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Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in MENA Cinema

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The Politics of Popular Music in Iranian Cinema: A Case Study of  
Dariush Mehrjui's "Santouri" (2007)

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## DOSSIER THÉMATIQUE :

Soundtracks of Our Lives: Music-Making and Musicians in Cinema of the MENA Region

# THE POLITICS OF POPULAR MUSIC IN IRANIAN CINEMA: A CASE STUDY OF *SANTOURI* (2007)

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**Abstract** | This article explores the restrictions placed on music creation and their broader societal implications in post-revolutionary Iran, focusing on Dariush Mehrjui's renowned film, *Santouri*, released in 2007. The narrative of the film demonstrates the state's censorship of music and cinema after the 1979 revolution, which parallels the film's tribulations during its production and subsequent unofficial release. Generally, the limitations imposed on popular music, known locally as *musiqi-e pāp*, became a prominent theme, explored openly or subtly within the context of cinematic storytelling. I discuss how the film serves as a revealing mirror of the complex and ambivalent attitudes towards censorship prevailing in Iranian society, encompassing both its populace and the ruling authorities. This article offers an analysis of the interplay between music, censorship, and societal dynamics in post-revolutionary Iran.

**Keywords** | Popular music, Iranian cinema, Film music, *Santouri*, Censorship, Dariush Mehrjui, Mohsen Chavoshi.

**Abstract** | Cet article explore les restrictions imposées à la création musicale et leurs implications plus larges dans la société post-révolutionnaire en Iran, en se concentrant sur l'étude de cas du célèbre film "Santouri" de Dariush Mehrjui sorti en 2007. Le récit du film met en évidence la censure de l'État sur la musique et le cinéma après la révolution de 1979, ce qui reflète les tribulations du film lors de sa production et de sa diffusion non officielle ultérieure. En général, les limitations imposées à la musique populaire, localement connue sous le nom de "musiqi-e pāp", sont devenues un sujet important, exploré ouvertement ou subtilement dans le contexte de la narration cinématographique. Je discute du fait que le film sert de miroir révélateur des attitudes complexes et ambivalentes envers la censure prévalant dans la société iranienne, englobant à la fois sa population et les autorités dirigeantes. Cet article offre une analyse de l'interaction entre la musique, la censure et les dynamiques sociétales dans l'Iran post-révolutionnaire.

**Mots-clés** | Musique populaire, cinéma iranien, musique de film, *Santouri*, censure, Dariush Mehrjui, Mohsen Chavoshi.

## Introduction

This article examines music-making restrictions and their societal implications in post-revolutionary Iran through a case study of a well-known film, *Santouri* (translated as *The Music Man* for its English title), directed by Dariush Mehrjui and released in 2007. After the 1979 revolution, the clampdown on music in public spaces was echoed not only in daily life but also in the stories told on the silver screen, significantly affecting the role of music in cinematic narratives, especially popular genres. I seek to probe the topic through *Santouri*, which deals with the problems faced by musicians, music censorship in Iranian society, and drug addiction. Soon after the film's first screening at the country's Fajr International Film Festival in 2007, it was subjected to a ban. Thus, it became a topic of discussion among cinema lovers, and the film's VCDs circulated on the black market. The film's focus on the life of a musician and censorship during its own production and distribution history provide a unique perspective on how musicians' lives were influenced by the changing political and cultural landscape. By examining the case study, this article demonstrates the importance of the field of popular culture as a realm for the struggle over state restrictions and how pop becomes political.

