Veiled Voices: Female Subjectivity and Gender Relations in Afghan and Iranian Cinemas

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Films as cultural products are remarkable sources for examining different dimensions of the complex institution of gender in the society in which they are produced. Focusing on a selection of cinematic narratives from post-Revolution Iran and Post-Taliban Afghanistan, this project examines the films' representations of women in private and public relations as gendered subjects. Following feminist scholars, who highlight the embodiment of gendered subjectivity in cultural and historical contexts, this thesis explores different aspects of gendered experience in cinematic texts and examines how gender and sexuality are subjected to power. It considers both form and content and aims to provide textual and contextual analysis, but its main purpose is to offer a sociological reading of the selected films. Looking at images of girlhood, motherhood, women's position in marriage and divorce, female love and desire, and women's political engagement, it aims to understand how, in what ways, and to what extent independent filmmakers challenge social strains, traditional authority, and political forces that form the dominant discourse of gender and gender relations in Iranian and Afghan cultures.

Reading the cinematic narratives in the socio-political context of their production, I contend that these independent films should be seen as part of the current discussions around gender politics and activist endeavours against conservative gender norms. In Afghanistan and Iran, where women's rights movements are considered anti-Islamic and therefore demonized and repressed by the state or powerful religious groups, filmmakers have become civil activists who use social cinema as a tool to promote social change. They have developed a veiled cinematic language that allows them to address women's status in society, shed light on the cultural and legal roots of gender discrimination, and challenge the patriarchal discourse of gender. This

thesis outlines the features of this veiled language; it also examines émigré films that complement this cultural dialogue while enjoying the freedom from governmental censorship or domestic pressures from religious groups.

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother, Esmat Dehnavi, whose voice still rings in my ears as she recited poems and sang in the snowy winters of Mashhad.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor Dr. Patricia Demers for her intellectual support of my PhD research and thesis and for her dedication, patience, and motivation. I could not have imagined having a better supervisor and mentor. Thanks are also due to my supervisory committee Drs. Nima Naghibi, Albert Braz, Iman Mercal and my external examiner Dr. Nasrin Rahimieh for their insightful comments and questions.

I am grateful to my partner and dearest friend Amir Yazdanbod for his unconditional support and challenging conversations. He believed in me and reminded me of my dreams and ambitions, making the process of writing and editing the thesis a much more enjoyable experience for me.

Special thanks to my friends Drs. Mahsa Pakravan and Marine Gheno for their compassion and inspiration. I was thousands of kilometers away from family, but Mahsa and Marine became my kin. I also thank Sarah Brandvold for her company during the last months of revisions and edits; her energetic presence made a huge difference.

I am thankful to my family, especially my sister Elham, for their faith in me and for their love and support.

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Introduction

Films embody cultural values and represent or criticize the society in which they are produced. Cinema can reinforce or call into question the cultural, social, and political conditions in which it is produced. This study examines a selection of cinematic narratives from post-Revolution Iran and post-Taliban Afghanistan in which personal history, gender, and politics intersect. Bringing female subjectivity to the forefront, these films address issues of gender, culture, class, religion, place, and nationhood in the context of the protagonists' everyday challenges in the private and public realms. Taking a feminist approach, this project aims to examine in what ways and to what extent independent filmmakers lay bare and challenge social strains, traditional authority, and political forces that shape the dominant discourse of gender and sexuality and gender relations in these societies.

The cultural, religious, and lingual affinities between the two neighbouring countries have led to a series of cultural exchanges in the fields of literature, cinema, and fine arts. In the past couple of decades, Iranian filmmakers' activities in Afghanistan, the support they have offered to their Afghan counterparts, and their subsequent collaborative projects have created rich connections between the two cinemas. One of the main concerns that Iranian and Afghan independent filmmakers, almost all of whom are concerned with social issues, share is a deep interest in the question of women amidst the conflicts among conservative and progressive forces. The selection of the cinematic texts examined in this thesis reflects the filmmakers' critical approaches to women's situation in family and society to draw attention to the powerful role of class, religion, tradition, and politics. As Susan Bordo argues, "gender never exhibits

itself in pure form but always in the context of lives that are shaped by a multiplicity of influences, which cannot be neatly sorted out and which are rarely experienced as discrete and isolatable" (238). Therefore, to properly examine representations of women in these texts, it is essential to understand the societies of their production and the cultural values that they embody.

This introductory chapter lays out the theoretical and contextual framework of the project, studies the notions of national and émigré cinemas, maps the borders of the research within transnational film studies, and proposes a definition of feminist cinema as minor cinema. It then frames the time span and geography of the study, offers a historical overview of post-Revolution Iranian and post-Taliban Afghan cinema, and outlines the structure and research objectives of the following chapters.

Film as Cultural Politics

Using film and popular culture to explore American politics, Kevan Yenerall writes that "the moving image and pieces of popular culture can provide us with the context, format, and 'in' with which to find common frames of reference, identify longstanding myths, illuminate the policy debates and political dynamics that shape and the tone and scope of our discourse, institutions, and political reality" (1-2). Similarly, Heather Latimer, who uses fiction and film to examine sexual politics in North America, argues that "Fiction, like other forms of representation, responds to and reflects not only the culture in which it is produced but also that culture's ideological gap. At the same time, it also actively helps shape that culture, and its ideologies, by offering alternative narratives and ways of understanding" (5). Agreeing with Yenerall and Latimer's views, I propose that cinematic explorations of girlhood, womanhood,

motherhood, female desire and sexuality, marriage, and divorce offer a chance to study how the politics of gender and sexuality function in the context of culture and to examine how they are connected to politics, religion, class, ethnicity, and citizenship. Films can give us culturally and politically important information about the time and the place in which they are produced and in which the stories happen. In other words, the temporal and geographical specificities of the fictional worlds and their production are significant in the way gender roles and relations are shaped and negotiated.

Social space, as Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout argue, "is never a merely neutral location" (qtd. in Holloway and Valentine 770). Space is "the product of social relations" (Massey 120-121), and is thus charged with politics, power, and control. Gender and gender relations are also intricately connected to space and place (Massey 2). When it comes to conceptualizing spatiality, Doreen Massey, the feminist professor of geography, advocates a progressive sense of space in which the local and the global are understood as products of interaction (117-123, 135-142, 151-152). "This formulation of the concept of place," Massey writes, "makes it clear that the understanding of any locality must precisely draw on the links beyond its boundaries" (120). In this approach, "the global is in the local in the very process of the formation of the local." Therefore, an area is "no more the product of an internalized history" (120). Grounding my research in cinematic texts, I recognize the intersectionality of social relations and spatiality and examine different aspects of women's lived experiences in the light of glocal politics.

Besides considering social space and the locatedness of gender throughout my thesis, I see a close connection between gender and class. For example, when I examine representations of girlhood, motherhood, or women's political engagement in the films, I pay attention to the

ways class hierarchy affects those issues and how class and gender interconnect to shape female subjectivity. This means that I do not intend to offer a unifying and generalized reading of these topics and reach a single image of womanhood or girlhood; I rather recognize the plurality of the experiences of girls and women, each functioning under the influence of a variety of factors. Although the lives of female characters in these cinematic texts reveal considerable similarities, each is formed differently under the existing conditions, inviting the viewers to consider all the topics under study in plural form.

Filmmaking as Activism

Following the terrorist attacks that took place on 7 June 2017 in Tehran, Ali Khamenei, the supreme leader of the Islamic state appeared at a meeting with university students. Contrary to the general expectation, he did not sympathize with the families of the people killed or severely injured in the attacks, describing the incidents as "games with firecrackers" that are "too trivial to influence the willpower the people of Iran" ("Islamic Revolution" n. pag.). Instead, he focused his speech on culture and the existing cultural threats. He encouraged his followers to "fire at will" whenever they felt that government organizations in charge of thinking and culture were not doing their job. He specifically mentioned that cinema needs attention, and said "I can refer to ten major cultural issues which are suffering from certain problems. An example is the issue of cinema which is an important issue. This is an important cultural issue. How is it managed? Who funds it? In the present time, they find foreign sponsors for movies as well" ("Islamic Revolution" n. pag.). It is not the first time that the supreme leader has expressed his concern about cinema. His words echo the conservatives' anxieties— which are as old as the Islamic

Republic— around the works of independent filmmakers and their social and political influence at the domestic and international levels.

Having a rocky relationship with state officials is a familiar phenomenon for writers, filmmakers, and intellectuals in non-democratic countries. Afghan filmmakers, especially women, have been working with serious security issues and constant threats from Islamists for whom cinema is anti-Islamic by nature. In an interview with the national newspaper *8 a.m.* in July 2009, the acclaimed filmmaker Roya Sadat talked in detail about the common challenges she and her colleagues faced and the pressures they received from local religious authorities (Akbarzadeh n. pag.). Similarly, religiously dogmatic groups in Iran have caused trouble for directors, but unlike the situation in Afghanistan, these forces are supported and protected by the state.

In the absence of an open society in which the government serves the people and protects their human rights and political freedoms, almost all civic activities are interpreted by the state as a political apparatus against the ruling power. In light of the state's high sensitivities towards the cultural domain, every artist, who has a critical approach to their society, inevitably becomes an activist, no matter how hard they might try to prove otherwise, and thus a real threat to the dominant order. For example, while Rakhshan Bani-Etemad has repeatedly noted in her interviews and speeches that she is a social filmmaker and not a political activist, she has been accused of serving the interests of the country's enemies by demonizing the state and depicting an unjustly dark image of the country. After Bani-Etemad's *Tales* (2014) won the award for Best Screenplay at the 71st Venice International Film Festival, the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ali Jannati criticized the film and stated that it is wrong if filmmakers focus only on

social scars and advertise against the Islamic Republic at the international level.[1] When the film received screening permission in the country, Parliament questioned the Ministry's decision and invited Ali Jannati for further explanation. A group of parliamentary members, who were not satisfied with the minister's answers, identified it as national security issue and pushed for further investigation.[2] The case of Bani-Etemad is not an exception but one of the many examples of the tensions between filmmakers and the state. Others, including Jafar Panahi, Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Abbas Kiarostami, and Tahmineh Milani, have experienced some level of conflict with the government or conservative political groups. Independent filmmakers have paid a high price for their work, but the consequences of their activities are generally less harsh than those of political and human rights activists who directly deal with social and political injustice. I argue that in this milieu, cinema has become a relatively safe outlet for providing social critique; therefore, these filmmakers are activists who offer alternative ways of understanding socio-cultural dogmas and questioning the ruling order.

In *Political Film: The Dialectics of Third Cinema* (2001), Mike Wayne describes third cinema as a political body of filmmaking "committed to social and cultural emancipation … [which] is passionate, angry, often satirical, always complex" (5). He writes that third cinema films are political in the way that they "address unequal access to and distribution of material and cultural resources, and the hierarchies of legitimacy and status accorded to those differentials" (1). He identifies four main features that distinguish third cinema: historicity, politicisation,

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1. https://www.radiozamaneh.com/173656
2. http://cinemapress.ir/news/65260/%D9%82%D8%B5%D9%87-%D9%87%D8%A7-%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D9%86%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%AA%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D9%88%D8%B2%DB%8C%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B4%D8%AF-%D8%AC%D9%86%D8%AA%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C

critical commitment, and cultural specificity. The historical context is important for third cinema because history explains "why we are, where we are, and who we are" (Wayne 14). Explaining politicisation, Wayne argues that for third cinema, "one of the key areas of concern which needs to be explored is the process whereby people who have been oppressed and exploited become conscious of that condition and determined to do something about it" (16). Third cinema draws attention to the dynamics of oppression and the way characters react to it. Critically committed, it seeks to "bring cognitive and intellectual powers of the spectator into play" (18). Also, it is grounded in the socio-historical processes and "explores how culture is a site of political struggle" (22). In view of Wayne's argument, the films examined in this dissertation are political; they are grounded in socio-cultural specificities and explore different aspects of gender oppression in women's private and public relations in Iranian and Afghan cultures.

Mapping Feminist Cinema in Iran and Afghanistan

Iran and Afghanistan have gone through drastic political changes in the last few decades that have affected both nations in all aspects, including the arts and culture. After the 1979 Revolution in Iran, cinema developed its unique aesthetic language during its struggles and negotiations with the state, and found itself a prestigious status in world cinema from the early 1990s. Meanwhile, Iran's neighbour to the East, Afghanistan, experienced the Soviet invasion, years of civil war, and invasion. Since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the establishment of a democratic Islamic republic, Afghan cinema, although still nascent and frail, has managed to find a significant voice in world cinema. As I mentioned earlier, one of the significant attributes of Iranian and Afghan cinemas is their increasing attention to questions of gender and female

subjectivity. A notable segment of these two cinemas, which can be called feminist, is composed of works— by men and women directors—that challenge the hegemonic codes of gender and reflect a critical awareness of the role of culture and politics in the formation of our collective and individual understanding of gender and sexuality. Throughout this project, Iranian and Afghan cinemas are viewed as heterogeneous and diverse bodies that originate from and find meaning in particular socio-cultural contexts. I will avoid using off-the-rack Western theories, and instead will select, modify, and utilize theories to make them suitable for my analyses of the films within their local and historical specificities. Taking Adrienne Rich's notion of a politics of location as its starting point, this study is aware that as gendered subjects we are created within "a place in history" ("Notes toward a Politics of Location" 212), and that, besides gender, we are located by ethnicity, religion, class, nationality, and race. It is from such a perspective that this study situates its observation of the films' aesthetic and thematic practices within their specific cultural and geopolitical context, and examines the intersections of body, gender and sexuality in the films' aesthetic and thematic practices to analyze how and to what extent they push the limits within governmental censorship and socio-cultural restrictions.

In *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen*, Alison Butler tries to reach a definition that accommodates the plurality and diversity of the concept in terms of form, content, and genre. She starts with a broad definition of women's cinema as "films that might be made by, addressed to, or concerned with women, or all the three" (1). She explains that women's cinema "is neither a genre nor a movement in film history, it has no single lineage of its own, no national boundaries, no filmic or aesthetic specificity, but traverses and negotiates cinematic and cultural traditions and critical and political debates" (1). In other words, it overlaps with other genres, movements, and cinemas. Teresa de Lauretis situates women's cinema in a glocal-political

context and argues that "alternative films in women's cinema are those which engage the current problems, the real issues, the things actually at stake in feminist communities on a local scale, and which, although informed by a global perspective, do not assume or aim at a universal, multinational audience, but address a particular one in its specific history of struggles and emergency" (qtd. in Butler 16). Butler accepts this definition and adds that women's cinema "crosses the boundaries between avant-garde and narrative cinema, independent and mainstream, but is rigorously exclusive on political grounds" (Butler 17).

Butler also overviews Claire Johnston's concept of women's cinema as counter cinema. What is significant in Johnston's perspective is her focus on cinema as social practice. For her, art is "a material thing within a cultural context which forms it and is formed by it" (36). Johnston rejects the 1970s feminist film criticism whose focus is on the media manipulation of women as sexual objects. She argues that for political cinema that aims to produce and disseminate knowledge, it is necessary to generate pleasure. She says, "In order to counter our objectification in the cinema, our collective fantasies must be released: women's cinema must embody the working through of desire: such an objective demands the use of the entertainment film" (qtd. in Butler 9). Arguing that "the plurality of forms, concerns, and constituencies in contemporary women's cinema now exceeds even the most flexible definition of counter-cinema," Butler proposes that women's cinema is minor cinema in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of minor literature. She writes, "To call women's cinema a minor cinema… is to free it from the binarisms … which result from imagining it as a parallel or oppositional cinema" (21-22). For her, women's cinema "is not 'at home' in any of the host cinematic or national discourses it inhabits, but that it is always an inflected mode, incorporating, reworking and contesting the conventions of established traditions" (22). Her assumption echoes Deleuze

and Guattari's contention that "minor no longer designates specific literatures but the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature" ("What Is Minor Literature?" 18). As Meaghan Morris states, Deleuze and Guattari "do not oppose a notion of social or ethnic *minority* to that of an abstract *majority*. 'Minor' and 'major' are used in a musical sense: they refer not to essences or states but to different ways of doing something" (xvii-xviii). Deleuze and Guattari explain that major and minor are not "two kinds of languages but two possible treatments of the same language. Either the variables are treated in such a way as to extract from them constants and constant relations or in such a way as to place them in continuous variation" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 103).

Besides "women's cinema," some critics have used the term feminist cinema to describe a similar concept. For instance, Anneke Smelik argues that feminist film "represents sexual difference from a woman's point of view, displaying a critical awareness of the asymmetrical power relation between the sexes" (2). She acknowledges that her definition can accommodate certain films by men. Likewise, Butler's broad definition of women's cinema allows for some works by men to fall into the category.

For this project, feminist cinema is a subset of minor cinema that diverges from the dominant cinema in its treatment of female subjectivity. Despite governmental control and/or sociocultural pressures, Iranian and Afghan feminist films manage to address the issues of gender and sexuality from a critical perspective in their form and content, and reveal the distorted power relations between genders. In this thesis, I aim to answer the following questions: How do the selected films reflect the values of these societies and cultures? Where do they compromise or where do they challenge those values? What aesthetic and narrative

strategies do they use to curb censorship? How do the state's cultural policies influence such films? And how do they question the dominant ideologies of their society?

In the absence of a better term, I cautiously apply the term feminist to the cinematic body under review in this project because I am aware of their specific local context. Many women authors, filmmakers and artists in the West may choose to identify as feminists or be so described by scholars and critics. But using the term in Iran and Afghanistan can have dire consequences for individuals. The Islamic state's tough stand on feminism, women's movements and any attempts to criticize or end gender discrimination has led to systematic repression of artists, activists, and writers. Government officials, from Ayatollah Khamenei to members of Parliament, frequently warn against the destructive influence of feminist thinking on Islamic family values. For instance, in a recent meeting with a group of academic and seminary women, Ayatollah Khamenei claimed that specific physical and intellectual characteristics make women incompatible for certain jobs, and warned against Western discourse that tries to "give women a masculine identity". He also stated that in Western thought women are reduced to sexual objects for men "to indulge in pleasure" ("Leader's Speech" n. pag.). Unlike Iran, Afghanistan has enjoyed the establishment of democratic government since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. Yet, the domination of classical patriarchy in Afghan culture and the power of Islamist groups have made it very difficult, and in many cases dangerous, for artists and activists to question the dominant gender relations of their society.

Iranian and Afghan Cinemas: Borders and Beyond

The prevalence and significance of the visual in general and cinema in particular is undeniable in our globalized world. Various economic, cultural, and political factors are influential in forming the position of national film industries at an international level. Studying these factors is necessary to understand the current structure of world cinemas. Also, increasing transnational aspects of films continue to remap the location and borders of cinemas. New geographies of cinematic production complicate the traditional notion of national cinema and call for transnational perspectives in the social, aesthetic, and historical study of films. Considering domestic and exilic films, Iranian and Afghan filmmakers' regional and global cinematic experiences, and film productions within national borders, I take a transnational perspective that is aware of the unevenness and heterogeneity of the cinematic debates within, beyond, or on the margins of nation-state borders.

From the early days of film studies in academia, national cinema was generally an unproblematic category and implied a natural relationship between nation and film. It was in the late 1980s that the concept was questioned by scholars like Andrew Higson and Stephen Crofts. In his 1989 article "The Concept of National Cinema," Higson argues that histories of national cinema can only be understood as "histories of crisis and conflict, of resistance and negotiation" (37). He explains that it has been the tradition in film studies to compare and contrast one cinema to another in order to define and analyze them. Rather, he invites critics to define national cinema also from an "inward-looking" perspective, which is "to examine it in terms of its relationship to already existing national political, economic and cultural identit[ies] … and set of traditions" (42). This inward-looking perspective is not about constructing the history of national cinema as unified and homogeneous; rather, it helps reveal the contradictions and gaps, and the

tensions between the hegemonic and non-hegemonic ideologies at work in the cinematic discourse of a nation-state.

Following Higson's contention that films are not "expressions of a national spirit," Stephen Crofts takes a similar perspective in his article "Concepts of National Cinema" (1994). He argues that in order to better understand national cinemas, it is important to analyze them in terms of these categories: "production," "audiences," "discourses," "national-cultural specificity," "the cultural specificity of genres and nation-state cinema movement," and "the role of the state" (387-389). He draws attention to the cultural, economic, and political contexts influencing the conventions of national cinemas, and highlights these contexts in the formation of certain themes within a national cinema. From this viewpoint, films do not represent the stable features of a national culture, but national cinema as a social practice becomes the place of debates about a nation's history, conflicts, heritage, and governing principles.

Taking a similar point of view in their introduction to *Theorizing National Cinema* (2006), Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen define films as "clusters of historically specific cultural forms the semantic modulations of which are orchestrated and contended over by each of the forces at play in a given geographical territory" (7). They later also add that "'the national' is not containable within fixed geo-political boundaries" (11). In fact, there are cinemas that "do not operate within a national frame, or rather, which operate simultaneously on national and regional scales" (Vitali and Willemen11). They cite the example of Palestinian cinema. But one can extend the argument to Iranian and Afghan cinemas that have been operating within and beyond geopolitical boundaries. Bringing these positions together, nation-state cinema can be seen as a culturally specific body of films that accommodate diverse traditions, identities, ideologies, and images from a particular geopolitical boundary.

Still, films are generally promoted in terms of their national identity, specifically for economic reasons, to secure them a collective position in the market place. National labels are also very important at film festivals. As a result, the concept of national cinema as a classical category will be around for marketing reasons and for histories and critical analyses of y seeing it as a site of resistance and conflict, we can reject the myth that it represents uniform and homogeneous national cultures and identities. I personally prefer to use the term nation-state rather than national cinema.

Now in a globalized world, cinema moves beyond the boundaries of nation-state in terms of representation, production, distribution and reception. This historical condition necessitates that we provide a definition that acknowledges the effect of domestic discourses as well as the increasing transnational dimensions of cinema. That is why scholars like Nataša Durovicová call for transnational perspectives in cinema studies. In her preface to *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, Durovicová asserts that if the global brings to mind totality and the national suggests nation-state borders, the transnational "implies relations of unevenness and mobility" (x). Transnational perspective in film studies has the potential to accommodate the émigré as well as ethnic texts that are located outside or on the margins of nation-state borders. Diasporic and exilic films are part of the debates on cultures, history, and socio-political issues of the national cinematic discourse. As Elizabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden write in *Transnational Cinema: The Film Reader* (2006), "The concept of transnationalism enables us to better understand the changing ways in which the contemporary world is being imagined by an increasing number of filmmakers across genres as global system rather than as a collection of more or less autonomous nations" (1). Taking a transnational perspective in this study makes it

possible for me to go beyond the limiting frame of nation and consider the cross-border relations, glocalities, and complex cultural modes of expression that shape these cinematic bodies.

Although the term national cinema implies borders, the reality of world cinemas reveals how most of them, including Iranian and Afghan cinemas, are "geographically dispersed" (Gow 193). Christopher Gow suggests that a deeper understanding of the complexities of post-Revolution Iranian cinema is attained when both New Iranian cinema and émigré films are viewed in relation to each other (192). It is from such perspective that my thesis accommodates works from heterogeneous clusters of national and émigré films in order to examine the dynamics of gender and sexuality in Iranian and Afghan cinemas.

