

Constructing Iranianness: A Discourse Analysis of the Diasporic Reality Show *Befarmaeed Sham*

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Abstract. In the past decade the popularity of the diasporic reality show *Befarmaeed Sham* has presented audiences in Iran, particularly the youth with an alternative definition of Iranianness. Filmed in Canada, Europe, and Australia, this television program portrays regular Iranians living abroad and dealing with the Western culture. Since *Befarmaeed Sham* is transmitted via non-terrestrial broadcasting system, the representation of Iranianness in this reality show is held to be in contrast with the one promoted by the state. Using a critical discourse analysis this study reveals some of the key discourses and their dominant meanings employed by *Befarmaeed Sham* to construct Iranianness. The study's findings suggest that through an exemplary popular cultural form *Befarmaeed Sham* constructs Iranianness, ultimately providing audiences with an alternative view on their Iranian *selves*.

Keywords: Iranianness, satellite TV, reality show, discourse analysis, counterhegemonic representation.

1 Introduction

Since the naissance of the Islamic Republic in 1979, Iran has undergone a devastating political, economic and social period, transforming the country from a mighty US confederate to a secluded country [1] frequently referred to as an anti-West nation in the major world's news and media outlets [2]. Accordingly, the beginning of the post-Revolution era marked the structural shift in the state's ideological disposition [3] which has had a wide range of overwhelming effects on the country and its people both at national level [5] and also internationally [4]. Throughout the past four decades or so, however, Islamic regime has been maximizing its investment on ideological and repressive state apparatus to maintain its position in the Middle East and increase its control over its people [6 pp 197-8]. Parallel to such attempts, the state-run national media has been constantly striving for construction of Iranian identity centred on Shiite, revolutionary, and anti-West ideologies, with the hope for ensuring the nation-wide unity and thus safeguarding the regime's power [7 p. 6].

The entrance of the free-to-air cross-border broadcasting technology and subsequently the upsurge of the Farsi satellite TV channels (FSTCs) during 1990s, however, marked a pivotal era for the nation as these exilic and therefore commonly anti-regime TV networks presented an alternative outlook on the Iranian identity [8]. Disturbed with the spread of FSTCs and their nationwide popularity, the Iranian authorities utilized a number of methods to block the inflow of these so-called 'invading signals' while alerting families about their depraving impacts on the 'pure Iranian culture' [9].

Yet, in spite of the authorities' preemptive attempts to interrupt the pervasion of satellite broadcast and to prevent people of Iran from receiving and consuming their contents, this new means for television viewing has been more popular than before [10]. The reason for

this is generally seen to be the outcome of the national television's inability to provide interesting and high-quality programmes as well as the excessive level of censorship on the TV imports [11].

On the other hand, satellite TV has provided people of Iran with a wide range of television channels with a profusion of programs, liberating them from being limited to national broadcast to satisfy their entertainment and information needs [12]. The Iranians' bond with satellite TV has also been widely reported in the media and studied by scholars, and while there is uncertainty about how many households in Iran possess satellite dishes on their rooftops, the government has already acknowledged that the number of satellite users exceeds 70 percent of the total population [13].

Nevertheless, as FSTCs become more and more popular across the nation, the younger generation in particular, as the major audiences of satellite TV, are presented with opposing definitions of Iranianness [14]. However, recently, the explosion of FSTCs and the escalation of rivalry between them for possessing the market and audience as well as raising their incomes have resulted in these TV networks to adopt a number of strategies [15]. To do so, some of them tried to follow the latest developments in global television production and programming and to pay more attention to the youth and their growing needs for entertainment [16]. In so doing, exilic television network Manoto TV with its headquarter in London premiered *Befarmaeed Sham*, a copied version of the UK's popular reality cooking game show *Come and Dine with Me* [17].

Just like the original reality show, *Befarmaeed Sham* gathers four Iranians who do not know each other to compete for a cash prize by exhibiting their cooking and hospitality abilities. Yet, unlike the original version, *Befarmaeed Sham* presents contestants not in the context of their homeland but in diaspora. In this way, *Befarmaeed Sham* portrays regular Iranians in the setting of day-to-day life in a Western country while facing the repercussions of their exile or migration. While contestants competing against each other, as part of their performance, they also briefly introduce themselves usually at the outset of the initial episode of each group. Other than personal introduction, contestants occasionally involve in deliberations with others in the group, discussing various political/social matters at certain points at time throughout an episode.

