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Tehran Theory Podcast with Joan Copjec

Persons in the session:

Joan Copjec – psychoanalytic theorist and Professor of Modern Media and Culture at Brown University

Nadia Maftouni – philosopher, Professor of Islamic philosophy at Tehran University, senior research scholar at Yale

Maedeh Rahmani – PhD candidate in philosophy of art

Mahmoud Nuri – PhD in art history, lecturer of cinema at Tehran’s University of Art



Maedeh Rahmani: Hi! This is Tehran Theory podcast! I’m your host, Maedeh Rahmani. It’s my privilege to have Joan Copjec in this episode. She is a psychoanalytic theorist, feminist, and Professor of Modern Media and Culture at Brown University. She’s been the director of the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture at the University of Buffalo and executive editor of its Lacanian journal, UMBR(A). Her books “Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists” and “Imagine There’s No Woman: Ethics and Sublimation” is among her most important publications. She is currently working on her forthcoming book “Cloud: Between Paris and Tehran” in which an interesting thread connects various notions from Henry Corbin to Abbas Kiarostami. She calls it her “Islam-psychoanalysis-Iranian Cinema” project. The session we’re going to hear was originally held as a webinar curated by Nadia Maftouni and it’s a suitable introduction for those who want to get acquainted to Joan’s work and particularly this project of hers.

Nadia Maftouni: Joan Copjec has had quite an adventure in psychoanalysis and what interested me particularly was her journey from Iranian cinema to Iranian thought. In a session I had with Slavoj Žižek, he mentioned how Joan Copjec’s focus on Abbas Kiarostami moved her towards Islamic philosophy and today I have the chance to ask her to tell me more about her journey. Hi Joan!

Joan Copjec: Hi Naida! Glad to be here!

Nadia Maftouni: Thank you for accepting this invitation!

Joan Copjec: Thank you! Thank you for inviting me!

Joan Copjec and Her Wish to Come to Iran



Joan Copjec: I was very honored by Nadia's kind invitation to speak about my work and delighted to meet you today. And I'm sorry it couldn't be in person. I have, in fact, never been to Iran. Even though I was invited twice. My Visa request was declined the first time, no reason given. And the event to which I was later invited was canceled at the last minute just before it was to take place. So I was particularly disappointed about not being able to enter your country on the first invitation. I had met Kiarostami once in the United States at Princeton at a lecture he gave there. And I spoke to him later. He was very kind. He had a very bad cold. He gave me his address and I still keep it in one of my books. So that was very nice. But it was very very disappointing that I didn't come. And I still have hopes. I believe that some of you know my work, because I sometimes have received phone calls surprisingly! I remember once sitting at my desk in Buffalo and picking up the phone, it was someone from Tehran, I said are you kidding me! And he assured me he wasn't! So, I know that some of you know my work.

Žižek and I – Psychoanalysis vs. Historicism

Joan Copjec: But I've been told that the impetus for this particular invitation may have been references to my work on Kiarostami in Islamic philosophy made by my colleague and friend Slavoj Žižek. He and I have collaborated for over three decades on numerous projects, psychoanalysis and cinema being two major mutual highways of our interest; other than numerous essays I've written in journals and books. I published two books. Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists. It was a critique of historicism which I thought was necessary. Because in the United States what happened is psychoanalysis was going full steam ahead, and then historicism came along and wiped it off the map, and made those who continued to do psychoanalysis apologetic. And I didn't think any apology was necessary. So my book was very polemical, a polemical defense of Lacan. The second book was called Imagine There's No Woman. And both of these dealt with psychoanalysis and Cinema. And they both take a theoretical approach which is similar to the one practiced by the Ljubljana School of psychoanalysis which is led, of course, by Slavoy and his two close Slovenian colleagues Mladen Dolar and Alenka Zupančič. In fact in my second invitation to Iran, which was canceled at the last minute, Mladen had also been invited to speak there. So the two of us weren't able to come.

