

University of Pennsylvania
Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
Seminar on Media and Culture in Contemporary Iran
NELC 2705
Fall 2022

Professor Fatemeh Shams

Class: Wednesdays 1:45-4:45 pm

Location: COLL 311A

Office: 838 Williams Hall

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Office hours: Wednesdays 12-2 (by appointment only)

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DESCRIPTION

This course explores topics such as identity formation, religion, politics and media and their role in the transformation and development of Iranian culture and literature during the modern period (1900-present). To understand the complexities of modern Iran, the course begins with delving into the origins of Persian identity formation and explores the role of Islam, not only in the formation of Iranian identity but also in the evolution of Iranian culture, literature and politics.

Some of the most significant historical events such as the demise of the Sassanian Empire, the advent of Islam and its indigenization according to Persian values and customs, the demise of Qajar dynasty, the Constitutional Revolution, 1953 CIA-backed coup and Islamic Revolution will be discussed through literary, artistic and visual lenses. Short stories, fictions, documentaries and movies will be used throughout the semester to offer a refreshing analytical lens for understanding modern Iran.

Primary goals of this class are:

- 1) Encouraging students to pursue original research on at least one aspect of Iranian culture.
- 2) Developing skills for critical and creative ways of thinking and approaching controversial concepts and discussions as far as Modern Iranian culture and society are concerned.
- 3) Developing academic writing skills and conducting original research.
- 4) Encouraging the students to consider their work for the publication at the end of semester.

This syllabus might be subject to change throughout the semester. Students will be notified about these changes in advance.

Learning outcomes

Several questions will be addressed and discussed with reference to Persian literature and movies: Who are “Iranians” and who are “Persians” and what is the difference between these two ways of self-identification? What is the role of immigration and politics in such self-identifications? What is Iranians’ relationship with Islam and other religions? How have members of different religious communities in Iran responded to the political and social transformations since the rise of modernism in Iran? How important is the role of literature and art in the formation of Iranian identity (along with sect, ethnicity, class, gender, etc.)? In what ways understanding Iran through the lens of literary texts, press, cinema and broadcasting industry help us questioning the common stereotypes about this corner of the world? Investigating these questions will help the students to:

- Comprehend the dynamics of conflicts, continuity and change, uprisings, and lingering tensions in Modern Iran.
- Understand the role of the youth, women, modern technology (e.g., social media), and alternative lifestyles in reshaping the dynamics of power and culture in Iran.
- Apply the literary knowledge acquired in this course to explore issues such as social change, uprisings, ideological tensions and social media in Iran.
- Use films, literary texts and social media as tools for critical analysis to address, identify, and analyse the sources of social change and modernity in Iran.

Structure and Grading Rubric

The course will run as a seminar and is primarily based on class discussions. Students are expected to participate actively in class discussions. Every week, each student will be responsible to discuss 1 assigned reading during the seminar. All texts will be read by all students and everyone comes prepared to take part in the discussions. The structure and details of leading-discussion will be further discussed during the introduction session.

Response Papers (2-3 pages): As part of their coursework, all students are required **to submit 3 short response papers (1-3 pages, double space, font 12 Times New Roman)** on one of the themes, keywords or concepts that have been discussed in the classroom during the weekly seminars. These short response papers are designed to help the students develop their academic writing and critical thinking skills in order to prepare for their final essay. Submitting these Responses on-time plays an important role in the students’ final grade. This coursework accounts for **25% of the final grade.**

Every Student gives 1 oral presentation about the final paper. Students are expected to choose their final research question/topic **no later than week 8** and pick a date to give a **10–15-minute presentation** about it. They will then receive feedback and comments from their peers and the instructor about their progress. Every student is highly encouraged to take part in these presentations. Helping your peers with their research through providing constructive feedback will be noted as an extra point. This coursework accounts **for 25% of the final grade.**

Class attendance accounts for **10%** of the final grade. Students can miss **one** class without prior notice or justification. Missing more than one session without a reason or a 24-hour notice, or delays in attending the class will affect your final grade.

Final research paper (6-8 pages, double space, font 12, Times New Roman) on a topic of the student's choice accounts for **40%** of the overcall grade. The final paper should be related to one and/or multiple topics that have been covered throughout the semester. Topics that do not fall within this course are **not** eligible. Including works of literature and art in the analytical framework of your final project is highly encouraged and will receive extra credit.

Citation Method and Academic Writing: Students must follow the **Chicago method of citation for bibliographies and footnotes; see *The Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th edition, for guidelines.**¹

Throughout the semester we will devote time to discussing practical techniques for planning oral presentations; structuring, writing, analytical thinking and revising your essays. By the end of the semester, students will feel confident to conduct independent literary research with the help of such guidelines.

Film screening and analysis will take place throughout the semester either in or outside classroom. Some movies will be available for online screening. Those that aren't, will be screened inside classroom.

Policies: PLEASE READ CAREFULLY

- Attending the class without having gone through the readings is equal to absence. Reading and engaging with the course materials are essential.
- Late submissions without a justification will be subject to daily **five-point penalty deductions**.
- Every absence has to be notified at least 24 hours prior to the session. Unjustified absence impacts the overall grade.
- Food, **laptop**, phone and other electric devices are **strictly** forbidden in the classroom. Please make sure to buy yourself a notebook for this course. You can carry your notepad for the readings if you wish. Laptop is only allowed for students who provide a medical reason or a letter from school.
- Coffee, water and snacks are allowed in the class. Please do not bring large portions of food to the classroom.
- Only postgraduate students are allowed to audit the classes but they, too have to register for the course via Canvas.
- Hardcopies for all literary texts are required.
- Movies that are assigned in the syllabus must be **watched** as part of essential homework. They are all either available on canvas via online streaming or on hold in the library (three-hour check-out allowance for each student) or will be screened in the classroom.

