

## The Exoticism Concept in Iranian Culture and its Aspects in Iranian Traditional Music

Mansoor Habibdoost

Department of Music, Faculty of Architecture and Art, University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran

---

**Abstract:** Exoticism can be considered under any cultural unfamiliarity in an art work. However, this concept is adopted to Western definition of similarity, here in Iranian (Persian) traditional music what the exotic elements are and how they are extracted can be considered under various musical reflections of Iranian cultural beliefs about the exoticism concept; backgrounds such as the viewpoint of Iranian culture to Western world, some of the verbal language strangeness in names and expressions of Radif, the differences of sound texture in this music also attitudes to female as another one to male. Although, a different approach contains the observation of outstanding unfamiliar elements in the four main traits of music (pitch, rhythm, timbre and dynamic). Therefore, the issue of this article is consideration the exotic elements in the content, structure and practice of Iranian traditional music according to the exoticism concept in Iranian culture so that, the topic can be started in this music and the medium prepared for more related researches in the future.

**Key words:** Exotic elements, exoticism, Iranian culture, Iranian (Persian) traditional music, radif

---

### INTRODUCTION

The concept of unfamiliarity in art is more expressed under the word exoticism. It can be referred to places, people and different traits of an especial culture which have found unfamiliar aspects or exotic elements in an art work. These aspects and elements can be traceable at different musical cultures such as Iranian traditional music. However, unfamiliarity concept goes beyond artistic reviews and is practical at philosophy and sociology fields too. In these studies, the quiddity and quality of unfamiliar identity and its differences with own one are paid attention.

Discussions about exotic elements in Iranian traditional music can fall in superficiality so that, this concept exists beyond the external appearances especially names and expressions applied in it for example, it can be said that names Rast Kouk (right tuning) and Chap Kouk (left tuning) in respect to male and female singing, leave an exotic aspect on female singers because of in Iranian culture, the word rast (right) is equivalent to the correct way and the word chap (left), incorrect one. The truth is such names and expressions are not raised from the content, structure and even practice of Iranian traditional music and are related to the instrument Kamancheh (fiddle-like) (Safvat and Karon, 2009) and Saba (Abol Hasan Saba (15 April 1902-19 December 1957) explains them according to the turn direction of tuning pegs of this instrument (Safvat and Karon, 2009).

Nevertheless, the exoticism concept is not unfamiliar to the practical nature of Iranian traditional music for example, in its performance by some non-Iranians or Iranians stayed away from the homeland, some unfamiliar elements compared to the samples of inside Iran can be heard; the elements such as vocal ornaments (Tahrir-e-Avaz-i) with regular and slow rhythm or unfollow accent and dialect of Farsi (Persian) poems sung by the singers of these vocal ornaments. Also the articulations of Iranian traditional music when are influenced especially by Western pop music can be considered the exotic elements.

The impressions based on the content interpretation and totality of Iranian traditional music also can show some other unfamiliarity in it for example, Nettl by division Radif to two main categories of the Shour-like Dastgah-s and Chahargah-like ones explains the category of Shour is generally similar to Arabic Maqams and the one of Chahargah, similar to Maqams of Iraqi music or generally to Western music. He also believes in composing music before performance or the contrary point of improvisation is a process affected by Western classical music and so is an exotic element in Iranian traditional music (Nettl, 2009).

On the other hands, the exoticism concept has its definite position in philosophy for example, at philosophy of feminist criticism, female finds an unfamiliar role at culture De Beauvoir (1972) (Simone Lucie Ernestine Marie Bertrand De Beauvoir (9 January 1908-14 April 1986)), the

French feminist philosopher, at the book. The second sex (*Le Deuxieme Sexe*) in 1949 claims women have always been the exotic entity to men. The quiddity of such a belief can be consider at the structure and content of any art genre such as Iranian traditional music to show an interpretation according to existence or non-existence of sexist view in it.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

This study is written in the domain of analytical literature of Iranian traditional music and the definite issues of musicology and sociology are applied for proceeding it. However, it has a reviewing medium and as well as other studies in the fields of art in which the conclusion of the outstanding ideas in related studies along with their criticisms, also new ideas are used.