Smitten by Kiarostami

A couple of years after publishing my second book, and while I was still undecided what I would do next, I took home from our neighborhood video store a copy of *The Wind Will Carry Us* out of simple curiosity. It was the first Kiarostami and the first Iranian film I ever saw. Immediately smitten, I threw myself into what seemed like an off-ramp project. I suppose one could say that like Marion in *Psycho*, Hitchcock's *Psycho* obviously, I exited the highway of familiar ideas and arguments and got caught up in a radically unfamiliar world. This analogy has obvious limits of course; it didn't end with a cinematic bludgeoning, nor did it begin with the neurotic hesitancy of that 35-minute parlor sequence in which Marion and Norman converse as the camera decides which direction to take. It's a very interesting scene because it lasts so long and you just have shot, reverse shot; you don't know what's going to vary and they're not really talking about anything. And I always interpret this as a neurotic hesitancy because this is going to be the transition from the world of Marion to the world of Norman and the clue is when Marion exits screen right, the camera doesn't follow her. It's the big sign that something's up. But this hesitancy is interesting, and I acted without hesitation by scrapping my plans for the next semester and offered instead two new courses, one on Kiarostami and the other on Iranian cinema. Never mind that I'm new next to nothing about either, and was forced to watch most of the films for the first time only a week or two before I had to discuss them in class. It was a very tense semester as you can imagine. But I felt I had no other choice, because I knew that there was no time to waste. The year that this is happening is 2004 and I was brought up short by an awareness that Iranian cinema had come to the attention of the world in the late 90s. So my own inexplicable inattention had however one salutary effect: Ignorant of the critical debate surrounding this cinema, I was free to find my own path. Naïveté is seldom a virtue, but it worked for me in this case. I knew nothing about the fabulous work of Laura Mulvey which she had done to put Kiarostami and Iranian cinema on the western map. As you, no doubt, know—or those of you who are cineaste... I know that I'm speaking to people from psychoanalysis, cinema, and Islamic philosophy, maybe not all together—but many of you, no doubt, know that she championed for offering an alternative to mainstream cinema in which an active male gaze—that's her term, male gaze—turn women into objects. So her whole defense of Iranian cinema and Kiarostami in particular is that it's an alternative cinema to this.

Guilt Culture vs. Shame Culture

Joan Copjec: As a feminist, I too was interested in the way the modesty system impacted Iranian filmmaking, but I began with a different Lacanian notion of the gaze. This idea of the male gaze I don't support, it's not a Lacanian reading of the concept of the gaze in my opinion. I was interested more broadly in the image as such, not only the image of the woman. At the end of the day the questions I asked stemmed from my psychoanalytic background. I'm interested in what makes the image of Iranian film different, and the modesty system was important because it presented a different distribution of the seen and the unseen. I thought that was a critical question to ask. And the first essay I wrote on Kiarostami focused on the affect of shame. The time that I wrote this essay the scandalous Abu Ghraib photographs had been taken just a few years earlier and these photographs brought back the insidious distinction between guilt and shame cultures. The insidiousness has to do with the fact that a hierarchy was presented: that guilt cultures were more advanced than shame cultures. This was largely discredited but the Abu Ghraib photographs brought it back, because they described Islamic cultures as being particularly vulnerable to shame, and this was a kind of a negative statement. So I thought I should address this, and the question of shame had to be addressed. And I did it, and this is how I began my project fearful of collapsing things. The question of Shame comes up very interestingly at the end of Lacan Seminar XVII and no one had discussed it at that point. And I decided for a special volume on that seminar that I would write about it. And I wrote it just in terms of Lacan Seminar to, kind of, resurrect the notion of shame from the one that distinguished it from guilt, give it a more sophisticated reading. And at the same time I was doing that, I wrote an essay on *The Wind Will Carry Us*. And I did this because Hamid Dabashi... he's a very important figure here in the United States, teaches at Cornell, has written a lot on Iranian cinema, he writes about political theory, he's very good. And he, very liberally I notice, throws around concepts from Islamic philosophy, doesn't really explain them to audiences. I don't know how audiences sometimes read that who aren't familiar with it, but I see it and it's always good and, you know, I like his work generally. But he came out with a kind of head-on attack on Kiarostami who he basically wrote very favorably about. He came up with a head-on attack on Kiarostami at the end of one of his books, and it disturbed me. It was an attack on *The Wind Will Carry Us* and the scene in the underground, milking of the cow scene. And I was appalled by what he said. It's hard to know what I called any essay I wrote, because I kept rewriting them over and over again, and they have different titles as I was working out my ideas, but I think one of the titles that stuck on me was called *The Descent Into Shame*. So it was a positive notion of shame that I developed in the analysis of that scene which was the crucial scene for me.

