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AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT WITH THE NATIONAL SCREEN: THE CASE OF IRANIAN-ARMENIANS IN TEHRAN

by

ZAINAB CHAMOUN

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by
ZAINAB MOHAMED ALI CHAMOUN

Approved by:

Dr. Blake Atwood, Assistant Professor Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies	Advisor
Dr. Greg Burris, Assistant Professor Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies	Member of Committee
Dr. Josh Carney, Assistant Professor Sociology, Anthropology, and Media Studies	Member of Committee

Date of thesis/dissertation defense: November 28, 2019

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Cinema was brought to Iran by and flourished through Armenians, a minority Christian population in the country, who have worked extensively in the Iranian film industry over the past century. Despite their significant presence behind the scenes, Armenians have been almost entirely absent from representation on screen. This absence became especially pronounced after the Islamic Revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The new government viewed all Iranians as Islamic subjects. Accordingly, post- revolutionary cinema has been regulated according to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) to protect the image of the ideal Islamic citizen. The institutional oversight of all Iranian productions has produced narrow representations that foreclose the diversity that has long marked Iran. In light of these narrow representations, how do Iranian citizens, who may not identify with this portrayed image, understand their national cinema? How do they use their experiences with cinema to define their national identity and to express a national sense of belonging?

This paper examines the affective relationship between ethno- religious minorities and Iranian cinema. Specifically, it focuses on how the Iranian populations, whose identities may not align with national narratives, react to the national screen. In order to investigate the research questions, this paper implements an ethnographic methodology consisting primarily of participant observations and focus groups. It is built on watching Iranian films with Iranian- Armenians both at home and in movie theaters, and following up those experiences with targeted discussions about their reactions, sensations, and interpretations. The paper also employs film textual analysis in order to unpack the typical narratives about the Iranian-Armenian community and the negative stereotypes associated with its existence in Iran. Such a project begins the work of understanding how a state- controlled national screen that aspires to embrace the entire diversity of the nation in a single one-dimensional and stereotypical image might, at many times, misrepresent and mis-interpellate its audience.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this study goes back to my last year of high school; it is the outcome of unencouraged curiosity at that time, many unanswered questions, and the desire to deconstruct the taboo ideas that surrounded me. It is the outcome of living in a one-dimensional community, dominated by a religious political ideology that adopts Iran as the ultimate reference and urges the community to unquestionably praise everything related to the Islamic Republic. It is the outcome of delving into the history of the national Iranian cinema and questioning it while detaching myself from the perception of my community. It is the outcome of several weeks in Tehran, spent with ethno-religious minorities, who are also living in a one-dimensional society that might be, intentionally or unintentionally, neglecting their particularity. It is the outcome of giving the primary voice to individuals who have different opinions that confront the one-dimensional view of Iran and its cultural productions, mainly the national cinema.

This study looks closely at how Iranian-Armenians interact with the national cinema of Iran. It puts the Iranian-Armenian community in conversation with their absences, representations, and mis-representations on the national screen of their country. Throughout this confrontation, this thesis deconstructs negative stereotypes about the Iranian-Armenian community in Tehran and gives new understandings and definitions of the national Iranian cinema. It also opens up a space for Iranian-Armenians to express their identities, national belongings, and interconnectedness of their community. How do Iranian-Armenians react toward their absence, or misrepresentation, on the national screen? How do they negotiate their national identity individually and collectively while watching Iranian films? Do they feel a part of the nation or alienated from it? Do they define themselves as Iranians, Armenians, Iranian-Armenians, or something else altogether? And importantly, how do they define the national Iranian cinema? In this study, I define the national cinema of Iran through the lens of Iranian-Armenians. I argue that there is a significant disconnect between how the national cinema portrays Iranian-Armenians and how they are in real life. The disconnect is the starting of this study that extends to highlight the contribution of Iranian-Armenians to the cinema industry in Iran and it explores, through reception, the dynamics of identity and affect holding the community.

The following introduction is divided into several thematic sections that build up to the argument of this study. It starts first with a short personal anecdote that explores the multiplicity of cinematic experience and reception, particularly with regard to Iranian films. Building on my personal experience, I explain later how societies and nations are dynamic entities, particularly Iran. Also, I argue that in cinema, there are always absences and silences on what is represented and for whom. My personal experience was a starting point to think about the silences, and who does not appear on the screen.

A. A Separation

April 12, 2012, Al-Mustafa Highschool – Nabatieh, *"Today, instead of taking two consecutive periods of English class, we are going to watch an Iranian movie" says Ms. Fatima, the English teacher and the daughter of a prominent Hezbollah parliament representative.*[1]
Everyone in class became very excited for the movie because it was Iranian. Much of South Lebanon, and almost every Shi'ite in the country, was influenced by everything related to Iran, especially after the 2006 war with Israel. We were all convinced that "if it's an Iranian movie, then it should be great."
We rushed to the school's theater, got mesmerized by the screen, and watched Asghar Farhadi's masterpiece 'A Separation' (2011).

---

[1] Mohamed Raad

On that day, April 12, 2012, during my last year of high school, I discovered and encountered Iranian cinema for the first time. While watching the movie, I was captivated by the images, the story, the dialogue, and the language. I also had to make a huge effort to understand what was going on. *A Separation* is not close to any of commercial Hollywood movies that we were familiar with at the time. By the end of the movie, my enthusiasm turned into disappointment due to its vague ending and unresolved story. I was prepared for anything except an open ending! I have since learnt that this is a feature of almost all of Farhadi's films, as well as of many other art-house movies from Iran. Before getting the chance to delve more into the denotations and the message behind the film, my thoughts were brought back, along with my classmates', to the genuineness and creativity of Iranian cinema. I still remember how Ms. Fatima was focused on showing us the competitiveness of this cinema and the possibility that it might exceed the success and dominance of Hollywood in few years. On that day, I left my high school with a lot of silent and inactive estimations and questions about Iranian films in my unconsciousness, waiting for a trigger.

Six years later, *A Separation* crossed my path once again. As part of one of my university courses, I read a brief interpretation of the film that made me curious to understand the politics of Iranian cinema and the country that produced it. In *After the American Century: The End of U.S. Culture in the Middle East,* Brian Edwards (2016) deconstructs Farhadi's attempt to represent a different portrait of the Iranian society in *A Separation.* Borrowing from "Who represents What in *A Separation,*" an article written by an Iranian blogger named Aram, Edwards examines the symbolic analysis of every character of the film:

> Nader represents the Iranian community which is struggling on the one hand with traditions and on the other hand with modernity.

> The grandfather is representative of traditions in the community. His Alzheimer’s is our historical memory. It is neither forgettable nor can he stand on his feet without the community.
> Simin represents Iranian modernity. She is the one who tries to make the community believe the necessity of her cause, i.e. migration.
> The pregnant woman stands for religious views in Iranian society. She wants to help carry the load of tradition (grandfather) but gets caught in the questions of purity/impurity and becomes a new problem for the community.
> Her husband is a representative of social biases and prejudices.
> Termeh is representative of the future stuck in the struggle between modernity, tradition, religion, and the film ends with her inability to choose.
> The little girl is the representative of the present. Younger than everyone, she is constantly reporting and painting the events. (as cited in Edwards, 2016, p. 109).

I find this brief analysis worth citing for several reasons. First, it immerses the reader in the film’s atmosphere, as well as the socio-political conditions of contemporary Iran. Second, and more importantly, it interrupts, on a personal level, the constructed image I have about the country. In fact, a large portion of Shia Lebanese has viewed Iranian society as a stable entity in which everyone is content, satisfied, and valued by the government. The Iranian Islamic Republic was promoted in Lebanon by Hezbollah as an ideal to which Lebanese Shia should aspire. The image of Iran as an ideal and successful nation state that embraces its diverse population was set as unquestionable and nonnegotiable. However, this thesis questions that claim while highlighting the shortcomings of Iranian-Armenian representations on the national screen. Although Edwards’ analysis of *A Separation* is, in a way, simplistic, it disrupted my preconceived notion of Iranian society. I could no longer see Iran as a homogeneous, ideal entity anymore. It became difficult to assume that life in Iran was easy and that people were very comfortable with their “strong” and “embracing” regime. After reading Edwards’ analysis of the film, it seemed as though the Iranian population is not as satisfied with its regime as Hezbollah wants to convey to Lebanese Shia.

This short anecdote about *A Separation* reflects how receptions of films are not monolithic across different people, and they do not stay the same for one person. These perceptions and interpretations often change according to the different cultural and educational backgrounds that the viewer encounters. Also, the diversity in viewpoints about films is something that I explored in this thesis. On another hand, this personal encounter shows that societies cannot be put into the frame of a single, stable image; rather they are in constant change all the time.

This research project focuses on Iran, which has a complex history and, therefore, complex receptions of media. The country witnessed multiple extreme political, social, and cultural transformations, beginning with the rapid modernization project by Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1925 and reaching the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the Islamization project carried by Ayatollah Khomeini during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). Consequently, people living in Iran have experienced their own anxieties, frustrations, and adopted different thoughts about the Republic. Also, given these different socio-political contexts, cultural productions of the country are highly influenced. This shifting, and oftentimes contentious relationship to the state and its apparatus was reflected in cinema.

B. Cinema in Iran: Shifting Purposes

"From its very beginning, Iranian cinema has had a tight relationship with the state" (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 13). During the Pahlavi era (1925-1979), cinema was used as a tool that served a Westernization project. According to Hamid Naficy (2011), cinema has benefited from the Shah's vision of the country and his westernization project to "centralize, rationalize, regulate, and propagate a modern, secular, and sanctioned new national identity and official culture" (p. 141). Foreign values and western lifestyles were disseminated to the masses through films. The state used cinema to glorify the regime and perpetuate its values and aspirations. The Shah desired to use cinema as "an ideological state apparatus to educate lay people and to promote new official syncretic culture" (Naficy, 2011, p. 155). Thus, censorship of the film industry has always been present in the country. On the one hand, cinema was a component and expression of modernity during the Pahlavi era, and on the other hand, it became a mouthpiece of Islam after the 1979 revolution.

The Islamic revolution in Iran was led by Ayatollah Khomeini, who believed that the country needed purification from the Western foreign values implemented by the Shah's regime. During the early days of the revolution, cinema was opposed by the religious clergy and was considered the devil's tool that brings corruption to the country. However, with time, "Ayatollah Khomeini declared the role of cinema to be a tool for 'educating the people' and that, like all art, it was to be put in the service of Islam" (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 35). After the Islamic revolution, cinema in Iran was repurposed as a pedagogical tool that educate the masses about being an Islamic citizen, and as a propaganda tool promoting and supporting the Islamic regime. The state's control over cinema in both eras—pre- and post-revolution—has produced concerns and questions about the scope and purpose of a national cinema. In both eras, a significant part of the nation has been alienated and ignored due to the narrow, one-dimensional depictions of the country represented on screen. In both eras, there has been a problematic reception by the Iranian populations who do not necessarily identify with what is shown on the screen.

Because of the heavy censorship on films and state's control on the movie theaters, the cinematic experience of the Iranian audiences is interrupted. Since the Islamic revolution, Iranian films have been representing an Islamic society in terms of lifestyles, relationships, dress codes, dialogues, and spaces. The aspect of diversity within Iran is being sided away from the screen. The process of purification has limited the spectatorship experience. Iranian audiences, of post-revolutionary cinema, are constructed as always present in the movie. There is a continuous awareness of the presence of the spectator and thus, he/she can't be absorbed into the movie nor detached from reality. According to Negar Mottahedeh (2009), Iranian post-revolutionary cinema is always aware of the presence of the spectator and it foregrounds "the film's look-at-ness against the absorption of the spectator's look in dominant cinema" (535). She also extends on what she calls "confronting voyeurism" using the example of the veil on the national screens. Mottahedeh (2009) says that the veil's ever-presence on the screen addresses "the presence everywhere of unrelated male viewer" (p. 534).

Cinema can help audiences to reveal their hopes as a nation. Dabashi (2001), speaking of Iranian cinema, said, "the cinema revealed our hidden hopes as a nation" (p. 7). It is also perceived sometimes as an isolated place where people can forget about their mundane problems and entertain. While being always depicted as a present spectator, the visual pleasures and experiences are limited, and the cinema's role as an instrument for entertainment and nation imagining is interrupted. Iranian screens represent an Islamic society with Islamic citizens while somehow neglecting and marginalizing other parts of the nation. Why are other religions almost entirely missing from Iranian screens? Why, when represented, are other religions mis-represented? How do non-Muslim Iranians feel while acknowledging that they are either absented or mis-represented from the national scope of Iranian cinema? The dynamic between alienation and disrupted reception is one that I unpack and explore vis-à-vis Iranian-Armenians, a religious and ethnic minority in the country that played an important role in the foundation of cinema in Iran.

C. Iranian-Armenians Between State TV and Cinema

In an attempt to challenge the one-dimensional portrayals of Iran on the national screen, this study focuses on the problematic reception and viewership of Iranian films under the Islamic regime, looking particularly at Iranian-Armenians. As an outsider, my perceptions about the life of Iranian-Armenians in Iran are shaped largely by what I have seen through media. These perceptions differ depending on who is disseminating the images. The Iranian Islamic Republic is concerned with showing the world its tolerant environment and its embrace of diversity. State TV, for example, has tried to portray the government's acceptance of Iranian ethno-religious minorities. In this version, Iran is a country that provides its ethno-religious minorities with a safe, positive environment, one in which they can practice their beliefs openly. On February 29, 2016, *Press TV*[2] broadcast a 12-minute report entitled "Armenians in Iran." The report emphasized the strong national bonds and common living between Iranians and the Armenian community, as well as the great political, cultural, social, and economic contributions to the country by the latter. The report ended with the following:

> We never use the term Persian-Armenian because we believe that all the ethnic groups of this country should be respected and treated the same; and that's why we call these brothers and sisters Iranian-Armenians. We use the term community instead of minority for our fellow Iranian-Armenian citizens because we believe that a strong nation is actually formed by many notable and prominent ethnic and religious communities.

As we can see, this report reflects the embracing atmosphere of the Islamic Republic and the strong compassion between the entities of the nation. It shows how the Iranian-Armenian community is considered as a crucial part that constitutes and defines the Iranian nation.

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[2] A news and documentary network owned by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)

There have also been several attempts to show that ethnoreligious minorities in Iran hold deep devotion for the country's religious-political leaders, Ayatollahs Khomeini and Khamenei, in order to affirm that the Islamic Republic is the choice of the whole Iranian nation, and not only Shia Muslims. Several visits of Khamenei to non-Muslim martyrs' families[3] have been filmed in Iran and broadcasted on the state's channels. In one of the visits, Khamenei headed to console an Assyrian Iranian family, martyr Robert Lazar's family. When he arrived, he received a very warm welcome. The elder Assyrian mother said, "I'm happy to meet you; your presence filled my house. You blessed our house. I have been waiting your visit for years." She then acknowledges Khamenei as a leader for everyone. She said, "Is he the leader for Muslims only? He is my leader as well. This leader is for everyone. I have the right to see him as well." Of significance are the two portraits in the family's living room: one for the martyred son, and the other for Ayatollah Khomeini. Such a depiction conveys that even non-Muslims believe in the values of the Islamic Revolution and adopt the spiritual leader as theirs too.

Before his return in 1979 to Iran from exile in France, Khomeini worked to construct his image as the leader of the Iranian nation. Since then, the Islamic Republic has tried to protect the value of Islamic governance and the need for a guiding spiritual leader. Such TV depictions help the government to legitimize its position within the diverse nation and support its claim to the larger international audience. But there is much more than what state-controlled television programming shows us about the life of ethno-religious minorities in Iran. The broadcasted and circulated portrayals are never done by the minorities, but for and about them. In order to know more about the status of these minorities, it is important to take a closer look into their personal life, thoughts, and emotions, instead of passively absorbing and completely trusting what is broadcast from the point of view of the Islamic Republic. This study opens the space to know more about the life of Iranian-Armenians. First, it examines whether they are being represented, not represented, or mis-represented on the national cinema of Iran. Second, this study gives a portion of the community the lead in expressing their thoughts, feelings, and national identities and belongings through direct cinematic experiences with them in Tehran, and face-to-face discussions about cinema and national identity. In order to achieve this, the present thesis is a reception study of Iranian cinema conducted through focus groups with Iranian-Armenians based in Tehran.

---

[3] Martyrs of the Sacred Defense during Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

When I first began this study, I recognized that Iranian-Armenians have been somewhat excluded from representations on the national screen. Later I realized that even when they are represented, the Iranian-Armenian community is often mis-represented or negatively portrayed on different levels. According to Hayward, "In defining/framing a national cinema, or is it the national of a cinema, what is instructive are the discourses mobilized to do so – what they include and exclude; how they choose to frame matters; the assumptions and presuppositions they make" (2000, p. 84). Iranian-Armenians are partially excluded from the national screen and the conditions around their exclusion must be taken into consideration while theorizing the national cinema in Iran. In this thesis, I study the dynamics of engagement between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian national cinema. I examine how Iranian-Armenians feel while watching Iranian films, and accordingly concluded new understandings and definitions of the national cinema of Iran. How do Iranian-Armenians think of themselves as a part of nation through interactions with the national screen? How do they define the national Iranian cinema?

Although Iran has a diverse population with many ethno-religious minorities, the Iranian-Armenian community represents a special case to study for several factors. First, Armenians have played an important role in nourishing the Iranian film industry, but they're either not represented or misrepresented on Iranian screens. The first Iranian feature, *Mr. Haji, the Movie Actor* (1934), was directed by an Armenian filmmaker named Ovanes Ohanians. Since that time, Iranian-Armenians have worked extensively within the industry, founding the first film school in the country. Yet, they are rarely seen represented on the national screen. It is not really new that Armenians are sided away from the national screen. Even when they have contributed to the industry as actors and actresses, they have played Muslim roles. This paradox raises questions about the state and its claims. If the state is eager to prove that Iranian-Armenians are strong and present members in the society, then why doesn't it show their active roles on the national screen?

Second, Armenians have a geographical homeland with defined borders, Armenia, and a shared national language, Armenian.[4] They carry a special attachment to their homeland that might compete with their attachment to Iran. This attachment plays an important role in complicating their articulation of an Iranian national identity. According to David Yaghoubian, (2014) "Armenians maintained an ethnoreligious identification with their traditional homeland that makes them a particularly important minority group with which to begin detailing the development of Iranian national identity and refining theories of nationalism" (p. xxviii). Finally, the Armenian community is very connected despite of the element of nationality. They share a different common language, as well as a memory of historical massacres and genocides.

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[4] Although there are Western Armenian and Eastern Armenian, the languages are approximately close. Iranian-Armenians speak Eastern Armenian, but still they can understand Western Armenian.

In the light of such unique characteristics, Iranian-Armenians open up the possibility of different interpretations about nationalism and national identity in Iran.

D. Framing the Study: Theory and Literature

Cinema was brought to Iran by and flourished through Iranian-Armenians. Despite their significant presence behind the scenes, they have been almost entirely absent from representations on screen, or mis-represented. This research examines the affective relationship between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian cinema. In light of narrow representations, how do Iranian-Armenians, who may not identify with the portrayed images, understand their national cinema? How do they use their experiences with cinema to define their national identity and to express a national sense of belonging?

In this study, I employ an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that largely builds on Stuart Hall's (1973) reception theory. Before delving into reception, I will briefly shed lights on the different theoretical steps I implement. Benedict Anderson (2006) proposes that a nation "is imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (p. 6). First, it is imagined because it is the formation of a shared national identity among people who might not have met or interacted. Second, it is limited because it occupies a restricted land within defined geographical borders. Third, it is sovereign because it flourished with Enlightenment and the revolutionary ideas of destroying the hierarchy of the higher power of religion and ruling dynasties. Finally, it is a community because it is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" where the personal self determines life (Anderson, 2006, p. 7). The elements of fraternity and brotherhood are essential in the formation of a nation and the deep emotional attachments people carry. I build on Anderson as a starting point for this study as he highlights the important role played by media technologies in shaping how a nation or a community imagines itself, and the element of brotherhood that generates the deep national feelings. This study focuses on the role played by Iranian cinema to influence how the Iranian-Armenian community imagines itself in the country and speaks of its identity and belongings. It also opens up a space for the deep emotions, triggered through cinematic experiences, that hold the Iranian-Armenian community.

The electronic capabilities and circulated images are known as, in Appadurai's (1996) words, "mediascapes." Due to the dominance of mediascapes in the modern world, audiences "construct imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 35). Appadurai describes mediascapes as "image-centered, narrative based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them is a series of elements (such as characters, plots, and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places" (p. 35). Building on, Iranian-Armenians create different imaginations about their community on the one hand, and on the Iranian nation, on the other, while interacting with Iranian films. Also, given its important role in shaping national imaginaries, the national cinema in Iran has been used as a powerful tool to create the national citizen and the good nation. But what happens when the national citizen represented on the screen does not align with the audiences' imaginations?

Cultural productions in Iran cannot be isolated from the Iranian regime and its ideology. Post-revolutionary contemporary Iranian cinema is dominated and controlled by the Islamic ideology. Iranian cinema is strongly entangled with the Islamic ideology. It is state-controlled and thus, shifting the national story in preference to the state's national narratives. In this sense, the Islamic ideology can be characterized as hegemonic. It is important here to recall Raymond Williams (1977) definition of hegemony in *Marxism and Literature*; "hegemony goes beyond culture, as previously defined, in its insistence on relating the whole social process to specific distributions of power and influence" (p. 108). Consequently, Islamic hegemonies have been dominating the national screen since the Islamic revolution, thus structuring and limiting the cinematic experience of audiences in particular ways. The national cinema of Iran can be considered as one of the state's "ideological states apparatus" that aims to interpellate the audiences into the Islamic Republic's ideology (Althusser, 1970). What does it mean to have a national cinema that does not represent the real diversity of the nation? How do audiences develop alternative understanding to the imposed hegemonies?

This study is concerned with how Iranian-Armenians interact with the national cinema of Iran and what ideas they articulate after watching Iranian films. It aspires to understand Iranian cinema by understanding how films are read by the Iranian-Armenian ethnoreligious minority. In his key article entitled "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse," Stuart Hall (1973) emphasizes on the importance of audiences' interpretation of media texts. He believes that producers "encode" messages and ideas into media texts that are then "decoded" by the audiences in several ways. According to Hall, the meanings of the media texts are never universal, and audiences derive meanings based on the different experiences they create while receiving. The audiences' interpretations of the media texts are not universal, and they react to what they receive on different levels. The process of receiving, perceiving, and decoding is not always aligned with the intended codes. According to Hall et al. (1976), "audiences decode from within the framework of the preferred structures of meaning which have been encoded, but, we argue, in ways which are consonant with their own frameworks of interpretations and lived experiences" (341). The audiences receive messages from different subjective positions and produce meanings according to their own social, political, cultural, and economic contexts.

According to Hall (1973), audiences decode messages and create meanings from three different reading positions: preferred reading, oppositional reading, and negotiated reading. They either accept the preferred meaning of the media text that is aligned with the producer's intentions, completely reject what the media text is suggesting, or negotiate the meaning while accepting some ideas and rejecting others. There positions are not exclusively influenced by the media text, but also by contextual factors and individual traits. According to Staiger (2000), "contextual factors, more than textual ones influence the way the spectator sees the film" (p. 1). Accordingly, this study splits agency between Iranian films and the viewing experiences of Iranian-Armenians to create meanings about the national cinema of Iran and the Iranian-Armenian community. Instead of completely depending on textual factors, this study takes into account several contextual factors that influence how Iranian-Armenians read the films including gender, culture, beliefs, lifestyle, and the mood and time of viewing.

This study examines how Iranian-Armenians express their national identity and articulate their national belongings to Iran through their engagement with Iranian films. According to Livingstone (1998), "In media research it involves attention to the audience interpretation of media texts while paying particular attention to the context of interpretation" (as cited in Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 19). In this study, Iranian-Armenians are minorities who are living in an Islamic society, where identities are being constructed by the state. The diversity of the population is being treated as Islamic objects instead of individual subjects. From this perspective, minorities in Iran, including Armenians, can be considered as racialized subjects who face daily challenges to adapt to the situation while maintaining their own sense of identity. Ghassan Hage (2010) in his article "The Affective Politics of Racial Mis-interpellation," differentiates between three forms of racialization: non-interpellation, negative interpellation, and mis-interpellation. What this study focuses on is mis-interpellation. According to Hage (2010):

> mis-interpellation, is a racism of a different order, for it is a drama in two acts: in the first instance the racialized person is interpellated as belonging to a collectivity 'like everybody else'. S/he is hailed by the cultural group or the nation, or even by modernity which claims to be addressing 'everyone'. And the yet-to-be-racialized person believes that the hailing is for 'everyone' and answers the call thinking that there is a place for him or her awaiting to be occupied. Yet, no sooner do they answer the call and claim their spot than the symbolic order brutally reminds them that they are not part of everyone: 'No, I wasn't talking to you. Piss of! You are not part of us.' (p. 122).

At many times, the government's ideological state apparatus, including cinema, can fail in interpellating the Iranian-Armenian community. Instead of hailing Iranian-Armenian into the Iranian nation, the national screen might be, instead, mis-interprellating Iranian-Armenians and complicating their expression of identity.

I approach mis-interpellation in this thesis through cinema. On the one hand, as I have already explained, the government's media try to show that Iranian-Armenians are well assimilated into the Iranian society, and they are an equal part of the nation. On the other hand, films that represent Iranian-Armenians associate them with negative stereotypes and frames them as the other. Such a dichotomy leaves the Iranian-Armenians confused about their existence in the Iranian society. The Iranian government focuses on circulating an international image of the Islamic Republic that hails Iranian-Armenians as a part of the Iranian nation. However, on a more internal and local level, popular films that depict Iranian-Armenians and are not usually circulated internationally, remind the community that it is "not a part of everyone" (Hage, 2010, 122). The media addresses Iranian-Armenians while embracing them within the nation and pushing them away from it at the same time; consequently, it leaves the community confused and mis-interpellated.

