Dancing to the “Hotline Bling” in Old Bazaars of Tehran

Far from its birthplace in the Bronx, hip hop culture and music has secured a significant socio-cultural and artistic position in Iran’s modern society. Present in all its key aspects −DJing, b-boying, graffiti, and MC − hip-hop culture has attracted the Iranian youth across different classes, locations, and ideologies. With its pluralistic, intertextual, and eclectic nature, hip-hop has become a new vehicle for a “relatively autonomous” form of self-expression among the Iranian youth and teenagers.

In this paper, examining Persian hip-hop within the framework of postmodern theory and aesthetics, I argue that polyvocality, eclecticism, bricolage, intertextuality, and pastiche are postmodern devices that have enabled the Iranian youth to take advantage of hip-hop music as a vehicle for self-expression and socio-political commentary, creating new discourses on gender and class issues, and putting less publically-discussed, sometimes even taboo, topics into debate. Growing in popularity across the Iranian society and spreading throughout the world in the Iranian diaspora, Persian hip-hop mirrors the concerns, emotions, fears, and hopes of the children of the revolution who are marginalized by the mainstream culture and media in Iran.

Furthermore, I claim that despite the relative socio-cultural isolation of the Iranian youth from the global pop culture due to diverse socio-political and cultural reasons, technological advances including the internet have empowered the Iranian young generation to experience, learn about, and connect to the global youth culture. Under the influence of the Western, dominant pop culture consumed through different media, mainly social media and the internet, the youth not only consume Western hip-hop music, but more importantly use it as a template and guiding framework to produce their own locally-meaningful music. As a terrain for the interactions between traditional, modern, and postmodern on the one hand, and local, global, and “glocal” on the other, Persian hip-hip requires a deeper analysis beyond the dualism of “McDonaldization” and “Cultural reterritorialization.” As an embodiment of glocalization marking the postmodern world, hip hop has created “an imagined world” or as Samy Alim puts it, a “global hip hop nation.” In this presentation, focusing on the formation of new spaces and new discourses in Persian hip hop, I cast light on the complexities and power relations involved in this encounter.

First, drawing upon my previous research and insider position, I introduce Iran’s underground music scene and its socio-cultural associations. Locating Persian hip-hop and its participants within the underground movement, I address some of its major and frequently-addressed themes to illuminate hip-hop’s position in modern-day Iran. Following the introduction of the music scene, I examine Persian hip-hop according to postmodern aesthetics to identify and interpret various devices used by Iranian hip hoppers.

Then as I focus on the Persian cover of Drake’s “Hotline Bling” by a recently-emerged, controversial hip-hop musician, Hamid Sefat, I analyze the complexities of the juxtaposition of local and global and the creation of new glocal spaces by utilizing postmodern devices that help us understand the global appeal of hip hop. As a postmodern, glocal medium bridging the Iranian youth, who have been constantly scrutinized by officials and the society, to a global hip hop nation, Persian hip-hop empowers the young generation to reject the boundaries and metannartives, and construct new identities and discourses. Rather than a mere imitation of Western artifacts, Persian hip-hop is glocally meaningful and its investigation in both local and global senses provides us with knowledge on the blind spots shaped by the dualism of cultural imperialism and cultural assimilation.

Having emerged amidst life struggles in the Bronx of the 1970s, the hip hop culture has significant racial and class associations that define its rebellious and critical nature. Giving voice to the marginalized youth, hip hop has traveled the world as both “canvas and template” (Baker 2006:236), bringing together certain linkages while simultaneously opening space for generating new meanings in new contexts.

With its global appeal, hip-hop attracted much scholarly attention as in the works of scholars such as Tony Mitchell and Samy Alim who focused on the encounters between local and the global. Growing in popularity, style, and thematic content, hip hop has become a remarkable element of youth culture across the Middle East, inviting hip hop and popular music scholars to investigate the juxtaposition of the East and the West, center and periphery in its new forms. Studying Turkish rap, Thomas Solomon, discusses new meanings of locality and social commentary among Istanbul rappers (2005). Laudan Nooshin explores the emergence of local identities and new spaces for the marginalized youth in Iran, highlighting that most Iranian rappers do not see hip hop as a cultural import, rather they see themselves as participants in a global discourse (2011). Taking a step further, Johnston argues that Persian hip hop has acquired an Iranian sound and identity through references to traditional poetry and music (2008).

The case study for this presentation demonstrates that Persian hip hop can’t be explained by the duality of “Iranianness” and “foreignness.” Challenging the boundaries between us and them, Hamdi Sefat uses Drake’s globally successful hit “Hotline Bling” as a template to create a new locality not restricted by geographical and cultural boundaries. Tehran as portrayed in the video clip, is an amalgamation of old and new, modern and traditional, Eastern and Western. On the one hand, Sefat sings a major Western hit in Farsi, copying Drake’s dance moves and gesture, tightly matching syllables and sounds to the original version, and creating an exact copy transformed by acquiring new meanings in a new context. On the other hand, the video shows a group of youths surrounding the singer walking through the old grand bazaar of Tehran among a crowd of daily dwellers and workers, demonstrating body movements like American rappers, showing off hover boards and in general appearing as totally out of context.