**Research history:** The quiddity of the exotic elements in Iranian traditional music has no especial history in the domain of analytical literature of this music. Although, it can be traceable in different discussion about musical reflection of social relations, like Iranian viewpoint to Western world and some names and expressions approximately unfamiliar to this music. Also another medium of the research contains the outstanding aspects of the exotic elements in the four main traits of music (pitch, rhythm, timbre and dynamic) which not only in Iranian traditional music, also in any definite music genre with its especial social and cultural context can be identified.

With attention to the role of culture at definition the exoticism concept, for categorizing such elements in Iranian traditional music, it is necessary to seek relations between Iranian social structures and this music, also the reflections of the social customs have to be shown at it. In the analytical literature of Iranian traditional music, these topics to some extent are payed attention; one of them seen by Nettl (2009) is the reflection of Iranian social structure and political power at Radif (Nettl, 2009). Also Hajarian believes in Radif is shaped by and affected from historic and political events, also cultural mentality of Iranians at the past (Hajarian, 2008) and so the reflection of Iranian thinking about the exoticism concept can be crystalized in it.

On the other hands, extraction the content and structural concepts of Radif including unfamiliar elements from names and expressions applied in it has a long history at its analytical literature for example, Khaleqi claims the similarity between the names Rak (the name of some Gusheh-s of Radif) and Raga in Indian classical music implies the structural similarity of them (Khaleqi,

1999, 2007), explanation of Gusheh-s Rak in Dastgah Mahour). This type of reasoning is not totally correct however can carefully be useful for seeking unfamiliar elements for example, Nettl says the variety of names in Radif displays it is formed by positioning different material together which can contain the exotic ones. Also Boroumand refers to this point about Radif that a Gusheh named Shekasteh (broken) at each Dastgah means the interval of whole tone breaks and changes by Koron symbol (an especial accidental symbol in Iranian traditional music which approximately effects like). However, he adds in the following of his talk that a definite deduction about the names of Gusheh-s is not possible (Boroumand, explanation of Gusheh Shekasteh in Dastgah Mahour). Masoudieh also believes in there is generally no relation between the names of Gusheh-s and the characteristics of their melodies (Masoudieh, 2011). Although, these characteristics in two Gusheh-s-Raz-o Niyaz and Souz-o Godaz are adopted with their names (Masoudieh, 2011) sounding divine secrets in the first and human griefs in the other.

Nevertheless, in the analytical literature of Iranian traditional music except the above items, discussions about the differences available in sonic texture and look to female as an exotic element to male is very rare. Hence, consideration the unfamiliar elements of this music in relation to the exoticism concept in Iranian culture has different aspects which can be categorized in four determining keywords including Western world, verbal language, sonic texture and female. These keywords at cultural interaction of Iranian society have found a reflection on Iranian traditional music or an analysis can be introduced based on their reflection on this music which will be mentioned in the following.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

**Western world as exoticism source:** The ideas that West and everything Western originality can effect on Iranian traditional music is more expressed by Nettl. He believes in Radif is Iranian equivalent of comprehensive and theoretical system of Western classical music. Also with attention to importance of vocal music than instrumental music in the past periods of Iran, he claims getting importance instrument than voice in the late periods is concerned by contact between Iranian traditional music and Western classical music and is an exotic influence of Western world on Iran (Nettl, 2009). The reasoning is some comments of Iranian musicians in the time which show they had superficially imitated from Western classical music as a universal one for example, they said instrument Santur (dulcimer-like) is the same piano (Nettl,

2009). Acceptance of such a similarity could make similarity between Iranian traditional music and the universal music. In this regard, Farhat also says: "the Iranian musicians are very eager to point out that the major mode is the same as the mode of Mahour (Farhat, 1966)." It is probable there is a proud sense in being such a similarity. Of course, it must be accepted that move toward West was a profound stream at policies of the late Qajar dynasty and during Pahlavi dynasty. So, it is not amazing such thinking stream shows itself very dominantly in the mind of some musicians of the time (Habibdoost, 2014).