The *santour* is a well-loved dulcimer in Iranian art music, and *santouri* literally means a *santour* player. The main character, Ali Bolurchi, is a *santour* player in Mehrjui's film. However, the film's music is a fusion of Iranian and Western musical timbres and styles. While the listener clearly hears the *santour*'s timbre at the beginning of the soundtrack, synthesizers and electric guitars become dominant in the songs and the result is heavily electrified, amplified, and rockized music. In this article, I use the term *musiqi-e pāp* to describe the film's music since practitioners of this style/genre identify their music by this term. Sasan Fatemi suggests that Iranian popular music – which he calls *musiqi-e āmme pasand* – derives from three sources: Iranian art music, Iranian urban folk music (i.e. the Tehrani *motrebi* genre<sup>1</sup>) and Western music.<sup>2</sup> However, I argue that *musiqi-e pāp* is essentially Westernized in Iran and includes pop, jazz, rock, rap and hip-hop, although some local elements are included. This type of music is highly commercialized and performed with Western instruments, especially synthesizers, electric guitars, drums and strings, with memorable lyrics and catchy melodies.

Specific dimensions of the Islamic Republic of Iran's intricate tapestry can be discerned and assessed by examining the trajectory of *musiqi-e pāp*, or Western-influenced music. This exploration not only reveals the broader social changes within Iran but also illuminates the repercussions and damages

1- For more details about the *motrebi* genre, see BREYLEY, Gay Jennifer and FATEMI, Sasan, *Iranian music and popular entertainment: From motrebi to losanjelesi and beyond*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.

2- FATEMI, Sasan, *Peydayesh Musiqi-e Mardom pāsand dār Iran*, Tehran: Mahour, 1392/2013, p. 11.

that ensued, embodying a microcosm of the challenges faced in reconciling cultural heritage with evolving artistic expressions. The evolution of *musiqi-e pāp*, originally emblematic of modernization during Mohammad Reza Pahlavi's reign, encountered a heightened sensitivity following the 1979 revolution, which mandated the eradication of perceived vestiges of the previous regime's modernization endeavours. This intricate interplay between sociopolitical transformation and artistic suppression offers a unique vantage point to evaluate Iran's complex journey.<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I will first provide a brief historical overview of music and cinema in Iran as a context for the film analysis that follows. For the production and reception of the film, I make use of interviews with the director and the soundtrack's lyricist, published on Persian websites, together with film reviews on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) to highlight the themes regarded as salient by ordinary viewers. In addition, this article draws on my lived experience in Iran between 2010 and 2021 as a music student and, later, a music teacher. Before becoming a music student, I was a music lover and clearly recall the events that happened in 2007 society and among youth communities regarding the ban on the film and the stories around it. In my close reading of the film, I use musical and lyric analysis to discuss the inclusion and combination of Iranian and Western musical elements in the film's soundtrack and explore the interaction between its use of *musiqi-e pāp*, its social themes and its visual images.

## Music and Cinema in Iran: A Concise History

The first attempts to make films in Iran date back to August 1900.<sup>4</sup> The shots that Mirza Ebrahim Khan-e Akkasbashi took of the Qajar dynasty King of Iran, Mozzafar Al-din Shah, in Belgium were an introduction to Iranian cinema history.<sup>5</sup> According to Hamid Dabashi, the coffeehouse paintings (*naqqashi ghahve khane-e*) and public folktale narrating (*naqqali*) made up the audiovisual prelude of movies in popular culture. They were Iranian cinema's predecessors.<sup>6</sup> The first Iranian sound film, *Dokhtar-e Lor*, directed by Ardeshir Irani, was made in 1933. The early Iranian movies showcased the idea of a modernized society but in a way that resonated with the Iranian audience. They were tailored to the local context and catered to the emerging middle class. Additionally, early Iranian cinema focused on providing entertainment and drew inspiration from Persian literary classics.<sup>7</sup>

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3- SEMATI, Mehdi, "Sounds like Iran: On Popular Music of Iran", *Popular Communication* Vol. 15, No. 3 (2017), p. 156.

4- DABASHI, Hamid, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future*, London: Verso, 2001, p. 12.

5- *Ibid.*

6- *Ibid.*, p. 15.

7- *Ibid.*, p. 21.

