

## The Making of Iranianness in the Kitchen: A Textual Analysis of the Cooking Game Show *Befarmaeed Sham*

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence and rapid proliferation of the predominantly anti-regime Farsi satellite TV channels (FSTCs) and their productions since early 1990s have not only transformed the Iranian mediascape, but also challenged the state's definition of Iranianness. Among the new generations of these free-to-air transnational channels, is *MANOTO*, a London-based television network which became a familiar name among Iranians since 2010 after premiering *Befarmaeed Sham*, a cooking game show copied from the successful British TV show *Come and Dine with Me*. Being broadcast for more than a decade, this reality show depicts the lives of ordinary Iranians in diaspora who have to deal with the unaccustomed culture of the West. Since FSTCs are strictly regarded by Iranian authorities as means of cultural invasion, the representations in *Befarmaeed Sham* are naturally seen to be in contrast with the Islamic regime's views on what it means to be Iranian. Yet, what remains less known is *how* this new form of popular cultural programme redefines Iranianness. Therefore, by performing a series of textual analyses on 7 sequences selected from various episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham*, and with a focus on the contestants' utterances, the present study uncovers some of the key representational aspects of this reality show. Ultimately, while highlighting the subtleties in cultural representation that render *Befarmaeed Sham* political, it is argued that this television programme offers audiences a new space for rethinking their Iranian selves.

**Keywords:** *Iranianness, satellite TV, cooking game show, representation, textual analysis.*

### INTRODUCTION

Soon after the inception of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran underwent a sudden social, political and economic change, whereby it lost its reputation as a powerful and reliable ally of the West and became a cloistered anti-West nation (Moshiri, 2019). For that reason, the post-Revolution period which began with a restructuring of the state's ideologies and policies witnessed a wide range of devastating aftermaths, both domestically around public life, and globally in terms of international relations (Milani, 2018). Accordingly, during the course of more than four decades, the ruling clerics in Iran have relentlessly capitalized on the repressive and ideological state apparatuses for maintaining their dominance over the nation and reaffirming their legitimacy in the region (Nazari, 2021). In line with such efforts, the state media have consistently been striving for constructing a homogeneous identity based on Islamic, anti-West and revolutionary ideologies, aspiring to bring about a kind of national solidarity that could secure the state's dominion over the nation (Ehteshami, 2017).

Nonetheless, the advent of the free-to-air transnational broadcasting systems, and thereupon, the rise of the Farsi satellite TV channels (FSTCs) in 1990s, marked a turning point for the Iranians, since these banished and thus, predominantly subversive television networks offered audiences a new space for rethinking their identities and belongingness to the nation (Wojcieszak et al., 2019). Troubled with the spread and popularity of FSTCs, the government adopted various technical approaches to inhibit their influx, while cautioning the families about their corruptive impacts on Iranian culture (Blout, 2017).

Yet, despite the preventive measures taken by the government to preclude Iranians from watching satellite programmes, the popularity of this relatively new form of media was on the rise (Alimardani & Michaelsen, 2021; Sohrabi, 2021). Indeed, such a remarkable feat in attracting Iranians, stemmed from not only the country's unwarranted media regulations, but also the audiences' clear disappointment in national television and its programmes (Khiabani, 2019). This was in view of the fact that the satellite TV provided Iranians with an abundance of tele-viewing choices, liberating them from myriad problems and limitations in satisfying their needs for entertainment and information (Matin, 2021).

Accordingly, whereas the FSTCs' viewership continues to grow across the nation, the audiences are more and more presented with alternative views on their Iranian selves and culture (Matin, 2020). Nonetheless, from the economic standpoint, throughout the past decade or so, the proliferation of the FSTCs and the escalating competitiveness in the media market have compelled these television networks to adopt a number of strategies (Alikhah, 2018). One way to do so was to keep up with the global trends in content production, while prioritizing the media needs of the population's younger segment (Alikhah, 2018). In pursuit of this, *MANOTO*, an exilic television network based in London, premiered *Befarmaeed Sham*, an adaptation of the UK's channel 4 popular reality cooking game show, *Come and Dine with Me* (Atashi, 2018).

Just like the British version, in *Befarmaeed Sham* four strangers come together to compete against each other by exhibiting their hospitality and culinary skills. Nevertheless, contrary to its original, *Befarmaeed Sham* features the contestants not in their homeland, but in diaspora. Thus, *Befarmaeed Sham* portrays ordinary Iranians against the background of everyday life in western countries where they have to deal with the consequences of their exodus. As such, besides competing for a prize, the contestants also engage in a series of self-narrations in which every one of them talks about his or her own biography often at the outset of the first episode of each group's quadripartite challenge. In addition to this, at times contestants participate in discussion with others in the group around social and cultural topics, later during the show.