My case studies are Iranian-Armenians who were born and raised in Iran and have the Iranian nationality but do not see themselves represented on the national screen. The government tries to reflect an inclusive environment without paying attention to the small details and to the uniqueness of its citizens. On the one hand, Iranian-Armenians feel as a part of the nation through daily activities including work, education, and governmental services. On the other hand, they feel distanced from the nation when they don't see themselves represented on the "national" screen. In this case, they might feel mis-interpellated, and thus, try to either alienate themselves from the nation or create new imaginations about it.

The literature review of this study addresses three general tackled themes: modernity, nationalism and national identity, and gender and sexuality, all intertwined with the concept of national cinema in Iran. The concept of a national cinema in Iran can't be limited to one definition or inscribed into a particular frame. It cannot be shaped within a single aspect because nationalism itself, in general, and in Iran particularly, can't be reduced to one manifestation. According to Thomas Erikson, "nationalism reifies culture in the sense that it enables people to talk about their culture as though it were a constant and also distinctive, but it isn't" (as cited in Hayward, 2000, 82). In the light of such ambivalence, there will always be ambiguities around the definition of a national cinema.

This study focuses on framing national cinema in Iran. This country is very diverse in terms of culture, religions, ethnicities, and political trajectories. The country has witnessed multiple sociopolitical shifts in both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary eras. In different eras, the state was concerned in uniting the nation and inscribing nationalist belongings according to its own ideology and vision of the country. Also, the Iranian government, at different periodizations, used national cinema to support its national agendas. According to Robins and Aksoy (2000), “it has become increasingly difficult to regard cinema culture except in terms of clouding the nation” (p. 202). It is very important to examine the evolution of nationalism in Iran and the expression of national identities within the broader contexts of modernity and national cinema.

Hamid Naficy, in his four-volume series, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (2011), represents a very detailed history about the evolution of national cinema in Iran and how it has been shaped by sociopolitical and religious dynamics. Naficy employs an interdisciplinary methodology in order to explore the different historical periodizations and link them to the evolution of the national cinema. In addition to close film textual analysis, he provides a deep analysis of social and political events happening at that time. He also uses facts about the film industry at each time in addition to visual studies, discourse analysis, biographies, and in-depth interviews.

In his 1st volume, Naficy (2011) studies Iranian cinema within the contexts of “national cinema” and “modernity”. Ever since it started in 1900, Iranian cinema favored nationalism, cultural modernity, and Westernization (Naficy, 2011, p. 1). Cinema in Iran, specifically, keeps altering on many levels including the local, national, transnational, and interethnic levels. Naficy (2011) studies the features of Iranian cinema and attributes them to the changing political eras. There is an interrelation between cinema and modernity through which they cross-fertilize each other. In other words, cinema is both a component and an expression of modernity (Naficy, 2011, p. 8).

Not only movies were agents of modernity, but filmmakers and audiences themselves were also catalysts of the modernization project. According to Naficy (2011), “modernity affected the film industry structurally by modernizing its mode of production and reception. It affected the movies textually by inscribing modernity as content and style, and as sensorium. Finally, it transformed filmmakers and spectators by turning them into modern individual subjects whose wishes and desires it manipulated and fulfilled” (p. 9). The meaning that lies behind the national screen is also affected by acts of reception. Naficy (2011) argues, “Iranian cinema (and Iranian modernity) was not a preplanned Western project imposed on or “injected” from outside of from above” (p. 2). He also adds, “Iranians resisted, rejected, accommodated, and selectively adapted and celebrated modernity and its features” (Naficy, 2011, p. 2). Although Naficy explicitly acknowledges that the act of watching isn’t passive, he doesn’t dedicate his research for reception studies. Instead, his research is mainly archival, focusing on films, filmmakers, and sociopolitical conditions, in order to frame what a national cinema could be and establish an integrated history of the Iranian cinema. However, this study looks forward to engaging the audience in framing the Iranian national cinema and its impact on the expression of national identities.

While Naficy’s study focuses on defining what is national cinema through a heavy archival research and from the point of view of filmmakers’ biography, Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) uses a more empirical and broad perspective. Naficy (2011) established a strong grounded research about big themes like nationalism, national cinema, and modernity, and Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) dedicated his research to study the reception of these themes through examining the national screen and its audience. Instead of drowning into the big intellectual theorizations about modernity and national cinema as rigid definitive terms, Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) focuses on acts of resistance, reception, negotiation, and adaptation to what is represented on the screen.

In his study, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Films and Society in the Islamic Republic*, Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) studies the link that exists between politics and cinema in Iran. He tries to look at the link through expanding on what censorship on cinema in Iran looks like. He shows how cinema in Iran is highly Islamized through delving in the policies that regulate it. While theorizing about national cinema, Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) explores "the negotiation of meaning that happens around the watching of Iranian films, which is particularly significant to study in relation to cinema as asocial practice" (p. 6). Watching a film for him is a process that should start from a very early stage. According to Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010), "both in the West and in Iran, films go through various stages of being seen on scripts, rushes, and later completed films before the above audience see the film" (p. 2). In order to follow the different stages of pre-production, production, post-production, distribution, and reception of Iranian films, he uses interviews with filmmakers to describe the conditions that surrounded the production of films. He also employs an ethnographic research where he explores how the audience articulates cinema politically and develops their own understanding to what Iranian nationalism is. Following an ethnographic approach that is concerned with acts of reception, Zeydabadi-Nejad's work fills the gap that lies in Naficy's study. He makes use of the role of the audience imagination, that Naficy acknowledges, in expanding what a national cinema is.

Both Naficy (2011) and Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) are being very specific about the nation, each from different perspective, without opening the possibility of other interpretations. Also, throughout their study, they lost the site of national cinema. However, this study focuses on how the encounters with the national screen can speak about the national cinema itself and alter its role. It builds on previous works and looks at how Iranian-Armenians imagine the nation through cinematic representations.

This study looks into nationalism and tries to frame the national cinema in Iran while focusing on what Iranian-Armenians feel while watching Iranian films that do not show them onscreen. How do the reactions and interactions of this community reflect on and reshape Iranian nationalism? David Yaghoubian (2014) in *Ethnicity, Identity, and the Development of Nationalism in Iran* explores Iranian nationalism through the lens of minorities. Instead of following the traditional trajectory of theorizing about nationalism, Yaghoubian (2014) gives the priority to ordinary minorities and voices to describe a big term like nationalism. He chooses to focus on Armenians and how they helped in shaping Iranian nationalism because he believes that they are the best community to study. According to Yaghoubian (2014), “Armenians in Iran sustain unique traditions, attachments, and loyalties that differ from those of the majority and thus from the majority monarchial and Shi’a Islamic Iranian national myth” (p. xxix). Accordingly, Armenians in Iran already have strong sense of national attachment to their community which makes their attachment to the Iranian national identity very informative and plays an important role in altering and adding to Iranian nationalism.

In order to articulate nationalism through the voices of minorities, Yaghoubian (2014) used social biography as a very new and innovative methodological approach in this aspect. He gives a great importance to the uniqueness of individual experience and its role in shaping nationalism. Yaghoubian (2014) poses challenging questions about nationalism that cannot be answered through the heavy scholarly theories, thus, inviting readers and scholars to rethink nationalism in empirical terms (p. 4).

Yaghoubian (2014) argues that in order to study Iranian nationalism, we should not neglect minorities and their contribution to the development of the nation. While he focuses on looking at the small details, actions, lifestyle, and life events of Iranian-Armenians, my study will focus on their interactions with and attitudes toward the national cinema. Similarly, like Yaghoubian's study, I aspire to extend the meaning of Iranian nationalism and to answer what Yaghoubian already started with, "What does it feel like to live as an Armenian in an Iranian, majority Islamic, society?" I find Yaghoubian's study really interesting and informative to my research because it focuses on what Iranian-Armenians want to say about their national belongings and attachments. However, this study focuses on these minorities in an attempt to frame national cinema as well.

The study explores how Iranian Armenians, living in Tehran, create new meanings of what is represented on the national screen and express negotiated national identities. In a similar framework, Roxanne Varzi (2006), in *Warring Souls: Youth, Media, and Martyrdom in Post-Revolution Iran*, studies how secular youth create new meanings of reality and national belongings under the Islamic republic. Just like Iranian-Armenians, these secular youth don't identify or align with the national narratives imposed by the current Iranian government. They carry different ideologies and understanding of the nation. Varzi (2006) engages the reader with her journey in Tehran between the years 1991 and 2000. She mainly focuses on the secular middle class youth living in northern Tehran. This study focuses on the same age group because they are highly affected by the residues of the Islamic revolution and the Islamic project that was implemented in the country during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). They haven't witnessed any of these shifting periodizations, but yet, their public life is being shaped by these changes. She mainly focuses on how these youth occupy the inscribed ideological Islamic space while living in completely different realities of their own (Varzi, 2006, p. 12). While Varzi (2006) measures the effect of ideological public spaces on the lives and identities of secular youth, this research measures the effect of the ideologically Islamized national cinema on the identities of Iranian-Armenians.

Varzi (2006) adopts different approaches to theorize about the urban youth perception of reality. She employs an ethnographic approach where she uses interviews, participant observation, and focus groups. She also pays attention to the visual culture of Tehran, including posters, images, and other media representations of the Islamic republic and the value of martyrdom. Varzi (2006) dedicates a big part of her study in explaining how the Islamic project made use of the Shi'i past in order to mobilize the masses. Being a part of the Islamic public space, the youth have to follow and subordinate to the Islamic rules, however, they're free to act their intentions in their private spaces. This created the public/private dichotomy which keeps the Iranian youth in a state of schizophrenia. Nonetheless, Varzi (2006) comes to conclude at the end of her study that Iranian youths are succeeding in re-adapting the Islamic space and negotiating the rules to express their identities in a way different from the imposed one by the republic.

This study is concerned with Iranian populations who don't align with the dominant representations on the national screen. It aspires to examine how these people negotiate such limited representations and express their own national identity in a different way, other than the inscribed one. Although it focuses on the ethnoreligious dimension, there are definitely other dimensions of marginalization including gender and sexuality. The restrictions applied to the national screen are due to the state's strict censorship and its concern in building an Islamic society through cinema. In post-revolutionary era, cinema is considered as an agent of corruption if not used wisely; wisely in terms of promoting the state's propaganda and complying with the Sharia law.

Consequently, many regulations focused on gender relations between men and women on the screen, as well as the representation of Iranian women. Under the Islamic regime, "the eye of the camera, the shared glace of characters and the hypnotized gaze of the audience itself were viewed as equally sinful" (Farzaneh, 2011, p. 79).

Negar Mottahedeh (2008) in *Displaced Allegories* articulates how Iranian filmmakers and women actresses were able to negotiate the codes and regulations inscribed by the Islamic Republic on film productions. She mainly focuses on the female figure and women's bodies because they were highly targeted by the "system of modesty" imposed by the government on cinema. According to Mottahedeh (2008), "in post-revolutionary cinema, veiled female bodies were generated to stand against the contaminating influences previously introduced into mediated technologies, and to guard against forces that film studies refers to as the meta-desire of cinema itself" (p. 2). Mottahedeh mainly argues that the proscribed voyeurism in the Iranian national cinema, embodied through the absence of women and desiring gaze pushed filmmakers to create a new visual language to reflect meanings to the audience. Unlike Naficy (2011) and Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) who provided a sociopolitical reading of the national cinema, Mottahedeh (2008) addresses the innovative visual language and the technology of aesthetics in order to shed lights on a new dimension of the national cinema in Iran. In terms of methodology, Mottahedeh (2008) selected three filmmakers and applied close readings to the film texts in order to show their ambivalence to the state's censorship. Her research shows that, in spite of the state's regulations on gender representations and limitations to women's representations specifically, filmmakers are able to create new cinematic experiences negotiating the boundaries and using these restrictions for their own good and for empowerment of women. She argues that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema "found new ground not in the negation of government regulations, but in the camera's adoption of the governmentally imposed veiled, modest, averted gaze, producing the national cinema as women's cinema" (Mottahedeh, 2008, p. 4). Drawing on her argument, the history of national cinema in Iran is full of acts of negotiations whether on levels of reception or production.

However, negotiations of gender and identity in Iran don't happen only in the realm of cinema. Afsaneh Najmabadi (2014) in *Professing Selves* delves into the life of queer identities in Iran. Acknowledging the complexity of the topic, Najmadi explains how transsexuality became legal in Iran through sex reassignment surgeries in order to eliminate and purify the society from deviance: homosexuality. She says, "For legal and medical authorities in Iran, sex change is framed explicitly as the cure for a diseased abnormality (gender identity disorder), and on occasion it is proposed as a religio-legally sanctioned option for heternormalizing people with same-sex desires and practices" (Najmabadi, 2014, p. 1). She also adds that Iranian homosexuals were coerced to do the surgery despite of their articulation of their sexual identity (Najmadi, 2014, p. 2). Through ethnographic fieldwork, historical archives, and different medical, legal, religious, social, and political discourses, Najmadi tries to show that trans identity in Iran bears more than one meaning. In other words, the trans identity in Iran challenged the dominant system of meanings instead of passively accepting the inscribed meanings by the government. Instead of fixing and "curing" homosexuality in Iran, transsexuality created new spaces for homosexuals to legally exist without being prosecuted. Both Mottahedeh (2008) and Najmabadi (2014) show that regulations by the government and the power of law are being negotiated and used by citizens in a smart way that challenges the dominant ideology while keeping the illusion of obedience.

While scholars have already done lots of great work in the field, they haven't examined national cinema from the perspective of mis-represented or absented ethnoreligious minorities. This study aims to fill this gap within the literature on national cinema in Iran and the expression of national identity. I believe that these topics are extensively studied, but they need to be addressed from different perspectives. In order to provide an integrated account about national cinema in Iran, it's very primary to look at what is missing rather than focusing on what is already there on screen, or how audiences are reacting to what is already there.

E. Methodology

In order to fulfill the aims of this study, I adopted a multi-method approach motivated and inspired by the previous literature. As the main purpose of this study is to give voice to the Iranian-Armenian community to speak its feelings, thoughts, and anxieties in the light of the national cinema of the country, I traveled to Tehran in order to conduct my fieldwork and be in direct contact with the community. My fieldwork took place between January and February 2019. I traveled to Tehran twice, each time for 15 days. My study focuses on two elements: the media texts embodied as Iranian films, and Iranian-Armenian participants, and it approaches the two elements differently.

I started my research in Tehran, during my first trip, with meeting Iranian-Armenian professionals and trying to recruit Iranian-Armenian participants. First, I looked up for Iranian films that represent the Iranian-Armenian. As the study shows, Iranian-Armenians have been represented on the screen recently, but the problem lies in the way they are portrayed on the screen. Since the study circulates around themes of national identity, belongings, and mis-interprellation, I found it more reasonable to choose Iranian films that involve Iranian-Armenian characters, although few, in order to give more space for my participants to engage with the media texts. This study, although planned before traveling to Tehran, was inspired by the days I spent in the country. Two of my films were chosen to be included in the study during my first visit to Tehran. I look into four films: *To Be or Not To Be* (1998), *Atomic Heart* (2015), *Oxidan* (2017), and the recently released film *Andranik* (2019).

After selecting the films, I used textual film analysis in order to read the meanings of the films embedded within characters and dialogue. I mainly focused on the representation of the Iranian-Armenian characters, their role in the story, the way they looked, the way they behaved, and the language they used. I also looked at the contextualized Islamic presence on the screen, in addition to the content of the films and the message that the director wants to deliver. Film textual analysis is key to this study as it tries to find hidden meanings of the media texts and was extensively used in Iranian cinema studies. Besides Naficy (2011), Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010), and Mottahedeh (2008), Hamid Dabashi traces the emergence, characteristics, and challenges of Iranian cinema through film textual analysis and in-depth filmography in *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (2007) and *Close Up: Iranian cinema, past, present, and future* (2001).

This study primarily builds on reception analysis. In my first trip, I recruited 15 Iranian-Armenian participants and formulated three focus group with 5 participants in each. My recruitment process was flexible and depended on my daily interactions in the country. It primarily consisted of snowballing. My Iranian-Armenian participants are Iranian-Armenians, born after the Islamic Revolution. They all use English and can express their thoughts and comments with the language.

With each focus group, I watched one of the selected films. My study mainly focuses on feelings and affective engagements with the films, so I used participant observation in order to capture spontaneous reactions to the films which can be very informative to my research question. Besides, I tried to engage my Iranian-Armenian participants with cinematic experiences at movie theaters. Motivated by Zeydabadi-Nejad approach, I moderated group discussions after watching the films. After going through the previous literature, I find it more practical and more telling to give the priority to the subject's voice to reach promising findings, rather than delving in archives and historiographies. I lead the discussion at the beginning using some general questions, and then, I let the discussion flow to lead.

The role of reception analysis in my study is to account affective experiences and active interpretations of Iranian films that intend to present Iranian-Armenians in problematic ways. Starting from their special socio-cultural position in the Iranian society, I read the texts of the film through their reactions and interpretations. First, I focused on how Iranian-Armenians are receiving the screened films. Did they passively accept what they watched? Did they aggressively reject it? Or did they negotiate media texts? After putting my Iranian-Armenian participants in conversation with the national cinema of Iran, I took into consideration the contextual factors that influenced their interaction, comments, and readings. After examining gender dynamics, cultural backgrounds, religion, language, education, and different lifestyles, I was capable of employing reception analysis on two levels; the first level speak of the national cinema, and the other level speaks of the Iranian-Armenian community' identity, hopes, and anxieties.

In addition to these approaches, I asked my participants to write, on a daily basis, a small paragraph or series of thoughts about their national belongings to Iran. I wanted them to answer what Yaghoubian (2014) tried to answer in his study, “What does it look like to live as an Armenian in Iran?” In their brief personal memoirs, participants translated their feelings, perceptions, frustrations, and hopes into papers. Before I left Tehran, I collected what they will have written and tried to find intersections. This approach is motivated by what Roxanne Varzi (2006) did in her study. In an attempt to erode the barrier between the researcher and the researched, this technique situates the study group and the researcher on the same level. On another hand, this method helped me to know more about the Iranian-Armenian community.

The issue of language is a major limitation of my study. Although my Iranian-Armenian participants are very good in English, and succeeded in expressing their thoughts, I needed the Persian language in order to access secondary resources. Even in terms of literature, there are many valuable resources that could inform my study, but I could not access it because I cannot understand Persian. I also was not able to easily reach out for Iranian-Armenians in Iran.

I find it really important to mention some ethical considerations surrounding my study. First, I must acknowledge that being a Lebanese Shiite woman from South Lebanon eases my entrance to Iran and circulation in the country. Second, given the political tension in the country and state’s censorship on research, I must be ready to face any problems that might affect my participants. I made sure to protect their privacy. Also, given my sociocultural background, my research purposes and subjectivity might be questioned. Iranian-Armenians might be suspicious about my intentions, and gaining their trust was a big challenge. However, as the earlier anecdote shows, my thoughts are dissociated from the sociocultural context that dominates the place that I come from.

F. Roadmap

This study shed lights on the shortcomings of the national cinema of Iran in representing the Iranian-Armenian community. It focuses on the disconnection between what the screen offers, and what Iranian-Armenians say. It also reflects on how the national cinema of Iran influences the Iranian-Armenian community in terms of expressing its national identity and its sense as a community. In order to pursue the aims of this study, I follow my argument step by step. Chapter II tells two important tales: Iranian-Armenians behind the camera and Iranian-Armenians in front the camera. It foregrounds their huge contribution to the cinema industry and pinpoints the shortcomings of their representations on the levels of narrative, exhibition, and negative associations. Then, I move to shift the focus on reception level and the interactions of the Iranian-Armenian community with Iranian films. In Chapter III, I put Iranian-Armenians in confrontation with the representation of the Armenian character on the screen and show, through their interaction, the ambivalence they live towards defining their identity according to their cultural backgrounds and gender. Chapter IV interrogates the mis-representation of Armenian-ness as religion on the screen. It shows the role of affect that triggers Iranian-Armenian seculars to think as a collective and defend the faith of their community.

CHAPTER II

IRANIAN-ARMENIANS AND THE SCREEN

January 28, 2019 – Saint Sarkis Cathedral – Tehran, *I was deeply welcomed and greeted by Archbishop Sebou Sarkissian at his office. I planned to meet him in order to know more about the Iranian-Armenian community in Tehran and seek possibilities to recruit focus groups. When I told him about my research interests, he, on the spot, called Anaheed Abad, the first Iranian-Armenian female director in Iran, and gave me her phone number to get in touch with her on my second visit. I had heard her name before from one of my participants, who told me about her movie* Yeva (2017), *a co-production between Iran and Armenia. The film tells the story of an Armenian woman living in Azerbaijan. After the death of her husband, she seeks refuge in an Armenian village. She lives there as a stranger who has to live in disguise and keep her hybrid identity hidden. Her film articulates themes of displacement, women, identity crisis, and patriarchy.*

Although I did not have the chance to meet Anaheed Abad, the fact that her name came up among my participants from the Iranian-Armenian community tells us about the continuous contribution of Armenians to the cinema industry in Iran. *Yeva* has been screened in both Armenia and Iran, in addition to several international film festivals. In September 2019, the film won the international Blue Knowledge Award at Venice International Film Festival. The film will screen soon in the US. The Iranian-Armenian community, at least from what I have experienced in Tehran, is very proud of this film and uses it as an example for their exceptional contribution in the industry. And yet the Iranian-Armenian community has long marked the Iranian cinema industry, well before *Yeva*.

This chapter highlights the important moments of Iranian-Armenians and the national cinema of Iran. It focuses on two tales: Iranian-Armenians behind the camera and Iranian-Armenians in front the camera. It oscillates between the early years of the cinema industry and 2019, conveying a controversial paradox: Iranian-Armenians have contributed a great deal to developing the cinema industry in Iran but have rarely been represented on the screen. As already established, Iranian-Armenians are almost entirely absent from the national screen. In rare instances in which they appear on screen, they are mis-represented. I argue that Iranian-Armenians have played an important role in the foundations of Iran’s national cinema but are mis-represented on the screen. On the one hand, their representations are limited as characters contributing to the plots of films. On the other hand, these representations are not accurate and imply false images and stereotypes about the Iranian-Armenian community.

In order to support my argument, I first look into the enormous contribution of Iranian-Armenians behind the camera. They helped develop Iran’s cinema industry and kickstarted what is now lauded as the national cinema of Iran. Because of their cosmopolitan and transnational background, Iranian-Armenians were able to bring new technological and intellectual advancements that paved the way for the early Iranian film industry. Iranian-Armenians brought cinema to the country and were instrumental in defining its identity and dominant genres. From the beginning, they were active in all related fields as film exhibitors, film directors, studio owners, technical personnel, and actors and actresses. The first section of this chapter is purposefully filled with Iranian-Armenian names that paved the way for the cinema industry to exist and develop in Iran.

The story of Iranian-Armenians is not limited to behind the camera; their role extends to in front of the camera as well. The second section of this chapter focuses on the classic tales of Iranian-Armenians on the national screen. In this section, I unpack the spectrum through which Iranian-Armenians are being mis-represented. First, I expose the limited narratives of the Iranian-Armenian community portrayed while employing a close reading of *To Be or Not To Be* (1998). Second, I look into the uneven exhibition of predominantly Iranian-Armenian films while zooming in to the recently released film *Andranik* (2019). Finally, I look into the frames that explicitly mis-represent the community and associate it with negative humiliating stereotypes.

The national cinema of Iran appears to be very selective in telling stories about the Iranian-Armenian community. However, this chapter does not focus on challenging these narratives; instead, it aims to establish an overview of the narratives screened about the Iranian-Armenian community and within what frames that community is shaped. Starting from their presence behind the camera and moving into their presence on the screen, this chapter situates Iranian-Armenians as the central power that developed cinema in Iran and influenced it on different phases, and interrogates how their efforts are not being acknowledged within their representations in front the screen.

A. Iranian-Armenians Behind the Camera

When Iranian cinema started, it did not take the shape of the Iranian national cinema that we know today. There was an existing tension around the identity of this cinema. It first started as a transnational cosmopolitan enterprise that developed later to become a national cinema. The Iranian-Armenian community was present in both moments. How did Iranian-Armenians operate on both levels? How did they participate in the evolution of the national Iranian cinema? In this section, I trace the contributions of Iranian-Armenians to the cinema industry since its early days. Highlighting their transnational aspect, Iranian-Armenians appear to be central in the transition of Iranian cinema from transnational to national enterprise. There was an existing tension whether cinema in Iran will end up as transnational or national, and Iranian-Armenians played a pivotal role in shaping this tension.

Since the 1900s, ethnoreligious minorities have played a primary role in promoting and developing the cinema industry in Iran. Multicultural and interethnic communities contributed to the rise of the Iranian cinema because of their connections to the outside world including Europe and Russia (Naficy, 2011, p. 32). As such, Iranian-Armenians were among the first directors, actors and actresses, and studios and cinemas owners. The Iranian-Armenian community has had an undeniable influence on the cinema industry. They were instrumental in developing the film sector while contributing to different related fields. There are many Armenians names that still echo today in the cinema industry of Iran including Ovanes Ohanians (1898 – 1960), Samuel Khachikian (1923 – 2001), and Varuzh Karim-Masihi, an Iranian-Armenian director who is popular among the community in Iran and active in the film industry.