As Sefat imitates Drake, old Tehran confronts Western urban culture, and Iranian hip hop enthusiasts claim membership to a global community. As such, rejecting the dichotomy of the local and global in interpreting hip hop in the global south, I claim that Persian hip hop can be best understood in terms of glocalization. While maintaining its Western essence, it has become transformed by local actors and conditions. As the East meets the West, none is compromising, both are continuously present, impacting each other and generating new meanings.

To discuss Persian hip-hop, it is necessary to first describe the current popular music scene in Iran. In the aftermath of the Islamic revolution of 1979, popular music faced official ban for nearly two decades, during which only certain forms and artists of Persian folk and art music were permitted to perform and produce music. With the presidential election of Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Khatami in 1997, a relative relaxation of regulations in the cultural and artistic domains signaled a new era in Iran’s pop music scene. Khatami facilitated music education and performance by easing the regulations on state-issued permits required for any musical activities.

While the legalization of popular music opened the public sphere and encouraged musicians, the required permit continued to limit the thematic contents and musical innovations which would fall beyond the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance criteria for approval. Furthermore, females were, and still are, prohibited from solo musical appearances according to the sharia’ law. As such, an alternative music scene emerged in Iran in the late 1990s. The underground music, or *musiqi-ye zirzamini* in Farsi, encompasses musicians who produce their music without the official permit.

While numerous underground musicians with diverse genres and styles have failed to obtain the official permit, few have been successful. In contrast to several rock musicians who could secure the permit for production and performance, hip hop artists have continued to face governmental disapproval mainly due to hip hop’s omnipresent Western influences, its defiant character, and lyrical contents. Restricted to the undergrounds, Persian hip hop has thrived despite limitations and obstacles. Today, nearly 2000 amateur and professional rappers are active in Iran who comment on various aspects of life from socio-political criticism to bragging about wealth and power.

More than anything, hip hop owes its success and popularity in Iran to technological advances including the satellite-broadcast television channels, the internet and social media. The internet provided the youth not only a window to the outside world, but also a new public sphere in which they have upheld their own place. Through satellite TV and the internet, the outside world entered Iranian middle and upper class households, gradually finding a place in majority of families’ spare time. Growing up in Iran in the 90s, I was frequently asked “Can you break dance?!” In fact, break dance was the earliest element of hip-hop culture to appear in Iran’s society.

Rapping, the most recognizable element of hip hop, however, emerged first in diaspora among exile musicians in Los Angeles. By the early 2000s rappers started to create a local hip hop scene which became a prominent part of Persian popular music. By the mid-2000s, with satellite dishes mushrooming on every roof across major cities and smaller towns, hip-hop found its place not only among the rich, uptown kids whose mobility and wealth enable them to experience and relate to the pop culture in major European and north American cities, but also among the members of lower and middle classes who faced economic, cultural, social, and artistic marginalization. While hip-hop bands such as Zedbaazi and Tik Tak belong to the upper classes, Soroush Hichkas takes pride in his lower-class status and values, and rapper Yas continues to give voice to the majority in the middle class. Most successful rappers, however, are those whose songs have a message or is simply a reflection of youth realities. Rappers Hichkas and Yas for example, have songs about poverty, inequality, women’s issues, and social injustice.

The global appeal of hip hop and what makes it accessible and meaningful to the youth in Istanbul, New York, Beirut, and Tehran has two major aspects: the beat and the words. Beats, made through sampling processes and musical borrowings, crossing spatial and temporal boundaries, and words refuting imposed metanarratives of social order and cultural values, give hip hop a postmodern character, making it fit different contexts. As Peter Manuel notes, by recycling and blending elements of the dominant culture exposed to the lower-classes and the marginalized through mass media images, the subcultures construct their own sense of identity “out of imagerial *objets trouvées*,” be it fashion trends or musical styles. Hip-hop, thus, has played a key role in contemporary young Iranians’ identity construction and negotiation in face of global connection and local isolation.

In response to the postmodern condition which involves the penetration of capitalism, consumerism, and mass media in all aspects of life, rejection of metanarratives, and emergence of a new sense of human subjectivity, postmodern art developed an approach toward valuing difference, representation of images and simulacra, blending elements of low and high culture, and denying historicity and sentimentality. Clichéd aesthetic devices to express these features are pastiche, particularly by combining and juxtaposing elements of distant discourses, self-referentiality and intertextuality, blank parody, irony, and refuting normality. Blending distant traditions in unconventional forms, mocking taboos and challenging traditions, religion and the Islamic-Iranian culture, Persian hip hop takes advantage of such postmodern features and rejects metanarratives of state and society’s control over the youth life. As such, postmodern aesthetics serve as ingredients for the (re)construction of new meanings and identities (1995: 230).