Coupled with the show's visual features, these monologues/dialogues predominantly focus on the contestants' connection to homeland, drawing attention to issues such as cultural identity, belongingness and nationhood, ultimately raising questions about representation of Iranianness in this reality show. Although such representations are deemed to oppose the one that prevails the state media (Farashbandi & Zangeneh, 2017) what remains less known is *how* this reality show attempts to redefine Iranianness. Therefore, the question that this study strives to answer is: What are some of the key representational aspects of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham*? That is to say, how this reality show deliberately includes certain ideas about Iran, Iranians and their culture (while excluding others) in the form of the contestants' utterances, in order to construct a specific reality about Iranianness.

#### CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on both 'Iranianness' as a contemporary but historically-based concept, and 'Discourse Theory' to explain discursive construction of Iranianness in mass media, particularly in the form of spoken language. The notion of Iranianness, or in the same sense, Iranian identity, as pointed out by a number of authors (e.g., Mohammadpour & Soleimani, 2022), has often been an ongoing subject of contestation as well as a source of frustration. Hence, the study of Iranian identity presents numerous challenges for researchers, not only because it deals with the complexities inherent to understanding the 'self', but also for

bearing the unique circumstances of Iran and its problematic history. Such challenges range from “the complex legacy of the premodern past to the diversity of ethnic and religious populations, from the history of encounters with multiple imperial powers to the long shadow cast by nationalist ideologies” (Vejdani, 2012, p. ix).

In this way, there have been varying understandings and interpretations of Iranian identity, either for the country’s large ethnic diversity and their varied circumstances and perspectives, or as the result of the scholars’ different orientations which have often caused inconsistencies in the available knowledge (Litvak, 2017). This is also reminiscent of Edward Said’s idea that “all intellectuals represent something to their audiences, and in so doing represent themselves to themselves” (1994, p. xv). That is to say, intellectuals make every effort to present a particular image of themselves to a society (and their opponents) and thus, take part in forming the identity of that society itself.

Consequently, the definitional ambivalence towards the concept of Iranianness has led to understanding of it in a variety of ways across the vast literature within Iranian studies or other fields, depending on who uses the term and for what purpose. Thus, to avoid unnecessary engagement in a search for an impeccable definition, the present study regards Iranianness in its less problematic sense: interchangeable with Iranian identity and merely conceptualized as a repertoire of shared national traits that typifies Iran, Iranians, as well as the country’s history and culture.

Furthermore, the theoretical basis of this study follows Foucault’s idea of discourse and views Iranianness as a discursive discourse constructed through language. In this sense, although a discourse circulates through a range of social sites and institutions, the media remains as a powerful “system of dispersion” of discourse (Foucault, 1972, p. 37) with their own appropriated rules of language, functioning in a wider framework that also affects their own capabilities and affordances. Hence, the media do not necessarily mirror the social world, but instead are “specific machineries that produce, reproduce, and transform social phenomena” (Carpentier, 2017, p. 60). Even though such an idea is at the core of nearly all discourse studies, it particularly characterizes the macro-textual/contextual approaches.

In this view, and parallel to Barthes (1981) post-structuralist tradition, the study adopts a macro-textual/contextual approach to discourse. Here, by taking on a broader definition of ‘text’ and regarding it as manifestation of meaning and ideology, “discourse becomes discourse-as-representation, or discourse-as-ideology”, and “the focus is placed on the meanings, representations, or ideologies embedded *in* the text, communicated *through* language, and not so much on the language itself” (Carpentier, 2017, p. 60). That being said, unlike micro-context where the approach is confined to the specific and immediate social settings, the emphasis in macro-context approach is more on the macro level of the social context in which discourse is circulated.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employs textual analysis to find out how the media texts, in this case contestants’ utterances (spoken language), are used to construct certain meanings. In this sense, a text is a unit of meaning for interpretation and understanding and may take various forms (e.g., book, song, video game, film and TV programme). In textual analysis, a text is whatever object researchers use to make interpretations about the culture, so “texts are things that we make meaning from” (Mckee, 2003, p. 29). Hence, “to analyze a text is to talk about the meanings in the text, and scholars call this *textual analysis*” (Newman, 2022, p. 35). Textual analysis is

generally defined as a close reading of media texts to uncover their latent meanings, and to get an idea of what a text is communicating to its readers. Ultimately, the researcher's goal in doing so is to expose the reproduction of power and social inequality (Hawkins, 2017).

The corpus for textual analysis in this study consists of the contestants' utterances in *Befarmaeed Sham* in the form of monologues/dialogues. The process of data collection began with sifting through hundreds of episodes of this reality show available in YouTube, and then earmarking those which seemed to have some sort of conversations around the idea of Iranianness. After identifying the relevant episodes, they were downloaded in the computer and were assigned with a number, before proceeding with the actual sampling process which involved a series of selecting, downsizing and processing (Rau et al., 2018). The employment of the purposive sampling strategy was in line with the study's aim as it did not seek representativeness of the entire episodes (and sequences) of the show, but to single out only those which could provide some of the most relevant and expressive instances for the textual analysis.