Together with visual features of the show, these mono-/dialogues often centre on the contestants' connection to homeland, highlighting subjects such as nationhood, belongingness and cultural identity which ultimately raise the questions about representation of Iranianness in this reality show. Although similar to other productions of FSTCs, the representation of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham* is assumed to be in contrast with the one that prevails the state-run mainstream media in Iran [18] what remains unclear is the particular ways in which the meanings of Iranianness are constructed in this reality show.

2 Conceptual Framework

The concept of Iranianness or in the same sense Iranian identity, as already pointed out by a number of authors [19, 20, 21], has been a source of frustration and a subject for endless contestation particularly within scholarly works [22] and historical accounts [23, 24]. Such definitional ambivalence about Iranianness, therefore, has resulted in the concept being defined variously across the vast literature in Iranian studies or other fields depending on who uses the term and for what purpose. Hence, in order to avert the impediments of unduly engaging in pursuit of an accurate definition for Iranianness, this study considered it in its less-problematical sense: interchangeable with Iranian identity and conceptualized simply as a

perceived or imagined repertoire of common national traits that characterizes Iran, Iranians, and their culture.

Furthermore, this study is based on Foucauldian strand of discourse theory and considers Iranianness as a discursive discourse constructed through language (in its broadest sense). In this way, although a discourse circulates through a range of social sites and institutions, the media remains as a significant “system of dispersion” of discourse [25 p. 37] with their own appropriated rules of language, functioning in a wider framework that also affects their own capabilities and affordances. The media, therefore, do not simply reflect or express the social world but indeed are imperative and “specific machineries that produce, reproduce, and transform social phenomena” [26]. Although such idea, albeit with different degrees, is at the heart of almost all studies of discourse, yet, it particularly characterizes the macro-textual/contextual approaches.

As such, and following the Barthes [27] tradition, the study adopts a macro-textual/contextual approach to discourse. Using a wider definition of text and considering it as manifestation of meaning and ideology, in this approach “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” [26]. The focus of macro-context approach, however, unlike micro-context where the approach is confined to the specific and immediate social settings, is more on social macro level of the context where discourses are circulated.

Subsequently, the purpose of this study was to look at some of the key discourses of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham* and to uncover their preferred meanings. In so doing, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) was conducted on a corpus comprised of purposively selected pieces of language spoken by various contestants in the show. Discourse analysis in this sense was concerned with what Burman and Parker called “the ways language produces and constrains meaning” [28]. Therefore, with a focus on the representation aspect of the discourse, this study set out to uncover some of the dominant (preferred) meanings that contributed to the discursive construction of Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham*, ultimately accounting for this reality show’s counterhegemonic ideology.

In this way, the outwardly innocent and unscripted spoken language of the contestants in this television programme functions as what Jurgen Habermas (cited by Wodak) called “a medium of domination and social force [that] serves to legitimize relations of organized power” [29]. This implies that power is embedded in language, and language, regardless of its source, form or nature is almost always ideological; it functions to win the consent of the majority by naturalizing certain version of reality and disregarding others. In this sense, power is the control over the meaning, and can take on both oppressive and liberating forms. In the case of this study, however, the former refers to the mainstream media and other state-controlled social institutions in Iran, while the latter describes what is generally known as new media including free-to-air transnational satellite TV and Internet. In other words, CDA is employed to examine the knowledge structure in *Befarmaeed Sham* and to uncover the dominant meanings of Iranianness in this seemingly nonpolitical ‘reality’ form of entertainment television.

3 Methodology

Discourse analysis is a method for investigating the use of language in social contexts and has been employed differently within a range of disciplines and depending on one’s theoretical perspective [30, 31, 32, 33]. This study uses critical discourse analysis (CDA) as it

was thought of within the poststructuralist theories of Foucault. From this perspective, discourse discursively constructs people's meanings which consequently influence their social practices discourse [25]. At the language level, discourse is a series of statements that make it possible to talk about a particular topic at a particular space and time with an ultimate goal of representing the knowledge [34]. Thus, discourse acts as a framework to debate "the value of one way of talking about reality over other ways" [32 p 5] through enabling or constraining what can be said, by who, where and when. Discourses, therefore, are more than just communicating channels but meaning-making systems and ways of creating reality; they are the "structures of knowledge that influence systems of practices" [35 p 57].

