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8-2016

Negotiating the Politics of Representation in Iranian Women's Cinema before and after the Islamic Revolution

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Negotiating the Politics of Representation in Iranian Women's Cinema before and after the Islamic Revolution

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

by

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August, 2016
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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council

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Abstract

From Mahvash, the Iranian entertainer who sang and danced coquettishly in numerous Iranian films that were produced before the Islamic revolution of 1979, to the skateboarding vampire girl who makes a feast out of abusive men in Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, the representation of Iranian women on screen has changed drastically. This comparative study focuses on the politics of representation of Iranian women in the cinema before and after the Islamic revolution, with the aim of deconstructing the readily-available notions of women's oppression in Iran. It analyzes the works of female Iranian directors Forough Farrokhzad, Samira Makhmalbaf, Rakhshan Bani-E'temad, Tahmineh Milani, Marjane Satrapi, and Ana Lily Amirpour, using the theoretical framework of the Islamicate gaze theory and accented cinema, while taking into consideration the different interpretations of third world cinema, women's cinema, and national cinema. At the intersection of all of these theoretical frameworks, is Iranian women's cinema. It is revealed that the transforming depiction of women on screen is due primarily to the socio-economic and political conditions of the country, but also to the fact that there is a growing number of female directors who are tackling women's issues and depicting women realistically on the screen.

Key words: representation of women, Iranian women's cinema, Islamicate gaze, accented cinema, Islamic revolution

Acknowledgment

I would like to acknowledge, first and foremost, my thesis director Prof. Frank Scheide, who was incredibly supportive, understanding, and helpful during the process of writing this thesis. Without his guidance and supervision, this thesis wouldn't have been complete.

I would also like to thank my thesis committee, Dr. M. Keith Booker, and Prof. Mohja Kahf, who also showed their support and helped me with whatever I needed in order to complete this thesis.

I would extend my thanks to the Fulbright program as well, because without this scholarship, I wouldn't have been able to pursue my passion in studying films. The program assistants have also been supportive and helpful throughout my two years of study at the University of Arkansas.

Finally, my deepest thanks goes to my family back home for their belief in me, and for my friends here, Samaher Al-Dhamen and Ketaki Deshpande, who made sure I ate well during the time of writing this thesis.

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Introduction

More Iranian women directed feature films in the first decade after the Islamic

revolution of 1979 than in all the preceding eight decades of filmmaking in Iran (Naficy,

A Social History Vol.4 94). This intriguing proliferation of women directors is at the

forefront of this analysis. This study aims to define certain characteristics of post-

revolutionary Iranian cinema by women, in comparison to pre-revolutionary

representations of Iranian women in cinema. It will isolate major thematic patterns

which characterize the unique identity of Iranian women's cinema. It asks the questions:

what has changed for women in cinema after the revolution? How were Iranian women,

despite censorship and difficulties with the Islamic government, able to produce a rich

cinematic experience? What was the representation of Iranian women in pre-Revolution

Iran's cinema? How was female representation different in Iran's post-Revolution

cinema? To explore these questions, this study will consider Iranian women's cinema

within the context of the history of this country while employing key related theoretical

frameworks.

Chapter one discusses the importance of reviewing Iranian cinema within its

proper historical context, which includes the fall of the Qajar dynasty in the early

twentieth century, the dictatorship of the Pahlavis, and the Islamic Revolution and its

aftermath. The chapter also explores the history of Iranian cinema, noting the most

important and relatable films and movements. These socio-economic and political

changes have certainly affected the progress of Iranian cinema, and of Iranian women's cinema in particular. Contextualizing the films that will be discussed later within their proper historical context is essential to having a broader understanding of them.

Chapter two introduces key theoretical concepts that will assist in analyzing the films chosen for this thesis. It is divided into two sections. The first section explores broad theoretical definitions, like the concepts of third world cinema, national cinema, and women's cinema. This section aims to provide summaries and operational definitions of these theories. The second section examines more specific theoretical frameworks; Hamid Naficy's Islamicate gaze theory, and his accented cinema theory, and aims to provide a solid understanding of them for utilization in the film discussion.

Given the shortage of films that were directed by women prior to the Islamic Revolution, chapter three primarily focuses on the 'representation' of Iranian women before that time. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first is concerned with the earliest Iranian films and the presence of women in them, while the second discusses the *FilmFarsi* genre. These two phases before the Islamic revolution reveal a polar opposition in its depiction of women on screen. Women were either hyper-sexualized entertainers or they were modest and pure housewives. This binarism proved hurtful and unrealistic toward Iranian women, and thus there were some counter films that rejected them. The third section discusses one such counter film – Forough Farrokhzad's *The House is Black* (1962).

Chapter four focuses on the representation of Iranian women after the revolution in films directed by Iranian women, and constitutes three sections as well: the subtle empowerment of women in Samira Makhmalbaf's films *The Apple* (1998) and *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003); the militant rejection of authoritative masculine powers in Rakhshan Bani-E'temad's film *We Are Half of Iran's Population* (2009) and Tahmineh Milani's film *The Hidden Half* (2001), and finally; the films of émigré and ethnic filmmakers, including Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), and Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). These films were chosen because of their fame and aesthetics as well as for their historical and cultural significance.

The most comprehensive examination that is relevant to this subject is Hamid Naficy's four-volume study *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*. This analysis covers the social history of over a century of Iranian cinema from 1897 to 2010. Volume I covers the artisanal period from the beginnings of movie-making in Iran in 1897 until the end of Reza Shah's rule in 1941. Since this thesis focuses upon Iranian women directors, volume I is not as relevant as the later volumes, except for laying the groundwork for this research, especially the historical beginnings of filmmaking in Iran. Volume II covers the period of the rule of Mohammed Reza Shah from 1941 to 1978 – just before the Iranian revolution that overthrew him and established an Islamic Republic. With the coming of the Islamic rule in 1978, Volume III explores the effects of the Iranian Revolution on its national cinema. Naficy traces the development of Iranian films in the

period right after the revolution until 1984, and how movie theaters were affected, filmmakers were exiled, and a new way of making cinema emerged in the wake of these new conditions. Volume IV covers the period from 1984 to 2010, and calls it 'The Globalizing Era'. This is the period where an Iranian women's cinema emerged as a powerful cinema having its own aesthetics and themes.

While Naficy does provide key understandings of Iranian cinema in general, his main theoretical framework is the topic of national cinema and its relation to modernity. The focus of this study is different in the sense that it emphasizes instead the concept of women's cinema and its relation to the national cinema. Women's cinema is best studied with the lens of women's studies, and thus comes the significance of this study.

I.   **Historical Context**

To contextualize Iranian women's cinema, it is vital to examine the specific

historical and political conditions Iran has experienced in the twentieth and twenty-first

centuries that have shaped its film industry. This chapter provides a brief history of

modern Iran, starting from the 1900s until the revolution of 1979 and through its

immediate aftermath. This social and political history will be intertwined with the

history of Iranian cinema and its development throughout these years.

With the Western mainstream media perpetuating the notion of Iran as a

scowling mullah who calls for the beheading of an author because of his literary piece,[1]

women threatened by religious police for violating Islamic dress code and showing bits

of hair, masses of people protesting and burning Western flags, or even more simply,

women's faces peering from under black chadors with a child in their arms, this

historicizing becomes essential. While these images that are perpetuated by the

Western mainstream media are true to a certain extent, they are still generalizing

images that lack the nuances required to understand a history and a culture. Iran is also

Persia, a country whose name summons forth much different connotations. As "Persia"

this country becomes a place of Sufi Rumi poems, melodious santur music,[2] colorful

Persian carpets with curvilinear inscriptions and designs, and rose and saffron gardens.

Both of these national identities are limiting and reductionist to the complex history of

Iran as it went through invasions, battles, dynasties, civil wars, and revolutions. These

connotations have also had an impact on the modern Iranian national identity, and subsequently, on Iranian national cinema. Thus, our aim is to deconstruct these stereotypical notions by situating them in their proper historical context, in hopes of providing new grounds of understanding that will help diminish such preconceived ideas.

    a.   Iran's Constitutional Revolution and the Fall of the Qajar Dynasty

The twentieth century brought significant changes in almost all aspects of Iranian life, ranging from population, literacy, and transportation, to the identity of the state, the people, and nature of their fears. At the beginning of the century, the people's fears were mostly centered on recurrent dangers, such as robbery, wild animals, *jinns*, famine, and diseases such as syphilis, malaria, cholera, and others. By the end of the century, these fears were shifted to modern-day concerns such as unemployment, housing, education, pollution, car accidents, among others (Abrahamian 3). The nature of these new concerns correlated with the gradual transformation of Iran from feudalism to state capitalism. Other changes that are directly related to the national consciousness of Iranian people include the transformative influence of Iranism and Shi'ism, or in other words, what their leaders said constituted their national identity and religions. Before the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the identity of Iran was inseparable from that of the Shah and the institution of the king (Abrahamian 5), due to the personal cult of the monarch promoted by the Pahlavi regime as an essential part of Iranian national

identity. After the revolution, many argued against this notion of Iran = Shah, and challenged what they called a tyrannical totalitarian system. The national identity became associated with racial background and state citizenship, rather than devotion to the Shah. Shi'ism had also undergone some radical changes in its meaning. While its proponents advocated apolitical conservative doctrines before the revolution, popular Shia culture discourse became an incubator of insurgency and a call for social justice after the revolution (Abrahamian 5). The month of Muharram, and specifically the tenth of Muharram which is called Ashura', commemorates the memory of Hussein bin Ali, the grandson of the prophet Mohammed according to Islamic tradition, who is believed to have been a martyr in the battle of Karbala' by Shi'ites. Ashura' and Hussein became symbols of social justice and the fight for freedom, and Shi'ism transformed to becoming a belief in the political revolution against tyranny. This interpretation proved significant during the time of the Islamic revolution as Shi'ism was used as a tool to drive the protestors forward in their fight against the secularist Shah. This changing interpretation of religious doctrine also influenced the films that will be discussed.

Iranian national consciousness was greatly affected by two major revolutions it experienced in the same century: one called for the establishment of a parliament during the Qajar dynasty in the early twentieth century, and the second called for the overthrow of the Pahlavi dynasty in 1979 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The first is referred to as Iran's Constitutional Revolution and it began with a

group of intellectuals who popularized investigating such concepts as democracy, oligarchy, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, imperialism, and bourgeoisie. This was partly a result of Western and Russian penetration which began early in the century and introduced new ideas to the Iranian people. The Qajars tried to limit Western influence through measures which later became known as "defensive modernization" (Abrahamian 36-38). These were the indirect triggers of the constitutional revolution. At the beginning of the twentieth century there were more direct factors that caused upheaval and protests, for example, there was an economic crisis brought about by bankruptcy and inflation. In 1905 in Tehran, there were several demonstrations which occurred during the month of Muharram and subsequent months thereafter that called for economic reform and the establishment of a representative assembly of judiciary and law makers (Axworthy 202). On August 5, 1906, Mozaffar od-Din Shah, the King at the time, gave in to the protestors and signed an order to create a national assembly. He died only few months after its establishment and was replaced by his son Mohammed Ali Shah Qajar.