Another rationale for adoption of a purposive sampling was that the pieces of utterance containing discourses of Iranianness (as units of analysis) were not randomly distributed among the entire episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham* (sampling population); while many episodes in a row might hardly contain a substantial discourse that could easily be related to the concept of Iranianness (at least in terms of spoken language), there were occasions in which a single episode presented a variety of significant and pertinent discourses. This meant that with a purposive non-random sample the quantity of subjects is less important than the criteria used to select them (Crabtree & Miller, 2022). Therefore, the employment of a random sampling was rendered unviable, and instead, a purposive sampling model (Figure 1) was adopted from the work of Benoot et al. (2016) for selecting a manageable number of the sequences of *Befarmaeed Sham* for textual analysis.

Following this model, a series of stage-by-stage inclusion criteria were applied to the episodes, and then to the sequences within the nominated episodes. Here, the goal of applying the first inclusion criteria was to keep only those episodes with some sort of talks about Iran, Iranians or their culture and discard the rest. This resulted in the nomination of 40 episodes, consisting of 52 unevenly distributed sequences, each of which had some sort of relevance to the focus of the study. The 52 sequences were then thematically organized into 7 groups, before the second inclusion criteria was applied to select the most expressive and meaningful sequence from each group. Finally, the process yielded 7 sequences which were contained within 4 different episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham*.

Treadwell and Davis (2019) noted that qualitative content analysis varies, depending on the inquirer's standpoint on the inquiry, and may change as both the inquiry and the inquirer's analytical thinking continues to progress during the research. Accordingly, the content (textual) analysis of the selected sequences was based on the nature of the text, and the research circumstances. This led to the focus on how the discourse appears to be shaping the audiences' worldviews, rather than on categories of language or frequency of occurrences (as in conventional content analysis). Therefore, the process of sampling began by extracting the pieces of language from 7 selected sequences, and were then translated from Farsi into English, before transcribing them and organizing them for further analysis.

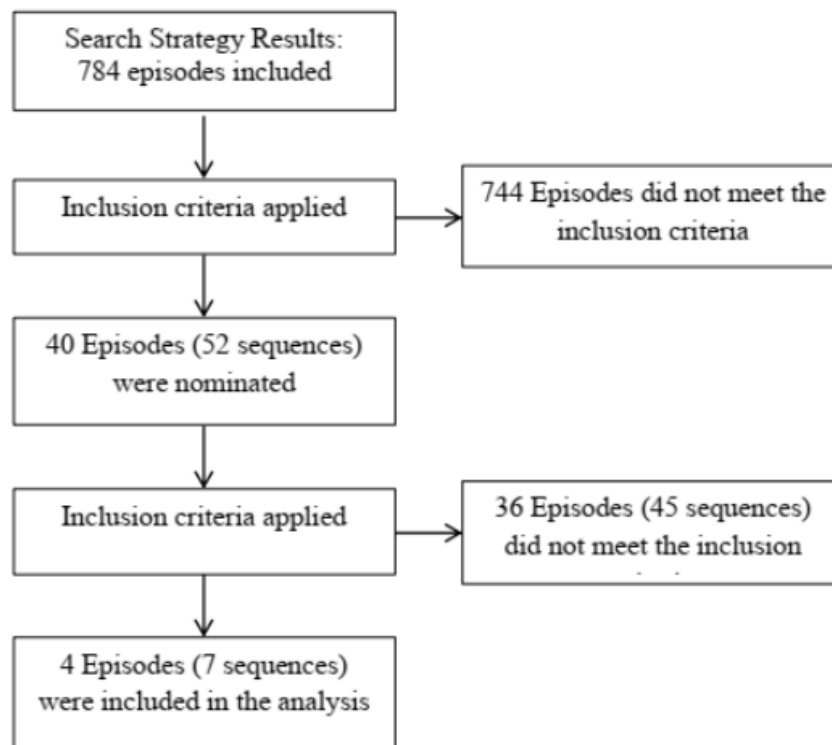


Figure 1: Procedure for Sampling Sequences of *Befarmaeed Sham*

Here, the unit of analysis was specified as one or more sentences (or paragraphs) uttered in a specific scene or sequence as long as it was significant enough to convey certain meanings about Iranianness. Hence, the lengths of these interrelated utterances or the duration of the sequences in which they took place did not determine the limits of each unit of analysis; a unit of analysis was merely the 'meaning', not the number of the words used for formation or conveyance of such meaning. Therefore, while one unit of analysis consisted of just a few short sentences, another unit of analysis was made up of a paragraph or more which in effect provided only one specific meaning and thus, counted as just 'one' unit of analysis.

The analysis process, however, began with the goal of uncovering and characterizing the many different ways in which Iranianness as a set of beliefs, values and attitudes was constructed in *Befarmaeed Sham*. At this point, the focus was on reducing the obscurity in representation politics through inspecting what is said and meant by the contestants which formed a discourse in connection with their wider sociocultural context. So, each unit of analysis was separately described as how it exactly appeared as it was spoken by the contestants in the show. The text was then interpreted in order to find what it is that the contestants were trying to convey as a meaningful message. Finally, these interpretations were explained in terms of their meanings' implications for social practice, which consequently enabled the revelation of these texts' preferred meanings, providing insights into construction of Iranianness through the discourse in *Befarmaeed Sham*.

