A case of historical adaptation in Iranian media: *Shahrzad* as a palimpsestuous hive of intertextuality

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**Abstract:** A comprehensive command of national (Persian) and Western (mainly English/American) literary traditions and a deep knowledge of historical events form the backbone of the cinematographic oeuvre of Hassan Fathi, an Iranian director noted for his “historian-adaptor” approach toward filmmaking. This being the case, in his *Shahrzad* series (2015–2018), the director details the August 1953 coup d’etat in Iran as an intertextual scenario in which a mélange of literary and cinematic “texts” and fictional characters along with historical figures are brought together in a dynamic and interactive process. In an undertaking that gives the series an interesting postmodern character, Fathi, instead of adapting a single literary work, engages in animating this historical event by interweaving *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Othello*, and *The Godfather* together. Taking advantage of adaptation theory as its theoretical framework, this paper attempts to delineate how, in terms of storyline and characterization, the series stages these multiple “texts” simultaneously. Overall, the paper proposes that *Shahrzad* is a palimpsestuous hive of intertextuality.

Subjects: Film Production; World Cinema; Film Theory

Keywords: Shahrzad; adaptation; intertextuality; palimpsest; postmodernism

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**PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT**

Literary adaptation is a dynamic and interdisciplinary field of study that serves to animate literary texts, themes, and characters through screen frames. Canonical texts, particularly those written by William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Henrik Ibsen, among others, are often adapted not only for commercial reasons but also for intercultural exchanges between different nations and countries. The transposition from page to screen is often accompanied by subtle changes and differences driven by aesthetic, social, cultural, and political goals. This paper is an attempt to address intertextuality and its multiple manifestations in an Iranian series *Shahrzad* (2015–2018) directed by Hassan Fathi who is interested in historical events. We effort to delineate to how in terms of storyline, characterization, and setting the series draw on an ensemble of literary and cinematic masterpieces. The paper will be of interest to scholars in several fields, including film studies, literary adaptation studies, and postmodern theory.
Nothing is original. Steal from anywhere that resonates with inspiration or fuels your imagination. Devour old films, new films, music, books, paintings, photographs, poems, dreams, random conversations, architecture, bridges, street signs, trees, clouds, bodies of water, light and shadows. Select only things to steal from that speak directly to your soul (Jim Jarmusch, as cited in Slethaug, 2014, p. 196)

1. Introduction: the will to adapt among Iranian directors

Hamid Naficy, in his four-volume A Social History of Iranian Cinema (2011–2012) points out that Iranian cinema has been engaged in an ongoing intertextual dialogue with “oral traditions, popular romances, folktales, modernist literature and poetry, and a rich tradition of visual, musical, and performing arts” (2011, p. 21). This cross-disciplinary dialogue reached its height during the 1960s and 1970s when directors like Farrokh Gaffary (1921–2006), Sohrab Shaheed-Salles (1944–1998), Ebrahim Golestan (b. 1922), Nasser Taghvai (b. 1941), and Masoud Kimiai (b. 1941), among others, developed a hybrid cinematic trend known as the “New Wave of Iranian Cinema”. Modelled on the Italian neo-realism and the French New Wave (Jahed, 2012, p. 88), this trend allowed Iranians directors to reflect on social, cultural, and political problems by drawing on and assimilating masterpieces of national and foreign literature and cinema—Gaffary scripted his 1965 Night of the Hunchback based on a story from One Thousand and One Nights; Taqvai’s 1973 Tranquility in the Presence of Others is based on Ghomam-Hossein Sa’edi’s Anxieties of Unknown Origin; and Kimiai adapts Sadegh Hedayat’s “Three Drops of Blood” to make his 1971 Dash Akol. In the twenty-first century, the new wave continues its activity under the banner of “intellectual cinema” in the works of acclaimed directors like Abbas Kiarostami (1940–2016), Dariush Mehrjui (b. 1939), Bahram Tavakoli (b. 1976), and Asghar Farhadi (b. 1972). To mention a few, for Sara (1992) and Ghosts (2014) screenplays, Mehrjui draws inspiration from Henrik Ibsen’s A Doll’s House (1879) and Ghosts (1881) respectively; Bahram Tavakoli’s Here without Me (2011), in which a family of three members is preoccupied with unfulfilled dreams, is an adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie (1945) and his Stranger (2014) is inspired by Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire (1947); The Last Step (2012), Ali Mosaffa’s second film, features James Joyce’s “The Dead” (1914); Varuzh Karim Masahi’s Doubt (2009) is a close reworking of Shakespeare’s Hamlet; and in a recent prominent example Asghar Farhadi adapts Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman (1949) to produce The Salesman (2016) which, co-produced by Mallet-Guy, won Best Actor and Best Screenplay Award at the 2016 Cannes and the Best Foreign Language Film in 2017 Academy Awards. To use Linda Hutcheon’s catchword, adaptation “has run amok” (2013, p. xiii) among Iranian filmmakers, the importance of which, however, has remained largely understudied.