Kiarostami – Corbin – Islamic Philosophy

So I was always fearful, as I said at the beginning, about imposing a Lacanian framework on material that might be resistant to it. So I was always checking myself to make sure that I wasn't simply... you know, I had Lacanian eyes and I saw the world that way and maybe the world was different! So you have to be careful about that. For example I knew, as a film theorist, that what the French did to elevate Hollywood cinema was very important, and it went much farther than any American. I mean we have the term Film Noir and the reason why it's French it's because it was a French genre. American cinema is very genre driven, but it never had a Film Noir genre. The studio did not intend to make something called Film Noir, it was the French perception. I had that in the back of my head that kept me going, maybe I could say something just like the French talk about America. But I was pretty naive at the beginning. The fortunate thing that happened, I think, for me—one of the fortunate things—was that I received, almost immediately... I don't know how my application prevailed, but it did. I applied for the Radcliffe Institute fellowship and there at the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard they have diverse scholars there. They don't come from one field, they have scientists and they have artists and so it's a mixed bag. And I didn't know how that would work, but it worked for me! It worked very well. We had to present our papers to people who... you know, mathematicians, biologists... so make ourselves understood to a larger audience. But we also learned, because we had lunches together. And fortunately for me, there were a few Scholars who worked on Islamic cultures. One of them was Sari Nusseibeh. He's a Palestinian, comes from a very famous Palestinian family in Jerusalem. He studied Islamic philosophy at Oxford and then at Harvard. And at lunch one day we were speaking and he mentioned the name of Henry Corbin and I said I think I know that name! I think I've heard of it! So I went out and bought a number of Corbin's books immediately. I was immediately struck. It was the time that I was trying to think and write and I was looking at his book *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth* and I said: Oh my God! I recall the thrill I felt when my eyes fell on the front cover of this book. The cover image is an example of visionary geography executed in Shiraz at the end of the 14th century; that's what Corbin has something to say about in the middle of the book. What I saw, however, was the zigzag path in Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's House*. It really is unmistakable. This was no coincidence, I was sure of that from the beginning. Distinct from natural geography, visionary geography—I learned—depicts an intermediary realm between the abstract and the sensible. It was through his conception of this intermediary space or imaginal world that Corbin opened a new path in the study of Islam, or this is the way that his most famous follower Christian Jambet put it, this is what he says about the concept.

For me it also did something else, it opened a viable means of working between Paris and Tehran. That is, between the highway of my expertise and my off-ramp archive. Corbin states explicitly that he chose the term *imaginal* with Lacan's term *imaginary* in mind. He viewed this interstitial space—where matter is immaterialized and spirit corporealized—as a place where... “to use a term currently in favor,” I'm quoting Corbin directly, “an anamorphosis is produced.” Now I knew that the term *anamorphosis* is in favor among a select group of people—they're called *Lacanian*s—who use it like *luminal* to show up the otherwise undetectable operation of the Freudian *drive*. Freud wrote that the drive never appears directly, we only know of its existence from its representatives. So this was a connection for me that was sound, very sound and important. This was taking place around 2005 or 2006 when I was reading all this material at the Radcliffe Institute. Since then the work of Corbin became indispensable to my project, for not only has it introduced me to a number of Islamic philosophers I wouldn't otherwise have read—my favorites are Corbin's favorites too: Avicenna, Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi, and Mulla Sadra particularly—it has allowed me to observe conceptual connections between these philosophers and psychoanalysis. As it turns out, I am not the only one who was able to see the correspondences between these disparate bodies of thought. A notable American literary scholar and stalwart supporter of Freud, Harold Bloom who taught at Yale for most of his life, published a very fine book *Omens of the Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection* which moves easily between psychoanalysis and Islamic Philosophy by strategic references to Corbin. It's a very strange book for Harold Bloom to have written, and it was late I think in his career, and he doesn't have many footnotes, and he just breezes through these connections, and he just very subtly moves between them. It's an interesting book, I recommend it.