With intellectual and technological advancements rapidly developing in Iran, cinema started to emerge extensively. According to Golbarg Rekabtalaei (2015), the national Iranian cinema started as a transnational experience (p. 76). She mentions, "focusing on the transnational elements of the films in this era reveals cinematic features that would arguably pose this cinema as a multinational/transnational enterprise" (p. 76). How did Iranian-Armenians participate in establishing the Iranian film industry as a transnational one? One of the early transnational moments happened with the introduction of the screen translator, the *dilamj.* This concept was introduced by Ardeshes Badmagerian (1863 – 1928), one of the early Iranian-Armenian pioneers in the cinema industry. Because of his frequent travels, he was able to import foreign technologies that paved the way for the cinema industry in Iran to exist, including the cinematograph. Badmagerian opened, in 1915, "an eight-seat public cinema, which he named *Tajaddod* (Modernity), emphasizing the linkage between cinema and modernity" (Naficy, 2011, p. 68). In 1917, he opened "the first public cinema that catered exclusively to women" (Naficy, 2011: 68). Badmagerian performed as his own screen translator in his *Tajaddod Cinema*, "becoming the first regular *dilmaj*" (Naficy, 2011: 124). The introduction of a screen translator that narrates what is happening on the screen to the audience influenced the introduction of multi-lingual subtitles for multi-lingual audiences.

Cinema, since its introduction to the country, was important for the Iranian-Armenian community and not just the other way around. First, Iranian-Armenians used films to promote their political identity. They were sensitive to the needs of their community and because of their important role in movie-house ownership and the cinema industry, they politicized this platform to resist and fight for their presence as an ethnic minority in Iran. According to Naficy (2011), "In 1929, Turkish consulates complained that Armenian movie exhibitors in Tehran, Tabriz, Rasht, and elsewhere were politicizing their screenings by programming films that were against Turkey and in favor of Armenian national aspirations" (p. 199). Iranian-Armenians took privilege of their dominance on the cinema industry to legitimize their presence and protect their identity as minorities. Their role also extended to promote the transnational identity that marks the Iranian-Armenian population.

Transnational moments in the Iranian cinema industry were promoted by transnational Iranian-Armenians. The Iranian-Armenian director, Ovanes Ohanians is the central name of the story of Iranian-Armenians and the introduction of a transnational cinema in the country. Ohanians, with his confusing transnational backgrounds, helped in shaping the early era of cinema in Iran. Ohanians studied film in Russia and emigrated to Iran in 1929. As an *émigré*, Ohanians took advantage of his cosmopolitanism to access borders and achieve his dream of establishing an independent film industry in the country (Rekabtalaei, 2015, p. 77). He "created

Tehran's first film studio, established Iran's first film acting school, and made not only newsreels for the government, but also the first silent feature" (Naficy, 2011, p. 209). Ohanians reflected his cosmopolitan identity on the shape of the cinema industry and lent it its transnational dimension.

"Highlighting his hyphenated identity as an Armenian Iranian, Ohanians clearly expressed his desire and hope for the establishment of a sovereign Iranian cinema industry" (Rekabtalaei, 2015, p. 89). Ohanians' role in the transnational phase started with his first Iranian feature film, *Haji Agha, the Cinema Actor* (1933). The film constitutes a turning point in the cinema industry at that time and was a major step towards modernizing the country through cinema. According to Rekabtalaei (2015), "*Mr. Haji, the Cinema Actor* was a modern cosmopolitan flick, one of an emergent cosmo-national cinema" (p. 85). It is a reflexive film aimed at familiarizing the audience with the idea of cinema and the importance of going to movie theaters and contributing to the industry. At that time, cinema was demonized by religious clergy, and cinematic experiences were exclusively lived by the elite in the royal courts. However, Ohanians, as a director, screenwriter, producer, and actor in his own film, helped in shrinking the distance between the public and the cinema, thus catering to the modernization project.

The film itself was inspired by his transnational background. Subtitles on the film were in three languages: Persian, Russian, and French, making it comprehensible by not only Iranian but also global audiences. Also, in terms of plot and characters, the film did not focus on promoting an Iranian national identity; instead, it introduced transnational characters wearing western modern outfits and promoting western concepts and behaviors including going to the cinema, acting, and male-female interactions. Through his film, Ohanians took an important step in shaping cinema in

Iran as a transnational enterprise and encouraged cinematic productions in the country. Although he did not directly introduce what is known as the Iranian national cinema today, he helped in paving its way.

Before starting to produce films, Ohanians focused his energies on owning all necessary film equipment and personnel and, thus, eliminating the need for foreign films (Rekabtalaei, 2015, p. 78). He acknowledged the importance of having professionals in the field and opened the first film acting school in the country in 1930, known as The Film Acting Training Center (Naficy, 2011, p. 209). The presence of such film schools introduced the general practice of casting actors and actresses, and thus helped in influencing what is now known as the national Iranian cinema. Ohanians' role extends to engaging women, especially Iranian-Armenian women, as actresses in the industry.

Iranian-Armenian women were instrumental in nourishing the cinema industry on different levels. First, they were among the first women to be cast as actresses on screen. The casting of women at that time was controversial, especially for Muslim women. Iranian-Armenian women, as Christians, were less bound by Islamic rules; they filled this gap and became the first screen performers in the country. Asia Qestanian was the first adult female main actress who appeared in Ohanians' previously mentioned film (Naficy, 2011, p. 151). Also, Ohanians cast his own daughter Zoma Ohanians for a secondary role in the same film. Iranian-Armenian women also were the first cinema and studio owners. The Armenian actress and opera singer Satropi Aqababov opened *Pari* (Fairy) Cinema in 1928. It was perhaps "the first movie house owned by a woman and designed from the start to cater to both men and women" (Naficy, 2011, p. 265).

The national cinema of Iran still takes advantage of Iranian-Armenian women to perform roles that Iranian-Muslims cannot. One of my participants, Biurak, told me that she was cast for a short film in the role of a hostess in a plane. She said, “I love acting and I always seek for small opportunities. Many casting calls mention that they want only Armenian actresses, not because they want us to be included, but because they believe that we have more freedom.” Despite the restrictions and codes of ethics controlling the representation of Iranian women on the screen under the Islamic Republic, Iranian-Armenian women’s contributions are affected by both political and ethnic barriers. Earlier, they were the first women to act on the screen, and nowadays, they fight for a genuine presence in the cinema industry. Anaheed Abad’s film is a continuation of what they started earlier by Iranian-Armenian women, and a remarkable moment for the national Iranian cinema.

Iranian-Armenians participated primarily in shaping cinema from a transnational to a national enterprise though establishing and dominating the majority of studios in the country. The national cinema of Iran started to take serious shape in the 1940s. Right after World War II, the industrialization of cinema began through the establishment of studios and production houses. In the late 1940s, film production and dubbing studios started to emerge through Iranian-Armenians. Diana Film Studio was owned by Sanasar Khachaturian, a female producer and owner of Diana Cinema (Naficy, 2011, p. 170). It was one of the most famous and well-equipped studios that employed “the writer-director Serzh Azarian, as well as cinematographers and cast members who were also Armenian” (Naficy, 2011, p. 170). When Diana Studio stopped working, two Armenian brothers and former employees at Diania Studio, Anik and Henrik Ovedisian, opened Shahin Studio in 1959 (Naficy, 2011, p. 170). In addition to these names, there are the Armenian producers Simik Costantin, Johnny Baghdasarian, and Vahan Terpanchian, who opened Alborz Film Studio in 1951. There is also Rubik Dezadurian, who opened both Shahb and Hamlet studios, which mainly specialized in "intertitling foreign movies and dubbing foreign and domestic productions" (Naficy, 2011, p. 170). These studios were vehicles that supplied Iranian-Armenian directors with the needed technologies to employ innovative genres in the national cinema at that time.

In the context of these studios, Iranian-Armenians played an important role in making use of them to introduce new genres that shaped the national cinema of Iran. Samuel Khachikian (1923 – 2001), also known as the "Iranian Hitchcock," is one brilliant Iranian-Armenian director whose work still echoes until today. He was a master of thrillers, who introduced the crime genre to the cinema industry at that time. According to Ehsan Khoshbakht (2017), Khachikian is one of the father figures of Iranian cinema who was "for 40 years synonymous with popular genre films inspired by Hollywood and enjoyed by big audiences." His work appealed to the predominantly Muslim population in Iran. The premiere of his films would cause traffic jams due to the huge outturn of Iranian audiences. He mastered new cinematic techniques in lighting, photography, framing, cutting, and sounds, adding a new form to the national cinema that was dominated by mainstream *filmfars*i genres that were highly influenced by Indian, Egyptian, and other cinema industries. He was the turning point that defined the cinema in Iran as the national cinema that we know today.

Khachikian brought a new form and style to a formless cinema (Khoshbakht, 2017). He said, "I wanted to save Iranian cinema from *roohozi.*[5] From the first day onwards, it wasn't the message or the content that I was concerned with. What I wanted was a precise cinema: action, correct editing, lighting, and so on" (as cited in

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[5] A popular and vulgar form of theatre.

Khoshbakht, 2017). According to Naficy, Khachikian opened Azhir (Alarm) Film studio that "produced nearly two dozen commercial movies, propelling Khachikian to the forefront of action and noir movies" (2011, p. 170). In his famous film *The Crossroads of Events* (1955), Khachikian introduced:

> a strong cadre of Armenian Iranian technical personnel to commercial cinema, including cinematographers (Vanak Vartanian), an assistant cameraman (Arakol Babakhanian), soundmen (Hanrik Avdisian, Vanik Vdisian), set designers (Hairo Nazlumian, Gargin Zakrian), a poster designer (Hajek Ojaqian), and a producer (Sanasar Khachaturian). (Naficy, 2011, p. 239)

Khachikian's contribution was not limited only to genres' innovations, but also he empowered the Iranian-Armenian technical presence consolidating a strong film industry through which the national Iranian cinema crystallized.

One significant role of Khachikian in marking and defining the national Iranian cinema lies also in the presentation of his work in international film festivals. Khachikian was the first one to promote the reputation of Iranian cinema abroad and represent it as a national cinema industry. Khachikian's *A Party in Hell* (1956) was selected by the Berlinale, and "it became the first Iranian film ever presented at an international film festival" (Khoshbakht, 2017). The Iranian cinema was recognized internationally and represented itself as a national enterprise through Khachikian. After the Islamic Revolution, Khachikian, like many of his colleagues in the cinema industry at that time, was "slowly and deliberately sidelined and then banned" (Khoshbakht, 2017). However, Khachikian is still recognized as a member of a minority who changed the course of the cinema in Iran, marked what is known as the national Iranian cinema, and became the filmmaker of the majority.

When the national Iranian cinema started to take shape, Iranian-Armenians were there. They are not just migrating subjects but also were present in the foundational moments of the national cinema of Iran. They were present at that time and they are present now. As we have been following Iranian cinema from transnational to national phases, the role of Iranian-Armenians in the cinema industry is more ambiguous than ever. Since the Islamic Revolution (1979), and even before, the role of Iranian-Armenians in the cinema industry has been shrinking. Iranian-Armenians are either absented from the national screen or mis-represented. Even in terms of acting and directing films, the Iranian-Armenian performance has been marginalized after the Islamic revolution.

This section is packed with Iranian-Armenian names, who participated and played a main role in introducing the cinema to the country and catering the industry. The main purpose of listing these accomplishments and contributions is to show their central roles in both transnational and national phases. It reflects the paradox between their huge role behind the camera and their marginalized role in front the camera as I examine in the following section.

B. Iranian-Armenians in Front the Camera

In this section, I move into the role of Iranian-Armenians in front of the camera. The Iranian-Armenian community has been represented on the screen in different moments; however, its representation is questionable. What are these moments? How is the Iranian-Armenian community represented? How are films marketed? What is the general reception of Iranian films representing Iranian-Armenians? I start with the first cinematic narrative I encountered about the Iranian-Armenian community and end with the most recent one that I watched in Tehran's cinemas. First, I discuss the classical narrative of the Iranian-Armenian community represented through *To Be or Not To Be* (1998). Second, I examine the marketing of films representing Iranian-Armenians while discussing *Andranik* (2019). Third, I look into recent films representing Iranian-Armenians in a stereotypical problematic way including *Atomic Heart* (2015) and *Oxidan* (2017). As already mentioned, this chapter is not concerned with Iranian-Armenians' reception. Instead, it is an attempt to explore the typical narratives about Iranian-Armenians and what has been said about these representations beyond Iranian-Armenian viewers.

On March 23, 2018, I watched *To Be or Not To Be* (*Budan Ya Nabudan*, 1998), an Iranian film that represents several Iranian-Armenian characters. It was the first time that I had seen Iranian-Armenians characters on screen. After watching the film, I acknowledged that the problem is not only the absence of Iranian-Armenians from the national cinema. Even if marginally represented, Iranian-Armenian characters can occasionally be found on the national screen of Iran. However, the controversy lies in the way they are being represented. The national cinema of Iran happens to tell narratives about Iranian-Armenians that do not necessarily reconcile with their real narratives in Iran. It tells stories and shape the community in a way that underestimates its history and presence in the country. We see the Iranian-Armenian community on the screen from a very angled perspective that bears to be represented more deeply and genuinely.

To Be or Not To Be is a representative film for the Iranian-Armenian community in Iran for several reasons. First, it was screened on Armenian celebrations and events. On January 11, 2015, for example, *To Be or Not To Be* was screened on the Christian New Year's Eve in Cinema Farhang ("Kianoush Ayari's," 2015). The celebration happens to be a common one with the Iranian-Armenian community, as well. The film was purposefully screened during the time of Armenian celebrations because it features the story of an Iranian-Armenian woman and might mostly appeal to the Iranian-Armenian audience; it is officially linked to the interest of the Iranian-

Armenian community. Second, the film, although somewhat outdated, can be found on imvbox.com— an online platform that streams hundreds of Iranian popular films with English subtitles —giving accessibility for international foreign audiences to watch a story of an Iranian-Armenian in Iran. Unlike other films, *To Be or Not To Be* does not include striking negative stereotypes about the Iranian-Armenian community and most probably did not face obstacles with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Instead, it is one of the representations that the government would like to promote about the Iranian-Armenian community. Although the film exempts the government from any condemnations of negatively portraying Iranian-Armenians, is there any other way to read the film? The typical narrative represented can be critically read and analyzed in a way that problematizes the representation of the community.

Before closely reading the film, I briefly explain the plot and its general reception. Directed by Kianush Ayari in 1998, *To Be or Not To Be* tells the story of Anik Avanessian, an Iranian-Armenian woman who has a severe cardiac insufficiency and is in a desperate need of a heart transplant. Anik's doctor, a Muslim man, tries his best to find her a heart. While they are at the hospital, a hopeless case of a man is announced: Amir, a Muslim man, stabbed at his wedding ceremony is kept in I.C.U. to keep his heart alive, but he is braindead. The doctor tries to make a deal with Amir's family and convince them to donate the heart, but they continuously reject his request. At the same time, the father of Masoumeh, another young girl who needs a heart, but her case is not as urgent as Anik's, tries to negotiate with Amir's family to get the heart instead of Anik. After many failed negotiations, the Muslim family finally accepts to donate Amir's heart to Anik and save her.

The film depicts the struggle over the heart and revolves around concepts of greed, discrimination, tolerance, and unity. The overall reception of the film was positive. Several reviews mentioned that the main message of the film is to promote unity and humanitarian values over any other favoritisms. It is a message for humanity that invites the Iranian nation, despite of its diversity, to unite and empathize with one another ("At a Review Session," 2001). The Muslim family had to ignore the fact that Anik is an Armenian woman and gives her the heart regardless. The film focuses on the identity of Anik as an Armenian and on the hard efforts made by the Muslim family to accept her identity. Such a dichotomy brings several critical questions to me as a viewer. How is Anik's identity represented as the other? Why did the Muslim family resist giving her the heart? What did the Muslim family have to overcome to finally accept and donate? How does the aspired message of the film contradict with the representation of the Iranian-Armenian community? In the following section, I will critically read *To Be or Not To Be* while juxtaposing it with the Iranian-Armenian history in the country.

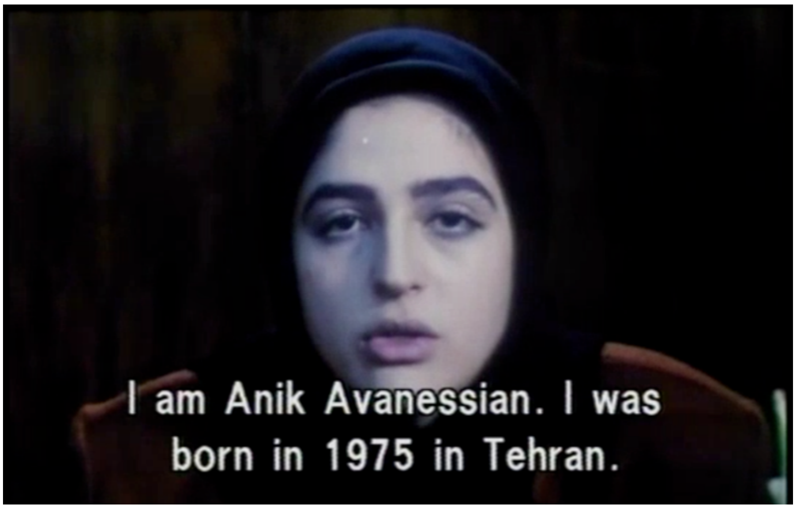
I am Anik Avanessian. I was
born in 1975 in Tehran.

Fig. 1 - Anik Avanessian (To Be or Not To Be)

When I first watched the film, I did not have many critical comments on the representation of Iranian-Armenians except for the presence of the hijab. I believed that the film mis-represented Iranian-Armenians because Anik appears in an ideal Islamic dress code. The viewer, especially if not Iranian or Armenian, cannot easily identify that she is Armenian until she says her family name (fig. 1). Iranians and Armenians can identity Anik's Armenian identity because of her Armenian accent. Despite the outer appearance, when closely reading the film, it becomes apparent that it mis-represents Armenians in a more central way. One of the critical comments on the representation of Anik is framing her in an exaggerated vulnerability.

To Be or Not To Be creates a cinematic experience that reminds Iranian-Armenians of their exhausting history of resistance and migration. Throughout the film, the Armenian body is represented as the ill body. Anik is represented as a vulnerable hopeless woman who needs a miracle to survive. In most of the scenes, Anik appears to be tired, pale, and breathless, however, very persistent to survive. According to the actress herself, Asal Badiee,[6] she practiced shooting the scenes several times in order to actually look breathless and depressed ("After Seventeen Years," 2015). Since Anik is the main character, the film pictures her intense struggle in a series of scenes. She is always coughing and catching her breath. She is very weak and in an urgent need of help. The film shows the intensity of Anik's struggle for life, which parallels with the Armenian struggle for life. The diaspora of the Armenian community has a shared memory of sufferings whether of the genocide or forced migrations; each community has a memory of struggles.

Despite the fact that the film implies a humanitarian message, it also establishes the existing gap between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian-Muslims. There is a prominent separation between the Iranian identity and the Armenian one. It can be implied that Iranian-Armenians are represented as outsiders and foreigners in their own country as if they are not an equal part of the nation, like Iranian-Muslims. Throughout the film, several scenes reflected the tension between the two identities, Muslim and Armenian. The Iranian-Muslim family repeatedly puts obstacles between them and Anik based on her ethnicity. They were hesitant to give her the heart not only because they care about their son, Amir, but also, they preferred to give it to a Muslim, like the other young girl Masoumeh whose father was willing to pay a big amount of money. In one of the scenes, Amir's uncle tells Masoumeh's father, who is trying to win over Anik and get the heart for his daughter, "Even if they gave 10 million… They cannot win." The father asks, "How come?" and the uncle affirmatively responds, "They are Armenian" (fig. 2).

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[6] Asal Badie died in 2013 due to cardiac and respiratory problems, and donated her organs after her death

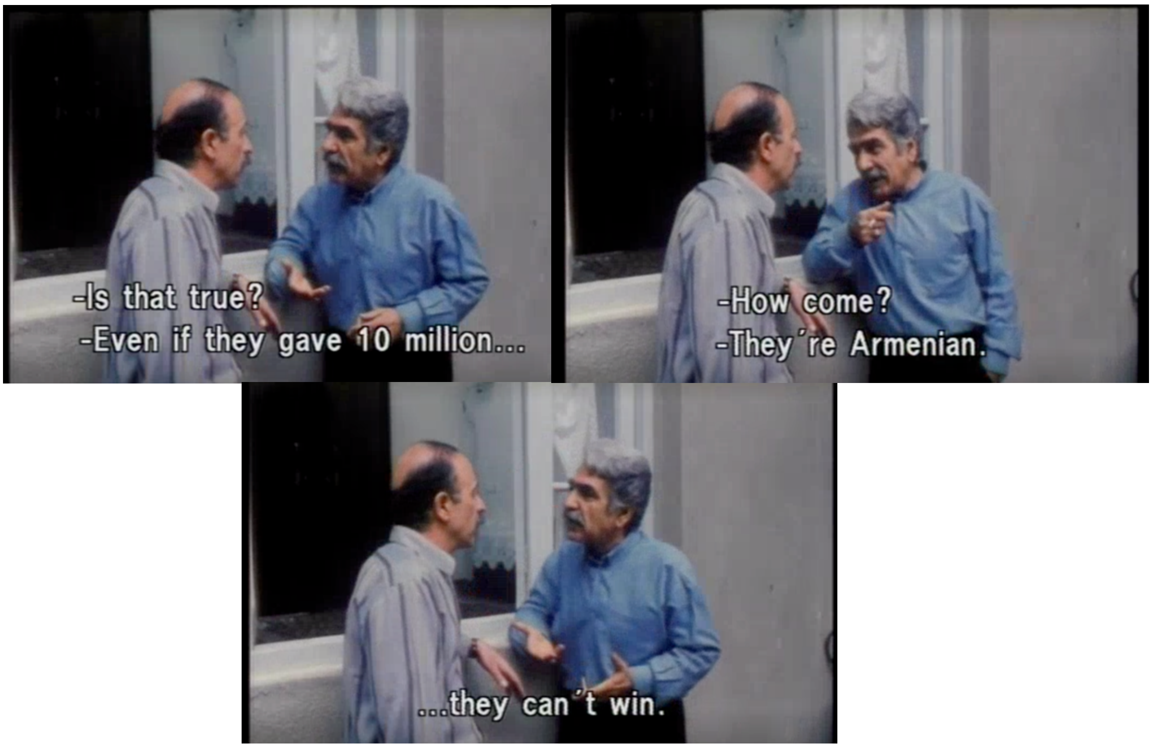
-Is that true?
-Even if they gave 10 million...
-How come?
-They're Armenian.
...they can't win.

Fig. 2 - They can't win (To Be or Not To Be)

Besides the factor of ethnicity, the Iranian-Muslim family increased the established gap between them and Anik while shaming her faith. In this situation, Islam appears to be the main cause of this gap and creates a hierarchy between the different ethnicities. In one of the scenes, Anik visits Amir's family in order to convince them to donate the heart. She wants to show them how desperate she is to live, and Amir's heart is her only hope. While she is breathlessly talking, Ahmad, Amir's brother, aggressively interrupts her and curses the ill woman. Due to his violent reaction, Anik's situation gets worse, and she faints at the family's house. They try to wake her up, but she is completely unconscious. One lady says to Ahmad, "Don't stand there, take her." Ahmad responds, "I can't touch her, it's sinful." Anik's case is potentially fatal and still Ahmad thinks that he is prohibited from touching her because Islam forbids him to touch foreign women. In this scene, the Iranian-Muslim family seems to be morally and ethically separated from the Iranian-Armenian one. The irony lies in the represented fact that cursing and emotionally abusing a sick woman is not considered a sin, but touching her is. At the end of the scene, they covered her with a blanket so that Ahmad was able to take her to the car and then to the hospital (fig. 3).

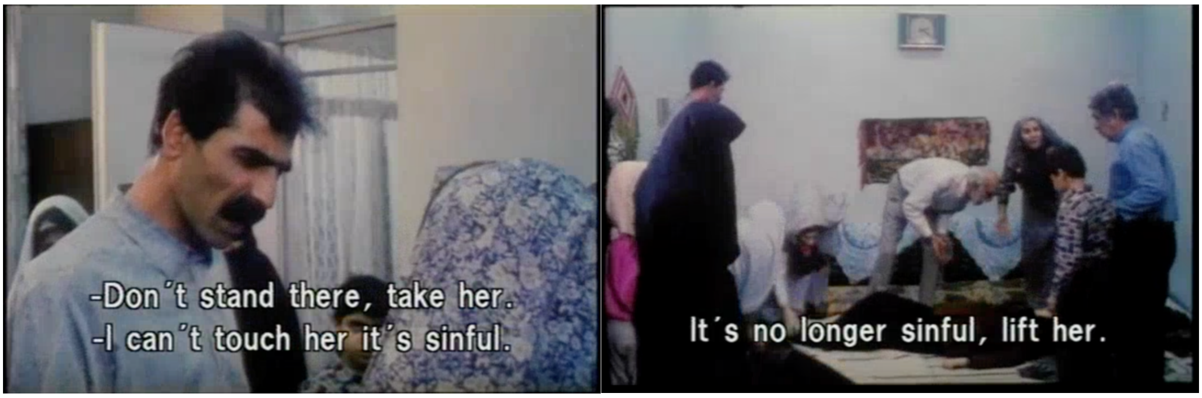
-Don´t stand there, take her.
-I can´t touch her it´s sinful.
It´s no longer sinful, lift her.

Fig. 3 - I can't touch her! (To Be or Not To Be)

To Be or Not To Be sheds lights on the role of the Sharia law in marginalizing the Iranian-Armenian community and separating it from the Iranian-Muslim one. Not only does it depict the differences between the two communities, but the national screen also favors the Muslim one over the Armenian. We might, for example, consider the scene in which the Muslim family discovers that Anik is Armenian. After the failed negotiations, Anik's mother visits the family in order to offer them money for the heart. Anik goes after her to get her back home (fig. 4):

> Anik: Let's go home.
> Anik's mother: No until they give their consent.
> Woman: You're not Muslims?
> Anik's mother: No, we're Armenians.
> Woman: I thought you had some accent. (Ayari, 1998)

In this scene, the whole Muslim family discovers that Anik is Armenian and becomes more alert in its reactions. For example, the Muslim woman has put a bowl of fruits in front of Anik's mother. When she discovers they are Armenian, she removes the bowl and asks her family not to eat the fruits. She took the bowl away and washes it (fig. 5).