On the other hand, an important point can be extract from Nettl (2009) viewpoint about Iranian traditional music to support extracting the exotic elements in this music. The point is a seek about Iranian society in relation to Radif structure which can show three effective qualities; importance of classifying or hierarchy, individualism or unpredictable and emphasis on honors (Nettl, 2009). Accordingly, everything in this music in contrast to these three points can be considered as an exotic element (and seemingly affected by West) including absence of classifying or hierarchy for example presenting Gusheh-s of each Dastgah unorderedly. Also predictability or happening based on the community agreement especially according to a logical repetitive structure. Such deduction can make unfamiliarity between some known forms of Iranian traditional music like Chaharmezrab or Reng and its main texture. These forms are predictable in structure and have some ostinato-like motives named Payeh also repetitive rhythmic pattern. Although, this tip can historically justified so that, if appearance of Radif dates back to pre-Qajar dynasty, Chaharmezrab and Reng are recently added to the practice of Radif and for example, it is said that Reng is invented by Darvish Khan (also known as Gholam Hossein Darvish (1872-22 November 1926)) (Safvat and Karon, 2009) or is added in the time of Mirza Abdollah (Also known as Agha Mirza Abdollah Farahani (1843-1918)) (Nettl, 2009).

The usage of orchestra for performing Iranian traditional music is also another example of West world influence on this music; especially in respect to this point that an Iranian traditional music orchestra has to neglect ornamental details available at the nature of this music because of practical problems in making synchronic sounds (Safat and Karon, 2009) while the especial ornaments are the fundamental of Radif and their quiddity are identical in shaping differentiation of some Avaz-es as Dashti with its main related Dastgah Shour. Iranian traditional music without the ornaments is superficial and performing them in a practice according to the notation or in an improvisational manner is necessary for presenting

an original performance (Safvat and Karon, 2009). Style of performance Iranian traditional music has its especial traits and more than everyone, ornaments can introduce it (Nettl, 2009). So, the usage of orchestra for performing Iranian traditional music basically is an exotic phenomenon.

The exoticism concept in Iranian traditional music can be displayed also by unfamiliarity to the principles of an original performance for example, Abuata and Bayat-e-Tork by being played on some Western instruments and the usage of the temperament tuning have found a popular and cheap mood (Safvat and Karon, 2009). Accordingly, the similar intervallic structures of Iranian traditional music with Western classic music can probably be an aspect of exoticism affected by Western world for example, at the short time Gusheh Isfahanak in Dastgah Mahour, a four tone structure from the leading tone until the mediant of C harmonic or melodic minor scale (in Western Classical music) can be heard. Also some Gusheh-s of Dastgah-s Mahour and Rast Panjgah can sound the quality of the major scale. On the other hands, it is probable to interpret some modes of Iranian traditional music according to the structure of Gregorian modes so that, Vaziri (Ali Naqi Vaziri; 1887-9 September 1979; 2012) and Khaleqi; Ruhollah Khaleqi; 1906-12 November 1965; 2007) do this. However, some of these interpretation may not be adopted to Iranian traditional music.

Also, the unconscious usage of some intervals of Western classical music in Iranian traditional music is an exotic aspect in the sonic texture of this music for example, in new Isfahan the changing B Koron to B is affected by the harmonic minor scale. So that, old Isfahan is originally similar to the natural minor scale and its key signature is B Koron, E and A Koron which shows a non-temperament shape of natural C Minor (Safvat and Karon, 2009). Or another example can be heard when some violinist who plays Iranian traditional music on this instrument, because of weak technique and superficial cognition in playing the Iranian especial intervals are attracted to make leading tone as Western classical music (Khaleqi, 2007).

**Unfamiliarity of verbal language:** Discovery the inner connections of a music is possible through studying the social customs and conventions related to that music (Hajarian, 2008). Accordingly, having a true study on the exotic elements in Iranian traditional music, the relationship between this music with Farsi have to be considered so that, the most structural patterns of this music are borrowed from the ones of classical Farsi poetry to some extent that Farsi Ghazal has imposed its conceptual plurality on Iranian traditional music (Hajarian,

2008). This viewpoint can leave an aspect of exotic elements in Iranian traditional music because of metaphor as the most important figure of speech of Ghazal is familiar reflection of an unfamiliar element. The method of considering this aspect in Iranian traditional music requires a peer to peer check of structural elements of Farsi Ghazal with the elements of this music in its totality or its integral sub-structures such as Dastgah Shour. This can be an issue for the future researches.

