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From Saints to Sinners: Identity and celebrity in a contemporary Iranian television serial

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January, 2008. Strolling through the evening streets of Tehran between August and October 2006, the flicker of television screens in homes, shops and cafes would have caught your eye, all showing *Narges*, the summer serial. Eavesdropping on conversations in restaurants and coffee shops, you would have heard people discussing the ill-fated love affair of the young protagonists, Nasrin and Behrooz. Browsing any one of the many newsstands on the streets of Tehran over the summer, the plethora of magazines and newspapers that featured *Narges*, supplying a veritable smorgasbord of tabloid tittle-tattle, further attested to its popularity and impact. These publications offered interviews with the stars, the stars' own analyses of and reactions to the characters in *Narges*, speculation about plot developments and responses to the death of Poupak Goldareh, the star of the show. The fascination with its stars continued after the serial finished as it emerged that a sex tape featuring one of the stars of *Narges*, Zahra Amira Ebrahimi, had found its way into the public sphere. The story received considerable coverage online and a certain amount in the international press. The Iranian media also reported the story, although they did so somewhat obliquely.[i]

The themes and characters of *Narges*

The following is a brief sketch of the twists and turns of the storyline of *Narges*, aimed primarily at introducing major themes and concerns of the program. *Narges* revolves around two families in present-day Tehran, the Shokats and the Mohtashams, and a limited circle of their friends. The Shokats consist of Mahmoud Shokat, a prosperous but tyrannical cloth merchant, his wife, Azam, their daughters Pari and Zohreh and their husbands, Esmail and Majid, and their wayward son, Behrooz. Narges

and Nasrin Mohtasham live with their ailing mother, their father having died the year before the serial opens.

Nasrin and Behrooz meet secretly, fall in love and plan to get married. Inevitably their families discover their relationship and oppose it vehemently, though on different grounds. At this stage, Mahmoud Shokat is blissfully unaware of his son's infatuation with Nasrin and his decision to marry her. Eventually, the two mothers and sisters decide that since Nasrin and Behrooz are determined to get married, it would be better to allow them to wed, albeit secretly, rather than face the possibility that they might marry without their families' permission and so they arrange their wedding.

Shokat does eventually discover the deception in which his family have become embroiled and is predictably furious. He comes to the wedding reception and upon seeing all his family there without his permission, explodes in rage. His anger causes Mrs. Mohtasham, who has been ill for some time, to have a heart attack and she dies that night. It is at this point that the enmity between Narges and Shokat is truly cemented as she blames him for her mother's death and he condemns her as a presumptuous busybody, determined to destroy him and his family. **[Video 1: Shokat discovers the secret wedding plans http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZzfgMnUDlg] [Video 2: Tragedy at Nasrin's wedding http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHCPATYYm2w]**

In the interim, Narges has fallen in love with her employer, engineer Ehsan Saeedi who recently divorced the materialistic, ambitious and seductive Shaghayegh. Concurrently, Azam discovers that Shokat has secretly taken a second wife, Forough, whom he has been keeping in an apartment just outside Tehran. Devastated, she tells Shokat that he must divorce Forough if their marriage is to have any chance of surviving. In an attempt to finally destroy Nasrin and Behrooz's marriage, and to settle old scores, Shokat sends Behrooz to Italy to work for his brother Ahmed. In a convoluted plan to force Ahmed to pay him a long-standing debt, Shokat asks Behrooz to (temporarily) marry his niece, Arezou, all the time hoping that Behrooz will consequently divorce Nasrin.

Meanwhile, Nasrin discovers that she is pregnant and Shokat, fearing the consequences, coerces her into having an abortion. Nasrin duly goes to an unsavory-looking backstreet hovel for an illegal abortion where she descends into a hellish

underworld, surrounded by hags and crones, but cannot bring herself to do it. Behrooz, however, decides to stay in Italy where, though as an illegal immigrant he spent his first months in some kind of refugee camp, he has now found work and freedom from his father. Nasrin divorces Behrooz and keeps the baby, bringing her up without him, with help from the newly married Narges and Ehsan.

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

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

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

Reception in Iran and government involvement

It was clear that *Narges* was a cultural sensation, one that had engulfed the entire nation, garnering enormous popularity and traversing the boundaries of class, gender and age, uniting the country in an orgy of televisual pleasure. It was obviously a significant presence in the lives of the Iranians I met, and understanding something about the place of this serial, and particularly its stars, in people's social lives and imaginations is a productive avenue to explore the ways in which identities in contemporary Iran are constructed and contested.