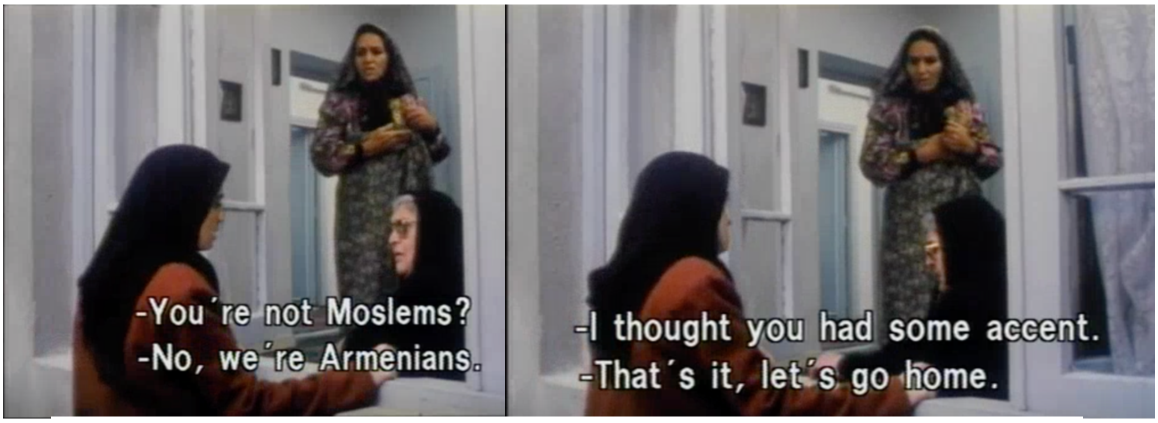
-You´re not Moslems?
-No, we´re Armenians.
-I thought you had some accent.
-That´s it, let´s go home.

Fig. 5 - I thought you had some accent (To Be or Not To Be)

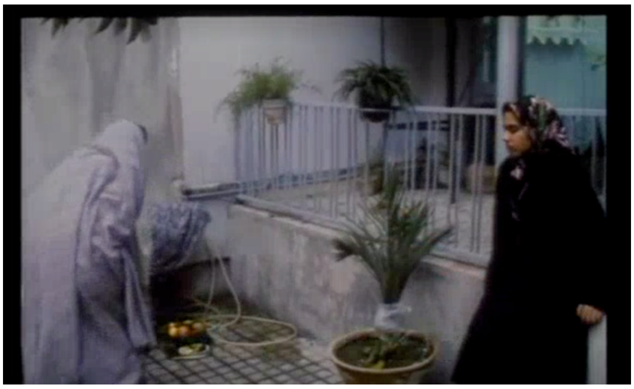

Fig. 4 - Najasat! (To Be or Not To Be)

Such a scene is humiliating to the Iranian-Armenian community because it sheds light on their so-called impurity. In the Islamic belief, Muslims cannot eat the food that touches the hands of the non-Muslims. One of the most shocking and offensive discriminatory concepts is the concept of *najasat,* which is known as the impurity of non-Muslims. According to James Barry (2017), “it mostly impacts on the lives of non-Muslims as an occasional annoyance or as an insult, but it is also reflected in laws which requires food sellers to display a sign in their shop windows indicating that their products are handled by non-Muslims” (p. 558). Here the national cinema is not only highlighting the ethnic and religious gap between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian-Muslims, but also reflecting the bias of the screen to the Islamic law of the country. It is depicting Iranian-Armenians as lesser individuals just because they are not Muslims.

So far, I have explained how the film attributes the survival of the Iranian-Armenian community to the Muslim presence. As already mentioned, the community is represented as a sick suffering body who needs help to survive. What does it take Anik to survive? Evidently, the heart of the Muslim braindead man. The Muslim family is depicted as Anik’s savor, who is vulnerable and abandoned. But, what does she need to give in return in order to win the heart? After many negotiations, the Muslim family finally accepts to give the heart to Anik without any money in return. When the family gives consent, Anik asks, “Do you know I’m Armenian?” making sure that the father knows her identity. The father said, “What’s the difference if you will keep our gift in your chest?” (fig. 6). Not only does the family agree to give her the heart unconditionally, they also overcome the ethnoreligious barrier which is almost always present in the real life in Iran. This representation shows that the Muslim family gave away a precious piece of their son to give life to an Armenian woman who did not give anything in return. In other word, the Muslim family is framed within the concept of unconditional giver.

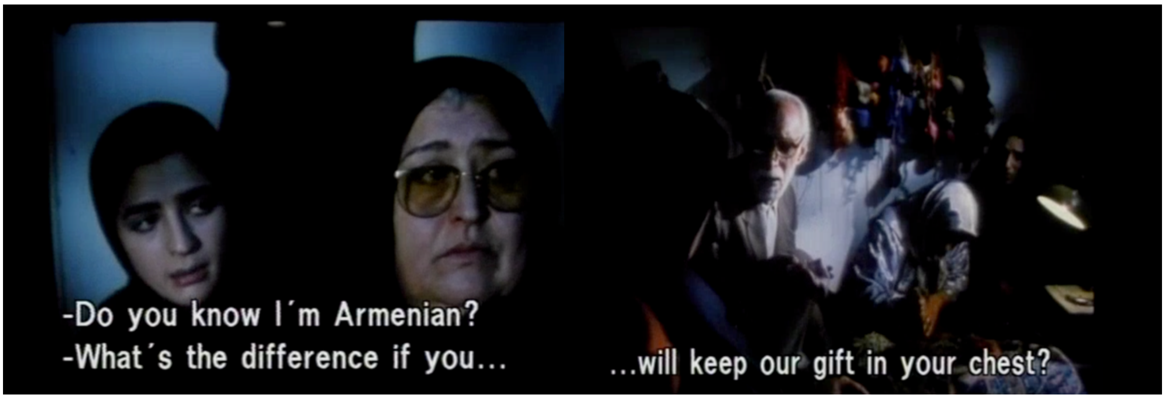
-Do you know I´m Armenian?
-What´s the difference if you...
...will keep our gift in your chest?

Fig. 6 - A Muslim Heart in an Armenian Chest (To Be or Not To Be)

Such representations might be regarded as humanitarian and promote values of unity, tolerance, and humanity. They can also be used to sanctify Iranian-Muslims who unconditionally love and embrace the Armenian community that was in need. The film explicitly attributes the survival of Anik to the generosity of the Muslim family. Keeping the Iranian-Armenian history in mind, we might even say that the heart symbolizes the piece of land given by Shah Abbas to the emigrated Armenian community centuries ago. It parallels with the Iranian-Armenian struggle and the hospitality provided by Iranians. Unlike the unconditional deal portrayed, the actual Armenian sick body had to survive itself in Iran while giving a lot of sacrifices in return and this is what the national cinema of Iran is specifically neglecting.

It is important to bear in mind that these representations are part of typical narratives and are not necessarily true. The Iranian-Armenian people I met in Tehran are aware of their contributions to Iran and to their history in the country. The national cinema, when representing them, neglects their accomplishments and undermines the effort they made to survive in the country. Biurak, one of my participants, said, “Shah

Abbas did not bring us here because of his good heart! We played an important role in educating the people and improving the industry." Also, according to Emin, another participant, Shah Abbas for Iranians is a legend, but for Armenians, he is overrated. Yes, he saved Iranian-Armenians from a violent history of massacres and treated them in a good way, but this does not erase the fact that they contributed to the land as much as the other partners in the country did.

Representative narratives of the Iranian-Armenian community limit the representation of Iranian-Armenians and neglect important moments of their history and contributions to the country. Instead of reminding them of the favor Iranians granted for Armenians, the national cinema of Iran can give the community accountability and a right over the land that they developed and the cinema industry they brought and nourished. Besides agriculture, Iranian-Armenians played an important role in reviving arts in Iran as already described in the first section of this chapter. Narek, another participant, said:

> The very first Persian colored television was made by Armenians. Pilots are Armenians. We brought sculpture. We brought print. We brought Jazz. We brought Metal. We brought cinema. When I talk about these innovations, people accuse us of being racists and show offs. It is not my fault that we have started these things here. That's why Shah Abbas brought us, he was a smart businessman!

These few comments are not built on the film, but the result of random chatting with my participants, and they successfully reflect the gap between how Iranian-Armenians perceive their community and how the national cinema does.

This detailed analysis establishes the dominant trope that appears in this film. It deconstructs the humanitarian message of *To Be or Not To Be* and reads it differently. It reminds Iranian-Armenians of a history of struggle and positions the Iranian-Muslim community as the savior. It alienates the Iranian-Armenian community and depicts the

Muslim one as an embracing one. *To Be or Not To Be* does not, in any way, translate the huge efforts made by the community to make this cinema exist in the first place.

While it is considered one of the few films that represent Iranian-Armenians, *To Be or Not To Be*, which was originally released in 1998, is outdated and has not been extensively reviewed. In the following section, I will read a more recent filmic representation of the Iranian-Armenian community in order to see how the national cinema can tell the story of the community in a different way, while mis-representing it on different levels. I will also focus on the level of exhibition since the film was being screened at the time I arrived in Tehran.

January 27, 2019 – Tehran, *On this day, I decided finally to walk through some Armenian streets and neighborhoods. While wandering through Ghaem Magham and Mirzaye Shirazi streets, I could not but feel the Armenian atmosphere with every step. There are many Armenian stores and restaurants. The names of the shops are written in the Armenian letters. What was common among almost all Armenian places on those streets is Andranik's film poster. Every shop front had at least two posters of the new released Iranian-Armenian film. I am still not completely aware of the plot and reception of the film, but what I am sure about is that the Iranian-Armenian community is proud of it.*

Before travelling to Tehran, I believed that Iranian films with Iranian-Armenian characters are very few, and even when present, they play secondary characters who contribute very little to the plot. However, and fortunately, when I first arrived in the country, I learned about the one-month screening of a film that is dominantly about an Iranian-Armenian family, and thus presenting Iranian-Armenian characters as primary ones. *Andranik* (2019) is another representative film of the Iranian-Armenian community. I am mentioning this film because I had the chance to watch it with the audiences in Tehran's movie theaters; thus, having the chance to explore how Iranian-Armenian films are exhibited and circulated in the country. Just like *To Be or Not To Be*, *Andranik* does not include any direct offensive representations of the community and it is regarded as a positive step for the Iranian-Armenian presence on the national screen. However, the way the film was exhibited and marketed interrogates the real intentions of the national cinema of Iran behind this film. The screening times and movie theaters reflect a selective hierarchy in marketing films that does not favor films representing Iranian-Armenians.

The film was directed and produced by Houssein Mahkam in 2018 but screened for the first time in Iran in January 2019. The setting of the film takes place during the reign of Mohamed Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) in Urmia in 1950. It tells the story of a fictional Iranian-Armenian political activist and revolutionary poet named Andranik, who was critical of the Shah’s regime. Because of his hostile attitude, a SAVAK agent tracks Andranik’s family in order to find and imprison him. Interestingly, however, Andranik does not appear in the film. There are only four characters in the film: Sonia, Andranik’s love interest; Father Petros, Sonia’s father; their servant Yurik; and the SAVAK officer, a member of the Shah’s secret police force. The events take place in one setting: the house of the priest, which is full of Christian symbols, including the Holy Cross and many religious icons. The film represents the negotiations made by the SAVAK policeman with Andranik’s family in order to know his place. It is important to mention that the character of the servant Yurik is played by the Iranian-Armenian actor Andranik Khochoomian.

On January 26, 2019, I watched *Andranik* for the first time in Cinema Farhang, one of the oldest cinemas in Tehran. It was screened in a very small movie hall that included only four rows of 12 seats each. Although it was during the early days of the screening, it was not placed in large halls. This likely goes back to economic factors. The Iranian-Armenian community is a minority, which constitutes only 2% of the population. The cinema industry aims to get as much profit as possible and, thus, movies about minorities are not expected to garner much viewership, so small theaters are utilized for such niche films. This might also inform the shortage of Iranian-

Armenian representations on the national screen. However, it is implicitly intended that this film will not attract a wide range of audience because it is about a minority, thus, it is screened in small halls.

Another shortcoming of the exhibition of *Andranik* is its overall screening time in the country. I received the screening times of the film from Albert, an Iranian-Armenian man I met in Tehran. The film was only screened for one month in 15 movie theaters across the country in the cities of Tehran, Mashhad, Shiraz, Esfahan, and Kish. As an average, the film was screened twice a day, but in different movie theaters. Although it is important to have the film screened in different cities, it should be screened more than one month in order to reach as much audiences as possible. People did not have the enough time to know about the film and watch it. Even many of my Iranian-Armenian participants did not know about the film until I told them. *Andranik,* which is supposed to give new hopes of the representation of Iranian-Armenians on the screen and show the embracing nature of the national cinema was poorly exhibited and publicized.

The general reception of the film in the movie theater seemed to be positive and the audience was engaged. I spent 90 minutes in the movie theater trying to capture any glimmer of the story; the film was in Persian and did not include any subtitles. I was sure that the film did not include any insults or negative stereotypes about the Iranian-Armenian community there. When the film finished, I approached an Iranian woman, hoping that she was Armenian. Although she was not, she entertained my questions and explained the film for me. There were around 20 people in the movie theater. Very few of the people watching the film were Iranian-Armenians; I succeeded in differentiating them because of their language. Those Armenian audience members primarily used the Armenian language to comment on the film. Those same members of the audience also kept taking photos on their phones of every scene that had figures denotating the Armenian community, including the priest, the cross, and the prayer room, as if they are not used to see such an Armenian presence on the screen. After my first cinematic experience in Tehran, I acknowledged that the exhibition of Iranian films representing Iranian-Armenians has its own shortcomings as well and the marketing of the ‘Armenian hero’ does not largely echo.

Reviews about *Andranik* did not focus on the dominant presence of the Armenian element in the film. Instead, reviewers were immersed in discussing the cinematography employed by the director and the film’s transition from a theatrical play into an art-house production. Also, news about the film discussed its potential participations in local and international film festivals. Ignoring the Armenian element gives an impression that reviewers and Iranian audiences are familiar with the presence of all Armenian settings and characters on the screen. However, in one article, written by the director himself, he tells the story of the *Andranik*’s birth while hinting to the important presence of Armenians behind and in front the screen. He gives credits to the Iranian-Armenian director Varuzh Karim-Masihi who showed a huge interest and support in turning *Andranik* to more than a theatrical play. He also gives credits to the Iranian-Armenian actor present in the film, Andranik Khochoomian, who was a reference for every specific Armenian representation, especially the religious symbols and the indoor temple (“Andranik’s Review Meeting,” 2019).

It is important to mention that the Iranian-Armenian authorities did not give permission to *Andranik*’s film crew to access any of the Armenian churches. Although *Andranik* was filmed in one setting, the house of the priest, some scenes were preplanned to take place in a church. However, as the director mentions, the Armenian Caliphate Council did not allow the production team to access any Armenian church

("Andranik's Review Meeting," 2019). The film was about a religious conservative family, and did not insult the Armenian belief, yet the council refused. This unexplained rejection will be more clarified in the upcoming section. The overprotecting attitudes are due to the previous productions that exploited the church and mis-represented the community. After such horrible experiences, I believe that the council generated trust issues with the national cinema industry of Iran. The following section explains how the national cinema is mis-representing the Iranian-Armenian community through associating it with negative humiliating stereotypes.

In this section, I move into another level of Iranian-Armenian mis-representation on the national screen. Between 1998 and 2019, two problematic films featuring Iranian-Armenians were produced; *Atomic Heart* (2015) and *Oxidan* (2017). Unlike *To Be or Not To Be* and *Andranik*, the films directly mis-represent the Iranian-Armenian community. Both films insulted Iranian-Armenians on multiple levels including personal behavior, faith, lifestyle, and even the outer appearance.

Before delving into the general reception of the films, I will briefly go through the plot of each. *Atomic Heart* (2015), also known as *Atom Heart Mother* (*Madar-e Qalb Atomi*) revolves around two drunk girls, Arineh, played by Taraneh Alidoosti, and Nobahar, played by Pegah Ahangarani, who drive the streets of Tehran at night after a boisterous party. Arineh represents the Armenian character in the film. During their loud road trip, the girls crash into a taxi car because they were driving in the opposite direction on a one-way street. At the moment of the accident, a mysterious man in a suit, Toofan, played by Mohammad Ali Golzar, helps them and asks them for a ride in return. When Toofan appears on the screen, the film takes on a surrealist quality that keeps the viewer wondering whether the remainder of the film really happens or not. Toofan joins the girls on their road trip and talks about past dictators, war, and utopic worlds while terrorizing them. The film wavers between realism and surrealism, reality and dreams. It oscillates between these modes while conversations revolve around history, politics, religion, war, and revolution. The film is set in 2009, during the execution of the Subsidy Reform Plan by previous president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

Atomic Heart is one of the few popular films that feature an Iranian-Armenian character. The film was produced in 2013, released in 2015, but was only allowed to be screened in Iran in 2017 because it carries multiple political, social, and religious controversies, including mention of the nuclear program and the Syrian war and the appearance of past Iraqi president Saddam Houssein, smoking marijuana, among others. Even the Tehrani youth were depicted as influenced by western commodities and music. In the next chapter, I will elaborate more on the representation of Armenian characters in the film and how my Iranian-Armenian perceived this representation and problematized it.

During my fieldwork, my participants did not show a lot of interests in Iranian cinema and films that represented them as a community; however, they were all very critical against *Oxidan.* This film tells the story of Aslan, a man who wants to procure a visa and look for his fiancé, who left Iran illegally. In order to easily get the visa, he asks for the help of a smuggler, Bahman, who advises him to change his religious identity and fake being an Armenian on the premises that religious minorities in Iran get visas easier than Muslims. In an attempt to convert, Aslan dresses like a priest, holds the cross and the bible, and adopts the Armenian identity. Aslan also succeeds, with the help of the smuggler, to terrorize an actual Armenian priest and work as a fake deacon in the church to support his fake identity in front of the authorities.

The reviews about the film brought my attention to a contradictory point of view among Iranian-Armenians and Iranian-Muslims. Both *Oxidan* and *Atomic Heart* negatively portray the Iranian-Armenian community, but is this portrayal noticed by the general public? The ethnic national identity and cultural background influenced the cinematic experience of the reviewers differently. While *Oxidan* explicity and violently attack the Armenian community and Armenian Christianity, reviews by non-Armenians read at as an insult to Islam and Iranian-Muslims ("The Critique of Oxidan," 2018). In one of the most absurd reviews I read, the author mentions that *Oxidan* undermines Islam because it focuses on the visual aesthetics of the Armenian church while portraying the mosque as colorless and lifeless place ("The Critique of Oxidan," 2018). Reviews by non-Armenians were very self-centered and focused on the representations of Islam instead of noticing the explicit insults associated with the Iranian-Armenian community.

Oxidan has been highly criticized by both Iranian-Muslims and Iranian-Armenians, but each have driven the criticism to a different opposing direction. Iranian-Muslims criticized the dialogue and the story. They did not find anything innovative about the film and accused the director of imitating Kamal Tabrizi's *The Lizard* (2004), a film that tells story of a prisoner who faked the identity of a Muslim cleric. They also condemned the director and accused him as being a coward for not crossing more red lines in terms of depicting religion. At the same time, the Iranian-Armenian community protested the film and acknowledged that it has a lot of social implications and Hamed Mohammadi, *Oxidan*'s director, went so far behind the red-lines and the sacredness of Christianity. Iranian-Muslims wanted the director to take more risks to boost the comedy up in his film, but the Armenian community hoped that the cinema industry in Iran will refrain from adopting such superficial and vulgar films.

Although it is an ethnoreligious minority, the Iranian-Armenian community appeared to be more concerned about protecting the national unity in Iran than the major population of the country. On a more formal level, Iranian-Armenian officials protested the film as well. Karen Khanlari, a representative of the northern Armenian community in the Islamic Consultive Assembly, questioned the legitimacy of such films and advised Iranian filmmakers to avoid making similar movies to maintain the national unity. He played an important role in the official protests about the films and issued, with a group of parliament representatives, a letter to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance to ban the film and stand behind the dignity of the Iranian-Armenian community ("Oxidizing Iranian Cinema," 2017).

Besides the official protests, filmmakers and actors in Iranian cinema industry criticized the films while reminding the public of the contribution of Iranian-Armenians to the national cinema of Iran. In response to the representation of the drunk Armenian woman in *Atomic Heart*, the Iranian-Armenian actor and director, Siamanto Barseghian, said, "the Iranian-Armenian director Ovanes Ohanians invented film and film schools in Iran, yet, unfortunately, the directors are not hesitating in insulting Armenians to fulfill their cinematic and artistic career!" (Sina, 2017). While Iranian-Armenians active in the film industry raged against the two films, director Ali Ahmadzadeh explained that he had no intentions in insulting Christianity, and for him, the character of Arineh is the best one in the film ("Conservative MPs Pressure Culture," 2017). He also supported *Oxidan* while indicating that the portrayals are part of reality ("Conservative MPs Pressure Culture," 2017).

Some reviews implicitly blamed the Islamic Republic for such films and their so-called "shameful" portrayals. The Iranian actress Shahareh Dolat Abadi, wife of Iranian-Armenian musician Andrée Arzoomanian, said, "Years ago, every religion and every ethnic group was cherished and highly valued in Iran. But now, we are being encouraged to insult any ethnicity and cross all ethical limits” (Sina, 2017). She ends her comment while bringing up *The Lizard* again. She questions the bias of censorship that problematized Tabrizi’s film on the premises that it humiliates the Muslim cleric, but easily allowed Mohammadi to release *Oxidan*. She asks with denunciation, “I would like to know if the humiliations were directed towards Muslim and Islam, what would happen?” (Sina, 2017).

This section has shown that that the few popular, well-circulated, and accessible films that portray Iranian-Armenians often feature negative representations. The films disseminated negative stereotypes about the community and challenged the teachings of Armenian Christianity. Also, the films intended to normalize false behavior that threatens national unity. In this section, the dissimilarity in reacting to films was apparent and influenced by the existing gap between Muslims and Armenians in Iran. The ethnic identity informs and determines one’s stand even in the utmost unbearable cases. While *Oxidan* obviously interferes with the Armenian community and Christianity, an Iranian-Muslim review mentioned, “the film positively endorsed Christianity; no wonder why no Christian group had taken a stand against the film!” (“The Critique of Oxidan,” 2018). Such an ignorant review reflects the contrast in approaching the national cinema of Iran among the different parts of the nation. While going through the reviews, it appeared to be quite astonishing to see the variety and contradictions among opinions.

C. Conclusion: Ending the Two Tales

The two tales discussed in this chapter highlight the crucial role and contributions of the Iranian-Armenian community behind the camera and its humble, often unaccepted, presence in front of the camera. In the first tale, Iranian-Armenians were the primary characters in shaping cinema in Iran and developing it in both transnational and national phases. It highlighted the role of Ovanes Ohanians and Samuel Khachikian in advising and establishing a strong base for national Iranian cinema. The tale was overfilled with Iranian-Armenians names including actors, actresses, directors, producers, cinema owners, and studio owners, reflecting that Iranian-Armenians are the central characters in developing the national Iranian cinema.

This chapter shows that the national cinema of Iran fails in representing the Iranian-Armenian community on the level of narrative, exhibition, and representation. How do Iranian-Armenians feel when they watch these films? Building on this question, the next chapter looks into the possibility of having different reactions among the Iranian-Armenian community itself. How did participants react to these films? How did they read the negative representations? How will their reaction inform their national identity and vice versa? In the next chapter, I unravel these questions while recounting my own cinematic experiences with my participants in order to reach new understandings of the national cinema of Iran.

CHAPTER III

RE-READING THE NATIONAL: FILMS AND IRANIAN-ARMENIAN IDENTITIES

“Sometimes it feels like I fit in both communities at the same time. I can befriend both Armenians and non-Armenians. I can communicate and relate to Armenian and Iranian minorities anywhere in the world. In my case, I was guaranteed to be bilingual, and this made me be more open to learn other languages like English and German. It’s a fact that bilingual people learn other languages more easily. When you only know one language, you can only think within the frame of that language; but when you know more languages, your mind is ready to accept and think outside the box. For me, I know and understand the cultural differences between my two different communities. Most people in the world grew up in a single one-dimensional community, but in my case, I am more privileged for being both Iranian and Armenian” – Emin on February 4, 2019

A. Into the City

January 20, 2019 – Iran, *the airplane landed at Imam Khomeini International Airport at 1:30pm and my journey started in Tehran! At that moment, I was overwhelmed with mixed feelings. For a girl who spent most of her time in the south of Lebanon, Tehran is an overwhelming enormously big city.*

Agha Hasan, the taxi driver, was waiting for me at the gate. I took a deep breath, greeted him, and followed him to the car. The moment I got into the cab, and he started to drive into the city, all uncertainties disappeared, and all of my worries turned into eagerness. My eyes were opened wide trying to capture and recognize every single detail around as if my fieldwork has already started and I am already late! I did not want to skip anything, even the taxi driver. I tried to chat with him as much as possible, and fortunately, Agha Hasan knows to speak a little bit of Arabic due to the nature of his work and his several visits to Iraq. At the beginning, he was quiet and conservative, but then, just like with Lebanese taxi drivers, we started to talk about many random topics.

I learnt that Agha Hasan was from Esfahan, so immediately I asked him about the Iranian-Armenian community there. The majority of the Iranian-Armenian population lives in Esfahan . Agha Hasan said, “There are many Iranian-Armenians, not only in Esfahan, they are scattered all over the country. Just like Lebanon, Iran has many different sects and ethnicities, and we are all living together in peace.” Although I did not ask him about the conditions of living, Agha Hasan insisted on showing that Iran is a very diverse country and all citizens have equal rights. He was defending the country without even being accused of the circulated stereotypes about Iran. Although not the purpose of this study, do they really have equal rights? All I knew at that moment is that they are definitely not equally represented on the screen.

