

**CULTURAL FRONTIERS:
WOMEN DIRECTORS IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY
NEW WAVE IRANIAN CINEMA**

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Iranian New Wave Cinema (1969 to present) has risen to international fame, especially in post-revolutionary years, for its social realist themes and contribution to national identity. This film movement boasts a number of successful women directors, whose films have impressed audiences and film festivals worldwide. This study examines the works of three Iranian women directors, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tamineh Milani, and Samira Makhmalbaf, for their films' social, political, and cultural themes and commentary while also investigating the directors' techniques in managing censorship codes that regulate their production and content. Importantly, these women directors must also navigate the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's censorship laws, which dictate that challenging the government's law or Islamic law is illegal and punishable.

These women directors make films that highlight the issues and social status of Iranian women, the working class, and the under-privileged; they touch upon motherhood, love, marriage, abuse, war, and more. Moreover, they are social films that compose the genre of "women's films," though the characters and filmmakers are both men and women.

While scholars have looked at the way Iranian women directors challenging both the traditional, one-dimensional representations of women in cinema, such as those in *filmfarsi*, this research draws upon feminist theory to argue that women directors utilize a number of strategies

to elude or challenge censorship codes, which range from creative shooting to simply skipping the censorship review process altogether. Films by Iranian women directors reject the Orientalist conception of Iranian women as Muslim women who are prisoners of their culture and society.

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PREFACE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

In the climax of Tamineh Milani's 1998 film *Two Women*, the main character, Fereshteh, is trapped in an alley while her long-time violent stalker holds her at knifepoint. This stalker had been following her since she was a young student, and his recent release from prison became an opportunity for him to exact revenge onto Fereshteh. Defeated, Fereshteh collapses onto the ground, facing away from her stalker, while he towers over her, glowering in anger. "You destroyed me. I wanted to marry you. You didn't let me," he growls at Fereshteh. "I wanted to make you happy."

But Fereshteh is now angry herself, and she retorts, "I wanted to study. You didn't let me. I wanted to make something of myself. You didn't let me." Her voice grows louder, and she is yelling, "I wanted to live. None of you let me. Not you, not my father, not my husband."

This scene from *Two Women* particularly exemplifies a biting commentary on the patriarchal norms of Iranian society, but it is one of the many examples of women Iranian directors producing subversive content in film that presents Iranian women's issues from an Iranian women's perspective. The patriarchal political power of the Islamic Republic can sometimes silence the voices or concerns of Iranian women, and some Western feminist and political rhetoric imposes a victim complex onto Muslim women, and by extension, Iranian women. American films and news media exemplify such Western discourse. In the hit 1991 film, *Not Without My Daughter*, the white woman protagonist, Betty, reluctantly visits Iran with her

Iranian-American husband and daughter. Once in Iran, Betty finds herself fighting over custody of her daughter with her husband, who reveals that he plans for them to permanently stay in Iran. However, it is the local Iranian women who facilitate the separation of Betty and her daughter, such as the school principal insisting that Betty needs her husband's permission to see their daughter. At one point, Betty's husband publicly beats her, and a group of Iranian women look on, making no effort to help Betty—one woman even smiles as Betty receives her beating, implying to the audience that Iranian women tacitly accept and encourage marital violence. Though the film is centered on a white woman, it still exemplifies the trope of Iranian women, portraying them as oppressed, backwards victims of violence and a primitive culture. Betty meets another white, American woman in Iran, but she finds that her new peer converted to Islam to please her husband, the same husband who is violent and abusive towards her. Again, the film reaffirms that Muslim women are victims without agency who suffer under the cruel reign of their uncivilized culture.

In more recent media, photojournalists selectively photograph Iranian woman who don the traditional, long, black chadors, instead of the diverse array of brightly-colored hijabs popular in contemporary street fashion of Iran. In the New York Times, Haleh Anvari writes:

Ever since the hijab, a generic term for every Islamic modesty covering, became mandatory after the 1979 revolution, Iranian women have been used to represent the country visually. For the new Islamic republic, the all-covering cloak called a chador became a badge of honor, a trademark of fundamental change. To Western visitors, it dropped a pin on their travel maps, where the bodies of Iranian women became a stand-in for the character of Iranian society. When I worked with foreign journalists for six years, I helped produce reports that were illustrated invariably with a woman in a black chador. I once asked a photojournalist why. He said, "How else can we show where we are?"

Here, Anvari highlights how Western photojournalists intentionally photograph Iranian women using the black chador to emphasize the Orientalist portrayal of Iranian women, and by

extension, Iranian society. While many Iranian women considered the chador to be a symbol of a successful revolution, Western news outlets depicted the chadors as a symbol of the threat of Islam, where women were supposedly forced to dress modestly against their will, once again reinscribing women's status as victims without agency. This type of photojournalism demonstrates the Western discourse surrounding Iranian women.

According to this discourse, Fereshteh is the "typical" Muslim woman who is oppressed by her Muslim, patriarchal society. However further analysis reveals that Fereshteh is not supposed to play the simple role of the terrorized victim; rather, she is a reflection of the feelings of many Iranian women who lived during Revolution. They, like Fereshteh, had to sacrifice their personal goals such as education and independence, to the whims of the men in their lives and to the orders of the men who rose to power in the Revolution. In the three-year period immediately following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, universities within Iran closed down, and this presented many challenges for women who were left with no degrees and consequently, no pathway to their becoming educated and independent, working women (Moruzzi 96). The film also defies traditional patriarchal norms in that, even women who follow all the cultural rules of submissiveness and purity, such as Fereshteh, are still subject to violence and subjugation. Though Milani makes a criticism of patriarchy in this scene, she, like many other women directors, also explores political, cultural, and social themes.

1.1 CENTRAL QUESTIONS

Contemporary female Iranian filmmakers must cautiously and astutely navigate the Islamic Republic's cinema censorship guidelines, as well as integrate themselves into a male-dominated

field (Rezai-Rashti 202). Filmmakers such as Rakhshan Bani Etemad and Tamineh Milani arose in the post-revolution era with profound films like *Gilaneh* and *The Hidden Half*, respectively (Rezai-Rashti 200). These films featured complex women characters and unique storylines pertaining to women's issues, which differed from the past lackluster and one-dimensional representations of women in Iranian cinema. As a result, Milani, Bani-Etemad, and other women film directors captured the hearts of viewers who welcomed the new complicated characters and accompanying subversive content to the field of Iranian cinema. Film scholars debate the feminist status of these films, but Milani, who believes her films should have a social impact and "raise the consciousness of women" was temporarily jailed for creating *The Hidden Half* (Rezai-Rashti 202).

Women Iranian film directors, such as Milani, continue to gain international acclaim, and more importantly, they continue to sculpt the identity of post-revolutionary film. As a result, key questions remain: 1) How do female film directors utilize cinema to convey their perspectives or opinions of Iranian everyday women's life or women's status under the Islamic Republic? 2) What cultural symbols and messages do they adopt, negotiate, or explore? 3) How do they simultaneously produce meaningful works yet also handle the Islamic Republic's film regulations? 4) How does their work challenge Western or traditional representation of Iranian women? The answers to these questions illustrate how Iranian women directors create and understand their identities and how they traverse the cultural, social, and political boundaries of their society with this identity.

This study answers these questions and investigates how women directors develop content in order to pass censorship laws and spread their desired messages. Using three case studies of women directors who tackle women's issues, class issues, and other themes, such as

war. This paper argues that these themes, and the way women directors interpret, subvert, and present them through film, challenge mainstream Western or patriarchal hegemonic discourse and what it means to be an Iranian woman.

1.2 OUTLINE

In the following sections, I outline my methodology in order to illuminate the process I used to study Iranian cinema and Iranian women directors. Then, I elaborate on the history of the political influences and factors that led to the formation of Iranian national cinema in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution, in order to show the relationship between the political atmosphere and the aims of Iranian filmmakers of the time. Furthermore, this section scrutinizes the evolution of women's representations and role in cinema and the film industry from the Pahlavi Dynasty through the Islamic Republic.

Though the leaders of the Pahlavi Dynasty and the Islamic Republic had contrasting political values, they shared the similarity of trivializing and minimizing multi-dimensional roles for women in the film industry, both on and off the screen. In the section on post-revolutionary cinema, I continue to explain political factors that influence Iranian cinema's development, as the newly instated Islamic Republic leaders had ambivalent feelings towards cinema, which was especially true towards potentially subversive topics that filmmakers might feature in their films. Some women directors confirmed the Republic's suspicions about truculent content, by creating films that defied the prosaic and dichotomous representation of women. Instead, these films portray women and their struggles in various issues such as motherhood, marriage, and love.

In the final sections, I analyze the political and cultural values scrutinized in the films of my three case studies: Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tamineh Milani, and Samira Makhmalbaf. These women directors are among the most famous, domestically and internationally, and their films have a reputation for portrayals of women and class struggles. For this reason, their films are widely accessible and also available with subtitles. Furthermore, while Bani-Etemad and Milani are veteran filmmakers, Makhmalbaf is a talented director who is the daughter of famed Iranian New Wave Director Mohsen Makhmalbaf. Their films demystify the process by which their identity as an Iranian woman is constructed, a process that defies simplistic Western notions of the oppressed Muslim woman and the representations of pure, good women and worthless, bad women found in earlier Iranian cinema. While these women are only three of the various Iranian women film directors, they are amongst the most successful and popular women filmmakers in Iran, making them worthy case studies. I analyze their films for cultural and socio-political commentary, and I also note how they use unique cinematic techniques to elude the censor-heavy restrictions of the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Culture and Guidance. I focus on the topics they choose to explore and how they portray their messages about these issues to their specific audience, whether it is the general Iranian audience, the reviewers at the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance, or film festival judges. The topic and content choices are important, because they indicate the issues that the women directors feel are important to the identity of an Iranian woman. These choices can also serve as a means of challenging Western discourse on Iran and Muslim women.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

My objective is to complicate Western portrayals of Iranian women, because these portrayals often strip Iranian culture and politics out of their frame of reference and the complex history of Iranian society. Feminist theorist Uma Narayan coined this process “de-contextualization.” This Western trend of “de-contextualization” applies to the importation and subsequent misrepresentation of life for marginalized “Others,” often in a post-colonial context, and in this case, for Iranian women. As I investigate the works of Iranian women directors, I use their films to resist the “de-contextualization” produced in Western discourse.

Using contemporary gender and sociological theory, I read films as a text to understand the cultural symbols and the various portrayals of the ideological woman in early Iranian film, and subsequently, how female film directors might choose to depict norms and cultural values in contemporary, post-revolution film.

This qualitative approach was apt for studying how women actively work through the cultural medium of film to illuminate the complex role of women in post-revolutionary Iranian society, the cultural symbols attached to womanhood, and how personal experience shaped the expression and meanings conveyed in the films. It answered the research questions of how these directors comment on women’s social and political status within Iran and how they maneuver the Islamic Republic’s censorship codes. Using this method, I also explored how Iranian filmmakers dispute Western notions of Iranian women.

After comprehensive research on the historical context and biographical context of the films, I watched all the films studied and explored in this paper, in order to better interpret and comprehend the messages about women's lives or suppressed lives conveyed to the audience, as well as to gain first-hand knowledge in the experience of witnessing Iranian film. However, the predominantly intended audience members of Iranian films are Iranian. I, however, am not, and I aim to approach the films with the acute awareness that I could potentially interpret the films differently than an Iranian person would. However, my position as an insider of Western culture allows me to better subvert the stereotypical and popular discourses that are imposed on analyses of Iran.

This study contributes to gender, sexuality, and women's studies as it examines Iranian women's interpretation of society and how they choose to represent that in the medium of film in ways that, following the lead of Mohanty, Narayan, Abu-Lughod, and others, challenge simplistic notions of "Other" women, being Iranian women in this context. I also contributed to the film studies field in exploring the political and cultural implications of Iranian women's films; more specifically, I considered how female film directors are challenging the structures of their patriarchal society while minimizing the impact of the censorship laws of Iranian cinema.

Unfortunately, the tensions of Iranian-United States diplomatic relations prevent student exchange programs, and furthermore, the United States State Department, fearing detainment, cautions strongly against United States citizens traveling to Iran. Consequently, this phase of my research is limited to analysis in the United States.

I have been a student of Persian for seven semesters, and this is a considerable asset in looking at the films. However, it is insufficient for translating and including research from scholarship written in Farsi. Additionally, I supplemented my readings on women's Iranian

cinema with articles about film theory as well as taking film studies course *Film Analysis* (ENGFLM 0530 – 1110), which greatly enhanced my abilities to dissect and understand filmic artistry and cinematographic details.

3.0 BACKGROUND OF IRANIAN FILM POLITICS

On February 1, 1979, three million Iranians fled to the streets, cheering for their national savior's return to Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Elton 177). One of the revolutionary leaders and the leaders of the new Islamic Republic, he was still configuring his plans and stance for the future of Iranian film. Khomeini's installment as a political leader of Iran surprised many revolutionaries who considered Khomeini to be a symbolic catalyst for the revolution, not an actual political actor (Elton 177). But Khomeini was determined to see his Islamic vision for Iran through. Having earned the support of the Iranian people in the revolutionary struggle, Khomeini enjoyed support from the masses for his vision (Elton 178).

Aiming to use the powerful influence of cinema for the State's interests, the Islamic Republic had no choice but to preserve the film industry, on the condition that it would become purely "Islamic" (Mir-Hosseini 2007). As a result of the "Islamicization" of Iran during the pandemonium leading up to the Revolution, 125 of the 524 cinemas in Iran were burned down (Sadr 169). Khomeini, however, publicly and famously stated that his regime did not oppose cinema, but only obscenity (Sadr 169). As the Islamic Republic kept Hollywood movies at bay, they also generously subsidized indigenous Iranian filmmakers and established a filmography institute. This gave rise to an Iranian film industry that now receives considerable international acclaim (Rezai-Rashti 198), exemplified by Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation*, which won a 2012

Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film, and in 2006, Tahmineh Milani won Best Director, Best Screenplay, and Best Film at the Asia Pacific Film Festival for *The Unwanted Woman*.

Though the 1979 Iranian Revolution brought about strict regulations and censorship laws for films screened in Iran, it also unlocked opportunities for the presence and participation of women in Iranian cinema (Rezai-Rashti 191). For example, the Islamic Republic's mandated public veiling "Islamic-ize" the public sphere for women, so it is not considered sinful for women to work alongside men, because their hijab protects them from the lustful gaze (Rezai-Rashti 193). In fact, post-revolutionary Iranian films have markedly increased the number of women directors. Moreover, women directors have often been able to evade censorship laws and succeed in indirectly criticizing the Islamic Republic and women's lived experience in the patriarchal society of Iran, through a combination of persistence, persuasion, and careful presentation (Rezai-Rashti 202). Furthermore, the post-revolutionary film industry is now considered a respectable and fulfilling field for Iranian citizens, including women, to pursue. This stands in contrast to the revolutionaries' pre-revolution stigmatization of film as a sinful form of Western colonization (Rezai-Rashti 203). Changing attitudes, funding, and the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1988 certainly provided Iranian women with strong reasons to join the post-revolutionary film industry (Rezai-Rashti 199).

As a result of the political upheaval and unclear direction of the film industry, Iranian filmmakers between 1978 and 1982 made films that were largely "safe" by staying one-dimensional and superficial (Sadr 169). Almost four decades later, the vetting process and inherent censorship continues to frustrate filmmakers who would rather focus their efforts on the craft of filmmaking than circumventing the Republic (Jahed 107). In the early 2000's, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, the current cinema-regulation committee of the

Islamic Republic, launched efforts to revitalize stricter supervision of Iranian film, in response to the “soft war”—war of international cultural imperialism or influence—of contemporary international politics (Jahed 107). The state’s goal is to hinder the creation of negative portrayals of Iran, as they reflect badly on the regime (Jahed 108). As a result, female directors who subvert or criticize the patriarchal society of Iran have faced not only banishment from filmmaking but potential jail time as well (Jahed 108).

4.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY CINEMA

In order to understand the context of filmmaking in post-revolutionary Iran, one must first examine *filmfarsi*, an early form of Iranian cinema that limited representation of women to one-dimensional roles that followed the virgin-whore dichotomy. Contemporary women filmmakers challenge these earlier representations of women characters dating back to *filmfarsi*, often creating their own women characters that rebel against the simplistic, one-dimensional depictions.

In the late nineteenth century, the advent of photography demanded more realistic portrayals of women. The traditional method of replacing women's characters with male actors or cutting women's characters out completely was inadequate (Mir-Hosseini 2001: 27). Reza Shah, the first Shah of Iran's Pahlavi Dynasty from 1925 to 1941 (Daniel 135, 141), aimed to "modernize" of Iran, which catalyzed the process of better representation for women in film, where narratives of love were common themes (Mir-Hosseini 2001: 27).

However, the Shah's regime also had a strict code for cinema, which forbade films from addressing social issues. Instead, films were mainly produced for commercial and entertainment purposes (Rezai-Rashti 195). The roles for women during this time were limited to a predictable and simplistic dichotomy of "good" and "bad" women (Rezai-Rashti 196). Good women were obedient housewives and bad women were immoral, provocatively-dressed, alcohol-drinking, cigarette-smoking, family destroyers (Rezai-Rashti 196). These films became known as a genre

called *filmfarsi*, largely regarded as unintellectual appeals to the masses with love stories and singing women (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 675). *Filmfarsi* also contributed to the degradation of the Iranian national identity, as many heavily sought to duplicate the singing and dancing from Indian films, instead of drawing from local culture (Mirbakhtyar 33). Most cinema patrons who watched these *filmfarsi* movies were from the lower and middle classes of Iran, as they could not afford to pay for the entertainment of high-class cabaret dancers (Mirbakhtyar 33). Though not intellectually stimulating nor particularly interesting, *filmfarsi* movies sparked the interest of the public and prevented the film industry's potential downfall (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 675).