This was particularly significant in terms of individuals' relation to the state. Television in Iran is, theoretically, all state-controlled. In reality more and more people have satellite dishes and the reach of foreign broadcasters is ever greater. However, the only terrestrial channels are those of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting and they generally have the largest audiences. The state makes little attempt to conceal its ideological standpoint in much of its output but as a dramatic serial, any sense of propaganda in *Narges* was bound to be subtler, if only marginally so. However, the fact that it was made by the government did, to a lesser or greater extent, color people's reactions and so forms an important piece of any analysis of the relationship between Iranians and the regime.

Narges and the star system

This article will examine the role that the stars of the dramatic television serial *Narges* play in this constructing of identities, and the interplay between these identities, in Iran today. Television is such a ubiquitous presence in contemporary Iran that it can be said to have become one of the elements that structures social relations, which is to say a part of a public culture through which (or indeed, against which) social identities emerge. Television and its stars, along with others form of mass media, have created "new environments for self-development and mobilization" and provide an invaluable context within with to examine identity.[ii]

Firstly, it will examine the blurring and narrativizing of the space between the public and private domains of celebrities. This will draw on the notion of "non-

reciprocal intimacy" whereby as modernity loosens sense of self and as central institutions are no longer able to grant ready-made identities to individuals, in their search for some kind of stable identity, people increasingly seek intimacy from afar and use mediated forms of communication to construct these identities, a process in which stardom is the ideal self-locating mechanism. Secondly, it will examine the place of stars in the context of a discourse of Shi'i martyrology, exploring whether celebrities have to some degree replaced religious figures and 'martyrs' in the public sphere. Finally, it will explore a recent sex tape scandal involving one of the stars of *Narges* through the notion of "cultural intimacy."

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

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

In conjunction with the broader re-evaluation of the role of popular culture and mass media in society, recent work has led to new conceptualizations of stardom. Though there are still those who regard stardom and celebrities in a very negative light, a

more nuanced approach to this phenomenon has emerged. As the very nature of stardom and celebrity has altered, so too has our understanding of it. While it is clear that fame is not unique to the contemporary world—'celebrities' in one form or another have always existed—what *has* changed is "the manner by which symbolic forms are produced and the contexts in which they are consumed."[v] As with the study of television more broadly, any analysis of stars must focus on "their structured polysemy, that is, the finite multiplicity of meanings and affects they embody and the attempt so to structure them that some meanings and affects are foregrounded and others are masked or displaced."[vi]

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

Marshall's study is, however, exclusively concerned with celebrity in the Western world, specifically in the United States. In Iran the status of television stars is somewhat different. Iranian cinema is renowned the world over. However, many of the films that receive such critical acclaim on the international film festival circuit are never shown in Iran. A limited number of Iranian films and carefully chosen and censored foreign imports are screened in cinemas to a limited audience. Iranians' exposure to film stars, both foreign and domestic, is far more restricted, therefore, than that of audiences in countries such as America.

In contrast, approximately 98% of households in Iran own a television set and so the population's awareness of and familiarity with television stars is much greater than that of their cinematic counterparts. Any sense, therefore, that their glamour or "aura of

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

The meaning of stardom in Iranian serials perhaps more closely mirrors that of American daytime "soap operas" than any other form of Western television. Jeremy Butler agues that daytime soap opera has no true "star system." Rather there is a "feeble system of media texts, a circumscribed intertextuality" in which individual actors are "more or less equally prominent/obscure in the multitudinous narrative lines."[ix] There is no sense of a 'star vehicle' and thus "while the cinema sells narrative images of stars, the soap opera sells solely the characters as the narrative, thus de-emphasizing the importance of actors as performers or 'stars'."[x] This is largely true in *Narges* - no single actor in the serial had the celebrity cachet to carry the program alone and *Narges* was in no way a 'star vehicle' that showcased any one single actor.