A significant turn away from the monopoly of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) in production and distribution of films and series inside Iran concerns the emergence of “Home Video Network” marketplace which helps producers-directors distribute their products online and through supermarkets to entertain more audience as a result. Bitter Coffee (Dir. Mehran Modiri, 2010), Made in Iran (Dir. Mohammad Hossein Latifi, 2012), Golshifteh (Dir. Behrouz Shoiebi, 2018), and Shahrazad (Dir. Hassan Fathi, 2015–2018) are some recent examples. While most of the mentioned examples seek a blockbuster status, Shahrazad trades on what Clare Parody calls “memory and nostalgia” (2011) as it unfolds in an epoch immediately before and after the August 1953 coup d’état in Iran, known as “the 28 Mordad coup”, that toppled Iran’s first democratically elected government and its popular prime minister, Dr. Mohammad Mossadegh. To animate such a crucial historical event within screen frames, the director relies on a highly complex “freeplay” adaptation of an ensemble of national and international literary/cinematic canons. The series, produced in three seasons, is to a considerable extent interlinked with and indebted to One Thousand and One Nights (a.k.a. Arabian Nights), Othello, The Godfather, among others, in an unprecedented intertextual manner. This palimpsestuous rewriting and juxtaposition of literary, historical, and cultural material (Sherry, 2012, p. 375) has a long pedigree: in Ryan’s Daughter (1970) David Lean draws on Madame Bovary, Far From the Madding Crowd, the Easter Rising of 1916, and the social upheavals of France in 1848 and Northern Ireland in 1968 (Park-Finch, 2017, p. 52); in Do the Right Thing (1989) Spike Lee refers to Martin Luther King, Malcolm X,
and The Autobiography of Malcolm X to critique racial discrimination (Slethaug, 2014, p. 10); in Richard III (1995) Richard Loncraine comments on twentieth-century fascism in a parable manner; and Wide Sargasso Sea (Jean Rhys 1966) and Foe (Coetzee 1986) “write back” to Jane Eyre and Robinson Crusoe respectively.

Shahrzad nods in this postmodern direction as Fathi provides insight into the sociocultural climate of a crucial pre-Islamic Revolution historical moment and interweave literature and politics into a filmic narrative. What distinguishes the series from previous endeavors, hence, is its filtering and visualizing a certain historical epoch through intertextual and transcultural sources resulting in a multilayered pastiche that manages to reconcile national audience with domestic products at a time when they tend to watch Farsi-dubbed versions of Turkish soap operas transmitted by such popular entertainment companies as the Dubai-based GEM TV on the satellite. Taking advantage of adaptation theory as its theoretical framework, this paper attempts to address the question that how in terms of storyline, characterization, and setting Shahrzad, in its first season, adapts and recasts an ensemble of “texts” to showcase social malaise and political corruption of the historical moment within which it is set.

2. Literary adaptation: from fidelity syndrome to multiple palimpsest

From a modernist perspective that privileges originality, author-ity, ownership, and unity of meaning—what Roland Barthes aptly calls the “myth of filiation” (1977a, p. 160)—literary adaptation is often reduced to judgmental denominators like ‘literature on screen’ and ‘literature in the second degree’ based on a lingering assumption that an adaptation, unable to render interior monologue, flashback, and stream of consciousness, is inferior to its source text. Following this hierarchized logic that is tied back to Lyotardian rhetoric of “master narrative” (1984) and/or Derridean “logocentricism” (Cartmell, Corrigan, & Whelehan, 2008, p. 1), the degree of “fidelity” and “truthfulness” to an antecedent originating text has been the principal yardstick based on which an adaptation is measured. However, fidelity criticism, Robert Stam deplores, is predicated on “unmarked normativities which place whiteness, Europeanness, maleness, and heterosexuality at the center, while marginalizing all that is not normative” (2005, p. 11). Parochial essentialist debates over fidelity and privileging the author as the sole originator of meaning almost entirely overlook how popular fiction, cartoons, newspapers, operas, advertisements, and different media cross over and influence each other. As might be expected, for example, the fidelity criterion falls short of explaining how Donald Barthelme’s Snow White (1967) not only is indebted to the Snow White fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm (1812), Walt Disney Productions film (1937), and several other European folk tales but also has given rise to Snow White: The Fairest of Them All (Dir. Caroline Thompson, 2001), Enchanted (Dir. Kevin Lima, 2007), Snow White and the Huntsman (Dir. Rupert Sanders, 2012).