In 1933, *Lor Girl (Dokhtar-e Lor)* was released, Iran's first film with Persian dialogue, directed by Abdul-Hosseini Sepanta (Sadr 27). The film's plot represented the reign of Reza Shah with themes of modernization and Iranian nationalism, but it also included larger cues to the status of colonialist influence within Iran and the social position for women at the time (Sadr 28). Government agent Jafar, played by Sepanta, travels to Lorestan, a province in the rural west of Iran, known for its bandit problem and the disapproving attitude towards the national government (Sadr 27). In the battle against the bandits, he discovers their captive, young and beautiful Golnar, who he quickly falls for (Sadr 27). Golnar has mutual feelings (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 674). Jafar and Golnar defeat the bandits, and he takes her away from the rural lands of Lorestan and introduces her to the city, a symbol of the modernization, industrialization, and urbanization that Reza Khan sought.

The film was instantly successful, and Sepanta became a celebrity, his appearances attracting crowds to film houses around Iran (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 674). On the other hand, actress Sadiqeh "Rouhangiz" Saminejad, who played Golnar, became a social outcast—friends, family, and even strangers scorned her for her character's love plot, singing, and dancing (Mir-

Hosseini 2007: 675). She never accepted another film role, changed her name, and passed away, alone and poor at the age of 81 (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 675). As a part of the plan towards modernization, Reza Khan aimed to “Westernize” women, exemplified by policies that banned the hijab and chador (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 673). These policies, however, did little to ease the transition for Iranian women, and as a result, Iranian women found themselves caught between Reza Khan’s modernization and long-standing “traditional” religious, patriarchal values (Sadr 28). This was Saminejad’s unfortunate situation, as Sepenta was a college-educated descendant of Mozzafar al-Din Shah’s court and had little religious background, so his vision for *Lor Girl* never sought to reinforce the traditional values of Iran’s people (Sadr 27). In fact, Jafar’s gun-toting outfit resembled that of a hybrid between “a cowboy and an upper-class British adventurer” (Sadr 29). This aesthetic glamorized Western colonialism and culture, as Jafar introduced Westernization to Golnar by saving her from the bandits and bringing her to the city (Sadr 29). Reza Khan aspired to create a unified Iranian national identity that would overcome the local ethnic and tribal identities, and similarly, the characters of *Lor Girl* were portrayed only through an urban versus rural lens (Sadr 29). Indeed, the colonialist narrative of “lonely rural girl is rescued by brave urban man” was a recursive theme in early Iranian cinema (Sadr 29). The “lonely rural girl” trope also served to bolster the conception of women’s status in traditional Iran, furthering colonial interests (Sadr 29). In this way, Golnar was the enslaved and oppressed Iranian woman, as captive of the Lorestan bandits, who became subordinate to the Western man (Sadr 30). At the end of the film, Golnar is wearing Western clothing and playing the piano, a dramatic transformation from the former captive of the ominous land of Lorestan, leaving the film’s audience in awe of Golnar’s adventure, and by extension, the greatness of Reza Khan’s Iran (Sadr 30). Golnar’s metamorphosis from “oppressed” Muslim Iranian woman to

“sophisticated” Western woman closely echoed the works of the Western scholars who studied the Middle East (Sadr 30). Unsurprisingly, these scholars produced Orientalist writings that predominantly depicted Muslim women as prisoners of their own cultures and religion (Sadr 30). The land of Iran itself was a post-colonial geopolitical symbol of virgin, untouched terrain, waiting to be colonized by the eager and all-knowing West, further cementing the “colonial rescue fantasy” (Sadr 32).

Most Iranian films at this point featured women who were meek and had few lines; furthermore, the actresses were non-Muslim Armenians (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 675). Yet, Golnar invited Jafar to her room at night, presumably an invitation for a sexual encounter; this was a slap in the face for the usual role for women characters in Iranian film at the time (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 675). Clerics condemned *Lor Girl* as impious, as Golnar was not wearing a hijab in the film, and the clerics suspected Golnar would corrupt the audience with her immoral actions (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 675). Even Golnar’s make-up and clothing in the film paralleled caricatures of Middle Eastern women in American films, successfully depicting both the Middle East and Middle Eastern people as “void of any active historical role” and “object of exotic spectacle” (Sadr 31). *Lor Girl* defied the expectations for women at the time, having expressed romantic and sexual feelings for Jafar and having danced and wore make-up. She was the beginning of a series of changes in representation of women characters. *Lor Girl* “broke the rules,” and as a result, it is a pivotal point in Iran’s cinematic history, especially for the representation of women (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 677).

As Iran approached the 1970’s, films began to reflect the bleak outlook of the future of the Pahlavi Dynasty. They were embedded with a “social consciousness,” underlying political themes, and they marked the New Wave of Iranian film (Akrami 140). In 1969, *The Cow*,

directed by Dariush Mehrjui, and *Gheisar*, directed by Masud Kimiai, were both politically charged films that marked a change in Iranian cinema (Sadr 130). Both portrayed an “alternative view of Iranian society, its people and their sensibilities” (Sadr 130). The plotline of *The Cow* was a story about a man who was obsessed with his cow’s death (Sadr 131). Tormented by the sadness and betrayal, the man succumbed to his obsession and began to think that he was the cow (Gabri 51).

The Cow inaugurated the New Wave of Iranian films, which generally explored the struggles of ordinary people’s lives (Gabri 50). Until this point, *filmfarsi* movies dominated mainstream cinema production with spectacle and fantastical narratives. New Wave Iranian films were faithful to more accurate depictions of life in Iran with empathy and respect (Gabri 50). The Pahlavi regime endorsed the *filmfarsi* genre for perpetuating the desired image of a modernized and industrial Iran, but Mehrjui’s *The Cow* shattered that image, paving the way for a new genre of Iranian films to arise (Gabri 50).

Directors of New Wave Iranian films were also inspired to politicize their films in the aftermath of the Shah’s White Revolution, a series of industrial and land reforms in the early 1960’s that amplified the already deepening divide between the economic classes of Iran (Fay 103). The Shah launched the White Revolution in the interest of increasing the enfranchisement of Iranian women, re-distributing the wealth more equitably, investing in higher education, as well as proving to Western powers that Iran was a modernized, powerful, and enlightened state (Fay 103). These reforms backfired, as income inequality deepened and resulted in alienating much of the Iranian population (Fay 103). Thus, in the post-White Revolution era of the late

1960's and early 1970's, Iranian film developed into film noir,¹ with directors focusing on the cynicism and alienation that pervaded Iranian society in response to the failure of White Revolution policies (Sadr 136). Films shifted towards the urban crime setting, which reflected the pessimism and sordidness of the political mood of the time (Sadr 136). The characters of such films were products of an alienated society and the depressive consequences of the Shah's decaying reign (Sadr 136).

The landmark post-White Revolution film, Masmud Kimiai's *Gheisar* (1969), was one of the first films to garner intellectual analysis in Iran (Sadr 136). In the film, Iran is a dark, crime-ridden land with a "disaffected populace" (Sadr 137). Gheisar, the bad boy protagonist, becomes Iran's archetype for the anti-hero, a "manifestation of nonconformity" (Sadr 137). The film was a nonconformity in that the style of the crime melodrama derived from the public's discontentment with the status of established society and desire to surpass the norms of the time (Sadr 137). Gheisar emulated a new type of masculinity, a tough-guy character that some denounced as degenerate at the time (Naficy 2011: 262). Kimiai proved that deviation from *filmfarsi* could be commercially successful, which was especially significant, as the state did not fund the production of *Gheisar*. Mehrjui's *The Cow* received such funding and worried less about earnings (Akrami 136).

After he returns from a business trip to the ravaged ruins of southern Tehran and discovers his sister had been raped, the enraged Gheisar plunges into avenging his sister (Sadr 137). Like a classic Western "revenge" narrative, *Gheisar* brought film noir to the forefront of

¹ Film scholar David Bordwell describes film noir as "dark film," with serious mood and harsh lighting. Iranian filmmakers turned to film noir to reflect their attitudes of gloom and pessimism in the aftermath of the White Revolution.

Iranian cinema (Akrami 136). Eventually, Gheisar finds his sister's rapist through Soheila, the exotic singer and dancer who was also the rapist's girlfriend (Moradiyan Rizi 23).

Paralleling his opposition to modernity,² Gheisar's rebelliousness was also challenging the rise of capitalism in a two-fold manner: on one hand, Gheisar was the individual who refused to blend into the masses of urban-based industrial capitalism, and yet on the other, Gheisar saw the "rugged individualism" of free enterprise as a detriment (Sadr 138). Gheisar was the inspiration for the rebel protagonist for many films to follow, many of which Kimiai directed (Sadr 140).

Though *Gheisar* defied the norms of *filmfarsi*, the portrayal of the women characters remained identical. The binary between the good woman and the bad woman prevailed through the virtuous sister of Gheisar and through the independent, exotic Soheila, the rapist's girlfriend (Dönmez-Colin 38). Gheisar avenged his sister's rape, preserving the routine *filmfarsi* trope that "goodie" women stayed at home and let the men protect them and their chastity (Mir-Hosseini 2007: 675). In contrast, Soheila was the archetypical "baddie" woman, as her job literally entailed her to dance for satisfying the lust of criminal men. Despite the avant-garde style Kimiai aimed for in directing his film *Gheisar*, he did not subvert tropes of women common in other Iranian films. Of course, Kimiai still laid the foundation for film noir³ and rebellion-themed movies for years to come in Iran.

Kimiai's *Gheisar* also toyed with the theme of parenthood and family, as Gheisar fervently refuses to start a family with his fiancée (Sadr 149). Though in film noir, heterosexual

² Gheisar's opposition to modernity could also be read as a criticism of the Shah's administration, as many Iranians were becomingly increasingly critical that the Shah was cozying up to Western powers and changing laws to reflect a new era of Western-inspired "modernity."

³ See definition in footnote 1.

relationships often coincide with finding happiness, Iranian film noir explored the trend of childlessness of heterosexual couples (Sadr 149). The protagonists of film noir expressed little affection towards their love interests, and protagonists were confused about their sexuality, which intertwined with their aggressiveness (Sadr 151). In Kimiai's other films, the wives of *Baluch* and *Sadegh Kordeh* were raped or killed (Sadr 149). Many films portrayed the father figurehead of the family as the aggressive, authoritative headman, which reflected the larger violence in the state and in class conflict (Sadr 130).

In films outside of the film noir category, familial gender roles for women and men mirrored the ideology of the "Great Civilization" of the Shah, who thought that women should be "beautiful, feminine, and moderately clever" (Sadr 150). The Shah imposed the royal family as the model for the ideal family structure; the Shah himself represented the powerful and undisputed leader of Iran, especially in the serious issues such as economy and defense, whereas his wife, Queen Farah Diba, was the true "emancipated Iranian woman," who stayed in the sphere of the feminine with "social welfare, education, art and culture" (Sadr 150). The man's honor was flexible, and "lost and regained," but the woman's honor was an absolute possession procured at birth that had to be protected for her entire life (Sadr 150). The Shah projected the "Great Civilization" as a goal for his people in an attempt regain popular support for his reign (Pardo 33). The "Great Civilization" also served as a counterweight to the ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini, who was gaining popularity at the time for heavily lambasting the Shah's reign (Pardo 33).

Films such as *The Cow* and *Gheisar* were trailblazers in the new era of Iranian film, where more and more aspiring filmmakers dared to politicize their films and integrate a "social consciousness" into them (Akrami 137). Film became a primary method for more creative and

personal expression, since the state regulated radio and television broadcasting too tightly for the production of subversive content (Akrami 136). Filmmakers embraced film noir, as it challenged the traditional narratives that dominated *filmfarsi* and film of the Pahlavi era (Sadr 151). As filmmakers continued to release quality films that departed from the preferred pro-Shah, pro-modernization themes, the Pahlavi regime tightened restrictions on filmmaking even further (Akrami 137). Filmmakers worked to circumvent the tougher regulation with multi-layered, calculated symbolism, metaphors, and allegories (Akrami 137). Iranian filmmakers utilized symbolism in their New Wave films to convey material conditions, such as the “concrete day-to-day realities of Iranian life” (Akrami 137).

As the public became increasingly alienated from the Pahlavi regime, filmmakers produced high-quality films that reflected their frustration, and many filmmakers catered to the lustful interests of movie viewers as well. In the 1970’s, filmmakers blatantly disregarded the Production Code’s rules about sex and nudity in films, and they used women characters as exploited objects of sexual gratification (Sadr 150). They were “outlandish, sexually charged cocktails of voyeurism, performance and prostitution,” as their themes often centered on men who hustled women beyond “traditional boundaries” in the attainment of sex and money (Sadr 150). Some depictions of women bordered on absurdity, where the women’s sexuality would be revealed in the most unfitting setting, in an effort to ramp up seduction (Sadr 151). More than one film exhibited a seemingly traditional woman wearing a chador who would remove her veiling to reveal a miniskirt (Sadr 151). Sex and the body became objects for consumption, as the films referenced the decline of shame associated with immodesty or display of the body (Sadr 151). Furthermore, in an era in which many felt helpless, the rise of bodily display in films

paralleled the trend of many Iranians turning to improving or controlling their own bodies as a means of direction and self-efficacy (Sadr 151).

However, not all portrayals of women in the last decade of the Pahlavi Era were so narrow. The utilization of women as national symbols was popular during Iran's Constitutional Revolution of 1905 and in the Iranian press in the 1940's (Pardo 30). Similarly, filmmakers used women to depict the notion that Iran was a "weak nation controlled by scheming all-powerful foreigners" (Pardo 30). Filmmakers associated the frailty of Iranian society with women, children, and pets due to their "subaltern" status (Pardo 30). Moreover, Iranian women were overt indicators of political change within Iran, due to the laws regulating women's dress code in public, such as the Shah outlawing public veiling in 1936, so such symbolization seemed logical to the filmmakers (Pardo 31). Regulations over women's apparel reflected how influential the leaders of the time were, as their visions even affected daily wardrobe choices (Pardo 31).

Associating women with the nationalistic reverence for homeland served as a call to unite the country in taking action (Pardo 31). Iranian women were used to reflect how the Iranian people were becoming increasingly alienated from the Shah's reign and his programs of Westernization, as the women symbolized Iran, the motherland and the Iranian people. This is evident in a string of films leading up to the 1979 Revolution. In Masoud Kimiai's 1971 film *Dash Akol*, Kimiai uses a woman to demonstrate the powerlessness of Iran (Pardo 36). Wandering warrior Dash Akol falls in love with Marjan, and though she also has feelings, they are oblivious to the other's love (Pardo 36). Eventually, the two do reveal their love for each other in a poetic scene, where Marjan covers Dash's prayer carpet in rose petals (Pardo 36). However, their love is not viable, so Marjan is married off to a man from a good family, and Dash eventually dies in a fight (Pardo 36).

Though Kimiai does employ the usual “man saves helpless woman” narrative, he also ends the film with a tragedy, in that Dash couldn’t have Marjan (Pardo 36). In the same way that Dash endeavors to save innocent and sweet Marjan but fails, Iranian people could strive to save their beloved homeland, but success might not be achievable (Pardo 36). *Dash Akol* was part of the 1968 to 1971 cluster of films that followed the baseline plot of a man aspiring to save the weak woman but ultimately dies or disappears (Pardo 36). The popularity of this plotline was an indicator of the larger social consciousness developing within the Iranian masses (Pardo 36). Thus, *Dash Akol* illustrates that the representation of women in New Wave films was changing; even though Marjan had little agency in her life, she symbolizes the frail purity of the Persian history and homeland.

Indeed, representation of women takes a drastic turn in the 1975 film *The Stranger and the Fog*, director Bahram Beizai presents complex commentary about the state of Iran on the eve of its Revolution, as well as featuring a multi-dimensional woman protagonist, Ra’na (Pardo 41). A man washes up ashore with no recollection of who he is or where he is from—only that his name is Ayat (Pardo 41). After a few tests, Ayat earns the trust of the villagers, and he marries a widow, Ra’na (Pardo 41). However, trouble arises when strangers in black clothing come for Ayat, and under Ra’na’s leadership, the villagers successfully fight them off (Pardo 41). Ultimately, Ayat decides he must return to the sea to investigate his past and keep the danger away from the village, and Ra’na weeps as he leaves (Pardo 41).

The Stranger and the Fog was released at the height of the alienation from the Shah’s one-party political system (Pardo 42), and Beizai used the plot to imply that the current historical period of Iran would end soon (Sadr 156). More interestingly, Ra’na played an integral role in the narrative, as well as having a status of leadership within her community (Pardo 42). She was

courageous and goal-oriented, and she married Ayat despite the tensions between her groom and the village (Pardo 42). She refused to sacrifice her “femininity” or emotions in the masculine struggle of the battle against the strangers in black (Pardo 42). As a symbol of Iran’s resistance movement, Ra’na also served to demonstrate “popular struggle,” because she won the battle against the men who came for Ayat, yet Ayat chose to leave anyway (Pardo 42). This film insinuated that revolution would be futile in solving Iran’s deep-rooted socio-cultural problems (Pardo 42). In fact, *The Stranger and the Fog* suggested that revolution would actually diminish the individuality of Iran’s men and force women into loneliness (Pardo 42). In this way, Beizai continued the metaphor of women as a representation of the Iranian people who were devoted to their homeland and who were stirring against the Shah’s monarchy, though his film suggests he did not necessarily support the calls for revolution.