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

> the soap opera actor differs because he/she has little or no star image outside of the character he/she plays. The intertextuality of the film star - his/her appearance in promotion, publicity, previous films, previous interviews/reviews - cannot be presumed for the soap opera star. Each magazine article must first *create* a soap actor's star image - his/her image

> outside of the context of the character he/she plays - and, having first separated image and character, must then compare/contrast that star image with that character.[xi]

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

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

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

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

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

[Video 3 Nasrin caught in a lie http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBZUFlHA4zo]

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

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

The selective/perfect/problematic typology emphasizes the way in which stardom can be used by individuals as a "stabilizing anchor" for the construction of identities in a world in which "modernity has loosened our sense of self."[xvi] It is in stardom that "we meet, non-reciprocally, the 'faces' who help us to form our social and personal identities."[xvii] The emphasis on the perfect fit between Poupak Goldareh and Narges serves to highlight the 'ideal' of the Islamic citizen to which the viewers of *Narges*

should aspire. In contrast, Hassan Pourshirazi's attempts to distance himself from the character he played functions to underline the undesirable nature of Shokat's character. By stressing the similarities between the 'real' Goldareh and Narges, and the disparities between Solouki and Behrooz, Nouri and Nasrin and Pourshirazi and Shokat, the mediated discourse surrounding these stars is instrumental in the creation of the 'ideals' that act as anchors in the construction of identities.

From Princess Diana…

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

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

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

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

Walking the streets of Tehran today, the evidence of this emphasis on martyrdom is immediately apparent. Christopher de Bellaigue describes asking for directions to a friend's house on Martyr Khoshbakht Alley: "Well, you go down Martyr Abbasian Street, turn right into Martyr Araki Street, and then turn left immediately after the Martyr Paki General Hospital…."[xx] Iran's highways and byways map the transformation of Tehran into an Islamic revolutionary space where martyrdom became state policy. Not only do the streets commemorate martyr upon martyr, their likenesses adorn buildings everywhere in the form of posters and murals, gazing down upon the city as its citizens go about their daily business. These pictures are essential to discourse of martyrdom: "Martyrdom is meaningless without memorialization, and memorialization is not possible

without a photograph."[xxi] They play a key role in bringing death into everyday life by introducing these images into the lives of people who never knew or ever saw the dead martyr. In this way, martyrdom has become a 'mediated experience' in Iran, its presence seeping into the lived reality of daily life, but without the necessity of first-hand experience.

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

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

The newspaper coverage of *Narges* included numerous articles about Goldareh. Obviously there could be no interviews with the star and so instead they included

interviews with her co-stars discussing their feelings about her, interviews with her husband and her parents and articles consisting of letters that members of the public had written about her. These articles had headlines such as: "Poupak has become and must remain a legend," "Poupak came to me in my dreams clad in a white *chador*" and "Poupak Goldareh had a soaring beauty" and there were many entitled "Memories of Poupak." The article headed "Poupak came to me in my dreams in a white *chador*" was an interview with Setareh Eskandari, the actress who replaced Poupak, in which she discussed her feelings about taking over the role of Narges in the circumstances. Eskandari explained that she had sought Goldareh's permission before accepting the part. She went to the hospital where Goldareh lay in a coma, poured out her heart to her and some days later Goldareh appeared to her in her sleep, wearing a white *chador*, to give her blessing to Eskandari's taking the role. The significance of this vision is explained by Michael Fisher's descriptions of the days preceding the Revolution. Fischer writes of how men went into the streets dressed in white shrouds which signified their readiness to be martyred. [xxvi] The image of Poupak in a white *chador* therefore not only invokes a sense of holiness and purity, but also has clear associations with the revolutionary discourse of martyrdom. From very early on in the serial itself then, the character of Narges is firmly embedded in this discourse. This provided a solid foundation for the subsequent portrayal of Poupak the actress as a quasi-martyr following her death in a car crash and further cemented the 'perfect fit' between Poupak and the character of Narges**.**

[Video 4: Narges prays in a white chador
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IuwKhkXZlSI]

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

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

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

In their remarks, they all sound at least quasi-cynical about the martyr complex—not, presumably, the sort of attitude encouraged by the government. Perhaps the all-pervasiveness of the discourse of martyrdom has rendered it a less compelling narrative. The notion of reverse "cultural intimacy" will be discussed a greater length in the next section but it is worth noting at this stage. Martyrdom is strongly inscribed in the world's perception of Iran, largely as a result of the Iran-Iraq war, but my informants' remarks suggest a sense of weariness with this image of Iran, an image from which they seek to distance themselves. The press, and *Narges* itself, presented Poupak Goldareh and her death in such as way as to confer the image of the martyr upon her, perhaps in an attempt to revitalize a discourse that though undoubtedly still powerful, is, in relation to the state, less influential than previously. Their reactions represent a desire, replicated in their reactions to a sex tape scandal involving one of the actresses in *Narges*, to disassociate themselves from the official public culture of the Islamic Republic in the eyes of me, an external observer. **[Video 5 Poopak Goldareh's last scene and cast tribute to her http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cKfyRKTHLEE]**