Having challenged referential and fidelity fallacies, Roland Barthes’ “The Death of the Author” (1977b) and Julia Kristeva’s notion of “intertextuality” (1980) also prepared the ground for a paradigm shift within media and adaptation studies. Critics and theorists like Stam (2004 with Alessandra Raengo), Cartmell (2010, 2012a), Imelda Whelehan (2013 with Cartmell), Hutcheon (2013), Slethaug (2014), and Leitch (2017) have sought to reorient adaptation studies by taking into consideration multidimensional and discursive aspects of literary adaptation(s) from multiple perspectives. Of these theoreticians, Linda Hutcheon and Gordon Slethaug make forays into adaptation studies from a postmodernist perspective which replaces author-auteur-ship, originality, autonomy, singularity, nation-state, etc. with compiler-arranger, intertextuality, pastiche, simulacra, palimpsest, and interculturalism. Such a postmodern twist helps “transcend the aoristic of ‘fidelity’” (Stam, 2005, p. 4) and/or what Harold Bloom calls “anxiety of influence” (1973). Following this line of thought, Hutcheon’s A Theory of Adaptation (2013 [first published in 2006]) provides a good starting point for breaking down our habitual understanding and experiencing of (literary) adaptation. It opens up a significant space in order to “challenge the explicitly and implicitly negative cultural evaluation of things like postmodernism, parody, and now, adaptation, which are seen as secondary and inferior” (p. XIV). She extends this thesis by noting that
“adaptation is a form of intertextuality; we experience adaptations [...] as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation” (p. 8). She delimits the scope of adaptation studies by providing valuable insights into a wide range of complex and multilayered factors, influences, and cultural repertoires involved in adaptation. In addition to providing a comprehensive theoretical template for taking into account multifarious and dynamic aspects of adaptation, Hutcheon characterizes adaptation poetics as a prop for performing artistic and cultural exchanges between ‘Self’ and ‘Other’. Adaptation, in her words, creates “a kind of dialogue between the societ[ies] in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves” (p. 149). As such, what she calls “the adaptive faculty” contains an “otherness” and “cultural recycling” that allows a recognition of underrepresented and marginalized voices. Probably, that is why Deborah Cartmell opines that adaptation is “the art form of democracy” (2012, p. 3).

Hutcheon’s argument that adaptations are “inherently ‘palimpsestous’ works, haunted at all times by their adapted texts” (p. 6), finds a rigorous resonance and endorsement in Gordon Slethaug’s Adaptation Theory and Criticism: Postmodern Literature and Cinema in the USA (2014). Creating a postmodern interplay between different American social issues and films, Slethaug’s main argument is that the question is “no longer to what extent an adapted film is faithful to its original but how even the smallest surplus unsettles meaning in both the original and adaptation, inaugurating creative uncertainty and instability and a dialogue between the original and the adaptation” (p. 34). This view considered, he elaborates on “substitution”, “supplementation”, “intertextual doubling”, “bricolage”, “citation”, and “(multiple) palimpsest” to bring home new intercultural significance and intertextual meaning. Among these notions, palimpsest seems instrumental to our analysis of Shahrzad as the series overwrites and supplements an ensemble of anterior works from different contexts and across different media. The use of pastiche, bricolage, and palimpsest, he notes, “where the many originals are cobbled together, overwritten, and exposed, becomes a particularly fruitful way to go against the dominance of origin and liberate the freeplay of textuality and meaning” (p. 29). In accord with Gérard Genette’s description of palimpsest as a form of overwritten by which “a new function is superimposed upon and interwoven with an older structure” (1997, p. 398), Slethaug avers that palimpsest stands for “a current text that hides or obscures other texts or one that contains the muted inscriptions of antecedents in order to engage this dialogue” (p. 192). An “overwriting that rewrites and plays with one or more originals in a destabilizing manner to inaugurate new import” (p. 192), he continues, a palimpsestuous work potentially incorporates myriad of texts, historical figures, fictional characters, narrative patterns, allusions, styles, and genres—themselves already read—simultaneously. A significant multiple palimpsest case in point, Slethaug suggests, is Jim Jarmusch’s Broken Flowers (2005). An ever-expanding palimpsest, the film self-consciously evokes Don Juan (as its protagonist), Nabokov’s Lolita (1955) and two of its eponymous adaptations by Stanley Kubrick (1962) and Adrian Lyne (1997), Nabokov’s short story “Signs and Symbols” (1948), and Alizée’s “Moi Lolita” song (2000) along with detective road movie genre.

Central to our analysis of Shahrzad and how it gives history a corporeal form is Fathi’s animating and bringing up to date historical incidents and figures within the context of 1953 coup d’État specifically by concentrating in particular on magnetic power and atrocities of a ruthless mob boss named Bozorg-Agha. The director’s attempt to animate a historical event through adaptation has a long cinematic precedence: in La Marseillaise (1938) Jean Renoir relates the early days of the French Revolution from the eyes of people involved (Andrew, 2004); Béla Tarr’s Werckmeister Harmonies (2000), an adaptation of The Melancholy of Resistance novel by László Krasznahorkai, deals with the Hungarian communist regime and German occupation (Hodgkins, 2009); series like The Tudors (2007–2010) broadcast on Showtime and Wolf Hall (2015), an adaptation of Hilary Mantel’s Wolf Hall (2009) and its sequel Bring Up the Bodies broadcast on BBC, televise Tudor era and British identity (Mullin, 2018). This proliferating filmic accounts of history is closely linked to “history-as-adaptation” concept, introduced by Raw and Tutan (2013) and further developed by Leitch (2015) and Weiser (2017). In The Adaptation of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Past,
Raw and Tutan problematize the concept of accuracy (interpretive history) by proposing that history and historical events should be approached as adaptations on the ground that history and fiction are equally human constructs (adaptive history). Following their footstep, Leitch argues that since “reinterpretations of the historical record amount to reinterpretations of earlier interpretations”, the writing of history “amounts to the adaptation of earlier histories” (p. 10). Taking history as one of the sub-genres through which adaptation functions, as far as our analysis of Shahrzad is concerned, enables the director to depict and connect characters from across political, historical, and artistic divides: characters as diverse as Mohammad Mosaddegh and Hossein Fatemi (national heroes), Nima Yooshij (a groundbreaking modern poet), Othello, and Vito Corleone whose iconic personae have been adapted and recast in numerous films and series. In an attempt to address the inseparable web of association between history, politics, and literature, the paper in the following pages attempts to chart the ways in which Fathi makes extensive use of palimpsest and “freeplay of signification” in Shahrzad.

3. Multiple palimpsest and historiography in Shahrzad

To begin with, one can argue that the directorial oeuvre of Fathi is characterized with an overarching principle: utilizing screen space as a conduit for visualizing historical events. Heroes Do Not Die (1996) and The Tenth Night (2001) chronicle the life and struggles of Iranians during the reign of Qajar dynasty (1794–1925). In Lighter than Darkness (2001) Fathi features the life and achievements of Mulla Sadra (1572–1640) who made considerable contributions to Islamic philosophy/metaphysics during Safavid period (1501–1736). His Zero Degree Turn (2007), a free adaptation of Michael Curtiz’s Casablanca (1942), narrates the life of an Iranian student in Paris during the Nazi Occupation. What these different works have in common is that they offer insights into the sociocultural milieu and historical moments/events they are set in. With this background in place, to quote Fredric Jameson, Fathi invites us to “think historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically” (1991, p. ix). Meanwhile, in comparison with Fathi’s other works, the experience of Shahrzad is far more challenging since it both covers wide-ranging subject matters and, from the self-explanatory title to characterization, owes much of its central narrative line to a complex and interacting web of literary texts and cinematic masterpieces.

A romance-crime melodrama, Shahrzad opens in Tehran in 1953 when the Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadeq and Dr. Hossein Fatemi from the nationalist camp voice their opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah and manage to nationalize the British-owned Anglo-Oil Company. This political tension that finally reinstated the Shah and overthrew the democratically elected Mossadeq under the secret support of CIA and MI6 agents (Sadr, 2006, p. 55) propelled the country into political and social upheaval. The escapades of such unsettling and catastrophic experiences are pointedly presented through the personality of a self-made authoritarian character called Bazorg-Agha Divansalar (acted by Ali Nassirian) who leads a mafia-like syndicate (Figure 1). His autocratic power thrives on a highly calculated string of double-dealings, betrayals, murder, and violent measures mainly carried out by his henchmen. Rival gangs like “Shervani” and “Behbudi” attempt to triumph over Bazorg-Agha by killing his wife and two sons in a preplanned car crash. Nevertheless, he enjoys greater wealth and power and, since he has invested huge amount of money in the coup, he can attain the prerogative of textile import though. This noir narrative of violent carnage, vice, and blood feuds that form the crux of the tension in the series under Bazorg-Agha’s leadership is sufficient in itself to establish the series’ connection with The Godfather (1972). Attentive audience can flesh out not only definite cultural and political parallels between the two works beyond their treatment of organized crime (post WWII 1940s and 1953 coup d’état) but also between the two main characters (Vito Corleone and Bazorg-Agha) who as strong and benevolent fathers take care of both family and business life. The point of this interpretation is that it can shed light on the larger social structures where The Godfather and Shahrzad supposedly take place.

Siegfried Kracauer, in his famous From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film (1947) observes “the films of a nation reflect its mentality in a more direct way than any other artistic media” (p. 5), which is especially the case in The Godfather and Shahrzad. With an oppressive
Sicilian background, Vito arrives in America where money, power, and respect are closely related. Francis Ford Coppola mentioned in an interview that he used “mafia” as a symbol for American Capitalism: “I always wanted to use the Mafia as a metaphor for America. If you look at the film, you see that it’s focused that way [...] I feel that the Mafia is an incredible metaphor for this country” (as cited in Farber, 1972, p. 224). The “Saga of the Corleones” not only touches on American values and American Way of Life but also chronicles the struggles for the American Dream by Italian immigrant families and their assimilation of the mainstream culture as Bonasera’s iconic and ironic sentence bears witness: “I believe in America. America has made my fortune. And I raised my daughter in the American fashion. I gave her freedom, but I taught her never to dishonor her family”. However, as Michael’s metamorphosis from a law-abiding person to a vengeful murderer exemplifies, The Godfather trilogy is “a metaphor of America’s state of corruption, both in spirit and commerce, which represents its tragedy” (Poon, 2006, p. 69). The world of The Godfather is one in which the ubiquity of corruption, excess, and vice of “good murders” is legitimized given that Vito has set up an alternative policing system with his close contacts to high-ranking politicians, judges, policemen and journalists. Put another way, in order to achieve the Dream one has to sacrifice family members, friends, and moral values. Likewise, Shahrzad opens in a stifling and dark sociocultural climate of a country where people struggle for “democracy” and “freedom” under Mosaddegh’s government. But as it turns out, such an attempt achieves nothing for Iranians but torture, arrest, terror, and censorship. In the series under discussion, different dimensions of this tragic quest are reflected most prominently in “Bozorg-Agha” and “Farhad” characterization, which the paper will address in the following paragraphs.

An important aspect which closely connects the story of The Godfather with that of Shahrzad is that they have a villainous patriarchal character in their focus. Coppola’s The Godfather portrays some accounts of the Italian-American culture—revolving around the family of Corleones, descendants of a Sicilian background—such as “identity politics, love, family relations, friendships, struggles against ethnic prejudice, [...]” (Warner & Riggio, 2012, p. 213). Vito Corleone is a non-WASP orphan who establishes an Italian-American Mafia empire and is much respected as the “upholder of the Sicilian Mafiosi values by which [the whole family] abide. He is a figure of familial authority more than a figure of organizational authority” (Poon, 2006, p. 190). Moreover, Vito, as the leader of the Mafia, uses networks of personal relationships (e.g. with an undertaker, a baker, a Hollywood producer) as a tool to perform tasks and achieve his goals (Warner & Riggio, 2012, p. 218). In addition, he conducts his undertakings based on his self-fashioned complicated codes: family and business are of paramount importance to Vito and his “success”. He considers family as
a holy institution: “A man who doesn’t spend time with his family can never be a real man”. Business, more importantly, legitimizes anything: “morality is so blended with considerations of profit that the ethical and the pragmatic are almost impossible to distinguish, resulting in a moral ambiguity that approaches a condition of moral confusion” (Warner & Riggio, 2012, p. 221). For the Corleones, in other words, business and family are one and the same.

To conceive Divansalar family (Bozorg-Agha) as the paragon of mobster narrative, Fathi heavily capitalizes on and draws inspiration from the bloody vendettas between Vito Corleone and the “big shots” like Virgil Sollozzo and the Tattaglia Family as drug barons. Having “all the judges and politicians in his pocket” as well as stacks of money, guns, flashy cars, illegal goods, and cluster of goons, Bozorg-Agha has an upper hand over all the other crime families like Shervani and Behbudi who in an unsuccessful attempt plot Bozorg-Agha’s assassination due to their quarrel about a competitive tender concerning some pieces of land in Rostam Abad. Similar to Vito, Bozorg-Agha’s leadership is based on personal relationships and material profit. He does not grant any requests without securing his own profit. The scene Hashem Khan, Farhad’s father, pleads for the salvation of his son is virtually similar to Bonasera’s plea. As soon as Hashem Khan’s request is granted, Shahrzad has to marry Ghobad to alleviate the pain of Shirin’s sterility. Then, Farhad regains his physical life by losing his emotional life. Like Vito Corleone, Bozorg-Agha grants or takes the life of anybody he desires. In other words, family and business go hand in hand for Vito Corleone and Bozorg-Agha. Overriding these codes is the theme of traditionally accepted images of patriarchal family and authority, the two cultural codes that prevail among Iranian families. In direct parallel with Vito, Bozorg-Agha is known as a kind traditionalist man who lives by strict moral codes and demands respect commensurate with his status (Figure 2). It is noteworthy that Bozorg-Agha, unlike Vito Corleone, does not belong to another cultural order struggling against ethnic discrimination or financial prosperity. Rather, he is a senior corrupt politician carrying out Shah’s orders.

In parallel with this harsh buzz of political upheaval, a love story gathers pace and force throughout Shahrzad. In the wake of the coup and the political unrest that ensued the government resorted to exile policy, banned journals from activity, and barred dissident writers/students from verbalizing their ideas. Farhad (acted by Mostafa Zamani)—an enthusiastic proponent of Mossadeq, a potential poet given his academic education in Persian literature, and an avid reader of Nima Yushij, Parvin E’tesami, and George Bernard Shaw—is accused of revolting against Shah (national security) and put on trial to be dramatically saved at the last moment by Bozorg-Agha who seeks to compel Farhad’s fiancée Shahrzad (acted by Taraneh Alidoosti) to marry his nephew.
and son-in-law Ghobad (acted by Shahab Hosseini) as a second wife for the possibility of having an heir. While women in Shahrzad, under the dictates of the patriarchal society, are treated as bearers of progeny and commodities to be purchased by men, Shahrzad, in defiance of conventional mores, is a medical student at Tehran University, articulate, and well-versed in literature and other branches of art. On the day of the coup d’état (August 19) while Shahrzad and Farhad have planned to see each other in Cafe Naderi as a meeting hub for nationalist and leftwing intellectuals, a number of hired thugs ransack the newspaper office where Farhad works. One of the thugs is killed as he is about to attack Farhad. Sentenced to death by a military court, Farhad attempts to elope with Shahrzad but is caught by Bozorg-Agha’s men half way to Shiraz. The struggle is resolved when following a web of intrigues and in order to save Farhad’s life, Shahrzad consents to marry the feckless frequenter of cabarets and gambling halls, Ghobad (Figure 3). Meanwhile, the newly-wed couple find their mutual life frequently beset by Bozorg-Agha and his foulmouthed daughter ironically named Shirin (Sweet).

The narrative structure of this heart-rending love story is partially drawn from that of One Thousand and One Nights—a miscellany of Middle Eastern folk tales compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age—which features a frame story and several embedded narratives. In One Thousand and One Nights, Scheherazade narrates a number of tales to Sultan Shahriyar over many nights to postpone her death. In the same way, Fathi narrates various tales to postpone the fulfillment of Shahrzad’s and Farhad’s love and add complexity and suspense to the series. What is more, after her forced marriage, Shahrzad reads Ghobad tales from One Thousand and One Nights to alleviate her agony, domesticate her unruly husband, and ward off Shirin’s obnoxious behavior. Moving farther into the past, Farhad and Shirin personae bear a strong ironized intertextual relationship with the romantic epic Khosrow and Shirin (1180) by the Iranian poet Nizami Ganjavi (1141–1209) whose œuvre is often compared to that of Shakespeare (Talattof & Clinton, 2000). While Farhad and the Armenian princess Shirin are deeply in love with each other in Khosrow and Shirin, in Fathi’s rendition the two are poles apart and alienated from each other, which potentially points to futility and contingency of love in modern life. Moreover, the love triangle between Shirin, Farhad, and Khosrow-Parviz in Nizami’s Khosrow and Shirin is epitomized in the love triangle between Shahrzad, Ghobad, and Farhad in Fathi’s Shahrzad. Nizami suspends the fulfillment of the romantic love between Khosrow-Parviz and Shirin through a series of separations, spatial distances, and hardships in a manner similar to what Shahrzad and Farhad endure. Ghobad is also very similar to Nizami’s Farhad, a love-rival who must be eliminated—figuratively sent to Behistun Mountain to carve stairs out of the cliff rocks—if Shahrzad and Farhad are to enjoy their deep love.
It is also tempting to suggest that the director develops two love-triangle plots based on Shakespeare’s *Othello*. It is worth focusing on how Fathi relocates *Othello* from its Venetian and Mediterranean context and fleshes out each character to showcase the tragic dimension of the love-triangle patterns. Its manifestations are powerfully encoded and objectified in a number of examples and events. The dominant love triangle revolves around Shahrzad, Farhad, and Ghobad where in order to save Farhad’s life, Shahrzad marries Ghobad only to bear him a child. The enactment of palimpsestuous blend reaches its apotheosis when over giving birth to a male heir, Bozorg-Agha presents Shahrzad with a white embroidered handkerchief belonging to his murdered wife (Figure 4(a)). One day, Shahrzad meets Farhad in a café and gives the handkerchief to him inadvertently to clean his bleeding finger (Figure 5(a)), which des-demonizes her. In a very naïve act, Shahrzad (Desdemona) tells Ghobad (Othello) about her unexpected meeting with Farhad (Cassio) which stirs Ghobad’s jealousy and suspicion. A few days later, Ghobad discovers a torn piece of poem dedicated to Shahrzad by Farhad which inflames his jealousy (Figure 6). However, unlike Othello, Ghobad as a modern man does not kill Shahrzad in a rush judgment. They solve the misunderstanding reasonably by talking about the problem. The parallel with *Othello* goes one step further in a meta-theatrical section: Babak (acting as Othello) and his fiancée Maryam (acting as Desdemona) stage *Othello* in National Theatre (Figure 7). Colonel Teymuri (Iago and Cassio), a frequent audience of the performances, falls in love with Maryam and through a series of political frame-ups meets her in his office on the pretext of censorship query. Finally, he proposes to Maryam one night. Finding his fiancée unfaithful, Babak realizes that the story of Othello and Desdemona has turned into “reality”. In a duel between Babak and Colonel Teymuri, Maryam and Babak are murdered and Colonel Teymuri is injured.

The notion of “conditioned” intellectual productions and culture by the owners of capital and material forces is embedded in the two love stories. In *Othello*, Alan Sinfield suggests, Iago,
Brabantio, and Othello relate their stories about Othello’s love affair with Desdemona (1992, p.30). However, the dominant white Venetian ideology that “interpellates” Othello as a black inferior outcast decides that his story is not plausible (Sinfield, 1992, p.30). Fathi, likewise, demonstrates how the dominant class both fashions and manipulates the identity of social members, intellectuals included. A representative of a patriarchal society, Bozorg-Agha is a power elite who scripts ideology. At the beginning of the series, Bozorg-Agha specifies his own plausible tale of “femininity” for Shahrzad: marrying, bearing children, and cleaning. His barren daughter Shirin fails to conform to the most decisive requirement (having a child to secure inheritance) of the female subject. Hence, Bozorg-Agha commands his son-in-law to marry Shahrzad—an offer nobody can refuse. Shahrzad manages to insinuate her own way and elopes with Farhad but their story of love-match marriage is implausible. Bozorg-Agha threatens Shahrzad by inventing some stories about arresting and shooting Farhad which seem plausible to Shahrzad and her father, on account of which she marries Ghobad. The handkerchief of Bozorg-Agha’s wife that travels through the time of tradition to modern time symbolizes a female’s obedience to her husband. Likewise, Babak’s devotion to Maryam loses its plausibility when Colonel Teymuri as the other representative of political ideology intervenes. After concocting some stories about censoring the staging of Shakespeare’s Hamlet and Othello, he succeeds in advancing his personal story. Babak and Farhad, in a society where “the sword is mightier than the pen”, are paralyzed and unemployed intellectuals and journalists: both lose their beloved, fight for freedom in vain, and find their journalistic and theatrical activities banned. Shahrzad’s attitude and conduct, however, threaten such established notions like clan, duty, and gender roles. Although Shahrzad acquiesces to an enforced marriage, she establishes her own space and bit of difference: she gives the handkerchief
to Farhad, keeps Farhad’s poem, and despite Bozorg-Agha’s decision for naming the baby Kabir (Great) she renames her son Omid (Hope). Moreover, Ghobad accepts her explanations about meeting Farhad in the café as well as the piece of torn poem and does not kill her. In short, Shahrzad is representative of the modern and educated Iranian women who do not bow down in conformity.

This stifling atmosphere of the country during and after the coup and people’s anxiety are palpably depicted throughout the series. The overt sign that showcases the suffocating and fruitless ideology of the dominant class is manifest in Shirin and her despicable personality. She is the direct wretched offspring of the dominant rich class characterized as barren, self-centered, and vulgar. What is more, in the hands of her scullery maid Akram, Shirin becomes an alcoholic suffering from nocturnal hallucinations and kills her longtime servant Malmal. This sterility is also displayed in a chain of unrequited or abortive loves: Shahrzad-Farhad, Farhad-Roya, Ghobad-Shirin, Maryam-Babak and Maryam-Colonel Teymuri, and Homeira-Hushang.

Amen-bird (Morgh-e Amin), in the same vein, is attendant to this tumultuous dark cultural profile. As an ingenious symbol in Iranian folklores, Amen-bird is an angel which constantly sings “amen” while flying. It is believed that if a person makes a wish while the Amen-bird is flying over his head, the wish will be fulfilled. In one scene in Cafe Naderi, Farhad reads Nima Yushij’s allegorical poem “The Amen-bird” and presents Shahrzad with an Amen-bird necklace (Figure 8). Nima Yushij composed “The Amen-bird” in 1951 (1330) when the National Movement of Iran, led by Dr. Mohammad Mossadeq, was active on the political scene. With revolutionary implications, Yushij’s “The Amen-bird” is an optimistic poem in line with the aspirations and hopes of Iranians to overthrow tyranny and dictatorship. Hence, the Amen-bird heralds change in the despotic system of society, which is a long-waited popular wish. Even after her marriage to Ghobad, Shahrzad keeps the Amen-bird necklace which proclaims her hope for a better future.