Both the origin of New Wave Iranian cinema, as well as the evolution of women characters throughout the Shah’s regime, stemmed from the increase of social consciousness within Iran. *The Cow* and *Gheisar* both were the result of male directors who aimed to more honestly portray the reality of Iranian people, as well as criticize the Pahlavi regime and elements of traditional and modern culture. The narratives of New Wave films break out of the mold of *filmfarsi* or other traditional film styles; instead, they address Iran’s complicated social, cultural, and political issues intelligently (Sadr 151). However, New Wave cinema underwent turbulence as Iran transitioned to the Islamic Regime in the 1979 Revolution (Gow 14). Suddenly, many experienced filmmakers were sent into exile, while the new regime either refused funding or demanded “Islamic” films (Gow 14). Filmmakers and the New Wave had to adapt to the different obstacles of the Islamic regime.

5.0 HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF POST-REVOLUTIONARY CINEMA

After the 1979 Revolution, the future of Iran's film industry was bleak, with some filmmakers altogether anticipating the end of the production of Iranian films (Mirbakhtyar 100). The Islamic Republic originally was disinterested in cinema, cutting government funds for the film industry altogether (Gow 14). Furthermore, the factions within the government, such as the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG)⁴, could not agree on how to regulate film, which led to arbitrary and frustrating censorship (Gow 14). Many experienced Iranian filmmakers were sent into exile for their past "un-Islamic" films (Gow 14). Even worse, there was no model or history of "Islamic film" in Iran; therefore, filmmakers were unsure how to approach the production of films that would meet the Republic's vague criteria (Gow 14). Financially, Iranian films could not compete with imported films. In the 1970's, Indian or American films dubbed with Persian accounted for 80 percent of the Iranian film market (Mirbakhtyar 100). The cost of importing and dubbing a foreign film was incredibly cheap compared to the cost of producing a film within Iran (Mirbakhtyar 100). Theaters were only

⁴ The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance controls and oversees the distribution and exportation of most types of media of Iran, including film. The MCIG also requires licenses for artists who want/need the permission of the MCIG for their work. If a film is to be screened in Iran, the film must first be licensed by the MCIG.

sustainable in urban areas, such as Tehran (Gow 14). Theaters built in religious areas such as Qom were usually burnt to the ground or converted into storage or religious buildings, as the locals disallowed the Western-influence and corruption of films in their city (Mirbakhtyar 103).

However, Iranian cinema prevailed, mostly due to two unforeseen circumstances. Firstly, the international acclaim of Iranian cinema attracted heavy foreign investment to the industry,⁵ which is still a critical leg of the industry today (Gow 16). Second, the Iranian government started to groom cinema as a national art, effectively increasing the number of films produced within Iran, despite keeping its censorship laws regarding religious piety (Gow 16). Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Republic began to see the potential in using film to create a national identity. In 2001, Iran produced 87 domestic films, compared to the 15 films in 1982 (Gow 16). Once the Republic established a cohesive and coherent system for producing and regulating films that adhered to the expected Islamic values, the film industry successfully became commercialized and internationalized (Gow 16).

In his famous first post-exile speech, Ayatollah Khomeini alluded to the future of cinema and similar media for Iran, stating:

We are not opposed to cinema, to radio, or to television... The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers. (Naficy 2012: 7)

In this statement, Khomeini made a distinction between his vision for the media of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the sinful, wicked cinema that plagued Iran in the Pahlavi Era (Naficy 2012: 8). Naturally, Khomeini and the traditional Shi'ite clergy of Iran strongly

⁵ As the administration of the Islamic Republic consolidated to groom film as a national art, they allowed room foreign investors in the interest of the nationalistic motives.

disapproved of the nudity and “un-Islamic” representation of women in *filmfarsi* and other pre-revolutionary cinema (Zeydabadi-Nejad 34). The women of pre-revolutionary films did not wear traditional Islamic dress, danced and sang for lecherous men, even consumed alcohol at times, and in the eyes of the clergy, this all served as evidence of the degradation of pure Islamic values (Zeydabadi-Nejad 34).

Ayatollah’s Khomeini’s ambition to purify the media of Iran coincided with the Iraq-Iran War of 1980 to 1988, resulting in an extremely conservative media, which served to solidify public support for the war against Iraq as well as galvanize the process of “Islamicizing” Iran (Zeydabadi-Nejad 36-37). The films of this time even garnered their own genre: Sacred War Cinema (Ginsberg 348). During the Iran-Iraq War, 300,000 Iranians were killed and over half a million were wounded (Ginsberg 348). In 1983, the Islamic Republic established the War Films Bureau, which regulated war films and trained filmmakers in creating the Republic’s desired cinema (Ginsberg 348). Thus, films of Sacred War Cinema were mainly documentaries or feature narratives that idolized the martyrs of the war as well as depicted the Iranian soldiers as pious, average men who sought to protect their people and homeland from the outside aggressors (Ginsberg 348). The War Films Bureau exemplified the Republic’s utilization of cinema in catering to their interests (Ginsberg 348).

The government sponsorship kept Iran’s film industry afloat (Mirbakhtyar 160). One pivotal point for Iranian cinema was when moderate cleric Mohammed Khatami became minister of the MCIG (Zeydabadi-Nejad 37). Khatami appointed executives who had experience in pre-revolutionary cinema and theater, subsidized filming equipment imports, decreased movie ticket taxes, and lent out low-interest loans to filmmakers (Zeydabadi-Nejad 37). These measures successfully inflated the annual number of domestic productions (Zeydabadi-Nejad 37).

Post-revolution, the government, along with a few religious revolutionary groups, established two main film organizations that would train filmmakers in the production of “acceptable” Islamic films: The Art Institute of the Islamic Propaganda Organization and The Farabi Cinema Foundation (Mirbakhtyar 107). Both organizations sought to provide the necessary resources for young aspiring revolutionary filmmakers, but The Farabi Foundation also had the responsibility of regulating the production and material of the experienced, professional filmmakers (Mirbakhtyar 107). All of the films produced in Iran were to follow the ideology of the Islamic Regime (Mirbakhtyar 107).

On the other hand, The Farabi Foundation aimed to steer both experienced and aspiring filmmakers towards producing films, given that the filmmakers heartily accepted the “Islamic” guidelines (Mirbakhtyar 110). Some pre-revolutionary New Wave filmmakers succumbed to the demands of The Farabi Foundation in order to continue their productions (Mirbakhtyar 110). The process with getting a film approved with Farabi was frustrating and extensive. A writer or director would submit a script to The Farabi Foundation reviewers, who would then edit or suggest changes to the script, meet with the director or scriptwriter, and demand the proper modifications (Mirbakhtyar 110). The ordered changes could range from minor edits to entire re-organizing or re-purposing of scenes and plotlines; sometimes the final draft would be unrecognizable compared to the original script (Mirbakhtyar 110).

The script-editing process within The Farabi Foundation could be repeated many times, until the advisors approved and sent the script to the MCIG, who would provide the license for the film production (Mirbakhtyar 110). However, in return for attaining a license, the film producer had to provide a list of all the people involved in the production, from actors to photographers to crew members, for the MCIG (Mirbakhtyar 110). Consequently, the Ministry

altered the list of people who would work in the production, favoring certain workers or actors over pre-revolution actors and workers (Mirbakhtyar 110). Oftentimes, the Farabi reviewers would reject actors and actresses who were too attractive, as they aimed to discourage the glamorization of physical beauty (Zeydabadi-Nejad 39). Even the portrayal of luxury within the films struck a negative chord with the censorship committees; for example, a chandelier in a film set might not have been approved (Zeydabadi-Nejad 39). During the filming itself, The Farabi Foundation or Ministry could intervene and change the way a scene was composed (Mirbakhtyar 110). The censorship codes prohibited insults to religious authority, encouragement of corruption, endorsement of wicked professions and behaviors, and promotion of foreign influence upon Iran (Zeydabadi-Nejad 40). However, these codes were open to interpretation, often culminating in debate between the film reviews in the Farabi (Zeydabadi-Nejad 40).

Once a film was finished, the MCIG greatly contributed to the publicizing of the film (Mirbakhtyar 111). The Ministry largely utilized the Fajr Film Festival and foreign film festivals (Mirbakhtyar 111). Though the Fajr Film Festival was established in 1981, the Ministry gained substantial control of the Festival in 1984 in order to better administrate which films would be successful or not (Mirbakhtyar 111). Any film that had been approved by the Ministry was forced to participate in the Fajr Film Festival in the competition section, where many of the jury members had connections to the Farabi Foundation (Mirbakhtyar 111). Some jurors refused awards to certain films in fear of the backlash from conservatives within the regime that the filmmaker would receive (Zeydabadi-Nejad 41). If films were not supported at the Fajr Film Festival, their chances of success in the film market drastically decreased (Mirbakhtyar 110). Additionally, the international department of The Farabi Foundation sent a few films, along with

a Farabi representative, to foreign film festivals, leaving the actual producers and filmmakers with little rights to independently send their films to other festivals (Mirbakhtyar 111).

In response to The Farabi Foundation's imposed censorship system, New Wave directors increased the symbolism and metaphors within their films, similar to the pre-revolution New Wave adoption of the Pahlavi Regime's censorship codes (Mirbakhtyar 161). However, The Farabi Foundation's censorship was more complicated and harsh, so New Wave films had to strengthen their efforts to circumvent censorship by the Islamic Regime. Children were less interesting to the Farabi censors, so New Wave directors often used children as characters, as they also functioned as symbols as well (Mirbakhtyar 161). In the film *Bashu*, for example, the protagonist was a little boy who symbolized a "reconciliation of two cultures" (Mirbakhtyar 161).

From 1987 to 1997, the New Wave cinema accumulated impressive worldwide acclaim with films such as *Children of Heaven*, which was nominated for an Oscar or *Taste of Cherry* which received the Golden Palm (Mirbakhtyar 161). Films critics internationally recognized the intellectual and intricate expression of national identity and humanism sewed within Iranian films (Mirbakhtyar 161). Despite international acclaim, most New Wave films did poorly in Iran, and they were not profitable (Mirbakhtyar 161). In fact, many New Wave directors stopped trying to produce films that would impress an Iranian audience; their main goal was international attention (Mirbakhtyar 161). Because New Wave directors no longer had to cater to the interests of Iranian audience members, the stories featured within the films deteriorated from the realistic, honest depictions of Iranian life to shock-value stories (Mirbakhtyar 162). This was a danger to the national identity that previous New Wave films were working to create (Mirbakhtyar 162).

As a result of Ayatollah's Khomeini's death in 1989, filmmakers experienced mild relief from the severity of the Islamic Republic's censorship enforcement (Zeydabadi-Nejad 41). Finally, there was space to negotiate and debate the status and future of post-revolutionary society (Zeydabadi-Nejad 41). President Rafsanjani allowed Khatami to relax the censorship codes (Zeydabadi-Nejad 42). Khatami lifted the ban on previously unapproved films and stopped requiring filmmakers to get their screenplays authorized by the MCIG (Zeydabadi-Nejad 42). Despite the slackened censorship laws, The Farabi Foundation still had to modify or reject films that were too politically sensitive or morally corrupt (Zeydabadi-Nejad 43). Political "hot zones" in films threatened the already fragile institution of cinema within Iran, so the censorship of such films sought to protect the Iranian film industry as a whole (Zeydabadi-Nejad 44). Following earlier models, perceptions of moral corruption in films mostly pertained to the representation of women, such as the purity of women character's role, the proper Islamic dress, and modest behavior (Zeydabadi-Nejad 44). Sometimes the censors simply relied on their own tastes in order to choose the best scripts due to limited funding and equipment (Zeydabadi-Nejad 47).

However, in 1997, Khatami was elected President as a reformist politician who vowed democracy and civil society (Zeydabadi-Nejad 49). Khatami appointed Ata'ollah Mohajerani as minister of the MCIG, and Seyfollah Dad became Cinema Deputy (Zeydabadi-Nejad 49). Dad removed the film rating system, which gave special privileges to films that the MCIG favored over others for their adherence to Islamic values (Zeydabadi-Nejad 49). Though some filmmakers were displeased they lost their guarantee to subsidies from the MCIG, others could finally continue or restart their film career (Zeydabadi-Nejad 50). A sociology graduate, Dad also strongly relied on statistics of audience reception in allocating funds and supplies to filmmakers (Zeydabadi-Nejad 50). He found that only 3.6 percent of the general public enjoyed

Sacred War films whereas 30.9 percent enjoyed “political and social films” (Zeydabadi-Nejad 50). In the interest of encouraging filmmakers to accommodate such statistics, Dad created a new genre of cinema called “cinema of reform,” which motivated filmmakers to delve into the “political and social films” that resonated with the Iranian public (Zeydabadi-Nejad 50).

Moherjani’s relatively liberal policies culminated in his impeachment in 1999, where his opponents condemned his press policies as well as his changes to the cinema industry, such as cutting subsidies for Sacred War Cinema and improperly regulating the treatment of women characters in films (Zeydabadi-Nejad 52). Though the impeachment was not successful, Dad consequently had to be much more cautious in the films that MCIG would approve (Zeydabadi-Nejad 52). Dad’s successor mostly continued the policies of his predecessor, though he did reinstate the policy of getting screenplays pre-approved by the MCIG (Zeydabadi-Nejad 52). Conservative president Ahmadinejad was elected into office in 2005, where he appointed Hossein Saffar-Harandi as minister of the MCIG, who promptly declared he would tolerate no feminism or secularism within Iranian cinema (Zeydabadi-Nejad 53). Some conservatives have criticized Saffar-Harandi for not reversing enough of the policies of Khatami’s time in office (Zeydabadi-Nejad 53). However, many filmmakers, to their disappointment, have found Ahminejad’s policy to be more restrictive than those of Khatami (Gugler 11).

The post-revolution compulsory veiling law increased women’s presence in the public sphere, because the hijab “Islamicized” public life, which was previously deemed secular (Zeydabadi-Nejad 106). The Iraq-Iran War similarly necessitated the addition of women in the public sphere, as many men had to leave their usual posts to fight in the war (Zeydabadi-Nejad 106). Magazines such as *Zan* and *Zanan* have actively analyzed and criticized the social and political status of women in Iran, inciting public debates about needed changes to policy and law

(Zeydabadi-Nejad 107). Some of these debates ultimately favored the Islamic feminists, who had been running the women's press, as more university courses opened for women, divorce laws mandated compensation for women in certain cases, and contraception became easily accessible (Zeydabadi-Nejad 107).

In this period, women's magazines had some influence on public opinion, however films were much more popular with Iranian women, who saw their own struggle reflected within the dramatizations and narratives of women characters in film (Zeydabadi-Nejad 107). Such productions were considered the genre of "women's films" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 107). Both men and women directors have composed women's films, which have risen in popularity starting around the mid 1980's (Zeydabadi-Nejad 109). Women characters with more agency began appearing, contrary to the usual passive bodies who mainly served to satisfy male gaze and expectations (Zeydabadi-Nejad 109). However, the term "women's films" is a flexible and fluid, as it can still encompass a wide diversity of films from a multitude of film directors. A film with a woman director does not necessarily constitute a film in the women's films genre, because, as Alison Butler states, women's film is a "hybrid concept: arising from a number of overlapping practices and discourses, and subject to a baffling variety of definitions" (Naficy 2012: 94). Like most genres of cinema, women's film is a continually evolving category that acts as an umbrella for films that collectively change the status quo for women within themselves. In the aftermath of the Iraq-Iran War, women infiltrated the film industry in the background positions such as designers, assistant directors, and stage managers, working their way up to the male-dominated space of leading film production (Lahiji 224).

Some of the more famous women filmmakers in the 1980's include Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tamineh Milani, and Puran Derakhshandeh, and more recently, Samira Makhmalbaf,

Marziyeh Meshkimi, and Manijeh Hekmat (Zeydabadi-Nejad 109). These directors sought to showcase the perspective of Iranian women, even boldly depicting love stories on-screen, which the MCIG usually corrals from the public (Zeydabadi-Nejad 109). Milani's 1999 film *Two Women* was a pioneer for women's films, attracting national attention for spotlighting issues such as domestic violence and the hierarchy in marriage (Zeydabadi-Nejad 110). Women directors of Iran use a range of genres such as social comedies to melodramas to illuminate life for Iranian women and to raise "consciousness" (Naficy 2002: 47). New Wave director Dariush Mehjri, who directed *The Cow*, even contributed to women's films with his 1992 film *Sara*, which depicted a housewife who fought to fix her husband's financial problems (Lahiji 224). New Wave directors engaged with women's films, which was an indicator of the larger acceptance of the addressing of women's issues within the New Wave movement (Lahiji 224). However, sexism could still permeate the lives and works of even the most "intellectual" filmmakers, as Tamineh Milani noted in an interview (Zeydabadi-Nejad 110). She pointed out that the man who could have just married a second wife to the embarrassment of his first wife or opportunistically have taken advantage of laws that prioritize men over women could be the same director who criticizes violence against women in his next film (Zeydabadi-Nejad 121).

Consequently, it is women directors are on the forefront of pivotal changes in Iranian culture. They are "gradually breaking out of their restrictive shells to declare their presence everywhere" (Lahiji 226). Women directors are the force toiling against the male-dominated field of cinema, who remain suspicious of feminist messages within women's films (Al-Marashi 232). In their productions, women directors of Iran annihilate the simplistic notion of the "goodie" women and the "baddie" women, and instead, they unapologetically paint portraits of realistic struggles and the daily lives of Iranian women (Lahiji 226). While both women and men

directors design symbols of political dissent that subvert the control of hegemonic discourse of the censors at the MCIG, cinema provides a battleground where women are able to contend with the way patriarchy affects women's lives in Iran (Derayah 155).

It is these works of political criticism that are challenging the one-dimensional representations of women from pre-revolutionary *filmfarsi* and the dominant Western discourse surrounding Iranian women. These women filmmakers address issues of gender, culture, class, and violence, and they do so while negotiating with censorship codes. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, a veteran Iranian film director, is pioneer of films about women in poverty, and her strategic navigation of censorship shines in her work.