Imam Khomeini International Airport is located in a deserted place. The city starts to appear gradually as you move away from the airport. While on the road, I could not ignore the wide landscapes on both sides and link them to the cinematic landscapes in Abbas Kiarostami’s Through the Olive Trees *(1994). I started to touch the familiarity of the city building on the Iranian films I have watched before. Mostly, all I know about*

Tehran is from what I see in Iranian films. Even when Agha Hasan turned on a football match on the car's mini screen, I remembered Jafar Panahi's final scene in Offside *(2006), where it showed the national pride among all Iranians when they won a game, and how they celebrated the victory all together, policemen and the law breakers young ladies, on the street. During my visit, Iran was competing in Asia Football Cup 2019. Watching football matches in cabs was a common feature that I noticed later after several rides.*

My excitement reached the peak when I saw a glimpse of Milad Tower out of the foggy sky after crossing Shahid Navvab Highway. Both Milad and Azadi Towers are symbolic monuments of Tehran and seeing one of them meant that I was really starting my adventure in the city. Almost all the highways in the city are named after Iranian martyrs and religious scholars. It is also very hard not to notice the paintings depicting martyrs' faces and figures of martyrdom and sacred defense. I was actually prepared to see this spread of martyrdom's visual culture as pictured in Roxanne Varzi's Warring Souls *(2006), however, I would never comprehend Tehran as a city of death or city of martyrdom.*

During my first sleepless hours in the city, I could completely view Tehran as a city that consumes culture. On our way to the hostel in Bahar Shomaly Street, we passed by many book stores, music instruments stores, DVD shops, and cinema theaters. DVDs and movie posters are present everywhere, even in minimarkets and supermarkets.

This chapter starts with my first encounters with the Iranian-Armenian community in Tehran. It demonstrates, through series of incidents and viewing experiences, the tensions between Iranian-Armenians and the country's national cinema. Building on the interactive relation between Iranian films and Iranian-Armenian audiences, this chapter suggests new critical readings and understandings of the national cinema of Iran. This study tends to deconstruct the exaggerated praise of the Iranian national cinema within my community through Iranian-Armenian viewers who are able to give new critical readings and analysis perspectives. In the light of the narrow representations of the Iranian-Armenian community on the screen and their reactions to the portrayals, this chapter embodies an interactive space where the Iranian national cinema is condemned as a propaganda machine and the Iranian-Armenian identity is negotiated and expressed differently.

As already mentioned, Iranian-Armenians are being represented on the national screen, but the problem lies in how they are being portrayed. The problematic representations of the Iranian-Armenian community on screen have created a space for

Iranian-Armenians to question their identity and national belongings to Iran. In this chapter, I focus on the reception of my Iranian-Armenian participants to the cinematic representations of the Iranian-Armenian character in Iranian films. What do Iranian-Armenian characters look like? What roles do they play? How do Iranian-Armenians react to problematic representations? What contextual factors affect their attitudes towards the screen? Does the screen mis-interpellate or interpellate the community? In the light of cinematic representations, this chapter focuses on how the Iranian-Armenian viewers receive and comprehend these representations, and react to them either confirming or rejecting what is being portrayed. It puts the Iranian-Armenian community in conversation with cinematic scenes.

I argue that the national cinema of Iran creates an interactive space in which Iranian-Armenians question their national identity and create new meanings and alternative understandings of the national screen. While obscuring and misrepresenting the Iranian-Armenian community, the national cinema contributes to complicating their expression of national identity and belonging. Cinema has always been a space for national imaginations, but what are the implications of stereotypical representations of the Iranian-Armenian community? In order to support my argument, I start my chapter by situating the importance of the national cinema in Iran to the Iranian-Armenian community. Are they interested in the national Iranian cinema? Do they watch Iranian films? Second, I unpack the “positive” representations of the Iranian-Armenian community on the screen based on a cinematic experience with one of my participants. Third, I follow the reactions of the Iranian-Armenian audience to the representations of the Iranian-Armenian character and analyze how their reactions reframe the national cinema differently and reflect their articulation of national identity. The attitudes of my Iranian-Armenian participants towards the national screen are influenced by contextual factors including gender, cultural backgrounds, socioeconomic conditions, education and family. There are many different approaches to study the national cinema, and in this chapter, I propose deciphering reactions of the Iranian-Armenian audience, and, thus, providing a new angle for theorizing the national screen through the lens of minority populations.

B. Situating the Screen: STOP THE FILM!

In this section, I explore how Iranian-Armenians position the national cinema of Iran in their lives. When I interacted with my Iranian-Armenian participants, I noticed that, as whole, they did not care much about the local popular Iranian films—whether representing their community or not. They do not follow updates about the national cinema of Iran and do not enjoy watching Iranian films. I was expecting such an attitude especially after learning that almost all of my participants did not know about *Andranik*, as I mentioned earlier. There is an explicit lack of interest in Iranian cinema that I try to unpack through reception analysis. Building on their gender, educational and professional backgrounds, Iranian-Armenians perceive the national screen differently. Their interest in what the national cinema offers is influenced by how they define their identity within the Iranian society.

One important factor that distances Iranian-Armenians from the national cinema of Iran is their articulation of a separate national identity. According to Robert Safarian, an Iranian-Armenian journalist, film critic, and filmmaker, the Iranian-Armenian community itself does not want to be represented on the screen. He said, "Iranian-Armenians often do not relate as Iranians and do not prefer to be represented on the screen as a part of the Iranian society." He also added that a big part of the Armenian community, especially the youth, are not integrated into the Iranian society;

rather they create their own societies and prefer to avoid interactions with the other. Such claims, although reasonable, are limited and cannot be generalized. Throughout my visit, I noticed that there are also many non-Armenian Iranians who do not follow the national cinema of Iran. There are definitely other factors that affect the Iranian-Armenian attitude towards the national screen. I argue that the national cinema of Iran is praised and understood differently by Iranian-Armenians building on their gender, cultural background, and articulation of national identity and also according to the genre of the film itself.

From the beginning of my fieldwork, it was clear that Iranian-Armenians do not favor the national cinema of Iran. This fact was made even more clear when two of my focus groups were unable to continue watching *Atomic Heart* and asked me to stop the film! “I told you that we do not usually enjoy Iranian films,” said Datev when almost all my participants asked me to stop or fast-forward the film to reach the end. Besides, during the film, they also asked me to stop it continuously in order to chat, eat, and play an online game together that was trending during my visit. Interrupting the viewing experience continuously and asking to stop the film was a disappointing moment in my fieldwork—but also one of the most informative.

In general, my fieldwork experience demonstrated that Iranian-Armenians do not care much about popular commercial films, nor are they proud of these films. The lack of interest appeared from the very beginning when they questioned my choice of the film. However, this orientation to Iranian cinema differs between Iranian-Armenian men and women. Iranian-Armenian men are more influenced by the national screen than Iranian-Armenian women based on the greater involvement of the former in the Iranian society. Argishtey and Artin, two men who seemed more engaged with Iranian cinema than the women in my focus groups, did not understand why I did not choose a

Farhadi or a Kiarostami film. Argishtey said, “We have a lot of good movies directed by Asghar Farhadi. They are absolutely better than this one.” Both Argishtey and Artin went to Iranian public schools, while the rest of my participants went to private Armenian schools. Consequently, they both acknowledge their Iranian identity more than the others. Argishtey and Artin both relate as Iranian-Armenians who are fully living both parts of their identity. They are used to be engaged with Iranian-Muslims since their childhood, and as males, their relations are less controlled and directed than women in Iran, whether Muslims or Armenians. The reason behind their attitude towards the national screen is not ultimately about gender since it goes back to their education conditions. However, it is not common to see Iranian-Armenian women attending a public school in Iran. None of my Iranian-Armenian female participants attended a public school. One of my participants, Datev, told me how Iranian-Armenian families beware their girls, from a very young age, from interaction with non-Armenian-Iranians.

In terms of acknowledging their national cinema, Argishtey and Artin do not see anything special about local commercial films. For them, the only Iranian cinema they are proud of and follow, to a certain extent, is that which circulates internationally. They showed pride in art-house films that traveled to important cities and film festivals. These films make them proud about the Iranian part of their identity and enhance their reputation as Iranians in light of the intense political situation. Nowadays, Iranian-Armenians face many obstacles because of their Iranian identity due to the US-Iran conflict and the sanctions on the country. There are also many negative stereotypes about Iran and Iranians circulated in the West, and *Argo* (2012) is one example that shows how Americans view Iranians. In the face of these misconceptions about Iran, some Iranian-Armenians situate Iranian cinema as playing an important diplomatic role in enhancing the reputation of the country which then reflects onto its citizens.

However, there is a discrepancy in their reception. *Atomic Heart* is also an art-house film that was screened in several film festivals including the Los Angeles Film Festival and Berlin International Film Festival, and still they could not bear to finish the film. When the film shifted to the dramatic part, revolving around social and political problems, my participants grumbled. For part of them, the problems that are facing Iran are not their problems, and they are not willing to spend more energy dealing with these problems even in their free entertainment time. It is important to attribute such reactions to the effect of socioeconomic conditions facing Iran at the current time. When I arrived to Tehran, I noticed how tired and depressed the people are because of the US sanctions. The economic burden is affecting how Iranian-Armenians relate to the Iranian society. My Iranian-Armenian participants could not bear a cinematic experience that reminds them of the ongoing economic crisis. In such exhausting conditions, some of my participants expressed a sense of longing to Armenia and a desire to immigrate.

At the same time, some of my participants in the second focus group did not seem to agree with sentiments raised in the first group. They could not understand how they are separating themselves from the problems facing Iran. The tension that happened in the light of the film informed how the Iranian-Armenian community itself is very complex in its national belongings, and its members speak of their national identity differently. Those who have been raised as a part of the Iranian society, and plan to stay in Iran, believe that problems facing the country are theirs too. However, Iranian-Armenians who have been raised in an isolated context believe that Iran is just like any other country; they care about it to a limited level and they are not willing to burn a lot of energy for the good of the government.

So far I have foregrounded the lack of interest in Iranian cinema shared between my Iranian-Armenian participants. The national cinema of Iran is not their priority. However, unlike Safarian's claim, the Iranian-Armenian community do care about being positively represented on screen. I believe that Argishtey and Artin did not react to *Atomic Heart* favorably like any other art-house film because it negatively portrays the Armenian character. If the cinema industry insists on representing Iranian-Armenians, they prefer that it represents them authentically, as an effective part of the Iranian society. They also see that Iranian-Armenians should be more engaged in performing roles and advising about the specific aspects of the community in order to avoid stereotypes and false judgements and representations.

However, *Andranik,* as already discussed in Chapter II, can be regarded as a positive representation of the Iranian-Armenian community. In the next section, I move to further investigate the intentions of the national screen while positively representing Iranian-Armenians based on a cinematic experience with Iranian-Armenian participants. How do Iranian-Armenians read positive representations? From what position do they react to the screen?

C. Questioning the Intentions of the National Screen

In Chapter II, I interrogated the intentions of the national cinema of Iran while focusing on three levels of misrepresentation: typical narratives, exhibition, and negative stereotypes. As I have already investigated, cinema is never innocent, and there is always "something political about cinema as the most effective form of propaganda" (Dabashi, 2001, p. 6). When the representations of the Iranian-Armenian community are associated with negative stereotypes, one can easily condemn the intentions of the screen. But what about representations that does not directly insult the community? Are they completely innocent? Without even associating negative stereotypes with the community, the national cinema does not seem very innocent and propaganda-less. Understanding how my participants receive the films tells that the national cinema of Iran might not directly misrepresent the community, just like in *Andranik* and *To Be or Not To Be*; however, it can be exploiting their presence on the screen for political agendas promoting the Islamic Republic. In this section, I question the intentions of the national cinema of Iran while positively representing Iranian-Armenian characters and narratives, but through the lens of Iranian-Armenian participants.

February 14, 2019 – Tehran, *it was Valentine's Day in Tehran, the day of love! During the afternoon, streets were crowded with people coming back from work and rushing to get red balloons and flowers. Heart shaped balloons were numerous and happy couples were everywhere: in coffeeshops, parks, and on street benches. For my part, I chose to spend my Valentine with Eric watching* Andranik *for the second time in Koroush Cinema at the mall. Although the mall was crowded with people, Andranik's theater was empty!*

After watching *Andranik* in my first visit, I noticed some shortcomings of the national cinema while representing Iranian-Armenians on the level of exhibition and circulation, but what about the narrative itself? In order to further investigate the intentions of the national cinema while using films like *Andranik* to represent the Iranian-Armenian community, I decided to watch the film with my Iranian-Armenian participants to see how they will read the film. Unfortunately, only Eric, one of my participants, was available to watch it before its limited screening came to an end. Even with one participant, the cinematic experience with an Iranian-Armenian viewer exposes more about the intentions of the national cinema. Eric, from his subjective perspective, gives new understandings of the national cinema of Iran and uncovers the "good intentions" of using the Iranian-Armenian heroic family.

Koroush Cinema is located in Koroush Mall. Eric and I shared a cab to reach the mall and as usual the streets were very crowded. It took us 50 minutes to reach the mall, and then 20 extra minutes to find the cinema. Eric does not like Iranian cinema, and he has a lot of negative preconceptions about Iranian films. Just like my previous experience while watching *Andranik,* the exhibition of the film was problematic. The film was screened in an empty expensive VIP movie theater. Thus, making it less accessible for regular audiences, who prefer to pay less and watch a commercial film. Surprisingly, Eric was not super enthusiastic about watching the film, even though it is all about an Iranian-Armenian hero. I even felt the need to apologize to him every now and then for torturing him for 90 minutes in the empty VIP hall. However, he at least really enjoyed the comfortable VIP seats!

After the film, we went to a very tasty burger joint to discuss the film. We grabbed two burgers and two chairs and started to talk about the film under the dark skies of Tehran. I asked him a very simple question: “What do you think about the film?” To my surprise, his answer was not at all simple. I was expecting a positive reaction to the film, since it does not have any negative stereotypes about Iranian-Armenians or scenes that insult or undermine the community. Eric, however, read the film differently. He dissected the film on different levels including the narrative, the genre, and the language. He dissected the film from the position of a minority individual living in the Islamic Republic. He dissected the film from the position of an Iranian-Armenian who is desperate to leave Iran.

Andranik's narrative tells a history of a pride of an Iranian-Armenian activist who fought all forms of dictatorship and oppression under the Shah’s regime. The national cinema of Iran seems to acknowledge the significance of the Iranian-Armenian experience and informs the public about an Armenian righteous struggle. However, for

Eric, the film was planned to be made for the benefit of the government. He believes that it is pure propaganda for the Islamic Republic that wants to show the inclusive safe environment it offers for minorities. He said that the film is trying to show how Armenians were restricted, persecuted, terrorized, and treated badly during the time of the Pahlavi Shah, and how the Islamic Republic now respects them and provides them with a safe environment. His reading of the film refutes what the government is trying to show, and his attitude is inspired by how he defines his identity.

Eric identifies strongly as Armenian and believes that they are living as a minority in Iran. As I am writing this thesis, Eric immigrated to Sweden to start a new life where he believes that he can feel safe, appreciated, and detached from ideologies that do not appeal to his Armenian identity. Eric read the film from the position of a minority and supported his point of view while bringing up the rights of other minorities in the country. He said, "Well, if the national screen wants to show a positive transformation after the Shah's regime, and an inclusive environment, why does not it make and promote a film about Baha'is." Baha'is are an oppressed minority in Iran, who are tracked all the time by the government and forbidden from practicing their beliefs. According to Barry (2019), "the Baha'i community has no recognition or security, and both the state and the clergy are hostile towards them" (p. 4). Although the Iranian-Armenian community is the most privileged minority in Iran (Barry, 2019), its members show solidarity with other less privileged and unrecognized minorities.

Solidarity among ethnoreligious communities in Iran comes from their continuous struggle to identify themselves in the nation. According to Emilia Nercissians (2012), "one needs to constantly justify, to himself, and to others, his chosen identity. Given the importance of solidarity-oriented ideologies for small ethnic communities, collective identity construction is a major engagement for which all occasions are taken, and much energy is spent" (p. 39). Although the national cinema here is trying to reflect an inclusive environment, readings from the Iranian-Armenian community informed completely an opposite message. From a minority perspective, Eric condemned the national cinema of Iran and classified *Andranik* as a government's propaganda film.

As already mentioned, *Andranik* is categorized as an art-house film. It was screened for only one month, speaks the language of art-house cinematography because of its abstract scenes, settings, shooting techniques, and frames. Further, it is circulated in international film festivals, as well. It is independently produced and targeted towards a niche market rather than a mass audience. It is not filled with comedic moments, romantic storylines, and catchy music like other commercial films and does not follow a proper narrative timeline with a defined ending. Its content and style can be classified as artistic and experimental. It was filmed in modest production sets and does not contain sophisticated special effects. *Andranik* can be considered as an art-house serious film that definitely does not attract much in the way of audience. In a normal case, the production of art-house films is a not a problem. But, choosing to finally represent Iranian-Armenians through an art-house film is problematic.

Pedram Partovi (2019) posits a gap within Iranian cinema between art-house and popular films. While popular films are "melodramatic and emotional, awash in sonic and visual color, deeply concerned with modern individuals and their struggles with social and familial obligation," art-house films are "minimalist, surrealist, lyrical, self-reflective" ("Iranian Cinema, Now and Then," 2019). Art-house films are challenging for audiences, especially during the first viewing. They are often critical, and the viewer might need to watch the film more than one time in order to understand the message of the film. Eric mentioned that some scenes in *Andranik* are hard to comprehend even by an Iranian-Armenian. The film hints towards many ambiguities behind the character of the priest and his relationship with the SAVAK policeman but did not explicitly explain what was happening. Besides being an art-house production, *Andranik* is also an historical film, while there are other commercial contemporary films being screened every day in Iran including *Finding Farideh* (2018) at that time. There was a turnout towards that film and *Andranik* did not have the chance to compete. Eric said, "Why a historical art-house film? Why not an entertaining one? They could have used the same story but filmed it differently. The youth will definitely not be attracted to watch this film." None of my Iranian-Armenian participants, other than Eric, have watched the film.

The *Andranik* cinematic experience, although neither expected nor planned, informs my study on many levels. Even if a film tells a proud story about the Iranian-Armenian community, it can be implicitly used to tell a proud story about the Iranian government itself. *Andranik* confirms and supports the claim of the Islamic Republic as an inclusive space to all minorities, but to which audience does it support this claim? Non-Armenian Iranians might mostly perceive the film positively, but Iranian-Armenians do not have a similar perspective while watching it because of their subjectivity. For Eric, the film reaffirms his position in the society as an exploited minority. He empathized with fellow ethnoreligious minorities in the country instead of the Islamic Republic.

This section shows the importance of interpreting the meanings of the national cinema through ethnoreligious minorities. Although their interpretations might sound radical, they actually give more critical perspectives in situating the national cinema of Iran and dig deeper into new meanings that might not be easily perceived by the major population in the country. In *Andranik*, Eric strongly challenged the intentions of the national cinema and the exposed the exploitation of Iranian-Armenians on the screen. Through his critical reception of the film, the national cinema proved itself to be abusive of the Iranian-Armenian community in favor of glorifying the Islamic regime. In order to further support my argument about the politicized intentions of Iranian cinema while representing Iranian-Armenians, I now move to analyze a more critical example that explicitly associates the community with highly negative stereotypes.

So far, I unraveled the intentions of the national cinema of Iran while focusing on the *Andranik* experience on both exhibition and reception levels. But, *Andranik*'s representation of the Iranian-Armenian community still can be categorized by Iranian-Armenian themselves as an empowering initiative for the community. Albert Begijanian, one of the Iranian-Armenian people I met there, was so excited about the film and he was the one who informed me about its screening schedule. Even many Armenian stores, as mentioned earlier, where covered with posters of *Andranik.* The film alone does not expose the hidden intentions of the national cinema while representing Iranian-Armenians. On the contrary, the claim can be twisted and used to acquit and justify the politicized intentions of the national screen. In order to investigate the intentions on a more substantial level, I look into a more explicit and direct misrepresentation of the community. In the next section, I examine the presence of alcohol in films representing Iranian-Armenians and expose the intentions behind it.

January 22, 2019 – Tehran, *it was during my first days in the city, and I was struggling to find Iranian-Armenian participants or any leads to the community. On this evening, I was hanging out with a group of secular Iranian friends in* See You in Iran *cultural house. I asked them if they know, by any chance, Iranian-Armenians who might be interested in taking part in my study. They all laughed and said that the only Iranian-Armenians they know are those who provide them with alcohol! Even one tourist from Poland offered to provide me with the contact of an Iranian-Armenian man who has been nurturing him with alcohol throughout his stay.*

One of the most prominent stereotypes associated with the Iranian-Armenian community is the consumption and distribution of alcohol. Not only consumption, but

Iranian-Muslims also believe that almost every Iranian-Armenian they meet has full access to trade with alcohol, which is illegal in Iran. While alcohol is allowed for Iranian-Armenians in their private spaces, they are not allowed to trade in alcohol in Iran. The reason for associating this negative stereotype with the Iranian-Armenian community is due to the privileges granted for the community; those same privileges are prohibited for Iranian-Muslims. According to Barry (2017), "the discretion of Armenian spaces allows the minority to carry out many activities otherwise forbidden in the Islamic Republic, such as socializing between unrelated unmarried men and women, no requirement of veiling, and permission to consume alcohol" (p. 563). Under the Islamic Republic's law, alcohol cannot be consumed in public, and Iranian-Muslims can be questioned and persecuted when found drunk. Iranian-Armenians do not face such problems. Their Armenian identity gives them the freedom to consume alcohol and escaping any suspicions by simply saying, "I am Armenian." Despite all conditional access to alcohol, Iranian-Armenians are still accused of being drunk and selling alcohol and unfortunately, the national cinema helps in promoting this false stereotype.

The national cinema, by its turn, helps in associating this stereotype with the Iranian-Armenian community while depicting drunk Iranian-Armenians on the screen. This section further problematizes the intentions of the national cinema while representing the Iranian-Armenian community. It shows how it associates negative stereotypes about the community while speaking the language of the major population of the country in perceiving or expecting the behavior of Iranian-Armenians. In order to build my argument, I begin by using examples the two controversial films I showed during my fieldwork: *Atomic Heart* and *Oxidan.* In *Atomic Heart*, the consumption of alcohol is associated with Iranian-Armenians who use their identity to justify themselves drunk. In one of the scenes, when the policeman stops the women, he asks

Arineh to breath. Both Arineh and Nobahar are drunk. As Arineh talks to the policeman, she covers her mouth. When he accuses her of being drunk, she says, "I am Christian!" (fig. 7).

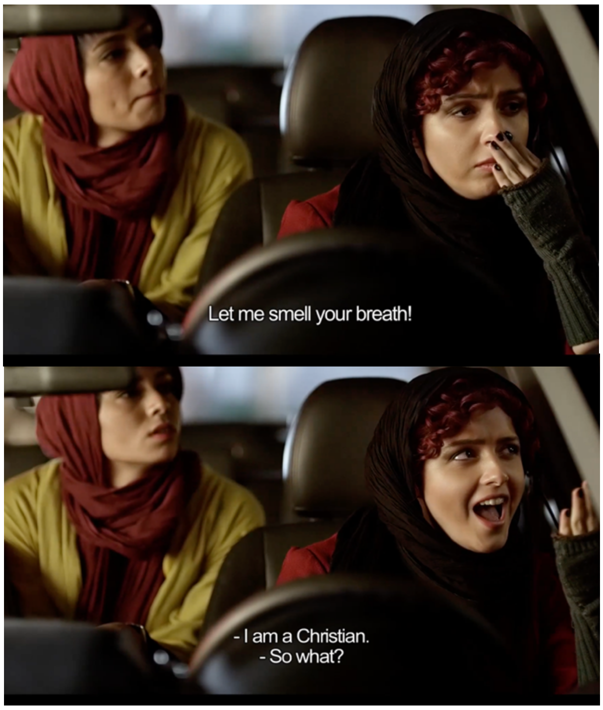
Let me smell your breath!
- I am a Christian.
- So what?

Fig. 7 - I am Christian! (Atomic Heart)

This scene triggered many emotions for my Iranian-Armenian participants. During this scene, Argishtey said, "Oh they are drunk. It always happens this way. Armenians are the symbol of alcohol. Most Iranians consume alcohol and even more than Armenians. They are also trying to open the first Iranian Rehab center for addicted people, and trust me, none of them are Armenians." Argishtey seemed to be fed up with this negative stereotype in real life, and the last thing he wants is a promotion for such a false representation. His reaction reflected how he tries to separate the Armenian behavior from the Iranian behavior. In this case, the national cinema of Iran participates in mis-interpellating the Iranian-Armenian audience who at times try to define themselves as Iranian-Armenians, like Argishtey, and at other times show a strong separation between the two identities.

The national cinema of Iran, although trying to integrate the Iranian-Armenian community on the screen, seems to separate the community from the entire nation. Although my participants did not favor such representation, they have been in similar situations in real life. Most of my participants avoid being questioned about alcohol because they are Armenians. However, they do not like to be associated with alcohol all the time because alcohol consumption is practiced by the whole nation, including Iranian-Muslims. The national cinema of Iran is not playing a role in diminishing these stereotypes and blending Iranian-Armenians with the nation. Instead, it is reinforcing these stereotypes and attributing a universal problem to the Iranian-Armenian community exclusively. In one of the scenes of *Oxidan*, Gevorg, a young Iranian-Armenian who want to convert to Islam, asks the fake priest Aslan and the smuggler Bahman to join him to the mosque because he was afraid to be rejected. Bahman responds saying, "I am afraid too. Have some gum, tea, coffee or something. I can smell it!" The smuggler's reaction implies that Gevorg smelled like alcohol (fig. 8).

