality of Iranian culture. Through the specific utilisation of Farsi, the symbolism of Persian rugs, and

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[172] Fran Lloyd, "Revisiting Arab Women's Diasporic Art Practices in 1990s London", *Middle East Institute,* April 5, 2012, https://www.mei.edu/publications/revisiting-arab-womens-diasporic-art-practices-1990s-london

interaction with multiple feminist influences, Farrah positions herself as subversive to both rigid notions of British womanhood *and* modern Iranian state repression of women's agency. In doing so, she situates herself between the trajectories of postcolonial hybridity and decolonial authenticity, mobilising both to form a distinct diasporic mode of being. Despite her relatively privileged positioning as a White-passing woman assisting in her ability to embody British-Iranian womanhood in an intentionally hybrid way, through introduction into the mainstream, Farrah may serve to transform social norms that position racialised voices as inferior and un-British. A quote from Maghbouleh's work on second-generation nostalgia through Iranian pop music is pertinent: "music is tradition, music is culture."[173] Through the creation and consumption of British-Iranian music like Farrah's, second-generation women may claim their agential liminal positioning as the product of the ambivalent interplay of competing patriarchal societies and through doing so, work to transform both.

[173] Maghbouleh, "Interited Nostalgia", 210.

Authentic Ontological Hybridity: Conclusion

Through my analysis, I have shown that both *Taarof* and Farrah's music represent a specific form of subversive agency that challenges reductive binary conceptualisations of British-Iranian womanhood. *Taarof* does this by attending to the affective, sociocultural and gendered dimensions of loss and belonging, revealing the contingencies of British-Iranian women's fulfilment of non-Western authenticity resulting from existing on the threshold of two interacting cultures. Farrah's music does this by exposing the ambivalent effect of racial passing on British-Iranian women's ability to enact a British identity and wage claims to diasporic belonging, while intentionally mobilising a host of variant cultural identity markers to perform a distinct transcultural womanhood. I have argued that both of these works achieve this subversive quality through an articulation of liminal agency that implicates both the postcolonial critical tool of hybridity and the decolonial re-centring of non-Western modes of being.

But when considering postcolonial critique on diasporic cultural production in the 80s and 90s, the positionality of creative practitioners has already been framed in terms of liminality and intentional doubleness. This was the foundation for hybridity's force in understanding the production of postcolonial subjects and first-generation diaspora populations during that timeframe. So how is my analysis of *Taarof* and Farrah different from the previous considerations of first-generation postcolonial subjects whose work has also been framed by these concepts? Why does it matter?

What these two productions do that is so important is they do not only posit the question of hybridity as a way of negotiating different ways of being or different cultures, a consideration that has traditionally dominated theoretical considerations of liminal positioning. They also attend to hybridity as an ontological and affective condition that second-generation creative practitioners are being born into and culturally raised within. Rather than conceptualising the first generation's struggle of being faced with a new cultural context, new language, and pervasive discursive division between the West and the East (an encounter which demands a negotiation of identity), second-generation individuals are born into an ontological and affective condition which is at its foundation one of hybridity. Of course, this does not mean that second-generation British-Iranian women are not also negotiating different cultural contexts through their cultural production. But beyond that, it moves away from hybridity's theoretical preoccupation with cultural interaction to recognise that for ontological hybrids, engagement with dual cultures is a distinct mode of being that reflects their equal formative

role in the creation of transcultural identities. By virtue of being born into a diaspora they exist as a bricolage and so this mode of being is somewhat unremarkable. It is less about the imposition of one culture on a population that has traditionally engaged with another; the second generation have an affinity with both and so construct and perform their identities in this way. For British-Iranian women, this means that their (both subversive and reproductive) interaction with multiple patriarchal cultural systems is a necessary constituent of their existence; as such, their positioning breaks free of constraining binaries that equate agency with comprehensive commitment to one rigid subject position. This can then be used to critique both societies that they are a part of.

The productions I have analysed also incorporate the introduction of hybridity into the decolonial authentic embodiment of non-Western modes of being. In this framing, authenticity is not situated solely in terms of the reproduction of specific non-Western modes of being, but in the amalgamation of these modes with Western modes in a tapestry that reflects the subjective positioning of the individual. This bricolage is decolonial and non-Western in itself, for it foregrounds an embodiment of diaspora subjecthood that subverts Western epistemological hegemony by destabilising its naturalised coherence as a whole separable from other modes. In this way, hybridity and authenticity do not need to be seen as comprehensively distinct tools for addressing diaspora existence. Their mutual cooperation is actually necessary for a nuanced conceptualisation of second-generation identity performance, since diasporic commitment to a rigid form of authenticity may inadvertently deny it to all of the second generation as a result of their ontological positioning. Authenticity without allowance for personal hybridity is circumscription and ineffective in both theorising the lived reality and analysing the cultural production of contemporary creative practitioners.