6.0 RAKHSHAN BANI-ETEMAD

Known as “The First Lady of Cinema,” Rakhshani Bani-Etemad is one of the most prominent women directors of Iran and arguably, the world (Cobbey 85). Born in Tehran, Iran in 1954, Bani-Etemad began her career as a documentary director for the Republic of Iran Broadcasting, after graduating with a film direction degree from the University of Tehran (Ginsberg 46). Her films usually focus on the struggles of lower-class Iranians, oftentimes with women as strong, survivor protagonists (Ginsberg 46). Bani-Etemad’s films analyze the effect of gender, class, and sexuality on everyday lives (Rezai-Rashti 202), so these films are mainly socially conscious documentaries (Whatley 31). In dealing with issues such as divorce, polygamy, poverty, criminality, and social norms, Bani-Etemad has a reputation for stretching the limits of the censorship codes (Whatley 31). In an interview, Bani-Etemad revealed, “My films deal with difficult and real issues and people recognize that. The respect that I grant to people and their problems is noticed by them” (Rezai-Rashti 202). Bani-Etemad’s films are brutally honest with the depiction of the miserable material conditions some Iranians endure in their lives (Rezai-Rashti 202).

The 1991 film *Nargess* established Bani-Etemad as a serious contender in the sphere of women’s films (Dabashi 229). Bani-Etemad directed the film, and she co-wrote the script and was a producer as well (Eslami 125). At the 1991 Fajr Film Festival in Tehran, Bani-Etemad won first prize for *Nargess*, which was the first time a woman won the award for a feature film.

This award also established her as a top Iranian filmmaker outside of the sphere of women's films (Naficy 2000). *Nargess* depicted the miserable poverty that Bani-Etemad observed in her days of documentary making, but it also daringly explored women's sexuality and even, incest (Dabashi 228). *Nargess* challenged the imposed narratives of sexuality of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, mainly through the character of the older woman, Afaugh (Dabashi 228). Afaugh is a petty thief married to a younger man named Adel, who falls in love with another woman, Nargess. Conflicted, Afaugh agrees to pretend to be Adel's mother to convince Nargess to marry Adel. In the end, when Afaugh fails to win Adel back, even after a successful, lucrative thieving job, she is heartbroken and walks in front of an oncoming truck.

In *Nargess*, the character of Afaugh completely disputes the film industry's binary for women characters, exemplified Masoud Kimiai's films (Dabashi 228). Afaugh is confident in her sexuality without ever resorting to the excessiveness of exotic dancers or the chastity of virgin bride (Dabashi 228). She is aware of her situation, aging and losing her beauty and her husband's interest, making her a realist (Dabashi 228). In comparison, Adel is the childish dreamer, who believes he will someday achieve the respectable life and be "his own boss" (Dabashi 228). Adel's sexuality was ancillary, as it was "contingent on Afaugh's generosity" (Dabashi 228). Even though she lost her husband to another woman, Afaugh's sexuality was the focal point of the events of the film, as she secured Adel as a partner in crime and partner in marriage (Dabashi 229). Afaugh volunteered herself to help Adel court Nargess, and as film scholar Hamid Dabashi notes, this maneuver "dismantles the patriarchally constituted roles of both men and women and the relationship of power they entail" (Dabashi 230). In other words, Afaugh demonstrated her capacity to catalyze Adel's sexuality, even if it wasn't directed towards her (Dabashi 230). She was not a passive and self-pitying presence who watched her husband leave; rather, she

facilitated an arrangement that would result in her suffering (Dabashi 230). Her crucial role in the union of Nargess and Adel makes Afaugh an essential element to the marriage, emphasizing her as an active agent of sexuality (Dabashi 230).

The love-triangle between Afaugh, Adel, and Nargess also disputed the Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex (Dabashi 231). The relationship between Afaugh and Adel suggested incest, because Afaugh raised and cared for Adel like he was her son (Dabashi 234). In “Gazes/Voices/Power: Expanding Psychoanalysis for Feminist Film and Television Theory,” Jackie Byars applies sociologist Nancy Chodorow’s criticism of Freudian Oedipal theory to film reading; she summarizes:

Chodorow directly contradicts Freud’s analysis of the Oedipal ‘family romance’ by asserting that the male’s development involves a negation of the primary identity, while the female’s does not. She insists that the female child does not give up her attachment to her mother during the Oedipal stage, as Freud argues, but develops instead a different model, a triadic model, for relationships. On the other hand, in order to develop ‘normally’, the male must repress his identification with the mother and develop a sense of himself as different and separate. (Byars 113)

Chodorow’s analysis of the “family romance” directly rejects the dominant Oedipal narratives of Classical Hollywood Cinema, and though Bani-Etemad’s film takes place in Iran, the storyline of Afaugh, Adel, and Nargess follows Chodorow’s theory more than it does with the traditional Freudian theory. At one point, Afaugh, pretending to be Adel’s mother, pays a visit to Nargess, and to Adel’s suspicion, the three become the triadic model that Chodorow describes. Nargess insists on getting Afaugh’s approval for her marriage with Adel, and Afaugh does not outwardly express disdain for Nargess’s existence, but rather, disappointment in Adel’s shortcomings. Meanwhile, Adel struggles to create his own identity separate from Afaugh, desperately trying to change his life and stop his thievery, just as Chodorow describes. Adel

enacts so much effort into his new identity that he does not reveal his status as a petty thief to Nargess until after they have married. Thus, Bani-Etemad's construction of the triadic model between Afaugh, Adel, and Nargess challenge the Freudian, masculinist storyline for women.

Bani-Etemad also criticizes the traditional nuclear family structure. By asking Nargess to marry Adel, who is secretly her lover, Afaugh rebuffs the nuclear family structure of mommy-daddy-baby, where the mother is obedient to the whims of the father (Dabashi 230). Not only does the arrangement between the two women and Adel dramatize the plot, it also thrusts forward toward the audience a deeply stigmatized and marginalized family structure that resulted from the poverty of the characters' reality (Dabashi 230). Bani-Etemad uses the love-triangle of *Nargess* to parody the nuclear family, as she drew the love-triangle from her experience as a documentary director working with Iranians in poverty (Dabashi 231). The Oedipal theory endorses the traditional mother-father-child structure, because it makes families productive, namely in that they reproduce (Dabashi 231). However, Afaugh, Adel, and Nargess are not productive, in that there is no child, which negates the capitalistic logic of reproduction and nuclear families (Dabashi 231). In this way, Bani-Etemad also stresses the alienation of lower classes as a result of the Oedipal-endorsed "instrumental rationalism of capitalist modernity" (Dabashi 231). As Hamid Dabashi notes:

Bani-Etemad intends precisely the same sort of liberation by in effect overemphasizing the most power institution of its perpetuation, namely, its strategies of gender formation via the sanctification of the Holy Family. What Bani-Etemad in effect exposes is the brutal economic forces that successfully disguise themselves as "traditional family values" in one of the most tyrannical institutionalizations of power. (Dabashi 233)

Strictly speaking, *Nargess's* love triangle exemplifies the alienation of the poor as a result of capitalism and its associated Oedipal gender roles and family structures (Dabashi 231).

Throughout the film, the plague of poverty wears on all the characters, illustrating the theme of the poverty correlating with moral decline (Reza Sadr 259). Adel's struggles with employment hinted at the bigger issue of unemployment in Iran (Reza Sadr 259). Bani-Etemad's critique of capitalism also highlights the toll on relationships (Dabashi 233). Because they are both products of paltry financial background and social isolation, Afaugh and Adel are together, as thieves who are "economically unproductive" (Dabashi 233). As members of the lower class and the culturally marginalized, they are in union in that they are similarly alienated from the rest of their society (Dabashi 233). However, Adel's attempts to rise above the life of a social pariah bogged in the cycle of poverty, by marrying Nargess, severed the bond he had with Afaugh, one of the only meaningful bonds he has ever had (Dabashi 233). Thus, Bani-Etemad again uses social realism to encapsulate the effect of larger systems of power and hierarchy on the most powerless and desperate in Iranian society (Dabashi 233).

In confrontations with censorship, Bani-Etemad had to make a few concessions. Though *Nargess* depicted women's sexuality, there was not a single sex scene and barely any female-male touching (Dabashi 229). Due to the stigma of a relationship between an older woman and a younger man, Bani-Etemad had to add a scene explaining that Adel and Afaugh were originally married (Reza Sadr 259). For domestic release, the soundtrack of *Nargess* featured a chorus, in contrast to the foreign release, which featured a woman's solo (Al-Marashi 213).

However, Bani-Etemad still snuck in a few shots that verged with breaking the code. In "Contradictions and Paradoxes: Political Censorship and Visual Representation of Women in Contemporary Iran," Lida Shanehchiyan argues that the censorship code of Iran forces artists to enhance their own language of symbolism in visual language (44). The artists are continually in a "cat and mouse game," trying to create new symbols with new meanings that can outrun the

wrath of the censors (48). The censorship code forbids eye contact between the female and male characters in films, so filmmakers must develop alternative methods of displaying meaningful, communicative gazes between differently-gendered characters (Kugler). Dr. Tirza Kugler describes:

The need to overcome the restricting rules brought about the development of implied cinematic tricks...Various alternative ways of gazing were developed: from unfocused look, gazing aside, a glance from a desireless gaze—to avoiding close-ups which emphasize the physical beauty of women, replacing them with long-shots which reduce sexual connotations and planning visual compositions which hide or partially block the view of female characters. (Kugler)

In this quote, Kugler explains the strategy that Iranian women filmmakers use in order to subvert the Islamic Republic's rules about gaze, by creating their own gazes that imply the meaningful connection that the codes seek to eliminate. Nargess exemplifies this strategy of alternative gazing, as they flirted with direct eye contact in various scenes between Adel and Nargess (Naficy 2000).

After Adel meets Nargess, he cannot stop thinking about her, even when he is at a restaurant with Afaugh. While Afaugh attempts conversation with him, he is obviously not listening, thinking about something else. Instead of replying to Afaugh's questions, Adel stares at the vase of flowers sitting in the middle of the table, even poking some flowers with his cigarette. "Nargess" is a Persian word for a type of flower, thus Adel's fixation on the flowers is a representation of Adel's newfound passion for another woman. Bani-Etemad perhaps alludes to Adel's sexuality, if the cigarette is a stand-in for his phallic sex drive and a flower retains its traditional representation of virginity. In the shot, the vase of flowers almost obscures the view of Afaugh's face, leading the audience to believe that Nargess would be a big part of Adel and Afaugh's life soon. This scene demonstrates Shanehchiyan and Kugler's observations to be true;

Bani-Etemad resorts to multi-layered symbolization in depicting the sexuality of a complicated love-triangle.

In her 1994 film *The Blue Veil*, Bani-Etemad, writer and director, brazenly portrays a love story on screen, a risky venture with the potential censorship of the state (Naficy 2000). The central relationship is opposite of that in *Nargess*, as a young woman and an older man come together in the film (Naficy 2000). However, this relationship must surpass class boundaries, unlike Adel and Afaugh who were both poor (Naficy 2000). For this film, Bani-Etemad won the Bronze Leopard prize at the Locarno Film Festival (Tracz). Nobar works at a tomato farm, when the elder farm owner, Rasul, notices her (Dabashi 235). Recently widowed, Rasul reaches out to Nobar, but his daughters and in-laws berate him, as they are worried about the stigma and financial consequences of having an affair with a lower-class woman (Dabashi 235). Despite this, Rasul pursues Nobar, and they develop strong feelings for each other.

Nobar and Rasul can be read as Iranian women's critique of Western feminist analysis. In "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," Chandra Mohanty criticizes Western scholars for reducing "Iranian Muslim women" into a single, monolithic group, instead of recognizing the agency and heterogeneity of Iranian women. Mohanty describes:

A further example of the use of 'women' as a category of analysis is found in cross-cultural analyses which subscribe to a certain economic reductionism in describing the relationship between the economy and factors such as politics and ideology. Here, in reducing the level of comparison to the economic relations between 'developed' and 'developing' countries, the question of women is denied any specificity. (71)

Here, Mohanty highlights that Western feminist scholars generalize "Third World Women" into monolithic categories, such as "Muslim women" or "Iranian women," and in the process of

doing so, these Western scholars fail to recognize women's diversity, specificities, groups, and agency. Instead, they draw vast blanket statements that oversimplify the situation of the groups of women at hand. These generalizations include that Muslim women are weak, victimized, and prisoners of their own culture who are forced into arranged marriages. This is conception is especially popularly associated with Iranian women, because of the Islamic Republic's famed mandated public veiling law.

However, Nobar stands in direct contradiction to those generalizations. Nobar, a young peasant woman with two children from a previous marriage and a proud personality, is the protagonist who wears a blue veil (Naficy 2000). The film's title is named after Nobar's veil, the supposed symbolization of Iranian women's oppression, yet Nobar is a strong protagonist, who encapsulates the dimensionalities of being a caretaker, lover, worker, and other identities. Nobar is poor, young, but Rasul is rich, powerful, and old (Dabashi 238). Moreover, it is Nobar's dignified personality that captures the attention of Rasul. Thus, Nobar was the active aggressor in comparison to Rasul, though he was supposed to be the agent with more power. Throughout the film, Nobar stands up for herself in the face of humiliation, and she walks with strength and assertiveness (Naficy 2000). At one point, Nobar even breaks the prescribed rules of modesty, as she beats up her brother when she catches him stealing (Naficy 2000). Breaking the censorship code is analogous to challenging the patriarchal demands of the Islamic Republic, thus disputing Orientalist conception of Iranian women—even a poor, working-class, uneducated woman like Nobar—as weak and inert non-actors.

Like in *Nargess*, Bani-Etemad uses symbolism to illustrate Nobar and Rasul's love without having to show the actors touching each other. In *The Blue Veil*, Bani-Etemad chose the characters' names in referencing the deep semiotic history of Persian culture (Dabashi 235). For

example, Bani-Etemad draws a parallel to the story of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, as the tomato farm owner's name was "Rasul Rahmani," which translates into "the Messenger of the Merciful" (Dabashi 235). Both Muhammed and Rasul lost their dignified wives early in their lives (Dabashi 235). Rasul also resembles Muhammed in his actions, as Rasul frequently expressed concern and generosity towards the workers on his farm (Dabashi 235). His car is white, the color that alludes to "ancient tales of saints and heroes" (Dabashi 235). Kabutar means "dove," which is a reoccurring motif within classical Persian stories, and Kabutar was also the name of the woman who acted as messenger between Nobar and Rasul (Dabashi 235). These semiotic references assuage the audience with the "culturally familiar" while simultaneously luring the audience and censors into accepting Nobar and Rasul's sexually tense relationship (Dabashi 235).

Ultimately, *The Blue Veil* was another one of Bani-Etemad's exploits that featured a love story as well as challenging the status quo of cultural constructs. Using various tactics of hints and cultural allusions, Bani-Etemad manages to depict the love of a taboo relationship, without Nobar and Rasul ever actually touching. Bani-Etemad's following films further stretch the censorship codes and modesty rules in the interest of enhancing the style of social realism and addressing more taboo themes (Naficy 2000).

In her 1997 film, *The May Lady*, Bani-Etemad addresses divorce, single motherhood, life priorities, and relationships while unmarried (Naficy 2000). Bani-Etemad continues with her theme of social realism as well as women's sexuality, as the protagonist in *The May Lady* carries out a relationship with an unknown man despite her career and parenting responsibilities (Cheshire). The film's protagonist, Forough, is a middle-aged divorced documentary maker,

having a notable resemblance to Bani-Etemad herself (Reza Sadr 260). The film mainly explores the balancing act between motherhood and love (Haeri 124).

Forough, a filmmaker on the verge of middle-age, lives with her grown son, Mani. However, Forough's relationship with her son grows tense, as Mani becomes suspicious of Forough's secret lover, though his face is never shown. Career-wise, Forough is also faced with the task of finding the "exemplary mother" to create a documentary about, and she interviews various women who have endured hardship and struggle in the name of their family. Despite Mani's protests, Bani-Etemad ends the film with Forough making a call to her partner, solidifying her will to pursue a meaningful relationship with him.

With some strategic shooting, Bani-Etemad works to create intimacy between the audience and the characters. Censorship codes demand that women are dressed in loose clothing and hijabs on screen, even if the woman is alone or only with related men in the scene (Naficy 2000). Thus, women in films must be dressed as if a third party is always watching, which creates a hindrance for filmmakers who want to depict intimacy and warmth between characters (Naficy 2000). Bani-Etemad confronts this barrier through the shot of Forough removing her veil, naturally incorporating it into the story (Naficy 2000). After returning home from work, Forough is shown walking to her room while also removing her veil, but she walks out of the shot right before her veil is actually off (Moruzzi 1999: 54). In this way, Bani-Etemad evades the obstacle of the impersonal of the gaze of the audience (Naficy 2000). The audience can better identify with Forough, who removes her veil when she's at home, like real women (Naficy 2000). Bani-Etemad's dedication to the authenticity of her characters also pushes her to toy with the censorship code (Moruzzi 1999: 54). This creative shooting is one of Bani-Etemad's strategies for managing the censorship code while still fulfilling her artistic vision.

The name “Forough” is a reference to Forough Farrokhzad, who was a famous and iconic modernist poet of Iran (Naficy 2000). This is significant in that *The May Lady*’s Forough and her lover, Mr. Rahbar, communicate largely by reciting Persian poetry, though it is Forough’s voice that dominates the voiceover of the film, interweaving recitations of poetry with soliloquies about the complications and entanglement of motherhood, sexuality, building a career, and love (Naficy 2000). This results in a presentation of free discourse, meaning the audience is tuned in with the deepest thoughts of Forough’s mind (Naficy 2000). The intertwining of Forough’s and Mr. Rahbar’s voices signify the physical yearning between the two, since they cannot be shown touching nor are they allowed to engage in too much as they are unmarried (Naficy 2000). Furthermore, because Mr. Rahbar, Forough’s boyfriend, is never shown in the film, the only immediate portal of desire in this relationship is Forough, so Bani-Etemad cleverly uses Mr. Rahbar’s absence to highlight Forough’s desire and sexuality. So if the audience empathizes with the relationship, they must do so through Forough’s forefront of sensuality (Naficy 2000).