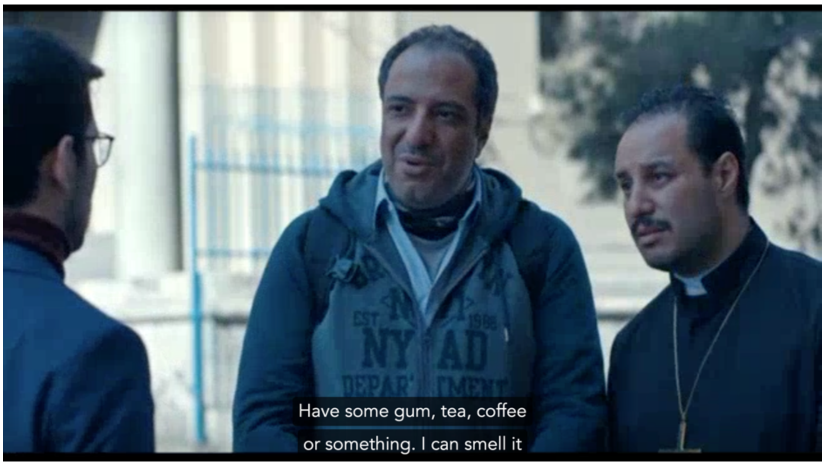
Have some gum, tea, coffee
or something. I can smell it

Fig. 8 - I can smell alcohol! (Oxidan)

This scene suggests that Iranian-Armenians are always drunk and smell like alcohol all the time. Narek, one of my participants, said, “it is still in the morning and Gevorg is already drunk! This does not really happen.” My participants did not like this depiction, and Emin, another participant, asked ironically, “Are they sure that this man is Armenian? And not a Muslim?” I found that Iranian-Armenian perceptions about Iranian-Muslims are completely opposite to what depicted on screen. They believe that Iranian-Muslims drink much more that Iranian-Armenians, and it is unfair to associate this behavior with Iranian-Armenians only. They all shared stories about how Iranian-Muslims keep asking them if they have alcohol, and as a reaction to the insulting scene, Narek shared a story of a Muslim family that drinks vodka at breakfast! In the light of such exaggerated representations about Iranian-Armenians, in a morally reprehensible way, the community finds it difficult to express its identity. Angine said, “if being a part of this nation necessitates the acceptance of such negative stereotypes, then I prefer not to integrate and leave the country when possible.” What we see here is the mis-interpellation Iranian-Armenians are living Iran. In the light of the screen, they are felt abandoned and unwanted.

Although some of these negative stereotypes are true in some cases, the Iranian-Armenian community believes that it deserves to be portrayed differently. The participants reacted to these representations while highlighting their undeniable contribution to the nation, as mentioned in Chapter II. There is a crucial role played by Iranian-Armenians as religious, ethnic, cultural, and linguistic minority in different fields. However, this role is being undermined. According to Nercissians (2012), historiography failed in giving credits and importance to the Iranian-Armenian contribution to the country (p. 34). She states, “studies on Iranian history, Iranian culture and art, or Iranian social and anthropological issues have too often confined their scope of study to the dominant groups and not considered minority cultures as part of their subject matter" (p. 34). I add that there is also a huge failure within the national cinema industry in accurately representing the Iranian-Armenian community. This failure crystallizes when my Iranian-Armenian participants recognize the absences of what marks the Iranian-Armenian identity from the screen.

These limited representations create a huge gap between Iranian-Armenians and the country's major population. The deviation of the national cinema and its bias to adopt the mentality of the major population while speaking about the Iranian-Armenian community alienates its individuals. The Iranian-Armenian community believes that true inclusion initiatives within the Iranian society starts with authentic portrayals on the national screen that breaks the dominance of negative stereotypes about the community. This continuous demand and objection reflect how Iranian-Armenians do not know whether they should relate as Iranians or Armenians. On the one hand, they believe that they have given a lot to the country and they are a crucial part of it with an ancient history. On the other hand, they are aware of the ignorance of the major population and the depictions of the national cinema of their community and thus feel alienated and not appreciated enough, and in some cases, seriously humiliated.

While the national cinema is suggesting that Iranian-Armenians overconsume alcohol in an exaggerated way, my participants tried to negate this representation while telling stories about how Iranian-Muslims are the ones who are ready to consume alcohol whenever it is possible. While Armenians are free to consume alcohol legally in their places, what might encourage them to consume it all the time? While Muslims consume alcohol heavily in the country, why is the problem attributed to the Armenian presence and not the restricting rule? The reactions of my participants confirm the bad intentions of the national cinema while representing them. It also confirms that the cinema is not speaking the language of the entire nation, however, it is speaking the language of the major population. It also serves in perpetuating the political agenda of promoting the Islamic Republic as an inclusive space where social problems are caused by minorities rather than the Republic's arbitrary ideology itself. Besides the not very innocent intentions of the national cinema while representing Iranian-Armenians, this medium creates more space for tension and national struggle while portraying false, unprecise depictions of the Iranian-Armenian community.

So far, I have exposed the intentions of the national screen while both negatively and positively portraying the Iranian-Armenian community. It is very common among Iranian-Armenian viewers to think of their national cinema as a means of propaganda. They believe that it is exclusionary by nature, and either follows the political agenda of the country or the mentality of Iranian-Muslims and how they perceive the Iranian-Armenian community. In the light of such extreme representation, the Iranian-Armenian community appears to be confused in how it defines its identity. In the next section, I move into a more confusing setting where Iranian-Armenians reject and negotiate the Armenian self-image represented on the screen.

D. The Armenian Self-Image

The central argument of this chapter is that national cinema of Iran creates a space where Iranian-Armenians struggle to define and express their national identity and belongings. In the light of the screen and its false representations about Iranian-Armenians, they at times, feel alienated and, at other times, feel confused. In this section, I look to the representations of the Armenian self on the national screen and how Iranian-Armenians react to these representations. What I mean by the Armenian self is how the Armenian character looks, behaves, and interacts with the other. In this section, I show how the Iranian-Armenian community struggles to agree on one aspect or representation of the Iranian-Armenian identity. The national cinema does not spend enough time and effort to produce an authentic real image of Iranian-Armenians, and thus, leaves the community uncertain about its position in the Iranian society. Between the definition of Armenian-ness on the screen, and the expression of Armenian-ness by Iranian-Armenian participants, this section reflects the tension between Iranian-Armenians and the screen, and the tension within the Iranian-Armenian community itself in defining what Armenian-ness is. I mainly look into the representation of the Armenian lady and the presence/absence of the Armenian accent.

One of the major interests of this study is to see whether Iranian-Armenians identify with the characters that represent their community on the screen or not. Do they see any similarities between them and these characters? In order to discuss this aspect, I focus on the outward appearance of Armenian characters on screen and their attitudes. I investigate this question while examining how Iranian-Armenian perceive the Armenian woman differently.

At the beginning, I expected that Iranian-Armenian women, for example, would not see any similarities between them and the Iranian-Armenian characters on the screen because of the compulsory veil. One of the major tenets of the national cinema that was developed following the revolution has been resisting voyeurism. Consequently, after the Islamic Revolution, a system of modesty was established and implemented by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. According to Negar Mottahedeh (2009):

> In post-revolutionary cinema, veiled female bodies were generated to stand, warrior like, against contaminating forces introduced into its mediating technologies under the Pahlavis, to stand against forced that film studies refer to as the meta-desire of cinema itself, articulated in terms of American melodrama’s dominant code of voyeurism and fetishism. (p. 543)

All representations on the screen, especially the representation of women and the interactions with male characters, are controlled and executed according to Islamic and cultural codes of ethics in Iran. Although the strictness of the system of modesty was not on the same level in all post-revolutionary years, being stricter in some and more flexible in others, it maintained its main target on imposing veil on all women. Consequently, all women performing on screen must wear the hijab and cover their bodies, even if they are not representing Muslim women—just as non-Muslim women must wear the veil in public in Iran in real life, as well.

However, the compulsory veil does not make much of a difference to Iranian-Armenian women. Meghedi, one of my participants, said, “Although we do not like it and it is not part of our identity, we got used to it. As citizens of this country, we wear the veil because we obey the law and seeing Iranian-Armenian characters wearing the veil on screen does not feel unfamiliar.” If the compulsory veil does not bother Iranian-Armenian women, then why do they so adamantly disagree with their representation on screen? What are the aspects that prevent them from identifying with Iranian-Armenian women?

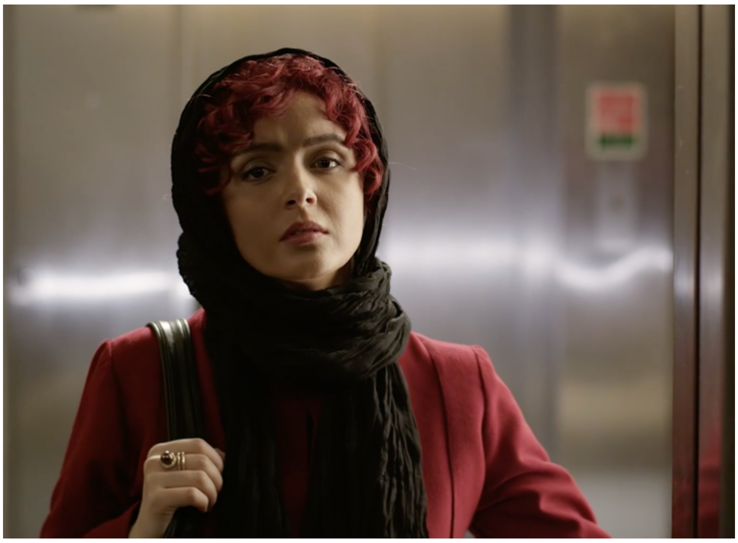

Fig. 9 - Armenian Redhead (Atomic Heart)

In this section, I discuss the outward representation of Arineh, the Iranian-Armenian woman in *Atomic Heart,* with specific attention to how my participants perceived the character. Arineh, has short hair dyed red. She wears her scarf loosely like the majority of women in Tehran (fig. 9). As an objective viewer, and not an Armenian, the representation of Arineh does not look odd. However, some of my Iranian-Armenian participants did not quite accept this representation of the Armenian girl.

During the film, Datev constantly asked with discontent, "Do we have such Armenian girls?" She believed that Iranian-Armenian women would not dye their hair red. In her perspective, being Armenian has its own standards; Armenian women are different than Iranian women, and they do not dye their hair with unfamiliar colors. It is important to mention that most girls I have seen on streets have their hair dyed in different colors, but for Datev, this is something that Armenian girls do not do, and this is how she differentiates herself from Iranian-Muslims. But the irony lies in the fact that two of my Iranian-Armenian participants from another focus, Angine and Armi, have their hair all dyed with a mix of blue, green, and yellow colors. Here, one can see that the national screen is not representing something odd about Iranian-Armenian women, but the way Datev defines herself made this representation unaccepted. But do all Iranian-Armenians reject such representation of the Armenian woman?

Datev's reaction might be considered extreme, but this is related to a great extent to how she defines herself. Datev strongly says that she is only Armenian. She neither identifies herself as Iranian nor does she have relationships with non-Armenian Iranians. However, within the Iranian-Armenian community itself, there are many different perspectives and expressions of the national identity in the light of the screen. For example, Armenoosh, another participant, did not get offended from the dyed red head. She said that there are always exceptions within any community and some Armenian girls dye their hair similarly. She also started to mention names in order to convince Datev.

What does such a discussion tell about the national cinema of Iran? Why does it use Armenian characters to represent "questionable" representations? Building on my participants' engagement, the national cinema of Iran is still excluding Iranian-Armenian from its targeted audience and abusing them on screen. It uses Iranian-Armenian characters in order to expose a problem within the Iranian society without linking it directly to Iranians. Consequently, the national cinema of Iran contributes in alienating the Iranian-Armenian community and make it more enclosed to itself. While Iran considers itself as inclusive to all ethnoreligious minorities, why does the national cinema use Iranian-Armenians to be the ones responsible for the problems of the whole nation? According to Argishtey, one of my participants:

> Of course we have Armenians with dyed hair. But it is so sad when introducing any problem in the Iranian society, or any unfamiliar representation, the cinema industry uses an Armenian symbol. This actually means that the society is denying its own problems. they are not being able to control it, so, they relate all causes to Armenian people, and the national cinema helps in promoting this idea.

The national cinema helps in positioning Iranian-Armenians as outsiders who are responsible for bringing foreign attitudes to Iran.

The reception of my participants to the representation of Arineh informed my study on two levels; first, defining the national screen and second, understanding the feelings of Iranian-Armenians. On the one hand, the national cinema appeared to be biased away from Iranian-Armenians. It participated, whether consciously or unconsciously, in alienating the community and making them believe that they are not a crucial part of the Iranian society. On the other hand, the reception in the light of the screen showed that the Iranian-Armenian community reacts to these representations differently. Datev completely rejected this representation while neglecting that in her Armenian community, there are such girls as well. Armenoosh accepted what was represented on the screen. Argishtey negotiated this representation and critically read it. He acknowledged that there are such Armenian women, but at the same time, he shed lights on the fact that the national cinema purposefully chose to represent controversial scenes through Armenians, and thus acknowledging that the community is not authentically Iranian. The different perceptions of the representation reflect how threatened my Iranian-Armenian participants, as minorities, might feel in Iran.

Depending on the different lifestyles of my Iranian-Armenian participants, their attitudes towards the representation of the Armenian woman varied. Although some of them are ambivalent towards their Iranian identity, Iranian-Armenians spend a lot of energy on being good citizens. Iranian-Armenians have to adapt to different, mutually exclusive standards of conduct under the Islamic Republic. They have to adopt different modes of behaviors in different settings in order to fit in. According to Nercissians (2012), “the ability to know that actions are deemed suitable or improper in any situation constitutes an important part of one’s social consciousness” (p. 36). Yet, the national screen failed in reflecting the effort they spend to blend in within the Iranian society and become accepted.

The Iranian-Armenian community insists on showing their loyalty and discipline to the country. They do not want to be perceived as law breakers or privilege abusers in order not to lose their rights in Iran. However, on the national screen, Iranian-Armenians are linked to the odds of the Iranian society and represented as trouble makers. What might be worth representing is the effort done by Iranian-Armenians to continuously switch between their identities in private and public settings. They spend a priceless effort in appropriating their identity to match the different forced standards that do not align with their beliefs and culture. One of the efforts they perform is related to the language and shifting between Persian and Armenian continuously, and unfortunately, this effort is also neglected and mis-represented on the screen.

False representations about the Iranian-Armenian self are not limited to the outward appearance and behavior; they also cross into spoken language. Of the various factors that weakens the authenticity of the Armenian presence on the screen, it is the absence of the Armenian accent and language that resonates most with Armenian viewers. Armenians, all over the world, have special languages that include Eastern and Western Armenian. Besides the language of the country they live in, most Armenians learn Armenian from birth. Throughout my stay in the city, Iranian-Armenians showed me the different Armenian schools they attended. They learn everything related to the Armenian language, history, and literature alongside Iranian language and history. However, this is a bit tiring for them because they are also forced to learn Arabic.

Iranian-Armenians obviously prefer to communicate with Armenian together. According to Barry (2017), “although this accent declined following the ending of segregation during the Pahlavi rule, it has re-emerged among the post-revolution generation who, despite being raised in a Persian speaking environment, speak Persian with a strong accent” (p. 570). The re-emergence of the Armenian accent is more common among the younger generation, and this is what I noticed during my fieldwork. The first thing I asked my three focus groups is to comment on films in English, and it was really hard for them to refrain from using Armenian because they are used to using the language when they are together. Also, almost all Armenians speak Persian with an accent. They actually enjoy speaking Persian with an accent; it is a point of pride for them. Given this fact, the least they expect while watching an Iranian-Armenian representation on the screen is to figure out the accent. But, is this accent represented on the screen? Does the national cinema reflect the fact that Iranian-Armenians speak with an accent?

In this section, I explore the absence of the Armenian accent from the screen and thus, problematize even more the representation of Armenian-ness on the national cinema of Iran. In *Atomic Heart*, Arineh does not speak with an Armenian accent. The only scene that highlights its Armenian accent and identity is when she mentions that name her brother to the policeman. His name is Areg, an Armenian name. Although she does not speak with an Armenian accent throughout the entire film, she pronounces his name with an Armenian accent. Armenians do not stress on the letter *r*, they pronounce it lightly. All of my participants agreed that the way she pronounces the name, with a soft *r*, is highly Armenian.

Even in *Andranik*, in which all the characters are Armenians, they neither speak with an accent nor use Armenian at all. Although the servant is performed by Iranian-Armenian actor, I believed that because of his acting career, he has mastered the Iranian accent. Since it is well known that Armenians prefer to sue their own language in private settings, it was odd to watch Sonia and her priest father communicating in Persian when they are alone. One must wonder why they wouldn't have it in Armenian with Persian subtitles. The only Armenian dialogue happened at the end of the film where the servant expresses his rage saying, "Kheyanat! Kheyanat!" in Armenian, which literally translates to "betrayal."

The absence of the Armenian accent and language in Armenian representations raises my participants' curiosity in knowing the politics behind recruiting actors and actresses. Why does the national cinema choose Iranian actors/actresses to perform Armenian roles? Or why does not it spend enough time on training actors/actresses to speak with an Armenian accent? Many of my participants are involved in the art field and they are very talented. However, most of them are aspiring to leave and express their talents abroad, in Armenia or the West. They are deeply mis-interpellated in Iran and do not feel that they have equal opportunities. The national cinema of Iran speaks the language of the major population of the country and does not care about delivering precise and true representations of Iranian-Armenians. While the absence of the Armenian accent is not familiar to Iranian-Armenian audiences, the presence of this accent might be problematic to the Iranian-Muslim audiences, who are the major population of the country. The national cinema does not want to alienate its main source of profit. It chooses to target the majority and exclude minorities, even when using minority representations.

So far, I have proven the lack of innocence within the intentions of the national cinema of Iran and its favoring to the major population of the country. Through exploiting the Iranian-Armenian presence on screen and falsifying the representation of the community, the national cinema of Iran is being defined by an exclusionary populist nature that paves the way for Iranian-Armenians to question their national identity and position in the country. Besides, instead of offering a space for the Iranian-Armenian community to express its hopes about the nation, the national cinema of Iran helped in aggravating their anxieties and complex national belongings. The national cinema of Iran does not even fulfill its role as an instrument for entertainment for the Iranian-Armenian community and deprive it from any pleasure.

E. Conclusion: An Anxious Identity

Shifting between stereotypical and vague representations, subjective spontaneous feelings, and real-life stories, this chapter reflects the tension between Iranian-Armenians the national screen. The national cinema of Iran is a creating a tense space where Iranian-Armenians are creating alter-understandings of the screen on one hand and questioning their national identity on the other hand. This chapter suggests new angles and perspectives for reading the national cinema of Iran and defining it. While representation of the Iranian-Armenian self, the national cinema of Iran is promoting itself an exclusionary means rather than an inclusive one. While mis-representing the Iranian-Armenian community and negating its vital characteristics, the national cinema is defined as a tool for the government's propaganda. Even while not associating the community with negative stereotypes, the national cinema of Iran is abusing the Iranian-Armenian community to serve the political agenda of the Islamic Republic. It also speaks the language of the major population of the country, and thus, does not target Iranian-Armenians as active audience.

Through engagement with the national screen, Iranian-Armenians expressed their contested identity. It happens to be that the Iranian-Armenian identity cannot be universally defined. Taking into consideration the different contextual factors, Iranian-Armenians articulate their belongings and identity differently. This chapter pinpoints the role of gender dynamics and education in affecting how Iranian-Armenians engage with the national screen. In general, Iranian-Armenian men, who attended public school, are more engaged within the Iranian society and care about the national cinema of the country in different forms. Also, Iranian-Armenian women are more fond into articulating an Armenian identity rather than an Iranian one because they has been responsibly raised to protect the Armenian identity and not to interact with Iranian-Muslims. Interestingly, the socioeconomic conditions facing Iran nowadays appear to be affecting how Iranian-Armenian interact with the screen and relate as Iranian or Armenians.

Moving between textual and contextual factors, this chapter suggests that in the light of the national screen, the Iranian-Armenian community is mis-interprellated on different levels. It also suggests that the national cinema of Iran, when representing Iranian-Armenians, falls into exclusionary and propaganda techniques that makes the articulation of an Iranian-Armenian identity even more complicated. There are huge gaps that push away Iranian-Armenians from embracing their Iranian identity, despite of the contextual factors that may push them closer. Iranian-Armenians challenged the portrayed images and creating new alter-understandings of the national cinema. Through the lens of the Iranian-Armenian community, the national cinema of Iran seems to fail on different ethical and national levels.

Not only messing with the representation of the Armenian self, the national cinema of Iran has given itself the privilege of messing with the sacred! The ignorance of the national screen continues to humiliate the community while mis-representing Armenian-ness as religion. One of the supervision regulations stated by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance threatened not to produced films that "insult directly or indirectly the prophets, imams, the supreme jurisprudent, the leadership council or the qualified jurisprudents" (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010: 40). In a country where religion plays a vital role in governance and the structure of the society, how does the national cinema articulate the religions of other minorities, specifically the Iranian-Armenian community? How does the national cinema negotiate the boundaries of the sacred and who defines the sacred? For a community where religion plays an important role in defining its identity, how do secular Iranian-Armenians react to poisonous representations of the Armenian Christianity?

CHAPTER IV

POLITICIZING FAITH: THE DEPICTION OF ARMENIAN CHRISTIANITY ON THE SCREEN

"Once I went to Mashhad with my friends. Before we left, my friend told me that he wants to buy souvenirs for his family and asked for my company. We went to a clothing shop to buy a religious scarf for his mother. While he was bargaining with the seller, the seller asked me, "Why don't you buy anything?" I Knew Mashhad was not the place to speak of my Armenian identity; it is like saying that I am from Mars. I ignored him but he insisted. My friend told him that I am Armenian, so the man delightfully replied "Oh, you made him a convert." I was not really offended personally but this behavior is both rude and dangerous. There is a potential that this country will not accept anything but Shia Islam." – Eric on March 13, 2019

A. The Space Between Us

In her collection of short stories, *The Space Between Us,* Zoya Pirzad (2014) poignantly depicts the separateness existing between Iranian-Armenian Christians and Iranian-Muslims. She narrates a series of stories that picture the different clashes existing within the context of love, religion, family, education, and marriage. She tells the story of an Armenian man, Edmond, growing up in Iran while highlighting the different cultural clashes between Christianity and Islam in the country. Her first story, "Sour Cherry Stones," is dedicated to Edmond's childhood and his friendship with a Muslim girl, Tahereh, the daughter of the janitor at the Armenian school he attends. Edmond narrates:

> The courtyard of the school and church was the only place where Tahereh and I could play together after school. Tahereh never came to our house, maybe because she knew that my father wouldn't like it. The room that Tahereh shared with her mother and father, on the ground floor of the school, was small and didn't have enough space for us to play. Also, if my father knew that I'd gone to

> the janitor's quarters, he would have thrown a fit, and my mother and I would have been forced to listen to a long and repetitive lecture about class and religion and the differences between people. (p. 3)

A scene like this pinpoints the main factor contributing to the separation between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian-Muslims: religion. Although Iranian-Armenians are an ethnic minority, they are also a religious minority. Other ethnic minorities living in Iran are Muslims, and other religious minorities, such as Jews and Bahais, are ethnically Persian. Due to their unique subjectivity in society, Iranian-Armenians highlight their ethnoreligious identity and protect it with cultural and social boundaries. As in Zoya Pirzad's short story, the father had to explain religious differences for his daughter from a very young age in order to protect their position in the society. As the scene suggests, the religious element is vital in defining the bounds of Iranian-Armenian community.

Religion plays an essential role both in the everyday life of the Islamic Republic, including among the Iranian-Armenian community. Within the Islamic Republic, religion, specifically Shia Islam, lies at the core of the country's institution and is the dominant player in governance and social and cultural structures. Meanwhile, for Iranian-Armenians, religion, namely Christianity, is inseparable from identity. Their identity is not only about their shared language, history, and collective memory; it is also about a shared sense of religious identity. The Iranian-Armenian identity contains both national and religious elements embedded within. Taking into consideration the importance of religion in Iran in general, the representations of it on the national screen are controlled, censored, and interpreted on different levels. Representations are stringently regulated by the government and constructed in a particular way and understood in a particular way. This chapter focuses on the representation of Armenian-ness as a religion on the national screen. It looks at the depiction of Armenian beliefs vis-à-vis how Iranian-Armenians describe their religion. The national cinema of Iran chooses to picture the Armenian belief in a particular way that is not always compatible with the Armenians' perception and interpretation of their belief.

Film censorship and reception in Iran are much more flexible than what we imagined them to be. The life of a film in the Islamic Republic goes through different stages of censorship even before being filmed. According to Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010), "films go through various stages of being 'seen' as scripts, rushes and later as completed films before they are ever released" (p. 2). Consequently, there are different stages of reception, as well. Zeydabadi-Nejad argues that "the problematic reception starts much earlier" before the audiences actually see the film (p. 2). In Iran, censorship of films mainly focuses on taboo subjects including women, politics, and religion. It is not common to see popular films that critically interpret Islam, for example, and if produced, these kinds of social films undergo a tough censorship process and might be banned or edited. However, this chapter shows that censorship is much more dynamic when it comes to representations of the Armenian religious beliefs.