Hip hop does not enforce a homogenized culture upon its enthusiasts, rather it encourages a locally-meaningful one. The pluralistic and inclusive character of the hip hop culture has made it a suitable tool for the youth around the globe to tell their own stories in a globally and locally meaningful way by utilizing the universal models. In fact, hip hop as Andy Bennett highlights is the most animated embodiment of glocalization. Rejecting the duality of homogenization and heterogenization, Roland Robertson introduces glocalization and invites us to examine the ways in which both have become mutually implicative in the late twenty-first century. Glocalization speaks best to our globalizing postmodern world discarding the two extremes of McDonaldization and cultural reterritorialization.

Persian hip-hop, a great embodiment of glocalization processes, employs postmodern devices such as pastiche, irony, and intertextuality to transcend lingual, geographical and cultural limits. Merging distant discourses and reconciling musical and stylistic features, Iranian hip-hoppers discuss the local issues with a universally-shared and understood language.

As a recently-emerged rapper, Hamid Sefat is famous rappers whose music helps us better understand the circumstances under which Iranian youth are experiencing glocalization processes. He gained popularity by the song “*Che*” for a movie with the same name about the Iranian politician and commander in Iran-Iraq war, Mostafa Chamran. Appearing in a camouflage, army outfit, with a long beard reminiscent of Chamran, Sefat created a warrior persona for himself, an image he has continued to reinforce in video clips. Promoted by “Avang” label and through the most widespread platform for Persian music broadcast, “Radio Javan,” Sefat has reached out to millions of young Iranians across the world. Having released several successful singles such as “Heyhat” and “Fake,” Sefat is now an influential hip hop artist whose music is publically discussed and heavily circulated on social media.

Sefat’s popularity rocketed with his Persian cover of Drake’s hit “Hotline Bling.” The song first attracted Iranians’ attention for Drake’s dance moves resembling Persian dance. A section of the video was cut and set to a Persian dance tune and was disseminated on social media. Hamid Sefat’s version of the song was an addition to the Iranianizition of Drake’s song. It brought Sefat enormous success and further publicized his special rapping style being succinct and fragmented with short phrases and single words. Trying to be as Drake as possible in voice and image, Sefat gained the title “Iranian Drake.”

Textually both songs share an expression of longing for a lost beloved from an arrogant male point of view. Language plays a key role in informing cultural sensibilities. Set to Farsi lyrics, “Hotline Bling” is no longer “theirs.” Sefat’s version uses a colloquial Farsi used by urban youth. By translating the lyrics to Farsi and giving it a street flavor in intonation and word choice, Sefat puts his own signature on the song, giving it a powerful local identity. Moreover, Farsi words bring their own socio-cultural connotations to the song, making it more authentic and meaningful to the audience who does not understand the English lyrics and cannot sing along with Drake.

Noticeably however, in the process of making the song “ours,” Sefat does not loose contact with the original version. He constantly brings Drake to mind by his body language and dance moves while the location and actors highlight the song’s distance from the original version. The grand bazaar of Tehran, a historical landmark, with narrow alleys packed with workers and customers is a representation of the traditional society confronting globalization and compression of space and time. Dancing to Drake’s super hit in such a context is itself an act of defiance. The images reinforce the distance between the singer and his crew and the people in the bazaar. Such ironic and exaggerated juxtaposition of the West and the East is a postmodern technique creating new meanings on place and youth culture. Sefat, his crew, bazaar people and workers, hover boards and getting a haircut on the street, are all paradoxes put together using postmodern fragmentation and intertextuality. The incorporation of Persian frame drum “daf” and the aural and visual prominence of the violin, a significant instrument in various genres of Persian music, further transform the song, making it more locally meaningful and relatable.

In this paper, briefly discussing Iran’s underground hip hop scene and its participants, I examined the global appeal of hip hop in light of postmodern theory and processes of glocalization. Focusing on the Persian cover of Drake’s “Hotline Bling” by Hamid Sefat, I showed that postmodern techniques of intertextuality, fragmentation, pastiche, and irony enable hip hop artists to draw on culturally, linguistically, geographically and historically diverse and distant resources in music production to convey their messages in the most accessible way. The eclectic and pluralistic nature of hip-hop culture encourages hip-hoppers around the world to not only expand their musical pallets but also transcend socio-political boundaries.

In Iran, Hip-hop has functioned as a democratic and open sphere, encouraging youth participation and inclusivity. Contrasting the limiting and elitist character of Persian art music, hip-hop is an accessible musical genre that has empowered Iranian youth to express their emotions and concerns by rejecting the dualism of high and low culture and metanarratives of religion, norms, and values. From criticizing the government for its malfunctioning to bragging about the life of rich kids in Tehran, Persian hip-hop encompasses a wide range of issues absent in public debates. Furthermore, set to Farsi lyrics, the global template acquires a local significance, bringing in wide-ranging connotations and meanings. Persian “Hotline Bling” is a glocal product which rejects the cultural isolation that state has tried to achieve through censorship and media control on the one hand, and shapes new discourses on identity, locality, and subjectivity in the postmodern world on the other. With the re-election of president Hassan Rouhani, a moderate who has promised to support musicians, the future of the hip-hop scene is to be examined.