Capitalizing on her background in documentaries, Bani-Etemad strategically interlaces documentary-style clips into *The May Lady*, as Forough is a documentary maker (Naficy 2000). The clips were Forough’s interviews of women speaking about the “ideal mother,” and some of the interviews were actual, real interviews with established women in the sphere of women’s issues (Naficy 2000). The interweaving of the documentary clips into the film gave the audience a double perspective—one of Forough’s personal struggle and that of the struggle of the mothers in the lower classes of Iran (Naficy 2000). Interestingly, some of the documentary clips featured women from Bani-Etemad’s past films, such as *Nargess* (Naficy 2000). Bani-Etemad used *The May Lady* to update her audience, as *Nargess* had a baby, which she didn’t have in her past film *Nargess* (Naficy 2000).

As Bani-Etemad's works usually are, *The May Lady* is a multi-layered and rich depiction of Iranian society's treatment of taboo love and family life (Reza Sadr 260). The myriad of difficulties Forough suffers through, as a divorced mother with a career and a secret boyfriend, are splashed to the forefront of the screen and into the apprehensive consumers, whose values and traditional lifestyles are brought into question (Reza Sadr 260). *The May Lady* is the polar opposite of the representations of women in *filmfarsi*. Whereas the women in *filmfarsi* are relegated to the "goodie" and "baddie" dichotomy, Forough is able to have a multi-faceted life, even a lover as an unmarried woman, and exist as the protagonist that the audience sympathizes with.

In her piece "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey describes the different "gazes" within "Classical Hollywood Cinema," though her description certainly applies to many Iranian films, New Wave or not. She explains:

There are three different looks associated with cinema: that of the camera as it records the pro-filmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product, and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion. The conventions of narrative film deny the first two and subordinate them to the third, the conscious aim being always to eliminate the intrusive camera presence and prevent a distancing awareness in the audience. Without these two absences (the material existence of the recording process, the critical reading of the spectator), fictional drama cannot achieve reality, obviousness and truth (843)

In this quote, Mulvey identifies three types of gaze: the camera, the character, and the audience. Mulvey writes that in Classical Hollywood Cinema, the look of the character, who is the male protagonist, dominates the look of the camera, and by extension, the audience. In Hollywood cinema, the audience then identifies with the male protagonist in their scopophilic view of the male protagonist's heterosexual love interest. In the *The May Lady*, Bani-Etemad also strives to eliminate the gap between the camera and the audience posed by the censorship codes. Bani-

Etemad does this to achieve verisimilitude and a sense of closeness with the protagonist, rather than to subject a woman to the male gaze. This attempt to bridge the gap between the gaze of the camera and the audience is a theme throughout Bani-Etemad's films, and it is another method of subverting censorship codes in the pursuit of uncut artistry.

Perhaps Bani-Etemad's most successful film in the box office, *Under the Skin of the City* portrays the story of a mother who survives against the forces of patriarchy, corruption, and alienation (Gugler 21). Bani-Etemad authored the screenplay, directed, and produced. *Under the Skin of the City* was released in 2001 (Firouzan Film). Winner of the Special Jury Prize at the Moscow Film Festival and the Netpac Award at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival, *Under the Skin of the City* garnered much international praise for Bani-Etemad as well as the film industry of Iran (Cobbey 84).

Tuba is an older mother who works in the factory to support her dysfunctional, lower-class family. Her husband, and son, Abbas, always scheme to sell their dilapidated house to make easy money. Tuba's oldest daughter, Hamideh, frequently returns home after suffering beatings from her husband. Tuba's younger daughter, Maboubeh, is going to school, but her best friend, Masum, who lives next door, runs away from home to flee her older brother's domestic violence.

Like in *The May Lady*, Bani-Etemad integrates documentary-style shots into the film, emphasizing the self-reflective property and estrangement not usually seen in classical narrative cinema. In fact, these are properties of counter-cinema. In her article, "Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema," Claire Johnson explores the question of how women directors construct their films in challenging the conventions of Classical Hollywood Cinema. She makes an important observation about the production of subversive feminist counter-cinema:

Clearly, if we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of non-intervention is pure mystification. The sign is always a product. What the camera in fact grasps is the 'natural' world of the dominant ideology. Women's cinema cannot afford such idealism; the 'truth' of our oppression cannot be 'captured' on celluloid with the 'innocence' of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film. (Johnston 37)

Here, Johnston emphasizes that "women's films" are artfully and purposefully constructed and creators of feminist media, because feminist criticism does not have the luxury of being the dominant ideology in the natural world, must take extra steps to construct the particular message that they want to yield, especially with counter-cinema. This is exactly what Bani-Etemad strives to do with some counter-cinematic aspects in *Under the Skin of the City*, such as including documentary shots, references to self-reflexivity, and speaking directly to the audience.

In "Godard and Counter-Cinema," Peter Wollen delineates some characteristics of counter-cinema, including estrangement, reflexivity, aperture, and multiple diegetic worlds—all of which occur within *Under the Skin of the City*. Regarding estrangement, Wollen states "The ruse of direct address breaks not only the fantasy identification but also the narrative surface" (125). By this, Wollen means that under classical narrative cinema rules, the audience identifies with the gaze of the camera, and by extension, the gaze of the character. But this process of identification is broken when the character directly addresses the audience, and Tuba does exactly that in a few of the documentary-style clips. The most notable one is when Tuba finished an emotional diatribe about her heart, and stops to ask, "Who are you showing these films to, anyway?" It is a confrontational question that forces the authorities and the privileged to re-evaluate their own relationship with the suffering and misery in society (Talu). The confrontational, directly-to-audience style estranges the audience from identifying with Tuba, and instead, they are left to uncomfortably evaluate their own relationship with the film.

Under the Skin of the City seems to be a “film within a film” scenario, as both the opening and closing shots are documentary interviews of Tuba. Clues to aperture⁶ and multiple diegesis⁷ actually appear in *The May Lady*. Tuba appears briefly in one of the documentary clips in *The May Lady*, when Forough was searching for the “ideal mother” to feature in her next documentary (Cobbey 89). In the documentary clip, Tuba pleads with Forough to help her, as she had one imprisoned son and one who was a fugitive (Cobbey 89). While editing, Forough re-watches the footage of Tuba, illustrating the connection she felt with Tuba and all the mothers she filmed (Cobbey 90). The “film within a film” scenario also gives *Under the Skin of the City* a self-reflexive element, where the film not only tells a story but scrutinizes the medium of film as well (Cobbey 91). This aperture is doubled, because at the end of the film, Tuba helps Abbas run away from badly getting mixed up with drug-running criminals. The audience does not know what will happen to Abbas or the rest of Tuba’s family, but Forough’s documentary clip does not suggest an optimistic outcome. Thus, the unresolved, ambiguous ending is aperture, contributing to the film’s status as a counter-cinema.

The angling and set-up of the shots within *Under the Skin of the City* also enhances openness of interpretation for certain scenes (Cobbey 91). For example, when Abbas confronts the land developer in an attempt to get the deed back for his house, the camera views the confrontation through a chain link fence, through which somebody is shoveling dirt through. The fence is a symbol of “loss of freedom” for Abbas, as he is conflicted about his actions and whether or not they have truly helped his family (Cobbey 91). Additionally, the “wide, gritty”

⁶ Wollen describes “aperture” as “open-endedness, overspill, intertextuality” (128). It is the opposite of closure. Aperture is not “harmonized within its own bounds” (128).

⁷ Diegesis is the film world. It is everything knowable by the characters. Perhaps the Forough from *The May Lady* is knowable by Tuba, but it is ambiguous. I maintain that there is a possibility for two diegesis.

shots emphasize the busy bustle of Tehran, showcasing all the families that survive and work and support themselves (Cobbey 91).

As in her past films, Bani-Etemad uses framing and strategic shooting to strain the modesty rules of cinema (Cobbey 91). For example, in one scene, Tuba washes her hair, but only her hair is visible in that shot, while her husband watches (Tracz). Tuba and her husband have a strained conversation, which ends in Tuba rejecting her husband's verbal advances, demonstrating their disconnected and tired marriage (Tracz). In another scene, Maboubeh slaps Masum's older brother in the face, reiterating the acceptance of women to man touch so long as it stems from violence, like in *The Blue Veil*.

As a veteran within Iran's film industry as well as the international film circle, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad has established herself as a serious documentary and filmmaker, with a career beginning in 1987 with *Off the Limit* and still continuing as of recently with 2005's *Gilane*, 2006's *Mainline*, and 2014's *Tales*. The most recent, *Tales*, is a series of shorts which continue the storyline of Bani-Etemad's previous characters, such as Nobar, Abba, and Tuba (Weissberg). Her various films have spotlighted the issues of motherhood, poverty, singlehood for women, social and cultural norms for women, and taboo love (Whatley 31). In her films, Bani-Etemad features women protagonists who shatter the cookie-cutter "goodie" or "baddie" women characters, who hold together their families and lives despite the forces of culture and politics working against them, and who embrace their fully dimensional human selves. Though she did take a hiatus from filmmaking for 8 years due to the overly restrictive laws under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's time in office, the abiding themes of working-class issues and women's issues remain represented in Bani-Etemad's work.

7.0 TAMINEH MILANI

Unlike Bani-Etemad, Tamineh Milani accepts the label “feminist,”⁸ as her controversial work revolves around women’s issues, mainly those of middle-class women (Phillips). Born into a middle-class family in 1960, Milani expressed interest in cinema at an early age, but she decided to receive her secondary education in architecture to please her parents (Rezai-Rashti 201). Though she earned her degree in architecture, Milani entered the film industry post-graduation as a crewmember. After a year, Milani landed a job as an assistant film director, and after a few more years, Milani began making her own movies.

Milani made international headlines in 2001, when the Islamic Republic arrested Milani for her film *The Hidden Half*, as the film contained scenes about counterrevolutionary groups, which triggered alarm from the state, despite the film having had been previously approved by state’s film reviewers (Phillips). Her charges included using art to promote anti-Islamic values, and Milani potentially faced the death penalty. Many filmmakers and activists, both inside and outside of Iran, protested for Milani’s release, and eventually, President Khatami asked for Milani’s freedom.

Milani’s 1999 film, *Two Women*, daringly spearheaded the issues of stalking, domestic and emotional abuse, harassment, patriarchy, divorce, and motherhood, all in one 96-minute

⁸ In her interview with SBS, Milani notes that many call her a “feminist filmmaker” due to the women’s issues addressed in her films.

film. Written and directed by Tahmineh Milani, *Two Women* illustrates the many difficulties contemporary Iranian women face under the patriarchal laws and expectations that silence their voices and hide their struggles (Molavi 217). Scenes of riots and conversations of changes in the state dotted the film, as they were clues to the audience of the film's timeline (Moruzzi 2001: 95). Milani suggestively hints at the hot political environment, right on the eve of the Revolution, an era in Iranian history that the Islamic Republic is particularly likely to censor (Moruzzi 2001: 95). The plot surrounds two college friends, Roya and Fereshteh. Both have goals to become successful career women, but while Roya marries a kind man and becomes an architect, Fereshteh runs into trouble with a stalker, her demanding father, and an abusive husband. Years later, Fereshteh contacts Roya with news that her husband has died.

The title of the film, *Two Women*, references Roya and Fereshteh, who both had successful and happy futures ahead of them, but their lives were drastically altered due to the arbitrary decisions or demands of the patriarchal men in their lives (Molavi 219). Roya is blessed with her husband, who is her business partner and an understanding, gentle, and loving man (Molavi 219). Fereshteh, however, had less luck, as she is subjected to the impenetrable fury of her father, the apathetic court judge, the abusive and violent husband, and the laws of Iran which place much of her fate in the palms of her husband.

Fereshteh's "perfect victim" character is critically important in that it is a contemporary criticism of the "good" vs. "bad" women dichotomy of the *filmfarsi* era. The traditional line of thought with "good" women is that they stay pure and virginal and let the men in their lives protect that purity for them. But with Fereshteh, Milani demonstrates that even when women do fulfill the traditional, patriarchal conception of the "good" and "pure" woman, men still have brash and undue control and harmful impact over the lives of these women. Thus, Milani argues

that it is not the fault of women when they suffer from abuse and violence; it is the men who seek the vulnerable and exercise their power accordingly.

Two Women is notable for how it addresses its women spectators. In “Women’s Genres: Melodrama, Soap Opera and Theory,” Anette Kuhn explores the relationship between film/television media and female spectatorship. Kuhn summarizes Charlotte Brunsdon’s analysis of female spectatorship for a British soap opera:

Successful spectatorship of a soap like *Crossroads*, it is argued, demands a certain cultural capital: familiarity with the plots and characters of a particular serial as well as with soap opera as a genre. It also demands wider cultural competence, especially in the codes of conduct of personal and family life. For Brunsdon, then, the spectator addressed by soap opera is constructed within culture rather than by representation. (153)

Brunsdon’s theory aligns with the story of *Two Women*, which Milani created to directly speak to the women of Iran. As Claire Moruzzi and Roxanne Varzi explain, Milani’s *Two Women* was made by an Iranian woman for specifically Iranian women, who have the necessary cultural competence to understand the context and subtext of the film. This is important because it defies the usual convention of audiences identifying with a male protagonist with a male gaze, as Mulvey points out is common in classical narrative cinema. In *Two Women*, Milani rebels against patriarchal norms of the film industry and criticizes the male gaze by creating the film for a female-audience who identifies with a female protagonist who is critical of the male gaze.

Two Women resonated with Iranian women, because the Revolution shut down universities for a few years and disrupted the plans and lives of many students, such as Fereshteh’s (Moruzzi 2001: 96). The disasters that hit Iran, such as the Iran-Iraq War and the devastated economy, reverberated into the lives of women, who suddenly found themselves in a new Iranian society that said no to their dreams of finishing school and starting life for

themselves (Moruzzi 2001: 96). As the dormitories were cordoned off, young women returned to the homes of their families, where they were pressured to marry and start a family, especially since the Islamic Regime started pushing for more “traditional values” for women (Moruzzi 2001: 96). Many women painfully sacrificed their goals of finishing school before getting married, and with the reopening of the universities nowhere in sight, these women had children and gave up their confusion and idealism (Moruzzi 2001: 96). This led to these women feeling trapped or betrayed, as they felt their lives were the price for Iran to set forth on the cultural and structural changes (Moruzzi 2001: 96). “It was the feeling that they had personally paid the price for a national experiment in gender relations, and the experiment hadn’t worked,” Morruzi reports, relating the loss of identity Iranian women collectively felt in post-revolution society (2001: 97).

Thus, Fereshteh’s story correlates closely with the collective breach of women’s trust, as she was not only held captive by the men of her life, but also by the national structural and cultural shifts taking place at this inopportune time in her life (Moruzzi 2001: 97). This is a counter-narrative against the stereotype of the “weak” Muslim woman, as Fereshteh exemplifies that even the smartest, most determined women are disadvantaged by multiple complicated structures that work in Iran.⁹ These feelings were specific to the experience of the young women who lived through the Revolution, thus, the spectatorship of these young women resonated the most with the story of Fereshteh, supporting Bunsdon’s theory of the cultural model of “successful” spectatorship.¹⁰

⁹ Patriarchal and misogynist structures exist outside of Iran, in the West, and on a global scale, but Milani specifically addresses those of Iran.

¹⁰ The “intentional fallacy” is the notion that films only have the meaning that the director intends them to have. Films are not ahistorical and can have a spectrum of meanings, but I argue

Milani suggests that Hassan, Fereshteh's stalker, "owns" Fereshteh through his male gaze, featured prominently throughout the film, especially when he stalks Fereshteh during her days as a college student (Langford 349). Hassan's gaze aligns with film theorist Laura Mulvey's conception of "woman as image" and man as "bearer of the look" (837). According to Mulvey, in traditional narrative film, the camera identifies with the gaze of the male protagonist, who is taking pleasure in enacting his gaze upon woman, the spectacle, in the film. Thus, as the audience identifies with the camera, the audience passively identifies with the male protagonist, and they do derive pleasure from the woman's to-be-looked-at-ness. Mulvey writes:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (837)

By this, Mulvey means that women are used in film a spectacle to serve the interests or the pleasure of the male protagonist, and by extension, the audience. Though Mulvey's essay pertains to classical Hollywood cinema, elements of the male gaze can be found in Iran's cinematic history, even in Iranian New Wave cinema. When Hassan stares at Fereshteh, however, the audience does not identify with him, and Milani is thus challenging the trend of the male gaze in narrative film.

In one scene, Milani directly contrasts two gazes, one from a potential suitor and one from Hassan, and Fereshteh's corresponding reaction (Fereshteh 349). Roya points out that Fereshteh's handsome suitor is driving by in a blue car, and both Fereshteh and Roya act

that one of the interpretations of *Two Women* is rooted in a very specific historical experience from a certain social position.

playfully, though Fereshteh modestly gazes downwards and asks Roya do the same (Langford 349). Then, there is a shot of the two girls in the car's side mirror, demonstrating that the handsome suitor in the car was looking at the girls, and standing next to the girls is a man who is holding prayer beads, emphasizing Fereshteh's pious reaction to the suitor's gaze (Langford 349). As Laura Mulvey would note,¹¹ the audience briefly identifies with the handsome suitor, as they view the shot of playful Fereshteh and Roya in the car's mirror, while the handsome suitor presumably is looking at Fereshteh for his own enjoyment. Fereshteh's to-be-looked-at-ness is briefly exploited, perhaps for the sake of contrast to Hassan's gaze. Fereshteh's demeanor quickly changes to worried when she spots Hassan, and indeed, Hassan is standing across the street, looking at the girls without trying to be discrete. Though the audience is cued into Fereshteh's anxious feelings, Roya has not, and instead, jokes that Hassan is good-looking (Langford 349). Roya's jest demonstrates that the audience is more intimate with Fereshteh's deep feelings than Roya is (Langford 349). While Hassan stares at Fereshteh, she tries her best to avert this gaze by again casting a downward feminine gaze, but interestingly, Hassan's gaze is presented to be ominous, unlike the gaze of the suitor from moments before (Langford 349). Michelle Langford writes:

A few shot/reverse-shots¹² of Fereshteh and Hassan follow, in which Fereshteh has modestly lowered her gaze while Hassan looks actively at her. This constructs him as a threatening force, his gaze a powerful weapon, much like the knife he will brandish in later scenes.