Cinema in Afghanistan and Iran

Decades of war, political chaos, and radicalism in Afghanistan have severely affected all creative work, including the art of cinema. From the release of the first Afghan movie in 1951 to 2004, three years after the fall of the Taliban, the country produced no more than forty films (Mehovic n.p.). A glance at the history of filmmaking in Afghanistan proves that the country does not have a national cinema in the conventional sense of the term. From cast and crew to funding, production, and distribution, Afghan films are products of multinational cooperation. *Love and Friendship*, the first Afghan film, produced after the Second World War, is a good example to illustrate the transnational nature of film production in Afghanistan. Herald Luis directed the film with the help of an Indian film company, using Afghan male actors and Indian female actors; the film was shot in Afghanistan and processed in Lahore, Pakistan (Loewen, Hakimyar, and Haydari 262). Silence overtook the Afghan film industry until the 1960s when a strong wave of nationalism "encouraged film-makers to produce films that identified Afghanistan as an

independent nation" (263). Afghan cinema managed to experience thriving years until the Soviet era (1979-1992), during which the country was occupied by the Soviet Union; the Communist party took over, and smothered creative work, including filmmaking, with its harsh censoring policies (264-65). Despite the censorship, filmmakers continued working during this period, but the Afghan film industry came to a halt with the civil wars (1992-96), followed by the Taliban's rule from 1996 to December 2001, which came to an end with the U.S. invasion. There is no doubt that the Taliban era was the darkest time for cinema in the country. As Bert Cardullo explains, under the Taliban "all movie houses were shut down or torched, films were burned, and even to watch a motion picture was considered a subversive act" (303). Since the fall of the Taliban, cinema in Afghanistan started to experience a rebirth. The body of post-Taliban movies shows that most of them, especially those that make their way to the international market, are products of multinational collaboration. Since 2000, Iranian directors have had a conspicuous presence in Afghan cinema's harsh journey through war and turbulence. Prominent filmmakers such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf, Marzieh Meshkini, Samira Makhmalbaf, Hana Makhmalbaf, and Babak Payami travelled to Afghanistan in the early 2000s and captured moments of Afghan life through the lens of cinema. Besides producing feature films in Afghanistan, Mohsen Makhmalbaf became one of the main supporters of Afghan film production. Arley Loewen, Timur Hakimyar, and Jawansher Haydari maintain that his support of "Afghan refugee artists in Iran has been a major reason for the surge of qualified Afghan filmmakers" (267). In 2001, concurrent with the release of his film *Kandahar* at Cannes, Makhmalbaf published a treatise called *The Buddha Was Not Demolished in Afghanistan; It Collapsed out of Shame*, explaining the situation of Afghanistan under the Taliban. In the treatise, providing an overview of the country's current situation, including its cinema, Makhmalbaf described Afghanistan as "a

country without an image" (12). Sixteen years have passed from the time he wrote the essay, and Afghanistan is not an imageless country, at least in terms of cinema. Afghan directors, influenced mainly by Iranian, Indian, and Russian cinema, continue to make films despite political turbulence, ethnic conflicts, and the prevalent radical fundamentalism Afghan society is struggling with on a daily basis. Post-Taliban films have had an increasing presence in international film festivals; nevertheless, Afghan cinema still has a long way ahead to establish its presence in world cinema.

After the overthrow of the Pahlavi monarchy, Iranian society was transformed drastically under strict Islamic regulations that defined a new framework for all public and private spheres of people's lives. Rejecting the notion of nation as secular, the state authorities replaced it with "ummat", a religious term that refers to the collective community of Muslims beyond national borders, in a large-scale attempt to revive Islamic ideals and establish 'pure Islam' (Naficy, *Social History* 3:10). After the Islamic Revolution,

> Islamic dualities of related (mahram) vs. unrelated (namahram) and permissible (halal) vs. impermissible (haram) ... [were] mobilized into all-encompassing panoptic systems of surveillance, modesty, and gender segregation and regulation that affected architecture, professional fields of study, human relations, dress, gaze, voice, body language, and gender relations, with particularly serious consequences for the social presence and cinematic representation of women. (Naficy, *Social History* 3:9)

Before the 1979 Revolution, one of the Shiite clergy's main concerns was cinema; they strongly believed that as a Western import, cinema was immoral and anti-Islamic, and therefore a threat to the values of a Muslim society. Consequently, 180 out of 436 movie theatres were set

afire during and after the Revolution (Zeydabadi-Nejad 34-35). For the state, the education system and mass media were contaminated with Western values and needed to be Islamicized. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, declared that cinema and all art should be in the service of Islam to educate the people (Zeydabadi-Nejad 35). In one of his works published before the Revolution, he had written that cinema and theatre were used by the Shah's regime to westernize society, "rape the youth of our country and stifle in them the spirit of virtue and bravery" (qtd. in Naficy, *Social History* 3:5). It took the state three years to constitute the rules of Islamic art and cinema. In 1982 the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was given the roles of overseeing cinema and applying the regulations, including the modesty system. Since then, the Ministry "reviews the film's synopsis, issues a production permit, reviews the completed film, and finally issues an exhibition permit" (Naficy, "Iranian Cinema" 232).

According to the new Islamic regulations passed after the Cultural Revolution in 1982, women were forced to wear hijab and any physical contact between men and women was prohibited on screen. As the locus of desire and sin, the female body was the focus of the new restrictions, and thus any representation of femininity that violated Islamic codes was not tolerated. For instance, "close-ups of women and point-of-view shots" which made it possible for the male audience and female actresses to look at each other directly were considered anti-Islamic and were banned (Mottahedeh, "New Iranian Cinema" 178). In the first few years after the Revolution, the filmmakers who were allowed to work, decided to ignore women altogether to avoid controversy (Naficy, "Iranian Cinema" 233). The restrictions were not limited to Islamic regulations; the state, aware of the power of cinema, did not tolerate themes of social or political disagreement (Farahmand 89). Regarding the state's strict control of cinema, filmmakers had to find new themes and locations to communicate with their audience and also avoid censorship.

They started making village films and movies with children as main characters, depicted women in rural colorful dresses, escaped the restrictions on urban dress codes and male-female relationships, and avoided directly addressing social and political issues. After the eight-year Iran-Iraq war and the death of Khomeini in 1989, a process of cultural and economic progress started in the country. But censorship still existed as an influential element in the realm of cultural production and the state was especially strict about political criticism.

When the reformist clergyman Mohammad Khatami was elected as president in 1997, his government tried to reduce social and cultural restrictions and expand the country's foreign relations despite the opposition of powerful conservatives. The press and cinema were granted relatively more freedom, and censorship was lessened. Following the policy of presenting a more moderate image of Iran to the world, the government increased its support of cinema as the representative of Iran at international festivals. Some directors who had been prevented from working after the Revolution were allowed to resume their career, and filmmakers were now able to address women's issues and socio-political problems as long as they did not cross the "red lines" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 50). The genre of social cinema in general and women's films in particular thrived during the eight-year presidency of Khatami. Although it was severely affected by the new waves of pressure on filmmakers and brutal censorship during the fundamentalist government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), Iranian cinema continued to preserve its high-status position internationally. Since the election of the moderate clergyman Hassan Rouhani as president in May 2013, the first rays of hope have begun to shine on Iranian society. His government officially started work in August, and one of the first steps it took in the realm of culture was the reopening of the House of Cinema—the main organization for film directors in Iran—which had been closed in 2011. The new government has promised to bring back

moderate policies to the cultural, social, and political domains; but it is too early to evaluate the current situation and future of cinema and filmmakers in Iran.

Post-Revolution Iranian films do not form a homogeneous national cinematic body that, after submitting to state policies, would have developed uniform and stable patterns. Rather, Iranian cinema is in a constant state of transformation and growth through filmmakers' negotiations with governments, pushing for more freedom of expression, and of course developing creative methods of circumventing censorship. Naficy claims that New Wave filmmakers on the one hand felt morally committed to the poetics of realism, and on the other hand felt the intellectual responsibility they had as socio-cultural critics. Yet they could not express their criticism directly due to the repressive censoring machine of the government; so "they resorted to symbolism, surrealism, mysticism, abstraction, and indirection, thereby tending to subvert … [some] tenets of neorealism, particularly those that emphasized reality, clarity, and realism" ("Neorealism" 230). Naficy designates indirection, ambiguity and symbolism as the main features of Iranian art films, and draws attention to the unsaid/unseen of the cinematic texts. In *Dislocated Allegories*, Negar Mottahedeh asserts that "the censorship of vision" after the Revolution led to the emergence of a non-voyeuristic cinema that is "the apotheosis of the 1970s feminist gaze theory" (14, 2). She argues that Iranian cinema "found new ground not in the negation of government regulations, but in the camera's adoption of the governmentally imposed veiled, modest, and averted gaze" (4-5), and produced a national cinematic language which carries the rules of modesty. Considering cinematic visuality not as universal but "culturally and politically informed" (12), Mottahedeh shows in her analyses of the works of Abbas Kiarostami and Bahram Bayzai how the veiling system has shaped Iranian cinematic texts.

Khatereh Sheibani also focuses on the symbolic and allegorical language of post-Revolution Iranian cinema and seeks its roots in Persian culture and literary tradition. Examining the works of Kiarostami and Bayzai, she contends that the cultural policies of the Islamic state led to the emergence of "a symbolical cinema that favours ambiguity over precision" (177). Sheibani adds that Iranian cinema has taken "an ambiguous cinematic stylistics whose medium is the image/seen, but whose main emphasis is the substance that is unseen. Therefore, Iranian art cinema does not exist exclusively in the illustrated images on screen. It relies on allegorical [and symbolic] meanings (the unseen) that are derived from images (the seen)" (178). The implied and the unsaid, wrapped within layers of cinematic techniques and devices and coded social and cultural references, are the hallmark of post-Revolution Iranian cinema for both national and international audiences. Portraying veiled bodies and voices, averted eyes, and unspoken feelings, Iranian films are filled with moments of ambiguity, indirection and veiling in their plots, themes, techniques, and aesthetics.

When it comes to government supervision, Afghan filmmakers have much more freedom of action. They can criticize the culture and address controversial questions much more easily than their Iranian counterparts. Afghan cinema is not under the rule of modesty and thus can create visual verisimilitude; actresses do not have to wear hijab; actors and actresses can have physical contact. However, the traditional and tribal structure of the society, the prevalence of traditional and radical Islam, and classical patriarchy make it hazardous to be involved in the film industry, which is considered immoral and aberrant. Hence, it is not the government but society itself that acts as the controlling force and draws the red lines. Looking at Iranian cinema as a model, Afghan directors have drawn on the austerity of Iranian neorealist movies. Moments

of silence, laconic conversation, and understatement are among the characteristics of Afghan cinema.

Political suppression, the eight-year war, the hegemony of Islamic ideology, and increasing economic pressures under international sanctions are the main reasons millions of Iranians have left the country since the establishment of the Islamic state in 1979. The large population of emigrants who settled mainly in Europe and North America started cultural production, including music, magazines, radio and television networks, and films, a number of which made their way to international film festivals. Some of the films produced outside Iran reflect the filmmakers' critiques of their homeland's culture and politics. Susan Taslimi's *All Hell Let Loose* (2001), Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2001), and Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud's animated film *Persepolis* (2007) are perfect examples of films that address the issues of gender and sexuality in Iranian society. While under the rule of modesty domestic filmmakers must tip-toe around such sensitive topics, those in exile have a freer hand in engaging in cultural critique.

Decades of political conflict have forced millions of Afghans to flee their homeland and take refuge in neighbouring countries and other parts of the world. Mass emigration accelerated especially from the 1990s civil wars until the fall of the Taliban. In those years, Afghan artists, musicians, authors, and filmmakers who saw the country in absolute darkness had no choice but to leave. Some returned after the establishment of a democratic government in 2002, despite continuous instability and political tensions; and some others chose exile but continued to contribute to the country's artistic domain. Atiq Rahimi is a good example; he has been writing fiction in Persian and French and has also made two films, *Earth and Ashes* (2004) and *Syngue Sabour* (2011), based on his novels of the same titles. Émigré directors from both countries have

had a significant share in the cinematic dialogue happening within and beyond their national borders.

Thesis Outline

This introduction is followed by four chapters and a conclusion. Arguing that childhood is a gendered notion that gets shaped within specific cultural and historical contexts, in chapter one I focus on the following five films to explore their representations of girlhood and the cultural and institutional politics that shape them: Hana Makhmalbaf's *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame* (2007), Siddiq Barmak's *Osama* (2003), Jafar Panahi's *Offside* (2006), *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), and Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998). In the second chapter, I examine representations of adult female protagonists as mothers, wives, widows, and divorcées in six Iranian and two Afghan films: Rasul Sadr-Ameli's *I'm Taraneh, 15* (2002), Kambuzia Partovi's *Border Café* (2005), Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002), Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (1999), Roya Sadat's *Ellipsis* (2004), and Atiq Rahimi's *Syngue Sabour* (2012). In this chapter, I try to show what the films reveal about women's challenges in the context of marriage and divorce, and the influence of socio-cultural forces on women's roles in families.

While dealing with the topics of love, desire, and sexuality in chapter three, I aim to understand how these controversial issues have appeared on screen. Providing close readings of Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady*, *The Blue-Veiled* (1995), and *Nargess* (1992), Jamishid Mahmoudi's *A Few Cubic Meters of Love* (2014), Rahimi's *Syngue Sabour*, Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2009), and Susan Taslimi's *All Hell Let Loose* (2002), I explore the ways

domestic and émigré filmmakers have addressed female desire and what alternative perspectives they have offered. In chapter four, I discuss representations of women's political engagement in Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men*, Tahmineh Milani's *The Hidden Half* (2001), Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Tales* (2014), and Samira Makhmalbaf's *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003). Examining the place of political engagement in the Islamic model of womanhood, I show what the films reveal about the cultural and legal consequences for politically active women who do not belong in the formal structures of politics. In the conclusion, I synthesize the arguments of each chapter, and then make a few statements about possible future work that can emerge from this project.

Throughout the thesis, I use various resources to support my arguments. I also make observations that are based on my lived experience as an Iranian woman. Born and raised in Iran, I lived thirty-one years under Islamic theocracy; my education, upbringing, and my career as a literary translator and storyteller were all greatly impacted by the cultural and political policies of the Islamic state. Living eighteen years of my life in Mashhad, the capital of Khorasan province that hosts the largest community of Afghan refugees and emigrants in Iran, I went to school with them and had the opportunity of socializing with family friends from the cities of Herat, Kabul, and Mazar Sharif. I witnessed how girls and women in particular suffered from the destructive rule of Islamic fanaticism. I developed a profound interest in the history and culture of Afghanistan, and used every available resource to increase my knowledge of the subject; hence, my observations about the topic are not limited to the six years of my PhD and have a much longer history. My political views as a secular person have influenced the content and structure of this project and the scholarly works I have consulted. I openly reject political Islam and

denounce all religious and traditional values that justify gender-based discrimination; my critical perspective towards Islam is reflected in my readings of the films.

Chapter One: Screening Girlhood

The role of children has not been ignored in the studies of Iranian and Afghan cinemas, yet childhood is usually seen beyond the realm of gender in critics' readings. As a result, girlhood as a category has been almost invisible. This chapter focuses on female child characters in the following films, which are aimed at adult audiences: Hana Makhmalbaf's *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame* (2007), Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), Siddiq Barmak's *Osama* (2003), Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* (1998), and Jafar Panahi's *Offside* (2006). It examines the roles children play in developing the films' critical engagement with the issues of gender and sexuality. More precisely, it explores girlhood in the context of religion, culture, law, and politics to address girls' gendered experience of selfhood, education, family relations, public and private spaces, and social expectations.

Childhood and adolescence are central phases for gender formation and one's understanding of gender roles and norms. But what constitutes childhood? What are the legal and social definitions of childhood? Where does childhood end and adulthood begin? Do we have a universal understanding of the time span? What are the factors that shape our understanding of the notion of childhood? I agree with Chris Jenks that the idea of childhood "is not a natural but a social construct and as such its status is constituted in particular socially located forms of discourse" (27). As Seth Lerer maintains, childhood "was not some essential or eternal quality in human life but was instead a category of experience shaped by social mores and historical experience" (2). It is a stage that "has meaning in relationship to other stages of personal development and family life" in the context of cultural and social norms (Lerer 2). There have been international attempts to reach collective agreements on the rights of children, yet in practice these formal definitions, conventions, and bills have not always been effective under the

reality of the locally dominant socio-cultural or political discourses. For instance, according to the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, a child is "every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier" (United Nations Human Rights). The governments of Iran and Afghanistan ratified the convention, but both reserved the right not to apply any provisions or articles of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Laws (United Nations Treaty Collection). Their reservations reveal that even the age span of childhood is not fixed in all countries and that religion and culture can be determinant factors in the legal and social definitions of the concept. Article 1401 Civil Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran states that the legal age of marriage is 13 for girls and 15 for boys (*Qanun-e Madani* 123), while it is 18 for boys and 16 for girls in Afghanistan (Saeed n. pag.). This very article implies the fact that childhood can end for the males and females under the age of eighteen. In both countries, people below the age of 18 can get married with the consent of their guardians. The age of marriage depends on social and economic class as well as education. For instance, Iranian middle and upper middle class usually marry after finishing higher education, while people from rural areas, traditional families and lower economic classes tend to marry at a younger age, even in adolescence. Young age marriage is more common in Afghan society that has very strong tribal and religious values. So, in the context of Iranian and Afghan cultures, the social and legal borders between childhood and adulthood are different from their counterparts in most Western societies. Accordingly, traditional values on the one hand and the law on the other work together to blur the line between girlhood and womanhood by imposing limitations and responsibilities on the lives of girls who seem to have more freedom of action than women.

Children in Iranian and Afghan Cinemas

After the Revolution, film production in Iran experienced a period of stagnancy, which was the result of an expansive political change that had also affected the cultural domain. It took the Islamic state a few years to define its cultural policies and regulate the criteria for cultural production. Correspondingly, filmmakers needed time to adjust themselves to the new regulations in order to find their voice in the new cultural and political milieu. Casting children as protagonists was a strategy that changed the face of Iranian cinema at the international level.

Children have been cast in Iranian films since the emergence of cinema in the country, but they came to the forefront in the early1980s. The state found it necessary to cleanse the society of all indications of westernization that contrasted with their Islamic ideology. Following the 1982 Cultural Revolution, any representation of femininity that violated Islamic codes was not tolerated (Naficy, *Social History* 3: 43-44). Many actors and filmmakers left cinema after the Revolution, and those who stayed had to conform to the new rules. Regarding the state's strict control of cinema, filmmakers, newcomers and those already in the industry, had to find new themes and locations to avoid censorship (Farahmand 99, 100). They started working with non-actors and making village films and movies with children as main characters that helped them escape the restrictions on urban dress codes and male-female relationships. As Hamid Reza Sadr argues, "Perhaps the most compelling factor offered by the use of children in these films is that they eased the problem of political judgment by throwing it into the realm of personal experience and feeling" (*Iranian Cinema* 232). This apparently innocent world with child leads enabled filmmakers to inscribe their socio-political criticisms through symbolism and indirection. Most child-centred films were produced in the 1980s and early 1990s when women were still absent or, as Hamid Naficy states, had "ghostly presences in the background or as domestic and

domesticated subjects in the home" (*Social History* 4:114). In fact, Naficy views the absence of women as a major factor for the emergence of children's movies (114). What I find most intriguing about the child-centred movies of this phase is that child protagonists are depicted beyond gender to serve what Naficy calls "the radical humanism of Iranian art-house movies" (208). These films mingle spirituality and humanism to celebrate compassion, generosity, and propriety as universal values. For instance, Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's Home?* is the conscientious quest of Ahmad, a country schoolboy who has accidentally brought home his classmate's notebook. Despite all the obstacles, he goes to the neighbouring village to return the notebook so that his classmate can finish his homework. Although Ahmad is not successful in his search, his sense of duty is strong and touching; he becomes a hero in a poetic realist film that honours the simplicities of everyday life. Even in films that have a more critical approach to their society, children, borrowing Naficy's phrase, become "a pretext for dealing with adult issues" (209). Jafar Panahi's *The Mirror* (1997) is a good example. The film depicts the first-grader Mina, who tries to find her way home when her mother fails to pick her up at school. Through the eyes of Mina, the film becomes a cultural critique by unveiling the ugliness of the lives of adults who are immersed in hypocrisy and pretension. Mina's presence and her naïve perspective help to highlight the film's critical approach to the adults' world. Mina is a witness on the margin of the narrative; her gender is a non-issue and her world as a child remains unimportant in the critical context of the film.

This feature of children's movies gradually changed as social cinema in general and women's films in particular thrived during the reformist government of Mohammad Khatami. The relatively open political atmosphere allowed filmmakers to take a more critical stance on cultural and social issues, and as a result, child protagonists, especially girls, found a more

complex presence in narratives to help the filmmakers promote their gender-conscious concerns within a framework that was defined by Islamic codes and was subject to the state's segregation and censorship politics. From 1997 onward, the child protagonists are not simply substitutes for adults whose gender is erased; rather, childhood and gender are key elements in their located experiences within the community, their interaction with others, and their developing sense of identity. Films with child protagonists evoke less reaction in censors and thus are safer options for filmmakers in their negotiations to get production permits (Sadr 230). Children may still be used as a pretext for addressing adult issues and become the voice of the adults in some films, yet their world suggests multiple layers of submerged meanings.

In 2000, when a number of Iranian filmmakers turned their cameras to Afghanistan, their war-ridden neighbour, they continued with their humanistic approach, documentary-like style, and nonprofessional cast. Due to years of war and political turmoil, it was difficult, even impossible, to find professional actors from Afghanistan. Also, religious and cultural beliefs made it extremely difficult to convince a woman's male relatives to allow her to appear in a film. Regarding these limitations, it was easier for filmmakers, both Iranian and Afghan, to find children to play the main roles. Hence, children were chosen to reflect the dreadful consequences of war, religious radicalism, political corruption, and regressive traditions. Children in Afghan cinema hold as much complexity as, if not more than, their counterparts in Iranian cinema. They draw the audiences' attention to the brutality of their everyday life, which is the outcome of decades of war, violence or strict cultural values, and awaken their sense of empathy. Aside from reflecting the world of adults, these films provide a critique of the ways their society deprives children of their childhood and imposes its extremely limiting norms of gender and sexuality on them.

Distribution and the Question of Audience

Understanding the distribution procedures of the films that are examined in this chapter can be influential in the way we interpret them. Although they all have strong local concerns and their geographical location plays a pivotal role in shaping the narratives and the protagonists' situations, the films were not screened at local cinemas for different reasons. For instance, *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*, an Iranian-French co-production that takes place in Afghanistan and revolves around the lives of Afghan children after the fall of the Taliban, was never shown in Afghanistan. It is worth noting that the Taliban destroyed cinemas, film and music archives. As Arley Loewen, Timur Hakimyar and Jawansher Haydari write, Kabul the capital city, which had eighteen movie theatres in the 1970s, was left with only seven after the Taliban (265). *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame* also did not receive screening permission in Iran, but it was shown at several international film festivals and also at cinemas in Japan, Portugal, France, and South Korea. *Offside*, *The Apple* and *The Day I Became a Woman* have similar stories. They had all received production permission from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and were filmed in Iran, but none was allowed to be screened in the country. Their pirated DVDs were distributed and attracted the attention of many viewers in Iran. *Osama*, an international co-production between Afghanistan, Iran, the Netherlands, Japan, and Ireland, came out in 2003 and was screened at several festivals, including the Golden Globe, Cannes, and London Film Festival, and was well received by Western critics and viewers, but it was not screened in Iran or Afghanistan. The filmmaker obviously had in mind international film festivals and foreign audiences when, in the absence of local movie theatres, there was almost zero chance of distribution in the country.

More than the other films, *Osama* openly targets a Western audience and has a message for them that is quite different from what it presents to its Persian-speaking viewers. This aspect reveals itself in the film's English subtitles, which in some cases are not translations of the original text at all. A good example is the Persian epigraph that appears on the screen before the film starts and the English subtitles that seem to provide the translation. The subtitles say, "I cannot forget, but I can forgive. –Mandela", while the quote in Persian says, "Oh God, side me with those who sacrifice their world for their religion, not those who sell their religion for the world." These are the words of Ali Shariati (1933-1977), the Iranian Muslim intellectual and sociologist whose revolutionary interpretations of Islam have inspired many Iranians before and after the Revolution. From the outset, *Osama* consciously divides its audiences into two groups and sends a different message to each. Mark Graham states that in light of Nelson Mandela's quote, the film can be taken "as a kind of Afghan Holocaust remembrance, an evocation of the past and its horrors to remind Afghans and the world of what must never happen again" (101). It can also be argued that the film aligns itself with the Western liberal mindset that justified the U.S. military intervention to 'save' Afghan women from the monstrous presence of the Taliban. Through the Persian epigraph, the film implies that the Taliban do not represent the faithful; they are the ones who sold their religion to gain worldly power. In other words, it views them not as the face of Islam but as a corrupted group that deviated from the path of God. *Osama* does not depict religion as the cause of evil; it rather rejects a radical reading of Islam that revealed itself in the Taliban's actions and policies. This viewpoint is not shared with the English-speaking audience, who are instead provided with a liberal perspective that probably leads to a more reductive reading. While *Osama* does not provide its audience with any information about the history of foreign interventions in the country and the formation of the Taliban under the support

of the U.S., it gives the West exactly what it wants to see. As Graham suggests, the film "replete with Orientalist set pieces," tells the West that "Afghanistan is a damsel in distress, desperately in need of rescue" (103).