With the succession of the new Shah, who was against the constitution, Iran fell into civil war. He led a military coup against the national assembly and many nationalist leaders were either arrested or executed. According to Ervand Abrahamian, this was brought about by three separate events, the signing of the Anglo-Russian Convention,[3] the backlash against the National Assembly for trying to reform the tax system, and the

heightening of the backlash by the proposition of sweeping secular reforms by some

liberals (49-50). The new constitution became an unrealizable dream as the monarchy

seized power and regained authority over the government, maintaining only a partial

minor form of the revolution's reform policies. The military coup by the Shah lead to an

organized resistance by many parliamentary rights activists and groups. They drew

support from three main sources: first, the group of volunteers known as *fedayis* (self-

sacrificers) and *mojaheds* (holy warriors) who were about one thousand and included

Armenian and Georgian communities; second, the nominal commander of the army

Muhammed Vali Sepahdar joined forces with rebels; and third, the support of big tribal

leaders such as the Bakhtiyaris (Abrahamian 52). As a result of the civil war the Shah

went into exile and his son Ahmad Shah, who was 12 years old at the time, became the

successor to the throne in 1909. A new assembly was formed and was known as the

Grand Majles, and many governmental officials who were allied with the exiled Shah

were imprisoned or executed.

The constitutional revolution of 1905-1911 was the first democratic revolution in

the Middle East, and replaced despotic monarchy with parliamentary monarchy. Many

of the changes that occurred in Iran during this time were adapted from Europe –

education, postal, and banking systems, the technologies of telegraphy, printing,

photography, and new literary, theatrical and musical forms. Cinema was only the latest

in this long list imported from Europe (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.1 27-28). The first

known actuality film by an Iranian was filmed in 1900 in Belgium by the Qajar court

photographer Ebrahim Khan Akkasbashi who had accompanied Mozaffar al-Din Shah on

his European trip (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.1 27). Royal sponsorship constituted the

earliest form of film support, and thus, Qajar-era cinema began as a private upper class

enterprise, made for and viewed by the elites in the privacy of their homes. However,

with the opening of the first public commercial cinema in 1905, films gradually became

available to the public (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.1 39).

Despite the political success of the constitutional revolution, the implementation

of modernization proved difficult for the new Iranian government as it lacked the

necessary tools to administer and reform the country. This signals the end of an era in

Iranian history, with the fall of the Qajar dynasty and its replacement by the Pahlavi

dynasty.

b. Iran under Reza Shah and Mohammad Reza Shah: Political and Social Life

In 1921, General Reza Khan seized Tehran in a military coup, and was

subsequently raised to power, becoming the prime minister first, and then the new

Shah in 1925 as appointed by the Grand Majles, displacing and overthrowing the Qajar

dynasty. He set about trying to modernize the country, which mostly consisted of

peasant villages, tribes, and small towns. Reza Shah had a model to follow and this was

Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the president of Turkey at the time, who had established

himself as the ultimate authority on secular principles (Axworthy 222). Reza Shah even

made a visit to Turkey to meet Atatürk in 1934, which symbolized the two nation's

similarities of values – nationalism, modernism, and secularism (Axworthy 226).

Reza Shah developed Iran in many ways. Most notably were his expansion of the

army, improvement of the transport infrastructure, investment in industrialization, a

modern prison system, and expansion of education.[4] In 1935, he instructed the Iranian

embassies overseas to require foreign governments to call the country Iran – instead of

Persia – in its legal documents and in official communication. This was an attempt by the

Shah to distance himself from the previous failed Qajar state and to constitute a new

Iranian national identity (Axworthy xiii).

Despite the effectiveness of modernization during this era, the Shah also imposed

severe restrictions on freedom of expression and heightened censorship. Thus, writers

and poets suffered. One of the notable writers who lived during Reza Shah's rule was

Nima Yushij, who wrote poetry in an innovative way, breaking from the poetic form of

classical Persian poetry. Although his style was rejected at the time by many

traditionalist poets, he was later accepted and became an inspiration for other poets –

notably Forough Farrokhzad (Axworthy 226), whose film will be discussed in a later

chapter. Reza Shah was criticized for highly centralizing economic and political power,

which led to corruption and public dissent. There was no elected self-government in

villages, towns, districts, or provinces. Officials were appointed from and accountable to

Tehran only (Keddie 99).

One of the most notable laws regarding women was the banning of wearing the

veil publically by Reza Shah's government in 1936 (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol. 1 147).

Sometimes, physical force was used to unveil the women in the streets. Some women

even refused to leave their houses because they saw it as an enforcement of a western

ideal, while some girls would not go to school because their observant parents would

not allow them to take their veil off in school (Keddie 100). Violence and state

prevention was one way of enforcing this new ideology unto women. Other ways that

helped achieve this unveiling process of Reza Shah's government were coercion,

encouragement, propaganda, and the publicizing of unveiled women (Naficy, *A Social*

History Vol. 1 147). Current mainstream media stereotypically depicts Iranian women's

clothing before the Islamic revolution as westernized and revealing.[5] When

understanding the history behind this forced unveiling process, this depiction becomes

not only unrealistic but also orientalist. The enforcement of a dress code for Iranian

women during Reza Shah's government is very much similar to how the current Islamic

government is forcing the veil and the strict modest clothing. This enforced

modernization was not the only struggle facing women. There were many more

substantial difficulties. As Nikki R. Keddie states:

> The Civil Code retained most of the sharia provisions that affected women:
> guardianship of children by the man in case of separations; consent of the
> father for a daughter's marriage; and polygamy and temporary marriage.
> A husband could kill an adulterous wife and her lover with impunity and
> could keep a wife from a job "degrading" to him or her. The only reforms
> were a rise in the legal marriage age and a requirement that all marriages

be registered in civil bureau. On the other hand, the spread of male and female secular education and emphasis in a variety of men's and women's writings and activities on modern, rather than ulama-endorsed ideas, began to encourage new roles and attitudes regarding women. (92)

This is not to imply that there was no improvement at all for Iranian women during Reza Shah's rule. Women entered into the workforce and were teaching, nursing, and factory working. Further developments were the admission of women to universities, their employment in government offices, and the opening of various kinds of recreational centers (Lahiji 217). In addition, there were a growing number of women's movements since the early twentieth century.

Another important development during the time of Reza Shah is, of course, the cinema, as silent films were starting to emerge all over the world in the 1910s and 1920s. In 1917, a theater opened in Tehran that admitted women. It was considered a daring move at the time because of Iran's traditional and religious society, so the theater was forced to shut down. However, a few years later, it was deemed acceptable for women to attend movie theaters if they were accompanied by men. The theaters mostly displayed American, French, German, and Russian silent feature films (Poudeh and Shirvani 324). The first Iranian silent feature, *Abi and Rabi*, by Ovanes Ohanian was produced in 1930. It was a comedy with no women in the cast or the crew. The second Iranian film, *Brother's Revenge* (1931), introduced two women characters who had to be played by non-Muslim Armenians because of the religious restrictions and prejudices against Iranian Muslim women at the time. The casting of an Armenian woman in the

lead also came with the third film, *Haji Agha, the Film Star* (1932) by Ohanian. However,

the first Iranian sound film, *The Lor Girl* (1933) by Abdolhossein Sepanta broke the taboo

of casting Iranian Muslim women. The film was shot in India and it featured a rural girl

who sang and danced in tea houses and inns (Dönmez-Colin 11). The film praised Iranian

nationalism and Reza Shah's modernization and was an immediate commercial success

and a box office hit.

Nevertheless, there was growing disdain and grievance from the people towards

the Shah, especially from the *ulama* (the clergy). They hated the enforced

westernization and the new dress code for women, which lead to protests in 1935, and

subsequently the massacre of several hundred people who were shot by machine guns

from the Shah's troops in the shrine precincts of the Emam Reza at Mashhad (Axworthy

227). Hence, the opposition came from two different positions: the clergy who opposed

the government after this massacre and for this enforced dress code, and the

intellectuals who hated the restrictions on freedom of expression and the growing

number of political prisoners. It was time for the Shah's abdication. With the beginning

of WWII, It was no secret that Reza Shah had good relations with the Germans, which

caused British and Russian troops to enter Iran and force his abdication in September

1941. He was replaced by his son Mohammed Reza.

During WWII, Iran's economic conditions were worsening. There was inflation,

scarcities, famine, and disruption of finances. This led to a growth of oppositional

groups, ranging in ideologies from nationalist and religious, to socialist. Political activity and protests increased from 1942 to 1945, owing to the war, Reza Shah's abdication, economic and social disruption, and new political freedom (Keddie 109). There was also a growing intelligentsia, which can be considered as a newly significant social group. These men and women were educated in Tehran or abroad, and had few outlets for their talents (Keddie 119).

In the 1950s, a struggle for the control of the government developed between the Shah and Mohammed Mossaddaq, one of the most popular politicians in the country at the time. Mossaddaq aimed for the nationalization of Iranian oil, and succeeded in achieving this. He was subsequently voted by the Majles to become the prime minister. Tensions ensued in the following years between the Shah and Mossaddeq, but with the help of the United States, the Shah was able to stage a coup and remove Mossaddaq from his position (Axworthy 236).

After the period of Mossaddaq, there was a national development program and a series of reforms in the 1960s, which was called the White Revolution. It included "a renewed policy of land reform, privatization of state factories, female suffrage, and a literacy corps of young educated people to address the problem of illiteracy in the countryside" (Axworthy 242). Although these reforms gave certain political rights to women, they were still lacking in terms of social and personal rights. Wives remained wards under the guardianship of their husbands, being able to become ministers, but

not being able to travel without the husband's permission. They were constantly under the control of the state and the family (Dönmez-Colin 39).

As for the cinema, Iranian cinema began to deteriorate after its first sound feature film due mostly to lack of private funding. There were no films produced between 1936 and 1947, resulting in the domination of the cinematic market by American, Indian, and Egyptian films (Poudeh and Shirvani 324). But a popular Iranian national commercial cinema began in 1948, with the emergence of the film genre *FilmFarsi*, which in turn produced the "stewpot" genre (including melodramatic and family comedy films), and the "tough-guy" action genre (Naficy, *A Social History* vol. 2 149). These films are popular tales in which "the clash of good and evil are based chiefly on class contrast (between rich and poor), a contrast of values (between chivalry and lack thereof), and social contrast (between city and village)" (Mohammed Kashi qtd. in. Naficy, *A Social History* v. 2 149). These films also had their fair share of prostitute themes where the woman, who was deceived and deserted, falls into prostitution. Women were often trusted with delivering the main moral message of the movie through stereotypical dialogues (Dönmez-Colin 37).

By the mid-1960s a new political figure emerged, a figure that would change the fate of an entire country for decades – Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He began to preach against the Shah in Qom, attacking his corruption, negligence of the poor and the working class, and his failure to keep Iran's sovereignty in its relations with the

United States. He gave a powerful speech in 1963 and was subsequently arrested,

causing the first series of protests in Iran demanding his release (Axworthy 242). When

he was released, he gave another speech which caused the authorities to deport him

and put him in exile – first in Turkey, then to Iraq, and eventually to Paris in 1978. By

that time the Shah had alienated the *ulema* (the clergy), had created a large poor

working class in Tehran, and had even alienated many of the educated middle class,

who were supposedly his supporters, through his violations of human rights (Axworthy

254).