¹¹ Mulvey argues that there are three types of gaze in film: spectator, camera, and character. The character look dominates the other two, because the camera identifies with the main character, usually the male protagonist, and the audience identifies with the camera.

¹² A shot/reverse-shot is an editing technique often used in narrative film to demonstrate a conversation between two characters, by alternating between shots of their speaking faces. In this context, the shot/reverse-shots create a "conversation" between Hassan and Fereshteh, while Hassan stares and Fereshteh tries to subvert the gaze.

Throughout *Two Women*, similar combinations of shot/reverse-shot structures and dark melodramatic music further emphasize Hassan's threatening gaze and encroaching omnipotence. (349)

Here, Langford highlights that Milani uses Hassan's male gaze to represent the danger that Hassan presents to Fereshteh and the dominating effect that it has on her. While Mulvey theorizes that men in film use their gaze to dominate women, and that is true of Hassan, the audience of *Two Women* does not identify with Hassan. As a result, they do not take pleasure in the domination of Fereshteh. Furthermore, Fereshteh fights the gaze through the editing. The shot/reverse shots signal an uncomfortable back-and-forth between Hassan and Fereshteh, where Fereshteh is resisting the gaze by refusing to engage and piously casting her gaze downwards. In a traditional uses, the male gaze has been used for domination. The man looks at the woman, while the woman is the passive object who exists simply for display. The editing of this scene demonstrates Fereshteh's challenge to the power typically embedded in the male gaze.

Ultimately, the themes of *The Hidden Half* were more nuanced than the state's interpretation. One common analysis of *The Hidden Half* is that the film is a criticism of the regime's treatment of women, who they hide "literally as well as figuratively" (Gugler 11). More interestingly, the "hidden half" most brazenly explored is the history and stories of the secular revolutionaries, a section of revolutionary history that the Islamic Regime neglects to heed (Gugler 11). Milani was forced to keep the scenes of secular revolutionary work to a minimum, and she especially could not disclose the many students who were killed at the hands of the Islamic Republic (Gugler 11).

The story follows Feresteh, the wife of a respectable judge in a middle-class community. When her husbands leaves on a trip to sentence a woman for her revolutionary past, Fereshteh becomes concerned for the fate of the woman and leaves her diary inside of her husband's bag

for him to later find. Inside the journal, she describes her own revolutionary past and asks her husband to be sympathetic to the woman on trial.

In *The Hidden Half*, Milani continues her pattern of using female characters to “reveal.” Here, Fereshteh uncovers her “beneath” to the audience (Langford 345). Unlike in *Two Women*, the “reveal” is not taking place between two women, Fereshteh and Roya, but rather, between Fereshteh and her husband. Fereshteh is telling her story through a series of flashbacks, but the audience occasionally returns to the judge, who is reading Fereshteh’s words in a journal, reminding the audience that they are viewing the judge’s imagination of the flashbacks (Langford 351). One might conclude that Milani returns to the Mulveyan formula¹³ of a male protagonist enacting his heterosexual male gaze onto a woman, but I argue that Milani is twisting the male gaze and putting the power into Fereshteh’s hand.

In “Shifting Gender(ed) Desire in Anne Fontaine’s *Nathalie...*,” Rachel Ritterbusch describes how the supposed object of desire can retain power by controlling how the gaze is enacted onto them. Ritterbusch analyzes the film *Nathalie*, where a woman hires a prostitute, Nathalie, to seduce her husband. She describes Nathalie:

[Some of the] sequences seem to present the classic paradigm highlighted by Mulvey: the male is the active bearer of the look while the female is the passive object of this look. Yet I argue that Nathalie is actually in control. She is an object of desire, but she determines who can look at her and when. In a certain sense, then, it is not her body that Nathalie sells, but rather her image. (Ritterbusch 39).

Fereshteh controls every word and image and detail that is presented to her husband, having had written the journal entry herself. In effect, she is still in total control of her image and manipulating the illusion to achieve her aim. In this way, Milani is not recreating the male gaze

¹³ See footnote 13.

within *The Hidden Half*, she is displaying the process in which Fereshteh actively reveals herself while defying the dominance of the male gaze.

This effectively makes Fereshteh and the judge co-narrators and suggests that Fereshteh wants to make her story public (Langford 351). The judge is both Fereshteh's husband and an important public official, so his position with regards to Fereshteh's story is double-sided and reinforces one of the film's overarching themes: listening to both sides of the story (Langford 351). Michelle Langford argues that Fereshteh's subversive political act signals Milani's call for a more sympathetic patriarchy:

It is through [the husband], who represents both the domestic realm of the family and the broader institution of the 'law', that the film expresses a hope that the law may one day be capable of paying more attention to the needs of women. Unlike many of the other male characters in the film...[the husband] is depicted as a kind and benevolent husband and father. He has the capacity to read her story sympathetically and thus, on a more abstract level, may emblemize a more progressive version of the Iranian patriarchy. (352)

In other words, Milani advocates for Iranian society to pay more attention to the "other" side of the story, which is the story of women, who have been relegated to subordinate or insignificant roles in cinematic history. The judge bridges together the sides of "private" and "public," and thus, Fereshteh, and by extension, Milani, wish to elevate their side of the story by appealing to a progressive patriarch.

The film's political analysis reflects its time period, as it was released during President Khatami's term, as Khatami was known for his reformist goals that inspired optimism in many Iranian women (Langford 352). Indeed, Milani's daring release of *The Hidden Half* illustrated that she was willing to create more subversive content due to her optimism in the shift in the Islamic Republic's administration (Langford 352). Despite such optimism, Milani was arrested for *The Hidden Half*, an arrest that shocked Iran and the world alike. President Khatami secured

Milani's release, after much protest on the national and international scale, but the ordeal highlighted the complexities, layers, and contradictions built into the Iranian government (Langford 353). These characteristics of the Islamic Republic played large part of why Khatami did not enact the reforms that Iranians such as Milani were hoping for (Langford 353). Therefore, Milani's arrest and subsequent release could represent the conflict occurring internally in the Iranian administration between reformist and conservative actors (Langford 353).

Though Milani leads the audience to imagine a happy ending¹⁴ with Fereshteh, who puts herself at risk for this woman she does not know, Milani purposefully leaves the ending ambiguous to the audience, to signal that the woman's fate could go either way, even if the judge patiently listens to her whole story (Langford 353). As Michelle Langford notes, "So, while the Khatami era enabled filmmakers like Milani to highlight issues central to women, legal reform to women's rights did not ensue" (353). While Milani leads her audience to desire and conceptualize a positive outcome for the counterrevolutionary, she does not give the audience the satisfaction of getting one. Milani uses the ambiguous ending to point to the uncertainty of the nation's change surrounding women's rights and issues (Langford 353).

Playing off of the ending of *Two Women*, Milani's 2003 film, *The Fifth Reaction*, features the same actress from *Two Women* and *The Hidden Half* as Fereshteh again in this part-melodrama and part-thriller. Young Fereshteh has recently lost her husband in a car accident, and the affairs of her and her two young sons are placed into the hands of her stubborn and powerful father-in-law, Hafid Safdar. This father-in-law did not approve of his son's marriage with Fereshteh, so after the car accident, he wants guardianship of the two children, but he

¹⁴ The judge sits down with the woman and asks her to tell him her whole story.

demands Fereshteh to move out. Heartbroken, Fereshteh and her friends devise a plan for Fereshteh and her children to flee the country, though Hafid Safdar is too powerful to outrun.

Premiered at the 21st Fajr International Film Festival, *The Fifth Reaction* clambered up to being the fifth most popular movie in box office ratings in the following year (Mahani), but Milani's critics, both conservative and reformist, bitterly denounced the film as one-sided and extremist (Zeydabadi-Nejad 114). *The Fifth Reaction* also directly tackles family law of Iran, as exemplified by Fereshteh's plight in staying with her children (Derayeh 156).

In *The Fifth Reaction*, Milani draws an interesting parallel with the famous Hollywood film *Thelma & Louise*, which came out only a few years prior to *The Fifth Reaction*'s release. Both films drew harsh criticism from male viewers upon their release, citing that the films had an unrealistic and unfair portrayal of men. This brings up the question of spectatorship again, and it seems that Milani drew upon the plotline of *Thelma & Louise* to construct the final part of her Fereshteh trilogy that would ring the loudest with the fed-up women of Iran. In "The Relevancy and Gender Identity in Spectators' Interpretations of *Thelma & Louise*," Brenda Cooper describes her studies recording people's reactions to the film. She describes:

Clearly, the women and men spectators read the film's narratives surrounding sexism differently. While the vast majority of women saw *Thelma and Louise* as victims of a sexist society, for most men, *Thelma and Louise* were not innocent victims, and White men thought depicting the film's male characters as rapists and "pigs" was simply justification for the crimes the two women commit. (Cooper 1999: 30)

Cooper highlights that the reactions to *Thelma & Louise* seem to be based at least in part on the gender identity of the spectator, and that was the case for *The Fifth Reaction* as well. Resorting back to Bunsdun's theory on the cultural model of spectatorship, "successful" spectatorship happens when the audience is tuned into the messages and experiences that are embedded into

the film. That women name rape as amongst their greatest fears explains why the rape scene in *Thelma & Louise* resonated with women and not men. In the same way, only women in Iran who understand the fear of losing their children under the Islamic Republic's family law that privileges men over mothers would grasp the portrayal of Safdar in *The Fifth Reaction*. However, at the film's resolution, Thelma and Louise drive off a cliff, since they refuse to be "imprisoned" again (Cooper 1999: 30), yet in the ending shot of *The Fifth Reaction*, Fereshteh is crying and literally cornered in a prison cell with her ominous father-in-law towering over her. While the former film suggests a cathartic release, *The Fifth Reaction* implies that even in defeat, mothers' desperation and suffering continue. This is important, because it demonstrates how Milani challenges the "traditional" patriarchal view of "bad" mother or "good" mother, while also skirting the censorship code by depicting the law as a detriment to mothers like Fereshteh.

As she noted in an interview with Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, Milani had to cleverly film a plotline that would gain the widespread sympathy of her audience while also being careful with the reviewers at the censorship office, stating:

I use a trick, in order to say what I want. For example, if I know that a woman whose children are taken from her is in the right, I will protest against it. But this is a delicate matter and you have to be careful how you protest. For example, if in *Fifth Reaction* I had questioned the custody laws, my film would have never got a permit. I question the law that says the child does not belong to the woman by asking the question whether that is possible under these conditions. So, I zigzag through. After seeing my film, the viewer is going to say, how cowardly they are to take her children from her. See what a trick I use to say what I want. (Jelodar 94)

In other words, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance approve Milani's requests for film permits because she meticulously and painstakingly proposes her films and its content as less subversive than they actually are. She emphasizes her main points of motherhood over the more controversial element of potentially challenging the Islamic Republic's custody laws. Her

“zigzagging” through film regulations is almost an art form in itself as she skillfully navigates the system to achieve what she wants.

Milani likely had to perform this “zigzagging” for *The Fifth Reaction*, which is even more rebellious and subversive than her previous films, in many ways. The opening scene of the film, for example, is an outspoken representation of Milani’s strong message about marriage, domestic violence, and women who feel powerless that permeates the rest of the film. This scene, where Fereshteh and her friends are eating lunch at a restaurant, sets the structure for the rest of the movie and cues the audience into Milani’s strong condemnation of power relations in wife-husband relationships and the lack of truthful discussion surrounding them. Firstly, the very setting of the conversation, in a public restaurant, implies that Milani wants to make the discourse about husband-wife relationship a public matter, instead of a private or “family” matter (Langford 354). The transition from private to public also reflects the change of tone in *The Fifth Reaction*, compared to *Two Women* and *The Hidden Half* (Langford 354). Whereas the latter films are told in flashbacks, *The Fifth Reaction* happens in real time and tells the story of Fereshteh making decisions to resist in the now. While *Two Women* and *The Hidden Half* were focused on the “reveal” of the women characters, *The Fifth Reaction* resembles more of a call to action (Langford 357).

The second half of the film, where Hadj Safdar, grows to his most powerful form emphasizes the strong, omnipotent male gaze that pervades the later part of the film. The audience does not identify necessarily with the gaze of Hadj Safdar, but Milani still critiques the male gaze with the *Thelma & Louise*-esque elements of Fereshteh’s attempt at escape. In “‘Chick Flicks’ as Feminist Texts: The Appropriation of the Male Gaze in *Thelma & Louise*,” Brenda Cooper argues that *Thelma and Louise* resists the male gaze. She outlines:

Female gazes are developed in the narrative structure of *Thelma & Louise* in three key areas: 1) resistance to male objectification and dominance, as articulated through the protagonists' mockery of the key male characters—Darryl, Thelma's emotionally abusive husband; the film's law enforcement officers; the leering truck driver; and Harlan, the would-be rapist; 2) "returning the look" by making men spectacles for women's attention, particularly J.D., the sexy, hitchhiking con-man; and 3), the celebration of women friendships. Significantly, the female gazes in each area are constructed through the agency granted to Thelma and Louise, thus presenting spectators with narratives that challenge the "traditional cinematic association of activity with masculinity." (Cooper 2000: 285)

Cooper highlights that *Thelma & Louise* resists the male gaze by estranging the male character from themselves and the audience and celebrating the friendship between Thelma and Louise. *The Fifth Reaction* mirrors these traits in their own way. In the opening scene of the film, the friends talk lovingly and adoringly of their husbands, subjecting them to their judgment and the ears of the group of friends, which reflects the "mockery" that *Thelma & Louise* conducts.

The friends chat about their loving relationships with each of their respective husbands, bragging about gifts and loving gestures. One even speaks of her husband's cute Turkish accent. Though women clearly speak about their husbands in a tone of adoration, they do so with a childlike appreciation, describing their husbands as one might do with their house pet. Then, Maryam, an older, unmarried woman, observes the conversation with a confused expression and comments, "You talk about your husbands as if they are not from this country" (Langford 354). With this line, Milani quickly changes the tone of the scene, as Taraneh's husband enters the restaurant with his secretary. Taraneh, who was boasting of her husband's love, kindness, and cute Turkish accent moments before, suddenly becomes serious and uneasy. By doing this, Milani peels away the layers of the façade that the women put forth, highlighting that their rhetoric and outward representation of their marriages differed from the harsh realities of many Iranian women. In this way, the "mockery" that Cooper describes becomes a rude wake-up call

that their husbands are not the good husbands they portrayed, and in that sense, their husbands and marriages are a hoax. Taraneh's husband publicly scolds Taraneh for being out, and their argument escalates to the point that Taraneh preemptively ducks from her husband's raised hand.

Everyone's theatrical performances of perfect marriages crumble when Taraneh publicly resists her husband's angry demands and returns to conversation with her peers. The other women open up about their own marital problems, and they collectively analyze what forces led them to such unhappy marriages (Langford 357). Milani intentionally opens with the scene of the women undergoing the process of becoming self-aware in order to emphasize how the women realize the difficult, almost impossible, conditions that the patriarchy presents for them and that the women wish for something more (Langford 357). As they begin to pick their own marriages apart, they realize their husbands are spoofs of the men they wished they were married to, making them a reflection of the "mockery" that Cooper describes.

Milani subverts the Mulveyan male gaze in that the audience identifies with Fereshteh, as she is the main character whose look dominates the gaze of the camera. Fereshteh's character traits as modest and virtuous also reflect the change of gazes in post-revolutionary film, as noted by Hamid Naficy (Langford 348). The audience identifies with the camera, which identifies with the protagonist, Fereshteh, and thus, the audience adapts the modest downward feminine gaze, instead of the usual, direct, male gaze of narrative film (Langford 348). Though Fereshteh does not succeed in escaping to Europe with her children, her virtue is maintained in the eyes of the audience through this identification (Langford 348).

As the plot progresses, Fereshteh's feelings of liberation from her father-in-law fade into ambivalence (Langford 362). Fereshteh's journey in the first place is simultaneously last-ditch

effort at escape and a glimpse of freedom (Langford 362). With intensified cross-cutting¹⁵ and a faster rhythm, Milani signals to the audience that Safdar and his henchmen are closing in on Fereshteh, and the audience loses hope (Langford 362). Hadj Safdar captures Fereshteh at a point where she had little options to turn back for his help anyway, having been caught eating food at a restaurant without any money to pay for the food.

This ending for Fereshteh reflects Milani's frustration and feelings of broken optimism. If *Two Women* and *The Hidden Half* were calls for a reformist government to join forces with Iranian women through patience and compassion, *The Fifth Reaction* could be read as the discontented disapproval with the reforms for women that never came (Langford 363). Just as Fereshteh quickly runs out of resources, the audience loses hope, and Safdar regains control of Fereshteh barely breaking a sweat, the women of Iran are fighting an uphill battle against the administration that seems to always neglect the voices of the women.

Milani actively works to deconstruct the one-dimensional roles that women have played in past Iranian films. Though Fereshteh is a victim, a wife, or a mother in all of the films in the trilogy, Fereshteh is still a protagonist that the audience deeply sympathizes for, and Milani's style of moving from the "private" to the "public" complicate the depiction of women as accessories to men. While doing this, Milani relates the plight of Fereshteh and other characters in the film to the experiences of Iranians who still remember the effects of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and whose lives are still heavily impacted by the politics three decades later.