In the 1960s, Iran had already been introduced to some of the world's finest cinema, and regular attendance at international film festivals by Iranian directors intensified the impact of foreign art films on the country. As a result, a new generation of Iranian filmmakers emerged, who began to view their society with a fresh perspective. Directors such as Ebrahim Golestan, Farrokh Ghaffari, and Dariush Mehrjui are known among the prominent filmmakers of that period.<sup>8</sup> From the 1960s until 1979, melodramatic cinema, which came to be known by the label *Filmfarsi*, was popular in Iran, attributable to Pahlavi's modernization initiatives.<sup>9</sup> *Filmfarsi* had the characteristic techniques of Hollywood melodrama; dancing and singing, as well as love stories, were part of that cinema.<sup>10</sup>

*Musiqi-e pāp* began to spread to Iran after the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> Mostly presented in the cabarets and movies during the second Pahlavi era (1941-1979), the genre was performed with Western instruments and arrangements. Following further modernization and Westernization carried on by Mohammad Reza Shah, Westernized popular music (*musiqi-e pāp*) emerged in Iran on a large scale in the 1960s. The issue of censorship and the lack of space for the free expression of political opinions are not new phenomena in Iran, and they have their roots before the Islamic revolution. According to Farzaneh Hemmasi, to circumvent censorship, many artists used vague lyrics that hinted at their dissent, instead of openly stating it.<sup>12</sup> She maintains that although *musiqi-e pāp* during the period leading up to the Iranian Revolution might not have been an apparent platform for the increasing political opposition in Iranian society, a growing number of songs opposed the political status quo.<sup>13</sup> Pre-revolutionary *musiqi-e pāp*, however, was compatible with the Westernizing policies of the state, while being a field for oppositional expressions against the state ideologies. Many songs, such as *Jomeh* (1971) and *Shabaneh* (1974) by Farhad Mehrad and *Buy-e Gandom* (1974) by Dariush Eghbali, tried to represent social problems with indirect, critical language and allegorical lyrics.<sup>14</sup> After the 1979 revolution, the restrictions imposed on music affected *musiqi-e pāp* more than other genres. From 1979 until 1998 *musiqi-e pāp* was not produced officially nor performed in public spaces.

Unlike the situation for music, the religious authorities did not propose the banning or elimination of cinema after the 1979 revolution; instead, they were

8- *Ibid.*, p. 26.

9- NAFICY, Hamid, "Islamizing film culture in Iran", in FARSOON, Samih K. and MASHAYEKHI, Mehrdad (eds), *Iran: Political Culture in the Islamic Republic*, London: Routledge, 1992, p. 125.

10- MOTTAHEDEH, Negar, "Iranian cinema in the twentieth century: a sensory history", *Iranian Studies* Vol. 42, No. 4 (2009), p. 535.

11- RASTOVAC, Heather, "Contending with Censorship: The Underground Music Scene in Urban Iran", *intersections* 10, No. 2 (2009), p. 62.

12- HEMMASI, Farzaneh, "Intimating Dissent: Popular Song, Poetry, and Politics in Pre-Revolutionary Iran", *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 57, No. 1 (2013), p. 57.

13- *Ibid.*

14- *Ibid.*

in favor of using film as a tool to counter Pahlavi's modernization culture and to establish an "Islamic culture."<sup>15</sup> A new cinema that was different from the one that existed before 1979 gradually emerged in the 1980s after the Islamic government was formed.<sup>16</sup> This new cinema often had social themes, showing societal harms and criticizing Iran's economic situation. During the period of the reformist president Mohammad Khatami (1997 – 2005), the spread of the Internet and relative freedom of media led to the production of fairly candid movies about societal issues, covering various subjects from social injustice to crime and marriage problems.<sup>17</sup>

In 1998, shortly after Khatami's election, restrictions on music were eased and the first post-revolutionary *musiqi-e pāp* albums and songs were released after two decades. Meanwhile, pre-revolutionary pop singers who fled to the US after the revolution kept on producing music. Their music, later known as *losanjelesi*, was disseminated and circulated in Iran unofficially via tape cassettes and VHS. The state restrictions and control over music production and dissemination have continued until today. Yet, with the establishment and widespread use of technological devices like MP3 players, compact discs and the Internet, and, later, online social media such as Instagram, state control has become less effective, and musicians of any genre have found a space for slightly freer musical activities.