     In 1978, an article appeared in the paper *Errela'at*, attacking the clergy and

Khomeini. It was written by someone trusted by the authorities and approved by the

court. The article twisted facts and invented fictions, suggesting that Khomeini was a

foreigner, a former spy, and a poet (being a poet would delegitimize his authorship as a

true clergy). The article prompted an immediate string of demonstrations, encouraged

by Khomeini who was in exile. A number of protestors died during clashes with the

police (Axworthy 256). The revolution had started.

   c. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 and its Immediate Aftermath

     Demonstrations started spreading, and Khomeini gained more popularity even

among other opposition groups. The goal was unified: to overthrow the Shah of Iran.

The Shah appeared on national television saying that he understands the grievances of

the people and would work towards the betterment of Iran, but it was all too late. By

the end of 1978 violence intensified, the Shah had killed over six-hundred nonviolent

protestors, and demonstrations reached more than one million people. The army was

no longer reliable, and the Shah had lost control. On January 16, 1979, he left the

country. What followed was a succession of serious changes. In February, Khomeini flew

back from exile to Tehran. To many, he was the face of the new nation, and the hope of

its revival. In April, he set the seal of the establishment of a state based on Islamic

principles with a referendum that returned ninety-seven percent support for the

establishment of an Islamic Republic (Axworthy 263). In November, protestors seized

the American embassy in Iran, and took diplomats as hostages. They were demanding

the extradition of the Shah so he could face trial – he was at the time seeking medical

treatment in the US. Khomeini backed the protestors, which ignited a crisis in relations

between the U.S. and Irani. The hostages were released after 444 days of captivity,

following negotiations mediated by Algeria. By the end of 1979, the liberals and

moderates were left looking extremely marginalized.

In September 1980 Saddam Hossein's forces invaded Iran, beginning an eight-

year war. Opinions differ over the reasons for this invasion – whether Saddam took the

opportunity of the weakness of Iran and wanted to snatch some quick gains, or whether

Iranian officials started a revolution among Iraqi Shi'as that destroyed his regime. The

war was destructive. As many as one million Iranians were killed or injured. By the end

of it, Khomeini allowed President Khamenei to announce that Iran would accept the UN

resolution which called for a cease fire (Axworthy 267-269). Khomeini died in 1989, his

funeral attracting crowds only comparable to that of his arrival to Iran after the exile.

During his famous speech at the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery, Ayatollah Khomeini

stated that the Revolution was not opposed to cinema, only obscenity. Pre-

revolutionary cinema had to be denounced due to its failure to act in accordance to

Islamic beliefs. People rioted, burning down any symbols of the Westernized Shah's

regime. Brothels, cabarets, and cinema theaters were burnt down and destroyed:

> More than 180 movie theaters were burned by fanatic arsonists. The
> revolutionary guards arrested many filmmakers and actors, confiscated
> their possessions and banned the screening of their films. Several film
> personalities were indicted on charges such as corrupting the public and
> were purged. Others went into exile. About 2200 previously shown
> domestic and foreign films were re-inspected, only around 200 receiving
> screening permits. Film production entirely stopped. (Dönmez-Colin 96)

It looked like there was a very bleak future awaiting the Iranian cinema. Yet, the new

Islamic government formed a set of regulations that led to the acceptance of cinema as

a viable means of communication and entertainment as long as it is compliant with the

Islamic tradition, meaning: no references to illicit relationship, no physical contact

between men and women, and no blasphemy (Poudeh and Shirvani 326). Until 1989, all

film ideas had to undergo five stages at the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance

(MCIG) to be shown: reviewing of the synopsis, approving the screenplay, issuing a

production permit, reviewing the complete film, and finally issuing a viewing permit.

Ideologically approved films, often with social content and stressing morality were made

by different groups. Many women started entering the film industry in all capacities,

including many women directors. Iranian films also started appearing at international festivals (Keddie 298). In general, many directors were able to overcome the strict cinematic regulations and directed successful films.

As for the effect of the revolution on the position of women, it is generally conceived to be mixed and contradictory. On the one hand, women lost the better treatment in terms of divorce, which gave the fathers custody of their child. Polygamy and child marriage were legal again. The imposition of the veil restricted women's public appearance. On the other, conservative fathers let their girls go to school because of encouragement from the religious hierarchy. In 2008 sixty six percent of students admitted in Iranian universities were women (Axworthy 276). Furthermore, an important trend regarding women began. More women started interpreting Islam in more gender-egalitarian ways. Many women were shocked and hurt for being deprived of rights and for the imposition of the new family laws. Hence, a new group of Islamist women pressed women's causes more effectively and started demanding women's rights using Islamic scripture (Keddie 293).

II.   **Introducing Theoretical Frameworks**

a. Third World, National Cinema, and Women's Cinema, What Does it Mean?

Moving from the historical context to the theoretical framework, this section begins by asking pivotal questions that are at the center of this thesis: what does Iranian women cinema mean? Does it fall under 'national' Iranian cinema? Or is it more 'transnational'? Is it part of a third world cinema and if so what does a third world cinema mean? In aiming to answer these questions, this section will lay the groundwork for the upcoming film discussion in the subsequent chapters. The three broad rubrics that need to be examined are: third world cinema, Iranian national cinema, and women's cinema. At the intersection of these three rubrics is Iranian women's cinema, and hence individual operational definitions must be discussed.

Third world cinema gained popularity with the introduction of the concept of 'Third Cinema' in the 1960's and 1970's. It emerged from the activism of Che Guevara and Frantz Fanon and is concerned mostly with developing postcolonial nations. The term 'Third Cinema' was coined by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in their manifesto "Toward a Third Cinema", which was published in 1969 and established this movement. Solanas and Getino called for a revolutionary cinema that reflected the conditions of postcolonial nations and their struggle for independence. They also called for a focus on issues of social justice, class division, ethnicity, and national identity. This cinema "recognizes in that struggle the most gigantic cultural, scientific, and artistic

manifestation of [postcolonial] time[s], the great possibility of constructing a liberated

personality with each people as the starting point – in a word, the decolonization of

culture" (Solanas and Getino 116). Hence, this cinema should be militant, anti-

imperialist, subversive, and Marxist. They have divided cinemas to three categories: first

cinema, which is Hollywood's commercialist spectacle films that views man as a

consumer of ideology and depicts life as it is conceived by the ruling class; second

cinema is Europe's authorship cinema that values authorial expressivity rather than

collective identity, and so it urges the filmmaker to depict his/her artistic expression in a

way that does not appeal to the masses but mostly to the elites; and finally the

alternative that they suggest is "third cinema", which is a cinema of liberation that is

against the system and supports the working class rather than the elites or the ruling

classes (Solanas and Getino 120-121). Third cinema became a key concept within

cinema studies, growing to encompass works made in Latin America, Africa, and Asia.

However, since Iran was not directly colonized, and decolonization is a key

element in analyzing third world cinemas, this categorization becomes problematic.

Indeed, there are Iranian film models that can be described as militant and

revolutionary, but with different social and economic conditions than those in Latin

America, where the movement originated. Furthermore, another criticism of

postcolonial film approaches is that they look at an external past factor in recognizing

the problems of the present. While this is true in some ways, it can be reductionist and

limiting in other ways. Some present factors, like migration, transnational terrorism,

globalization, and others may play into the new ways of shaping our national identities.

Structural and hierarchical hegemonic powers that operate within the axis of post-

colonialism may as well operate within the axis of different conditions that may be

overlooked because of the focus on the postcolonial trouble. Nevertheless,

understanding the roots of the concept of third world postcolonial cinema and its

possible influences on Iranian women directors will help shape our understanding of the

films better.

This leads to the second rubric, and that is Iranian national cinema, where the

specific social, political, and economic conditions of this country shapes its cinematic

narratives. The concept of nation and nationalism is relatively a recent phenomenon in

the larger scheme of history, but it has had a significant effect on the concept of cinema.

On the one hand, films have always been 'international' because of their use of subtitles

to transcend language barriers. On the other, films have also been a medium of cultural

and political expression that is specific to one nation, and they have also helped in

shaping national identities. Lenin realized this power and famously said "of all the arts,

for us cinema is the most important" (qtd. in. Corrigan, White, & Mazaj 906). His soviet

government used cinema as a medium to unify the people and spread propaganda while

sharing glimpses of its culture. Thus, an analysis of the national cinema and its relation

to world cinema will prove crucial to understanding Iranian women cinema, especially

when taken into consideration films produced outside of Iran and diasporic filmmakers.

There are different approaches to defining nation in critical theories, including

"nation as a nation-state; nation as the linking of state and culture; nation as a common

cultural destiny; nation as a soul; nation as a narrative; and nation as a symbol"

(Corrigan, White, & Mazaj 906-907). One of the groundbreaking studies on the concept

of the nation is Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* in which he argues that

nations are imagined political communities – "imagined as both inherently limited and

sovereign" (Anderson 6). It is imagined because all members of a certain nation,

however small it may be, will never know most of their fellow members. But they will

still feel some kind of communal ties among themselves. It is limited because no matter

how big any nation is, there are always finite boundaries that separate it from other

nations and make the notion of a universal nation improbable and even impossible. It is

sovereign because this concept was born in the age when enlightenment was breaking

the normal hierarchical realm of the society, and it has matured in the age when people

realized that all religions are allomorphic and share similar ontological claims (Anderson

7). Anderson then questions what makes such imagined qualities drive individuals to

having strong emotional attachments to their nations, to the point they are willing to

die for it. Thus, within this lens, the concept of nation becomes an instrument to achieve

political and economic ends. Cinema, too, can propagate the concept of nations to

achieve political ends. *Triumph of the Will* (1935), the famous German propaganda film

about the return of Germany as a great superpower, is one such example.

Anderson's questions certainly helped define the critical theories of national

cinemas, as similar dilemmas may occur. To address the specific case of Iranian national

cinema, we must ask what it encompasses. This will lead to a grey zone of other

questions such as: does Iranian national cinema mean that the director and the cast

must be of Iranian citizenship? Or does it include films by diaspora Iranian directors?

Does the production need to be done in Iran? Should the setting be strictly Iranian or

does it allow for different settings outside the political borders? How does the exhibition

of the film plays into this? And several elastic variables that have significant factors in

defining the national cinema. Early studies would conceive of the notion of national

cinema as films that revolve around one centralized nation. However, with the many

complexities that the concept of 'the nation' holds, it becomes challenging to conceive

such an idea. Scholars suggest these various mobilization of the concept as follows: first,

one can conceive the notion of the national cinema in economic terms, relative to the

relationship between national cinema and the local film industry of that specific nation;

second, one can study national cinemas with a text-based approach of the film itself and

examine the characters, the narrative, and the style in relation to the nation; third,

there is the possibility of a consumption-led approach, and it studies the film audience;

and fourth, one can study national cinemas through a criticism-led approach, which normally involves quality art cinema of a particular nation (Higson 52-53).

One important work that discusses these possible complexities is Stephen Crofts' essay "Reconceptualizing National Cinema/s" in which he reconceives the concept of national cinema to offer an account of its global reach in terms of "the multiple politics of their production, distribution, and reception, their textuality, their relations with the state and with multiculturalism" (Crofts 941). He distinguishes between seven varieties of national cinemas: 1) cinemas that differ from Hollywood but do not compete directly, offering a different set of themes and narratives, most notably European art-house cinema and the likes of it; 2) cinemas that differ from Hollywood and European art films and critiques them in terms of bourgeois individualism, mainly the model of the third cinema discussed earlier; 3) European and third world entertainment commercialized cinemas that struggle to beat Hollywood; 4) successful cinemas that ignore Hollywood, like that of India and China; 5) Anglophone cinemas that try to imitate Hollywood like the cinemas of Britain, Australia, and Canada; 6) totalitarian cinemas which are state-controlled and promote state ideology, most evidently the Stalin-era Soviet films; and finally 7) ethnic and regional cinemas that are different (in terms of language and culture) from the states that encloses them, such as Aboriginal cinema (Crofts 942-949). While these varieties certainly help answer the question of what constitutes national cinemas, they should not be treated as strictly independent, as they can overlap each

other. Iranian national cinema, for example, can fall under several categories. The

Iranian New Wave movement which began roughly with the emergence of Dariush

Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969), shares a lot of characteristics with the European art house

model, so it can be under the first category. It can also be argued that Iranian cinema

after the revolution is state controlled by the Islamic authorities and Islamic ideology,

and hence it can fall under the sixth category. This thesis will mostly deal with Iranian

films that are part of the Iranian New Wave Cinema movement, and thus, the first

category is the most relevant.

While Crofts does not see the concept of national cinemas as a comprehensive

method to analyze the features of a given national character by itself, he does support

its application in analyzing some features in world cinemas (Corrigan, and White, with

Mazaj 940). One aspect of this approach which he agrees is that is views world cinemas

as the "other", in opposition to Hollywood cinema.[6] Furthermore, in the 1980s and

1990s, the concept of transnational and global cinema was developed to supplement

the parameters previously explored under the umbrella of individual "national

cinemas". This concept is used to "understand the hybrid ways in which filmmakers

imagine today's world as a global system rather than a collection of autonomous

nations" (Corrigan, and White, with Mazaj 908). Transnational and global cinema will be

explored further in the section discussing the emerging studies in exilic and diasporic

cinemas.

The third broad rubric that needs to be examined is women's cinema. It is a particularly challenging term to define, taking in consideration its ambiguities, as it suggests either films directed by women, concerned about women, addressed to women, or all four. The concept has been debated within feminist film scholarship since the 1960s. In its broad definition, the term 'women's cinema' mostly means films that are directed or written by women. A study by Martha M. Lauzen proved that the number of women employed in key creative behind-the-scenes roles on the top grossing U.S. films was only 9 percent in 2008, which is the same percentage she had measured ten years earlier (White 1). This scarcity of female creative directors has led to an increasing debate about gender inequality in Hollywood in specific. Furthermore, there is a preconceived stereotype about women's cinema as a derogatory term in which popular commercial tear-jerking dramas or chick flicks are the norm. Needless to say, this is very limiting and reductionist. Hence, we may still ask the question: what does a women's cinema mean specifically? Alison Butler speculates in her important study *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen*:

> Women's cinema is a complex critical, theoretical, and institutional construction, brought into existence by audiences, film-makers, journalists, curators, and academics, and maintained only by their continuing interest: a hybrid concept, arising from a number of overlapping practices and discourses, and subject to a baffling variety of definitions. (2)

Butler argues that women's cinema has transitioned from being a counter-cinema (or oppositional cinema) to being a minor cinema. Women's cinema as counter-cinema

reflects the common feminist oppositional attitudes toward mainstream Hollywood

cinema in which the woman is mainly the object of desire. These views are reflected

mainly in four important waves – if we may call them so – of feminist film criticism: 1)

the sexual and social power relations evident in the politics of looking and being-looked-

at, as mainly discussed by Laura Mulvey's important founding text "Visual Pleasure and

Narrative Cinema" in which she advocates a new language of desire; 2) the combination

of political and social struggle with the representation of women's desire, as evident

mostly in Claire Johnston's essay "Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema" in which she

calls for the release of 'collective fantasies' in order to free women of their

objectification; 3) refocusing the attention towards the spectator, as in Teresa de

Lauretis' essay "Aesthetic and Feminist Theory: Rethinking Women's Cinema" which

advocates an approach that is reconstructive rather than deconstructive, and finally; 4)

the discussion of women's cinema in terms of its relations to intertextuality and

hegemonic cinema traditions, as theorized by Judith Mayne, Tania Modleski, and others

(Butler 06-19). All of these groundbreaking studies have helped shape the earlier

feminist film criticism in a way that is oppositional to mainstream entertainment

cinema.

  This "counter cinema movement" is almost outdated as a concept because of the

plurality of forms of narrative, and thematic concerns now recognized in film

scholarship. Instead, there is a shift toward the designation of a "minor" rather than

oppositional cinema. The concept of the minor cinema comes from Gilles Deleuze and

Félix Guattari's conception of minor literature[7] of minority and marginalized groups, and

it is written in a major language rather than a minor one. Minor literature is neither a

literary genre nor is the classification an artistic evaluation because its existence is

largely due to the popularity of its subjects (Butler 19). There are "three defining

features of a minor literature [that] are instantly recognizable as characteristics shared

by women's cinema (and indeed most feminist activity): displacement, dispossession,

or, as they term it, deterritorialisation; a sense of everything as political; and a tendency

for everything to take on a collective value" (Butler 20). These features will prove useful

when analyzing some of the cinematic case studies in this thesis, although it must be

stressed that its applicability is not horizontally equal. Butler believes that calling

women's cinema a minor cinema can free it from the binaries that inflicted the

preceding oppositional feminist film criticism, binaries such as popular cinema/elitist

and avant-garde/mainstream (21). The position of women in contemporary culture is

neither included nor excluded. This in-between-ness has led to a lack of a cohesive

collective identity, and thus, minor cinema emerges to demarginalize this position.

b. The Islamicate Gaze and Accented Cinema

After examining these three broad rubrics that constitutes the fundamentals of

studying Iranian women's cinema, it is now appropriate to introduce specific theories

that can be applied to the films that will be discussed as case studies.

In Volume Four of *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Globalizing Era,* Naficy introduces the concept of the Islamicate gaze in Muslim and Middle Eastern films. The cinematic gaze and storytelling in Iranian films is radically different from the Western feminist male gaze theory. Naficy argues that the semiotics of looking and hijab in Islam is based on four suppositions. First, the eye is not a passive organ, but rather active and even invasive sometimes. The Islamic religious doctrine interprets this gaze as being sexual and aggressive in a way that is supposed to prohibit people (specifically men) from forbidden gazes. Second, women's sexuality is considered excessive, and if uncontained by modesty, it leads to the moral corruption of the society. Third, women are thought to be exhibitionists. Thus, the cultural industry (films, music, arts) thrive on such exhibitionism to attract men's sexual urges and gain profit. Finally, men are considered acquiescent when women's sexual allure is encountered, for their gaze is assumed to be uncontrollable if the woman is not modest enough (*A Social History* Vol.4 106). These suppositions reflect cultural tensions that existed in the cinema prior and after the revolution. They illuminate some important aspects of Iranian cinema, such as the Islamic guidelines formulated by the state, and some specific historical incidents like the burning of theaters after the revolution.

These four suppositions mediate and control the discourse on hijab in Islam and thus the male gaze, as theorized by Laura Mulvey, becomes inapplicable when interpreting a substantial number of Iranian and Muslim films. The male gaze as

interpreted by Western feminism is aggressive as a controlling agent that suppresses women and supports phallocentric power relations. There are two main types of looks that are normally identified in cinema: one is based on scopophilia and is voyeuristic (derived from Sigmund Freud); and the other is based upon the identification of the looker with the object of the look, and it is narcissistic (derived from Jacques Lacan). Naficy argues that there is a third type of look that is not quite associated with the cinema yet, and that is the masochistic look which is derived from Gilles Deleuze's study. This third kind of look is one most relevant to the discourse of modesty and hijab. This masochistic look explains the presumed excessive power of women and the effect of the male gaze on men. "Instead of controlling women through their gaze, men are lured and captured by their own look on unveiled women and are thereby 'humiliated' and made 'abject' by women", and these are the sources of men's masochistic pleasure (*A Social History* Vol.4 107). To further clarify this, consider the example of a man who is known to be modest and religious among his peers. He would feel ashamed if he looked at women, because of this pressure of constantly fearing God and the society's suppositions. However, he might still derive pleasure from gazing at women, and since this pleasure is associated with shame and humiliation, it is masochistic.

The modesty discourse in Islam encourages an averted look for both men and women, while the look in Western media is more direct and some would interpret its desired outcome as pornographic. In practice, this averted look takes the form of

avoiding direct eye contact, considerable distance between men and women when interacting with each other, and an almost unfocused distracted body language where the man would sometimes look at the ground and play with his pocket while interacting with the woman – all in the name of modesty and following the Quranic scripture.[8] On the other hand, on occasions of unnoticed subjects of the look, the onlooker transforms his/her look from an averted one to a direct evasive gaze. This play between the averted look and the unnoticed evasive gaze creates a dual culture of surveillance and exhibitionism where the veil turns the object of the look into an erotic object by hiding aspects of it and hence creating the distance that formulates scopophillic and masochistic looks. Naficy further clarifies:

> Unlike its general conception in the West and by some feminists and opponents of the Islamic Republic, veiling as a social practice is not unidirectional. It is a dynamic process in which both men and women are implicated. There is also a dialectical relationship between veiling and unveiling: that which covers is also capable of uncovering. Women thus have much latitude in how they present themselves to the gaze of onlookers, involving body language, eye contact, types of veil worn, clothing worn underneath the veil, and the manner in which the veil itself is fanned open or closed at strategic moments to lure or to mask, to reveal or to conceal the face, the body, or what is underneath. In this sense, they are actually empowered. (A Social History Vol. 4 109)

Needless to say, this empowered aspect of the hijab in Islam does not diminish its oppressive aspects in other conditions. Thus, within these understandings of the hijab and the Islamicate gaze, we may present a refreshing new look into Iranian women's cinema.

The second theory that is helpful here is Accented Cinema, as theorized by Naficy in his book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*. "Accented Cinema" refers to a distinctive branch of postmodern film, one that enacts what Naficy calls the politics of the hyphen in which one's identity is doubly defined and reflects a double consciousness. The hyphen provides multiple and constructed identities. In fact, each hyphen consists of a number of other "intersecting and overlapping hyphens that provide inter- and intra-ethnic and national links" (Naficy, "Situating Accented Cinema" 984). Thus, it resists the readily nationalist and homogenous attributes.

Accented cinema is both a cinema of displacement and a displaced cinema (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.4 370). In terms of Iranian displaced filmmakers, there are at least 264 filmmakers of Iranian descent who have directed a minimum of 1,170 films outside of Iran between 1960 and 2012. Twenty-six percent were women directors, seventy-two percent were men, and the remaining two percent were collective or unknown (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol. 4 376-377). Such a vast number of filmmakers outside of Iran should definitely not be treated as a homogenous group because it would be misleading to disregard the many factors that differentiate them, such as social and class affiliation, religion, gender, profession, ethnicity, etc. However, accented cinema theory helps to discover the commonalities between exilic and diasporic filmmakers, as they share certain features. Iranian accented cinema is part of a global

movement created by deterritorialized filmmakers. It is also part of the Iranian national

cinema in which the filmmakers travel across borders instead of being inside Iran.

'Accent', Naficy explains, "refers not to the speech of the diegetic characters but

to the narrative and stylistic attributes of such films and to the filmmaker's interstitial or

collective production modes" (*A Social History* Vol.4 393). Nevertheless, the actual

speech accent is one of the most powerful markers of group identity and solidarity, as

well as of individual difference and personality. Therefore, accented cinema combines

this linguistic aspect of our identity and the stylistic attributes of its films. In terms of

characteristics, it is defined by certain stylistic and thematic characteristics such as:

narrative hybridity, loss of one's original language, visual fetishes of the homeland and

the past, incorporation of voice-over narration, multi-vocality, real or imaginary

journeys to/from the homeland, and authorial and autobiographical narratives (Naficy,

"Situating Accented Cinema" 989-994).

Naficy divides Iranian accented films into five overlapping types: exilic, diasporic,

émigré, ethnic, and cosmopolitan. Exilic films refer to an external exile where the

filmmaker voluntarily or involuntarily left the country of origin and longs to go back, but

cannot. This desire is projected in the return narratives, where the character in the film

returns to his/her country of origin. Diaspora too often begins with trauma and coercion

but, unlike exile, it is necessarily collective. Attributes such as multiplicity and hybridity

are dominant among diasporic filmmakers, while with the exilic filmmakers (especially

the political ones) it is mostly binarism and duality. Émigré filmmakers also left Iran, but

typically for the purpose of emigrating and settling in other countries and eventually

obtaining citizenship. The trauma of displacement and the desire for an impossible

homecoming is less prevalent with the émigré filmmakers. Ethnic filmmakers are the

second generation who are born into exilic, diasporic, and émigré families. Thus, their

relationship to their country of origin is often indirect and abstract, leading to memory

and fantasy mediations. Finally, the cosmopolitan filmmakers are those who resisted

any attachment to the homeland and the nationhood, while focusing instead on

individuality and personal expressivity (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.4 393-397).

These broad rubrics that define Iranian women's cinema, as well as these specific

theoretical frameworks, will collectively assist in developing a much deeper

understanding of the films than an investigation using only one lens would.

III.   **Representation of Iranian Women in Films Produced before the Islamic**

Revolution

Women in Iranian cinema have been portrayed in numerous ways, from the

binarist 'housewife or prostitute' model to the more complex and multifaceted

portrayals. A pattern of characteristics, however, can be traced in the representation of

women before the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This chapter identifies this pattern and

presents a better understanding of the kind of films that existed before 1979. During the

entire history of Iranian cinema up to the revolution, only one woman is credited with

directing a fiction feature film: Shahla Riahi, a commercial cinema actress who directed

and acted in *Marjan* (1956), which was a commercial and critical disappointment

(Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.2 207). Given the scarcity of women's cinema in Iran prior to

1979, this chapter focuses instead on the representation of women. There will be,

however, one case study of a short documentary film directed by Forough Farrokhzad;

The House is Black (1962), which depicts a different uncommon pattern to women's

portrayals.

a. Early Iranian Films (1900-1941)

As film exhibition changed from being a private event for rich families in the early

1900s in Iran to public all-male theaters, it is not surprising that the first incident of film

censorship occurred over an unveiled foreign woman in a foreign film (Naficy, *A Social*

History Vol. 1 133). This reveals an early association of women with modernity and the

national identity. Any time a national identity is at stake, women, their social roles, and

their representation on screens becomes a contentious topic for the national debate.

The first feature film with a woman acting without a full veil, *Mr. Haji, the Movie Actor*

(1933), featured an Armenian Christian woman called Asia Qestanian. She was, thus,

less bound by Islamic traditions and she had more leeway in her dress code. As Naficy

states: "in fact, because of their religion, Armenian women formed the first cadre of

female actors in Iran, both in theater and in cinema" (*A Social History* Vol. 1 151). Even

though they appeared unveiled or with minimal head covering, they still wore modest

clothing and behaved modestly. Interestingly, despite this, there were still some

glimpses of subverted moralities and modesty and the sexualization of women. For

example, in *Mr. Haji, the Movie Actor*, a mother who wears a veil and is holding a baby

in her arms is standing in the street between crowds of people witnessing an event. She

is so enthralled by the occurring drama that she mistakenly and absent-mindedly sticks

her baby's milk bottle into the mouth of a strange man standing next to her. Besides

being comical, this scene also implies suggestive erotic and sexual tendencies (Naficy, *A

Social History* Vol. 1 272).

The first Iranian feature film with sound, *The Lor Girl* (1933), cast the first Muslim

Iranian woman to play the lead role. The film was produced in India at considerable

expense because Iran was lacking in technical resources. Apart from casting the first

Muslim woman, in contrast to the previous Armenian Christians, the film tells an

exceptional story of a young woman who is leading an independent life in a violent

social environment. The main lead is a dancer and an entertainer at a rural tea-house.

She is desired by the local chief, but is strong enough to reject his advances. This theme

of feminine power challenged traditional gender roles that dictated the place of a

woman is her domestic home (Lahiji 217). The film presented a progressive plot that

was hailed by critics and viewers alike for its empowering self-representation (Naficy, *A

Social History* Vol.1 239).

Despite the success of these first few Iranian films, the fourth Iranian film, *The

Tempest of Life* (1948), was not screened until 15 years after *The Lor Girl* (Lahiji 217),

due to the unstable conditions that Iran underwent in the 30s and 40s which were

discussed in the previous chapter. Iran experienced economic problems, the conflict

between state and clergy, the abdication of Reza Shah, the forceful removal of the hijab

for women, and other important changes that destabilized society and cinematic

production. *The Tempest of Life* tells the story of a man and a woman who meet in

musical concert and subsequently fall in love. Their love faces many obstacles before its

fulfillment. Shahla Lahiji claimed that the film "was a tepid family melodrama devoid of

the candour which marked *The Lor Girl*. Yet it was still aware of the problem of women

and took a critical – albeit crude and indirect – look at the supreme power of men in the

patriarchal structure of the family" (218).

The Tempest of Life and other films of the same genre which were produced in the 40s were hardly successful. This was a result of many factors, but mainly it was due to the competition from larger production companies in India and Egypt – two major film exporters that influenced early Iranian cinema. To confront this crisis, Iranian film producers imitated Indian and Egyptian films that were semi-musicals and crowd-pleasers. Thus, the genre *FilmFarsi* surfaced during the late 40s.

b. The *FilmFarsi* Genre and the Binarist Depiction of Women

FilmFarsi is a genre of Iranian B-grade feature films. The term was coined in 1953 by a French-educated film critic named Amirhushang Kavusi, and this designation became popular among critics (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.2 149). Kavusi claimed that the only thing that these films had inherited from Iranian culture was their Persian language, and hence the name *FilmFarsi*. Otherwise, they were "formless, structureless, and storyless" (qtd. in. Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.2 149). These films were often described as having poor lighting, set design, photography, and acting, and critics were quick to denounce them. Seeing the popularity of semi-musical Egyptian and Indian films, Iranian producers incorporated similar dance and song scenes in their own films, simulating a cabaret lifestyle and appeasing the tastes of an audience looking for quick satisfying sex-filled entertainments. In her book *Women, Islam, and Cinema*, Gönül Dönmez-Colin describes these films as such:

> Provocative scenes were used abundantly, with or without narrative justification, to appeal to the fantasies of sexually deprived men. A plump

and flabby dancer called Mahvash was the dominant sex symbol, so much so that in the provincial towns, screening of foreign films would often be stopped midway to present one of her dance numbers. After the premature death of Mahvash, other dancers followed and cinema continued to treat women as sex objects. During the 1960s, films targeting the single young men of the lower middle classes and banking on their suppressed sexual drives showed women as gullible, weak creatures, destined to become prostitutes or cabaret dancers, unless saved by a good-looking muscular man. These cheap fantasies had nothing to do with the real women (or men) of Iranian society, but no one seemed to mind. (Dönmez-Colin 37-38)

Despite the prevalence of such rigorous critiques of *FilmFrasi*, it must be said that these films did strengthen the development of Iranian film industry as they attracted moviegoers and private investors. During the 1950s, three to twenty five films were produced each year (Poudeh and Shirvani 324), and this was a huge leap from the low-producing almost non-existent Iranian film industry in the 1940s. Furthermore, these critiques seem to be stemming from two departure points: on the one hand, from the Iranian intellectuals who studied abroad and witnessed the development of European aesthetics and hence were ashamed of such low-culture films; and on the other, from the religious authorities and clergymen who feared the influence of Western morality on the Iranian society. Hamid Naficy also notes how these critics regarded these commercial films as conspiracies plotted by both the money-seeking film corporations and the Shah's government that aimed for Westernization and quick modernization, all to lure the Iranian society into sex, fantasy, and violence (*A Social History* Vol.2 150). There was no such conspiracy per se as many factors contributed to the popularity of such films, and not merely the collaboration of state and the Iranian film industry.

We may briefly examine two examples from that period in order to develop a

better understanding of the complex nuances of the binarism regarding depictions of

women that existed in Iranian cinema at the time. The first example is the abundance of

the professional dancers, singers, and

entertainers, who performed songs in

filmfarsi movies. Banu Mahvash was a highly

popular performer particularly with lower-

class patrons who enjoyed the tough guy

Figure 1: Mahvash
Source: sixpillarstopersia

subgenre of *filmfarsi*.[9] She performed in cabarets, on radios, and in movies (Figure 1).

She was famous for her call-and-response kind of singing where she engages the male

spectators and they respond to her singing by repeating phrases after her. She received

screen credit as a character in at least seven comedies and melodramas between 1956

and 1960 such as *The Sun Shines* (1956) and *What's the Difference* (1960). However, she

performed in many more movies without being credited. In fact, it is estimated that she

performed three hundred songs for the movies (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.2 209).

Mahvash published an autobiography, that was actually a sex manual with illustrations

of her in swimsuits, called *Secrets of Sexual Fulfillment*, and it was widely distributed and

available. Interestingly, film producers spliced film clips of her into unrelated Iranian and

foreign movies in an attempt to make the films more appealing for the lower classes. In

one such instance: "Gary Cooper walked into a saloon to order a drink. The film then cut

to a black-and-white clip of Mahvash singing a *luti* song. Several more cuts between

Cooper and Mahvash sutured the close-up image of Cooper looking with the image of

Mahvash dancing" (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.2 209). In another instance, the producer

of female director Shahla Riahi's film, *Marjan*, forced her to insert clips of Mahvash's

singing and dancing into her film to combat the film's unsuccessful reception and to

attract audiences (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.2 210). It is important to note that *Marjan*

was unsuccessful because, as a melodrama, it did not follow the mainstream tendency

that called for dance and song scenes. Therefore, we may conclude that the first feature

film directed by an Iranian woman was a commercial failure because it was different

from what was currently popular. Mahvash's life ended tragically in a fatal car accident

in 1961, and her funeral attracted large numbers of mourners.

     A second example of the depiction of women in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema

is Massoud Kimia'i's film *Qeysar* (1969). The film's plot is simple: it tells the story of a girl

who was raped by a thug, and killed herself to escape the shame. Her older brother rises

to defend the family's honor by fighting with the thug, but he also gets killed. In the

midst of this chaos, between the loss of the family's honor and the death of the sister

and the brother, arrives Qeysar, the younger brother, who was living an industrial life

away from his family. It is now up to him to regain the family's honor. He manages to kill

the perpetrator and a number of his associates, until the police come and he is killed by

the police for resisting arrest. Apart from the sister who committed suicide, the film only

includes Qeysar's passive mother and a cabaret woman whose only task was to fulfill

the heroes' sexual impulses (Lahiji 220).

As indicated in these examples, there are two opposing binaries concerning the

portrayal of women. On the one hand, there is the image of the cabaret dancer and

singer who is normally depicted as a seductive young beautiful woman. These kinds of

characters can be read as the perfect epitome of Mulvey's 'male gaze' theory. The

woman in such films is gazed at by three different 'gazers': the camera, the male

protagonists of the film, and the spectator. The Islamicate gaze theory is not directly

applicable because these films did not follow the Islamic system of veiling and modesty.

These gazes were more scopophillic and voyeuristic than they were masochist. On the

other hand, there is the image of the good woman who is a "faceless, unexciting figure

who wore traditional costume and stayed in the background as an obedient housewife,

or a virgin in training for the role, whose only concern in life was to make the home

comfortable for male masters" (Lahiji 221). Pahlavi-era commercial movies produced

these main typologies of womanhood, which were both patriarchal and hierarchical.

The polar opposition of chaste/unchaste, pure/impure creates a delusional perception

of the Iranian society at the time. Naficy further deconstructs these typologies by

dividing them into three categories: Blood women, such as mothers and sisters, who are

normally depicted as being virtuous and innocent; wives, who shared some attributes of

blood women; and women entertainers, who are considered to be morally suspect and

sexually available (*A Social History* Vol.4 96). However, it is important to note that these

classifications are not permanent as women characters would sometimes change roles

in the course of a movie, especially if transforming from an entertainer/prostitute to a

morally decent women as a result of falling in love or marrying.

Sayyed Ebrahim Nabavi's study of women's professions in Iranian movies that

were exhibited between 1969 and 1978 further confirms this binarism in the

representation of Iranian women in post-revolutionary Iran (Table 1). If the professions

of 'dancer and singer', 'prostitute', and 'cabaret worker' are added together, the

number of films that produced such characters would amount to eighty four motion

pictures. By contrast, the number of women who played roles of housewives is fifty five.

Table 1: Women's professions in Iranian movies exhibited between 1969 and 1978

Women's Professions	No. of Films
Housewife	55
Student	4
Dancer and singer	52
Prostitute	22
Artist and writer	8
Cabaret worker	10
Blue collar workers and laborers	16
Unemployed and vagrant	15
Owner/manager of business and land	7
Civil servant	3
Nurse	5
Teacher	6
Other	16

Source: (Nabavi, "Zen dar Sinema-ye Iran"
qtd. in. Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.4 98)

When considering the question of women's cinema, we may argue that these films were hardly part of a tradition of women's cinema. Clearly, the first reason is that, apart from *Marjan*, they were directed by men. In addition, they were neither oppositional nor minor (Butler's terms) in their confrontation of gender norms in the Iranian society. They also did not concern the conditions of women almost at all, as they were films made for the pleasure of lower-class middle-aged men.

c. A Different Case: *The House is Black*

"There is no shortage of ugliness in the world. If man closed his eyes to it, there would be even more. But man is a problem solver. On this screen will appear an image of ugliness, a vision of pain no caring human being should ignore. To wipe out this ugliness and to relieve the victims, is the motive of this film and the hope of its makers" – this narration, on black screen, begins Forough Farrokhzad's short documentary *The House is Black* (1962). It is one of the most notable Iranian documentaries filmed in the style of poetic realism, and Farrokhzad was the foremost woman poet associated with poetic realism in mid-twentieth century Iran. Following the introduction the black screen then cuts to a frame of a woman wearing a face veil with only her eyes and bits of her hair showing. The woman is looking at herself in a mirror. The frame is constructed in a way that the viewer sees her back and her reflected face in the mirror. As the lens zooms in to the mirror, the viewer notices that one of the woman's eyes is disfigured. This scenes uses the veil as a fascinating framing device in which it is first the

object of focus, but then as the camera zooms in and the veil is no longer in focus, the viewer is shocked to notice the disfigured face. This is Farrokhzad's way of informing the spectators that her film was not produced for a relaxed entertainment.

This short documentary is set in an unidentified leper colony in Iran. It begins with a scene of bitter irony because it reveals young boys in a classroom, reading prayers of thanks to God from a textbook, while their leprosy is very visible – hands deformed and eaten away, and faces disfigured. Farrokhzad's off-camera voice-over enters the scene and she narrates: "who is this in hell, praising you, O Lord?". Farrokhzad's voice-over presents a mournful outcry to the poor conditions of the people and an urge to shed away the stigma associated with the disease. She documents scenes from the leper colony while narrating a mixture of her own poetry and passages from the Quran and the Bible: a man singing and tapping his almost fingerless feet; another trying helplessly to light a lighter for his cigarette; a woman carefully applying *kohl* (traditional black eye makeup) in front of a mirror; people gathering for food pick-up; people preparing for a wedding where they sing and cheer; a girl combing the hair of another girl; and other scenes that document the lives of the people living in this leper colony. These scenes are highly poetic and the overall mood, as described by Naficy, is mournfully operatic (*A Social History* Vol.2 83).

In contrast to these scenes, comes the middle section of the film where a male narrator describes the medical aspects of leprosy in a formal prosaic off-camera voice-

over. The setting is a hospital where patients undergo physiotherapy and learn how to

walk and spread their fingers. In one astonishing shot a woman is seen holding her

infected hands before the camera. Then we see that the camera is actually underneath

a glass table. A heavy cloth then covers

her hands and a brick is placed on top.

The camera angle in this frame plays a

role in enhancing the emotional value

of the scene as the spectator can see

the woman's palms pressed against the

glass table and her facial expression

Figure 2: *The House is Black*
Source: frame grab from Minassian

(Figure 2). One reason this scene is so effective is that the female narrator is replaced by

a male voice who clinically describes the procedure, after we have been used to hearing

commentary that reflects poetic realism. Naficy draws an important distinction:

> The clash of these two styles in a single film – the one lyrical and
> ambiguous, the other official and positivist – [. . .] testifies to the struggle
> of creative filmmakers to find a personal and truthful documentary voice
> in a society and a medium driven by an impersonal official style. It also
> testifies not only to the gendered and double voicing of the film but also to
> the double authorship of its narration. (*A Social History* Vol.2 83-84)

This double authorship draws attention to the concept of equality in filmmaking. It is an

assertion that is evident even in Farrokhzad's poetry in which a strong feminine voice is

always exhibited.

Furthermore, this film may be considered one of the earliest examples of the

emergence of the Iranian New Wave Cinema, which began in the mid 1960's. The

movement provided much needed advancement for Iranian cinema. It was a movement

that was meant to abandon the traditional commercial movie genres like *FilmFarsi*, and

it was aiming towards "enhanced realism, character interiority, narrative continuity, a

coherence of space, time, and causality, and improved technical qualities" (Naficy, *A*

Social History Vol.2 335). Dariush Mehrjui's film *The Cow* (1969) is widely considered the

first Iranian New Wave film. However, it can be argued that *The House is Black*,

produced nine years earlier, also belongs to the same movement due to its innovative

style and cinematic technique which combines bold realism with lyricism, resulting in

what may be called a poetic realist style – much like the films of the Iranian New Wave.

Despite the apparent binarism that engulfed women's representation on Iranian screen,

this film went against the odds to challenge such perception, and to show women as

human beings despite the infectious disease and societal norms that dictated the roles

of women. This film seems to acknowledge the notion of gender as a socially-

constructed idea, and thus, acknowledge its oppressive hierarchical power. Farrokhzad

has given voices – and to some extent agency too – to men and women in the film by

depicting this illness as something associated with humanity. Unlike the first female

Iranian director, who was forced to insert scenes of dancing in her melodramatic film,

Farrokhzad has owned her authorship and voice. Thus, it is clear that the coming female

Iranian filmmakers were inspired by such a figure and such a film.

While the binarism depicted in the *FilmFarsi* genre was prevalent in the Iranian

film industry before the revolution, it can be argued that there has been a parallel

movement that countered this duality and depicted the real lives of Iranian women. The

correlation between this film and post-revolutionary Iranian women's films will prove to

be significant.

IV.   **Case Studies of Iranian Women's Films after the Islamic Revolution**

In post-revolutionary Iran, cinema has flourished and women have gotten more

involved in terms of filmmaking and production. In fact, in the single decade following

the revolution, more women have emerged as filmmakers than in all the decades of

filmmaking preceding it. Naficy divides the period after the revolution in relation to

Iranian women's involvement with the cinema into three phases. The first phase, which

was immediately after the revolution in the early 1980s was characterized by the total

elimination of women on screen. The images of unveiled women were cut from existing

Iranian and foreign films, causing unacceptable narrative disruption and confusion. This

led to another technique in the elimination of women; the offending parts were blacked

out from the frames with markers. The second phase, which was in the mid 1980's,

introduced more regulations relative to the appearance of women on screen. They were

domesticated and had no significant roles in films. The system of gender segregation

governed the characters dress, acting, and gaze, which means long and loose-fitting

outfits, no physical contact between men and women in films, and no direct gaze. The

third phase has appeared gradually since the late 1980s. It is marked by the emergence

of women filmmakers and a more substantial dramatic presence of women in leading

roles (Naficy, "Veiled Vision" 132-133). These phases can be read in correlation with the

suppositions of the veiling politics in Islam, discussed earlier. The excessiveness of

women's sexuality, their relation to morality in Islamic societies, the uncontrollable gaze

of the man if the woman is not properly veiled – all of these suppositions that existed

even before the revolution contributed to such harsh regulations regarding women's

cinema during this period.