## FINDINGS

### *The Affectionate Iranians*

One of the most prominent ways in which *Befarmaeed Sham* took on representing Iranianness was through focusing on behavioral characteristics of the people of Iran and depicting them as an affectionate nation. The selected sequence in this regard features an Englishwoman Sepideh (Figure 2) hosting the other three contestants in the group. Filmed in Manchester, England, this sequence was chosen from the Group 11 Season 10 UK. While facing camera in an earlier scene, Sepideh who fluently spoke Farsi, provided the viewers with a brief biography of herself, saying that 30 years earlier she married an Iranian and spent more than 10 years in Iran where she assimilated the culture and learnt to speak the local (Farsi) language.



Figure 2: Sepideh (Dawn) preparing food in her kitchen

In one of the later scenes, she was shown engaging in a discussion with her rivals in the group at the dinner table. It began with a statement by Elham, a female contestant who raised the idea that Iranians are friendly and affectionate people:

Iran is a great country with unbelievably affectionate people . . . as you know, they all want to succeed in life and prosper, why not!?

Subsequently, Sepideh entered the conversation and tried to sensationalize the talk by asking Amir (one of the male contestants) if he ever pined for Iran:

Don't you ever miss your country? You left Iran just like that and moved here [England]? (Sepideh)

Certainly, I do miss Iran. After all, we were born and raised in Iran. Most of our joyful and happy memories are from there. Personally, since I moved here, I was completely preoccupied with my job and didn't have much time for myself. (Amir)

When I lived in Iran, those who I used to meet, like relatives and friends, often asked me “Why did you choose to live in Iran?! England is a terrific place! What a waste!” Then I told them “No, that’s not what you think”. They all thought that here [England] was a paradise. After all, living here has its own challenges. (Sepideh)

During the last part of the same scene, however, another set of discussion arose: What are some of the things about Iran or Iranians that attract you the most? The things that you don’t see here? (Amir)

I could say with confidence, things like affection and warmth. You cannot find it here [England]. Unlike us, Iranians are really close to their family and friends. We tend to keep our distance from others. We are cold! (Sepideh)

The above excerpts illustrate how a short narrative of belongingness to homeland creates sentimental feelings about nationhood, qualifying Iranians as compassionate and amicable people. This helped to extend the grand narrative of Iranian-Western binary opposition, placing the warm Iranians against the cold Westerners. This is, in particular, remarkable, since a non-Iranian (Sepideh) validated such contrasting attributions, supporting the believability of the raised idea. This is, of course, in the light of the fact that Iranians have long been regarded as a highly hospitable and welcoming nation (Yarbakhsh, 2021; Mehran, 2019). Yet, putting forward this topic in *Befarmaeed Sham* produces an essentialist view on the people of Iran, constructing a subjective image of, not only Iranianness, but also the ‘otherness’.

#### *The Glorious Past*

The second major way through which *Befarmaeed Sham* inconspicuously undertook the agenda of representing Iranianness, involved drawing attention to the country’s modern history through opening up a new discussion that, in one way or another, created a specific understanding about the social conditions in Iran as opposed to its recent past. The sequence that led to this finding was indeed from the same group (Group 11 Season 10 UK); after the guest’s arrival and prior to dinner, the contestants engaged in another discussion about some of Sepideh’s most memorable photos which she intentionally picked from her family album to show to the guest contestants as a way to entertain them (Figure 3). These nostalgic photos which were taken decades ago during Sepideh’s stay in Iran (before the Islamic revolution), stirred up the guest contestants’ emotions and acted as a wistful reminder of the happier and glorious pre-revolution era. In the first scene of this highly emotional sequence, Sepideh was shown in a wide shot as she proudly talking about her incredible experiences in Iran and explaining the photos one after another to her guests. This was then interrupted with few cuts into other close-up scenes where each of the guests were shown individually as they pensively opened up facing the camera somewhere in the house and talked about Sepideh’s pleasant personality:

As we arrived, we noticed that Sepideh had put some of her old photos on the coffee table. They were taken more than three decades ago when she lived in Iran with her husband and his family. (Elham, female contestant)

I was so pleased to see that a foreigner, who lived in my country, participated in this Iranian competition and proudly displayed her family photos and said “these are my unforgettable memories of Iran”. (Amir, male contestant)

The atmosphere in these photos was incredibly overwhelming! We barely believed they were taken in Iran. For a brief moment I thought they were photos of Switzerland or some ski resort in the Alps. I was so excited to see these truly amazing pictures! (Saviz, male contestant)

The above remarks are clearly indicative of the contestants’ astonishment and delight as they barely believed that a foreigner from the West has high regards for the people and culture of a Third World nation. Although at first glance this sequence seemed to be a just a candid scenario wherein Sepideh’s respectful gesture naturally triggered the Iranian contestants’ sense of patriotism and some emotional reactions, a closer look reveals the deeper ideological meaning at work: The photos were showing the pre-revolution time when Iran was in the path of Westernization process.