### **Santouri: A Case Study**

Cinema had a significant role in illustrating *musiqi-e pāp* and the limitations imposed on it in the years following the revolution, particularly after the 1998 political reforms. Mehrjui is one of the directors whose works have attracted the attention of film critics both before and after the revolution and have consistently delighted fans of his cinema. *Santouri* is a film that frankly represents what is known as the figure of a popular musician after the revolution. The movie's main character, Ali Bolurchi, who comes from a religious family, is eager to learn how to play the *santour* instrument. His backstory is that he chose to pursue music and a music career, but his family disagreed with him. One of the movie's themes is the main character's endeavour to organize a concert, and the director emphasizes the challenges of obtaining the government's authorization. Inevitably, Ali has to resort to singing and playing at weddings when he fails to get that permit. Following that, he becomes addicted to heroin, and his wife leaves him. At the beginning of the film, Ali narrates his life and, in that monologue, he points out the limitations of *musiqi-e pāp* at that time: "During that period, I was very poor, they didn't give me permission, or they gave me permission late, and my works

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15- *Ibid.*

16- NAFICY, Hamid, "Islamizing film culture in Iran", *op. cit.*, p. 125.

17- DÉMY-GEROE, Anne, *Iranian National Cinema: The Interaction of Policy, Genre, Funding, and Reception*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, p. 71.

were illegally copied before that. I also couldn't hold a private concert because I might get arrested."<sup>18</sup> We can consider this monologue as a testimony of what happened to pop musicians in that period. The depiction of a failing marriage, economic problems, drug usage and addiction, as well as the featuring of a popular musician and the restrictions that come with it, are all illustrations of Iran's post-revolutionary social challenges.

Along with the movie's subject matter, the limitations on *musiqi-e pāp* in Iran and the theme of drug addiction – the real-world events that affected the movie's production – are also essential to consider. For example, at the time, Mohsen Chavoshi, the lead singer for the soundtrack, was not permitted to perform and release music officially. The director refused to accept censoring due to the limitations and harm it brought to the film's narrative and, as a result, the movie was prohibited and has never been theatrically screened in Iran. It was only screened once in Iran at the Fajr International Film Festival, for international visitors in February 2007.<sup>19</sup>

Mehrjui, the director of *Santouri*, states that:

The most bizarre thing that happened to me in the cinema during these years, the saddest event in my life, was the banning of the *Santouri* which caused this movie to fail for no reason. By the time we came to release the movie, the illegal copy of the film had come out, and the commercial possibilities of the film were lost. They wrote to me from all over the world that this movie was terrific, and a family even messaged me that their son was so affected by watching it that he doesn't even smoke anymore. At the Fajr festival of that year, the people recognized *Santouri* as the best film. But right on New Year's Eve, after all the investment, the film was banned for no reason. They even called me from the "Ministry of Intelligence" and said that they had no problem with this film, and it was never found out why screening of the movie was stopped and, finally, the future of *Santouri* was destroyed due to the cruelty of some people. I did not get any income from this movie as a writer, producer, or director.<sup>20</sup>

Although Mehrjui has stated in an officially published interview that he did not know why his film was censored and banned, and that there was no reason behind it, this ban can be examined from several perspectives. Anne Démy-Geroe believes that this restriction started with the soundtrack of the movie.<sup>21</sup> The leading actor, Bahram Radan, mimed the singer Mohsen Chavoshi who, as previously mentioned, lacked governmental authorization at the time. Furthermore, the banning of *Santouri* can be considered from other angles. For

18- All translations are mine unless, otherwise indicated.

19- DÉMY-GEROE, Anne, *Iranian National Cinema*, op. cit., p. 61.

20- "Interview with Dariush Mehrjui", *Iranian Cinema Journal*, 23 April 2015, [online]. Link : <https://www.cinemajournal.ir/?p=3201> (accessed 15 September 2023).

21- DÉMY-GEROE, Anne, *Iranian National Cinema*, op. cit., p. 18.



example, the movie's story is about infidelity and addiction. Ali's wife smokes cigarettes, and married couples touch one another (when fighting) while not being married couples in the real world, thus breaking an Islamic taboo. All this falls under the red lines of Iran's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. This same organization that decides whether a piece of music is permitted also determines the film's approval. Although these judgments are ostensibly based on Islamic rules and principles, they often appear to be influenced by the personal preferences of the minister in power or other factors, and do not consistently adhere to particular norms. After issuing a permit, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance accepts responsibility for a published artwork. As a result, sometimes officials choose to avoid taking a risk and ban artwork that might not be a perfect fit with Islamic rules and principles.<sup>22</sup>

Apart from a handful of legislative actions and their subsequent amendments, a distinct legal framework outlining explicit constraints on Iranian films remains absent. Consequently, a substantial portion of the censorship procedure depends on the predispositions, perspectives, and judgments of those tasked with overseeing its implementation.<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, at the time of *Santouri's* release, the era of the reformist President Khatami had ended, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency (2005–2013) had begun, marked by greater repression and censorship.

However, as mentioned previously, censorship in Iran is not essentially a post-revolutionary issue. Like *musiqi-e pāp*, cinema was subject to censorship before the revolution. As stated by this IMDb reviewer,

The famed Iranian director, Dariush Mehrjui, has achieved the rare distinction of having banned films in Iran before and after the 1979 revolution, *Dayereh Mina* (The Cycle) and *Santouri*, respectively. Both films share similar traits in that they try to show some aspects of Iranian society that authorities would rather keep hidden: drug addiction and corruption in *The Cycle* and drug addiction and treatment of musicians in Iran in *Santouri*.<sup>24</sup>

In the review above, the two issues of drug addiction and being a musician are mentioned. It seems that these two issues had equal weight in the narrative of the film. They are, moreover, related, as Ali's struggles with his livelihood as a musician lead to his drug addiction. We can also look at another review that indicates the prejudice toward popular musicians in Iran: "Director Mehrjui does a great job creating an atmosphere where one truly feels society's issues in regard to drug addiction. There has been a stereotype for some time now that

22- *Ibid.*

23- ASL 19, "Censorship in Iranian Cinema", in DECHERNEY, Peter and ATWOOD, Blake (eds), *Iranian Cinema in a Global Context: Policy, Politics, and Form*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2014, p. 229.

24- "The Music Man (2007)", *Internet Movie Database* [online]. Link: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0385277/reviews/> (accessed 24 April 2023).

young Iranians in the music industry are prone to becoming submerged in a world of drugs, alcohol, and womanizing habits.”<sup>25</sup> *Santouri* depicts this milieu – for example, in a party scene (see Figures 1 and 3). Yet, the film goes further than the stereotypes by exploring the root-causes of the problems.



Figure 1: Ali's wife, Haniyeh, drinking at a party

In one of the party scenes (see Figure 1), it is meaningful to note that the party guests and Ali's wife Haniyeh appear to be drinking alcohol – an act which is against the Islamic Republic's laws – as suggested by the glasses in their hands. Yet all the women are wearing the *hijab*, as is compulsory in public spaces and onscreen in Iran. The disparities evident in depicting the consumption of alcohol while adhering to *hijab* attire testify that, during the movie's production, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance lacked well-defined, written criteria regarding the acceptability of such portrayals within the film context and, instead, relied upon subjective assessments aligned with Islamic law, as discussed earlier.

### ***Santouri* and *musiqi-e pāp***

After Ali gets involved in addiction and his wife leaves him, we see a scene where Ali is talking on the phone while his house is empty (Figure 2). There are posters of Western pop/rock musicians, such as John Lennon, Jim Morrison, and others, on the wall. It appears they are witnessing a pop star's downfall. Mehrjui attempted to make Ali similar to the Western pop/rock star by framing him in this way. Additionally, the posters of Western pop/rock musicians on the wall allude to the widespread belief in Iran that a musician who is familiar with Western popular music and its musicians is a more skilled musician. During

<sup>25</sup>- *Ibid.*

my music teaching experience in Tehran from 2015 to 2020, I had the unique opportunity to witness the prevailing belief, particularly among youth, that being familiar with Western popular music and its musicians equated to a higher level of musical skill. The enthusiasm among young music students to learn Western popular music styles was palpable. Whenever I introduced elements of Western popular music during lessons, whether it was iconic melodies on the electric or acoustic guitar composed by artists like Pink Floyd or Sting, students would become visibly excited and engaged. This excitement was often in stark contrast to their reactions when presented with classical guitar pieces by composers like Francisco Tarrega or even traditional Iranian melodies, which were met with less fervour. Furthermore, this perception extended beyond the classroom. In the streets and musical venues of Tehran, the influence of Western popular music was evident, particularly among younger generations. Whenever someone played a Western popular music piece, it would garner more attention and admiration from youth. Passersby from the same demographic would stop to listen, and the atmosphere would be filled with an air of familiarity and excitement. This phenomenon not only highlighted the influence of Western music in Iranian society but also underscored how deeply ingrained the belief in its superior musicality had become among Iranian youth. The fusion of Western and Iranian musical elements was creating a dynamic and evolving musical landscape that reflected the changing tastes and preferences of the younger audience.



Figure 2: Ali in his apartment, framed by posters of Western pop/rock musicians on the wall

Although Bahram Radan's acting in the lead role is impressive, the movie's impact and success would diminish if Mohsen Chavoshi's voice were to be replaced by another singer.<sup>26</sup> I remember that the music and Chavoshi's distinctive voice drew attention when the film was first screened during the Fajr International Film

26- FAZELI, Nematallah, KHALEDIAN, Eghbal, and FERDOWSI, Mehrave, "Tahlil neshane shenakhti taraneha-ye siah va rabete-e an ba vagheiat haye ejtemaei dahe-e 80", *Rasaneh* 8, No. 108 (1396/2017), p. 144.

Festival, and unauthorized copies of it were circulated. Through the creation of *Santouri*, Mehrjui introduced Chavoshi, as a singer, to the public – a singer who, if not the most well-known singer in Iran right now, is unquestionably one of the most well-known popular artists.<sup>27</sup> *Santouri* was a turning point in Chavoshi's artistic life, although the film was never theatrically screened and he did not have governmental authorization at the time of its production.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, his presence in *Santouri*, according to Mehrjui, allowed him to obtain governmental authorization after years of endeavour and become an official musician.<sup>29</sup>

Ardavan Kamkar, a famous Iranian *santour* player, played the *santour* parts of the soundtrack. Four tracks were used in the movie and all of them were sung by Chavoshi; the *santour* was used in all parts, and Bahram Radan mimed the songs. Nematallah Fazeli, Eghbal Khaledian and Mehrave Ferdowsi note that there is a specific type of lyrics used in *musiqi-e pāp* that originates from the mood of the society and is not intended to be solely entertaining. Most of the lyrics that were popular among young music audiences throughout the 2000s expressed frustration, fury and despair. Fazeli, Eghbal and Ferdowsi, as well-known insider Iranian researchers, refer to them as dark/depressing lyrics (*taraneha-ye siah* in Farsi).<sup>30</sup> *Taraneha-ye siah* is clearly present in most of Chavoshi's songs in the 2000s; his songs' gloomy lyrics indicate despair and speak about social issues such as suicide, infidelity or failed love.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 3: Ali performing at a party

27- DARABIAN, Shahab, "Mehrjui: Yek omr cinema va adabiat", *Khabargozari ketab-e Iran*, 8 December 1398/2019 [online]. Link: <https://www.ibna.ir/fa/report/284349>.