What we see, then, is a tremendous disconnect between how the national cinema of Iran depicts Armenian Christianity and how Iranian-Armenians describe their faith in relation of the national screen. How does the national screen articulate the Armenian faith? I argue that the national cinema of Iran politicizes religion on the screen and creates a space for Iranian-Armenian audiences to defend their faith affectively. What I mean by 'politicizes' is that the national screen chooses to depict Armenian Christianity in a way that favors Islam and serves the political agenda of the Islamic Republic. On the one hand, Iranian cinema, by in large, manipulates the sacredness of Armenian religious symbols, and thus, distorts the characteristics of ancient belief. On the other hand, it legitimizes the superiority of Islam in Iran over other minority religions, particularly Armenian Christianity. While undermining

Armenian religious belief, it creates a space for the affective engagements, even among secular Iranian-Armenians. They eagerly stand up for their community and defend its faith. Despite the fact that they do not identify with religion, and they are often critical of it, they nevertheless feel obliged to defend Armenian Christianity when confronted with its misrepresentation on the screen. Therefore, we might say that the national dimension is a space that holds it together. Religion remains an important part of the community and it is through moments like this that minority gathers around something too essential to the community even if individuals do not relate to it. It reaffirms the importance of religion in defining the Iranian-Armenian community.

B. Cinema and Religion: The *Riya* of the Islamic Republic.

On March 19, 2004, *The Lizard*, a film by Kamal Tabrizi, was supposed to be screened, but officials stopped it from happening. According to Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010), “the main reason was that Tabrizi had gone where no other filmmaker had gone before: a comedy about the clergy” (p. 90). The film launches severe social criticism and states that threats and pressure cannot force people into religion anymore (p. 96). After a series of negotiations with the MCIG and modifications made to the film, the film was finally released and screened. Still, it caused a wave of protests and controversy, condemned as “offensive to the robe of the clergy” (as cited in Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 99). Consequently, it was once again removed from the screen by the MCIG. The life of *The Lizard* reflects the Islamic Republic’s anxiety about representations of Islam.

But what about the representation of other religions including Armenian Christianity? *The Lizard* was shut down because it mocks a Muslim cleric, but does the MCIG take similar steps when the film mis-represents an Armenian cleric and the

Armenian faith? In this section, I discuss a series of representations that distort the Armenian faith and its clergy. It is mainly dedicated to expose the *Riya* of the Islamic Republic and its double standards while monitoring the national screen. Riya translates literally to hypocrisy. I attempt to use this concept because it is a highly condemned act in Islam. The Islamic Republic tends to fight Riya, yet it translates it into actions especially in cinema. Before delving into the main argument of this chapter, I will first foreground the post-revolutionary cinema and explain the centrality of religion in both the life of the screen in Iran and the life of Iranian-Armenians. As we will see, there is a kind of double standard when it comes to monitoring the national screen. Following the 1979 revolution, there was an implementation of what Hamid Naficy calls 'islamicate cinema' that prioritizes Islam over other religions and articulates it differently, which leads to the double standards.

After the Islamic revolution, the country witnessed an ideological struggle and a sharp shift that completely altered its foundation and principles. The main objective of the new Islamic regime was to Islamize the country and implement a purification plan that pulls out all roots and aspects of Westernization in Iran. Given the influential power of media, the Islamic Republic focused on Islamizing the national screen and controlling the life of Iranian films. The government advocated a new adoption of the national cinema, which is oriented by Islamic values and promotes an Islamic culture. But how are the Islamic values implemented while representing another religious belief? In this chapter, I show that the national cinema of Iran is selectively Islamic, and neither sanctifies nor employs the core Islamic values while representing the Armenian religious belief. It champions Islam at the expense of other beliefs; it undermines and demeans the Armenian faith in an attempt to glorify and grant a privileged elevated image of Islam.

The elevation of Islam on the national screen started as soon as the Islamic Revolution happened, and it was translated through codes that regulated the cinema industry in the country. Before the Islamic Revolution, in 1966, a set of regulations and ethics governing film production, exhibition, movie houses, and the cinema industry were released:

> The screening of parts or all of a film that contains the following items is prohibited in the entire country:
> 1. Insulting monotheism, religions, holy books, and prophets, saints, and things held sacrosanct.
> 2. Insulting the true religion of Islam and the Twelver Shiite faith and its saints and those things held sacred by it. (Naficy, 2011, p. 92)

The regulations explicitly put all religions, not only Islam, first. These set of regulations reflect a respecting environment that guarantees that all religions are on the same level with Islam. However, after the Islamic Revolution, in February 1983, a new code of regulations was introduced, and surprisingly, the order of the rules shifted:

> The code stipulated that exhibition permits would not be issued to films that:
> 1. Insult directly or indirectly the prophets, imams, the supreme jurisprudent, the leadership council or the qualified jurisprudents
> 2. Encourage wickedness, corruption and prostitution
> 3. Encourage or teach abuse of harmful and dangerous drugs or professions which are religiously sanctioned against such as smuggling, etc. (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 40).

As we can obviously notice, after the Islamic Revolution, Islam comes first. There is a theoretical elevation of Islam, and all its related matters and individuals, over other religions. The code even did not literally preserve the rights of other religions.

However, even if the code explicitly protects the representation of ethnoreligious minorities, there is disaccord between what the Islamic Republic claims in regulations and what the national cinema of Iran actually offers. On the one hand, the regime promotes an embracing nature of the republic, that respects all the ethno-religious components of Iranian society, especially Iranian-Armenians. On the other hand, it exploits the national screen to undermine and illegitimate the Armenian faith while glorifying and legitimizing Islam. This disconnection reflects the paranoia and the *Riya* of the Republic and the politicized censorship institutions and techniques; it is Islamic but does not adopt the core Islamic values; the screen censors taboo subjects but not those related to the Armenian faith. It also reflects a deeper disengagement between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian-Muslims that is both caused by and influence the unjust representations on the screen.

In the following section, I go through a series of negative representations and misrepresentations that distorts the Armenian faith and elevates Islam over it. I will dedicate this section to deeply set up the double-standards of the national screen while depicting religious beliefs and then move into the role of affective engagement in understanding the screen and redefining the national cinema of the country.

1. Distorting the Holy on the Islamic Screen

Given the previously mentioned code of regulations of the national screen, what about the other religions, especially the religions of the book, which are supposed to be respected and validated within the country's legal and cultural frameworks? As we will see, the national cinema of Iran contributes to marginalization of Armenian religious belief by manipulating the sacredness of its symbols. While vaguely representing the Armenian church and negatively portraying Armenian priests, the cinema industry in Iran reflects its bias towards Islam and its ignorance to minority religions in the country, despite flowery speeches of equality and religious freedom. Examples like *Atomic Heart* and *Oxidan* provide evidence of the bias of the national screen and its attempts to put Islam first while undermining others.

Notably, the Armenian faith was either vaguely represented or misrepresented in both films on different levels. However, from what I noticed during my fieldwork, the Armenian church is physically misrepresented, as well. At the heart of Karim Khane Zand Street, lies Saint Sarkis Cathedral; one of the central churches in Tehran and where the Armenian Archbishop Sebou Sarkissian serves. The church was besieged with a tall, isolating wall that make it almost invisible when its gates are closed. Behind the church, there is a building covered with a gigantic painting of Ayatollah Khomeini with a written script that says, "Dear Khomeini, we will never put down the flag you have raised." Although I was not intending to scan the visual culture of the city, the location of the painting, behind the crosses on the top of the church, was triggering and could not be ignored. The positioning of the painting appears almost intentional: a reminder of the Republic's Islamic identity in the shadow of Christian spaces. Despite the fact that public spaces in Tehran include non-Muslim places, the Islamic Republic tries to obscure non-Islamic visibility by injecting such paintings and explicit messages. These strategies on the part of the Islamic Republic to control the public space and visual culture intersect with its strategies in politicizing the screen in favor of the Islamic revolutionary ideology and thought.

But how does the screen obscure Armenian churches? Although there are many churches in Tehran, they are not easily accessible by non-Christians. Iranian-Muslims are not very knowledgeable about the Armenian religion because of the imposed separation between the two communities in the public spaces. Thus, due to lack of actual interaction, Iranian-Muslims are not aware about the characteristics and principles of the Armenian faith and its churches. Their lack of knowledge is reflected by directors and producers, who represent the Armenian church on screen. In this section, I will discuss the representation of the church on the national screen vis-à-vis its reality. The Armenian church is represented in both of my case films *Atomic Heart* and *Oxidan,* and both representations were problematic in the view of my participants because of their vagueness of detail, absence of security, and inappropriate presence of alcohol.

In *Atomic Heart*, the church was represented in the second part of the film, when it started to become surreal. The three characters, Arineh, Nobahar, and Toofan out of nowhere were in the church. Arineh was playing piano in front of the altar, Nobahar was watching from the balcony of the church, and Toofan was sitting in and watching from the front seat (fig. 10). After she finishes, he sarcastically claps for her, sits beside her, and plays some sort of loud music.

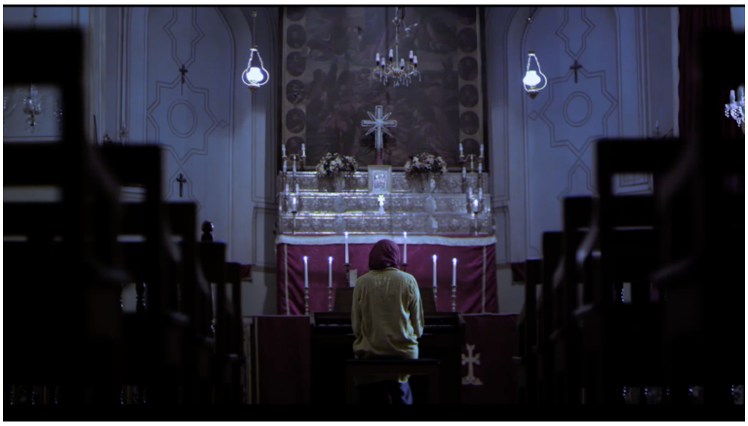

Fig. 10 - In the [Armenian?] church (Atomic Heart)

My Iranian-Armenian participants objected what was being represented, which prompted our discussion. They could not easily decide whether the church was Armenian or not. My participants started to go through a discussion about the differences between Christian churches in terms of the shape of the cross, the altar, and music instruments that the national cinema industry is not very aware of. Argishtey said, “it might be set to resemble Saint Sarkis Cathedral, but it is not the church. In our churches, you do not usually see music instruments in front of the altar.” These are precise differences between the different Christian churches that non-Christians will likely not recognize. Iranian-Muslims usually confuse Armenians with Catholics, and they are not aware that the majority of Armenians in Iran follow a different independent church. Christians from different sects recognize these differences easily; however, Iranian-Armenians believe that the cinema industry does not really care about their perceptions.

During a confusing discussion about whether the church was Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, or Apostolic, Armenoosh changed the topic and said, "it's okay. The director did not receive a Christian education." We might ask here, would an Iranian-Armenian director be allowed to distort the representation of the mosque? The unawareness and lack of knowledge of the national cinema when it comes to minority religions is one of its major shortcomings. Although the church was represented in an unrealistic setting, the director did not make even the slightest effort to know more about the differences between various Christian churches. We see a similar instance in *Oxidan,* in which the representation of the physical church space was equally confusing. Narek said that the church is represented as a Catholic one because of the confession area, and Armenians do not confess. Through vague representations of the church, the national cinema appears to confuse the Armenian belief with other Christian beliefs. The national cinema of Iran contributes to the undermining of Armenian belief while also being ignorant about its details and characteristics, thus articulating it as unimportant. However, such details are very important in the foundation of the Armenian church, and they matter to even secular Iranian-Armenians. Iranian-Muslims also experience this kind of confusion, and thus, as already mentioned in chapter one, the national cinema of Iran primarily embodies a mirror of the mentality of the major population of the country.

Oxidan also represents the Armenian church in a problematic way. In the film, it was depicted as a public space which anyone can enter easily. Bahman wants to help Aslan obtain a fake Armenian identity. He decides to make him a fake Armenian priest.

They both break into the church, tricked and violently assaulted the priest, and stole the documents they need (fig. 11). All of this happened without them being questioned by anyone because there were already no one at the church. It was an easily accessible space with no guards or gatekeepers.

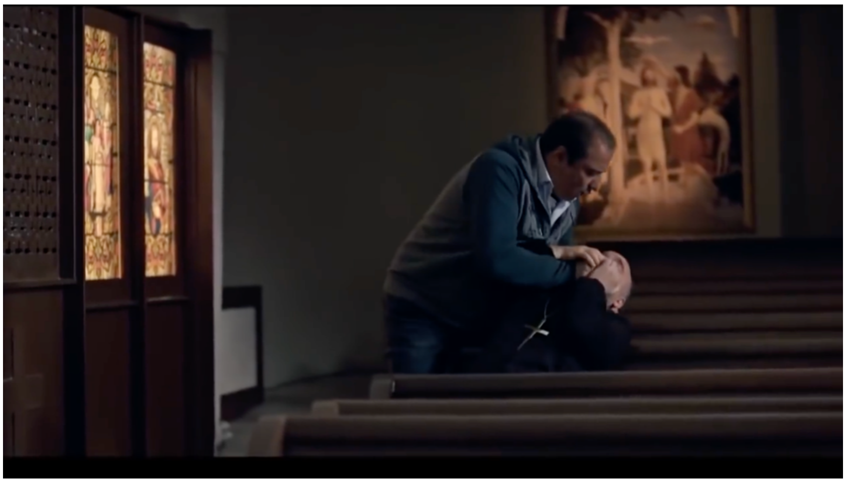

Fig. 11 - Attacking the priest (Oxidan)

My participants commented on the absence of security within the Armenian church, which, in their experience, is not common in the real life. When it comes to the church itself as a space, it is never left without any security. Churches in Tehran are not very accessible for all Iranians, and thus entering the church requires some formalities, including permission, whether legal or from the guards. In all cases, when non-Christians want to enter the church in Tehran, they need to inform those who are in charge. During my fieldwork, I visited multiple churches, but I was never left alone inside. In Saint Holy Mary Church, the guard kept following me as I wandered through the church and its yard. He even stood beside me when I wanted to light a candle and pray.

The presence of alcohol within the church scenes in *Oxidan* also triggered my participants. As we saw in the previous chapter, this topic is a particularly sensitive one. My participants were annoyed during *Oxidan* because of associating the alcohol stereotype with the Armenian church. In one of the scenes, during a baptizing occasion, the priest appeared to be holding a big bowl of wine (fig. 12).

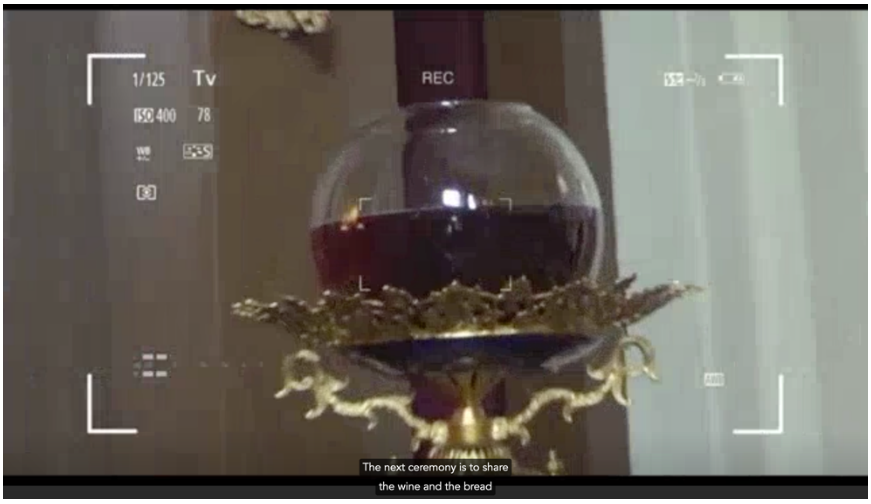

Fig. 12 - Wine and bread (Oxidan)

Narek said, “It is not a party! Nobody does that! We usually see big bowls of alcoholic drinks in night clubs and not in churches!” Eric said, “These representations are reinforcing negative stereotypes that we try to escape. We taste a little bit of wine during the communion, and not for the sake of drinking. But our friends still ask, ‘Is it true that you guys drink at the church?’” For them, the national cinema is contributing in marginalizing the Armenian belief and reinforcing the gap between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian-Muslims. Narek also said, “Iranian films are usually picky when representing something related to Islam. They represent it specifically without manipulation or distortion. However, when it is related to Christianity, or any other religion, they do not pay attention to details.” This confirms the selective nature of censorship in Iran over the cinema industry.

Just as the national cinema does not accurately represent religious spaces, also it does not understand the significance of the religious clergy to the Iranian-Armenian community. Because Iranian-Armenians are recognized as a religious minority by the Islamic Republic, their leadership is embodied by the Armenian religious clergy. Spiritual leadership plays an essential role in the life of Iranian-Armenians in Iran, even for those who are not necessarily religious. According to Barry (2019), “in times of difficulty for Iranian Armenians, whether as individuals or a collective, the MPs and the clergy were the two groups who represented their interests” (p. 102). These two groups are highly respected and appreciated by the Republic. Nevertheless, the national cinema of Iran does not translate this “loyal” relation between Iran and the Armenian religious clergies.

In *Oxidan*, the priest appears to be very vulnerable. Although good-hearted, but in a very naive way. As already mentioned, in one of the scenes, Bahman violently attacked him and stole the church’s property; however, the priest did not even resist and all that he did is to sit in front of the altar and pray. In another scene, Aslan and Bahman approached the priest and asked for his forgiveness and help. The priest immediately, without giving a moment of thought, forgave them and offered to help Aslan in faking an Armenian religious identity. He hired Aslan as a fake deacon who was responsible for helping him in prayers and ceremonies.

Such scenes portray the priest as a naïve and irresponsible leader. He did not respect the particularity of his belief and participated in a fraud. My participants did not accept this representation. Angine said, “You can never find such an Armenian priest. They tend to be overprotective of the rules and the Armenian belief.” However, in the film, the priest was risking the Armenian church and involving it in a fraud. He also appeared to be deceiving the believers who attend the church and exploiting it for the sake of a Muslim citizen who wants to leave the country. In other words, the Armenian priest appeared to be the sinner.

Not only was the character of the priest negatively represented, but so too was the family of the priest misrepresented in these films. For example, in *Atomic Heart*, while Arineh and Nobahar drive through the city, a policeman man stops them and enters the car. When the policeman enters the car, he asks Arineh about the songs she is listening to. The two girls are listening to some sort of heavy metal music and when she raises the volume, he said, "You aren't Satan-worshippers, are you?" Arineh answered, "How is that even related sir? My father is a priest in Tehran. I myself play in the church choir. We are a religious family!" (fig. 13).

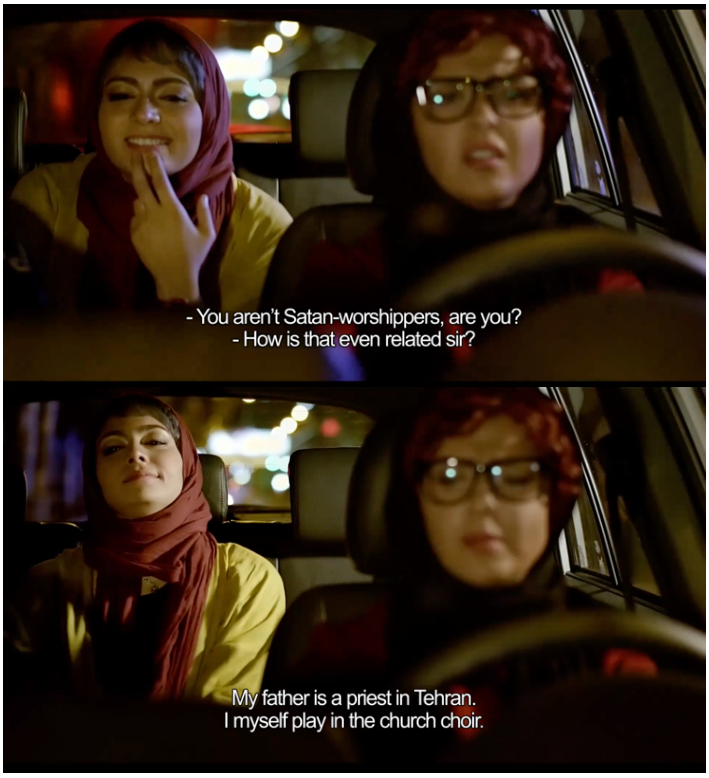
- You aren't Satan-worshippers, are you?
- How is that even related sir?
My father is a priest in Tehran.
I myself play in the church choir.

Fig. 13 - Satan worshippers (Atomic Heart)

This scene was regarded as problematic because it does not authentically represent the family of the priest. Commenting on this scene, Armenoosh said, “Unlike a Muslim family, you cannot find such attitudes and behaviors in a religious Armenian family. Usually, the daughter of an Armenian priest is conservative.” Within the Armenian culture, the family of the priest is usually conservative and religious; this fact is very popular among my Iranian-Armenian participants, even if just in theory. As already mentioned, one of my focus groups consist of metalheads. Iranian-Armenian participants translate overprotective attitudes on the Armenian religious family because they acknowledge the importance of its image in an Islamic society. For them, the religious Armenian family is a representative of the Armenian community in the Iranian society. They believe that this image should not be interrupted because it affects how the society perceives them.

2. *Legitimizing the Superiority of Islam*

Besides the distorted symbols of Armenian Christianity, the two films *Atomic Heart* and *Oxidan* participate in elevating Islam over Armenian Christianity. Not only in theory does the national cinema put Islam first through regulations, but also in practice through representations. In this section, I move into a more private setting where my participants did not simple nod their heads at the ideological and religious pervasiveness of the Islamic Republic on national screen. I argue that the national screen is legitimizing the superiority of Islam over other religions in Iran, and specifically Christianity. It is focusing on glorifying Islam while shedding light on the imperfections of other religions. First, it is obscuring and negotiating the politics of religious conversion. Second, it is complimenting the Iranian-Muslim while humiliating the Iranian-Armenian. Given these kinds of mis-representations, my Iranian-Armenian participants expressed their annoyance and reconciliated with their faith in order to defend it.

The comedy-drama *Oxidan* represents a nominal religious conversion case from Islam to Christianity, but how is the context of conversion represented? Aslan fakes the identity of an Armenian priest and plays the role of Father André. As suggested by the smuggler Bahman, converting into Armenian Christianity is the easiest way to get a visa. When Bahman suggested the fake conversion technique to Aslan, he freaked out and started to say repetitively, "Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah!" Astaghfirullah is an Islamic expression used to seek forgiveness from God and distance the Muslim from the sin. This moment in the film is important because it shows how Muslim-to-Christian conversion is not accepted, even if it's just an idea or a fake conversion.

Although formal and false, converting into Armenian Christianity was depicted as a sin, and my participants felt assaulted. This kind of fake religious conversion happens frequently in Iran (Barry, 2019); however, my participants did not tolerate the representation of the conversion for several factors. First, they did not understand why Aslan found it very hard to fake an Armenian belief. They believe that Aslan should have been more relaxed and accepting because he is not actually converting. Emin said, "Converting to our belief is not a sin. The real sin is to force all minority religion to act Islamic in their own country!" The misrepresentation of conversion here opens up a space for my participants to critique the Republic's policies towards minorities. Although they are predominantly secular, my participants interacted with this scene as a conscious religious minority which is forced to follow the Islamic codes and rules in public spaces. They reacted as an aware religious minority to the rights of the community that are being margined and overshadowed. I believe Iranian-Armenians suffering from the dichotomy they live under the Islamic Republic. They spend a lot of effort to act differently between public and private spaces. They showed a strong empathy to the Armenian belief based on the struggling and confusion they are living in the Islamic Republic because they are a religious minority in the first place.

In another scene, the national screen showed a bias towards Islam while depicting a Christian-to-Muslim conversion case. Unlike the representation of the fake Muslim-to-Christian conversion, a real Christian-to-Muslim conversion was depicted on the screen in a very naïve, simple, and fluid context. While Aslan is playing the role of Father André, Gevorg, a young Armenian man, approaches him for confession and advice. Gevorg is in love with a Muslim girl and wishes to marry her. In Islam, marrying a Christian man is preconditioned by him converting to Islam. Aslan, or Father André, immediately commands Gevorg to convert and to change his name, and surprisingly, Gevorg follows his orders quickly and headed to the mosque to start learning the principles of Islam. It was effortless for him to choose to change his religion and consequently to give up his own identity.

My participants were annoyed by the double-standards of the national screen reflected in both conversion scenes, Muslim-to-Christian and Christian-to-Muslim. Narek said, “Armenians do not simply change their religious belief for marriage!” Annie, one of the Iranian-Armenians I met during my visit, told me the story of her parents. Her father was a well-known musician and her mother was a Muslim actress. When they wanted to marry, her father changed his religion formally without really turning into a practicing Muslim; this is often the case. He did not even change his name. I am not saying that religious conversion does not take place in the country; however, it is not that simple and easy. During a conversation with the Archbishop Sebou Sarkissian, he told me how aware they are of the Christian-to-Muslim conversions happening, and he attributes this to the project of the Islamic Republic. He said, “one of the main objectives of the Islamic Republic is to Islamize the whole country, and to turn everyone into Shi’as specifically.” Religious conversion happens in Iran, but it is definitely more complicated that what is portrayed in the film.

In the Islamic Republic, converting to any religion other than Islam is illegal and forbidden. Although it guarantees the rights of existing religious minorities, it is not flexible when it comes to increasing the minority population with new Iranian converts. Those who wish to convert are threatened by persecution or forced migration, even if they were Iranians. Iranian-Muslims in Iran are locked into the prison of Islam as long as they are living on the premises of Iranian lands. The Islamic Republic tends to prioritize the religious dimension over the national one, and sometimes it consolidates both dimensions; the national identity becomes defined by the religious one and vice versa. To be an Iranian citizen is to be an Islamic one. In this section, I discussed how the national cinema of Iran articulates the complication of religious conversion from the point of view of the Islamic Republic. The national cinema of Iran refers that it is very easy to convert into Islam, while it is taboo to convert into Christianity, without taking into consideration the privacy and particularities of Armenian Christianity even in the case of nominal conversion.