Discourse analysis generally is concerned with the investigation of texts (in its broadest sense) for providing "insights in to the way speech and texts shape and reproduce social meanings and forms of knowledge" [36]. The texts for analysis in this study were pieces of spoken language extracted from various episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham* available in YouTube. These selections were based on whether or not a piece of language spoken by contestants in the show contained information that is relevant to any aspect of Iranianness. Therefore, such information, in one way or another had to include some description or attribution in regard to Iranian nation, their country and/or their culture. In this research, however, every piece of spoken language is referred to the unit of analysis which consisted of a number of sentences so long as it could exclusively communicate a particular concept relevant to the study.

Nevertheless, despite individual pieces of spoken language were analyzed, the study's focus was not on what every individual contestant was thinking or meaning at that time. Rather, the study's interest was in the structures of knowledge that were represented in these individuals' statements which became a discourse only in their relation to each other and to broader institutions and ideologies. Likewise, the study aimed to reveal and characterize the many different ways in which Iranianness as a set of beliefs, values and attitudes was constructed in *Befarmaeed Sham*.

Although there are many hundreds of episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham* available in YouTube, due to the scope of this study only a limited number of them were viewed and examined for possibility of containing the discourses of Iranianness. In this way, the method for sampling involved a process through which several episodes of *Befarmaeed Sham* were sifted through until 3 major topics around the concept of Iranianness were identified for further analysis. In so doing, after searching '*Befarmaeed Sham*' in YouTube, the first episode of each group (every group consists of 4 episodes) were selected for a quick check for the content. The reason for this was to expedite the process of searching since generally the contents relevant to the study is more likely to be found in the first episodes as they contain introductory, self-narratives, and often discussions among contestants. Following a cursory examination of the selected episodes' contents, only 3 scenes with relatively more relevant mono/dialogues were chosen for discourse analysis. Therefore, while it should be acknowledged that such sampling did not provide an exhaustive survey of all the available episodes, some of which might have equally relevant contents, there was also little possibility for the study's scope to include more discourses for analysis as it would be at the expense of an in-depth and detailed account for them. Consequently, the sampling process was not meant to provide representativeness or a percentage breakdown of the ways in which Iranianness had been represented throughout multitude of the episodes of the programme. Rather, each sample represented a different line of constructing Iranianness which taken together established a less equivocal contour of *Befarmaeed Sham*'s ideological *modus operandi*. However, the identification and analysis of these 3 major topics seemed to form a sensible baseline that

could adequately address the purpose of the study in providing insights on constructing Iranianness in *Befarmaeed Sham*.

Nonetheless, after the pieces of language were extracted from selected scenes, they were translated from Farsi into English with a help of a local graduate student and then were transcribed for further analysis. At this point, the Fairclough's discourse analysis model that considers the investigation of a text within the sociocultural context of its production, circulation and consumption, was applied on the transcribed texts. In so doing, 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 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' dominant meanings and provided insights into construction of Iranianness through the discourse in *Befarmaeed Sham*.

In regard to the analysis of the transcribed text, however, it should be noted that utmost emphasis was neither unduly on the style and structural patterns nor on the formatting and syntactic orders as it is practiced in conversation analysis method. Instead, the study's main focus was on the preferred meanings and capturing the *essence* of each unit of analysis (or a number of sentences uttered in a specific scene and centered on a specific topic). In so doing, more attention was paid to issues such as concise translation of the contestants' utterances, what meanings such utterances were set to convey, and the most likely (dominant/preferred) interpretations of such meanings. The emphasis of the analysis was also on clarifying the opacity in representation politics through looking at what had been said and meant by the contestants which formed a discourse in connection with their wider sociocultural context.

4 Findings

4.1 Warm and affectionate nation

The first scene, in which the spoken language was extracted from, introduced Sepideh (Dawn), a British middle-aged female contestant who hosted the three Iranians in the group. Recorded in Manchester, England, this sequence was selected from Group 11 Season 10 UK. In an earlier scene, Sepideh who was fluent in Farsi, provided a brief introduction of herself and told that she was married to an Iranian and lived ten years of her life after marriage in Iran more than thirty years ago. In one of the subsequent scenes, however, she engaged in a conversation with other contestants while having dinner. This dialogue started with a comment by Elham, a female contestant who referred to Iranians as a friendly and affectionate nation:

Iran is a great country, the people there are all affectionate, you know, they all want to progress, and really why not!?