All the films discussed in this chapter belong to the third phase, as they are

produced between 1998 and 2014. The films are divided into three sections: Two of

Samira Makhmalbaf's films and their themes concerning modesty, and the aspiration for

change and women empowerment; a couple of films by two of Iran's most prolific

women filmmakers, Rakhshan Bani-E'temad and Tahmineh Milani, and their

confrontational oppositional themes; and finally two films from Iran's émigré and ethnic

women filmmakers, Marjane Satrapi and Ana Lily Amirpour. These sections are divided

in accordance to thematic elements, as each discusses a certain genre and theme of

filmmaking. These films are significant because they can be read as a prototype of

Iranian women's cinema.

a. Samira Makhmalbaf's Aspiration for Change and Women's Empowerment

Samira Makhmalbaf may be considered the quintessential female Iranian director

because of her prolific filmmaking experience and for her recognition at worldwide

international film festivals. She became the youngest director selected for the main

competition at Cannes Film Festival, with her directorial debut *The Apple* (1998), as she

was only eighteen when she directed it. Two films by Samira Makhmalbaf are chosen for

discussion: *The Apple* (1998), and *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003). The films are of

different type, as the first is docu-fiction while the second is fictional, and they provide

good exemplifications of Makhmalbaf's style and the representation of women and girls

in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

The Apple tells the true story of two young twin sisters, Ma'asouma and Zahra,

who were held captive by their old father and blind mother for eleven years (all

characters playing themselves). Their neighbors filed a complaint to social workers and

demanded they take some action regarding the family's situation. The girls do not go to

school and have poor communication abilities, being barely able to speak, let alone read

or write. The film follows their journey as they discover the wonders of the outside

world, befriend their neighbors, start speaking more confidently, and roam the streets

of their town. The apple, a constant desirable fruit for the twins, signifies not only their

quest for liberation but also their humble dream of being able to buy one. Gender,

youth, public and private spheres, oppression of the familial institution, veiling and

modesty, are all topics in this film.

Using Naficy's concept of the Islamicate gaze, it can be seen that both films evoke

a discussion of the veiling system. They question and subvert the averted gaze in direct

and indirect ways. In *The Apple*, Makhmalbaf uses mise-en-scéne to show an oppressive

system based on modesty and veiling. The twins are living in a constant imprisonment

not only through the actual captivity and the enforced veiling but also through the

architecture of their own house. The rooms are dark and claustrophobic. There is an

iron gate that is constantly locked and keeps them away from the yard. There are

several shots where the girls reach out through the bars of the gate to water the plants

in a clear depiction of their yearning to be outside. As Naficy also notes, the high walls of

their house veil them from the neighbors, although the latter still manage to practice

their panoptic surveillance over the girls and intrude on their lives (Naficy, *A Social

History* Vol.4 128). The social workers force the father to cut the bars of the iron-gate

using a saw, and this symbolizes direct opposition to the system of modesty. Taking the

concept of the Islamicate gaze further, it can be noticed that Makhmalbaf also

employed an indirect break with imprisonment and surveillance. The girls befriend a

neighboring boy who, at first, tempts them by holding an apple but not giving it to them,

and then leads them to a nearby shop that sells apples. This friendship breaks the

modesty codes and the panoptic surveillance system.

At Five in the Afternoon addresses the plight of women in Afghanistan and their

quest for education and leadership. Filmed entirely in war-damaged Kabul, the film

centers around Nogreh, a young woman living with her father, sister-in-law, and the

latter's infant son in a bombed-out building in this city. They, like so many other

immigrant families, can barely afford anything. Unbeknown to her devout father,

Nogreh sneaks away from her Quran classes to attend a newly established school for

girls. During a school survey concerning the students' professional aspirations, Nogreh is

inspired with the idea that she can become the president of Afghanistan. A heated

debate ensues between the students over the efficacy of a woman's presidency and whether it will help defeat the Taliban. Nogreh, however, is still determined that she can become the president. She meets a young Afghan poet, who arrives on a bus full of homeless refugees, and he assists her in her aspired campaign by taking her to a photographer and answering her questions about women presidents around the world. However, the film is not an inspirational tale about the liberation of women, as Nogreh's quest is depicted as a bitterly impossible one. The film ends with their displacement because the dilapidated building they used to live in became overpopulated with refugees. Nogreh's family roams the desert in search of a place to stay. At the end of the film she walks away repeating a refrain she heard from the poet, which is actually from Federico García Lorca's poem about the death of a bullfighter: "At five in the afternoon. / Ah, that fatal five in the afternoon! / It was five by all the clocks! /It was five in the shade of the afternoon!".

The film breaks systems of veiling in different ways. The hijab becomes a spectacle, or as Kate Millet names it, 'theater of chador' (qtd.in Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.4 109), where a woman's face and gaze become a stage for practicing empowering communication. In one scene, several chador-wearing girls walk by in the street, but with their hair and under clothes slightly showing. Nogreh's father instantly averts his look and turns to the wall until the girls pass. He is an epitome of the four suppositions that Naficy laid out. Nogreh, on the other hand, is an example of how to subvert those

veiling systems. She is careful to wear her full face veil in front of her father, but as soon

as he is out of sight, she removes it and shows her face and bits of her hair. She keeps a

white high-heeled shoe in her purse, and wears them in replacement of her black flats

at times when she can project her femininity as a mode of empowerment. Men and

women are forbidden to socialize intimately with each other, and so their gaze, which is

uncontrollable by authorities and can be undetected at most times, find new ways of

communication that implies either seductive or modest connotations, depending upon

the desire of the subjects. Nogreh's gaze, as well as her presumptive love interest the

poet, is highly desexualized. Her gaze indicates her existentialist dilemma of how she

will achieve the presidency in such horrible conditions for women, rather than how she

will win her love interest. However, Nogreh exchanges the sexualization of the gaze with

the sound of her white shoe tapping on the ground, and with the symbolic constant

defiance that is evident in the act of changing her shoes. The shoe, in Nogreh's case,

takes on the role of the gaze and becomes a subversive tool to challenge the modesty

system. It turns the limitations of the veil into a theatrical musical challenge of

oppressive factors.

It is evident, thus, that both films by Makhmalbaf subtly transgress systems of

veiling. Furthermore, they also embody the three defining features of women's cinema

as discussed earlier by Butler. The features are: a feeling of displacement (displacement

of Nogreh's family), a sense that the personal is political (Nogreh's oppressive conditions

turn to a quest for women presidency), and the presence of a collective value (the

neighbors' actions in collectively signing the letter to social workers to free the twins is

an embodiment of collective value).

b. Political Activism in Works of Rakhshan Bani-E'temad and Tahmineh Milani

While the works of Samira Makhmalbaf are subtly feminist, the works of

Rakhshan Bani-E'temad and Tahmineh Milani are loud, even militant, in their support

for women's rights. In a speech given at the University of Tehran in 1999, Milani

expressed an urgent need for a women's cinema – or making films that reflected

women's perspectives and experiences. Her sentiment is shared by Bani-E'temad who

also expressed a dislike of the representation of women in films before the revolution

(the dualistic representation of pure/impure discussed in the previous chapter) and

called for a real depiction of real women on screen (Dönmez-Colin 103). Both films

discussed here, *The Hidden Half* (2001) and *We Are Half of Iran's Population* (2009),

reflect this militant call for the political participation and honest representation of

women.

In 2001, Milani was arrested and kept in custody for a week because of her film,

The Hidden Half. She was accused of acting against national security, denying God,

promoting anti-Islamic ideas under the guise of art, and campaigning in support of

counterrevolutionary exile groups (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.4 168). Her imprisonment

caused a controversy regionally and internationally; petitions were signed, news outlets

widely shared her story, and Amnesty International called her a prisoner of conscience. She was released on bail shortly thereafter.

Despite this controversy, the film is not a direct 'call to arms' as the authorities depicted. It tells the story of a married woman, Fereshteh Samimi, who decides to reveal her secret past life to her husband on the day he is traveling from Tehran to Shiraz to hear the appeal of a woman sentenced to execution, in hopes that he will hear the woman's story in a less critical way and pay more attention to her side of the story. The film proceeds in a long flashback as the viewer learns the story of young college student Fereshteh. The flashback is set during the immediate aftermath of the revolution when Fereshteh had just been admitted to the University of Tehran. It is revealed that she was a communist sympathizer as she was involved with a group of leftist secular women, who countered the Islamic authorities. She also had a brief love relationship with a celebrated middle-aged intellectual who shattered her idealist revolutionist values. She later discovers, from no other than his own wife, that he was married, and that he loved her because she resembled his first love interest who died. Fereshteh decides to leave and never informs him of her departure.

Bani-E'temad became a leading figure in publicly condemning the imprisonment of filmmakers and intellectuals and issuing calls for action. Her social activism is further empowered in *We Are Half of Iran's Population*, a forty-six minute documentary, shot months before the 2009 Iranian elections. The purpose of the film is to depict social,

economic, legal, religious, professional, and political demands by Iranian women's rights activists, and then to show these demands to the 2009 presidential candidates and ask for their comments. Interestingly, the film is the answer to an earlier Bani-E'temad film entitled *To Whom Will You Show These Films?* (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.4 46). Bani-E'temad reveals in the beginning of the documentary that this question has been asked numerous times in the past by the women she is filming, and she always had no answer. Iranian women's hesitation and uncertainty of being shown on screen is directly related to the four suppositions that Naficy discussed in his Islamicate gaze theory. The resistance to being shown on screen stems from the same belief that a modest woman does not reveal herself in any way possible. In any case, with this documentary, the answer to that question has become clear: she will show it to the 2009 presidential candidates. The last ten minutes of the documentary is dedicated to hearing the comments of the presidential candidates. It is worthy to note that some of the presidential candidates who participated in the documentary were arrested after the film's release, such as Mir Hossein Mousavi. In addition, the only presidential candidate who did not attend the screening of the film was Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. He won that year, amid major controversy because there were allegations that the elections were corrupt. This resulted to Iranian protestors demanding the removal of Ahmadinejad after the elections, in what became to be known as The Green Movement.

Both films by Milani and Bani-E'temad reveal a quest for the true representation of Iranian women. Bani-E'temad is clearly aiming to hear from all social strata and economic sectors as she interviews women in discussions, seminars, book exhibitions, and on the streets. Furthermore, the film propelled an important minor change; for the first time the wives of presidential candidates sat next to them in public and participated in the discussion. This inclusion of women is also one of the messages in *The Hidden Half*, as it encourages hearing the other side of the story. Fereshteh writes the letter to her husband in hopes that he will hear the convicted women's full story. At the end of the film, during the present time, she coincidently meets the man she fell in love with after 20 years of separation. He asks her the pivotal question: why did she leave without talking to him first, and she realizes that she also fell into the same trap that she warned her husband against, and that is the trap of not listening to the story from all sides. The message of the film, hearing all sides of the story, becomes a powerful moral by the end of this narrative, because even the main advocate of that message, Fereshteh, realizes that she has not heard the other side of the story.

Furthermore, these two films may be read under the lens of third cinema because they criticize bourgeois individualism and advocate for the collective struggle of women in a militant Marxist way – similar to what Solanas and Getino called for in their Third Cinema manifesto. Both Fereshteh in *The Hidden Half* and the Iranian women activists in *We Are Half of Iran's Population* are social justice advocates that call for the

liberation of women, and thus these films can certainly be categorized under the 'Third Cinema' movement. However, the opposing element in these films is not the colonial power, but rather the hegemonic power of patriarchal authorities.

c.   Women's Émigré and Ethnic Films

The two films chosen for the discussion of émigré and ethnic cinema are Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2009) and Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). Both films exhibit interesting characteristics that are associated with Naficy's accented cinema theory, and thus, analyzing them within this lens will prove to be significant.