Antithesis: Wasserstrom

I was apprehensive, of course, about possible perils of relying on an authority whose authority might be seriously challenged by other authorities in the field who knew much more than I. And it didn't take long to learn that the work of Corbin had its detractors. I thus decided to give one of the most vocal critics of him a hearing. I refer to the book by Steven Wasserstrom, the name of the book is *Religion After Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos*. This book states it's harshest criticisms for Corbin. Wasserstrom regards the Eranos meetings in Switzerland among representatives of the three great monotheistic religions as a misguided Cold War attempt to rob religion of its most important elements—and for him those elements are laws, rituals, and social history—and to replace them with an aestheticized version of religion that is reliant on a theory of symbols.

So this general criticism he has against just these Eranos meetings in all three of the religious philosophers that he's discussing, well this is general; he targets Corbin particularly, and I think many of the attacks struck me as ad hominem. Because he also credits Corbin as being the most fierce conceptual scholar among them. And he painted Corbin as the wingman for the Shah, and Khomeini's rise to power as a fitting rebuke to Corbin's most notable concepts, the imaginal world prominently among them. So in response to these charges, I thought if I'm going to continue to work on Corbin I must absolve him of these criticisms. So I set out as my task to do this and to weigh another project. So I wrote a detailed defense of Corbin's concepts of the imaginal world, the cloud, and tauteology. This essay was published in a special issue of the journal *Psychoanalysis and History* and the name of that special issue was *Psychoanalysis and the Middle East*. This is perhaps the essay among those devoted to Kiarostami, Iranian cinema, and Islamic philosophy with which I am most pleased. No doubt because it is the one in which I put the greatest effort into demonstrating why and in which way key concepts of Islamic philosophy could be shown to perform functions similar to concepts of Freud and Lacan. Christian Jambet's book about Mulla Sadra—the name of the book translated in English is *The Act of Being*—was a critical resource for me here, despite the fact that Jambet himself has no such aim in mind. I suppose the theoretical effort I put into this essay allowed me to finally shed my worries of being regarded as a kind of trespasser.

Reception or Deception?

Joan Copjec: I hasten to add, however, that one of the most remarkable facts about my Kiarostami-Islamic Philosophy project is that from the moment I began it, the interloper charge was never left leveled against me. From the first courses I taught I was struck by the openness of people including even especially Iranians to discuss the films with me. This is, I realize, no small testament to the films themselves which are appealing to audiences who may not even understand the nature of their appeal. I show films like *The Cow* and *Still Life* and the students can still get excited by the threading of the needle! And I'm always glad about that! But I tell them to look for, of course, ahead of time.

I was teaching in Buffalo when I first became interested in Kiarostami and I invited Hamid Nafisi to give a lecture in conjunction with my courses. It was anticipated that a small audience would turn out for what was considered a specialty topic: an introduction to Iranian cinema. I thought differently and so requested a large lecture hall assuring the powers who dole out rooms that it would be filled.

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My secret weapon was the large Iranian community that lived in Buffalo. I only became aware of this community when a few of them popped up in my classes. They spread the word about the lecture and filled the auditorium. Now Nafisi did his part too. His wonderful lecture was illustrated with film clips of early Iranian cinema—including the charming ones I mentioned—starting with the official first: the footage of the feast of flower ceremony shot in Belgium in 1900 by the Royal Court photographer of Mozaffar al-Din Shah. The audience was suitably enchanted by this lecture, everyone who left the huge lecture hall. The final chapter came after my Harvard experience at the Radcliffe Institute discovering Corbin. I was at the time in Buffalo and I was director of the Center for the Study of Psychoanalysis and Culture and I had founded with my graduate students a Lacanian journal called UMBR(A) which is translated into a few languages and is widely read. We published a special issue on a psychoanalytic topic every year. The ease with which I was able to stir up interest in Iranian cinema encouraged me to propose an issue on Islam and psychoanalysis for UMBR(A)'s 2009 issue. The students were perplexed, they came here to study psychoanalysis and I said let's do one on Islam and psychoanalysis! They wondered aloud where we would find contributors to write on a topic that seemed not to exist except in my head! And it must have seemed that way to the students because besides teaching a course on Islamic philosophy and Iranian cinema and Kiarostami, I was dropping strange essays—that they didn't know where they came from—into other courses too. So I worried about this myself, where I was going to find the contributors. But there was nothing to be done other than look for them. And while I was doing this I convinced a former graduate student who had just founded a journal of her own and wanted me to help her edit the next issue... I said yeah I'll do it if you do it on Islam and psychoanalysis! So I decided not to do one, I decided to do two issues of two different journals at the same time not knowing where I was going to find people to write for them. I just sat down and looked and read books and read books till I found proper people. I imagine some people were surprised and wondered how these two volumes suddenly appeared out of nowhere. Well it didn't come out of nowhere! This is what I want to say finally. For if I was able to find enough good office to fill these volumes of Islam and psychoanalysis, it's not my invention! Ok, if you have any questions, I would be happy to answer them.