Figure 3: Contestants looking at nostalgic photos of Iran

As such, this sequence was suggesting the contestants’ strong patriotic sentiments, not towards present Iran under the rule of the clerics, but for Iran during the Pahlavi’s dynasty. This in turn, marked Islamic Revolution as a turning point for backwardness of the nation, molding a past-present binary opposition that put forward the idea of prosperous and modern pre-revolution Iran as opposed to a gloomy and declining post-revolution Iran. Therefore, the discreet incorporation of such touching articulations in *Befarmaeed Sham* deliberately evoked a nostalgic and fascinating image of the pre-Revolution Iran with all its merits and glories, in order to create a disparaging and unsympathetic image of the country today.

### *The Brainiest Third Worlders*

In another general approach in representing Iranianness through focusing on the people’s behavioral characteristics, *Befarmaeed Sham* idealistically defined Iranians as intelligent



people, at least among the people from the less developed nations. This finding came into view by analyzing a different sequence from the previous group; during the dinner, Saviz (Figure 4) almost suddenly started to talk about an official survey that he purportedly stumbled upon some time ago which reported the rankings of immigrants across Europe in several categories, such as education, labor, social benefits: In a different scene of this group, during the dinner, Saviz (Figure 4) almost suddenly started to talk about an official survey that he purportedly stumbled upon some time ago which reported the rankings of immigrants across Europe in several categories, such as education, labor, social benefits:

You know, there was a survey conducted among all the immigrants in Europe, seeking which nationalities were best in certain categories. In the Netherlands, for example, Iranians ranked first in education category, Turks ranked first in labor, and Arabs ranked first in social benefits, as they call it, or as we call it eat and sleep!

The above comments, at first glance, seem to be merely a platitude or perhaps a piece of proclaimed information that Saviz shared with others in the group in order to start a fresh series of small talks which are not unusual in casual friendly gatherings. On a deeper level, however, such remarks at least in two ways become expressively germane to the idea of Iranianness.



Figure 4: Saviz sitting at dinner table next to Sepideh

Firstly, in these commentaries Iranians were only compared with Turks and Arabs, passing over other dominant immigrants, such as Chinese, Africans, Latinos, and so on. This is suggestive of a strong sense of rivalry between Iranians and these particular nations as traditional competitors which has also been the subject of scholarly works which generated a plethora of literature in this regard (Kamrava, 2017; Ghattas, 2020). This is perhaps because of Iran's cultural proximity (including religion) of Turkey and the regional Arab countries that makes these nations such an easy target for this kind of deliberate comparisons among Iranians (Matin, 2021).

Secondly, these comments indicate a clear intention for proving a point about intellectual superiority of Iranians over other non-Western nations. In this way, the absence of comparing Iranians with the world's developed nations, particularly Western countries, was self-evident of the contestants' perceived risk of being too ambitious, unrealistic and fantasist. Therefore, through a series of purposeful formulations, *Befarmaeed Sham* creates an image of Iranians by describing them as an intelligent and erudite nation which to this day remains top-ranking at least among their closest traditional rivals in the region. Ultimately, this type of emphasis on Iranians' intellectual supremacy seems to have negative racial connotations, even though it might benefit some at the level of identity construction.

### *Tolerating Other Religions*

As another major approach in representing Iranianness, *Befarmaeed Sham* highlighted the issue of religion by problematizing this important aspect of life and defining Iranians as a people who accept the existence of different religions. This was reflected in a sequence from Group 3 Season 10 UK where Sarah (the host), a female contestant living in London, was shown alone preparing her menu in the kitchen before the arrival of the guests (Figure 5). At this point, she started talking about her biography and sharing some of her memories living away from the homeland. In this manner and as part of her speech she revealed her personal views on differences between religions, and the problems arising thereof, as well as the need for recognition of people's right to choose and practice any religion:

I have many friends from around the world, Jewish or Christian, in fact we don't have any problem with each other. The only problem is our government. I hope one day this will also be resolved so that we can really live together peacefully and happily. I hope we don't see children perish offshores trying to migrate. I hope one day all the borders that separate us vanish, and no religion could overpower other religions and innocent people. Indeed, it's all about money and power. We, as ordinary people, are happy with just a small plate of food. We don't need more. Having more isn't necessarily good.

In the above passage, Sarah tried to put across her opinion on the importance of the equal recognition of different faiths and beliefs as well as being aware of the non belligerent nature of the world's religions in order to avoid conflicts and bring about peace. In doing so, and to support her views, Sarah referred to the fact that she had a number of friends with different religions, but their beliefs were never a barrier to their relations, whatsoever. Along these lines, she further mentioned that the real miseries arise, not from ordinary people who are generally temperate, but from the imbalance in power relations among religions and the statesmen's greed.