¹ See: <https://www.citationmachine.net/chicago>

IMPORTANT NOTICE ABOUT COURSE MATERIALS:

All course materials will be available on Canvas.

Course Outline

Week 1: Introduction to the course: In the first hour, we will go through the syllabus together to make sure all questions and concerns have been answered.

Essential Readings: Origins of Iranian Identity

- Iran: A Very Short Introduction, Ali Miransari
- Mohamadali Jamalzadeh, Persian is Sugar

Week 2: Identity Formation (2): Religion, Ethnicity and Race in Iran

- Watch at Home: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a3bOL8j3ypQ>

Essential Readings:

- Reza Zia Ebrahimi, Self-Orientalization and Dislocation: The Uses and Abuses of the “Aryan” Discourse in Iran
- Short Story: I Grew Up Thinking I Was White
- Short Story: What does it mean to be Persian?

Week 3: Identity Formation (3): Religious Minorities in Iran: Jews, Christians and Armenians

- Documentary Screening: *Jews of Iran* (screening and discussion in the class)

Essential readings:

- Eliz Sanasarian, Ethnic anatomy and politics of non-Muslim minorities
- Tehran Children, Chapter 8, Mikhal Dekel
- Things We Left Unsaid, Zoya Pirzad Novel Excerpt, (canvas)

*****Email your 1st response paper by Sunday 13:00 pm via Canvas*****

Week 4: The Rule of Law and the Constitutional Revolution

- Tobacco Reggie and the Ulama
- Constitutional Revolution and Iranian Intellectuals
- Excerpts of Constitutional Revolution’s Literature

Week 5: Women in Iran: Islam, Gender, Divorce and Marriage

Option 1: *Two Women* by Tahmineh Milani

Option 2: *Divorce Iranian Style*, Ziba Mirhosseini

Essential Readings:

- Fatemeh Sadeghi, Shadi Sadr, *Out of Frying Pan, into Fire: Young Iranian Women Today*
- A Feminist Generation in Iran?
- Persian women poets

**** Email your 2nd response paper by Sunday, 13:00 pm ****

Week 6: Muslim Brothers, Paperless Refugees: Afghan Refugees in Iran

- **Watch at Home:** *At Five O'clock in the Afternoon*, Samira Makhmalbaf

Essential Readings:

- Zuzanna Olszewska, "A Desolate Voice: Poetry and Identity among Young Afghan Refugees in Iran"
- Poetry excerpts from Afghan Poets

Week 7: 1953 Coup

- Ervand Abrahamian, 1953 Coup
- Katuzian, Arbitrary rule
- The Depiction of 1953 Coup in Modern Persian Literature

Week 8: 1979 Revolution: Islamic or Not?

- **Watch at home:** *Argo*

Essential Readings

- Michael Axworthy, *Like the Person We Ought to Be: Islamic Republic 1979-1980*
- Ulama, Bazar and the Revolution
- Hooshang Golshiri, *The Victory Chronicle of The Magi* (canvas)

****Email your 3rd Response by Sunday 13:00 PM****

Week 9: Iran-Iraq War: Shi'ism and the Ideology of Warfare

- **Watch at home:** *Bashu the Little Stranger*

Essential Readings:

- Chubin and Trip: Iran and Iraq at War
- Short Story: Amir Ahmadi-Arian, War Museum
<https://witness.blackmountaininstitute.org/issues/vol-xxxi-2-summer-2018/the-war-museum/>

Week 10: Politics of Sport in Iran

- **Watch at home:** *Offside*

Essential Readings:

- H.E. Chehabi, A Political History of Football in Iran
- Jenny Steel and Sophie Richter-Devroe, “The Development of Women’s Football in Iran: A Perspective on the Future of Women’s Sport in the Islamic Republic”

Week 11: The Underground Scene

Bring your Hard Copies of Tehran Noir (Instructions on how to proceed with the stories will be given in the classroom prior to the session)

Essential Readings (along with Tehran Noir):

- Asef Bayat: Tehran: A Paradox City
- What Islamic Republic Has Failed to make Tehran a Spotless City?

Week 12: Drugs, Addiction and Drug Policy in Iran

Essential Readings:

- Maziar Ghiabi: Under the Bridge in Tehran: Addiction, Poverty and Capital
- Maziar Ghiabi: Maintaining Disorder: The Micropolitics of Drug Policy in Iran

Week 13: Queer Life in Iran

Watch at home: *Circumstance*

Essential Readings:

- Afsaneh Najmabadi, Transing and Transpassing across Sex-Gender Walls in Iran, *Women Studies Quarterly*
- Afsaneh Najmabadi, Verdicts of Science, Rulings of Faith: Transgender/Sexuality in Contemporary Iran, Social Research

Email your 4th Response by Sunday 13:00 PM

Week 14: Facebook Iran

Essential Readings:

- J. Eloranta, H. Kermani, B. Rahimi, Facebook Iran: Social Capital and the Iranian Social Media (canvas).
- A. Nasirzadeh, The Role of Social Media in the Lives of Gay Iranians

Week 14: Iranian Diasporic Communities

- **Watch at Home:** *Persepolis*

Essential Reading:

- Amy Malek, Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production: A Case Study of Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* Series
- Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Daniel Douglas, Second-Generation Iranian-Americans
- Persis Karim, Iranian Diaspora Kuku

December 18th: Final Papers Submission [17:00 pm] Email the Word file to my email address.