On the other hands, according to this assumption that Radif is the continuum of Iranian pre-Islam music or probably has 700 year old history (Hajarian, 2008) cannot deduct some verbal language similarities of this music to exotic music of neighbor cultures of Iran are reflection of each other so that, if there were some familiarity before it has become unfamiliar now for example, despite the verbal similarity between Rak in Radif with Raga in Indian classical music, there is no relation between them especially in intervallic structure (Farhat, 1966; Masoudieh, 2011). Gusheh-s Rak in Dastgah Mahour are located in the heart of Radif and have its general intervallic and rhythmic structure. So, according to the verbal language similarity cannot know Rak and Raga as the reflection of each other.

**Exoticism in sonic texture:** The especial sonic texture of Gusheh-s of each Dastgah and its presence in the other Dastgah-s as well as show an aspect of Radif aesthetic can show a sort of exoticism in the scale of each Dastgah for example, at Gusheh Shakasteh in Dastgah Mahour, the emotional quality of Dastgah Afshari is heard while each Gusheh has to have its especial quality (Boroumand, Explanation of Gusheh Shakasteh in Dastgah Mahour).

The usage of octave tones with different accidental symbols also shows another aspect of exotic elements in the scale of each Gusheh or Dastgah for example, at the sonic texture of Dastgah Mahour, tone A4 is ornamented by B4 which can be seen in Gusheh-s Nasirkhani, Mahour-e Saghir and also Aragh. Accordingly, the usage of B3 shows an exotic element to its octave (B4) in this Dastgah. This unfamiliarity is clear to some extent that some Iranian musician believes in this usage of B3 is concerned by leading tone in Western classical music and the goal of its appearance is move toward C4.

However, the usage of octave tones with different accidental symbols in Iranian traditional music displays an especial point of Radif aesthetics as a music genre based on modal system. For this reason, the usage of practical harmony of Western classical music in Iranian traditional music presents another aspect of exoticism in this music. The basis of the practical harmony is equality of homonymous tones in different octaves while in Iranian

traditional music such an equality does not exist. Henry Cowell (11 March 1897-10 December 1965), the American composer who has two piece about Iranian culture says about this issue: “classic European harmony fits scales but not modes, whether the modes be those chosen for development in the orient or in the occident (Cowell, 3).” Although, some Iranian composers who tried to use practical harmony of Western classical music in Iranian traditional music implicitly refer to this lack of relevance for example, ‘the first and second phrases (with the practical harmony) stimulate the emotional quality of Shour in B, Dashti in F, Hejaz of Abuata, Bayat-e-Shiraz and so on (Fakhreddini, 2015). Meaning of the stimulation in this quotation indicates unfamiliar identity of the practical harmony compared to Iranian traditional music.

On the other hands, the rare usage of some tones or intervals in a few Gusheh-s of each Dastgah can be a sort of exotic elements for example, the outstanding usage of unfamiliar tones E Koron 4 and B Koron 3 from the beginning of Gusheh Neyriz until its middle in Dastgah Mahour can show a sort of exoticism. Such a usage exists about E Koron 5 from the beginning of Gusheh Ashouravand until near the end of it in the same Dastgah. Such understanding makes a definite reason for some superficially structural problems of Radif and identifies them as the exotic elements with aesthetic function. Here is an emphasis on this idea that neglecting superficially structural problems of Radif for generalizing some rules on its structure, itself is an aspect of exoticism in Iranian traditional music and in conflict with Radif entity. On the other hand, maybe this generalization is affected by an incorrect understanding of scientific methodology in Western world.

**Female as exotic entity:** Feminist criticism refers to a broad area of discussions about resistance against male domination for example, feminists tried to show difficulties on the way of learning music in the past could cause to the submissive position of females in the music world and low number of female composers (Nochlin, 1988). Of course such as these discussions have continued until now and another topic of feminist criticism focuses on the logic of forming art works. Here, art is the reflection of social perception of sex and identity, however the position of female as subject not object has not found a definite expression in artworks (Ataie Ashtiani, 2006).

This viewpoint can be useful for considering the exotic elements in Iranian traditional music. Although, it should be noticed that in Iranian culture there are not many aspects of sexism for example, in Farsi language there are no specific pronouns for female and male. Also in some miniatures from the past of Iran, there are the

scenes demonstrating female musicians in an acceptable social situation. In this regard Khaleqi has an especial section about female musicians during Qajar dynasty in one of his book (Khaleqi, 1999).