Next to this, and in order to continue the conversation Sepideh tried to make a small but sentimental talk as she asked Amir if he had missed Iran:

Don't you ever miss Iran; you left your country like that and came here (Sepideh, female contestant)?

Of course I do. After all we grow up in that country (Iran). Most of our memories and pleasures in our life were in there (Iran). Personally since I came here I've been busy with work that there wasn't left any time to spend on myself or for leisure (Amir, male contestant).

When I was in Iran, the people whom I met, like friends and relatives, used to ask me "why you came here?! England is a great place! What a pity!" Then I told them "No, that's not true". They thought here (England) is heaven. After all here has its own hardship (Sepideh).

Throughout the dinner scene, however, some other discussions were brought up when Amir asked Sepideh:

What are the things that you like the most about Iran, the things that are different than here, those things that really attract you a lot?

And Sepideh responded:

For example, the warmth that you have, we don't have in here, indeed Iranians like their families so much . . . Likewise I also liked my husband's family, but you see, unlike Iranians, people in English families are distanced one from another, they are 'cold'.

As exemplified in the above excerpts from the contestants' dialogues, at this point of the show the overall conversations were directed towards thinking of Iranians as a warm, friendly and compassionate nation. In so doing, the contestants collectively created a binary opposition of western-Iranian in correspondence to another cold-warm or unfriendly-friendly one. Such idea was also reaffirmed when Sepideh who presumably represented western people, acknowledged that as opposed to westerners, Iranians are warm and affectionate. Although there are convincing accounts that describes Iranians as highly welcoming and hospitable [37], raising such a topic in *Befarmaeed Sham* forms an essentialist view on the nation. More importantly, the formation of such essentialist view on Iranians in *Befarmaeed Sham* is achieved through juxtaposition of the nation against the West and its culture. In so doing, by attributing certain positive mannerism to Iranians while considering westerners deprived from such optimistic and humane qualities, *Befarmaeed Sham* succeeded in offering a subjective view on Iranians and their culture which set them apart from the West and their cultural norms. Through an attempt in attributing such a buoyant virtue to the Iranian culture while causing damage to the West's moral image, this conversation illustrated how gaining advantage over their imagined oppositional binary offered them some sort of ideas for reflecting on their identities and an easy way to describe themselves as Iranians.

4.2 Glorious pre-revolution

In another scene from the aforementioned group, after guests' arrival and just prior to having dinner, the contestants were involved in some discussions about Sepideh's most unforgettable family photos which she chosen from her album to show to other contestants. These photos which were taken decades ago when Sepideh used to live in Iran, incited the emotions of other contestants who started to express their feelings about both pre-revolution Iran and also Sepideh's persona. In this relatively poignant scene, Sepideh described the photos one after another. The scene was then cut a number of times into other scenes showing a close-up shot of other contestants individually talking in a private corner of the house to the camera about Sepideh and her personality:

As we arrived, we saw that she had laid some old photos of Iran on the table, taken almost 30 years ago when she was with her husband (Elham, female contestant).

I was very glad to see that an Englishwoman, who lived in my country, comes to us and proudly shows us those photos and says "these are old pictures of Iran" (Amir, male contestant).

The ambience shown in the photo was so overwhelming that one hardly could believe that it was Iran. For a moment I thought it was Switzerland or some ski resort in Austrian Mountains. It was very interesting for me (Saviz, male contestant).

The above comments which came with great surprise for Iranians in the group, clearly indicates that on the one hand, these contestants were flabbergasted as they did not expect an Englishwoman to have reverence and respect for Iran as a Third World country. On the other hand they seemed to be proud of having their country praiseworthy enough to be admired and therefore kept memory of by a westerner who is perceived to be far more modern and knowledgeable to notice such merits. Yet, what should be noticed here is that photos featured pre-revolution era Iran which invoked contestants' admiration. Hence, from these comments one could construe a clear but indirect distinction between pre-revolution and post-revolution Iran which was made by the contestants.