In the past decades, Islamic countries like Iran and Afghanistan have had uneasy political relations with the West that have affected their media image. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the hostage crisis, Imam Khomeini's call for exporting the Revolution to the world, the reign of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the 9/11 attacks, and several other events have intensified the negative images of Iran and Afghanistan in Western media. Naturally independent films from these counties draw the attention of many curious critics and festival goers who are in search of an 'authentic' image. Under such conditions, the duty of the independent filmmakers, who on the one hand have local political and social concerns and on the other hand wish to attract an international audience, becomes complicated. Especially when they challenge such issues as gender, sexuality, and class, there is a risk of repeating Orientalist stereotypes about Islam, the Middle East, and Muslim women's oppression, in their work. Criticizing their society without falling into neo-Orientalist discourse is a difficult task that sometimes filmmakers fail to accomplish.

The five films discussed in this chapter are very outspoken in their critique of the cultural, religious, political and legal elements that shape the protagonists' gendered experience of everyday life in the public and private realms. Setting the films against the state values, the filmmakers seem to be conscious of their role at both national and international levels, and have in mind foreign film festivals. There might be moments when the films, consciously or unconsciously, echo the Western rhetoric about the Muslim world. While examining girlhood as

a located and plural notion in the films that have a strong critical tone, I am aware of the risk of neo-Orientalism that can affect the work of the filmmakers as well as the researcher.

Arguing that childhood is a gendered notion that gets shaped within specific cultural and historical contexts, this chapter focuses on five films to explore their representations of girlhoods and the cultural and institutional politics that shape them. As Dawn H. Currie argues, working with cinematic and literary texts and treating them as representations "helps us see gendered identities such as adolescent femininity [as] cultural constructions" (17). In this study, girlhood is not seen as a unitary and universal state of being but as diverse and located. The films discussed in this chapter focus on girls in more traditional settings, depict their position within family and society, and critique the established or enforced gender borders.

The Burden of Womanhood on the Shoulders of Afghan Girls

Osama and *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame* get their viewers to accompany two Afghan girls, one in the terror-stricken days of Kabul under the Taliban and the other under the ruins of the Bamiyan Buddha statues after the fall of the Taliban when schools have reopened and girls' rights to an education are recognized. The struggles and sufferings of each protagonist find meaning in the context of Afghan culture as well as the local political milieu; the girls' experiences in public and private spheres are deeply affected by the socio-political conflicts of their time.

Buddha Collapsed out of Shame is Hana Makhmalbaf's first feature film, and it received critical acclaim at different international film festivals. It is set in Bamiyan, Afghanistan, where the Buddha statues were dynamited by the Taliban in 2001. The film depicts the quest of a six-year old Bakhtay, who lives with her mother and infant sibling in the caves of Bamiyan and is

encouraged by the boy next door to go to school. It borrows its title from Mohsen Makhmalbaf's treatise *The Buddha Was Not Demolished in Afghanistan; It Collapsed out of Shame*. Mohsen, Hana's father, is one of the main supporters of Afghan film production and one of the first Iranian filmmakers who travelled to Afghanistan in the early 2000s and captured moments of Afghan life through the lens of cinema. In his treatise, which was a reaction to the bombing of the Bamiyan Buddha statues, he blamed international society for its indifference to such a cultural disaster. He drew attention to the Taliban's ban on all forms of imagery, and saw Afghanistan as "a country without an image" (12). His description seems right in light of the massive destruction of movie theatres and film archives under the Taliban. If the country had an image at an international level, it was largely negative. After 9/11 and George W. Bush's war on terror, Afghanistan came to the forefront of Western media as the land of terror and Islamic radicalism.

The film starts with a black and white shot from the past showing a large crowd of Afghans gathered under the Buddhas of Bamiyan. They are smiling and clapping; they seem to be celebrating something, yet the sad music over the image creates anxiety in the audience. Its slow rhythm and sad tone are in contrast with the pace and mood of the visual. The music is ahead of the image; the apprehension that it creates seems to anticipate something unpleasant, even catastrophic. While the music continues, the brief shot cuts into the following ones, all colour, which show the destruction of the statues by the Taliban. The sense of anxiety turns into sorrow, and the combination of sound and image in the three shots from 2001 creates a tragic mood, which well conveys the weight of that heart-breaking moment in the history of Afghan culture. The quick cut between the shots, the short length of the shots, and the weight of

historical information provided in the brief opening scene accentuate the intensity of the historical events that set the context, crucial to our understanding of the film's events.

The film begins and ends with the bombing scene and the same music, creating a cyclical structure. The bombing of the Buddhas becomes a prelude to the film narrative; it works as a frame story that invites the viewer to read the story within this particular historical context. The music is repeated three more times throughout the film and creates a parallel between the tragedy of the Bamiyan Buddhas and the personal lives of the characters. It makes connections between the geopolitical landscape, the historical event, and the lives of individuals, and becomes a motif to suggest the tragic quality of life.

The narrative has five major stages; in the first stage, the little girl Bakhtay is babysitting her sibling in her mother's absence, when Abbas the boy next door, who is physically tied up by his mother to stay at home and finish his homework, reads a humorous anecdote to her. She is amused by the story but is unable to read; she can only name the pictures in the book. Eager to learn reading in order to be able to read humorous stories, Bakhtay leaves home to go to school; her passion makes her too impatient to wait for her mother's return, and she starts her naïve yet enthusiastic quest for education, which is the second stage of the narrative.

The second stage comprises her attempts to acquire the means of education and find her way to school. First, she encounters the reality of money, economy, and exchange. She goes to the store to learn that she needs money to buy stationery. In the absence of the mother, she takes eggs from home to sell in the market. Following Bakhtay in her journey to the market, the viewer witnesses a poverty-stricken society where women are almost absent from the public realm. While men ignore her, Bakhtay stubbornly struggles to make them see her and respond to her

request for trading. Bakhtay is surrounded by oblivious men busy with work or engaged in conversations with other men. She manages to sell two eggs but drops the other two by accident. Although she only gets half the money she was aiming for, she manages to achieve relative success in her first battle on her quest. When she can only buy a notebook with that money, she takes her mother's lipstick as a pencil. Bakhtay uses her imagination within limitations: she turns the lipstick into a pen; cosmetics become the condition for learning. The lipstick, as a symbol of femininity, becomes an inerasable element in an environment where any sign of female 'immodesty' has grave repercussions.

On her way to school, which forms the third stage of her journey, Bakhtay encounters impediments that delay her arrival. She runs into a group of school boys "playing the Taliban" close to the ruins of the Buddha statues. Pointing their twigs at her as guns, they want her to surrender. The head of the group, a boisterous and aggressive boy, interrogates her, and declares that it is wrong for women to go to school. He sentences her to stoning and covers her head with a paper bag. Scared and impatient to leave for school, Bakhtay says she does not want to play stoning. It is not a game, he says. The disturbing conversation illustrates how violence is normalized in these children's everyday life in a country wounded by decades of war and atrocity. While the other boys start digging a hole for her, the head of the group draws a circle around Bakhtay and orders her to stay inside it. Bakhtay cool-handedly steps out of the circle as soon as he joins the other boys digging. He draws another circle and goes back to work, but she steps out again. The boy, frustrated, reprimands her, asks her to repent, and draws another circle around her. Ignoring the boys' verdict, Bakhtay jumps from one circle to the other and turns them into hopscotch. This moment of playfulness becomes symbolic of her transgression, no matter how limited and temporary it may be. It is the girls who add color and brief moments of

joy and liveliness to the narrative and their acts are in clear contrast with their cruel, morose, and dark environment.

Later the boy takes Bakhtay into the cave where three other girls are kept hostage, and orders her to stay there. After he leaves, Bakhtay encourages the girls to take the paper bags off their heads and explain why they were arrested by the boys. One is there because she was chewing gum and it is improper, according to the boys, for a woman to chew gum. The second girl is there for wearing lipstick. But the most ironic case is the little girl who was arrested for having beautiful eyes. "They say my eyes have wolves, meaning they're attractive," she explains to Bakhtay. Beauty becomes a sin for women when they are seen as the cause of vice and chaos. The paper bags connote forced limitation when they are pulled over the girls' heads; the bags limit their vision and make it difficult them to look around and walk easily.

Bakhtay's encounter with the boys and the three girls reveals certain facts about gender relations in their society. Through their "play," the boys are exercising the power they are endowed with by society for being male. They imitate their elders and order the girls to be submissive. They all perform the gender roles that are either traditionally accepted or influenced by the prevalent radical Islamic ideology, and practice masculinity and femininity the way they observe it performed around them. They remain relatively safe as long as they stick to the norms, but any transgression has punitive consequences. The girls are punished for their misconduct and—with the exception of Bakhtay—do not express any objection, as if training to become submissive wives, daughters and sisters.

Bakhtay eventually finds the girls' school where her quest is meant to end. The scene in the classroom that comprises the fourth stage of the narrative portrays Bakhtay's first day at

school as an absurd and sardonic experience. She walks into a classroom without being noticed by the teacher, who is busy writing numbers on the board. All the seats are taken and no one is willing to accommodate Bakhtay. She can only persuade one student to share her seat with her by letting her rip off pages from her notebook. Bakhtay uses the lipstick to win the students' attraction and find herself a place among them. She walks around the room painting their lips and cheeks with the lipstick, and turns the room to a class of clowns. The teacher, who has no interaction with the students, expels Bakhtay when she notices her and finds the class in chaos.

Bakhtay leaves the building and rings the bell on her way out, dismissing the school. The scene in the classroom, the destination of Bakhtay's quest, is very short compared with the other stages. The dysfunctional girls' school in contrast with the 'real' world highlights the fact that the girls are not provided with the appropriate educational tools they need to prepare for life; the real education for them happens at home and in society. They imitate their parents, relatives and neighbours and practice how to become the women their society expects.

Bakhtay is again surrounded by the boys on her way home. They order her to raise her hands, pointing their guns at her, and ask her to die. She needs to fall on the ground and pretend to be dead so that they leave her alone. Abbas arrives and encourages her to listen to them. He says, "Die Bakhtay, die. You need to die to be free." Bakhtay surrenders in the end and falls on the ground as we hear explosion and the music from the first scenes of the film. Bakhtay becomes Buddha and has to collapse despite her determination throughout the film, just like the statues that had survived many wars for hundreds of years. Bakhtay's odyssey depicts Afghanistan in a nutshell. It has become a country where religious fundamentalism has drastically affected people's everyday life, and violence and coercion rule. Bakhtay's symbolic death can be read as a tragic ending that leaves no hope, or it can be interpreted as a realistic

approach that saves the film from falling into a romanticized quest narrative. I argue that the latter better serves the logic of the film, which celebrates a girl's agency amidst the hostility of a system that works to exclude her and the other girls from the public and push them back into the private. Bakhtay temporarily surrenders in order to free herself from the vicious circle of the boys' ruthless game and continue her journey. Her performing moment brings to mind the women for whom death is in fact the price they pay for their disobedience; it also functions as a reminder for Bakhtay and the viewers that for a girl like her, who dares to question, desire, and act, there are inevitable moments of conformity or submission in order to survive within a system that uses all the available sources to leash her ambitions and turn her into an obedient woman tightly bound in the name of morality, tradition, and religion.

While Makhmalbaf's film leaves room for female agency in post-Taliban Afghanistan, Siddiq Barmak's *Osama* (2003), which depicts the sufferings of the ordinary under the reign of the Taliban, chooses a disconsolate destiny for its female child protagonist. *Osama*, released two years after the U.S. invasion and the fall of the Taliban, starts with the struggles for survival of a female nurse in Kabul amid the Taliban's havoc. She has lost her husband in the civil war and has a daughter and an old mother to look after. Now she is forced to leave her job in the hospital in order to save herself from the wrath of the Taliban, who have forbidden women from working outside the home. Like the other female characters in the film, the nurse remains nameless, perhaps to represent half the population of a nation when they lost their basic rights under a radical theocratic regime because of their gender.

The audience is introduced to the world of the film through the viewpoint of a Westerner, a journalist who is following and filming Espandi, an Afghan beggar boy, in the alleys of Kabul. When Espandi looks right into the camera and asks for more dollars to guide the man through the

streets and show him more of the city, it seems that the Western viewers are the film's intended audience. Through the camera, Espandi addresses them and invites them to pay if they are curious to see Afghanistan. They shortly run into a demonstration of chaddari-clad women. Although the women are soon arrested by the Taliban soldiers and put into cage trucks, the crowd of blue-veiled women, carrying signs and shouting for their right to work, which looks like a flowing river, is nothing like the voiceless and static image of Muslim women in Western media. When the women are forcibly pushed into the cages, the soundtrack is a mixture of their voices and chickens clucking. The film resists the stereotypical image of invisible women in the Muslim world, and also acknowledges the oppressive and degrading rules of the Taliban against women.

Following Espandi, the journalist runs into the nurse and her daughter, then films the women's demonstration, and is finally attacked and arrested by the Taliban. The scene takes about five minutes and comprises two types of shots, the ones with limited perspective that show his filming and those with a panoramic view that hold his filming as a framed story within the larger narrative of the film. The journalist goes after the nurse, her daughter, and Espandi, who are running away from the Taliban, but he has to stay outside with his camera when they rush inside the house and close the door behind them. His view as an outsider is limited because he is not able to gain access to the inner world of Afghan life and culture. His project of filming Afghanistan and the nation's catastrophe remains unfinished, but the film does not stop where he is stopped. The filmmaker himself, as an insider, manages to take us to the private interior, inside the walled and veiled spaces where tragedy crawls under people's skin and turns the dreams of girls, boys, women and men into dust.

The Taliban's decree that women cannot go to work does not match the reality of a society that has lost tens of thousands of men in decades of war. The nurse's family is a clear example; there is no man left to support them. That is why the nurse is so desperate to keep her job. She goes back to the hospital to ask for her four-month-outstanding salary. Walking along the corridors, now pocked with bullets and rockets, she follows the superintendent, who explains to her that there is nothing left to pay the staff and the hospital will soon be closed down. The hospital is suddenly raided by the Taliban, who start interrogating and arresting people, but the nurse is saved when her patient's son, a middle-aged man, steps in and pretends to be her husband. Terrified of the Taliban, the people rush to leave the hospital. The camera shows the people from behind when they are emptying the hallway; the camera is placed above the characters, suggesting their vulnerability and weakness. These fleeing bodies, affected by networks of power, become sites of religious and political struggles. While the people are running away, we see a disabled boy lagging behind in the hallway whose presence finds a symbolic meaning; he may represent the country crippled by fanaticism, civil war, and poverty.

In the dark night of Kabul, behind the walls and beyond the Western journalist's reach, the nurse, her old mother, and ten- or eleven-year-old daughter live since the Taliban have decreed that women stay at home. They can only be seen in public if veiled and accompanied by a male relative. The night falls in Kabul and her small family is sitting together in the dim light of a lantern. The grandmother is braiding the girl's hair, and the mother is lamenting the death of her husband and brother, one killed in the Kabul war and one in the Russian war. A household without a man is a wreck at the time of this national cataclysm. She wishes she had a son instead of a daughter; she wishes God had not created women. But the grandmother disagrees: "Men and women are equal. My hair grew white but I saw no difference between men and women. They

both work equally hard, and they are equally unfortunate." She has a solution for saving the family from hunger; she will cut the girl's hair, dress her in men's clothes and from the next day she will be a boy, the breadwinner of the family. The girl is frightened; the Taliban will kill her if they find out. The grandmother tells her a folktale to calm her down:

> Once upon a time, there was a good-looking boy whose father had died. He went to work and came home exhausted. He was tired of working. He wished he could be a girl so he wouldn't have to work. One day, the wise man told him that if he passed under the rainbow, he would become a girl. What's a rainbow? asked the boy. It's a souvenir left to us by Rustam the great hero to free us from pain and misery. Boys turn into girls and girls into boys.

The grandmother does not finish the story, and it remains unknown if the boy manages to pass under the rainbow or what happens after if he does so. Recounting the story and braiding the girl's hair, the grandmother seems to be weaving folktale into the ghastly reality of their life and changing it forever. A tale in which the magic power of the rainbow can wash away the people's misery and pain becomes the resource for the grandmother's action, which will affect their entire life. It seems that when the reality is dark, women take refuge in folk songs and tales to soothe their wounds. The woman in Atiq Rahimi's *Syngue Sabour* takes a similar path when she brings to life the tale of a patience stone that can absorb one's pain and free them from suffering. Both films incorporate oral tradition and folktales into their narrative but manage not to romanticize it. Specifically, in *Osama*, the grim reality of the outer world defeats the possibility of relief that folktales may provide.

From the next morning, the girl, with her hair cut and dressed in male clothes, is sent to her late father's friend, who has agreed to employ her in his small shop. Present in public as a boy, the girl is able to watch the world around her and have access to places that are open only to men. But eventually her transgression, cross-dressing, which is against Sharia Law, puts her in a dangerous situation. The ease her mother and grandmother had hoped for does not last long when the Taliban start recruiting all the local boys for school to teach them religious and military practice. Espandi recognizes her, and names her Osama to protect her from the boys who pick on her for her feminine features. Once she is in the school and under the teacher's scrutiny, it becomes impossible to hide her gender. The old teacher cannot take his eyes away from Osama, this beautiful child whom he finds sexually appealing. When she refuses to undress and attend the ablution session, the school officials get more suspicious. They hang her upside down inside a well to make her talk, and her gender is revealed when she menstruates. The penalty for her crime is death.

The film echoes actual cases from the time of Taliban when citizens were brutally punished for their everyday conduct that did not match the Taliban's radical interpretation of Islam. Cross-dressing, as an example, is frowned upon in Islam. Sharia Law draws upon two main sources, the Quran and Sunnah (the sayings and acts of Muhammad the prophet). Crossdressing is not mentioned in the Quran, but there are hadiths that forbid it. For instance, according to a hadith narrated by Abu-Hurayrah, "The Apostle of Allah, peace be upon him, cursed the man who dressed like a woman and the woman who dressed like a man" (qtd. in Bolich 260). Thus, in Muslim countries where Sharia Law is practiced, cross-dressing can have punitive consequences.

Cross-dressing enables Osama to enter the madrasa (religious school), a world that is closed to the female, a particular space where the Taliban expand their ideology by indoctrinating the recruited boys. Hence, the madrasa plays a significant role because it is the place for the Taliban to reinforce and perpetuate its ideology by producing devoted, loyal subjects. Osama trespasses the strict codes of gender and enters the sacred world of the madrasa forbidden to her. She commits a sin by stepping into the superior realm of the masculine. Now inside the madrasa, she witnesses how the boys are trained to fit into the Taliban's ideal masculinity. The film focuses on three aspects of the training: military practice, memorizing the Quran, and jenaba ghusl (ablution Muslims must perform after sex), thus highlighting the ways the ideology shapes men's world. Osama observes this procedure, and is punished for the knowledge and insight her transgression provides for her.

The scene finishes with the shot showing Osama being arrested by the boys and covered with a chadari. The following scene shows her in jail, crouching down among other prisoners, awaiting her execution. She is the only one wearing a mustard-colored chadari that distinguishes her from the crowd and becomes a sign that shows that she, as a child, is in the wrong place. The shot cuts into another one in which Osama, in men's clothing, is playing skipping rope behind the bars with her back to a group of blue-colored chadari-clad women sitting on the ground. The next shot is a close-up of Osama's sad face behind the bars while we still hear the rope skipping in the background. The scene moves back and forth between the close-up and the medium shot showing Osama playing, and draws attention to the contrast between the ruthless reality and her imagination that knows no boundaries. In the name of Sharia, the borders between childhood and adulthood are violated. Osama's childhood is stolen and she is forced into womanhood, a realm to which she yet does not belong.

Ironically Osama is saved from the death sentence by Mullah, the old teacher. He takes her away to be one of his several wives. In his house, he walks her to a room away from the wives and children. Osama only sobs in silence. In the next shot the man walks out in his undergarment and washes himself in the tub, performing the Jenaba ghusl, implying that he has consummated the marriage. We do not see Osama leaving the room afterwards; rather, the film ends by showing Osama playing skipping rope behind the bars. It goes back to the realm of the imagination and takes refuge there in order to serve the aesthetics of defeat instead of imaging the broken and defeated heroine. The ending highlights the fact that Osama's girlhood is taken away from her in the name of Sharia, and that she is raped in the name of marriage, two realities that have become possible with the power and control that men like Mullah have gained under the reign of fundamentalism.

Osama fails to illustrate the political and historical background that made possible the rise of the Taliban. As Graham states, "We are never told where the Taliban came about, how they came to power, why they are in Kabul…. Rather we are immediately immersed in an insane world" (89). Without contextualizing the story of Afghan women's oppression and by showing them as passive victims, the film seems to echo the imperialist discourse that justifies the military presence of the U.S. and other Western powers in the region in the name of saving women. The extreme passivity of its female characters does not fully reflect the reality of the lives of girls and women in Iran and Afghanistan who do not simply submit. When it comes to the complexities of gendered experience of selfhood, space, and otherness, I argue that Hana Makhmalbaf renders a better job than Siddiq Barmak in illustrating the dynamics of gender relations in *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*.

Destruction and conflict dominate the atmosphere of *Osama* and *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame*, and shape the destinies of their child protagonists. The films show how political chaos and war aggravate the poor situation of Afghan girls and women. Beyond the country's Western borders, Iranian filmmakers portray girlhood in a different context where tradition, honour culture, or strict state regulations play a significant role in the everyday life of girls and their understanding of girlhood.

Girlhood in the Margins: From Kish to the Outskirts of Tehran

The Day I Became a Woman is an episodic film comprising three stories, each depicting a female protagonist at a certain stage of her life, one in childhood, one as a young married woman, and one in old age. The stories take place on Kish Island in the Persian Gulf. The title brings to mind Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement that "one is not, but rather becomes a woman" (236). From the start, the film takes a non-essentialist stance on gender to highlight its social construction and the way people's understanding of gender norms and roles is formed. The episodes are named after the protagonists: Havva, Ahoo, and Hura. Since this chapter focuses on girlhood, it only discusses the first episode of the film that portrays its child protagonist's encounter with the notion of womanhood and its social implications.

In the first story, Havva (Eve in Persian) wakes up to find that this day she turns nine and thus is "not a child anymore," according to her grandmother. She will officially become a woman, which means that she has to cover her hair and avoid contact with non-related men. The grandmother expects Havva to leave childhood behind and carry out her religious duties as a woman; the mother asks her to get up and prepare for school; and the only thing that occupies

Havva's mind is playing with her friend Hassan, who has come to their door. Her innocent insistence on going out with Hassan and her incessant begging for permission reveal how her world is detached from her grandmother's. Havva and Hassan both seem confused, not understanding how overnight she has become a different person. Hassan naively asks Havva's mother, "We could play yesterday, why not today?" Asghar Seyed-Gohrab argues that Hassan's statement highlights the "arbitrariness of traditional cultural norms and Islamic beliefs about becoming a woman" (136). Like Hassan, Havva does not seem to comprehend the logic behind her grandmother's argument. Of course, she is familiar with the cultural rules, but she does not understand how they apply to her. Havva does not rebel, but the fact that she does not go against her grandmother's dictates does not stop her from negotiating. She claims that since she was born at noon, she still has an hour before she becomes a woman. While trying to convince her grandmother, Havva is asked to bring the sewing kit, which she pretends she is not able to find. Farhnag Erfani perceptively notes that Havva's "little fib is not rebellious against the veil; it is only a means of freeing herself to go out and play with Hassan" (119), but it shows her power, no matter how limited it seems, to maneuver the possibilities and get what she wants. Later she shows a trick to Hassan who has a hard time finishing his homework. Havva tells him to erase the teacher's signature from his notebook and present it again as his new homework. If she is not rebellious, it does not mean that she is submissive; her little lies on the day she is becoming a woman suggest the future strategies she will use to deal with the social limitations imposed on her as a woman. Therefore, the film recognizes female agency even within a traditional society with strict gender rules.

The film, as Seyed-Gohrab suggests, highlights the veil as an identity marker (135). Havva receives a black chador on her ninth birthday and thus her "becoming a woman is marked

… by her wearing a black veil" (135). In the beginning of the episode, Havva wakes up in a white mosquito tent and when she wants to come out, she holds the tent around her head as if wearing a chador. Her unintentional veiling implies that she is already familiar with veiling and uses it playfully, imitating her mother and grandmother and preparing for womanhood. It also foreshadows the important role that the veil will play throughout the film. Its significance is reflected in the black chador Havva receives from her mother as a birthday present that marks the end of her childhood, a present that may be disappointing to Havva but not surprising at all.

The veil has been associated with backwardness, but veiling finds different connotations in various contexts. If it is voluntary, it reflects individuality and agency. If it is forced, it is considered anti-modern. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, where Hijab is mandatory, the veil has created a paradox in women's lives. Through imposed veiling, women have been deprived of their individual choice and the right to dress. At the same time, the veil has enabled their large-scale social participation, even in careers and activities, such as acting and filmmaking, which were considered inappropriate for women before the Revolution. In other words, the veil has confined women in some ways and given them access to freedom in others. The film shows this paradoxical function when Havva trades her black headscarf for a colourful plastic fish. The boys make a sail from it for their raft, which they use in the third episode to give a ride to Hura, the old protagonist, and freely set out on the sea. The veil becomes "a symbol of both freedom and imprisonment, depending on how it is used" (Seyyed-Gohrab 142). Hava's trading her black headscarf for the plastic fish also highlights her age and shows how her concerns as a child are distant from the social expectation. She is only a child taking pleasure from watching the fish moving back and forth in water.

In *The Day I Became a Woman*, womanhood is marked with veiling but the veil does not hide women's personal and generational differences. Both the mother and the grandmother wear the chador and want Havva to start wearing the veil now that she is nine, but each has a different approach. The grandmother forbids Hassan to play with Havva who, as a woman, should not spend time with unrelated men. When Havva goes to the rooftop to talk with Hassan, who is in the street and not allowed in, the grandmother shouts at her, "Not on the roof; you are a woman now". The mother, coming home from the bazaar, says, "Careful Havva! It's windy up there and you may fall." She lets Hassan in and asks him to stay and play with Havva. Clad in the black chador and her face half hidden behind the niqab, the mother may look like a younger duplicate of the grandmother, but she is more dynamic than the grandmother who stays in the private space behind the walls separating the house from the street. Havva wears the chador her mother brings her at noon and says goodbye to Hassan, but given the generational differences the film reflects, the audience foresees Havva practicing the social norms from a more liberal perspective. She becomes a woman within the already written rules of gender and sexuality, but there is room for her subjectivity and also the possibility of gradual change in traditions.

The grandmother eventually allows Havva to go, but gives her a twig, sticks it into the sand and explains to her that at noon the twig's shadow will completely disappear, which means that she has to be back at home. Havva takes the twig with her and promises to be back by noon. She finds Hassan in his house. He comes to the barred window to explain that his sister does not allow him to leave home because he has to finish his homework. The image of Hassan behind the barred window shows how boundaries impose limitations on both men and women; in fact, men's lives, like women's, are affected by cultural constraints. The walls and the veil definitely limit Hassan and Havva's communication but they cannot halt it. Hassan asks Havva to buy ice

cream, but Havva returns with a lollipop and some tamarind that they share. The sharing of the lollipop can prefigure the possibility of interaction in the future despite the existing limitations. Critics have also interpreted it as erotic. Michelle Langford argues that Havva's rubbing the lollipop on her lips and making sucking sounds that resemble a kiss "stand in for and bridge the gap, separated by the chain of allegorically connected signifiers … to virtually connect male and female bodies" (12). Agreeing with Langford, Seyed-Gohrab adds that this sharing can be redefined as "a sensual and even sexual transgression" (136). These allegorical readings are pertinent because children in the film, besides depicting their own worlds as kids, portray gendered aspects of adult life. In Iranian cinema, upon which codes of modesty are forced and the image of women and their gender and sexual relationships is exceedingly controlled by censorship, filmmakers project controversial issues of gender and sexuality into the children's seemingly innocent world. Within this context, the dynamic of Havva and Hassan's relationship is heavily charged.

Given the name of the protagonist, the episode makes a clear reference to the story of Eve and Adam who, according to Abrahamic religions, were banished from Eden after eating the forbidden fruit. If in the creation myth Eve and Adam committed the sinful act which could have been avoided, in the story of Havva entering the sin zone is inevitable and only a matter of time. According to Sharia Law, the eligible age of marriage for females is nine, when they are considered to be women and biologically ready for sexual consummation. Even if Havva is still occupied with childhood dreams, her acts and movements will find new meanings when she becomes a woman. In one hour, Havva's body will turn into a locus of sin because it will have the potential to sexually arouse and lure men. The twig she carries around with stress

continuously reminds us that the time of innocence is coming to an end, and that upon becoming a woman, Havva steps into the sin zone from which there is no escape.

The Day I Became a Woman reveals girlhood and womanhood as social constructions, and challenges the arbitrary nature of the line between the two notions in the context of a traditional Islamicate culture.[3] The film skillfully reveals the constructed nature of gender norms and roles, and shows the intricate process of the formation of girlhood and womanhood in the light of tradition, religion, and law. In this film Meshkini critiques the way a girl's childhood is erased in a culture that sees her as a potential woman who is capable of threatening the family's honour and thus justifies regulating her presence in private and public spaces as well as her acts and relations. Meshkini's niece (and daughter by marriage) Samira Makhmalbaf does something along the same lines in *The Apple* (1998), a film that depicts the extreme mental and physical confinements imposed on two sisters in defense of honour.

The Apple, Samira's first feature film, recounts the true of story of two twelve-year-old sisters, Masoumeh and Zahra Naderi, who were confined at home by their overprotective father, Ghorban-Ali, since birth. When neighbours found out about the girls' situation, they reported it to the welfare centre, which immediately intervened. After national television and press covered the story, Samira approached the family and convinced them to play themselves in her film, which relates their story from the moment the officials stepped in. Blurring the line between documentary and fiction, the film tells the story of the sisters' imprisonment, the motivations behind it, and its consequences. It shows how the sisters' language and bodies have been

[3]. In this thesis, I use the term "Islamicate" to describe cultures and societies rather than states. As Najmabadi explains, the term refers "not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims" ("Reading" 163).

deformed within their confinement, and how they start to revive after communicating with the outside world. SF Said suggests that *The Apple* can be read as "a psychological inquiry into communication, a political parable about ignorance, a treatise on gender in the Islamic world" (163). However, I believe that the dogmatic mindset that led to the girls' confinement has deeper cultural roots, and that limiting it to Islam is reductive. It needs to be considered within the cultural context and the pivotal role of tradition, which goes beyond religion.

Masoumeh and Zahra, locked up for their whole life, have not had the chance to interact with people other than their parents. Although they have normal intelligence, their walking and speaking have not developed. Deprived of socialization and confined within the walls of the small house, their words are mumbled and their steps unsteady. Home space, as Holloway and Valentine argue, "is not necessarily a haven for children, being … a space which is constituted through relations of power and control" (774). The film shows how the father of the family, as the legal guardian and authority figure, has exercised his absolute power, which has turned home space into a prison. The result of his crushing control within the domestic sphere has been the daughters' misshapen bodies and broken language. Ghorban-Ali suggests that since his wife Suqra is blind and cannot take care of the girls, as a father he had no other choice; it was his responsibility to protect them. Ghorban-Ali's obsession with confinement as the right solution has a long tradition in the history of gendered control. As Farzaneh Milani notes, "women's chastity has been inextricably linked with space. Mobility has often been associated with chaos and the opportunity for sexual promiscuity in women" (*Words, Not Swords* 5). Physical and spatial constraint is the punishment the girls have received for their gender. As females, they are potential threats to their family's honour and thus need to be limited and controlled. As Milani explains, if not through religion, gender apartheid "has relied on physiology, chastity, safety,

beauty, and patriotism to restrict women's mobility" (3). This cultural preoccupation with women's movement is reflected in Ghorban-Ali's extreme action and his reasons for it. The moment the girls are returned to their family, Ghorban-Ali locks them up again. It seems to be the only way he knows for protecting them. When the social worker Ms. Mohammadi arrives to find the girls behind the locked doors, she releases them to explore the neighbourhood on their own and locks up the parents instead. Exercising her authority over him, she wants Ghorban-Ali to taste imprisonment. He is sitting behind the bars he himself has created when suddenly a ball comes over the wall and a few seconds later three boys climb up the wall, look over and ask for their ball. Ghorban-Ali says to Ms. Mohammadi, "I told you I had to lock the door because the boys throw in their ball. They ring the bell and when no one answers, they climb the wall and jump into our yard. So, I have to lock the door; what if one of them harms the girls, what am I to do then?" He mentions several times throughout the film that if someone harms the girls, he will be dishonoured. For him, it is his responsibility as the man of the family to preserve his honour, which depends on the sexual conduct of female relatives. If he manages to protect cultural definitions of gender-specific decorum in his family, he has saved his dignity. Ms. Mohammadi says, "You know what the problem is? They are girls. If they were boys, they could go out with you and play outside. They could even climb people's walls." In response, Ghorban-Ali quotes from a book called *Fathers' Advice*, which says a girl is like a flower and a non-related man is like the sun. The flower will wither under the sunlight. "The story of man and woman," he adds, "is the story of cotton and fire. If fire comes close, it will burn cotton." In order to prevent fire, he has to keep his daughters away from all the possible threats. Imprisonment, an extreme case of gender control, is Ghorban-Ali's answer to protect his honour.

Zahra's and Masoumeh's malformed bodies, captured by the camera in the last years of the twentieth century, are shocking for the viewer, but the film does not stop there. Instead of focusing on the tragic outcome of a father's tyrannical behaviour, the film zooms out to cover the context and explore the motives. It does not portray the father as a flat character, a heartless patriarchal figure. Rather, it shows his humane side, his fears and concerns as a loving parent.

Ghorban-Ali lives in poverty and struggles to provide for his family's basic needs. Coming home after a long day, he is in charge of house chores. He cooks for them and teaches the girls to cook and clean. He addresses them with compassion and embraces them after their reunion. Although he is not an educated man, he is very polite; he uses formal language and addresses people with respect. Whenever his wife swears with rage and wants the social worker to leave them, Ghorban-Ali invites her to calm down. Even when he is angry at his neighbours for calling the welfare centre, he remains well-mannered. His main worry is people's judgment, and the reason he cannot forgive his neighbours is that they have defamed him. In a traditional society where collective values are more important than individual inclinations, people's judgment can strongly affect one's everyday conduct. In such a society, people become the guardians of cultural norms by watching and judging each other. The film astutely depicts the dynamics of surveillance in the neighbourhood. Although houses are separated by tall walls and windows are covered with thick curtains, Ghorban-Ali and his family are being closely observed by their neighbours. His solution is an extreme reaction to social mechanisms of surveillance and honour culture.

The mother's presence indicates other aspects of the girls' imprisonment. Suqra seems more controlling and strict than her husband. The moment she meets her daughters in the welfare centre, she wants them to cover their hair. She is not happy with Ms. Mohammadi's presence and

the new changes around the house; she wants the doors locked and the girls inside. She expresses her rage with cursing, either whispering or shouting swear words. She is the product of the same dogmatic worldview as her husband and assists him in perpetuating the outdated values. In the hands of Ghorban-Ali and his complicit wife, Masoumeh and Zahra have lost twelve years of childhood, and confinement has been their share of the world.

Ms. Mohammadi unlocks the door and asks the girls to go out and find friends. Wobbling down the alley holding the mirrors and combs Ms. Mohammadi has brought for them, Zahra and Masoumeh seem excited about everything they come upon. They stop to examine themselves in the mirror; they mumble to each other and smile with amusement. They connect with their own image before communicating with others, but self-knowledge cannot happen in isolation; they start to know themselves from the moment they connect with others. On their journey, they come across boys and girls of their own age and younger who are confused or frustrated by their inept movements and gestures. Masoumeh and Zahra are stopped by a boy who is hanging an apple from a string out the window and wants them to catch it. The apple becomes the symbol of Ghorban-Ali's fears, all the precarious attractions that threaten the girls' chastity. It also refers to the forbidden fruit in the biblical story of creation and represents sin. But for the viewer, the apple embodies the experience of living life as a human, with all its pleasures and pains. The sisters catch the apple; they later bring apples for their father. Zahra unlocks the door when Ms. Mohammadi refuses to do it for Ghorban-Ali. Holding their father's hand, they leave the courtyard with the door wide open behind them. The film ends when Suqra, who is left alone, finally daring to step out. Walking down the alley and calling her daughters, she bumps into the hanging apple and reaches out to take it. Throughout the film, the four members of the Naderi family eventually hold the apple, either purposely or by accident, a fact that implies the film's

optimistic approach. The film anticipates a better future for them now that they are holding the apple in public and away from locks and barred doors.

The Apple and *The Day I Became a Woman* depict the utmost limitations forced on girls in the name of honour and religion. The cruel isolation of the two sisters is the rotten fruit of a father's obsession with his family's image within the community. Havva is deprived of Hassan's friendship by a grandmother who is culturally bound to observe her granddaughter's religious coming of age. While these two films focus on the family's major position in the formation and perpetuation of gender roles, Jafar Panahi's *Offside* draws attention to the state and the part it plays in limiting girls' movements and actions in the public domain.

Marginality of Girlhood in the Centre: Urban Girls in the Battlefield

Jafar Panahi encapsulates the alternative spirit of male directors in Iran who dare to take the minor position in their national cinema, borrowing Deleuze and Guattari's description, and become "foreigners in their own tongue" (*Thousand Plateaus* 105). Panahi challenges the standard measures of his society and cinema through his unconventional perspective towards gender and sexuality, and creates another form of consciousness. His film *Offside* is significant because it does not fall into fatalism and makes room for female agency in a realistic way. It portrays the bold actions of a group of young women against the legal and cultural restrictions of their society. If the four other films discussed above focus on girls in the social and economic margins of society, *Offside* sheds light on the lives of teenage girls from the capital city who, because of their upbringing and relatively greater access to resources provided by their families, are able to take the next step and demand their social rights, including access to certain public spaces.

The film is set at Azadi Stadium in Tehran, where only men are allowed according to the rules of the Islamic state. The national soccer team is playing against Bahrain, but the fact that half of the nation is excluded from supporting their team adds more significance to the game that is being played. Although all the scenes are shot in public spaces and almost all— except for the opening and ending scenes in the bus— are set outdoors, one can feel the pressure of a suffocating social background throughout the narrative. The film focuses on a number of young women who try to find a way to get into the stadium despite all the supervision, several checkpoints, and the large number of soldiers and police officers monitoring people's entrance. These women, who are struggling to watch the game at the stadium, have a personal story behind their decision. The film shows how their action, however personal it may seem at first glance, is deeply political. Determined to break into the forbidden space, these women have to deal with the reactions their decision provokes in others from family to strangers, from the officials to ordinary people. Under the gaze of men, some sympathizing, some indifferent, and others scolding, the women, who have found cross-dressing as an effective trick to get in, encounter various responses that have cultural, religious, and political roots. The film creates a dialogic platform to stage the social heteroglossia, the multiplicity of voice. It reflects the tension between centripetal forces of patriarchal hegemony and centrifugal forces of female individuals who are struggling to decentralize.

The title of the film refers to a transgressive position of a soccer player. According to the *OED*, to be offside is to be "in a position on the field of play where only players of the opposing team are allowed at that particular instant" (n. pag.); it also means "away from the expected or usual place" and "improper" (n. pag.) It seems a relevant title for a movie that revolves around an actual soccer game that happened in Tehran between Iran and Bahrain. But the term finds a

broader meaning and makes a clear connection between the rules of the sport and women's position in Iranian society. In other words, it becomes a metaphor for the nature of women's action in the film in relation to men and society. Like a player in an offside position in the game, they are punished for their presence in the illegal place. They are viewed in opposition to men, whose status is similar to the members of the opposing team. This analogy implies competition and struggle for superiority, a position legally preserved for men in Islamic Iran. Of course, there is a key difference that needs to be considered: unlike the situation of women in the film, in soccer the rule applies to everyone, not only to a segment of the players involved.

The film creates a space for multiple voices that argue, negotiate, or clash to engage in dialogues which happen between people of different genders, generations, classes, and ideologies, revealing significant aspects of the gender/sex system in Iranian society. Here I examine some of the dialogues to show their diversity and to underline how the film utilizes the combination of these arguments to expose levels of patriarchy, question the fundamentals of male guardianship, and give voice to the young generation of women who practice their agency to push against legal and cultural limitations.

The opening sequence of the film shows an anxious father looking for his teenage daughter who has left for the stadium to watch the soccer match. He is explaining to the man who has given him a ride that he is trying to find her before his angry sons do to protect her from them. "They will kill her if they catch her," he explains. His words reveal the prevalence of honour culture among the working class and traditional families; they also show the cultural taboos that revolve around women's every day conduct. Then the film introduces a young woman dressed up as a man on the bus that is taking the male fans to the stadium. A man who discovers the young woman's gender cannot take his eyes from her. The woman, worried that the

man's attention might reveal her secret, approaches him when others are distracted by a fight, and asks him to mind his own business. She says, "Stop staring at me or I won't be able to get in."

-- "I hope you can," the man responds. "Don't worry, I will take care of it. If they notice there, I myself will help you."

-- "I don't need your help. You don't need to play Fardin. They've told me how to get in."

Their conversation plays a pivotal role in setting the base for the film's trajectory. The man, a total stranger, expresses his concern and proposes to protect the woman, but she describes his action as Fardin-like and rejects his offer. Fardin was an actor who appeared in many film-farsi and tough guy movies before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The term film-farsi refers to "popular feature films made in Iran between 1948 and 1978" (Kashi cited in Naficy, *Social History* 2: 149). These commercial films, as Naficy explains, were "full of improbable plots, escapist fantasies, and inexplicable coincidences" (150). One of the recurrent themes in them was family honour in which men's honour depends on women's sexual conduct and men are expected to protect women (231). Fardin became an icon of ideal masculinity in popular culture in Iran: a man who would do anything to protect women from any sexual shame and against other men's ill intentions. If Fardin is the emblem of male guardianship, which is approved and encouraged in traditional Iranian culture, the female character in *Offside* reminds the man of the nature of his gesture and rejects it as something outdated. Also, through this reference to film-farsi, the film defines itself against the thematic values and narrative mode of the genre.

Other male characters in the film have a similar outlook towards women: they deem it their responsibility to guard women from other men. For instance, the man selling tickets and posters outside the stadium is not willing to sell the woman a ticket. He says she is no different from his own namus (related women), whom he does not wish to be surrounded by thousands of male strangers. He finally sells her a ticket at double the price.

Upon trying to slip through the security, the young woman is caught and sent to an enclosed area on the stadium roof, where a few other young women are guarded by three soldiers. The viewer later realizes that she is there not as a soccer fan but to fulfil a friend's dream who is now dead. Surrounded by traffic fences in a corner, they do not have a view of the game, but they convince the soldiers to report on the match for them. The young women exchange views on soccer in general and the game in particular while each gives a brief explanation for her presence in the stadium; they have different reasons: passion for the sport, or the desire to accompany male relatives, but they share the same opinion that they have a right to be there in spite of the existing legal and cultural restrictions. They all remain nameless in the film except for Fatemeh, a high school student who came with a classmate, but could not manage to enter the stadium. We learn her name when her classmate's father, whom the film introduced in the beginning, finds her on the roof and blames her for misleading his daughter. Feeling embarrassed in her friend's father's presence, she wears her chador, averts her eyes, and stands still in a corner.

Camera distance is essential in reflecting the characters' emotions and thus in our understanding of their acts and reactions. For instance, the close-ups of the female character in the first scenes reveal her fear and anxiety upon arriving at the stadium, and in the final scene they show her sense of joy, relief, and sorrow at the same time when Iran wins the game and she

cries in silence commemorating her deceased friend and his wish to be there. The film also uses close-ups for dialogues between two characters coming from different social, generation, or gender groups, when each becomes the voice of a certain group and makes attempts to reach a common point with the other. The significant examples are the two-shots used during the dialogue between the father and the soldier as men coming from different age groups, and the ones between the small-town soldier and the young woman who acts like a tomboy. In these two-shots, the characters are next to each other in the frame at the same level and with the same distance from the camera. This composition on the one hand creates a sense of parity between the two characters and on the other shows more easily the characters' facial expressions and thus their emotions. In the case of the young boisterous woman and the small-town soldier, the viewer can see how the soldier's sense of righteousness gradually fades away during the conversation and gives way to doubt and hesitation. Although he cannot escape the orders he has received from above, the conversation influences his next moves, which are more sympathetic.

A significant moment in the narrative occurs when the young woman, who has managed to sneak into the stadium and watch the match for a few minutes, comes back to the roof with news from the game the other women are thirsty for. She had escaped when one of the soldiers accompanied her to the washroom, but changed her mind and came back because she did not want the soldiers to get in trouble. She was aware that the young recruit was not able to exclude anxious male fans from the toilets, and felt some responsibility for the discipline he would likely face. She starts narrating the game and enthusiastically invites the other women to help her recreate it. Their space turns into a stage; she becomes a stage director and the other women are actors who start improvising under her guidance. Ironically, the real game is taking place not on the field but here on the rooftop, and the soldiers, drawn by the women's passion and

determination, passively watch. The film consists mainly of eye-level shots, but in this particular scene the combination of eye-level shots and those from higher vantage points gives a theatrical quality to the scene. The alternating change of camera height also draws attention to the physical limitations of their space, despite which the women define the rules of the stage. The whole scene shows how they manage to create a space of their own within imposed borders and practice their limited agency within the existing social conventions. Their act brings to mind the actors' improvisation on the stage; while the stage and the text are already there, the actors can still bring moments of creativity and freedom to the stage and their performance. Throughout the film, the camera is not static but frequently in movement, and female characters are framed in movement while male characters move only in response to them; in other words, it is the women who initiate movement. This physical movement in the film creates a sense of mobility and change that implies the inevitable socio-cultural changes started by women in Iranian society.

The story happens in the stadium during a real soccer match, yet the onscreen space is limited to the roof where the young women are kept. The field remains off-screen. The viewer's understanding of the off-screen space is limited to its sound that mingles with onscreen sound and also the characters' discussions about the ongoing match. In fact, through this visual limitation, the viewer shares the female characters' experience of confinement that is forced upon them in a public space.

In the narrative, the women enter a public space that is legally closed to women; they force their presence upon the male-exclusive area and temporarily create a space for themselves within it. Traditionally in Iran and other Islamicate societies, women are associated with the private sphere while the public one belongs to men. As Milani explains, "the indoors, the 'private,' … the world of women is trivialized [while] the out-of-doors, the 'public', the world of

men… is affirmed, elevated" (*Veils and Words* 5). I contend that women's presence in the stadium divides the space into two sections, the public, which is inside the stadium where only men are allowed, and the private, the small space on the roof where the women are kept. If we compare the stadium/ roof to the outer/ inner and centre/ margin dichotomies, we can argue that by focusing on the roof and avoiding the game, the film refuses to privilege the male-designated space. *Offside* chooses to stay in the outskirts and elevate the world of women whose presence is not even noticed by most men at the stadium.

Conclusion

Iranian and Afghan films have taken a symbolic style that is ambiguous, implied, and veiled, characteristics that create an effective visual language in which material signs and symbols are used to project a larger cultural message. This distinctive quality is evident in the five films examined in this chapter and the detailed analyses of symbols and metaphors, including the lipstick, the circles drawn in the sand, the apple, the skipping rope, the veil, and the mimed game on the roof of the stadium. Another powerful image is the braided strands of hair that Osama plants in a vase before leaving home for work. If long hair symbolizes femininity, the poetic image of planting it implies the desire and hope for the resurrection of femininity slaughtered by the fanatic Taliban who worked for years to reduce the female population of the country to the very basics of their reproductive role. Osama's braided hair and its loss can also refer to girlhood and its erasure, something the child protagonists from the other films experience in different ways and at different levels.

Girlhood as a social construction requires to be understood and analyzed in the context of local social relations and institutional and cultural politics. By highlighting the historical and

cultural conditions, the contextual analyses of the films reveal how the girls' locations as well as class, cultural and national discourses form their experiences and the discourses of girlhood in their society. The films discussed in this chapter portray girls who struggle within family and social structures in which gender-specific discriminations are often accepted as the norm. The main reason behind the girls' challenges is their gender and the cultural specificities that inform the discourse of gender. Girlhood is seen as a transitional phase during which girls should be trained and disciplined for womanhood. They are sexualized and thus need to be constrained and monitored. Bakhtay is stopped by the boys on her way to school because they consider it inappropriate for a girl to pursue education. In their violent game, which is a replica of the adult world around them, the boys punish the girls for any transgression of the cultural norms and rules of gender. Osama's childhood is taken away from her; in the midst of war and terror her life is darker than that of her male counterparts because the reigning ideology of her time does not see her as a human being. Womanhood, and thus veiling, is imposed on Havva whose only desire is to play with her friend. Masoumeh and Zahra have lost twelve years of their lives in confinement in the name of honour and protection. The girls in *Offside* are not allowed in the stadium because it is a man's domain, where they do not belong. The films show how patriarchal power blurs or erases the line between girlhood and womanhood in the name of tradition or religion, and thus disrupts the notion of girlhood. Through sexist gender politics, adult roles are imposed upon girls, girls' movements are curtailed, their relations are monitored, and their access to the public domain is restricted.

The films reveal the hierarchical relations between genders, the girls' subordinate positions, and the cultural conditions that shape the discourses of girlhood. Although the protagonists do not simply submit, most of them are defeated in their quest. Bakhtay should play

along and die in order to be free; Osama ends up in the hands of the old man as his wife; Havva wears the chador, leaves her friend Hassan and walks towards womanhood; and the girls in *Offside* cannot watch the game despite the fact that they have temporarily intruded in the male space. Yet the films leave room for agency and hope, even in a glimpse, and imply that change, no matter how gradual, is inevitable. But one asks what awaits these girls in adulthood and their experiences as women with such an unpromising start. This is the main question that the next chapter seeks to unpack by exploring representations of women through marriage, divorce, and motherhood.

Chapter Two: Imaging Women through Marriage, Motherhood, and Divorce

Films with child protagonists mainly work to compensate for the absence of women in certain phases in Iranian and Afghan cinemas. The emergence of women's cinema has a close connection to the relatively open political atmosphere that paved the way for the growth of civil rights movements and the production of cinematic and literary texts that critically engage with socio-cultural problems and address such issues as gender, class, and religion. The body of Afghan and Iranian women's cinema forms a wide range of critical texts from simple portrayals of women's victimhood to critical depictions of their struggles and transgressions through marriage and motherhood. At the intersection of controlling cultural and governmental norms, filmmakers have depicted wives and mother-figures who denounce the constraints upon them, strive for independence, and create agency.

This chapter examines representations of adult female protagonists as mothers, wives, widows, and divorcées in five Iranian and two Afghan films, Rasul Sadr-Ameli's *I'm Taraneh, 15* (2002), Kambuzia Partovi's *Border Café* (2005), Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002), Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (1999), Roya Sadat's *Ellipsis* (2004), and Atiq Rahimi's *Syngue Sabour* (2012). It aims to show what the films reveal about women's challenges in the context of marriage, their legal and cultural rights and duties as wives and mothers, and the influence of socio-cultural forces and patriarchal rules on women's domestic roles. It looks at lingering traditions and the realities of societies in transition to understand the characters' struggles within family and society. This chapter also explores how the films question the cultural norms, where they submit to the rules of censorship or cultural codes of modesty, and to what extent they can cross the imposed boundaries of social acceptability to provide alternative images of womanhood.

Motherhood in Context

Since the publication of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* in 1979, which launched the critical discussion on motherhood, studies of maternity and mothering have become a flourishing research area in feminist scholarship. Given that motherhood has historically been "locked out of history" (Sarah Dowse qtd. in Maushart 16), feminists have tried to examine and "unearth the complexity and diversity of this experience" (O'Reilly 25). Motherhood is a shared experience among many women in the world, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion and nationality, but mothering is neither a universal nor natural experience. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn notes, mothering "occurs within specific social contexts that vary in terms of material and cultural resources and constraints ... [and] is constructed through men's and women's actions within specific historical circumstances" (3). Considering the dominance of patriarchal structures in different cultures, Rich argues that motherhood is an institution to keep women under male control (13). The experience of motherhood is closely related to how men's and women's positions and roles are defined within the social structure. In Iranian and Afghan societies, women's roles are influenced by religion, tradition, and honour culture. Understanding these cinematic representations in the context of Iranian and Afghan cultures helps to explain the complexities of the selected films' female protagonists' experiences of marriage and motherhood.

In Islamicate societies, motherhood is highly valued. As Julie Peteet writes, "Islamic discourse elevates mothers to near saintliness and exhorts believers to honour mothers" (136). The Qur'an narrates the story of mothers such as Mary (mother of Jesus) and Hajar (mother of Ismail) and praises them for their strong faith and devotion. Prophet Muhammad is frequently quoted on his praise of mothers and motherhood; he said that "paradise lies under the feet of the

mother" (qtd. in Wadud 45); several other examples can be found in the Prophet's *hadiths* (sayings) that emphasize the distinguished role of mothers in families. Considered the primary responsibility of women, motherhood determines to a large extent women's relationship with society. In Afghanistan, where traditional Islam and tribal values are closely intertwined, motherhood is the only socially acceptable position for a woman after marriage to receive support from her husband and achieve credibility in the community. Similarly, motherhood brings great respect for women in Iranian culture; a woman without children is considered incomplete. She proves her utility by functioning as a medium through which her husband guarantees the succession of his family. According to the kin-scripts framework that Carol B. Stack and Linda M. Burton draw to explain the structure of traditional family-centred networks, every member is expected to do certain tasks to help the family survive over time (33-36). Within such a structure, reproduction is a woman's kin-work, her contribution to her new family after marriage. The cultural meanings of motherhood besides the complexities of women's experiences as wives, widows, or divorcées shape the female protagonists' struggles, motives and acts, and influence their interactions in personal and public relations.

Exploring the images of motherhood in popular culture and melodrama in *Motherhood and Representation* (1992), E. Ann Kaplan describes as "resisting texts" the cinematic and literary works that offer a critical perspective on motherhood. Interested in the cultural, political, and economic functions of such texts, Kaplan examines how they reveal the constraints that patriarchy forces on women in their private and social lives as wives and mothers (125). Unlike the complicit text, "which uncritically embodies the patriarchal unconscious and represents women's positioning as … signifier of passivity," the resisting text "situates itself … in the level of the social formation [of womanhood and motherhood]" (124, 125). Kaplan explains that the

resisting text "raises moral/political issues in its very narrative – in the discourses between characters or through disembodied commentary" (126). It "refuses to categorize mothers in the mythic patriarchal manner" and "foregrounds its … mother figures as speaking subjects rather than passive sufferers or evil manipulators" (127). The mother figures in such texts struggle "in various ways to create spaces for themselves within the controlling patriarchal ideology" (128). Kaplan examines motherhood from both psychoanalytic and socio-historical perspectives. Although my research is far from psychoanalysis, I find useful the socio-historical aspects of her work. Looking at motherhood as an institution and seeing womanhood as a social construction, I apply Kaplan's term "resisting text" to a range of films that refuse the simple category of bad/good mother and reveal the cultural and economic forces that affect women as wives and mothers within and outside the realm of marriage.

As Robert Scholes writes, "much of what we take to be natural is in fact cultural" (127). For instance, words, the seemingly transparent signifiers that neutrally refer to concepts and objects, in fact bear socio-cultural meanings embedded in ideology and history. For the sake of this study, let us consider "dokhtar," the Persian word for girl (which also means daughter). If it is used to mean girl, "dokhtar" connotes virginity; thus, it refers to females from birth to almost any age if they are unmarried. This cultural connotation reveals itself in one of the descriptions provided by *Moeen Encyclopedic Dictionary of Persian*: "a virgin; any woman who hasn't had physical intimacy with any man" (*Vajehyab* n. pag.). In the popular culture of Iran and Afghanistan, what turns a girl into a woman is marriage. "Zan," the Persian word for woman, is only used to refer to a woman who has been in a marital relationship, implying that she has lost her virginity. In other words, sexuality and sexual practice are woven into the concepts of girlhood and womanhood and function as the main factor separating the two. It is worth

mentioning that I am not arguing that in practice all unmarried women in Iranian and Afghan cultures remain virgins or do not have sexual experiences. The cultural associations that these words carry can give us significant information about the politics of gender and sexuality of their society. This introduction helps us better understand the cultural categorization of females under girlhood and womanhood, the family dynamics, and the roles of girls and women within family and society. It also explains the reason why this chapter starts with the character of the teenage Taraneh in Sadr-Ameli's *I'm Taraneh, 15* (2002). Taraneh leaves girlhood behind and walks into the realm of womanhood through a marriage that she chooses at the age of fifteen. This chapter, which explores cinematic representations of women through marriage, divorce and motherhood in order to analyze the cultural ideas about these roles and the social expectations associated with them, accepts Taraneh as a woman as she herself consciously assumes the role.

Defying Communal Values and Striving for Independence

I'm Taraneh, 15 recounts the struggles of the fifteen-year-old school girl Taraneh who gets pregnant during a temporary marriage. Taraneh, living with her ailing grandmother, has managed to achieve a balance between school and her part-time job in the absence of her widowed father who is in jail. Taraneh is lured by her stalker's confession of love and a marriage proposal. She marries Amir, the eighteen-year-old high school student, despite her father's reluctance and the objections of Amir's mother, Ms. Keshmiri. Taraneh's grandmother is against temporary marriage (known as sigha in Iran), for the social stigma associated with it, but Ms. Keshmiri's explains that it is only out of religious concern; Taraneh and Amir will remain engaged until they finish school, and in the meantime, they can be together without any religious or legal restrictions. A few hours later when the wind blows away their sigha document while Amir and

Taraneh are happily driving down the highway, the film further highlights the transient nature of their relationship and foreshadows their breakup.

Amir is soon disappointed when he finds Taraneh too occupied with her duties at work and at school. Their marriage comes to end when Amir is arrested by the morality police for attending a mixed-gender party, and Taraneh cannot forgive him. Meanwhile, Taraneh's grandmother dies, the house is put up for sale, and Taraneh has to find a new place. After Amir joins his father in Germany, Taraneh finds out that she is pregnant. Feeling devastated, she approaches Amir's mother for help, but Mrs. Keshmiri, who is the head of a women's organization, does not even believe that the child is her son's. She calls Taraneh a fraudulent loose woman and a blackmailer, and asks her to get an abortion and leave them alone. Taraneh drops out of school to avoid scandal. Rejected by Mrs. Keshmiri, the advocate of strict moral rules, Taraneh opens up to Mehri, a sex worker she encounters, who later becomes a close friend. Finding her path through fear, hesitation, and confusion, Taraneh decides to keep the baby. She starts a trajectory that takes form in her conversations with Mehri. Distancing herself from the dominant religious and moral prejudices of her society, Taraneh feels closer to Mehri and her friends than to Mrs. Keshmiri.

The film first and foremost is a critique of temporary marriage, which is only recognized as valid in Shi'a Islam and accepted by the legal system in Iran (Mir-Hosseini 164). According to Shi'a jurisprudence, through temporary marriage, whose main purpose is sexual pleasure, "a man requires exclusive access to a woman's sexual faculties for a specified period in exchange for a clear and definite payment" (165). In a temporary marriage, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini explains, the woman "has no claim to maintenance … even in the event of pregnancy" (165). This information helps the non-Iranian viewer to understand the roots of Taraneh's troubles as she gets pregnant

and later as a single mother. The film also criticizes the pressures that youth experience in Iran under police and legal surveillance. Marriage becomes the only option for Taraneh and Amir due to their families' traditional and religious values in a society where people are monitored and penalized for their everyday conduct in the name of Islam. Although Taraneh willingly agrees to marry, the social setting reveals how she is indirectly forced into it.

Taraneh's decision to keep the baby may seem to be echoing the anti-abortion laws in Iran. The risk of censorship that the topic can pose is undeniable and thus it makes sense to see the film's prolife option as a safe strategy to avoid censorship, but I suggest that the film offers a nonconformist idea about motherhood, family structure, and family lineage. In a traditional community where anything other than the classical family structure under the guardianship of a man is unimaginable, the very image of Taraneh as a single mother challenges the codes surrounding ideal family and motherhood. Confiding to her friend Parand, Taraneh says, "I wished to have a family like anyone else. How would I have known it would end like this? But nothing matters anymore. My family starts from me. I'll become a mother." Rejecting the limiting definition of family that can only be formed under the name of a man, Taraneh claims a position that is exclusively masculine in her society. By declaring the emergence of a complete family that starts from her, she defines an alternative family and she fights for it to be legally recognized.

Taraneh gives birth to a girl she names Naqmeh, which is a synonym for her own name and means a pleasant song. In order to get her a birth certificate, Taraneh needs to prove her marriage, a task that gets more difficult when Mrs. Keshmiri is not willing to cooperate as her son's representative. Despite all the troubles, Taraneh takes the case to the court and wins. Mrs. Keshmiri is shocked to hear Taraneh giving her own last name to the clerk, explaining that the

child does not have a father to take his last name. She also asks the clerk to leave blank the name of her daughter's father. Her action is a transgression against the accepted codes of family to create her own beyond the male discourse that legitimizes the institution. In other words, she creates a new family structure that is possible to exist outside the paternal order.

Under the judging eyes of her neighbours, Taraneh strives to have a normal life, expecting her father's release and hoping for new love. The film resists a romanticized depiction of Taraneh's pursuit of independence and her path to motherhood. The limited takes, tilted camera angles, and dark colours highlight the bitter reality of Taraneh's life. The opening deep focus shot shows Taraneh, with her back to the camera, walking down a long and semi-dark tunnel. The film ends in the same place, but this time Taraneh, holding her baby, is walking towards the camera. The repetition of the setting and the dimly-lit tunnel with an unclear end imply Taraneh's uncertain future before and after her marriage, and the depth of field highlights the fact that she is alone throughout this journey.

Border Café (2005), directed by Kambuzia Partovi, is another resisting film that transgresses certain cultural norms and refutes some expectations about women's roles in family and society as mothers and wives. The story takes place in a small town near the border between Iran and Turkey, and revolves around the life of a widowed mother named Reyhan and her familial and economic struggles after the death of her husband Ismail. In one of the beginning scenes, the camera follows a group of mourners, all male except for Reyhan and her small daughters, who accompany the clergyman to the border café that belonged to late Ismail. While men take the seats in the café, Reyhan and the daughters sit in the kitchen, reminding the viewer of the strict rules of segregation and heavily gendered spaces in the rural community in Azerbaijan province. After the clergyman prays for Ismail's soul and his family's wellbeing,

Nasser acknowledges his duties as Ismail's oldest brother and promises in the presence of relatives, neighbours, and friends that he will look after his late brother's family.

A woman from Southern Iran residing in the province of Azerbaijan after marrying into a traditional Azari family, Reyhan does not agree to marry Nasser, who is a married man with four children. She resists the pressures from her in-laws and goes against the cultural expectations of the community that wants her to submit to him as her family's new guardian. Despite Nasser's objection, Reyhan opens Ismail's border café with the help of Ojun, Ismail's assistant, to earn a living and support her two daughters. Afraid of the rumours that may affect the family reputation, Nasser uses every possible tool to stop her from running the café, a career that is considered masculine and thus inappropriate for a woman. But Reyhan's homemade dishes and the warm ambience of the café start to attract many customers, mostly foreign travellers and truck drivers. The thriving place brings more rumours and increases the tension between Nasser and Reyhan. Nasser manages to close the café but he cannot bring Reyhan to her knees. Determined not to yield to his will, Reyhan approaches the owner of a café across from Nasser's restaurant to rent his place to her to start her business again.

The film, which perceptively avoids feminist propaganda, seems to target the local audience and contributes to the current socio-cultural discussions revolving around women's issues in the country. A significant feature that attracts the viewer's attention is that the Islamic state is almost absent from the film and Reyhan's situation; in other words, the film is not reduced to a political critique of the government; rather, it delves into the micro-mechanisms of culture, tradition, and community that shape Reyhan's position as a woman and the dynamics of her acts and interactions throughout the story. Another noteworthy aspect is the portrayal of a woman who fights for her right of independence not out of systematic education but intuitive

emotions that define her love for Ismail and her refusal to marry Nasser and submit to the cultural norms of the community. It is in the context of these features that Reyhan's resisting and sometimes transgressive acts highlight the film's attempts to break out of a mere depiction of women's subordinate position.

Reyhan is not a perfect sacrificial mother-ideal; she is rather flawed. Marrying Nasser and accepting his financial support would make life easier for her daughters Sarah and Leyla and save them from the cultural stigma of having an unruly mother, but Reyhan refuses to act against her own desire. She chooses the path that aggravates their life. In the absence of Ismail, who used to take their older daughter to school, the ten-year-old Leyla has to quit school when it is not possible to commute. Nasser promises to take Leyla to school if Reyhan agrees to marry him, but her daughter's education is a privilege Reyhan is willing to suspend temporarily in order to achieve a greater goal, which is her independence. When she steps out of the domestic realm and into the café, a masculine space, to support the family, she brings along her daughters who spend their time in the café kitchen, where she prepares food, or among the people who stop for a meal or a drink. Away from home and in the midst of bustling hours in the café, Reyhan is not the all-caring, nurturing and devoted mother the society expects her to be, a fact Nasser frequently reminds her of.

Within a community where blood and ethnicity are the defining factors of selfhood and otherness, Reyhan's commitment as a wife goes beyond her relationship with her husband and extends to his family. Since she is the mother of Ismail's children, even after Ismail's death she remains the in-laws' namus, which means that her everyday conduct influences their honour. Reyhan is expected to stay in the family and guarantee herself a secure position by marrying Nasser. She is supposed to follow the local cultural customs and obey Nasser, the male authority

figure. When she rejects Nasser's proposal, she is seen as the self-seeking outsider who does not care about the in-laws' family honour. In their eyes, she does not fulfil her role as a devoted wife and mother, and breaks the rules of family and kinship. The in-laws, men and women alike, condemn her actions and invite her to reconsider her decision, accept Nasser's protection and leave the café to men, but Reyhan does not fall into the guilt trip and instead turns the café into an alternative space where family and kinship find new dimensions.

With Reyhan's cooking and the administration of Ojun, who is also a non-local, the thriving café becomes a hub mainly for foreign travellers who enjoy its homely warmth. The border café, a formerly masculine space, is a temporary replacement for home where outsiders develop an uncommon form of kinship. When Reyhan gives shelter to the 19-year-old Russian woman Svieta—the clandestine migrant who was on her way to Italy in search of a peaceful life—to protect her from the dangers of the road, she extends her motherly support and accepts her without any judgment. Helping Reyhan in the kitchen, playing with Leyla and Sarah behind the café, and staying at their house overnight, Svieta gradually becomes a member of their family. Similarly, the Greek truck driver Zakharia, who is attracted to Reyhan and her strong personality, becomes kin to her and the family she has created. What connects these people is not blood, marriage, ethnicity or even language. They come from different cultures and speak different languages, Greek, Russian, and Persian. Yet they develop a strong sense of understanding that is beyond Nasser's ken. Outside the box of restricting family rules and expectations, Reyhan offers support to strangers who become insiders, even closer than the in-laws.

Borders, as Gloria Anzaldúa writes, "are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe" while borderland is "a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of

an unnatural boundary" (25). Nasser represents the hegemonic discourse of classical patriarchy that set borders to define family and protect family relations from the unrelated, and Reyhan becomes the creator of a borderland that challenges the regulations of family borders. If borderlands are "the culturally indeterminate areas where identities and political affiliations are constantly negated and negotiated" (Getty and N igeartaigh 1), the border café is a space where border crossings are made possible. Its physical location and the nature of the communications that form in it constitute a borderland where the conventional criteria for belonging and exclusion are refuted and the rules are kinship are questioned and redefined.

It is worth noting that the café brings together those who are not settled and are seeking someone or something. Svieta has fled the war in her country and is in search of a peaceful life. Zakharia has not lost hope and still looks for his wife who abandoned him years ago. Ojun is a non-local whose nickname is "Dar-be-dar," which means wanderer, referring to the fact that he has no family ties in town and thus does not belong there. Reyhan, under whose protection this kinship has formed, seeks independence. What is significant about the members of this alternative family is their openness and acceptance of one another despite their obvious differences, a feature missing in the patriarchal values of the homogeneous local community the in-laws belong to. The border café becomes an alternative home where heterogeneity is celebrated and embraced. In this borderland that Reyhan builds, people are not superheroes; they are ordinary imperfect individuals with personal wounds, mistakes, flaws and histories that make them real. Reyhan is far removed from the mythic sacrificial and self-denying woman who is defined only by her wife/mother role; she fights first and foremost for her right of freedom and independence as an individual.

The story is narrated in retrospect by three people: Zakharia, Svieta, and Nasser. Each perspective adds to the film's complexity and helps the viewer better understand the motives behind the characters' words and acts. Zakharia and Svieta do not fully understand the cultural specificities of the tension between Reyhan and Nasser. Language is another significant barrier between them that sometimes leaves them with half-true conjectures. Therefore, their narratives create a relatively objective distance that allows the domestic audience to observe the events outside the cultural biases of their society. Their admiring words indicate how deeply they were touched by Reyhan's resilience and her strong character. Their narratives move the film beyond a simple portrayal of women's victimhood. In other words, Reyhan is not a silent victim that the film gives voice to; rather, she is a resisting woman whose voice resonates through Zakharia and Svieta's accounts. Nasser's narrative gives him a more humane face by situating his struggles with Reyhan in the context of the cultural values that shape his role as the head of the family. As a caring brother, he wishes to fulfil his duties and provide full support to his brother's family, but in order to do so without creating rumours in the community, he needs to legitimize his guardianship by marrying Reyhan and moving her and her children to his house. Yet in the closing scene of the film, when he recounts the story to his older daughter in the balcony of the unit he had prepared for Reyhan and her children, his drunken words become a declaration of his defeat, proving again the power of Reyhan's resistance and the influence of her actions. The film celebrates Reyhan's non-conformist and transgressive decisions as a mother and wife without romanticizing them.

"Ahoo," the second story of Marzieh Meshkini's episodic film *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), also depicts a woman's struggles in defiance of communal values. Ahoo is the name of a young married woman who is participating in a cycling race despite her husband's

disapproval. Like Havva, the child protagonist of the first episode, Ahoo is a native of the Kish Island. The place is of great significance because it bears a deep contradiction between the strong tribal values of the native residents and the shopping attractions it provides as a free trade zone for the middle- and upper- middle- class tourists from Tehran and other large cities. The luxurious malls, shopping centres, and hotel resorts give the island a modern look that overshadows the lingering traditional values that have survived the physical transformations of the city. If for most Iranians the island is a pleasant vacation destination, the film reveals a different face generally hidden behind the modern façade of the city. The episode tells the story of a confrontation between the two forces of tradition and modernity; while the former is strong, the latter is inevitable.

Away from the busy streets of the city, the episode opens in the plain where a man riding a horse is searching for someone, calling the name Ahoo (which means gazelle). The shots of gazelles running away in the plain each time the man calls out the name help to characterize the woman and also foreshadow what is to come. In Persian culture, gazelle connotes grace and innocence as well as elusiveness and swiftness. The way the man chases Ahoo also resembles the way a predator runs after the prey to hunt it down. The man finds Ahoo among a group of women riding their bikes on a quiet road along the Persian Gulf. Revealed to be Ahoo's husband, he asks her to get off the bike and leave the race if she wants to save her marriage, but Ahoo's answer is negative. Seen in the centre of the frame riding along the road with the women in the background, the man physically dominates the image. His aggressive tone and body language, his height on the back of the horse, and his white clothes in contrast with women's all-black garments intensify his dominating position. The medium shots capturing his calls and Ahoo's reaction imply the power relations between the two. The man, shown again in the centre

of the frame with the vast tropical landscape in the background, looks into the camera from an angle above the eye and shouts to her to stop, echoing his authority and power. Ahoo, who is also shown in medium shots, with other cyclists behind her and struggling to keep her hijab intact, seems unstable and disturbed. Her face which is in focus in the foreground reveals fear, fatigue, and unease, but she does not surrender.

Unable to convince her to leave the race, the man comes back this time with the mullah and threatens to divorce her immediately. The mullah begs her to think of her family honour and obey her husband, but Ahoo is determined to continue the race. After the mullah follows the husband's order and divorces them, the man shouts at Ahoo that it is all over now, and then rides away. The moment he leaves, all the voices and sounds disappear from the soundtrack except for the sound of her cycling. It then mingles with the sound of waves hitting the shore. The soundtrack and the dramatic slow-motion shots of Ahoo light-heartedly cycling along the water create a sense of freedom, which soon fades away with the emergence of vibrating simple notes of melody that create suspense and nervousness. The road sign, saying "This is your location" without providing the location on the map, indicates a sense of uncertainty and uprootedness, implying what awaits her after the divorce. Despite the husband's words, it is not over; the divorce is only the beginning of further troubles ahead. A few metres past the sign, she overhears two women from the group gossiping about her, reflecting a glimpse of the aftermath of divorce for a woman like her in a traditional society.

The two other groups of men— the first including her father and the second the men of her tribe— who show up on their horses during the race cannot change her mind. Every time each group approaches, she increases her speed, looking more determined to win the race. Ahoo finally gets off the bike when her two brothers block her way. They take away her bike, but they

cannot stop her from moving. The episode ends with an extreme long shot that shows Ahoo walking in the opposite direction towards the camera. Her mobility is a process that cannot be stopped or undone.

I'm Taraneh, 15, *Border Café*, and *The Day I Became a Woman* unfold the complexities of their female protagonists' experiences in the context of cultural, legal and economic pressures that rule the dynamics of power relation between genders. Coming from the working class or living in a very traditional community, Taraneh, Ahoo, and Reyhan belong to the margins of Iranian society, but they are not voiceless or passive; they relentlessly fight for their independence regardless of the expectations of their society and family.

Border Café and *I'm Taraneh, 15* do not deal with children's perspective on their mother's roles and responsibilities; Reyhan is not seen from the eyes of her daughters, and Taraneh's daughter is still too young to have an opinion. The question of children's understanding of motherhood remains unaddressed in these films. Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* (2002) and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (1997) respond to this particular aspect by highlighting the relation between women and their children and their struggle to make a balance between their rights as women and the cultural norms that form their children's expectations.

Perils of Motherhood: Mothers in the Eyes of Their Sons

Kiarostami's *Ten* comprises ten countdown sequences that screen conversations between Mania— a young photographer who is divorced and remarried—and her passengers as she drives around the busy streets of Tehran. Each sequence starts with a number and the sound of a whistle, reminds the viewer of sport events, which, as Jonathan Rosenbaum suggests, has "a distancing and formalizing effect" (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum100). These conversations are

recorded on two digital cameras attached to the car's dashboard, showing the driver and her various passengers through separate camera angles. Mottahedeh agrees that the film can be taken as "an ethnography of the life of urban Iranian women" (138), but she moves beyond the content and draws attention to Kiarostami's minimal directorial role throughout this documentary-like fiction film. Highlighting the link between "the body of the veiled women" and Kiarostami's cinema after the Revolution, Mottahedeh argues that his absence from the set in the film "points up the possibilities of heterosocial interactions between female actors and their male director" (138). Reading the film as a coda to Kiarostami's oeuvre, Mottahedeh writes that *Ten* "reads as the exposure of the now de-auteured auteur's literal quotation of modesty laws in his post-Revolutionary work" (139).

Ten addresses the cultural notions of womanhood, marriage and motherhood through Mania's conversations with her passengers, including her ten-year-old son Amin, her sister, and the strangers she gives a lift. Of the six passengers she picks up, her son is Mania's only male companion who appears in four of the sequences that take place over an indefinite period of time. One of the distinctive aspects that make the film a proper case study for this chapter is its focus on the mother-son relationship. Dedicating a considerable portion to the conversations between Mania and Amin, the film shows the mother from her son's perspective and reveals how their tensions are deeply rooted in Amin's understanding of a woman's duties as a mother and wife. Seeing his mother as an egotistic woman who sacrificed her marriage for her job, Amin undermines Mania's motherly affections and easily disrespects her. He is not willing to hear his mother's side of the story when Mania explains why she was not happy in her marriage and decided not to stay with a controlling man. Mania fails to persuade him to see their mother-son relationship outside her first unsuccessful marriage. In Amin's eyes, he and his father are the

victims of the unjustifiable ambitions of a self-centred wife/mother. Amin's anger toward his mother, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa notes, "reflects not only his father's attitude but the attitude of an entire culture toward any woman who takes the initiative in a divorce, in pursuit of her own interests" (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum 101).

The opening sequence, which runs for more than fifteen minutes and is the longest of all, includes a lengthy close-up of Amin whose "patriarchal rant" shows him "like a puny version of Mania's suffocating ex-husband" (Mottahedeh 138). The camera angle, Amin's close-up and his dominance throughout the long take create uncomfortable moments for viewers who seem to be receiving his bombarding accusations and sharing the experience with Mania. The sequence ends with a brief medium close-up of Mania only after Amin leaves the car. "From this point on," as Motahhedeh suggests, "the camera associates its view with this photographer's veiled body, gives itself to the claustrophobic environment she has long tried to escape, and attends to her tempered frustration with the erasure of women from Iranian societal laws" (139).

In the first sequence, Amin is planning to move in with his father seven years after his parents' divorce. The three other sequences of his conversations with Mania take place after he has moved out of Mania's house. In each sequence, Amin is more aggressive than the previous one and less willing to communicate with his mother. In the ending sequence, which is the shortest of all, he gets in the car and, in response to his mother's greeting, he demands to be taken to his grandmother's, without even bothering to look at Mania. The four sequences reflect the growing distance between the son and the mother over a stretch of time, anticipating a broken relationship. Amin both echoes his father and expresses his own thoughts that reflect his developing character as a male. His attitude casts doubt on the possibility of a more open-minded generation of men in the future. Unlike the only old woman in the film, who seems to accept all

the pains, failures and losses of life in the name of destiny and God's will, the young women, especially Mania and the sex worker, show signs of rebellion and non-conformity. The contrasting image of the old woman and the young women in the film implies a statement about younger generation of women in Iran; the character of Amin implies the perpetuation of patriarchal values that dominate the power dynamics between the sexes.

Saeed-Vafa argues persuasively that the prevalent use of exterior scenes and public spaces as location in Iranian cinema has to do with "the cultural notion of privacy" ("Location" 204). Such scenes are also used as a strategy to cope with the rules of modesty and governmental regulations. Public spaces function as "a cinematic version of Hijab" used by many filmmakers to address more private and inner feelings (Saeed-Vafa, "Location" 204). *Ten* uses the car as its location because it is "the ultimate private space" (Saeed-Vafa, *Abbas Kiarostami* 100) and yet it is within the public space and requires female veiling. It brings together some elements from both public and private spaces. It does not have the personal privacy of a bedroom, but it provides the characters a relatively secure place within the exterior space to talk about their personal fears, frustrations, and expectations.

The conversations between Mania and her son provide most of the information about the story, including the stormy marriage of Amin's parents and their divorce, Mania's busy life as a career woman, her current husband and Amin's resentment toward him, her ex's plan to remarry and her son's approval of his father's decision, and Amin's ideas about an ideal mother and wife. The dialogues between Mania and the other women reveal other aspects of women's experiences, including their struggle to combine career and family, their sense of identity, female love, desire and sexuality. Their talk, as Ronaldo Caputo argues, "gives a *voice* to issues that are troubling both at an individual, private level, and at the public level of cultural ideology" (n.

pag.). The episode with the sex worker in particular tells a lot about the power dynamics of marriage, and offers an alternative perspective to prostitution and female desire, topics that will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

Ten has some similarities with Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* (1997) that breaks the taboos of divorce, single motherhood, and female desire by portraying a career woman who struggles to achieve a balance among her job as a filmmaker, her role as a divorced mother, and her desires as a lover. Within the film, the protagonist Forough Kia is directing a documentary on exemplary mothers, a project she describes as a way to know herself. Besides pursuing her career, Forough is caught between her teenage son's possessive feelings and her own desire to be with her lover, Mr. Rahbar, who remains off-screen throughout the film. The film puts together snippets of her everyday life and career, including her struggles with her son Mani, her phone or epistolary conversations with Mr. Rahbar, and her interviews with different women from working-class mothers to lawyers, publishers, and politicians in her attempt to find the criteria for an ideal mother.

The May Lady is a bold movie in the sense that it unveils the disparity between the reality of women's experiences and the myths of ideal womanhood/motherhood. Forough is a caring mother who has raised her son in the absence of her ex-husband who left Iran after the Revolution for political reasons. The mother and son are very close. Mani's attachment to his mother is obvious in his affectionate, and even flirtatious, manner when he gives her earrings as a birthday present, or when he takes her shoes off after she comes home from work, feeling exhausted. His behaviour implies broader aspects of their relationship, which are reflected in Forough's statement that "He is playing the man in my life." One reason for his possessiveness, as Bani-Etemad explains in an interview with Gönül Dönmez-Colin, has to do with Iranian

culture; “Men are very sensitive in issues relating to their women, wives or mothers,” she adds (Dönmez-Colin 22). Hoping to protect his mother from emotional attachments to any man other than himself, Mani tries to be both her son and her lover. He cannot accept Mr. Rahbar as a part of his mother’s life because in his mind his presence is in conflict with Forough’s motherhood. In a society where mothers are considered selfless non-sexual beings, their right to romantic love is not recognized. When Forough’s friend encourages her to embrace her love for Mr. Rahbar, Forough confides to her about the worst dilemma she is facing as a mother. “When you are a middle-aged woman and a mother, you can’t easily talk about love,” she says. “If I say I want to live with the man I love, the first thing I will lose is the crown of motherhood,” she adds. Like a crowned queen or a saint on the pedestal, a mother is admired for her absolute devotion that cannot be combined with love and desire for a man. A woman cannot pursue romantic love if she is a devoted mother nor can she have both because her society sees love in conflict with motherhood. At first Forough is not sure how to deal with her love life because she does not wish to lose her son, but she finally comes to terms with it and asks Mani to respect her choice. She manages to bring about a reconciliation between her motherhood and her love life, embracing her other half.

The opening shot of the film rhymes with the ending shot, implying Forough’s transformation throughout the story. The movie starts with a static close-up of Forough showing half of her face while she is on the left side of the frame. Later in the bedroom, the camera focuses on her portrait photo with half of her face shrouded in the shadow, referring to the hidden emotions that are not acknowledged. The trope, as Dönmez-Colin argues, suggests that Forough “hides her feelings such as her love for a man; half of the character is always hidden” (21). The ending shot is another close-up of Forough, this time showing all her face on the right

side of the frame. Changing from a hidden half to a full image of her face and moving from the left of the frame to the right, the two resembling yet different shots create a cyclical structure to capture the nature of her growth and movement. In the absence or denial of desires, she is not a complete person. Coming to terms with her right of love besides her role as a mother and career woman, Forough achieves a sense of wholeness by the end of the film, and rejects the notion of motherhood as a selfless person who finds absolute satisfaction through her 'holy' duties.

The protagonist's name, as Naficy suggests, is a tribute to the Iranian poet and filmmaker Forough Farrokhzad (*Social History* 4:161). An influential modernist poet, who lived a controversial life as a divorced woman and mother in a patriarchal society, Farrokhzad (1935-1967) was the subject of many rumours about her non-conventional love life. Her strong female voice and candid poems on female desire were a revolt against the conservative notions of women's chastity. Farrokhzad wrote both about her motherly affections and her sensuousness. By borrowing the name of such an iconoclastic female figure, the film draws the viewer's attention to the similarities between its protagonist and Farrokhzad. Although Forough Kia does not appear as transgressive as Farrokhzad, the film pushes the boundaries of modesty in post-Revolution Iranian cinema by portraying an artist who is a single divorced mother in an unmarried relationship. The last line of the film, when she introduces herself over the phone, is telling in the context of her blooming as a complete woman. While she is facing the camera, her voice-over is heard saying "Hi, I'm Forough"; the naming, is "the triumph … of the individual over the collective" (Naficy, *Social History* 4:163). Her full face and the enunciation of her name suggest individuality, female agency, and female subjectivity. Like Farrokhzad, Forough Kia moves beyond a sacrificing mother figure to embrace romantic love and desire.

As Forough works on her documentary about exemplary mothers, fragments of the documentary are incorporated within *The May Lady*. Through her interviews with working-class mothers, mothers of Iran-Iraq war martyrs, lawyers, politicians, and publishers, she seeks to define the characteristics of an ideal mother, and she finds it extremely difficult to determine which one of her interviewees to feature as the exemplar of perfect motherhood. Questioning her own place among the large number of phenomenal mothers, who, in her words, "left love in their children's coffins and buried it with them," Forough feels guilty about her relation with Mr. Rahbar. But as she finds her way through hesitation, she decides to leave the project, believing that she is not qualified to judge her interviewees and select one as the best. Although she continues to film and edit the documentary, by rejecting the initial idea of featuring one as the exemplary mother, she denounces the dominant views about good mothering, oppressive images that perpetuate the socio-cultural prescriptions for women to fulfil the unrealistic expectations of motherhood.

Tragic Triumphs of Resistance in Afghanistan

The selection of films from Iranian cinema discussed in this chapter represents a wide range of resisting texts that unveil the cultural foundations of women's subordinate position, the burden of marriage and unrealistic images of ideal motherhood on women's shoulders, and women's constant struggle to achieve a balance between their different roles in family and society. The study of similar topics in the context of Afghan cinema proves the existence of resisting films that reveal the patriarchal values affecting women's experiences of marriage and motherhood. For instance, *Ellipsis* (2004) directed by Roya Sadat, the first woman filmmaker in the history of Afghanistan, bears some similarities to *Border Café* and its portrayal of a widowed mother

striving to make a living despite various pressures. The film has major technical deficiencies, but since it is the very first work of an Afghan female director, one cannot ignore its significance. *Ellipis* stands out for yet other reasons. While Siddiq Barmak's *Osama* and similar movies justify the U.S. invasion by portraying women's victimhood under the reign of the Taliban without referring to the long history of foreign political and military interference in Afghanistan, *Ellipsis* depicts the life of women and men who live miserably even after the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of the Western-supported government of Hamid Karzai. As Graham argues, the film shows that "when the world should be transformed and the great evil shaken to its very foundation, we find that instead nothing has changed" (134); it also reveals how "gender oppression continues, enabled by the American government's support of warlords who continue the misogyny where the Taliban left off" (134).

Like Reyhan in *Border Café*, Gol Afrooz is a young widowed mother living in a village by the border and struggling to feed her children after the death of her husband, the breadwinner of the family. She is also stalked by her brother-in-law Shir who, according to the rules of their community, assumes it his right to marry Gol Afrooz. When Shir's wife warns him about his decision and reminds him of their poverty, he says he can afford not only two but three wives. If the tension between Reyhan and her brother-in-law forms the central conflict in *Border Café*, Shir's request is only a marginal and unimportant problem for Gol Afrooz. If Reyhan can gain economic independence to support her children, Gol Afrooz can barely feed them. Despite her strong will, she is defeated by the harsh realities that have to do with her geographical location that is shaped throughout history.

In the drought-ridden border village where farming is no longer possible and thus people have lost their only source of income, warlords employ men and women as drug couriers. Gol

Afrooz bakes and delivers bread to the house of Khan, who is the local warlord, but her income is less than enough to feed her family with only stale bread. Even marrying Shir cannot save her and her children. Living under the shadow of a man's name, she might be safe from other men's sexual pursuits, but still she will be hungry as Shir's wife. Her children will be sent to her late husband's parents, who also suffer from poverty. Gol Afrooz cannot stand the thought of being apart from her children, so marrying Shir is not an option for her. Watching her constant struggle, Khan offers to hire her as a drug courier. She first resists but when she finds no other way to pay for her children's food and her ailing son's medication, she ultimately crosses the border but is immediately arrested by the Iranian border security who separate her from her son. Although she is never passive, economic deprivation and brutal poverty leave no room for Gol Afrooz's agency.

I agree with Graham that *Ellipsis* can be seen as the sequel to *Osama*. If the latter justifies the need for a saviour in the name of Afghan women's victimization, the former "thrusts the viewer into the world of historical contingency to finally face the challenge of continued Afghan suffering" (Graham 134). As Miriam Cooke argues, "Politics in the era of American Empire disappear behind the veil of women's victimization" (228). The U.S. feminist majority supported the invasion in the name of saving Afghan women (Cooke 227). The chadari became the symbol of women's oppression and the American mission was to lift it. Unlike *Osama*, which follows this imperial logic, *Ellipsis* does not lift women's veil; it rather unveils the dark reality of Afghan life that continues to exist after the U.S. invasion. The barren desert surrounding the village and the harsh winds create an unpleasant atmosphere resonating with the resident's austere life in the peripheries. Short dialogues or silence between characters, especially women, prevail throughout the movie. This vocal paucity along with the empty landscape serves the minimalist imagery of

the film that is in contrast with the depth of the tragedy it portrays. As Graham suggests, "there are no words … to contain the enormity of what this widow (and by extension her nation) has seen and experienced" (136).

The film portrays Gol Afrooz's struggles in the context of the prevailing economic and political corruption, but it does not fail to reveal various aspects of gender oppression and the cultural forces shaping women's experiences and their social and personal interactions. When Gol Afrooz goes door to door asking her neighbours for a bowl of flour, every household shares the same story of poverty. Lonely women look after their hungry children in the absence of husbands who have been lost. Gol Afrooz can finally get the bowl filled where there is a man to support the family. In the afflicted and dysfunctional community, where most people have to submit to Khan's authority in order to survive, there is no room for willpower. Gol Afrooz has to go to Khan in order to save her children; she has to plead with the Mullah to persuade Shir against his marriage proposal. With men's tight grip over economic and religious powers, women's limited agency is reduced to its minimum, leaving them almost no freedom of choice or decision. Gol Afrooz's daughter silently watches her as she strives to save her family. The repeating close-ups and medium shots of Gol Afrooz's daughter highlight the despairing look that never leaves her face as she witnesses the everyday tragedy unfolding in front of her.

Although the film criticizes the patriarchal structure that perpetuates women's subordination, it does not reduce all women to voiceless victims. Gol Afrooz and the other female characters are not bound to the private; they are rather mobile and active, working hard and fighting against the cruelties of life forced upon their nation. Even the folksongs they sing echo their fears, opinions and objections. For instance, consider the scene showing five village girls carrying urns of water and singing this song about marriage:

Girls pick flowers but don't smell them.
Stay in fathers' homes! Don't get married.
Fathers give us wheat bread
But husbands sting us like scorpions. Oh, father, I'm a good girl!
Don't marry me off to an old man
Or I will be banished from my family.
I will go mad in far-off black mountains.
You married me off far-away.
I was not content but you did it by force.
I didn't agree, but it was my fate.
You used me as firewood in this furnace.

They express their pain and fear through the song which unfolds the common marital customs that are against women's will. As Graham writes, the scene "makes it clear that tradition is never simply the provenance of men. Women … craft folk songs like this one, laments that by their existence testify to their powerful presence within the traditional culture" (140).

Besides these women, the film portrays those who enforce the rules of patriarchy. Shir's mother, for instance, meets Gol Afrooz a few times, trying to convince her to marry her son despite the fact that she will have to abandon her children. She is complicit in serving hegemonic patriarchy and assisting her son to achieve polygamy, a right he is entitled to by their traditional culture. Shir's mother, as Graham argues, is "a comprador colonized from within, and a reminder that patriarchy is a cooperative enterprise" (141).

The film challenges misogynist marital customs, yet it rejects a one-sided negative image of Afghan men whose company would bring only misery for Afghan women. While Gol Afrooz

confides to a female relative that she was married to Samad against her will, she recalls the short period of time she happily spent with Firooz, to whom she was engaged based on mutual love. The short flashback to that temporary period is in contrast with the rest of the scenes in terms of colour, clothing, and makeup. Throughout the film, dust and soil dominate the setting, and the characters' dark clothes and pale faces are in harmony with the muted colours of mise-en-scène, but the flashback shows Gol Afrooz with vibrant makeup and floral clothes. She joins the clean-shaven and well-dressed Firooz with an affectionate smile and admiring eyes. They are working together to build their house while behind closed doors Gol Afrooz's mother agrees to marry her off to Samad.

Ellipsis is not a transgressive text, but it manages to tell the tale of Afghan women in a political context. It portrays women as daughters, wives, widows, and mothers, in the context of tradition, war, imperialism, economic and political corruption, and religion, without presenting them as silent and passive victims. *Ellipsis* is a legitimate precursor to *Syngue Sabour* (2012), an unconventional film that boldly crosses the red lines of Afghan culture and dares to break the taboos of the fatherland by addressing sex, body, and sensuality, the most denied and hidden aspects of womanhood in traditional Afghan society, and offers a transgressive image of motherhood.

Syngue Sabour [*The Patience Stone* (2012)], directed by the Afghan-French novelist and filmmaker Atiq Rahimi, is based on Rahimi's novel of the same title, which was published in 2008.The film is the story of a young mother of two children in war-ridden Afghanistan looking after her husband, who is in a coma after being shot in the neck. She finds herself revealing her painful childhood memories and dark secrets of her marriage to her unresponsive husband,

viewing him as her patience stone that would absorb her disheartening tales of fear and pain and release her from suffering.

Although the film indicates that the story is located somewhere in Afghanistan, the unnamed war and city in an unspecified contemporary time draw attention to the long history of civil wars, political tension, tribal patriarchy, and religious fundamentalism the country has experienced. The opening scene provides a succinct sketch of the country's historical context: as the camera slowly moves along a grey wall and over a grey-blue curtain with shadow-like patterns of migrating birds, news-slices from radio anchors and Afghan politicians' speeches from different eras are heard that declare the assumption of power by a new party. These voices blend with the sound of tanks, gunshots, sirens and rockets, and people shouting "Allahu Akbar" (God is great) in the background. In these interspersed news pieces, the names of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, Mujahedeen, and Taliban are clearly mentioned, referring to the country's political tensions and the numerous wars of the last four decades.

While militant groups start to take control of the area and violence increases in the neighbourhood, the unnamed female protagonist of the film, anxious and desperate over her husband's sixteen-day- long coma, spends her time saying her prayers which, according to the mullah, the imam of the mosque from whom she seeks advice, might be the only possible solution to her husband's recovery. Locking her children out of the room so that they will not disturb her unconscious husband, she spends her time at his side and talks to him about her fears and frustrations. Regardless of her husband's unconsciousness, whenever she needs to leave the house to do chores, she asks for his permission as if she cannot imagine doing otherwise. After the neighbourhood loses its relative safety, she is abandoned by her husband's mother and brothers who, once proud of him fighting heroically for years in the name of Islam, do not even

ask why he was wounded. Their hero now lies unconscious in bed because of an insult: “Just because a man said to you, ‘I spit in your mother's pussy!’ Someone on your own side! You get insulted and end up with a bullet in the neck!” his wife whispers with tears in her eyes. It is ironic that the husband was wounded by a man from his own party; it also reflects the sternness of honour culture in Afghan society.

Upon failing to accomplish her task of bearing a child a few months after her marriage, the protagnonist should have been replaced by another woman who can fulfill her “function” adequately. The protagonist’s mother-in-law, who plays an important role in maintaining patriarchal values, repeatedly urges her son to remarry. In traditional patriarchal societies, becoming a mother-in-law is probably one of the only opportunities for women to exercise power in the family and have authority, especially over daughters-in-law; the woman becomes a jealous and protective mother for the son, and the daughter-in-law remains a rival who has to learn to submit. In the film, the young woman is under the constant tortures of her mother-in-law; she explains to her husband that she soon realized her position as a young married woman was at risk. “You don’t know what I had to do to make you keep me. If you had known, you would have killed me. I didn’t want you to abandon me. If you had abandoned me, everyone would have rejected me, my father, my mother, everyone,” she whispers to her husband (*Syngue Sabour*). For the young woman, who is in danger of complete social ostracism and abandonment, the only way to avoid this situation is through becoming a mother.

The protagonist does not have any other choice but to become a mother in order to save her marriage; interestingly, she never talks about her own desire to have children. There is no scene in the film in which she displays “motherly” affections towards her children with the extreme sensitivities ascribed to “ideal mothers.” She locks her children out of the room and

spends most of her time beside her husband. She absent-mindedly responds to their calls of hunger, fear, or loneliness only after she makes sure that it is safe to leave her husband for a short while. She seems wholly devoted to him and thus, motherhood simply becomes a medium through which she can perfect her commitments as a wife. It is ironic then that she fulfills what her society perceives to be her highest duty—bearing children for her husband—through adultery.

According to Sharia, the punishment for married women who commit adultery is stoning to death, which gains its legitimacy from the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. It is worth mentioning that not all Muslim countries follow Sharia; countries like Iran and Saudi Arabia apply almost all the codes while some only practice a few aspects of Sharia Law, and others have secular systems and do not apply them at all. There are several *hadiths* quoting Muhammad prescribing the penalty for adultery, including this one: "Take from me, take from me as *Allah* has revealed to me the penalty for the adulteresses; for the unmarried is 100 lashes and for the married is *al-rajm* [stoning]" (qtd. in Noor 100-101). Although it does not take place in all Muslim countries, stoning is still practiced in some Sharia-ruled countries; for instance, it has existed in the criminal codes of Iran since 1983 (a few years after the establishment of the Islamic state) and is used as a penalty for adultery (Terman 3). Stoning was also common under the Taliban in Afghanistan (Drumbl 354-355).

"Under patriarchy," Harriet Lerner states in *The Dance of Deception*, women are well schooled in pretending and deception" (15). As Lerner elaborates, "pretending may be necessary for survival, or ... absolutely essential" (16). In their kitchen or backroom gatherings, women share stories about how to fake virginity on their wedding night or to hide pregnancy from their family before their wedding ceremony. In *Syngue Sabour*, the young mother unveils such female

secrets in her long monologue. She confesses to her husband, "I've lied to you […]. On our first night, you thought it was the blood of my virginity. But I had my period. I kept that from you on my aunt's advice. I was [a] virgin but I was afraid, afraid of not losing any blood" (*Syngue Sabour*). Faking virginity blood is one of the first tricks that she learns from her aunt to preserve her marriage, but it does not stop there; she needs her aunt's assistance with different ploys to negotiate and live within the strict rules of patriarchy. In fact, it would be almost impossible for women under traditional patriarchy to survive without other women's complicity and support. In *Syngue Sabour*, the young mother's accomplice, her aunt, is a sex worker. She was sent to live with her parents-in-law by her husband because she could not bear children. After being raped constantly by her father-in-law, she murdered him and escaped. It is ironic that as a sex worker she is in a better situation than the time she was under the control of her in-laws. In a sense, she has found shelter in prostitution. Determined to help her niece keep her marriage, the aunt does not deprive her of support. As the young mother reveals in the final scene, it was with the help of her aunt and her pimp that she could become a mother and save her marriage.

Smiling with confidence, the protagonist lies down next to her husband and says, "I was not sterile, *you* were," verbalizing a reality that is silenced in her society: infertility is only associated with women and the possibility of a male being barren is unthinkable. When a couple cannot have children, the only presupposed solution is the husband's remarriage. There is no place for doubts about a man's fertility and virility because they are closely connected with his masculinity, and thus unquestionable. As Rich notes in her foreword to *Of Woman Born*, defining childbearing as women's primary role and the dominant fact of their life has been so strong in different cultures that "[t]erms like 'barren' and 'childless' have been used to negate any further identity ... [while] the term 'nonfather' does not exist in any realm of social

categories" (11). *Syngue Sabour*'s protagonist dares to use the term "sterile" for her husband and breaks the myth of men's virility as a universal fact in her culture. She describes that she had intercourse with a strange man locked up in a dark room. It happened several times and then she became pregnant with her first child. Revealing how secrecy and guile have shaped her identity as a wife and mother, the woman brings her tales to an end by explaining that she had to use the same technique for her second pregnancy, but she is not sure if it was the same man from her first liaison or not. Her narrative is a story of trickery, which brings to mind the long tradition of feminine guile in literature, popular culture, and folklore.

From folktales to popular culture, sitcoms and Hollywood movies, one can find numerous examples of guileful women who apply every possible trick to achieve their desires. In Middle Eastern cultures, there are abundant references to women's trickery in proverbs, folktales, literary and religious texts, but all attribute guile to women's nature. Laura Mulvey argues that "the sexualised image of woman says little or nothing about women's reality, but is symptomatic of male fantasy and anxiety that are projected onto the female image" (qtd. in Najmabadi 206-207). Following Mulvey's argument, Afsaneh Najmabadi invites the readers to seek for the male unconscious in wiles-of-women stories. She explains that folktales are cultural fictions that need to be analyzed within their own cultural and historical context (208). Folktales might reflect the values, fears, and tenets of social order, or they can function as instructive, controlling, or warning mechanisms. As powerful devices to uphold patriarchy, folktales were sometimes used to position women into conventional gender roles. In oral and written folktales from Muslim cultures, according to Margaret Mills, there are two types of female trickster: anti-social and pro-social. While the anti-social woman trickster "acts for her own non-procreative sexual gratification, to the destruction of the social order, male authority, and the individual

males who come in her way," the pro-social female trickster makes use of tricks in order to "secure justice and repair social order, including patriarchal, sexual and family order" ("Between Covert and Covert" 63). In the tales of women's trickery that Najmabadi, Mills, and Fadwa Malti-Douglas read from Islamicate cultures—either Arabic or Persian—the seductive woman is severely punished and the humble and faithful woman is rewarded with marriage and motherhood. While men are warned against the guiles of women and encouraged to strengthen their bond with other men, women are reminded of the consequences of seduction and trickery and are exhorted to adhere to the codes of modesty.

Based on her recordings of oral narratives in Afghanistan in the 1970s, Mills explains that in these folktales there are plentiful examples of *makr-i zan* [women's guile]. As Mills notes, studying folklore in the contemporary Afghan context is important because Afghanistan is primarily an oral society in which spoken words have crucial significance in everyday life: "people's words are their bond; social values are taught orally through folklore and commentary on everyday events" (60-61). Atiq Rahimi has paid significant attention to the folktale and oral tradition in *Syngue Sabour*, which is reflected in its title, narrative elements, and structure.

In Persian literature and folklore, *syngue sabour* [patience stone] is a magic stone that has the power of releasing people from their pain. The person, who is always humble and righteous, puts the stone in front of her, and confides all her agonies to it; the stone then absorbs these pains and shatters into pieces to set her free from her suffering. Finding a strange feeling of comfort in talking to her unconscious husband, the young woman in the film decides to tell him everything. It is ironic that the husband, who has never before been present to listen, becomes her patience stone after ten years of silence between them. The film provides an in-depth image of the woman and her struggles throughout marriage, yet she remains nameless as do the other characters.

In Persian as well as in Arabic anecdotes and folktales, women generally remain nameless with no specific personal information about them. Malti-Douglas argues that "[t]his absence of information ties in with the namelessness to create simply a female voice, unidentified and nonspecific" (38). Unlike folktale characters who are flat, *Syngue Sabour*'s protagonist proves to be very complex: this devoted wife has ten years of secrecy and astuteness hidden in her heart. Although she has saved herself through various ruses, she is more complicated and dynamic than the two common types of female trickster in Middle Eastern folktales. Her affairs only serve procreative purposes; she sleeps with unknown men to get pregnant, and her encounters are devoid of any sexual gratification on her side. Filled with fear and disgust, she cries and throws up after each act of intercourse but gradually learns to accept it "with a feeling of guilt," as her destiny. Unlike the guileful women in folktales who only desire sex, she surrenders to copulation to submit to a patriarchal social order that reduces her to a procreative function and that does not recognize any social status for women outside the box of marriage and motherhood. It is only motherhood that brings status to her, and she is determined to gain it through each and every possible way, even adultery, which is in contrast with the ideal image of mother that is pure and angelic.

Syngue Sabour has some interesting similarities with *The Thousand and One Nights*, the renowned Middle Eastern book of folktales. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, King Shahriyar, having lost his trust in women after his wife's infidelity, marries a succession of virgins and executes each one the next morning. Determined to save women from being murdered, Shahrzad, the daughter of the *vazir* [vizier], steps in and marries the king. After the consummation of the marriage, with the assistance of her sister Donyazad, who asks for a story, and the king's approval, Shahrzad tells a story until the sun rises but leaves it unfinished. The king, curious to

know the ending, gives her another night, but Shahrzad continues her tales for one thousand and one nights until Shahriyar realizes his mistake and begins to change. Through Shahrzad's story telling, the king is healed and she is saved from death and rewarded with motherhood.

Believing that she is destined to be set free by telling her husband the unsaid, the woman in *Syngue Sabour* starts narrating her own tales and secrets of their marriage, even though she is constantly interrupted by rockets, the invasion of militant groups, hunger, and exhaustion. Her stories reveal the tricks undertaken by women, but unlike the stories told by Shahrzad in *The Thousand and One Nights*, these ones are not about the wiles of other women—they are stories of her own guile. If Shahrzad has saved the lives of other women and herself through narrating misogynist wiles-of-women stories for the king while standing in the position of a wise and modest woman, the woman in *Syngue Sabour* also risks her life more than ever by confessing to the deceits that she has had to undergo to save her marriage and, thus, her marginal position as a woman. Najmabadi argues that Shahrzad is ultimately safe from the wrath of the king because of her complicity: "the only safe woman is a complicit woman; a woman who narrates these 'healing' tales is enacting a plot of masculinity production" ("Reading: And Enjoying" 214). While Shahrzad exonerates herself through her complicity, the young mother in *Syngue Sabour* unveils the traumatizing and self-destructive aspects of her submission to the patriarchal pattern—revelations that endanger her.

In "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich invites authors to revise, to look back "with fresh eyes" and to enter "an old text from a new critical direction" (35). She explains that it is imperative "to know the writing of the past, and know it differently than we have ever known it; not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us" (35). As if answering Rich's call, Rahimi brings elements of folktales into his work yet, with fresh eyes, digs out the

roots of patriarchy in women's tales of deception and shifts the focus to women's perspectives. Being aware of the cultural significance of folktales, Rahimi, in his narrative, initiates a dialogue with them from a critical viewpoint. The tricks employed by women, embedded in the culture and folktales of the Middle East, become one of the main themes of *Syngue Sabour*: not to repeat negative stereotypes of women but to delve into the socio-cultural roots and reasons of the long tradition of women's covertness. The film breaks the silence and seeks the source of women's trickery in patriarchy. In her analysis of women's wiliness in Persian oral literature, Mills reminds us that "guile is a weapon of the weak" ("Whose Best Tricks" 263); *Syngue Sabour* narrates the struggles of the most repressed members of society from within, giving a voice to the oft-silenced.

In *The Thousand and One Nights*, Shahrzad is the wise storyteller, and Shahriyar is the one who is healed by Shahrzad's tales; as Najmabadi argues, the very act of narrating misogynous stories becomes part of the healing of the king ("Reading: And Enjoying" 214). In *Syngue Sabour,* the healing happens for the woman protagonist through the process of her narration, while the husband is the one who is shattered in the end. Along with revealing her secrets, she experiences a crucial conversion in which she moves from guilt and shame to self-awareness, and shifts her focus from her husband to herself.

Rahimi's *Syngue Sabour* borrows some themes and elements from Middle Eastern folktales to tell a contemporary tale of a woman's secrets and guiles, but unlike them, the film seeks to examine the reasons for women's secrecy and trickery in social and cultural structures. Breaking out of the duality of angelic-demonic mother figures and giving priority to the individual perspective of the woman, who is kept silent and thus unheard, *Syngue Sabour* reflects on the complications of motherhood and shows how it is entangled with and informed by notions

of masculinity in Afghan society. The film also suggests that in Afghan culture, motherhood is a controlling social institution that perpetuates patriarchy and functions as the sole channel through which a woman is guaranteed a relatively safe position on the margins, under the shadow of a man. *Syngue Sabour* is in fact a brave unmasking that reveals the shivering truths about female experiences.

Conclusion

The wide range of resisting texts examined in this chapter reveals various aspects of the cultural structure within which women's everyday experiences of womanhood take shape. The films' critical perspectives on marriage and motherhood unveil the patriarchal norms that determine women's roles within family, and bring to mind Rich's statement that "the experience of maternity and the experience of sexuality have both been channeled to serve male interests" (*Of Woman Born* 42). If *Ellipsis* depicts its female protagonist's troubles and pains within and outside marriage by laying bare the oppressive cultural conventions of her society, each of the other films moves at least a few steps further to challenge some of those values and offer nonconformist strategies to undermine women's subordinate position. Taraneh builds an alternative family outside the hegemonic norms of patriarchal structure; *Border Café* uses widowhood as a starting point for the female protagonist to claim her right of independence as a woman; Reyhan transforms the border café into a borderland where new forms of kinship and family are possible to develop and grow; Mania and Forough claim their right to love as career women and divorced mothers; Ahoo rejects her oppressive husband to pursue her goals at the price of losing her marriage; the protagonist in *Syngue Sabour* practices her agency to achieve the redeemed position of motherhood through infidelity. They are all active subjects disobeying

or breaking the rules in one way or another. They are not perfect mothers or women; they embrace their imperfection to denounce the cultural myths of ideal motherhood/womanhood.

Chapter Three: Representing Female Desire and Sexuality

Women's sexuality is one of the strongest cultural taboos in all Islamicate societies, including Iran and Afghanistan. It is recognized and legitimized within marriage only as a tool for satisfying the husband's sexual needs. The ideal woman is an angelic and self-sacrificing mother and obedient wife. This image puts forth a spiritual creature with a precious inner pearl that needs to be preserved from possible contamination, and thus leaves no room for female sexuality. Clerics and other religious public figures are almost the only group who have the right to address sexual issues; focusing on men's sexual needs, they remind women of their religious duty of 'tamkin' (obedience) and urge them to satisfy their husbands unconditionally. Other than such state-supported traditional views, sex and sexuality are absent from public discussion in both Iran and Afghanistan, whether in the official media or the institution of education. Therefore, female desire and sexuality are among the most intriguing issues to study in both national and émigré Iranian and Afghan films.

Shortly after the Islamic Revolution, "the representation of women and romantic love in Iranian cinema became the subject of much controversy" (Naghibi 119). But filmmakers have managed to create critically powerful works even under the codes of modesty. Love, desire, and eroticism as highly controversial topics have appeared more frequently on screen, yet through a veiled and ambiguous visual language that is also present in Afghan films, mostly due to strict cultural norms rather than governmental supervision. If domestic films must abide by rules of modesty, émigré cinema enjoys a distinct level of freedom in its critical approach to the contentious themes of desire and sexuality. This chapter examines a selection of films to explore how each group contributes to the immature discourse of female sexuality and desire in cultures that have disregarded it for so long, how films like *The May Lady*, *The Blue-Veiled*, *Nargess*, and

A Few Cubic Meters of Love manage to touch upon such controversial topics with subtlety, while *Syngue Sabour*, *Women without Men*, and *All Hell Let Loose*, all by émigré directors, tear down the veil and address the issue directly.

Divorced/Widowed Mothers in Love

Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady*, Kambozia Partovi's *Border Café*, and Abbas Kiarostami's *Ten* depict divorced/widowed mothers and their struggles with romantic love in a culture where female love and desire are incompatible with the mythic image of motherhood. Each film highlights certain aspects of female desire and subjectivity through a veiled visual language that has been developed in post-Revolution Iranian cinema.

Kiarostami's *Ten* addresses female sexuality in the context of marriage and prostitution in the episode where Mania converses with a sex worker. As the only episode filmed at night, it shows that Mania out of curiosity gives a lift to the sex worker who gets in her car mistakenly, assuming that the driver is a man. Repeating the word "interesting" to describe the nature of the woman's profession, Mania hopes to get a glimpse of her life. She wants to know how sex workers can sleep with someone in the absence of love, and how they can live without any sense of sin or guilt. But unexpectedly, in response to her questions about the whys and wherefores, the woman starts challenging her supposedly secure and ethical position in marriage. In a few seconds, a conversation that seemed to give Mania the opportunity to cast light on the immoral life of a fallen woman is turned around and Mania is put on the spot. She immediately loses her dominant position in the dialogue and the judging gaze is reversed. While the sex worker is off-screen, Mania is in focus during the lengthy close-up that shows her face—sometimes hidden in

the shadows or showered with street lights—and gradually exposes her vulnerable sense of righteousness hidden behind her moral principles as a respectable mother and wife.

The sex worker remains off-screen during the episode except for the final seconds when she gets out of Mania's car and the camera cuts into a long medium shot as she walks away and gets picked up by a male driver. The fact that her face is never shown is significant for two reasons. First, the film defies the stereotypical imaging of the sex worker as heavily made-up, with unusual hair colour and provocative clothing, and thus rejects the fetishistic eroticism associated with the image and instead adopts a non-voyeuristic strategy. As a result, it does not create a contrast between Mania as the decent working wife and the sex worker as the fallen woman. Second, her visual absence provides her some level of privacy and protects her from the judging or curious eyes of the viewer. This strategy matches the woman's approach in responding to Mania's questions that have a moralistic tone. Surprisingly, she does not offer the common narrative that describes prostitutes as victims of violence, rape, or poverty. She does not allow Mania to pity her; she repeatedly points out that she loves her job and enjoys it. Also, she undermines Mania's superior position that comes from her socially approved status as a married woman, and unsettles the power dynamic between them by mocking Mania; she calls her an idiot, returns her questions about guilt and shame by questioning her marriage and the validity of her love life, and reminds her of women's economic and emotional dependence in marriage.

In *Marked Women: Prostitutes and Prostitution in the Cinema*, Russell Campbell suggests that cinematic representations of female prostitution mainly serve the male imagination within the framework of patriarchal ideology. He argues that even the attractive image of the rebellious prostitute who defies patriarchal norms and achieves financial and sexual autonomy is "usually finally contained within the dominant ideology, with the protagonist being reformed or

punished" (35). In other words, the punishment she receives or the reform that the prostitute undergoes by the end of the film counteracts her rebellion. Unlike Campbell's description of the dominant imaging of the prostitute in cinema, the sex worker in *Ten* is the rebel and remains so. She embodies the qualities that Nickie Roberts praises in sex workers: "The whore is free in the sense that she does not bind her sexuality to any one man; on the contrary, she openly challenges the notion of female monogamy" (354). The sex worker in *Ten* has chosen her profession in reaction to men's promiscuity, which even in Mania's eyes is common and acceptable. Unlike the two other women in the film, who grieve for being abandoned by the loves of their lives, the sex worker explains that her ex's infidelity opened her eyes to women's pitiful status in marriage. She reproaches wives for their emotional, sexual, and economic dependence on men for whom it is socially accepted to fool around. She also derides the moralistic approach that depicts wives as respectable members of society; she does so by comparing their function within the institution of marriage to the prostitute's role: both the wife and the sex worker engage in a give-and-take relationship with the man; the difference is that the sex worker preserves her sexual and financial autonomy while the wife loses her individual integrity in marriage.

During the conversations with her son and sister, Mania defends her right to have a loving marriage. In response to Amin's statement that he does not love his stepfather, Mania explains that she married in pursuit of happiness, not to find him the perfect stepfather. She expresses her emotional needs in marriage. Other young women in the film talk about their love life or express their sorrow over losing the men they loved, complaining about men's infidelity. But the sex worker is the only character who openly addresses female sexuality and desire. Her episode was one of the reasons the film did not receive screening permit in the country;

Kiarostami did not agree to cut it as the officials at the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance had asked him to (Hayes n. pag.).

In the context of a veiled cinema and society, the sex worker unveils women's subordinate position within marriage. She ridicules the supposedly honourable wife-figures, and laughs at marriage as an institution that serves men and controls women's sexuality. It has been argued by some scholars that prostitution serves the male order. As Campbell suggests, both marriage and prostitution are institutions created by patriarchy to provide companionship, nurturing, reproduction, and sexual pleasures for men (3). The female sex worker, even the rebellious one, is ultimately outlawed, marked off, and discriminated against. But what is distinguished in *Ten* is the strategy of using the character. If we accept Eylem Atakav's assertion that "one of the projects of the patriarchal paradigm is to reduce the prostitute on screen to an object of male desire" (86), then the film defies that paradigm by criticizing the patriarchal structures in marriage and highlighting female subjectivity.

Ten plays on the idea of homoeroticism. In conversation with Saeed-Vafa, Rosenbaum suggests that Mania's flirtatious tone and the sex worker's erotic jokes about Mania's real intention for giving her a lift create highly sensual moments that draw attention to lesbians in Iran, a fact always denied by the state (Saeed-Vafa and Rosenbaum102). Although acknowledging the idea, Saeed-Vafa argues that Mania admires the woman "because of the strength, integrity, and self-containment of her silent suffering and secret rebellion" (102). Maybe Mania comes to appreciate the woman by the end of the episode, but that is not how she feels at the beginning when the woman gets in her car. The erotic moments take place in the opening moments of the sequence and briefly draw attention to another sexual taboo within a patriarchal system that denies female homosexual desires. By recognizing female

homoeroticism, the film does not limit female desire to heterosexual relations, even though the governmental regulations make it impossible for the filmmaker to address the topic in detail.

Unlike *Ten*, with its relatively open approach to the issues of sexuality and desire, Kambozia Partovi's *Border Café* and Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* provide subtle pictures that adopt an averted gaze and communicate their themes of desire and eroticism through certain images, symbols, and references without violating the rules of modesty. When the state and society encourage the unreal image of mothers as holy figures, portraying realistic images of mothers without halos is indeed onerous. When physical contact and expressions of intimacy and desire between men and women are not allowed on screen, it becomes challenging to touch upon the sexual and the erotic, a task *Border Café* and *The May Lady* undertake carefully, each in its own unique way.

The influence of government regulations is evident in *Border Café*'s screening strategies or certain objects or characters that are used as vehicles to convey the erotic and the emotional throughout the narrative. For instance, Reyhan's three-year-old daughter Sarah is a medium through whom emotional tensions between the three main characters are handled. In other words, a child protagonist becomes a pretext that reflects the bodily aspects of the male-female relations among Nasser, Reyhan, and Zakharia. Nasser holds Sarah and caresses her kindly every time he visits Reyhan. He brings Sarah presents and talks about the daughters' need for fatherly love, promising he will do more once they move to the new unit in his house. In response, Reyhan pleads with him not to spoil Sarah and let her get used to her father's absence, implying that Nasser cannot replace Ismail in their family. She does not accept the gifts Nasser brings for the girl. Zakharia's feelings towards Reyhan are also projected on Sarah; the kindness and care he showers on Sarah are an indirect way of communicating with Reyhan. He holds Sarah and gently

touches her hair. He points to her eyes and lips, trying to learn some Persian words. Unlike the times Reyhan rejects Nasser's affectionate behaviour with her daughters, she allows Zakharia to express his feelings and openly communicate with them. When Zakharia puts Sarah on his lap and kindly whispers in her ear, Reyhan happily watches. She allows her daughters to keep the souvenirs that Zakharia brings for them. In the absence of tactile and emotional connections that cannot be shown on screen, Sarah functions as a medium that reflects Nasser's and Zakharia's feelings towards Reyhan. The way Reyhan responds to the two men's relationship to her daughter indicates how she feels about each of them.

Another medium utilized to illustrate some aspects of sensual desire between Reyhan and Zakharia is food. Reyhan stays in the kitchen preparing food for the customers, not paying attention to the men who come and go, except for Zakharia. She knows the exact dates Zakharia stops at the café for food and rest. When he arrives, she puts extreme care into preparing his food; she garnishes his dish and carefully wipes off the plate rim. Then she stands by the kitchen window and watches Zakharia with joy as he gratefully tastes the delicious dish she has exclusively prepared for him. In other words, food carries the erotic weight between the two characters and conveys their growing desire for one another.

When the border is closed for a week because of the political tensions in the region, Zakharia decides to stay at the cafe. A day before the border opens, he practices a few Persian words he has learnt from the Iranian drivers to express his feelings to Reyhan. Shaving in front of a small blue-rimmed mirror outside the café, Zakharia is shown through a couple of close-ups and medium shots from behind as he is rehearsing his confession in Persian. In the evening as Reyhan and her daughters are leaving to take the mini-bus home, Zakharia approaches her and says the words. In a medium shot with Reyhan's face in focus and the mini-bus in the

background, she lets go of the corner of her chador when he says he loves her and her daughters and asks her to go with him. Looking startled, she walks away from him and runs to the mini-bus. In a long shot, the mini-bus drives away as Reyhan looks towards the camera, not taking her eyes from Zakharia. The camera immediately cuts into a close-up of Reyhan at home as she is watching herself in a mirror that is identical to the one Zakharia had, creating the effect that the sequence is a straightforward response to his words. Reyhan gently touches her forehead and the wrinkles on the corners of her eyes, and moves her fingers to her cheeks. She then takes off her scarf and smiles as steam covers the mirror, showing that she is in the shower, creating a highly sensual image without being voyeuristic. This erotically charged sequence embodies Reyhan's desire for the forbidden love of Zakharia. She later says no when Zakharia comes to her house to officially propose. Wearing a white chador over her light-coloured clothes, Reyhan is shown in a medium shot as she gloomily says she cannot and the next shot shows her two daughters sitting next to her, referring to her responsibilities as a mother.

Like other aspects of women's experiences, female desire and subjectivity are located. Living in a rural area within a traditional community, Reyhan is bound to strict cultural rules that curtail her expressions of love and desire. Under the constant surveillance of neighbours and relatives, her daily interactions are limited. Although an outspoken woman, Reyhan is prudent when it comes to expressing her emotions. The ending saves the film from being a romantic narrative about a miserable widow saved by the love of a man; it also offers a realistic picture of Reyhan and her social responsibilities and considerations as a mother. Her choices at the end are culturally located, associated with her social class and the specificities of the place where she lives and raises her children.

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *The May Lady* addresses love and female desire in an urban middle-class context with an educated, working protagonist who is aware of her rights. As Naghibi has observed, the film is controversial especially because it addresses "women's right to love" (118), a characteristic it shares with *Border Café*. Compared with Reyhan, Forough is more vocal when it comes to her love life, but in general the film adopts a highly veiled visual language. For instance, Forough's lover, Mr. Rahbar, remains off-screen, and therefore there are no scenes depicting physical aspects of their relationship. Their interactions are depicted through their phone calls and letters. This particular feature resonates powerfully in the context of the enforced veiling that has affected arts and cinema as well as women's daily life in Iran. Under the Islamic regulations, portraying a realistic and honest image of the private and the personal is extremely difficult; these regulations usually have led to directors ignoring female desire or indirectly addressing the topic. By visually concealing Forough's lover, Bani-Etemad reacts to the rules of modesty that tend to curb women's representations on screen. The film gives access to him and his thoughts only through his interactions with Forough; he does not have an autonomous presence in the film outside his relationship with her. Hence, Forough finds a central position around which other characters, especially Mr. Rahbar, and their significance are determined. In light of a veiled visual language, this strategy reinforces Forough's subjectivity.

Forough's expressions of love and desire are veiled as is her body, but her voice dominates the narrative. She conveys a sense of dilemma throughout the film and sometimes even blames herself for loving a man other than her son, yet she does not refute the significance of her love life. Talking to a close friend during an evening walk in the park, Forough says, "The worst dilemma is when you have to choose between two main principles of your life," referring to motherhood and romantic love, and seeing her love for Mr. Rahbar as important as her love

for her son. The viewer has access to Forough's opinions about romantic love and motherhood through her correspondence with Mr. Rahbar, her conversations with Mani and her friends, and her inner thoughts via voice-over. Her diary also becomes a powerful medium to communicate her private thoughts and feelings as a divorced mother in love. On her birthday, she gives her diary to Mani and wants him to read it because she has nothing to hide from him. Mani is touched by a passage that describes Forough's experience after divorce. While they are shown through medium shots and close-ups as they are sitting at the small dining table at home, the viewer hears the passage through Forough's voice-over: "Then it was you and me, Mani's mother, but Forough was left and forgotten somewhere like many other women in my situation who left their other half, and no one remembered the fact that a woman is not only a mother, but is a woman and in need of love." They are interrupted by Mr. Rahbar, who unexpectedly appears at their door, seemingly willing to join them in celebrating Forough's birthday. Accusing his mother of expecting Mr. Rahbar, Mani furiously leaves the house although minutes earlier he was silently crying over reading the diary. Mani's objections affect Forough's approach to her love life, making her keep it separate from her everyday social and personal life and treating it as something that cannot be fully embraced. Nonetheless, she eventually finds inner peace as she recognizes and claims her other half that defines her beyond her role as a mother. She manages to view love and desire as inseparable parts of her life that cannot be denied, ignored, or hidden.

To Desire or to Be Desired: Women Fighting for Romantic Love

Popular culture generally promotes images of desiring men and desired women. In most societies, it is common, even encouraged, for a man to openly express his feelings and chase the woman he is attracted to. Iranian and Afghan cultures are no exception; traditionally, if women

wish a respected status in their community and among their future in-laws, they are expected to wait for men to initiate romantic love. The dating culture is changing, especially among young urban women and men, yet these traditional values still linger. To be desired legitimizes a woman's love for a man; the acceptable formula is that she receives love and then desires in return; otherwise, she is stigmatized as a lustful, seductive, and dangerous woman, violating the ideal image of womanhood that embodies obedience, submissiveness, and innocence. Afghan society is even more inflexible; a woman can only love back, after marriage, if the man is approved by her male relatives, mainly her father and bothers. *Love Crimes of Kabul* (2011), a documentary by the Iranian-American filmmaker Tanaz Eshaghian, reveals these specific cultural rigidities by showing a women's prison in Kabul where almost half of the prisoners are jailed for 'moral crimes' such as premarital sex and running away from home. The pregnant 20-year-old Kareema, for instance, is awaiting trial for having premarital sex with her fiancé, and the 18-year-old Sabereh was turned in by her father for having an affair with her suitor. These cultural differences and similarities regarding women's desire and love are well reflected in Bani-Etemad's *Nargess* and *The Blue-Veiled* and Jamshid Mahmoudi's *A Few Cubic Meters of Love*. Regardless of their profound differences, they all depict assertive female characters who fight for the man they love and do not hesitate to break the social norms that prevent them from reaching their goal.

Nargess concerns a male thief named Adel who falls in love with Nargess, a young woman from a large poor family with an ailing father who easily approves their marriage. To Nargess' mother, Adel's proposal might be her daughter's only chance to have a better life. The couple's joyful days are soon disrupted, however, when Adel is arrested and Nargess finds out about his real profession. Their story is set in the context of a love triangle that involves Nargess,

Adel, and his first wife and crime partner Afaq, who is about fifteen years his senior. Hamid Naficy argues that "the love triangle itself is not as radical as it seems, for polygamy is a traditional practice that the Islamic Republic had revived" (*Social History* 4:158). But I suggest that the nature of the relationship between Afaq and Adel is indeed radical, an aspect that has been overlooked. Unlike the common images of polygamy showing older men taking two or three younger wives, this film offers an exceptional case in which the woman has power over the man. Afaq is the authority figure and Adel strives to set himself free from her control and his loveless marriage forced upon him when he was only a teenager.

Throughout Adel's conversations with Afaq, Nargess, and the fence he works with, it is revealed that as a child, Adel ran away from home after his father's death and his mother's second marriage. Afaq, a young woman who had been abandoned by her drug-addicted husband, gave Adel shelter, accepting him as the child missing in her life. When Adel reached puberty, they married upon Afaq's request. It is implied that theirs was a temporary marriage and thus not registered. A thief, Afaq trained Adel to work as her partner. Now, after several years, Adel has moved out and struggles to save himself from the relationship in which he is trapped. Meeting Nargess reminds him of his right to love and independence, two crucial traits missing from his relationship with Afaq.

When Adel's mother refuses to perform the traditional proposal ceremony for him, Afaq offers to play the role of his mother and join him to meet Nargess' family only if he does not abandon her. Adel reluctantly agrees and Afaq stays away from the couple as she had promised, but after Adel is jailed Nargess goes to Afaq, still believing that she is her mother-in-law. Afaq keeps her company during the few months Adel is in prison. After being released, Adel is upset to find Afaq staying with Nargess. Assuming that Afaq intends to ruin his marriage, Adel tells

Nargess the truth about his first marriage. To his surprise, Nargess is more troubled by Adel's profession than by his relationship with Afaq. She pleads with him to find a decent job, a task that proves to be extremely difficult for someone with a serious criminal record. When there is no hope of finding a real job, Adel agrees to join Afaq to execute her last robbery plan that goes well and leaves them with a few million in cash. With a bag full of money, they go to Nargess and ask her to join them before the police arrive. They are planning to move to the south, where nobody knows them and they can start a new life. Feeling shocked and insulted, Nargess grabs the bag and runs outside, intending to give the money to the police. Adel and Afaq chase her down the highway to stop her. Adel and Nargess fight over the bag until she gives up, throws the bag into the road and walks away. Hesitating for a moment between Nargess and Afaq, Adel goes after Nargess when a loud car screeching and Afaq's scream stop them. The closing sequence shows Afaq's body soaked in blood with the bag by her side. Death seems to be the only ending the film can offer for the woman who lives out of the bounds of cultural and social norms.

The film pushes the boundaries of modesty in every possible way; as Naficy has observed, "casting a woman as an expert thief" is a good example of the film's several transgressions (*Social History* 4:158). Afaq's profession is one of the features that make her stand out as a highly unconventional female character portrayed against the approved image of womanhood. Rather than prudent and pious, Afaq is wild and boorish; she violates the generally accepted canons of women's proper behaviour. She is aggressive and uses coarse language; she does not hesitate to confront Yaqoob, the fence, or Adel if she does not approve of their opinions. She humiliates Yaqoob when he haggles over the price of stolen items. She does not even hide her love and passion for Adel; despite Adel's indifference, Afaq does not give up her

desiring gaze. The film gradually discloses that, like the other characters, she is a marginal person and the product of rough circumstances, but she is not depicted as a voiceless woman crushed under social and economic hardships. She exercises power over the people around her and challenges the conservative dynamics of female-male power relations. In sum, unlike the obedient and naive family woman, Afaq is the embodiment of female unruliness, and her death echoes the fact that there is no place for her in society. Not fitting into her domestic and social roles, she has to die to make room for the ideal wife-figure of Nargess, the resilient and sacrificial woman who strives to save her marriage at any price.

Although sexual fetishism is absent from Afaq's character, she certainly has a lot in common with the *femme fatale* figure, the enigmatic and seductive woman who, in Rebecca Stott's words, is the symbol of "otherness" and "represents chaos, darkness, death, all that lies beyond the safe, the known, and the normal" (37). I agree with Helen Hanson and Catherine O'Rawe that "Each manifestation of the femme fatale has to be studied in relation to its local context and history" (3). The construction of the *femme fatale* in the work of Bani-Etemad is significant for conveying the cultural unease around the agency of the unbound woman. Afaq's active sexuality, although veiled throughout the film, and her unorthodox powerful presence work closely with her enigmatic essence to portray her as the embodiment of threat against the male order. The tragic ending reflects the punitive consequences for active female sexuality and a nonconformist desiring woman.

Nargess utilizes certain visual techniques to reflect on love and desire. Direct eye contacts and desiring gazes are frequent throughout the film, but in the absence of male-female physicality, the filmmaker "employs a mediating object" (Naficy, *Social History* 4:159). The sequence showing a heated argument between Adel and Afaq is a good example: when Adel

leaves, Afaq takes one of his shirts from the closet and holds it in her arms. Weeping quietly, she smells the shirt and rubs it gently against her skin. The shirt becomes the mediating object to show Afaq's feelings for Adel. Bani-Etemad also uses objects or settings to allude to romantic intimacy. Afaq offers her house to the newly married couple as the only decent place for them to spend their first night together. She is about to leave the house when the bride and groom arrive with their guests. Afaq runs up the stairs and hides in the stairway until the guests depart and the couple is left alone. Looking down the stairs, Afaq sees the touching white heels and black leather shoes right by the closed door, implying the couple's union and physical intimacy, which means Afaq's biggest fear –losing Adel— has come true. Although codes of modesty have forced certain limitations on the film's portrayal of an unruly woman, Bani-Etemad succeeds in reflecting the perils the character of Afaq imposes on the conventional roles of women in Iranian society. She also uses this figure as a cinematic device for highlighting the oppressive social and cultural norms that control female sexuality and subjectivity.

If Bani-Etemad's *Nargess* is the tragic portrayal of a desiring woman who strives to take charge of her love life, her *The Blue-Veiled* depicts a brighter future for another woman who is desired. The young single Nobar must support her underprivileged family and protect her younger brother and sister from their abusive opium-addicted mother. She finds a low-wage job at a tomato plantation that belongs to the generous widower Rasoul Rahmani. Nobar attracts Rasoul's attention from the very beginning when she stands against the factory's hiring policy that gives priority to married applicants. Overhearing the conversation between Nobar and his assistant Asqar, Rasoul is impressed by Nobar's assertive manner. An upper-class good-willed senior, Rasoul is highly respected among his relatives, friends, and employees. Knowing that his feelings for a young working-class woman would affect his relationship with his daughters and

taint his reputation, Rasoul decides to find Nobar a supportive husband from a decent family who would accept her for who she is. Nobar does not hesitate to reject the suitors Rasoul finds for her and threatens to leave her job if he wants to marry her off. When Rasoul finally confesses that he is in love with her, Nobar admits that she feels the same. They agree to conduct sigheh—the temporary, renewable marriage that remains unregistered— to avoid clashes and conflicts with Rasoul's family. His daughters find out about Nobar and try to bribe her into leaving their father, but when she declines their offer, they approach their relatives and ask for help. Feeling insulted and disgraced, Rasoul tells his daughters and sons-in-law that all his wealth is theirs; he packs a suitcase and leaves to live with Nobar.

Regarding the topics of love and female desire, the film requires close analysis from two different aspects: the role of women in their romantic relations, and the film's strategies to visually manage these controversial topics within a veiled cinematic discourse. To achieve this goal, I first analyze the characters of Kaboutar and Nobar, and then examine the relationship between Nobar and Rasoul as well as the collateral story of Asqar and Kaboutar, who both work for Rasoul.

In the beginning, Kaboutar and Nobar are shown as self-confident single women who fight for their rights. Although struggling with financial issues, they strive for economic independence. In her late thirties, Kaboutar is still single and lives alone. She is a strong-willed woman whose femininity is hidden behind her tough appearance, coarse-hair-covered face, and crude language. Other workers call her Qodrat, a male name that means power, referring to her unfeminine looks. Kaboutar breaks the silence and revolts whenever she is discriminated against or bullied because of her gender. When she protests a male colleague's continuous harassment in vain, she uses physical violence as the last resort. Like her, Nobar does not tolerate being

objectified or discriminated against. Their self-esteem and sincerity draw Nobar and Kaboutar together to build a strong friendship. They live and work within communities where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained and modesty brings women social acceptance and respect. In such a cultural milieu, Nobar and Kaboutar challenge the male-dominated norms of virtue. While women are advised to avert their eyes from unrelated men, these two female characters dare to gaze. Especially Nobar's piercing gaze is repeatedly highlighted through close-ups that accentuate her beauty framed in her loose, bright-colored headscarf.

Nobar and Kaboutar work ceaselessly to take control of their lives despite all the existing problems, and reclaim their agency in almost every aspect of their private and public lives yet, when it comes to love and desire, their confident and forceful personalities seem to fade away. They do not act to express their feelings to the men the love; they rather wait for the men to initiate the dialogue, as if their romantic feelings gain credibility only after men's approval. Kaboutar is in love with Asqar, but she admits her feelings for Asqar only after he proposes. In a similar manner, Nobar expresses her feelings for Rasoul only after he confesses to his love for her. Before that, Nobar uses passive aggression to react to Rasoul's attempts to find her a decent man. After their marriage, when Rasoul's daughter and son-in-law visit her to ask her to leave their father, instead of saying that she is Rasoul's wife and thus is not going anywhere, Nobar mumbles that she will leave only if that is what Rasoul wants. Her tone and body language are very different from those of the audacious Nobar the viewers got to know earlier in the film. Her trembling voice and shy eyes pinned to the ground in this scene have nothing in common with her confident voice and bold gaze in other scenes. The way Nobar and Kaboutar handle their love life reflects deeply entrenched cultural assumptions about romantic love and its gendered structure. Even assertive women like them fall short of their standards in the context of romantic

love. They seem to acknowledge their right to love only after receiving the men's approval. They lose their independent voice and autonomous subjectivity; they do not initiate but rather play along.

Now to look at the strategies of the film and the way it presents romantic love and portrays moments of desire and intimacy. *The Blue-Veiled* conforms to the codes of modesty in some ways and pushes the boundaries in others. The non-urban setting allows for portraying Nobar in floral dresses and colourful headscarves. Her bold body language and confident verbal communications tell her apart from the stereotypic images of working-class women as voiceless and submissive. Her blue scarf makes her stand out in the crowd of working women, most of whom are dressed in dark clothes. From the beginning, every time Rasoul runs into Nobar, he finds her wearing the same blue scarf. After he allows her to bring her little sister Senobar to work, one morning Rasoul calls out "Hey, you blue-veiled!" upon his arrival at the plantation. While the viewer expects to see Nobar to be the addressee, she is shown wearing a red scarf. As Nobar and Senobar greet Rasoul, the audience watches the two sisters, one in a blue scarf and the other in a red one, gratefully welcome the man. From this moment on, the film presents Senobar as the substitute for Nobar for expressions of intimacy or romantic reciprocity that are not allowed on screen. This special role is also implied in the playful use of the name Senobar that holds the word 'Nobar' in itself. Thus, under the rules of modesty, Senobar becomes a medium to portray the relationship between Nobar and Rasoul. In one scene after the marriage, Rasoul is sitting on the porch at Nobar's, caressing Senobar's head on his lap and telling her a story, while exchanging affectionate glances with Nobar. As Naficy argues, "This tender scene strongly suggests that [Senobar] is a stand-in for [Nobar] who cannot touch her lover and lay her head on his lap" (*Social History* 4:159). In general, the film manages to maneuver around visual

restrictions and succeeds in capturing the essence of desire and romantic love in the life of female characters who fight for their rights.

Imaging Desire and Sexuality beyond Governmental Regulations

If domestic filmmakers resort to ambiguity and indirection when working with the controversial themes of love, desire, and sexuality, émigré directors enjoy a notable level of freedom which is well reflected in the thematic and visual aspects of their work. In Iranian and Afghan émigré cinemas, Susan Taslimi's *All Hell Let Loose* (2002), Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2009), and Atiq Rahimi's *Syngue Sabour* (2012) are significant in terms of their dauntless and uncompromising ventures that push the boundaries of gender and sexuality.

Among these three films, Taslimi's *All Hell Let Loose* stands out because it examines the cultural tensions around gender and sexuality in the context of migration. Unlike the two other films that are set in Iran and Afghanistan, *All Hell Let Loose* illustrates the struggles of an emigrant Iranian family in Sweden as the father's sense of honour, moral values, and patriarchal authority are challenged by his wife and daughters. The film opens as Minoo returns from the United States to her family to attend her sister Giti's wedding. Her father, Mr. Sarbandi, who runs a home-based catering, does not welcome her return because he had thrown her out a few years ago, after she became pregnant by her Swedish boyfriend. Through vignettes of the past and Minoo's nightmares, it is revealed that she had an abortion before moving to the United States, where she worked as a stripper and appeared in low-budget porn videos. As Sarbadni strives to regain authority in the family, Minoo uses every possible strategy to defy his control and consequently the tension between the two increases. Sarbandi locks her up in a bedroom right before Gita's wedding, but Minoo manages to escape and shows up as a belly dancer at the

ceremony, doing a strip-tease in front of the guests as an act of revenge. Feeling disgraced and humiliated, Sarbandi denounces Minoo and his whole family in the presence of the guests, who leave in embarrassment. Afterwards, Sarbandi's mother, who lives with the family, summons her son to join them and eat now that they are gathered together after Minoo's return. Sarbandi is heard off-screen replying that he is coming. Rochelle Wright argues that Sarbandi's authority is lost forever, "but by challenging him publicly in such a provocative manner Minoo has also made her own situation untenable" (68). She adds that "Though the film ultimately illustrates the breakdown of patriarchal authority, it does so without providing a positive alternative" (68). Unlike Wright, Gow suggests that the ending implies the possibility that Sarbandi "will eventually come to accept his diminished authority as family patriarch and will attempt to sketch out a new role for himself within the family unit" (113). Like Gow, I believe that the film indicates the possibility of reconciliation between Sarbandi and his family only after his concealment strategies are shattered, his family secrets are exposed, and he is faced with all his fears of disgrace. Men's honour is determined by their women's daily conduct, so Minoo's half-naked body during the ceremony can be interpreted as a metaphor for Sarbandi's vulnerable position as he stands undisguised under the gaze of the people of his community. Now that all his fears have come true, Sarbandi is emotionally and mentally naked, having nothing to hide anymore. After being unveiled in the eyes of others, Sarbandi might be able to find a way to mend the broken relationships within his family, perhaps this time outside a patriarchal structure.

It is not an exaggeration to argue that for Iranians family is the most important social institution, where the roles are clearly defined in terms of gender and age. Culturally and legally, the husband is the head of the family and thus financially responsible to support his wife and children. The ideal wife, compliant and devoted to her husband and children, is the exemplar of

sexual virtue for her daughters. Parents play a significant role in children's education and marriage, and children are raised under strong parental control and expected to respect and follow family and cultural traditions and norms. Female virginity is still the symbol of virtue and great value, and premarital sex is not acceptable by most parents. It is common for grandparents to live with the oldest son and his family. They are treated with respect and consulted on certain family occasions and decisions. Children are expected to express politeness in their language and behaviour, and euphemistic vocabulary rules the daily interactions within the family.

In the light of these facts, the Sarbandi family is indeed a dysfunctional unit with no future if its members, especially the father, are in denial and blindly continue to stick to patriarchal values and traditional rules that have lost their meaning. The image of the Sarbandis is a mockery of the flawless and sacred notion presented and promoted by the Islamic state. *All Hell Let Loose* exposes the failings and other dark family realities that are normally kept secret or denied. It does not hesitate to challenge the veneration for the institution of family and the fake halo surrounding it. Sarbandi cannot keep control over his family and his authority is constantly challenged by his wife, children, and mother. The fact that his first name remains unknown in the film is very telling in the sense that his identity is merely shaped by his role as the head of the family. It seems that he has nothing outside the family structure and that is why he works so desperately to exercise power over his entire family. His wife Nana flirts with Leif, the handsome mechanic who visits regularly to fix and maintain her sewing machine; she does not even try to hide it from Sarbandi. Sarbandi is most proud of his younger daughter Giti, who is engaged to an Iranian man he has approved. Sarbandi believes that having abided by his rules, Giti has saved her virginity for her future husband and their relationship is as limited as Srabandi has asked, but she secretly meets with her fiancé for sexual flings. Not feeling safe and secure at

home, