

Institution: University of Edinburgh		
Unit of Assessment: Panel D - UoA 26: Modern Languages and Linguistics		
Title of case study: Establishing Scotland as a centre for understanding Iran through its cinema.		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2011-2019		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Prof Nacim Pak-Shiraz	Personal Chair of Cinema and Iran	September 2010-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014 – March 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact <p>In 2014, Edinburgh International Film Festival turned its lens on Iran, a country whose image is overwhelmingly negative across much of the world, particularly Europe. Drawing on her research into Iranian cinema, Iranian society and Islam, Professor Nacim Pak-Shiraz curated 23 of the Festival's film screenings, many using the only copy in the world, and all Scottish premieres. Since then, her research has underpinned over 60 film screenings and events on Iranian film, largely as part of the Edinburgh Iranian Festival - Film Season (EIF-FS), gaining the trust of Iranian filmmakers and distributors to premiere work outside larger, more established festivals. This trust has proved vital in raising EIF-FS's international profile and sustainable growth, taking it from a biennial to annual event respected for its non-Eurocentric approach to film, its celebration of female perspectives, and active engagement of audiences with filmmakers, curators, and researchers in understanding Iran through its cinema.</p>		
2. Underpinning research <p>It was while studying Arabic as a postgraduate student that Professor Nacim Pak-Shiraz first realised the powerful role that cinema played in shaping people's understanding of her native Iran. Studying alongside Western peers, whose perceptions of the Islamic Republic were largely based on the 1991 Hollywood film, <i>Not Without My Daughter</i>, she was repeatedly asked about the reality of life, particularly as a female, in a theocracy. From a fascination with the power of Western media, and the way it continuously shapes the image of the 'Other', she developed a greater interest and expertise in the lesser-studied area of how 'Others' construct images of themselves. Since 2000, she has been studying Iranian cinema, with a particular focus on the role it plays in exploring the complexities of Iranian society and Islam.</p> <p>The first of three main themes in Pak-Shiraz's research is Iranian film directors' treatment of religious and historical narratives. Her 2011 book, <i>Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film</i> (3.1), is the only monograph examining the engagement of film with Islam to date, sparking debate about cinema's compatibility with religion and spirituality. Latterly, her research on this theme has explored recent Iranian religious epics, including 'Qur'anic Epics', in an era during which the representation of religious figures, including prophets, in Islam has been particularly controversial, and the creation of religious films a highly sensitive undertaking. The research examines how, recognising the medium's power, the Iranian theocracy has used cinema to provide an alternative image of Islam and its</p>		

prophet to those presented by Muslim extremists and Western narratives, while also claiming to critically examine Muslim sources (3.2 and 3.3).

In her research on religious films, Pak-Shiraz looks at how Iranian cinema has become one of the very few in the Muslim world to have imagined and narrated stories of revered religious figures. In her work on **constructions of masculinity** in Iranian cinema - the second of her key themes - she demonstrates how recent Iranian films have skilfully used the cinematic language to narrate men's stories of alienation and despair (3.4 and 3.5). Iran has been the focus of many studies on the subjugation and marginality of women, but little has been studied about the theocracy's impact on male identities. In her research, Pak-Shiraz examines a number of recent films with men as the focus, from middle class men in vibrant Tehran to men on the fringes of society. Challenging stereotypes, she explores how such tales provide a more complex insight into masculine identities in patriarchal society than has been studied to date. One particularly innovative strand of her research is on **female filmmakers' representations of men**.

The final theme of Pak-Shiraz's research is on **continuities and discontinuities** in Iranian cinema over the last six decades (3.6). She examines the theme through post-2010 Iranian productions, including films by both the established 'maestros' of Iranian cinema, and those of the new generation of filmmakers, born after the Iranian Revolution and the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. Engagement with the filmmakers themselves, including some who have spent years in self-imposed exile, has enabled Pak-Shiraz to examine consistencies, breaks and gaps in the oeuvre. In this way, she has been able to trace the development of style, themes and cinematic language in Iranian films, from pre-Revolutionary times to the present.

3. References to the research

3.1 Pak-Shiraz, N. (2011). *Shi'i Islam in Iranian cinema: Religion and spirituality in film*. London: I.B. Tauris. ISBN: 978-1-84885-510-6 (Can be supplied by HEI on request).
<https://edin.ac/2KYy3EH>

3.2 Pak-Shiraz, N. (2016). The Qur'anic epic in Iranian cinema. *Journal of Religion and Film*, 20:1, pp. 1-25. <https://edin.ac/2L21p4V>

3.3 Pak-Shiraz, N. (2019). The divine word on the screen: Imaging the Qu'ran in Iranian cinema. In A. Cancian (Ed.) *Approaches to the Qur'an in contemporary Iran*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 375-408. ISBN: 9780198840763 (Submitted in REF2)
<https://edin.ac/2L2Vn47>

3.4 Pak-Shiraz, N. (2017). Shooting the isolation and marginality of masculinities in Iranian cinema. *Iranian studies*, 50:6, pp.945-67. DOI:[10.1080/00210862.2017.1357672](https://doi.org/10.1080/00210862.2017.1357672)

3.5 Pak-Shiraz, N. (2018). Constructing masculinities through Javanmards in Pre-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. In L. Ridgeon (Ed.), *Javanmardi: The ethics and practice of Persianate perfection*, pp.297-318. London: Gingko Library. DOI:[10.2307/j.ctv75d0fs.15](https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv75d0fs.15). (Can be supplied by HEI on request).

3.6 Pak-Shiraz, N. (2019). Iranian cinema today: An ode to the past and new directions in the future? In J. Bloom and S. Blair (Eds.), *Islamic art: Past, present, future*. Newhaven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, pp.260-77. ISBN: 9780300243475 (Can be supplied by HEI on request) <https://edin.ac/2XQSWdw>

Funding:

Nacim Pak-Shiraz. Royal Society of Edinburgh, Small Grants. *Women Depicting Freedom of Movement in Public and Private Spaces in Iran*. 2019. GBP7,500.

Nacim Pak-Shiraz. AHRC-CASAW Research Network. *Male Bodies and Masculinities in the Middle East*. 2014. GBP16,350.

4. Details of the impact

Home to the Edinburgh International Film Festival, the world's longest continually-running film festival, Scotland has established itself as a leading centre for exploring global cultures through film. One of the key challenges in maintaining this position is gaining the trust of film producers and distributors to premiere new work, and of filmmakers and actors to participate in events, especially where this involves additional obstacles - such as visas and licence agreements - affected by fragile international relations. Over the past six years, research by Professor Nacim Pak-Shiraz has enabled the directors and curators of Scotland's film festivals to premiere new work by Iranian filmmakers, show older work that has grown hard to access, and bring Iranian perspectives, especially female voices, into previously Eurocentric conversations. Her work has enriched the debate around cinema by presenting Iranian films neither as an annex to Western Cinema nor as a window to the 'exotic', but as a vibrant, parallel discourse on the medium.

In 2014, Pak-Shiraz programmed and led two 90-minute panel sessions based on her research at the 68th Edinburgh International Film Festival. She also worked closely with the Festival's then Artistic Director, Chris Fujiwara, in planning its various Iran sections, comprising 23 screenings of 19 Iranian films. Most of the films had not been previously accessible or available in English subtitles, many comprised the only copy in the world, and all were Scottish premieres (many also UK premieres). Drawing on her research into **religious and historical narratives** and **continuities and discontinuities**, Pak-Shiraz was instrumental in persuading reclusive filmmaker, Ebrahim Golestan, to take part in a session bringing together masters of the past, a new generation of filmmakers, scholars, and Fujiwara, to evaluate the development of Iranian cinema. Audience feedback mentions the rarity of this opportunity, the draw of the directors' "*perspectives*" and "*personalities*", how interesting it was to see the "*influence of censorship*" and an appreciation of how "*new cinema [has been] emerging from older stories (Golestan)*" (5.1).

The following year, Pak-Shiraz's research on **constructions of masculinity** was used in the programming of the Edinburgh International Film Festival, and as the main theme of the Edinburgh Iranian Festival Film Season (EIF-FS). Audience feedback was effusive; a typical email said "*So wonderful to learn more about a country and people that have been traditionally shrouded in mystery to those in the west*" (5.2). Of just over 200 people surveyed at eight film screenings and three post-screening discussions, 91% said that they had learned more about Iranian cinema, and 79% that they had learned more about Iran (5.3). Prior to Pak-Shiraz's involvement, EIF-FS was biennial, but the cultural and commercial opportunities opened up through her research made it viable to run annually at the request of venue partner, Filmhouse. The 2016 Season was moved into a bigger screen (93 seats), all five films were sold out, and four post-screening events were programmed, including discussions with the filmmakers.

By 2018, Pak-Shiraz's research on **female filmmakers' representations of men** had gained the attention of Iranian female directors and their distributors. This made it possible to theme that year's EIF-FS on Women Constructing Men, bringing together eight commercial and arthouse films at Filmhouse, including one screened in the venue's largest, 280-seater space. The screening of *Untaken Paths*, a film not often included in festivals, attracted a particularly large number of Iranian-Scots living outside Edinburgh, due to the fame of its multi-award-winning Director, Tahmineh Milani, who took part in a post-screening Q&A. Writing to Pak-Shiraz about the "*outstanding*" Season, the filmmaker, critic, and curator of Channel 4's major season on Iranian cinema, Mark Cousins, said: "*I was very impressed ... The thematic focus was clear and relevant, the choice of films was original and illuminating, and the thinking behind the event was rich and deeply informed. I pride myself ... on knowing about Iranian film, but I learnt much from the screenings and discussions ...*"

The audiences were considerable and passionate, and it was a real coup to have Tahmineh Milani as a guest.” (5.4).

EIF-FS founding director, Sara Kheradmand, has publicly said that *“We are not a typical Iranian Festival aimed at Iranians ... The global issues, such as the [theme of domestic violence] in Untaken Paths, could be happening anywhere” (5.5).* It is hardly surprising then that such themes have extended the impact of Pak-Shiraz’s research, and EIF-FS, beyond film audiences and the Iranian community in Edinburgh. Survey responses from the eight screenings curated by Pak-Shiraz for the 2019 Season show that, by the Edinburgh Iranian Festival’s 10th anniversary, 27% of the EIF-FS audience was travelling from outside Edinburgh and the Lothians to attend (14% from outside Scotland), with 62% of people having never attended before, and 84% likely or very likely to return (5.6). Kheradmand has written: *“The film season is beginning to be recognised on an international level. We are definitely well known now by Iranian Film distributors from around the world, and our reputation and track record allows them to trust us and be willing to take part in the festival by sending us their films ... The invitation of high profile guests, has only been successful because of [our] collaboration” (5.7).* This was found to be particularly true when, in March 2020, EIF-FS was impacted by COVID-19 and the Iranian filmmaker and women’s rights activist Mahnaz Mohammadi recorded interviews to be screened alongside opening feature, *Son-Mother*, when she could no longer attend in person to discuss her work in the context of Pak-Shiraz’s research.

As the international reputation of EIF-FS has grown, so too has Pak-Shiraz’s influence outside Scotland. She has spoken on her research themes in Turkey, the United States and Iran itself; running workshops on Iranian cinema at the 2017 Fajr International Film Festival in Tehran, for example. In turn, international recognition and activities have enabled her to draw more Iranian talent to Scotland, including multi-award-winning Iranian female actor Fatemah (Simin) Motamed-Arya as an Edinburgh International Film Festival jury member and ‘in conversation’ guest in 2018, and as EIF-FS co-curator and panellist the following year. Motamed-Arya has said *“Nacim’s research on Iranian Cinema has enabled me to engage with audiences on a profound level, exploring together through film and dialogue the differences between how Iran and its people are perceived internationally and the more nuanced reality” (5.8).*

For Filmhouse, which is the hub of both the Edinburgh International Film Festival and EIF-FS, Pak-Shiraz’s research has opened up new possibilities to engage audiences in film. This began in 2016 with Pak-Shiraz using her research on traditional Iranian performing arts to curate a pop-up exhibition of 13 posters from the cinema’s archives as a starting point to discuss Iranian history, politics and society - the first time the venue’s café space was used in this way. In the years since, the cinema has hosted an Iranian Animation Showcase (another first for UK audiences), and two EIF-FS photographic exhibitions in its café, the most recent in 2020 curated by acclaimed Iranian photographer and former photojournalist, Laleh Sherkat. The Director of Programming at Filmhouse has said *“it was crucial for us that the Edinburgh Iranian Festival make its Film Season an annual event. The range of themes the research and knowledge of the region’s cinema has enabled us to address, in partnership with EIF-FS, has not only given us a sustainable Season that attracts both returning and new audiences, year on year - and industry guests of the highest calibre - but also new opportunities to use our space that helps us contextualise the films we show and maximise the potential of our building and its archive” (5.9).*

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

5.1 Edinburgh International Film Festival 2014 survey responses.

5.2 Edinburgh Iranian Festival Film Season (EIF-FS) attendee’s email.

5.3 EIF-FS 2015 survey responses.

5.4 Testimonial letter from Mark Cousins, 6th March 2018.

5.5 Sara Konradi's review of EIF-FS 2018 in *The Student* (readership c.30,000; print circulation 2,500), 'Iranian cinema returns to Edinburgh as tribute to female directors'.
<http://www.studentnewspaper.org/iranian-cinema-returns-to-edinburgh-as-tribute-to-female-directors/>

5.6 EIF-FS 2019 survey responses.

5.7 Testimonial by EIF-FS founding director, Sara Kheradmand.

5.8 Testimonial by Iranian actor Fatemah (Simin) Motamed-Arya. This is evidenced by a recording of a phone conversation, in Persian, between Pak-Shiraz and Simin, who is listed as contact in the submission.

5.9 Testimonial by Director of Programming, Filmhouse Cinemas