¹⁵ Milani alternates between the two separate storylines of Fereshteh and Safdar so that the audience can follow along with both, though the characters are not tuned into the information of the other's storyline.

8.0 SAMIRA MAKHMALBAF

Born in 1979, Samira Makhmalbaf is one of the youngest film directors in Iran and especially in the New Wave genre of Iranian cinema (Ginsberg 262). Daughter of famous New Wave film director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Samira Makhmalbaf skipped school at age 14 to enroll in her father's film academy, the Makhmalbaf Film House (Ginsberg 262). From there, Makhmalbaf became the youngest film director to compete in the Cannes Film Festival at age 17 with her 1998 film *The Apple* (Ginsberg 262). Though her father has influenced her directing style, Samira Makhmalbaf is unique in that she has an "exacting and rigorous" process of analyzing and portraying the status of her film's characters, environments, and perceptions (Danks). For example, Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* focuses on the true story of the lives and societal treatment of two girls who lived locked inside their home for 11 years in suburban Tehran (Danks).

Screenplay written by Mohsen Makhmalbaf and directed by Samira Makhmalbaf, *The Apple* is a hybrid of fictional and documentary style, as the "actors" were actually the real people playing themselves, such as the young twins, the father and mother, the welfare officer, and the neighbors (Ginsberg 262). Makhmalbaf continues the trend of casting non-professional actors and shooting on-location throughout her films (Sheibani 122). Makhmalbaf's debut feature film impressively tackles many themes of New Wave cinema, such as the treatment of women, religious stricture, and family (Ginsberg 262).

I argue that Makhmalbaf challenges Orientalist notions of parenthood and family in *The Apple*, by exploring the thought process and desires of Ghorban, the abusive father of the twin girls. While it is true that Ghorban mistreated his daughters in the name of religion or culture, Makhmalbaf renders a deeper understanding of Ghorban's reasoning and commitments, because this understanding defies the Orientalist notion of Muslim men as "evil, misogynist savages." In "Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World," Edward Said describes the representation of Islam and Muslim countries and cultures in the media, theorizing that Western institutions of knowledge enact every effort to construct the representation of Muslims as uncivilized, violent brutes:

The media say what they wish about Islam because they can, with the result that Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism and "good" Muslims dominate the scene indiscriminately; little else is covered because anything falling outside the consensus definition of what is important is considered irrelevant to the United States interests and to the media's definition of a good story. (150-151)

Though Said is criticizing news outlets here, his point rings true with regards to the popular Western conception of Muslim men. Westerners can and do depict Muslim men as "uneducated savages," according to Said, but Makhmalbaf counters this Western representation by making a film surrounding one of these Muslim men who mistreats his daughters and relies upon his religion for guidance.

Makhmalbaf never paints Ghorban, or his wife as the villains of the film, despite their public reputation of captors of their children (Wood 59). Though some may have considered Ghorban's parenting tactics as abuse, Ghorban kept his children inside with the best intentions, and he never hit or emotionally abused his children (Wood 59). In fact, in one scene, he teaches his daughter how to cook rice, in the interest of making sure she would one day be able to fulfill her wifely duties. Instead, Ghorban's parenting is loving, but in a "clumsy, unintentionally

abusive way” (Wood 59). Ghorban demonstrates his foolishness when he says, “A girl is a flower and would fade in the sun,” but Makhmalbaf makes it clear that his foolishness is what guides his actions, which is why he mistakenly imprisoned his daughters.

As a result of their confinement to home, Zahra and Massoumeh are mentally underdeveloped (Whatley 32). However, as a result of their father’s love, Zahra and Massoumeh explore the town cheerfully, curiously, and delightedly (Wood 59). The girls don’t have resentment, fear, or neurotic symptoms; instead, they invite their father to come explore their newfound freedom with them (Wood 59). This difficult depiction of parental abuse complicates the usual narrative of domestic or child abuse.

Ghorban’s wife, the twins’ mother, is blind. This highlights the difficulty in navigating daily life for the disabled, especially for those with minimal resources (Wood 59). The wife speaks different dialect of Persian than her neighbors, so she has trouble communicating with neighbors or the social worker (Moore 18). This, combined with her physical disability, she is largely isolated from the world (Moore 18). Secondly, the wife’s literal blindness is symbolic of her indoctrination and internalization of her husband’s beliefs about keeping women safe and inside, like delicate flowers (Wood 59). She further illustrates this when the camera films her daughters in the opening scenes by compelling the twins to cover their faces, including their eyes (Moore 18). This implies that the wife believes that her daughters should be modest, much like her husband reasons, and that a “visual relationship with the world is inherently dangerous” (Moore 18). In other words, the wife acts as an extension of the incarceration the girls face from the father, even if she is extremely trapped in her position of isolation herself. This is again demonstrated in shots where the twins are holding apples, which symbolize freedom in some ways, but their mother clenches their arms as if to restrain them (Moore 18).

The vast majority of the film's characters are women. The agents of social change for the twins are notably all women (Darznik). It is the women of the neighborhood who worry over the well-being of the twins and report Ghorban to the welfare office. It is the social worker, who is a woman, who insists upon the girls' freedom and develops a plot to persuade the father to see her way. Perhaps Makhmalbaf values women as the active players who must work against the misinformed values of the patriarchy. Yet, the twins' mother stands as a resolute in insisting that her door be kept intact so that her children can be safely contained in the house. In this way, the mother represents the traditionalist views held by woman who can act as an obstacle for social change.

However, in an interview, Makhmalbaf stated that she witnesses the mother in a moment that hinted at hope for change. In the last scene, the mother seems to look at herself in the mirror, even though she is blind, and in the same scene, she laughs, the only time she laughs in the entire film (Johnston 1999: 19). The mirror carries symbolic weight for the girls as well. The social worker gives the girls mirrors and combs as gifts, and these represent Zahra and Massoumeh's initiation into public female identity (Moore 18). While the mirror could symbolize the importance of self-presentation, Zahra and Massoumeh use their mirrors to reflect a variety of things, including a goat and a lock, which challenges the social expectations of appearance for girls (Moore 18).

As Irene Matthews describes, *The Apple* was a "poem of resilience" that depicted the family lost in their misguidance and reflective of the issues that girls and women of greater Iran also endure under a patriarchal society (Matthews 103). As Makhmalbaf revealed in an interview, she saw herself in Zahra and Massoumeh, so she was inspired to draw the metaphor

between them and others (Matthews 103). Makhmalbaf commented on her directing style, stating:

I wanted to know what ideas made him [Ghorban], despite loving his daughters, do such a thing. I don't judge, I just show things as they are. Let people look at themselves and see what is wrong and what is right; if they want to change, they can. (Johnston 18)

Makhmalbaf has a relaxed directing style in *The Apple*, yet she still conveys commentary on the status of women within the patriarchy of Iran. She is careful in not demonizing the father or the mother, but rather, she investigates the complex social and cultural factors behind the incarceration of the little girls.

In the 2000 film, *Blackboards*, both Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Samira Makhmalbaf collaborated on the screenplay about two teachers in the unforgiving desert of Kurdistan in Iran, roaming the arid land for pupils or work. *Blackboards* was winner of the Cannes International Film Festival's grand jury prize in 2000, though Makhmalbaf had to smuggle the film into the festival, as she had not received a permit from the Islamic Republic for production (Garcia). The film earned Makhmalbaf her reputation for exposing the difficulties and despair in the lives of people who have lost their homes in war (Garcia).

The film follows Said and Reeboir, both of whom are teachers in need of work, wandering the mountainous terrain carrying their blackboards on their backs. After the two part ways, Reeboir stumbles upon a group of young boys carrying large loads, and he discovers that they're "mules" and smuggling contraband across the Iraqi border. Said, on the other hand, finds a group of Kurdish nomads who are trying to find their way back home after having fled the war.

In making a film about the often forgotten victims of war, Makhmalbaf counters the Western conception of war and violence as innate in Muslim cultures; rather, she paints a portrait

of many Muslim people who struggle to live in the insufferable and terrifying war-torn badlands.

Edward Said describes the American news coverage of the Iran-Iraq War:

The Iranian revolution and the hostage crisis have furnished alarming evidence of what has come to be called “the return of Islam.” Finally, there has been the resurgence of radical nationalism in the Islamic world and, as a peculiarly unfortunate adjunct to it, the return of intense superpower rivalry there. An example of the former is the Iran-Iraq war. (Said I)

When the New York Times explains a surprisingly strong Iranian resistance to Iraq’s incursion, it resorts to a formula about the “Shi’a penchant for martyrdom.” Superficially, phrases like that have a certain plausibility, but in fact I think they are used to cover a great deal of what the reporter knows nothing about. (Said li)

Said is critical of the Western news coverage, because it views the conflict in the narrow and Orientalist terms of religion, ethnic groups, and stereotyping. Taking Said’s criticism further, the portrayal of Muslims as an aggressive, violent band of brutes distracts from the greater issue at hand: violence, war, and suffering. Thus, Makhmalbaf’s *Blackboards* challenges the Western media’s distraction from the suffering of the people, and illustrating the atrocities of war through the representations of the hungry teachers, young drug-smuggling boys, and the homeless Kurdish nomads.

At first glance, *Blackboards* seems to take place on an open terrain, whereas *The Apple* is confined to the crowded lower-class district of Tehran (Mulvey 26). But *Blackboards* reveals that the mountainous landscape is just as suffocating and restricting in that its people are trapped in the perpetual homelessness and ennui. Thus, Makhmalbaf continues her theme of “struggling to find freedom” (Mulvey 2001: 26). The film touches upon marriage, divorce, borders, war, and homeland. Makhmalbaf caught the international audience’s attention with the many shots of the mountainous, barren badlands where groups of people, Kurds in search of their home, young boys trying to support their families, and hungry unemployed teachers traverse the lands,

dodging the bullets of war, searching for something more. The Kurds are a large ethnic group of the Middle East, spread throughout Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria, who have no established state of their own (Ni 1). Differing Kurdish tribal groups have varying political opinions, and cultural customs and language might deviate from one another, an effect of the diaspora (Ni 3). During the Iran-Iraq War, Iraq forcefully dispelled Iraqi Kurds from Iraq, in fear that the Kurds would start an uprising against the Iraq government (Ni 3). As a result, thousands of Iraqi Kurds were forced to flee to neighboring countries, such as Iran, and many times, they were not welcome wherever they went (Ni 3). This leads to situations such as the one in *Blackboards*, where groups of people meander the land with no established place to go.

While *The Apple* as filmed in clear chronological order, *Blackboards* has a disillusioned sense of time (Mulvey 2001: 26). This blurry timeline, combined with the plot points of ambiguity, and the unbounded nature of the deserted wasteland culminate in the effect of suggesting that the struggle of the nomads and young boys is unending (Mulvey 2001: 26). “And if the film refers to both the abstract and the precise in its location, its timeframe is also ambivalent: it is as though shock has left these people in a continuous ‘now’ of fear and struggle for survival,” Laura Mulvey describes (2001: 26). In other words, Makhmalbaf manipulates the spatial and temporal relations to create the effect of eternal anxiety and malaise, which could reference both the perception of people’s pain and the prolonging of war.

Makhmalbaf holds nothing back in references to war—the people dodge bullets, Halaleh, one of the Kurdish nomads, voices her fear of chemical weapons, the boys die at the hands of soldiers. The Kurds wander, looking for their homeland, when they have no official state, no land to call home. This despair is cemented when Said leads them to the promised location, and the old Kurd men question Said’s integrity, believing that the desolate land in question is not the

home that they remember and desire. The old men yearn to return to their homeland so they can die there in peace (Ni 1), yet this wish is unfulfilled. It is ambiguous whether or not Said led the Kurds to the correct location, but the old men do not reach their goal of a peaceful return to the homeland regardless. War is a prevalent theme in Iranian cinema, but Makhmalbaf openly rejects Sacred War Cinema and focuses on the pain of the victims of war instead. The audience's heart wrenches as they sympathize deeply for these people who have lost so much. At one point, a man asks a teacher to read out loud a letter from his son, because he is illiterate and his son is a prisoner of war in Iraq (Weale).

Ironically, while the teachers beg for people to be their pupils to no avail, their blackboards that they carry around on their backs serve many purposes for the people they meet on their journey. While the young mule boys do not need literacy to continue their lives as smugglers, they accept the blackboard when it serves as an ankle splint (Garcia 1). Similarly, the nomadic Kurds are mostly old men who have no interest in becoming literate, but the blackboard serves as a pallet for an injured man, a shield from bullets, and a clothesline for wet clothes (Garcia 1). It seems that the blackboards serve every purpose but to teach. In this way, the blackboards become a tool to preserve a culture in the context of displacement (Ni 5). The teachers lose or break their blackboards, not for teaching, but to help the boys or nomads in times of need. While reading and writing are useless to the boys and the old Kurdish men, oral tradition might be more practical. One boy recites a story of killing a rabbit to soothe his pain when he becomes injured (Romney). This again points back to the preservation of cultural tradition.

The young boys, the teachers, and the old Kurd men represent different generations of the same lost people (Ni 1). This is further confirmed when one of the boys reveals his name to be

Reeboir, just like the teacher's name is Reeboir. So Reeboir tries to teach the young Reeboir to write his own name. When Said marries Halaleh, the old Kurd man becomes his father-in-law. These different generations face the same general theme of desolation and homelessness, despite their contrast in age. Thus, Makhmalbaf suggests that the suffering of these people extends through time and space; it is not confined to a particular setting (Mulvey 3).

While *The Apple* ends on an optimistic note, *Blackboards* keeps its theme of bleakness throughout its duration (Danks 10). The Kurdish nomads find hope in following Said back to their homeland, but what they find is nothing like they remembered or wanted. Though both Reeboir and Said are able to contribute to the groups they meet in some way, neither of the groups is saved (Romney). Reeboir must say goodbye to the group of boys he has grown fond of, not knowing if they will survive the soldiers' gunfire, and Said loses everything, from the Kurdish nomads, to his wife, to the blackboard he had carried on his back (Romney).

Samira Makhmalbaf's next film, *At Five in the Afternoon*, was released in 2003. It is a sequel to her father's film, *The Road to Kandahar*, and it is also an Iranian-French production (Holloway). This film is set in Kabul, Afghanistan,¹⁶ right in the aftermath of the fall of the Taliban but before the authoritative regime rises to power (Clarke 73). During this transitional period, women more freely attended school and other public places, which previously were more sanctioned from women's lives under the rule of the Taliban. Though still part of the Iranian New Wave, *At Five in the Afternoon* highlights the social realities of Afghan women (Clarke 73). The actress who played protagonist Noqreh was a schoolteacher before Samira Makhmalbaf recruited her for the film (Bresheeth 25). In this film, Makhmalbaf explores freedom, the despair

¹⁶ Afghanistan and Iran share a common ancestry of Persian culture, and Makhmalbaf uses Afghanistan as a backdrop for *At Five in the Afternoon* as both cultures still feel alienated from the consequences of war, though Afghanistan more recently so.

of war, and homelessness, all emphasized by the surreal shots of the overcrowded and crumbling Kabul.

The plot surrounds Noqreh, who lives post-war Afghanistan. Due to an influx of Pakistani refugees, Noqreh, her elderly religious father, her older sister, and her sister's hungry infant become homeless. Noqreh secretly attends a secular school for girls, where she aspires to be the first woman president of Afghanistan.

Like in *Blackboards*, the theme of war is prevalent, but this time, the setting is in Afghanistan and the story is centered on an ambitious Afghan homeless girl. Makhmalbaf's portrayal of Noqreh, and the other Afghan women, reflects Lila Abu-Lughod's analysis of Western conception of Afghan women in "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." Abu-Lughod argues that Westerners conceive and represent Afghan women as an "exotic" Other that are in need of "rescue" from their Muslim—and therefore, violent—environment, culture, and religion. She argues:

Most pressing for me was why the Muslim woman in general, and the Afghan woman in particular, were so crucial to this cultural mode of explanation, which ignored the complex entanglements in which we are all implicated, in sometimes surprising alignments. Why were these female symbols being mobilized in this "War against Terrorism" in a way they were not in other conflicts? (Abu-Lughod 784)

Here, Abu-Lughod highlights that Afghan women are used as pawns in the mobilization for war, and in this case, the Western media used many images of Afghan women in burqas to illustrate the Taliban's cruelty and savagery, which by extension, would make the United States invasion of Afghanistan seem more justified. Abu-Lughod continues:

Even RAWA, the now celebrated Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, which was so instrumental in bringing to U.S. women's attention the

excesses of the Taliban, has opposed the U.S. bombing from the beginning. They do not see in it Afghan women's salvation but increased hardship and loss. They have long called for disarmament and for peacekeeping forces. (789)

Again, Abu-Lughod emphasizes that Afghan women are not the weak, victimized prisoners without agency. Western representations as such are inaccurate and Orientalist. Makhmalbaf tackles these Western representations head-on in *At Five in the Afternoon*, displaying the aspirations, hardships, and cruelty of war through protagonist Noqreh. In one shot, Noqreh's elderly religious father turns to a wall and shields his eyes as two young girls who are not wearing their burqas walk by; here, Makhmalbaf emphasizes that the onus falls on the man to be modest—not the young girls.

However, Makhmalbaf does not follow Abu-Lughod's words perfectly. Abu-Lughod condemns Western feminists for their fixation on the burqa and its symbolization as "oppressive." Makhmalbaf, on the other hand, uses the burqa and at times, religion, as a representation for darkness. One of the overarching themes of *At Five in the Afternoon* is the transitioning between darkness and light, as Julie Clarke argues (73). This is demonstrated through shots of Noqreh changing her shoes from the black flats that her father approves of to the white Western-styled heels that she wears to her secret secular girl's school (Clarke 73). More broadly, Mena, Noqreh's classmate, is a beacon of hope in one scene, where she fiercely debates that a woman can be president of Afghanistan, a determination that has trumped the sadness of having her whole family killed by the Taliban (Clarke 73). Yet, later, Mena perishes in a bombing, and the girls of the secular school gather to mourn Mena's death (Clarke 73). These contrasts illustrate Makhmalbaf's foray into both sides.