28- DEMY-GEROE, Anne, *Iranian National Cinema*, op. cit., p. 61.

29- BABAZADEH, Bahman, "Hamle-e tond kargardan sarshenas be khanande-e pāp", *Musicema*, 21 June 1394/2015 [online]. Link: <https://www.musicema.com/node/236271>

30- FAZELI, Nematallah, KHALEDIAN, Eghbal, and FERDOWSI, Mehrave, "Tahlil neshane shenakhti taraneha-ye siah va rabete-e an ba vagheiat haye ejtemaei dahe-e 80", op. cit., p. 143.

31- *Ibid*.

Figure 3 shows a scene from the movie where Ali performs at a party. Throughout, the narrative shifts between different times: Ali's present life as an addict, Ali and Haniyeh's marriage, and Ali's eventual rise to celebrity. The fall of a pop star and Haniyeh's migration to Canada is how the film concludes. In what may be an attempt to please the audience, Ali is taken to a drug addiction camp and quits there in the end, but Haniyeh never returns.

Haniyeh first meets another man at the party scene in the film's first half, where the audience discovers that there has been infidelity between the couple. The other man is stylish and pleasant. He is also a musician and violinist. After a short conversation at the party, it is clear that Haniyeh is attracted to the violinist and she seems exhausted by Ali's addiction. The director has tried to show the two men's different styles visually by having the new character wear a suit and tie and to present him as handsome and gentle. After Haniyeh and the violinist's small talk is finished, Ali appears from another room, looking drugged up, and he quickly begins his playing of the *Santour* and singing.

The instruments that can be seen in this scene include: *santour*; *tombak*; electric guitar; *setar*; acoustic guitar; and cello. However, the sound of the *tombak*, *setar*, and cello are not identifiable in the song. It seems that the director intended to show an orchestration with symbols of traditional Iranian music merely visually; the composer also tried to incorporate elements of Iranian traditional music into the Western popular music style by combining Iranian and western instruments, but the music produced in the end sounds more like Western popular music. The sound of the electric guitar and techno percussion patterns are contrasted with the *santour*. The presence of the *santour* has also helped to give the Westernized popular song a distinctive Iranian musical identity. I remember when this song became well-loved; people used to buy the CD from the black market and listen to it in their cars or at home. Even when I was at school, my friends memorized the song and would sing it in groups during our times of recreation.

Taraneh Mokkaram wrote the lyrics of the song performed in the party scene, and the official title of the song is "Infidelity." Despite the findings of Fazeli, Eghbal and Ferdowsi, Mokkaram did not accept the claim that her lyrics are *taraneha-ye siah*. In an interview, she stated that "I did not have dark/depressing lyrics; I have romantic protest songs like "Infidelity" from the *Santouri* album." However, she acknowledges that her work has elements of "sadness" which, she says, are "more of a complaint than a feeling of hatred."<sup>32</sup> The contrast between the practitioner's view and the researchers' conceptualization highlights the diversity of people's interpretations regarding happiness and sadness in music, melody and lyrics, and the necessity for ethnographic study of such issues.

32- "Interview with Taraneh Mokkaram", *Aka Iran*, [online]. Link : <http://biografiaka.akairan.com/biography/superstar/news20174308183029731.html> (accessed 3 February 2023).



The song “Infidelity” starts with these verses:

I am nervous and anxious.

I can't sleep again tonight, and I don't know where you are.

I don't feel okay and stay awake till morning. I stare at the clock.

I ask what this feeling is.