Nevertheless, having a definite interpretation in mind, it can be probable to discuss through feminist criticism about content, structure and practice of Iranian traditional music for example, the move toward *Owj* (climax) is an interesting topic showing female as an exotic entity to male. *Owj* in Iranian traditional music generally is a moment with the highest pitches which normally has the highest dynamic and volume than the other musical episodes (Habibdoost, 2014). This moment with its female-like trait has a transient quality and in contrast to it there is *Foroud* (cadence-like) which has lowest pitches and male-like sound, displaying a stable and static trait. However, *Owj* shows the most emotional tension, so this interpretation is not a negative value for female and can distinguish the importance of female against male. *Owj* shows gradually going from *Daramad* (start) of a *Dastgah* toward a moment with the highest pitches and dynamic, then gradually backing toward *Foroud* which is another form of *Daramad* (Mehrani, 2010). Here a feminist critic can discuss getting access to female identity as a sexual object has always been in the mind of male playing, improvising or composing Iranian traditional music in the past. Male after accessing to this object gradually frees it and tries to be calm down at *Foroud* moment. Nevertheless, some Iranian musicians believes in this gradually move is because of need for warming up the singer voice (Farhat, 1966) which is an idea in regard to the practice.

### CONCLUSION

Consideration the exoticism concept in Iranian culture and its aspects in Iranian traditional music requires knowing social perception of Iranians about unfamiliarity and retrieving it in the content, structure and practice of Iranian traditional music. Accordingly, consideration the unfamiliar elements of this music has different aspects which can be categorized in four determining keywords including Western world, verbal language, sonic texture and female. Every of these keywords has found a reflection on Iranian traditional music (Nettl, 2009) claims the most outstanding ideas about the effect of Western

world on Iranian traditional music. In definition the exotic role of verbal language in *Radif*, it is important to avoid from superficially looking to unfamiliar names and expressions applied to it. On the other hands, the sonic texture of Iranian traditional music can be noticed in some aspects as the usage of octave tones with different accidental symbols so that, each of these tones can find an exotic identity compared to its octave. While feminist criticism discusses on male domination view in forming Iranian traditional music. The issue also can be considered in the four main traits of music (pitch, rhythm, timbre and dynamic) in the future.

### REFERENCES

- Ataie Ashtiani, Z., 2006. Aesthetics at gender analysis of feminism. *Motaleat-e Rahbordiy-e Zanan*, 32: 166-201.
- De Beauvoir, S., 1972. *The Second Sex*. Translator: H.M. Parshley. Harmondsworth, Australia.
- Fakhreddini, F., 2015. *Iranian Music Harmony*. 1st Edn., Moein, Tehran.
- Farhat, H., 1966. *The dastgah concept in Persian music*. Ph.D. Thesis, University of California.
- Habibdoost, M., 2014. *The Concepts of Music*. Boloor, Rasht.
- Hajarian, M., 2008. *An Introduction to Ethnomusicology*. Ketabsara-ye Nik, Tehran.
- Khaleqi, R., 1999. *Story of Iran's Music*. 7th Edn., Vol. 1, Safi Ali Shah, Tehran.
- Khaleqi, R., 2007. *A Look to Music (Iranian Music)*. 2nd Edn., Rahrovan Pouyesh Cultural Institute, Tehran.
- Masoudieh, M.T., 2011. *Ethnomusicology (An Introduction to Comparative Musicology)*. 3rd Edn., Soroush, Tehran.
- Mehrani, H., 2010. *The Book of Sight Singing (The Theoretical Foundations of Western and Iranian Music)*. 2nd Edn., Vol. 1, Publisher the Author, Tehran.
- Nettl, B., 2009. *The Radif of Persian Music*. Translator: Ali Shadkam. Soureh-ye Mehr, Tehran.
- Nochlin, L., 1988. *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? In: Women, Art and Power: And Other Essays*, Nochlin, L.(Ed.). Harper and Row, New York.
- Safvat, D. and N. Karon, 2009. *Iranian National Music*. Ketabsara-ye Nik, Tehran.