The metaphor of the two sides extends to Noqreh's dual life, as she must perform religiosity for her father and sister, and she becomes secular when her father is out of sight (Clarke 73). Clarke explains Makhmalbaf's use of lighting to emphasize Noqreh's duality:

Indeed, the shift between Noqreh's religious and secular modes of being is carefully crafted when she walks through dark enclaves between the school buildings into the light; when she lifts her burqa, changes from black flats into white high heel shoes and opens an umbrella.

It seems that the arrival to school is Noqreh's light and the burqa is seen as darkness, but it could be both the darkness of a hindrance or a way of hiding. Here, Makhmalbaf touches upon the theme of education as a saving force for the characters, compared to the theme of education in *Blackboards*. While Noqreh's father insists throughout the film that society is losing its loyalty to Islamic values, chanting, "Blasphemy is everywhere," Makhmalbaf signals that the restrictions of Islamic rule are lessening, with a shot of Noqreh reading the Quran that is blanketed with a dark shadow (Clarke 74).

Noqreh's umbrella is also significant, as it speaks to the tragedy and violence that has happened in the name of Islam (Clarke 74). When all the girls of the school gather to mourn Mena's death, they collectively hold up their umbrellas. The dome of Noqreh's umbrella is similar in resemblance to the local mosque's dome, thus creating a link between darkness, or Mena's death, and the name of Islam (Clarke 74). In this way, Makhmalbaf is not condemning the religion, but rather, the violence that has appropriated the name of the religion.

Like in *Blackboards*, Makhmalbaf tackles the theme of homelessness, though this time, with an emphasis on Afghan women. For example, the opening shot is of Noqreh and her sister walking towards the camera, while the closing shot is of Noqreh and her sister walking away. Both shots are dubbed with the sound of a woman whispering a poem, one written by a Spanish

poet who uses repetition to create significance (Clarke 73). The continuity between each shot implies that the Afghan women are stuck walking in a circle from which they cannot leave (Clarke 73). The portrayal of the girls' ennui is double-sided, in that Makhmalbaf suggests that Afghan women have an important voice, but this voice is one of sorrow, as they have nowhere to escape from the war-torn remnants of their homeland (Clarke 74). Thus, Makhmalbaf agrees with Abu-Lughod that Afghan women have agency and an important voice, but Makhmalbaf expands upon that to imply that Afghan women now use that voice to express the suffering and trauma they have suffered.

This Spanish poem appears in the plot when a Pakistani refugee writes it on a photograph of Noqreh and gives it to her. She whispers the poem to herself, wandering the abandoned palace at night, reading the poem with a lantern (Clarke 74). Here, Noqreh's voice and the light are intertwined with one another, suggesting that the light for Afghanistan is the women's voices, yet Noqreh is reading the poem based off of repetition, which reinforces the cycle of homelessness that they are trapped within. Thus, Makhmalbaf indicates that their voices are ones of melancholy.

Water, as Julia Clarke notes, is a motif present throughout Makhmalbaf's films (74). In *The Apple*, the twins watered a plant to give it life, and in *Blackboards*, the old men splashed their peer to encourage him to pee (Clarke 74). Similarly, in *At Five in the Afternoon*, water is a symbol of idealistic life (Clarke 74). While in the palace, Noqreh carries two buckets on her back and searches for water. She can hear the sound of the dripping water, yet she meanders the halls unable to find the source of the dripping (Clarke 74). So close, yet so far, the water is Noqreh's desired life just always out of reach (Clarke 74).

While roaming the halls, Noqreh exhibits a moment of identity clash, where she flows between the Western, high-heeled aspiring politician to the nomadic, poor, hungry woman she is (Clarke 74). The clacks of Noqreh's white high heels echo through the towering palace walls, but at one point, she chooses to take off these shoes, and with the shoes, she sheds her symbol of freedom and femininity with it (Clarke 74). She becomes barefoot, and the audience is momentarily reminded of Noqreh's harsh reality; her family is homeless and searching for basic nutrition (Clarke 74).

The heels, however, let Noqreh become regal and confident, as she struts through the palace with an aura of aplomb (Clarke 74). Noqreh stops to listen to the dripping water, and she stomps on the floor with each foot, five times each (Clarke 74). Julia Clarke explains this stamping as a resistance against the silencing of women:

Noqreh's stomping, like the actions of a bull about to face the matador's crimson *muleta*, becomes a refrain metered out amidst the immense silence of the palace...Her stomping, read as the voice of Afghani women who will not longer be silenced, is in direct violation of the Qur'anic verse that she sang at the beginning of the film: 'and women stamp not their feet on the ground lest their hidden beauties become evident'. (74)

Thus, like an aggressive bull, Noqreh stamps on the palace ground with her shoes of freedom and aspiration because she no longer will tacitly accept the violence, verbal or otherwise, that silences Afghan women and forces them to the background. This sequence of Noqreh stomping her foot supports Abu-Lughod's argument that Afghan women have agency ignored by Western media. Noqreh is conducting a simple act of resistance against a Qur'anic verse in order to prioritize her own voice. Thus, Noqreh represent Afghan women who have enough agency to choose how to stand up for themselves and how to be active players in their own lives. In this way, Makhmalbaf challenges the Orientalist conception of Afghan women.

Makhmalbaf revisits the theme of darkness and light one last night in the closing scene, where Noqreh's family is forced to burn their measly carriage for warmth (Clarke 75). The light from the fire distinguishes the family from the darkness of the desert, the horse's eye is distinguished from the darkness of its body, and the moon shines in the sky from an otherwise dark night (Clarke 75). Dishearteningly, the corpse of Noqreh's sister's baby is pale, standing out from the fire's smoke (Clarke 75). Though the warmth of the fire hints at hope and light, Noqreh and her family continue their search for water and a life, trudging through the desert (Clarke 75).

Samira Makhmalbaf is known for her use of non-professional actors. Sally Vincent interviewed Makhmalbaf in 2004, writing:

And she [Makhmalbaf] is indignant again when I talk about the actor in her film. Because she was not an actor. She might be now, but when they made the film she was an ordinary woman, a young widow with two children who agreed to take part, to bring something of her own to Samira's venture. As did everyone else. These are real people, expressing themselves. Samira has never used actors, except once, and that was a very small part. (Vincent)

As illustrated here, Makhmalbaf prides herself on her casting practices, stating that she wants to listen to the people, not judge or scapegoat (Vincent). By using non-professional actors, Makhmalbaf brings an element of "reality" to her films, and she strives to let the "actors" have influence in the making of the film (Vincent).

This technique pays off in *At Five in the Afternoon* in one scene where Noqreh asks a soldier about French politics in the interest of gathering information to run her future political campaign. This soldier is an actual UN peacekeeper, who apparently agreed to appear in the film as himself, due to his personal interest in cinema (Vincent). In his conversation with Noqreh, he reveals that though knows who the President of France is, he does not know why the people of France voted for him or what his platform was (Vincent). After a few moments of thought, he

resolves himself to say, “I am a soldier. I don’t interfere in politics” (Vincent). Having used the strategy of non-professional casting, Makhmalbaf highlights the disconnect between the so-called fighters for democracy and the political decisions of the world’s elite.

Makhmalbaf’s films have graced the world’s film festivals and caught the attention of international film critics. Fans of her work relish in the magnificent shots of the mountainous badlands of the Iran borders, the compassion in portraying a family entangled in a web of neglect and hypocrisy, and the sorrowful messages of girls in Afghanistan still suffering in ravaged post-war lands. As a part of the Iranian New Wave, she explores the themes of war, homelessness, marriage, and parenthood. Makhmalbaf is subtly critical of the devastating effects of war, and she asks that her audience examine the re-defining of home and parenthood and identity that comes along with the catastrophe of violence and imperialism. Makhmalbaf touches upon the cultural symbols of religion, veiling, Western influence on fashion, and light and dark. Her work challenges the Western narrative that war “saves” the invaded country. She also challenges the Western conception of the “evil” and “savage” Muslim man who imprisons his daughters. Makhmalbaf illuminates the agency of Afghan women through the presentation of Noqreh and her aspirations for education, political change, and finding her voice.

9.0 CONCLUSION

The films of Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tamineh Milani, and Samira Makhmalbaf illustrate that women Iranian directors in Iranian New Wave Cinema have tackled subversive issues facing women and the working class while simultaneously managing the censorship codes of the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. These films further serve as a challenge to simplistic Western image of Iranian women as submissive victims. In this study, I have explored the cultural, social, and political themes of three prominent women directors in Iranian New Wave Cinema, and I have also touched upon how these women navigate censorship laws.

After the Revolution of 1979, there was a lull in Iran's film industry due to internal government conflicts surrounding questions of regulation (Gow 14). However, once the Islamic Republic realized the vast potential of utilizing cinema as a national art for Iran, they allotted government resources to eager filmmakers, on the condition that they follow the Islamic codes of censorship. This, and heavy foreign investment, saved the Iranian film industry (Gow 16). Previously, many Iranians had considered cinema to be sinful, but Ayatollah Khomeini allowed cinema, so long as it fulfilled his vision of an Islamic Iranian society (Mir-Hosseini 2007).

With the Islamic Republic's mandated public veiling, the public sphere became an "acceptable" place for women to work and study, since their protective veils "Islamic-ize" the space (Zeydabadi-Nejad 106). Furthermore, many women were forced into the public sphere to

replace the many men who left to become soldiers in the brutal Iran-Iraq War (Zeydabadi-Nejad 106). Equipped with their hijabs and the government's newfound appreciation for Iranian cinema, women directors climbed the ranks of Iran's film industry and were writing, producing, and creating films that would amaze women, Iranians, and international audiences alike.

The representation of women characters in *filmfarsi* of the 1950's and 1960's, as well as the early films of Iranian New Wave, relegated women to the one-dimensional roles of the "goodies" or "baddies" (Lahiji 226). Furthermore, Western conceptions of Iranian women are usually limited to depicting Iranian women as weak victims of their patriarchal Muslim culture. The reality is that the rising number of women directors in Iran are creating films that feature character that replace these lackluster depictions of women, and in these films with complicated women protagonists, these women directors use film as an artistic and cultural medium to comment on the status of women or under-privileged peoples in Iran. Some have called this category of films "women's films," a genre that has increased in its popularity since the 1980's (Zeydabadi-Nejad 109).

For example, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, the First Lady of Cinema, started her film career as a TV documentarist, but moved to creating films with women protagonists who suffer from harsh material conditions, reflective of the lower-class of Iran (Whatley 31). Bani-Etemad earned herself reputation for challenging censorship codes and addressing taboo themes. In her 1991 film, *Nargess*, one of the main characters is an aging woman who is the lover of a younger man. This protagonist is frank about her sexuality, and yet, she also takes on a motherly role for her lover, pretending to be his mother so he can marry another girl. Like in her documentary work, Bani-Etemad portrays the disheartening effects of poverty on the lower-class, who hope for more, yet make do with what little they have. Bani-Etemad addresses sexuality again *The Blue*

Veil, where a small child is used to depict the sensual relationship developing between the two love interests (Dabashi 239). Later, a shot of two dancing pairs of feet imply that the characters have wed and have consummated their marriage (Naficy 2000). Despite such strong implications, Bani-Etemad evaded the censorship codes and enjoyed international accolades (Tracz). Bani-Etemad's 1997 film, *The May Lady* is perhaps the most subversive of Bani-Etemad's work, featuring an aging divorced filmmaker who lives with her son, struggling to find the balance between motherhood, having a career, and having a secret lover. In an effort to preserve the authenticity of the character, Bani-Etemad shoots the actress in the process of taking off her hijab, though the audience does not actually see the character without it. Since censorship codes do not allow for women to be filmed without their veiling, Bani-Etemad skirts the edge of what is allowed and what is not with shots such as this.

Famously imprisoned for creating "un-Islamic" films, Tamineh Milani is also an acclaimed Iranian filmmaker whose films are unabashed in criticizing the patriarchal laws and culture of Iranian society. In contrast to Bani-Etemad, Milani focuses more on the plight of middle-class Iranian women. Milani's Fereshteh trilogy is particularly memorable, where three films feature a protagonist named Fereshteh, who suffers in various ways under patriarchal rule. The 1999 film, *Two Women*, brazenly condemns and portrays marital abuse, stalking, divorce, and motherhood. Fereshteh and Roya are smart girls in college, but while Roya becomes a successful architect, Fereshteh is subject to the rule of her father, the abuse of her husband, and the encroaching assault of her stalker years later. Usually, domestic violence is thought to be a family issue, and thus, a private issue (Langford 354). The format of the film is Fereshteh staging a tell-all for Roya after many years of no contact, and in this way, Milani suggests that she wants domestic violence to become a public issue, a matter of public responsibility (Langford 354).

The following film, *The Hidden Half*, was the controversial film that briefly landed Milani in jail, for including scenes of communist counterrevolutionaries, even though she had previous approval from the censorship board's reviewers (Phillips). In the film, Fereshteh reveals her rocky communist past through a journal entry to her husband, who is a high-status, respected judge. Throughout the film, Milani emphasizes the theme of patiently listening to the "other side" of the story, as the husband learns of his wife's secret story and in return, he shows compassion when he goes to hear the testimony of another woman is on trial for her counterrevolutionary past (Langord 352). In this way, Milani calls for the progressive patriarch, perhaps an allusion to Mohammad Khatami, who was the President of Iran at the time of the time and a reformist politician who sparked hope in many women for progressive changes in the government (Moruzzi 2001: 97). Milani illustrates the story of Fereshteh finally taking action and rebelling against her overbearing father-in-law in *The Fifth Reaction* by taking Fereshteh on a wild car chase around Iran as she tries to escape the country and keep custody of her children. In an interview, Milani explained that she carefully pitched the plot of *The Fifth Reaction* to Iranian film reviewers using a method she refers to as "zigzagging" (Jelodar 94). In this "zigzagging," Milani does not directly challenge Iran's custody laws, but rather, she emphasizes a mother's right to custody of her children (Jelodar 94).

Samira Makhmalbaf, the youngest film director of the three and a part of Iran's famous Makhmalbaf clan, has impressed worldwide audiences with her cinematically beautiful films *The Apple*, *Blackboards*, and *At Five in the Afternoon*. In *The Apple*, without demonizing the patriarchal figure, Makhmalbaf criticizes hypocritical patriarchal values that work to the detriment of women, especially to the young girls who are imprisoned in their home for 12 years due to their father's interest in protecting their purity from the dangerous forces of the outside.

Makhmalbaf created the 2000 film *Blackboards* without a production permit from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Garcia). Instead, Makhmalbaf smuggled the film out of Iran into the Cannes International Film Festival and won a grand jury prize (Holden). *Blackboards* tackles the despairing conditions for Kurdish nomads in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, who live in fear of bullets falling from the sky and the insidious threat of chemical weapons. The characters, who wander the mountainous terrain with hopes of someday returning to a home, demonstrate the film's theme of homelessness and the catastrophic consequences of war. These themes continue in *At Five in the Afternoon*, where young Afghan girl Noqreh seeks to someday be president of Afghanistan but suffers from literal and symbolic homelessness and meanders the desert with her hungry family looking for a life realized. *At Five in the Afternoon* suggests that Afghan women have a voice, like Noqreh with her political aspirations and fondness for poetry, yet are lost in the badlands of a war and a sense of unsatisfying listlessness.

These separate case studies of Iranian women directors demonstrate that each director has a unique style of exploring similar themes of womanhood, motherhood, sexuality, and more. Rakhshan Bani-Etemad portrays the complexity of womanhood through characters such as Forough in *The May Lady*. Tamineh Milani brazenly expresses her frustration with the stolen agency of women under patriarchal law. Samira Makhmalbaf conveys political criticism of war and highlights the cost of war to the most vulnerable. These directors' methods of coping with censorship coding overlap, but most notably, Bani-Etemad times the shot so that the actress without her hijab is hinted at but not actually seen, Milani utilizes her technique of "zigzagging" when cooperating with the authorities, and Makhmalbaf might skip right over attaining approval from the Ministry and head straight for the international film festivals.

9.1 RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

This begins an analysis of Iranian cinema that foregrounds the unique contribution of these influential female directors who have successfully challenged Iran's treatment of women while evading censors. I used the case study of three women directors, but they are the among the most famous, if not the most famous, women directors in all of Iran. They are privileged women in having been able to receive an education of their choosing, and they are all middle-class or upper-class.

9.2 FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Future research will investigate the works and socio-political implications of Iranian women directors and should expand to include women directors other than the most famous ones. In this way, they can address the problem of focusing too narrowly on a potentially unrepresentative sample of women directors. While the three case studies may be limited to viewpoints of a middle-class or upper-class woman. This research does not include the works of a filmmaker who might have grown up poor or had no opportunity to receive a college/film school education.

I only used three case studies, and there are many more women directors in Iran. While I made this choice knowing that I would gain specificity by sacrificing the coverage of more directors, this research focuses on a narrow sample of women directors.

The researcher should also take note of the president's policies and views. President Khatami's progressiveness inspired Tamineh Milani in her films and he also pardoned her from

prison. It is not unlikely that President Rouhani or future presidents of Iran are influencing women filmmakers and changing the enforcement of censorship codes in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance.

For a new direction, researchers can investigate other groups of underprivileged in Iran who are featured in films made by Iranian women. Though possibly lower in number, films about the LGBTQIA+ community could point towards the future of subversive filmmaking for women directors. *Facing Mirrors*, a 2011 film by Negar Azarbayjani, explores the plight of an Iranian trans man named Eddie. Gender-affirming surgery is legal in Iran and is not an uncommon procedure (Munshi).

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