Someone says “betrayal”.<sup>33</sup>

According to Shackelford et al., we can organize infidelity into two main categories: “emotional” and “sexual.”<sup>34</sup> The sense of infidelity in this song is emotional infidelity. The lyricist has attempted to portray the feeling of emotional breakdown by describing anxiousness, waiting (by referring to staring at the clock) and insomnia brought on by anxiety. The emotional aspect of infidelity is an apparent theme throughout the movie and in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema more generally, since the portrayal of sexual intimacy has not been permitted for public exhibition in Iran since the Islamic revolution. Cultural boundaries and taboos, in addition to government restrictions for such a film, are among the reasons for this absence.

## Conclusion

After the 1979 revolution, the cinema in Iran was able to depict social themes, either directly or indirectly. The limitations of *musiqi-e pāp* also became a subject that was either explicitly or indirectly discussed in Iranian cinema. Even though *Santouri* was never officially released, it drew the attention of many viewers. *Santouri* narrates the story of a popular musician's career without governmental authorization and serves as a testimony of what happened to *musiqi-e pāp* after the Islamic revolution. In this article, I examined the topic of music and politics in post-revolutionary Iran through *Santouri*'s soundtrack and scenes. Although ethnomusicologists and popular music scholars have studied several aspects, styles, and genres of Iranian popular music, locally known as *musiqi-e pāp*, few studies have taken into account film music, especially popular music and its musicians. While *Santouri*'s narrative shows state censorship and control over music production and dissemination, the film itself underwent similar problems during the time of its production and upon its release. More importantly, the film showcases the ambiguous attitudes in Iranian society, among both citizens and the authorities, towards popular music and culture.

The censorship of the film, however, had opposite effects, as is often the case. While initially, the soundtrack was authorized by the state authorities after disputes and the singer was banned, in the years to come, the singer, who was formerly unauthorized and “underground”, became a well-known, well-loved

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33- MOKKARAM, Taraneh, “Infidelity”, Lachini media [online]. Link: <https://lachini.com/lyrics/Khianat/Mohsen+Chavoshi> (accessed 3 February 2023).

34- SHACKELFORD, Todd K., LEBLANC, Gregory J., and DRASS, Elizabeth, “Emotional reactions to infidelity”, *Cognition & Emotion* Vol. 14, No. 5 (2000), p. 644.

and, later, authorized musician in Iran. In contrast, the film *Santouri*, despite its underground afterlife on pirated video and on the Internet, remains censored in Iran.

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**ملخص |** يستكشف هذا المقال القيود المفروضة على إنشاء الموسيقى وتأثيراتها الاجتماعية الأوسع في إيران ما بعد الثورة، مركزاً على دراسة حالة الفيلم الشهير «سانتوري» للمخرج داريوش مهرجوي الذي تم إصداره في عام ٢٠٠٧. يظهر سرد الفيلم الرقابة الحكومية على الموسيقى والسينما بعد ثورة عام ١٩٧٩، مما يتوازى مع محن الفيلم خلال إنتاجه وإصداره غير الرسمي لاحقاً. بشكل عام، أصبحت القيود المفروضة على الموسيقى الشعبية، المعروفة محلياً باسم «موسيقى البوب»، موضوعاً بارزاً، استُكشف بوضوح أو بشكل ضمني ضمن سياق السرد السينمائي. أنا أناقش أن الفيلم يعمل كمرآة مكشوفة تكشف عن المواقف المعقدة والمتناقضة تجاه الرقابة التي تسود في المجتمع الإيراني، شاملة كل مكانه والسلطات الحاكمة. يقدم هذا المقال تحليلاً للتفاعل بين الموسيقى والرقابة وديناميات المجتمع في إيران ما بعد الثورة.

**كلمات مفتاحية |** الموسيقى الشعبية، السينما الإيرانية، موسيقى الأفلام، «سنتوري»، رقابة، داريوش مهرجوي، محسن تشافوشي

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