Q&A

Mahmoud Nuri: Thank you, you mentioned how the French elevated interpretations of Hollywood cinema and we know that when Truffaut wrote his famous letter to Hitchcock asking him for the interviews, Hitchcock replied “Your letter brought tears to my eyes and I am so grateful to receive such a tribute from you.” Well Hitchcock was under the pressure of being looked at as a mere entertainer, and he needed the French confirmation to interpret his work in an intellectual level. The story of Kiarostami might be the opposite. He always had the intellectual confirmation, but if he ever received negative comments, it was like: You don’t make films for your own people. Also, as you mentioned how Laura Mulvey brought Kiarostami on the map, can we imagine an alternative reality where his work is left unnoticed intellectually?



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Joan Copjec: I just finished teaching a Hitchcock class and I know that, yes, he was bemused by the reaction he got from the French. And it also was actually quite clever because, you know, the term auteur was invented basically for him; he was the first auteur. As you know there's an auteur theory by the Cahiers critics. But the thing is there was this spat too on Bazin. What Bazin prized in cinema was very unlike Hitchcock cinema. And, in my mind, it was almost as if he was taunting Bazin. So Bazin was not Bazin who was on the side of Hitchcock, he gave him some air time because all his colleagues were so fascinated. But that was a very complicated history and it dawned on me this time when I was teaching—every time you teach a course you'd do it differently of course, hopefully, if your mind's still working—so I really was emphasizing that actually it's a kind of an anti-realism approach that Hitchcock made his films through. I could be very specific but this is not a Hitchcock discussion. But as for Kiarostami, yes, I say I never got any pushback because no one said to me you can't speak because you don't know, you're coming from a different culture, you can't weigh in on this topic... There was one trip that I took in the Middle East and there are a number of people there—and I was just thrilled with having found Kiarostami—and there are a couple of Iranians who said to me: “No, we prefer Beyzai!” And I was sticking up for my favorite! But Kiarostami received awards from the very beginning. He was acknowledged, I think, in Iran too from the outset. Of course, the laurels that he received from international film festivals made him an international star, but it also brought him a lot of criticism and resentment. Because the claim was that he was making films that would appeal to the western eyes. So there's a lot of that. I've had to do it—and I've noticed that Laura Mulvey has done that too—to set aside this adverse reaction to Kiarostami precisely. But this happens frequently. I worked for a while on a black artist, Kara Walker, and she he won prizes at a very early age for her work which is really brilliant, and large segments of the black population oppose her because they say: Outsiders like you, we don't! It was that kind of reaction. So it's complicated, the kind of resentment that can build up.

Mahmoud Nuri: Are there other Iranian movies or Iranian directors that you would like to mention? Well, you mentioned *The Cow* and *Still Life* and it's always interesting when examples are not limited to Kiarostami.

Joan Copjec: Yes, when I teach Iranian cinema of course I begin with Forugh Farrokhzad's *The House Is Black*. And then I just go all the way up to the most recent ones. I like Panahi's work *Crimson Gold*. Under the Skin of the City by Rakhshan Bani-etemad. Farhadi, of course very popular here, he broke through some kind of barrier here, won all kinds of awards. Makhmalbaf, the whole family, they get younger and younger. I try to give the full range of films.

Mahmoud Nuri: You mentioned how Laura Mulvey opposed mainstream cinema in which an active "male gaze" turns women into objects and her defense of Iranian cinema and Kiarostami is that it's an alternative to this. Negar Mottahedeh has also said that the safeguard in Iranian cinema against the "male gaze" makes post-Revolution Iranian cinema the apotheosis of 1970's feminist gaze theory. Do you buy that?