In this way, by marking the 1979 Islamic Revolution as an epoch-making political and cultural turning point for the nation, a binary opposition was moulded through discourse which emphasized Iran's backward shift from previously westernized and well-thought-of country to a disappointingly below average and internationally isolated one. The tactful inclusion of such cynically poignant articulations in *Befarmaeed Sham*, therefore, patently conjured up a nostalgic and mesmerizing image of the pre-revolution Iran with all its tributes and glories, while bringing about a belittling and less desirable repute for the country at present time. Hence, despite the fact that the contestants in the show did not seem to be admonitory and showed no sign of vilification towards Iran's current situation in their comments, yet, such apparently contrived absence of criticism countervailed by their adulation of the country's bygone status.

4.3 Drinkers but not drunkards

In another scene from this group Sarah (the guest contestant with the same name as the host) is shown alone in a quiet corner of the house while expressing her displeasure about the host serving too much alcohol throughout the night and during the dinner:

One thing is very unusual in tonight's gathering, you see, we don't drink this much liquor in Iran. Liquor is good and I like it, but, well, so much liquor and so many varieties of it doesn't seem to match our culture. I didn't like it. There were more liquor than food and I wasn't really satisfied with this part of tonight's gathering.

In looking at the expression made by Sarah, and without making any sided judgment about contestants' individual (dis)likes about alcohol consumption, and regardless of considering whether the host was serving her guest alcohol in excessive amount or not, what might be remarkable is the work of such discourse in naturalizing the idea of ordinariness of alcohol consumption among Iranians. In this way, such discourse would suggest the alcohol consumption among Iranians is a common social practice and a cultural norm, leaving little room for materializing any thought that Iran is an Islamic nation which prohibits alcohol consumption whatsoever [38]. The Befarmaeed Sham's portrayal of Iranians in diaspora as they freely drink alcohol is one of the most prominent sights all throughout the episodes of this reality show. Such visual aspects are considered to signify prestige, modernity and an association with civilized western world. They also significantly assist the dialogues and conversations in the show in crafting a discourse that embodies Iranians' innate and illusive desire in identifying themselves as civilized and modern as people in the non-Muslim western societies.

5. Conclusions and Discussion

The people in Iran are constantly surrounded by reminders disseminated from mainstream media and other state-controlled social institutions about what it means to be Iranian. These meanings, however, have been challenged by competing discourses of Iranianness which came into being since the emergence of FSTCs during 1990s. Nevertheless, due to the proliferation of entertainment televisions among FSTCs in recent years, the dissemination of such opposing discourses has considerably shifted from news and anti-government productions to seemingly nonpolitical popular cultural programs. Produced by exilic television network MANAOTO TV, the reality cooking game show Befarmaeed Sham exemplifies such shift and the subtle ways that discourse is used for constructing and representing Iranianness. Through conducting a CDA this study looked at how contestants' spoken language worked as a discourse that contributed to the construction of Iranianness in this reality show. In so doing, the study took on three key sites through which some aspects of the country, the nation or the culture of Iran were represented in various episodes of Befarmaeed Sham. Although the analysis did not fully cover an exhaustive list of possible discourses deployed by Befarmaeed Sham in representing Iranianness, the limited number of aspects analyzed in this study exemplified the representational work of the discourse in this relatively new form of television programming.

In this way, the study's findings revealed Befarmaeed Sham's inclination in extending the ideologies which in most part seemed to be inconsistent with the dominant discourses of Iranianness upheld by the state. In summary, according to such ideologies, Iranians, unlike westerners, are warm and affectionate people who disregard Islamic principles and drink alcohol but not in excessive amount. In addition, this view holds that contrary to the present conditions in the country, Iran had a modern and glorious past during pre-revolution era. In line with the foremost premise of CDA, these findings illuminate Befarmaeed Sham's obscure predisposition in constructing the meaning of Iranianness and the ways in which such meanings reflect or reaffirm the ideologies that prevail across FSTCs. Moreover, unlike some of the FSTCs' solely political programs which directly put forward their adversarial views on Islamic regime, Befarmaeed Sham advocates similar views in a subtle and inconspicuous way by naturalizing its ideologies through discourse in an apparently non-political and candid reality-entertainment format. Hence, while the findings of this study shed some light on Befarmaeed Sham's representation politics, they also highlight the idea that such seemingly neutral and innocent reality shows are indeed deceptively political in nature. Consequently, the representation of Iranians and their culture in Befarmaeed Sham, as this study suggests, functions as a counterhegemonic ideology that challenges the dominant discourses of nationhood and national/cultural identity in Iran, which in turn provides audiences with an alternative view on their Iranian *selves*.

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