Nonetheless, Sarah's remarks had a central point that highlighted a need for rejecting the dominion of one powerful religion over others. In other words, it was emphasized that people should not submit to the idea of any form of religious supremacy, if they seek prosperity, love and peace. In this way, it seems that Sarah's words were set to make a distinction between people and governments, and also the need to call for Islamic regime in Iran to recognise other religions. As Islam is the official religion in Iran, with the majority of the population following the Shia faith, addressing the religion supremacy seems to be of the

utmost importance in contemporary Iran, as the state has had a long record in disregarding the minorities' rights in the country.

The employment of such discourse in *Befarmaeed Sham* clearly indicated this television programme's intention in underlining the people-government divide. It was also suggestive of its ambition to portray Iranians, particularly those who lived long enough in diaspora, as a nation with high religious tolerance. Such idealistic comments also provoked the idea of moving towards globalization which naturally calls for renunciation of religious prejudice, a message specifically designed for establishing a version of knowledge that regards Iranians separate from their fundamentalist ruling clerics. Hence, by bringing into play the subject of religious tolerance and by differentiating people from government in this regard, *Befarmaeed Sham* managed to discursively form a one-sided meaning of Iranianness; that is to say, who Iranians are, and how they should think in order to join the modern world.



Figure 5: Sarah expressing her views while cooking in kitchen

### *The Drinking Nation*

One of the major themes found in many episodes has often been *Befarmaeed Sham*'s attempt to normalize the idea of drinking among Iranians, thus foregrounding the meaning of Iranianness in a generalized and subjective manner. The selected sequence that was analyzed in this regard was taken from the previous group (Group 3 Season 10 UK). This sequence began with a wide shot, where all 4 contestants were having dinner and being served with an assortment of liquor (Figure 6). This sequence was then intermittently cut several times to show how the guest contestants individually thought of the host's cooking and hospitality skills. One of these scenes featured Sarah (the guest contestant with same name as the host) as she was apparently sitting alone in a bedroom, facing the camera and complaining about serving various types of alcohol in excessive amount by the host before, during and after dinner:

There's something wrong with tonight's crowd! You see, in Iran we don't consume so much alcohol in one sitting. Alcohol is not bad and I like it, but, well, there's no such thing as drinking too many different types of liquor in our culture. I didn't really like it! There were more liquors on the dinner table than food!

Here, Sarah's (the guest) comments, far from being a matter of arguing about the standard amount of consuming alcohol, or passing judgment on the host's mannerism, was the representational work that tried to naturalize the idea of drinking among Iranians. In this way, another dimension of Iranianness seems to transpire discursively through articulation of a discourse that suggests alcohol consumption is part of the Iranian tradition which goes back at least a millennium before the arrival of Islam. And that despite being a Muslim nation, the people in present-day Iran continue to drink, disregarding the Islamic laws and the regulations set by the authorities.



Figure 6: Contestants chatting at dinner table full of liquor

Although featuring the contestants as they overtly drink alcohol is one of the prevalent themes almost throughout all the episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham*, this particular sequence presented a unique way of depicting Iranians as a drinking nation. Nonetheless, the concept of drinking nation put forward in this episode, in all its representational forms, be it visually or verbally, can be seen as just another way of associating Iranian culture with the Western way of life. However, at this time, there was an additional emphasis on how Iranians are different from other Islamic nations in the region. Therefore, as part of the programme's overall representational agenda, this particular sequence, not only once again touched on Iranians' aspirations to be associated with the West, but also specifically stressed on their uniqueness as a nation whose attachment to the illusive pre-Islamic culture remains irreconcilable with the establishment's rules and ideologies.

#### *Impossibility of Freedom in Iran*

The idea of lack of freedom in Iran has often been omnipresent across almost all the episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham*, as this reality show tries to advocate individuals' liberties and condemn restrictions posed by the authorities. This has inevitably led to just another way of defining Iranianness; depicting Iranians as liberty seekers, and criticizing their government and culture for blocking the process of democracy and freedom. The selected sequence for investigating this matter, however, was taken from Group 14 Season 2 Canada, where Roudabeh, a female guest contestant was shown with three others in her group at a dinner table (Figure 7) engaging in a series of discussions about the motives behind their migration to Canada, and

the consequences of making such life changing decisions. Here, when it was Roudabeh's turn to talk about her biography, she began by saying:

I arrived here [Canada] in 2001. It's been 14 years since then, and I came here alone.

Roudabeh, then, responded to one of the contestant's questions who asked her whether it was hard to leave Iran and migrate to Canada, by saying:

Indeed, it really was. It's a culture shock, especially when traveling alone. Coming from the Third World to Canada . . . Iranian culture is very different from other cultures like the one here. Moreover, I was only 21 years old and I didn't know what to do, "what kind of life is this!?" I used to wonder. But it's been 14 years now, and I really feel content. I like Iran very much but I don't have any intention to return.