…to Paris Hilton

Shortly after the final episode of *Narges* was broadcast, a private film of the 25-year old actress Zahra Amir Ebrahimi, who played Zohre, one of Shokat's daughters, in *Narges*, having sex was widely distributed throughout Iran. The film was available on the Internet, on pirated DVDs and on mobile phones. The twenty-minute sex tape was made two years ago and shows Ebrahimi and her then fiancé at the flat they used to share. Ebrahimi has denied that she is the woman in the tape, claiming that it was made by her vengeful ex-fiancé who wishes to destroy her career. In an interview with British newspaper, *The Guardian*, she said: "I watched the film after I heard about the fuss from colleagues and the girl in it is not me. I admit there are some similarities to the character I played in *Narges*. It is possible to use studio make-up to have a person look like me. I have some knowledge of montage techniques and I know you can create a new face by distorting the features of another person."[xxvii]

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

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

resume, you will see that I have taken part in mainly spiritual or religious films and programs."[xxviii] In contrast to stars such as Paris Hilton, whose careers have thrived on such scandals, Ebrahimi's career has been devastated by the allegations. According to several of my informants, at least two serials in which she starred have been cancelled as a result of the tape and she seems unlikely to be cast in many productions for the foreseeable future.

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

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

Andrew Shryock's reworking of Herzfeld's notion of "cultural intimacy" provides a productive framework within which to understand the responses of my informants. In his original discussion of cultural intimacy, Herzfeld stresses the centrality of "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation," drawing attention to the fact that cultural intimacy may at any moment "erupt into public life."[xxxii] Herzfeld argues that embarrassment and an uncomfortable self-recognition are the key markers to cultural intimacy, sentiments which describe the collective representation of intimacy. The less literally face-to-face

the society we inhabit, the more obviously cultural idioms become simulacra of social relations."[xxxiii] This becomes increasingly relevant in a world in which mass media are absolutely central to all forms of self-representation. Shryock's re-interpretation of cultural intimacy in the context of mass media is predicated on a world in which *everyone* is involved in projects of self-representation and uses it to address such things as constructs of abomination, 'public secrets' and sensitivities to what outsiders may be thinking or saying.

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

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

Soheila, a woman in her thirties, commented that this was not the first time that a tape of this kind had been made in Iran. She said that these sorts of things had been happening for a while in Iranian society but that this was the first time that such a tape's existence had been publicly acknowledged, and it was only in the instance of Zahra Amir Ebrahimi that the authorities decided to do something about it because they were so

shocked by it. This apparent acknowledgement, and the emphasis in the press that the Tehran's chief prosecutor and the Attorney General have been involved in the investigation into the tape, suggest a desire to make an example of this case. In an atmosphere in which the regime is increasingly concerned about Western influence on Iran's youth, attempts on the part of the authorities to shore up Iran's moral foundations are not surprising.[xxxiv]

My informants' insistence on their tolerant attitude towards Ebrahimi's sexual activities seems very much tailored to local perceptions of outsiders' attitudes toward Iran. In this sense, it can be seen as a kind of a *reverse* cultural intimacy, one that is predicated on a sensitivity towards foreigners constructing Iran solely in terms of a brittle Islamic morality. In the case of someone such as Soheila, a cosmopolitan young woman working at the British Council, these might well be exactly the types of stereotype that would embarrasses her, an embarrassment which might possibly inform her discussion of sexuality with me, an outsider. Their reactions seemed designed to dissociate themselves from the official culture of the Islamic Republic, not simply in terms of a dichotomy based on a 'censorious regime' and a 'tolerant public' but official culture in a more general public sense, inextricably linked to outsiders' perceptions of Iran.

Where do we go from here?

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

Richard Dyer's typology of the perfect/selective/problematic fit between stars and the characters that they play provides one means by which to analyze their role in the construction of identities. The extensive mediated discourse around stars leads to a sense of "non-reciprocal intimacy," an intimacy based on the one-way communication of media

coverage of these stars, a feeling that fans 'know' the stars. This provides a point of stability around which to secure identities. By setting themselves up in opposition to the negative qualities of the characters that they played and pointing out the analogies between the characters' virtues and their own, they were established as ideals, role models, examples for the viewers of *Narges*.

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

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

My informants sought to distance themselves from the perceptions of Iran that they imagined outsider observers such as myself to have. Their wariness of the efforts to integrate Poupak Goldareh into a wider discourse of martyrdom and their insistence on their lack of censure of Zahra Amir Ebrahimi further point to a desire to challenge the public identities of Iranians constructed through the discourse of the Islamic Republic.