So far, the national cinema of Iran appears to be legitimizing the superiority of Islam through altering the politics of religious conversion; it is easy to become a Muslim, but very hard to even fake Armenian Christianity. The screen is confirming the genuineness of Islam and unoriginality of Christianity. I have already focused on the misrepresentation of the Armenian faith and religion, and now I will move forward to the misrepresentation of the Armenian faith practitioner. In an attempt to continue with elevating and legitimizing Islam, the national cinema of Iran gleams the image of the practicing Muslim on the expense of the practicing Armenian, who is both committed to his faith and to the Islamic Republic.

The national cinema of Iran creates a space of competition between practitioners of both beliefs, Islam and Armenian Christianity. The screen is embodying a fighting arena between the Muslim practitioner and the Armenian one, while obviously advocating the former. It focuses on glorifying ‘the Muslim’ through humiliating the ‘Armenian Christian.’ I have already pointed out the existing gap between Iranian-Armenians and Iranian-Muslims, but what is more dangerous is the created gap between Islam and Christianity. Islam is the religion of the Islamic Republic and has a strong affiliation with the government, and this situation creates a division based on faith.

Oxidan manipulates Christianity on several different levels and demeans that which is sacred. When Bahman and Aslan accompanied Gevorg to the mosque, they taught him how to perform Woudou’. While washing, Gevorg asked, “Can’t I do this with warm water?” Bahman responded angrily, “Islam isn’t for sissy men. Don’t take our time if you can’t do it. Wait! Didn’t I say Islam is not up for a joke?” (fig. 14). This scene was not funny for my Iranian-Armenian participants for two reasons. First, it is hinting that non-Muslim men are sissy, and second, it is suggesting that Christianity is a joke. Such a dialogue, although it does not compliment Islam directly, it glorifies it while undermining other religions. Instead of simply using embroidered expressions to glorify Islam, the film offends Armenian Christianity for the same means.

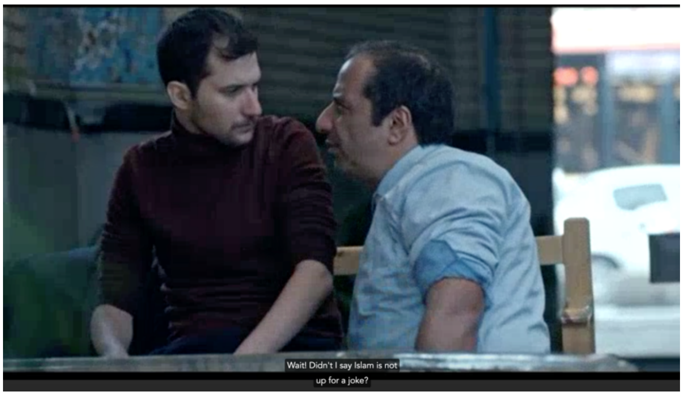

Fig. 14 - Islam is not a joke (Oxidan)

It is important to mention that Gevorg, in the film, is a soldier as well; an Iranian-Armenian soldier who is supposedly willing to scarify himself to the country. During the previous scene, Eric said, "a sissy Armenian man who happens to be a soldier at the same time?!" Iranian-Armenians are very aware of their contribution to Iran. On the one hand, the Iranian government tries to always include Iranian-Armenians by highlighting their solidarity and sacrifice during the war, and on the other hand, the national cinema is directly accusing an Armenian soldier of being sissy and coward. During the discussion, Narek said, "the national cinema has spent a lot of time and energy on producing sacred defense films. I believe that they are aware of the bravery of Iranian-Armenians and their contribution in the Iran-Iraq war." The memory of the Iran-Iraq is still active in the minds of Iranian-Armenians and humiliations to the Armenian soldier makes it more present. They were both affectively engaging with the screen and with the past of their community. Emin said, "I would never die for this country, but my ancestors did, and their memory should be protected." There is something conflicting here. On the one hand, Iran valorizes soldiers in a very possible means especially though media, whether through the visual culture of the city, sacred defense films, literature, and official speeches. On the other hand, the national screen is demeaning a soldier, Gevorg, just because he is Armenian. The shared memory of sacrifice of Iranian-Armenians created an affective engagement with their past while watching such a misrepresentation on the screen. They do not want neither their past nor their loss and suffering to be forgotten, despite the fact that they themselves would not fight for Iran. In the Islamic Republic, martyrs, soldiers, and religious clergy occupy a very important symbolic position. Unfortunately, the national cinema of Iran seems to advocate another system of ethnic and religious hierarchy on the screen. There is a masked hierarchy in Iran that might not be admitted by the official state but certainly experienced by ethnoreligious minorities.

Besides these symbolic hierarchies, the national screen also delivers a physical hierarchy to confirm the preference and priority of Islam in Iran. In the last scene of *Oxidan*, which delivers a supposedly happy ending, Aslan gives up on the visa and decides to stay in the county and marry his manager at work. He drives the motorcycle to his wedding along with the Muslim clergy and the priest. Aslan was driving, the Muslim clergy is sitting behind him, and the priest is in a lower seat attached to the motorcycle (fig. 15). The order of seats in the scene reflects the hierarchy of the religious clergy in the country; the Muslim clergy always comes first, and the Christian clergy comes second. The Muslim clergy in Iran is much more important than the Christian one. Angine said, “the priest helped and embraced Aslan, and he definitely knows him much more than the Muslim clergy, but still he chose to favor the Muslim one with the best seat.” Such statements remind that of the elevation of Islam over other religions in Iran despite of their amount of contributions to the country.

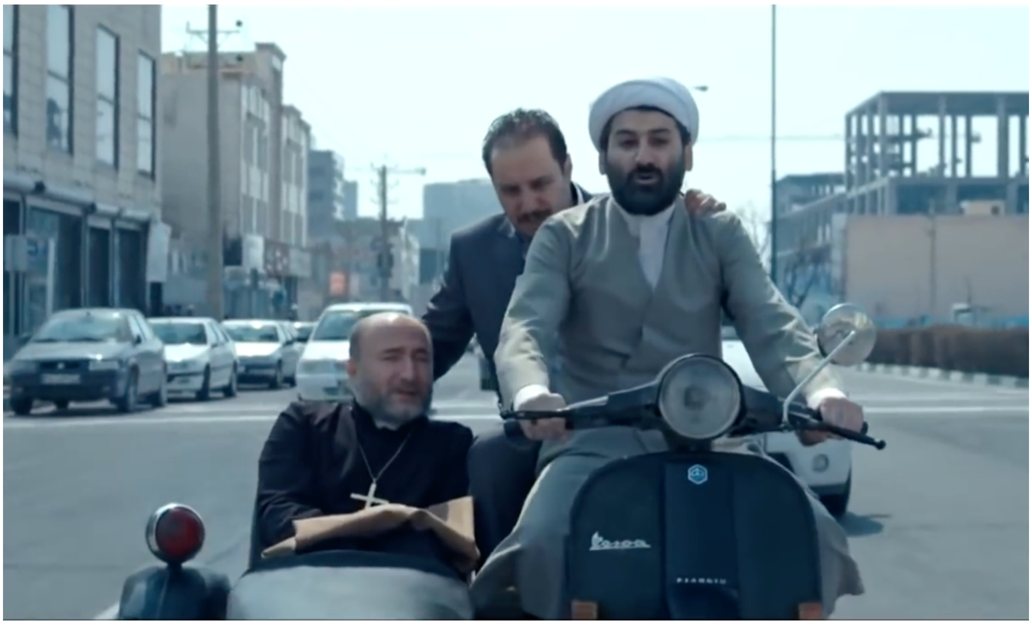

Fig. 15 - A religious hierarchy (Oxidan)

These series of scenes and analysis tell us that the *Riya* of the Islamic republic has extended to dominate the cinema industry and the politics controlling it. While film censorship is very firm when dealing with representations of Islam on the screen, it does not firmly and justly operate when representations are about Armenian Christianity. Although the national screen is theoretically regulated according to the Islamic values, it is practically neglecting these values when representing minority religions. It is exploiting the representation of others' belief in order to bring Islam again to the surface. However, Iranian-Armenian young adults succeed in fighting the propaganda circulated on the national screen and exposing the hypocrisy employed by the Islamic Republic through critically interpreting the articulation of the Armenian belief and encountering the images with reality. Although almost all of my participants seculars, and do not really care about religion, they showed a great resistance to the insult that touched their Armenian belief because it constitutes a part of who they and their ancestors are.

C. An Affective Engagement

The previous readings of the films have been primarily inspired by the engagements and comments of my Iranian-Armenian participants. While recruiting participants, I noticed that only a few numbers of them are believers or practicing Christians. Most of them are secular, and I was worried that they might not engage with offensive representations of the Armenian faith. Surprisingly, my participants showed eagerness to defend their nominal faith and, thus, to problematize the national cinema of Iran. Why would seculars become so involved in defending religion? How could the Armenian faith unite the Iranian-Armenian participants who do not even believe in it? According to Staiger (2000), “affective and emotional experiences and pleasures probably underpin every act of reception” (p. 4). In this section, I account the affective engagement of Iranian-Armenian seculars around the religious belief of their community.

The two case films, *Atomic Heart* and *Oxidan,* generated multiple strong reactions on the street. Many Iranian-Armenians protested the film and launched different campaigns against it. Together Christian religious clergies, alongside with Iranian-Armenians, objected the appearance of religion as a joke on the screen. Although my participants were mostly seculars who do not care about religion, they are aware of the importance of religion to their Armenian identity. I did not expect from them to defend the Armenian faith, especially my second focus group which is formed of a group of secular metalheads. However, they were too emotionally invested in legitimizing their belief and sanctifying it despite of all misconceptions represented on the national screen. Both religious and non-religious Iranian-Armenians showed full solidarity with the Armenian faith and readiness to question those who are responsible for such misrepresentations.

These misrepresentations, especially in *Oxidan,* created an affective space where my participants first were questioning the role of the Iranian-Armenians who are working in the industry. The film includes several Iranian-Armenian complementary characters, and Gevorg himself is an Iranian-Armenian actor. Narek was really disappointed with their lack of contribution to the plot of the film in terms of correcting or rejecting. He said, “I know this guy. And I know a bunch of the men who were at the funeral in the film. They are all Iranian-Armenians who had the chance to reject such representations and at least refuse to participate, but they did not, and I wonder why!” Also, my participants pointed out the fact that the cinema industry should benefit from the Iranian-Armenian presence in order to fill its lack of knowledge about Armenians. They also believe that it is important to have stronger presence whether on the screen or behind it in order to put limits to the ignorance of the national screen.

While reacting to another scene, my participants also informed their solidarity, despite of the religious belief, with the image of the Armenian Christian. Aslan and Bahman accompanied Gevorg to the mosque to help him convert. While teaching him the Woudou’, a Muslim religious clergy approached them with suspicious looks; he does not usually see a Christian father at the mosque. When they explained that they are trying to help Gevorg to convert, he was relieved and said, “At first I thought you are here to convert him out of Islam.” My participants accused this scene of promoting a bad image of the Armenian religious clergy and putting them in a questioning situation. Eric said, “Armenian fathers do not convert Muslims in Iran because preaching is not part of our belief.” My participants told me that usually Muslims approach the church to convert, and not the opposite. But all registered churches cannot do such acts because it is illegal. On one night in Tehran, Narek showed me Saint Paul church; the place where past conversions used to take place. The church now is closed, and it is not possible to enter it. While life in Tehran beyond the screen proves that Armenians do not preach and do not convert Muslims, life in Tehran on the national screen is trying to show the opposite. Narek said, “it is obvious that the film is humiliating for Armenians, but what is really serious is that the national cinema is changing facts about the Armenian community related to its religious beliefs, and this is something not acceptable.” On the one hand, it is accusing their citizenship and devoutness to the rules of the Republic, and on the other hand, it is changing facts about the Armenian religious belief.

The unexpected engagement of my Iranian-Armenian participants and enthusiasm in defending the Armenian faith corresponds with one Roxanne Varzi’s (2006) ethnographies. She pictures Tehran as a city of death and martyrdom through focusing on martyrdom visual culture. In one of her field visits to Tehran, her cousin asks her if she would like to take pictures of “the important architecture, ancient monuments, and pre-revolution sites” (Varzi, 2006, p. 127). Instead, Varzi dedicates her efforts to reflect the visual culture of the city embodied with martyrdom and death. She answered, “No, thanks, that’s not what I’m after” (Varzi, 2006, p. 127). Her response made her cousin anxious and he said, “Why do you want to show the rest of the world our fanaticism? This is not Tehran – these are forms of government propaganda” (as cited in Varzi, 2006, p.127). Although secular, and aspiring to leave the country, her cousin did not give up on defending and protecting the image of his city. Although not comfortable in Tehran and against the Islamization project of the city, Varzi’s cousin felt the responsibility to defend his country and protect its reputation instead of attacking it in the eyes of the foreigner West! I believe that his attitude was mainly motivated by national sentiments; he did not want to abandon his city. Similarly, my Iranian-Armenian secular participants refused to abandon the uniting element of their community, that is religion, and showed resistance towards all demeaning and negative representations and fought to discredit the messages disseminated on the national screen.

Their reception to the stereotypical films created a space where things in the Islamic Republic appear to be more hopeful. The cinematic experience of my Iranian-Armenian participants created a space where they were able to have a back and forth and go through unlimited, albeit challenging, discussions with the screen. Post-revolutionary cinema in Iran stages the individual experiences of religion, morality, and ethics. According to Blake Atwood (2016), who talks about post-revolutionary cinema and its attempts to keep the revolutionary spirit and legitimacy, “despite the Islamic Republic’s attempt to leverage cinema to keep the spirit of the revolution alive in contemporary Iran, revolutions cannot last forever, and their fleeting nature challenges us to understand what happens to the relationship between revolution and cinema once the revolutionary dust has settled” (p. 145). Now, forty years after the revolution, I can confidently say that the revolution indeed did not last forever. Due to ignorant representations, and one-dimensional ideological ends, readings of the national screen are taking place to confront it.

The Iranian-Armenian audience questions the core values and causes of the revolution and problematizes the exploitation of the popular cinema under the Islamic regime. In this chapter, my participants questioned the absence of the ideals of the Islamic revolution from the screen while representing a different religious belief. Where are the values of tolerance, respect, and solidarity? Where are the utopic imaginings of the unified embracing nation? Throughout the discussion, my participants were dealing with the national cinema as a means of state's propaganda and a manipulative tool that is seriously threatening their existence and history. Iranian-Armenians value their history and know it very well. Narek said, "the national screen is the mirror of the Islamic Republic. It is changing facts and creating new realities." He believes that the Islamic Republic, since the revolution, has tried to create a new reality for Iranians and to normalize it for the newer generations. He said, "our generation did not experience the times of the Shah, but we hear about it from our parents, but will we tell our children about these times?" The Islamic Republic has the power to change the past. Instead of deleting, it is editing facts in favor of its ideology. Similarly, the national cinema is changing facts and disseminating concepts about Iranian-Armenians and Christianity, although through small details and simple dialogue, but attempts to normalize a new false vision of Armenian Christians.

Yes, my Iranian-Armenian participants are mostly seculars, but they were all bothered with the portrayals of their faith for several factors. They redefined the national screen and confronted the demeaning representations of their religion. When encountering these negative representations of the Armenian faith, the national cinema of Iran provokes an affective attitude among Iranian-Armenian seculars who do not really care about religion in their everyday lives, but still defend its representations on the screen. One of the factors that contributes to such an engagement is the fact that all what they try to do all day is to answer stereotypical questions and try to correct Iranian-Muslims' perceptions about Armenians, and the national cinema, through these representations is simply smashing their efforts. As a community, they showed solidarity and defended their common belief and efforts to continue existing in Iran. They think beyond individualism. They are more like a collective entity that is trying endlessly to protect its heritage and identity.

Also, the Iranian-Armenian community is already fed up with physical religious discriminations in Iran, and they do not want for such acts to extend more! According to Barry (2018), religious discrimination in Iran "is manifested in both formal and informal ways" and ethnoreligious minorities, including Armenians, are "legally barred from many government and military positions in Iran and have a lesser status in several aspects of the law" (p. 145). While they might not be able to fight for such explicitly and physical discrimination, my Iranian-Armenian participants were eager to fight the virtual discrimination employed by the national screen.

Another important notice came up from my participants is the paradox within the cinema industry when representing something related to religion. In the light of such confusing and vague representations of the Armenian church, my participants appeared to know a lot about their faith and the formalities of their religion although they are seculars, and some of them are atheists. Even if they do not believe, or do not care about the Armenian church, they spent a significant time in criticizing these representations, proving it wrong, and also questioning the directors and producers. Because religion is important for the Armenian community and defines it, whenever the faith is humiliated, the community shows solidarity and unites to defend it. The Iranian-Armenian community is eager to protect what is left from its identity and heritage which are inseparable from its faith. Iranian-Armenian seculars, although might not relate to religious people or issues, they still care about protecting the belief.

I think it is important to think of what motivates this affective engagement in the first place. Besides the importance and centrality of the religious reference to the community, my Iranian-Armenian participants' engagement was a result of how they prioritize their fights in the country. Secular Iranian-Armenians definitely dream of a different structure of the government. They spend a lot of time imagining of what's like living outside the Islamic republic. However, because they are a minority, they acknowledge that it is very difficult to achieve such a big change at the moment. Their current struggle is to exist safely and not change the whole regime. For them, the affective minority bond is much stronger and more important than their imaginations of the country and personal identifications of their self. Iranian-Armenians identify with religion differently, but they are able to separate their personal identifications from the community good.

Now, 40 years after the revolution, the Islamic Republic, needs to reevaluate films from a broader perspective that guarantees the rights of ethnoreligious minorities and minority religions. While the image of Islam is important to the Islamic Republic, the image of Armenian Christianity is vital to Iranian-Armenians, whether seculars or not! Iranian-Armenians are aware of the shortcomings of the Islamic Republic in embracing the community despite the flowery speeches it sponsors. Experiencing the reality beyond these speeches, the Iranian-Armenian community does not seem to be fully content, or even close to being satisfied. The Islamic Republic spends a great amount of time and effort to legitimize its revolution and glorify Islam as the inclusive religion that suits all other ethno-religious minorities. While the Republic gives itself the privilege to speak of its accomplishments and benefits to the Iranian-Armenian community, Iranian-Armenians play the role of listeners who reluctantly accept the claims and nod off their heads approvingly in official settings. However, when government wanted to use the national screen as means to legitimize its existence, serve its agenda, and elevate Islam other minority religions particularly the Armenian Christianity, my Iranian-Armenian participants did not compromise! Building on the previous analysis, the Iranian-Armenian community succeeds in exposing the politicized bias of the national screen and uniting all together despite of their differences when it comes to the dignity and just existence of the community.

D. Conclusion: Religion as a Way Out

February 27, 2019 – Tehran, *It is my last day in Tehran. I was on my way to the airport and my eyes were fixed to the cab's window. I was capturing the last glimpse of the city and giving it my goodbyes. I was also wondering if it has anything more to offer. I spotted a huge building with a verse of the Qura'an that says, "And whoever desires other than Islam as religion – never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the hereafter, will be among the losers." I have read this verse before, but it had a stronger impact when I saw it publicly on that building.*
The verse is publicly condemning, in a very diverse country, all those who do not follow Islam, including Iranian-Armenians, and terrorizing them. At that moment, I realized that Islam in Iran is politicized in every single way to undermine the different other and different beliefs.

Wandering the streets of Tehran alone is capable of telling that religion is a basic player in the Islamic Republic. Besides sponsoring a form of social and political discrimination, religion and religious diversity sponsor the national screen. On the grounds of the presented cinematic experiences, religion appears to be politicized on the screen as well. The national cinema of Iran is abusing the Armenian faith in order to legitimize the superiority of Islam and subordinating other beliefs. While messing with the holy symbols of Armenian Christianity and disrespecting the particularities of the Armenian faith and the loyalty of Armenian practitioners, the national cinema of Iran is explicitly unraveling its hypocrisy and ignorance.

For Iranian-Armenian audiences, the national cinema is creating new false realities and editing history in order to legitimize the political ideology of the government. Due to its extreme arrogance and crossing the red lines, the national screen is encouraging an affective engagement from the Iranian-Armenian audience. Despite the fact that they might not be practicing Armenians or even believe in Christianity, my Iranian-Armenian participants defended the belief of their community and condemned the national screen and the cinema industry. They were able to read the films from the point of view of the community without merely focusing on their individual subjectivity. Although the national cinema is aiming to undermine the Armenian faith and consequently discredit the legitimacy of the Armenian community in Tehran, it strengthened the connection between the very different members and generations of the community.

Through distorting the sacred symbols of Armenian Christianity and exploiting the religion to legitimize the superiority of Islam in the country, the national cinema of Iran is not only undermining the Armenian faith, it is also giving a clear unwelcoming message to Iranian-Armenians. The Armenian religious belief on the national screen is used as a way out; Iranian-Armenians are associated with emigration and leaving. Such an association raises a lot of critical questions over the homeland. Is the national screen trying to intentionally make Iranian-Armenians leave? Although the emigration of Iranian-Armenians has increased in the past four decades, but does this deprive them from sharing Iran as a homeland?

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Do you love Tehran?
Love? Love is a big word here
- Narek

During my two fieldtrips in Tehran, I tried my best to direct my focus on giving the primary voice to Iranian-Armenians there. I remember when I first spoke about my research, many people from within my community denounced my choice and could not understand why I chose to focus on Iranian-Armenians. For the majority of them, Iran is an ideal country who can give lessons in embracing ethnoreligious minorities and its national cinema is beyond criticism. For them, Iran is only defined as the country who will defeat the US, and its cinema is already outturning Hollywood. However, in this study, Iran and its national cinema are addressed through the lens of Iranian-Armenians, who can, more than anyone living outside Iran, deconstruct any promoted image about the country and its national screen.

This thesis is entirely built on the following paradox: Cinema in Iran was brought by Iranian-Armenians; however, they are either absented from or misrepresented on the screen. In Chapter II, I argue that Iranian-Armenians have played an important role in the foundations of the Iranian cinema, on both transnational and transnational levels. I tell the story of Iranian-Armenians behind the camera and Iranian-Armenians in front the camera. When cinema started as a transnational enterprise, Iranian-Armenian were present. As merchants, travelers, and cosmopolitan filmmakers, they helped in nurturing Iran's film industry. Ovanes Ohanians is one of the prominent early Iranian-Armenian names that marked the transnational aspect of the early Iranian cinema and paved the way for its transformation into a national one.

When Iranian cinema continued as a national enterprise, Iranian-Armenians were there. As studios establishers, production houses owners, film technical personnel, and new genres innovators, Iranian-Armenians paved the way for the national cinema to exist. After highlighting their roles behind the camera, I move to discuss their roles infort the camera. I pinpoint the shortcomings of the national cinema in addressing Iranian-Armenians on the levels of narrative and exhibition. Using *To Be or Not To Be,* I examine the shortcomings of the representative narrative about Iranian-Armenians in Iran. Using *Andranik*, and after living my first cinematic experience in Tehran, I notice the poor exhibition of films representing Iranian-Armenians. Lastly, using examples like *Atomic Heart* and *Oxidan,* this chapter informs that recent popular Iranian films, while finally representing Iranian-Armenians, it associates them with negative stereotypes.

After foregrounding the contributions of Iranian-Armenians behind and in front the camera, and suggesting what the screen has to tell us about the community, I move to answer the following question: What Iranian-Armenians have to say about their representation on the screen and their community? In Chapters III and IV, I grapple with reception. I put the Iranian-Armenian community in conversation with the national screen. while highlighting both textual and contextual factors, this study reflects the complexity of the Iranian-Armenian identity and the affective motivations that mark it. I unpack the spectrum through which Iranian-Armenians interact with Iranian films. In Chapter III, I argue that the national cinema creates an intense interactive space where Iranian-Armenians question their national identity and belongings. From a subjective minority point of view, Iranian-Armenians unpack the political intentions behind any positive filmic representation of the community, just like Eric's experience with *Andranik.*

The chapter pictures how, on one hand, the national cinema of Iran mis-interpellates the audiences and, on another hand, the Iranian-Armenian community is influenced by several contextual factors that decide its readings of the films. When confronted with the representation of the Armenian self-image, the Armenian community showed ambivalence towards what truly defines Armenians and what doesn't.

In Chapter IV, I delve more into the affective engagement of my Iranian-Armenian participants with cinematic representations of Armenian Christianity. After discussing the *Riya*, hypocrisy, of the Islamic Republic in censoring the national screen, the screen appears to be undermining the Armenian faith while legitimizing the superiority of Islam over minority religions and distorting the sacred symbols of Christianity. My participants falsified a lot of demeaning representations in both *Oxidan* and *Atomic Heart,* and defined the national cinema as ignorant. Despite the fact that my participants are seculars, they strongly defended their faith and its representation. The affective engagement of the Iranian-Armenian community was first motivated by the political importance of their religion to the community in Iran. The Iranian-Armenian community is defined as an ethnoreligious minority, and the Armenian religious clergy defines its leadership and guarantees its rights and needs. The Affective engagement tells us more about how the Iranian-Armenian community in Iran prioritizes its needs. I have highlighted how the Iranian-Armenian community acknowledges its position as a minority under the Islamic Republic. For them, changing the regime is a dream. Until then, staying attached to the community bigger bond is much more important.

Seven years have passed already since I watched *A Separation.* During that time, I didn't expect that my thoughts, questions, and confusion about the film will lead me to this research. However, my experience with *A Separation* at that time is very different from my experience with Iranian cinema now. Before, I couldn't completely comprehend, perceive, and express my opinion about Iran due to the heavy religio-political propaganda promoted in my hometown and between the members of my community. But now, I can at least personally confirm that there is much more than what we are being told and encouraged to believe. Seven years ago, *A Separation* opened closed doors in my unconsciousness. Now, seven years later, *A Separation* paved my way to spend an adventurous fieldwork in Tehran and unfold the untold stories about Iran and its national cinema through Iranian-Armenians.

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