This scene then cut into another scene where Roudabeh was shown alone in a bedroom explaining more about the importance of freedom for her:

Since my childhood, I was a little different from others. That's not to suggest that I was better than them or otherwise, but I generally liked the things that others didn't. For instance, since childhood I was interested in playing drums. Today, you face serious problems if you want to be a drummer in Iran, even if you were a man. For me, freedom is important . . . in here [Canada] you can do what you want. Apart from the authorities' control in Iran, which I don't wish to discuss here, it's our Iranian culture that limits us. I'm a go-getter, and I've been more interested in things that are forbidden irrationally. I believe we live once, so we have the right to do what seems right. That's why I decided to come here, where I ballet dance, play drums, bass, and other musical instruments.

In the first part of her speech Roudabeh tried to introduce herself to others in the group as an independent and courageous Iranian woman who dared to embark on a solo journey in pursuit of her dreams somewhere far away from her homeland. While animatedly unfolding her story, she also admitted the difficulties that she faced while adjusting herself to the new living conditions and the culture of the host country. Here, she specifically made a point when she told others how living in Canada had bestowed her a sense of satisfaction and a chance to be who she always wanted to be. In another scene where she continued to talk further about herself, she pointed to the impossibility of realizing one's rightful dreams in Iran due to the lack of freedom as well as stern restrictions imposed by the government on many aspects of life particularly for women. Additionally, she pointed to the influence of Iranian culture as a more powerful force than authorities' control which seems not to tolerate anything beyond traditional way of life and the existing status quo.

In these connected scenes, the insertion of a conversation among the contestants who discussed their reasons for migration, complemented Roudabeh's Personal assessments which explicitly stressed the existing limitations in her homeland, drawing attention to the

shocking condition of her peers' freedom in Iran. Whereas these apparently impulsive utterances seem to support the organic flow of the show's narrative, they do, indeed, conjure up an abstract conception of 'restricted Iran'. As such, despite freedom remains a major concern for Iranians, particularly the youth (Matin, 2022a), the strategic positioning of these pessimist talks provides *Befarmaeed Sham* with a chance to perpetuate a specific view on the subject of liberty in Iran. Therefore, the astute inclusion of the discourses of freedom in the show generates a predisposed outlook which lays emphasis on the oppressive nature of the authorities in Iran, against the liberal Western societies and their noninterventionist governments. This also brings about a perception about Iranians, describing them as a nation that simply submits to their oppressive government; a people who rather than defending their own civic rights and fighting for democracy, took the easy way of migration.



Figure 7: Sara (right) at dinner table talking about her new life in Canada

### *Iranian Mask*

The last theme covered in this study deals with just another behavioral characteristic that *Befarmaeed Sham* attempted to attribute to Iranians, representing them as a nation whose culture encourages them to hide their true emotions and to act otherwise. This can be explained by examining one of the sequences selected from the first episode of the Group 8 Season 2 Canada that featured Elham as the host. In one of the earlier scenes Elham is shown alone in the kitchen (Figure 8) preparing dinner while she talks about differences between the people of Iran and Canada as well as acculturated Iranian émigrés. Here, she began to express her pensive discontent with how the people in Iran try to project a version of themselves that is different from who they really are:

It's been four years since we came here [Canada], well, I think Canadians, and the Iranians who live here, are themselves. They live for themselves, not others. I mean they're not forced to become or do anything against their will. This is a place where you can be or do whatever you want, albeit if they're lawful. Here, people are themselves, nobody hides behind a mask. I do what I want. We don't have to be pretentious.

As Elham's comments suggest, there is a national trait among Iranians that perhaps can be metaphorically described as 'Iranian mask'. Deeply embedded in Iranian culture, as her words implied, this mask presents one's superficial appearance as his/her true self, and it is often put on with the purpose of pleasing or impressing others. Alternatively, the mask might be thought of as a way to avoid others' judgements or encroachment upon an individual's private space. In contrast, and according to this view, the Westerners do not even need such a mask, as they are indubitably honest, straightforward and unpretentious. Here, occidental peoples are imagined to be of supreme sophistication, the ones who freely express their feelings and audaciously let others know what is in their minds. Likewise, as another part of Elham's speech denoted, Iranian émigrés who spend a substantial number of years in diaspora, are naturally upgraded by learning from and emulating the Western culture, becoming frank and outspoken, just like them.

At this point, Elham's remarks function as a national trait discourse through which Iranians' shame and dishonesty is disapproved, while the Westerners' straightforwardness and honesty is revered. By this means, and through positioning the West vis-à-vis Iran, in corresponding to honest-dishonest or confident-insecure binary oppositions, *Befarmaeed Sham* offers another perspective on what it means to be Iranian.