Iran is a country in flux. Though the Islamic Republic does not look in any danger of crumbling in the near future, the regime's project of creating a nation of ideal

Islamic citizens is faltering. Modernity, which despite what many of its critics would argue, has been a powerful force in the Islamic Republic, inevitably leads to a re-examining of identities. As the familiar centralizing institutions around which people have constructed their identities change or fall away, identities must be reconstructed and renegotiated. As the frame of reference or circumstances change, so must familiar identities be rearticulated.

My informants' responses to *Narges* generally and to its stars specifically indicate a deep unease with the collective public identity constructed through the 'official culture' of the Islamic Republic. Almost thirty years after the Revolution and the profound identity crisis in Iran that both heralded and accompanied it, the ambiguity surrounding the construction of identity persists. The question is further complicated by a new generation who have grown up entirely under the Islamic Republic but who have had far more contact with world beyond Iran, interacting with numerous other cultures and different versions of modernity, leading to "hybrid/hyphenated identities, often further compounded by ancestral, linguistic and religious differences in Iran."[xxxv]

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

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

[ii] Karen A. Cerulo. 1997. Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*. 23: 398.
[iii] Stephan Hinerman. 2001. Star culture. In James Lull, ed. *Culture in the communication age*. London: Routledge. p. 194.
[iv] Ibid. p. 195.
[v] Ibid. p. 197.
[vi] Richard Dyer. 1998. *Stars*. With supplementary chapter by Paul McDonald. London: British Film Institute. p. 3.
[vii] David P. Marshall. 1997. *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. p. 119.
[viii] Ibid. p. 121.
[ix] Jeremy Butler. 1995. "I'm not a doctor, but I play one on TV": Characters, actors and acting in television soap opera. In Robert C. Allen, ed. *To Be Continued… Soap Operas Around the World.* London: Routledge. p. 147.
[x] Ibid. p. 147.
[xi] Ibid. p. 148.
[xii] Hinerman. 2001. Star Culture. p. 207.
[xiii] Dyer. 1998. *Stars*. p. 127.
[xiv] Ibid. p. 129.
[xv] Ibid. pp. 129-30.
[xvi] Hinerman. 2001. Star Culture. p. 209.
[xvii] Ibid. p. 209.
[xviii] Yann Richard. 1995. *Shi'ite Islam: Polity, ideology, and creed.* Trans. Antonia Nevill. Oxford: Blackwell. p. 1.
[xix] Roxanne Varzi. 2006. *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. p. 6.
[xx] Christopher de Bellaigue. 2004. *In the rose garden of the martyrs: a memoir of Iran.* London: HarperCollins. p. 45.
[xxi] Varzi. 2006. *Warring Souls*. p. 62.
[xxii] David Pinault. 1992. The Shi'ites: ritual and popular piety in a Muslim community. London: I.B. Tauris. p. 169.
[xxiii] See Christopher de Bellaigue. 2004. *In the Rose Garden of the Martyrs*. London: HarperCollins.
[xxiv] Varzi 2006. p.82.
[xxv] The Shi'i sense of 'saintliness' also resonates with concepts of *baraka* (broadly speaking the free gift of blessing by God) shared by Sunnis or indeed a wider sense of Islamic charisma.
[xxvi] See Fischer. 2003. *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution*. 2nd Edition. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press).
[xxvii] Robert Tait. http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1954553,00.html 22 November 2006. Viewed 03 March 2007.
[xxviii] Robert Tait. http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1954553,00.html.
[xxx] Richard Creasy. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/news/news.html?in_article_id=415903&in_page_id=1770
[xxxi] Robert Tait. http://www.guardian.co.uk/iran/story/0,,1954553,00.html
[xxxii] Michael Herzfeld, Michael. 2005. *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the Nation-State.* 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge. p. 3.
[xxxiii] Ibid. p. 6.
[xxxiv] My informants' (and my) 'knowledge' of the investigation is based purely on hearsay and articles in the press. The 'investigation' might thus be something that is 'known' on the same level that it is 'known' that it was Ebrahimi in the tape. Whether or not it is actually in process, and indeed whether or not the tape is genuine, the 'investigation' would work just as well as a justification for a renewed focus on the morals of Iran's youth.
[xxxv] Richard Tapper, ed. 2002. *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representations and Identity.* London: I.B. Tauris. p. 20.