The two cultural productions that I have analysed have dealt with second-generation ontological hybridity and its interaction with authenticity in different ways. When we consider *Taarof*, the way in which these themes are manifested focuses more on the tension between the ontological hybridity of second-generation British-Iranian women and the imposed authenticity of the first generation as incorporating a specific cultural mode of being from the diaspora. Nazanin's failure to perform a prescribed authenticity reveals the difficulties of existing at the threshold of cultural interaction when authentic second-generation positionalities are seen as extensions of the first-generation experience and not distinct positionalities in their own right. Her embodiment of hybridity is enacted through her rejection of necessitated clash between Iranian and British cultural norms. Through Nazanin's reclaimed

ta'arof, she displays the hybridity not of cultural negotiation but of ontological doubleness, recognising the inseparability of her subjecthood and a unique transcultural mode of being. Then regarding Farrah, the consistent embodiment of ontological hybridity is clear throughout her work, from the casualness with which she mentions multiple, seemingly antithetical musical influences, to the range of visual props that bestrew her music video with variant representations of identity positioning. It recognises the difficulty in advocating one form of authentic Iranian-ness that does not account for the interaction of the idealised pre-Revolutionary Persian Empire and the present-day Islamic Republic, both irrevocably imbricated in the hybrid reality of Iran as a homeland. Farrah claims transcultural diasporic authenticity through engagement with multiple incarnations of Iran and the West, unapologetically embodying ontological hybridity and, like *Taarof,* promoting a distinct second-generation understanding of British-Iranian womanhood. In this way, *Taarof* represents the invisible processes of diasporic inclusion/exclusion behind Farrah's ability to achieve hybridity unproblematically; it shows the foundation, while Farrah displays the ultimate incarnation.

Through both of these productions, we see that for second-generation British-Iranian women, finding personal authenticity in both diasporic and host cultures does not mean that their ability to authentically embody Iranian cultural norms in their diasporic production is hampered. Following this recognition, we can move away from the preoccupation with cultural clash to focus on the socially transformative potential of cultural production that engages with these forms of transcultural agency to disrupt hegemonic cultural norms that exclude diaspora positionalities. This is where my contribution to existing research on Iranian diasporic cultural production lies; my interpretation of hybridity's ontological relevance alongside notions of authenticity revitalises its usefulness for a more nuanced analysis of the specificity of subversive second-generation cultural production.

Moving forward, an increase in scholarship that attends to the specific hybrid ontological positionality of second-generation Iranian diasporic individuals is essential to further complicate hybridity's usage and modify it for contemporary relevance. In particular, second-generation British-Iranian women are a group that has been theoretically neglected; as they continue to engage in practices of cultural production, there is opportunity for further inquiry into how ontological hybridity is manifested in specific transcultural practices. An attendance to how they are practicing authenticity in relation to their hybrid positioning will give a greater

understanding as to how these two critical tools can be effectively mobilised together for an understanding of contemporary diasporic identity formation.

Moreover, we must also continue to take note of the socially transformative work of second-generation British-Iranian women's cultural production that challenges stable, ethnicised conceptualisations of British womanhood, and how their specific positioning places them as radical critics of both diaspora and host state inequalities. Culturally productive practices that embody this liminal, authentic, ontological hybridity pose a threat from within to the exclusionary dimensions of British cultural citizenship. As such, attention to these practices serves as a foundation from which other creative practitioners may engage in subversion. Furthermore, funding, advertising and circulation through social media distinguishes second-generation cultural productive practices from those of the first generation most primarily analysed. Attendance to the specificity of socially transformative potential that this institutional shift holds is also highly relevant for the creation of more nuanced theory and understanding. As the encompassing reach of online content grows, the availability of subversive work for general consumption will only continue to expand; we must be perceptive to its impact on the mainstream cultural matrix, for comprehensive theory and potential for greater action.

Second-generation authentic, ontologically hybrid women have something unique to offer, both in terms of theory and social transformation. Farrah asked, "*what do we do?*" We keep paying attention.

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