Satrapi was born in Rasht, Iran to progressive political parents who participated in the protests against the Shah but were disappointed with the eventual Islamic rule. As a teenager, she was sent to Vienna to complete her high school education because her parents were concerned that her rebellious nature would lead authorities to arrest her. She then returned to Iran for several years, but eventually chose to immigrate to France. Given this background, Satrapi fits under Naficy's typology of émigré Iranian filmmakers.

Persepolis is an animated coming-of-age autobiographical black and white film, based on the author's graphic novel of the same name. It tells the life story of Satrapi during the period from when she was a child to the time she decided to emigrate to France, connecting such personal life events as her first love interest and an experience of homelessness in Austria with such historical political events in Iran as the dictatorship

of the Pahlavi era, the overthrow of the Shah and the revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, and

the rise of the Islamic Republic.

Figure 3: Persepolis
Source: frame grab from Satrapi

In one segment from *Persepolis*, Satrapi's father tells her the story of how Reza

Shah overthrew the Qajar dynasty and became the first Pahlavi Shah. Unlike the rest of

the film's stylized realist approach, this segment is drawn in classical Persian painting

style, with the characters drawn like puppets (Figure 3). This reflects the fetishization of

the homeland and the past that Naficy notes as one of the characteristics of accented

cinema. Furthermore, the film is multilingual in terms of its language, and it is hybrid in

terms of its style. Starting from its title, Persepolis is the Greek name for Persia, which

already evokes a hybridity in language. Furthermmore, Satrapi notes how she was

influenced by German expressionist films, particularly F. W. Murnau's visual style and

Japanese horror films (Naficy, *A Social History* Vol.4 495). The film, in this sense,

becomes a mash-up of styles and genres, or a pastiche in postmodernist terminology.

Accented experimental films, as Naficy notes, tend to inscribe more autobiography than

feature films, and the narration mediates between various levels of identity (personal, ethnic, gender, racial, national, etc) ("Situating Accented Cinema" 987). This is especially true of *Persepolis* as well, as Satrapi muses over her multiple identities, and gets confused among them sometimes. In one scene, for example, a man at a party in Vienna asks her where she is from, and she responds by saying she's from France, only to be haunted by the shadow of her grandmother moments later asking her to be true to herself. The issue of identity and its multiplicity becomes hyper-visible in émigré cinema.

Ana Lily Amirpour, on the other hand, is a second generation diasporic Iranian. She was born to Iranian parents in the UK, and then moved to Miami, Florida as a young girl, eventually settling in Bakersfield, California ("Ana Lily Amirpour"). Thus, in Naficy's diasporic typology, she may be classified under 'ethnic' filmmakers since they are the second generation who are born into exilic, diasporic, and émigré families.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night is a fictional vampire / Western film. It is set in the imaginary "Bad City" – an Iranian isolated ghost-like town in which the streets are almost empty. In actuality, the film is set in Bakersfield, California, among the abandoned factories and power plants of the city. One of the first shots in the film sets the tone: a bridge over an empty valley full of dead bodies. The title of the film instantly evokes an image of sexual assault, as our patriarchal cultures have implanted the fear of walking home alone at night for girls. The twist is that in this film the girl is the predator, not the prey. The film tells the story of a lonesome vampire, known only as the Girl, who

wears an open chador, skateboards at nights, preys on her victims, mainly abusive men,

and protects a prostitute from harassment. She finds a little comfort in befriending (and

eventually loving) Arash, a lonesome man who shows compassion and kindness – unlike

the rest of the men in the film.

The film plays on the multiculturalism of its filmmaker by alluding to many

Iranian, American, and European pop culture figures, as Isabel Ortiz notes:

> Within this pan-cultural landscape, Amirpour's character of The Girl — the skateboarding vampire who wanders the streets of Bad City, alone — becomes the film's avatar for the experience of encountering, following, and obsessively consuming American and European media as a marginalized Other. By aligning its gaze with that of the near-silent Girl, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* dramatizes the experience of the second-generation immigrant teen who draws her blood from different media designed by and for white audiences. She dances alone in her room to '80s synth pop and papers her walls with a many-layered collage of rock band and movie posters. She wears a striped shirt swiped from Jean Seberg's T-shirt in *Breathless*, but pairs it with a chador instead of a trench coat. When asked to name a song she likes, she answers "Hello" by Lionel Richie. In this way, The Girl is as much a vampire as she is a rabid culture geek, following, watching, and appropriating the most seductive targets of her obsession.

The spaces the characters move within are neither completely Iranian, nor completely

American. In one space, there is a poster on the street of a woman in a *niqab* with the

words "Oh, sister, repent!", in another space, a Halloween party in a club crowded with

people. Such posters are abundant in Iranian streets and they tend to show a polar

opposition between the modest woman who wears the *niqab* and the immodest

woman who does not. The binarism that is reflected in Pahlavi-era's films between the

pure and the impure woman is again reflected in post-revolutionary Iranian accented

films. But in this case it becomes a hybridization of Iranian and American culture, being at the border of each one of them without really being either. Though the film follows a sprouting romance between the Girl and Arash, real love is actually between the filmmaker and all her popular culture influences to which she is devoted. In creating Bad City, she constructed a space that is a mash-up of her parents' Iran and the American and European pop culture references that immerses her work (Ortiz). For example, the Girl steals her skateboard from a young boy who highly resembles the young children of the Iranian films produced by Majid Majidi and Abbas Kiarostami. He seems to be a reference to that golden age of Iranian cinema in which innocence of children is the main theme.

Furthermore, one of the themes of accented cinema is the right to be represented, even if the subject of representation does not completely fit in the constructed notions of particular societies. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* gives voice and agency to two underprivileged people in society, a prostitute and a transgender woman. The prostitute, Atti, is rescued by the Girl from Arash's abusive father who has forced her to take drugs with him. Atti is also shown to be humane and caring, contrary to the popular image of prostitutes in Iran. There is also the presence of a transgender woman in the film. She was present at the club party, and she is seen occasionally as well throughout the film, even though she does not say anything. In one sequence, however, she dances with a balloon on top of a roof, wearing a polka-dotted scarf and a

fringed shirt. Even though the representation of both Atti and the unnamed transgender woman is minor, it still gives voice to the underprivileged people by merely representing them on screen. The fact that it is done in a post-revolutionary Iranian film is even more powerful. By the end of the film, the Girl and Arash drive away from Bad City, in a journey that reflects the departure of the emigrant from his/her home country. Their relationship to Bad City becomes that of displacement but also of imagination and fantasy.

Persepolis and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* are both great exemplifications of the development of Iranian diasporic cinema. They even put forth the discussion of the national cinema. They are certainly Iranian, with the historical narrative that is at the heart of the former, and with the Iranian/American cultural pastiche that is the delight of the latter – only they are accented.

Comparative Discussion and Conclusion

From the first Iranian feature sound film, *The Lor Girl*, to Amirpour's 2014

vampire film, the representation of Iranian women on screen has shifted drastically. The

earliest Iranian films had issues concerning depicting Muslim Iranian women on screen

and women's attendance in theaters. They exhibited some subversive tendencies that

challenged the system of modesty, with their depiction of suggestive erotic scenes and

with the powerful stories of women resisting assault. The *FilmFarsi* genre in the late 40s

and throughout the 60s and 70s, though binarist and reductionist in its depiction of

women, came at a fitting time in history when modernization and westernization was

enforced on Iran, and when the influence of Bollywood and the Egyptian cinema was

inevitable. Despite this inevitability, Iranian women's cinema was able to produce its

own culturally significant works, the likes of *The House is Black*, which tackled important

issues in relation to medical stigma and women, and exhibited some unique stylistic

characteristics such as the duality of authorship and poetic realism. Clearly, the women

directors who emerged after the revolution were inspired by the works of Forough

Farrokhzad.

The works of Iranian female filmmakers after the revolution were diverse in

nature, but they shared the theme of resisting the hegemonic order of veiling and male-

dominated societies. From subtle resistances like Makhmalbaf's films to militant

resistances like the works of Bani-E'temad and Milani, Iranian women's cinema has

remained focused in its women-empowering themes. As for Iranian women's accented

cinema, though wide and diverse in thematic elements, they share a sense of in-

between-ness which is crucial to their identity. The stylistic features of their films are

different from those motion pictures made by women inside of Iran. However, they also

share a similar notion of transgressing the boundaries and daring to include new ideas

and question old ones.

This study aims to shed light on the differences in representation of Iranian

women in cinema, whether it was before the Islamic revolution when most films were

directed by men, or after it when women directors emerged in significant numbers.

These transformations in the depiction of Iranian women on screen are in accordance

with the socio-economic and political transformations that Iran has experienced since

the beginning of the twentieth century. They also reveal the complexities and different

nuances that deconstruct the immediate stereotypical notions that viewers may have.

While these works certainly cannot be used to homogenize Iranian women's cinema

into one constricted box, they undoubtedly do exhibit some important characteristics

that can be applicable to a greater number of films.

Clearly, this topic is rich and cannot be fully understood in this limited study, but

mapping out these specific changes and analyzing these films in light of the particular

theoretical frameworks chosen will hopefully pave the ground for future more in-depth

analytical work that explores further the notion of Iranian women's cinema. While most

studies analyze either the works of Iranian female directors after the revolution only, or

the representation of women in films made by both men and women, this study aimed

to contextualize it further by bridging the gap between pre and post-revolutionary

cinema and by focusing only on women directors. This study is also different in its

inclusivity of the hyphenated female filmmakers – an area often understudied in similar

papers. My recommendation for future studies is to cover a wider range of Iranian

female filmmakers and to examine stylistic and thematic commonalities among them, in

hopes of creating a classification that will enhance our understanding of Iranian films.

Notes

1. Ruhollah Khomeini of Iran, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, issued a fatwa ordering and allowing Muslims to kill the British Indian author Salman Rushdie for his novel *The Satanic Verses*, which was considered blasphemous by some Muslims.

2. A stringed musical instrument that originated in Iran.

3. The Anglo-Russian Convention was a 1907 conference that divided Iran into three zones, allocating the north to Russia, the southwest to Britain, and the rest as a neutral zone.

4. For more information on these positive developments of Iran during Reza Shah, see Axworthy (222-225) and Keddie (88-104).

5. A quick search in the internet database of 'Iranian women before the Islamic Revolution' will reveal that mainstream media almost always depicts them as very westernized. Whereas that holds some degree of truth, it was not the case for many Iranian women at the time who still preferred their traditional conservative clothing.

6. See, for example, Lucia Nagib's article "Towards a Positive Definition of World Cinema" in which she urges to give up thinking of world cinema oppositionally.

7. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's book *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*.

8. The Quranic scripture mentioned are those two verses in specific: "Tell the believing men to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts. That is purer for them. Indeed, Allah is Acquainted with what they do. And tell the believing women to reduce [some] of their vision and guard their private parts and not expose their adornment except that which [necessarily] appears thereof and to wrap [a portion of] their headcovers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women. And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their adornment. And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed." (*The Quran*, "An-Nur" 24.30-31)

9. For more on the genre of tough guys, see Naficy's *A Social History* (Volume 2), chapter five.

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