To sum up, in a retrospective look, Fathi attempts to portray a critical era in the history of Iran which is believed to put an end to the socio-political and cultural development of the country. With regard to the passage of time and conflicting ideologies, Alan Sinfield remarks “dissident potential derives ultimately not from essential qualities in individuals (though they have qualities) but from conflict and contradiction that the social order inevitably produces within itself, even as it attempts to sustain itself” (1992, p.41). “Despite their power,” he continues, “dominant ideological formations are always, in practice, under pressure, striving to substantiate their claim to superior plausibility in the face of diverse disturbances” (Sinfield, 1992, p.41). Although Shahrzad portrays
violence and savagery in a backward patriarchal society, it foreshadows and demonstrates positive changes. For instance, Shahrzad’s older sister, Homeira, has not been allowed to study at university and was forced to marry at a very young age while Shahrzad can go to university to become a physician and work in society like men, according to Bozorg-Agha. Shahrzad’s younger sister is even luckier to join the Society of Vanguard Ladies or play sports at gym. Hence, it could be argued that Fathi’s serial is not exhaustively pessimistic: Sharzad’s son, though not born out of love, is named Omid (Hope) which demonstrates that the director attempts to fashion a bright future for the characters of the series. At the end, Bozorg-Agha, Shervani, and Behbudi are gunned down; Ghobad, a family outsider despite his blood relationship with Bozorg-Agha, becomes “Godfather” to the Divansalar Empire like Michael Corleone in The Godfather; Shahrzad and Farhad marry; and the Amen-bird and little Omid herald a brighter future, all of which bring to mind Vito’s dying words: “life is a beautiful thing”. Ghobad’s ascendance to power as an idle young man loitering in cabarets that carries echoes of Shakespeare’s Henry V marks as an intertextual thematic bookend to the series’ first season and our discussion.
4. Conclusion
In the works of such theorists of adaptation studies as Stam, Hutcheon, and Sleuthaug, questions like “faithfulness” to a single identifiable literary source and whether a given film is better than the book it adapts, the two dominant investitures that enforce a singular authoritative voice upon the field, are replaced with more holistic, creative, and multifaceted approaches. In keeping with this perspective, postmodernism represents a novel point of departure from these value-laden assumptions whereby adaptation is considered as a vessel for transcending academic borders, national territories, and the distinction between “high” and “low” culture. One of the central operating assumptions of such perspective is that literary adaptation, inherently intertextual and palimpsestic, both engages in ceaseless dialogue with and rewrites a network of texts, films, musical records, utterances, political events, and cultural phenomena. The directorial oeuvre of Hasan Fathi, in its entirety, is characterized with a deep knowledge of national (Persian) and Western (mainly English/American) literary traditions and awareness of historical events. This being the case, in Shahrazad the director self-consciously incorporates substantial material from local and Western canons to present a mélange of authors, fictional characters, and historical figures despite their deep-seated cultural and social differences. In a typically postmodern manner, the director funnels this rhizomatic web of citations through a historical event that still looms large in national memory of Iranians, i.e. the 1953 coup d’etat that wrapped the country in nightmarish conditions. The result is a very complex and playful postmodern interplay of “textuality” (drama, film, and poetry) premised on animating a complex network of political incidents. It allows the director to carve out a niche for commenting on cultural attitudes, beliefs, and discursive practices of the time under consideration. Attempting to address Fathi’s “historian-adaptor” approach in directing Shahrazad, this paper illustrates the extent to which an eclectic mixture of One Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights), Shakespeare’s Othello, Nizami’s Khosrow and Shirin, and Coppola’s The Godfather—each written and produced across different centuries and countries—creates a heightened complexity of characters, themes, and subject matters. The Godfather is an intertextual venue for visualizing the ubiquity of political corruption and conflict that culminated in overthrowing the democratically elected Mossadegh in 1953. The series also utilizes One Thousand and One Nights and Othello to demonstrate how the dominant ideology and power relations stomp on ordinary and subordinate parties. A twenty-first century Iranian series that serves to stretch adaptation conventions, Shahrazad, it is tempting to conclude, is a palimpsestuous hive of intertextuality in which Vito Corleone, Othello, Desdemona, Scheherazade, etc. dance together.

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