Figure 8: Elham cooking in kitchen while comparing Iranians with Canadians

### CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The Iranian mediascape is constantly flooded with reminders about the definition of Iranianness, disseminating from various state-run media outlets. Since the emergence of the FSTCs in early 1990s, such definition has been radically challenged by these cross-border TV channels' competing discourses, providing audiences with a space for rethinking who they are as Iranians. However, in the past decade or so, and in response to the youth's unmet needs for entertainment television programmes as well as the new circumstances of media market forces, the majority of the FSTCs opted for incorporating entertainment television into their programming schedules. This, inevitably entailed shifting the propagation mode of the anti-regime ideologies, from predominantly political to entertainment contents. The flagship of the latter, which exemplifies such modification in programming, is arguably *Befarmaeed*

*Sham*, the first of its kind Iranian cooking game show that since its launch in 2010 have gained massive popularity among people of all ages, particularly the young ones.

Following such developments, this study stepped up to throw some light on how a presumably non-political and lighthearted reality TV like *Befarmaeed Sham* could function as a political vehicle for subversion, and through perpetuating oppositional discourses of Iranianness. To do so, by performing a series of textual analyses on 7 purposively selected sequences of this programme, the study tried to reveal some of the ways in which the contestants' utterances were employed to forge a particular version of Iranianness. In this way, by focusing on the monologues/dialogues of the participating contestants in the show, the analysis of each sequence uncovered a key discourse through which an aspect of Iranianness was represented. As such, even though the performed textual analysis did not fully take in an exhaustive range of the possible discourses of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham*, yet, it demonstrated the subtle work of the representation in a seemingly innocent cooking game show. Besides limitations of textual analysis in revealing the meaning of national identity (Badarudin, 1996), what remains unexplored in here, is the visual aspect of the representations in this TV programme, precisely because television is intrinsically a multimodal (visual/audial) medium. Hence, the follow-up studies can focus on image-based analyses such as semiotics, in order to build on the findings of this research.

Nevertheless, the overall findings of the present study pointed to *Befarmaeed Sham's* predisposition to spread the kind of ideologies that, to some extent, were in conflict with the beliefs indoctrinated by the Iranian theocratic regime. In short, according to the ideologies behind the production of *Befarmaeed Sham*, 1) unlike Westerners, Iranians are affectionate and amicable people, 2) who used to live a prosperous and modern life just like Westerners up until the Islamic revolution when the trajectory of their progress drastically plummeted. 3) Iranians are, or at least consider themselves to be, the most intelligent people among the Third World nations, particularly unbeaten by Turks and Arabs in this regard. 4) By the same token, this view holds that although the rights of the religious minorities in Iran continue to be undermined by the state, Iranian people, particularly those who have lived enough in Western countries and embraced their culture, do not consider religion as a barrier for human relations. 5) Iranians, unlike other Muslim nations, ignore Islamic teachings and consume alcohol, probably to feel more like the so-called sophisticated Westerners. 6) This version of reality also suggests the impossibility of freedom in Iran, especially for women, and that the only way for one to realize his or her dreams is to pursue them somewhere in the free and democratic Western world. 7) Such outlook, once again, places Iranian culture vis-à-vis the West's, impugning the former for cultivating face-saving practices as a form of concealment of one's true self, while praising the latter for cherishing straightforwardness and self-expression as a universal value.

In line with the theoretical assumption of textual analysis, these results, to a certain extent, illuminated the obscurity around the idea of Iranianness and the ways in which it is constructed in *Befarmaeed Sham*. More importantly, based on these findings it can be said that unlike solely political satellite TV programmes which directly set forth their antagonistic stance towards the Islamic regime, *Befarmaeed Sham* takes on a more subtle and inconspicuous cultural approach, allowing little room for suspicion. This reminds us of James Curran's (1991) critical view on television entertainment that regarded such popular cultural forms as a means of expressing and reinforcing ideology. In this view, and despite *Befarmaeed Sham's* apolitical tone and also its ostensibly candid form that often typifies the



genre (Wahab, 2010), the elusive work of cultural representation through discourse renders this reality show deceitfully political.

Additionally, although the representations in *Befarmaeed Sham* assume an essentialist view on Iranian identity, they still function as a counter-hegemonic discourse that challenge the dominant ideologies in Iran, providing audiences with a fresh perspective on their Iranian selves. This is in the view of the circumstances that for more than four decades, the broadcast media, as the main means of influencing the public opinion, have relentlessly strived to integrate Shia, Revolutionary and anti-West values into the Iranian identity construct. In support of the masses' resistance to such prescribed construct, the presence of alternative media and the unfettered choices of popular culture associated with them, created the possibility for Iranians to rethink and negotiate their Iranian selves. Hence, although the FSTCs' representations are themselves hegemonic in nature (just like any other mass mediated and representational forms), from emancipatory and advocatory point of view, they function as counter-hegemonic forces that inspire and boost the nation's quest for refashioning their Iranian identity.

Finally, the burgeoning number of the popular cultural programmes across FSTCs and their ever-increasing popularity among youth, call for further research on representation of Iranianness across other genres as well as their receptions among young viewers. These investigations, in turn, will have the prospect and capacity to reflect on the critical issue of the youth's identity politics (Matin, 2022b) that notably arise at the juncture of the young generation's struggle over the meaning of Iranianness.

#### BIODATA

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