Joan Copjec: I don't, maybe because I never accepted this male gaze theory. I simply didn't go in that direction.

Nadia Maftouni: Let me say thank you to Joan, I really enjoyed your words, especially your comments on Henry Corbin because of my fields of research. And the last word of mine, I'm not sure to say it or not, but I'm really sad for your loss and since I saw the photo of Michael, I wanted to say I'm really sorry for this event. And I'm not sure if this invitation was proper or not regarding your situation.

Joan Copjec: Have you met Michael?

Nadia Maftouni: No, but I knew his work and when I was studying about your works I found out about the loss that occurred last year. Since I love my husband very much wanted to say I'm really sorry for the event.

Joan Copjec: Thank you!



Mahmoud Nuri: So to shift it to a more happy ending I also can't resist mentioning the beautiful setting of your room and the library which is attached to the top. Because I always see libraries find their roots on the ground, so this one's really beautiful

Joan Copjec: Do you see this? This is a Chinese philosopher's stone, Michael's Chinese philosopher's stone.

Maedeh Rahmani: beautiful, thank you so much for your time. It was a pleasure.

Joan Copjec: Okay, and thank you! Bye bye!

Thérèse-Anne Druart

The 22nd Episode of Talks with Eminent Thinkers

School of Philosophy

After earning an M.A. in Medieval Studies from the Université Catholique Louvain in 1968, Thérèse-Anne Druart went on to earn a Ph.D. in Philosophy with a dissertation on Plato in 1973. She then took a B. Phil. in Oriental Studies, section Mediaeval Islamic Philosophy and Theology, at the University of Oxford in 1975. She spent the academic year 1975-76 as a Research Fellow at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies at Harvard University. She taught at Georgetown University from 1978-1987 as Assistant and Associate Professor. She joined the School of Philosophy at The Catholic University of America in 1987, where she became Ordinary Professor in 1997.

Besides teaching at The Catholic University of America, she was a Visiting Professor of Andalusian Arabic Philosophy at the Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona, Spain in the spring of 1993. In fall 1995, she taught a weekly seminar in Arabic philosophy at the University of Pennsylvania. She was twice a Visiting Professor during the summer at the Université Catholique de Madagascar. In May 2005, she gave a one week intensive seminar on Avicenna's Metaphysics at the Universidad de los Andes in Chile.

She is the sub-editor of Averroes (Ibn Rushd), Long Commentary on the De anima of Aristotle, transl. with intro. and notes by Richard C. Taylor (New Haven: Yale Library of Medieval Philosophy, 2009). She has edited seven books and published some 100 articles, mainly in Arabic philosophy.



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Nadia Maftouni

University of Tehran

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The Joys of Philosophy

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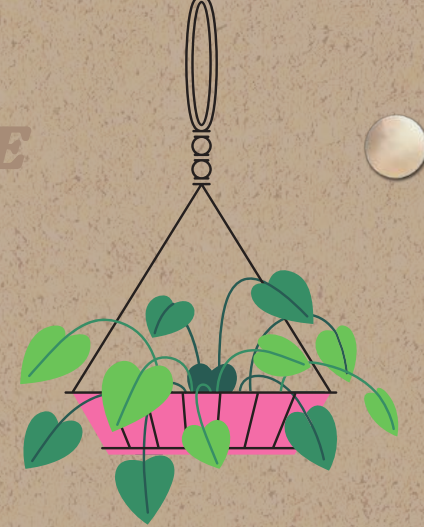
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Tehran University of Art



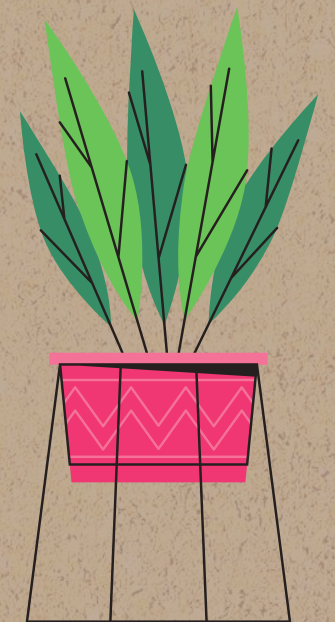
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The 22nd Episode of Talks with Eminent Thinkers



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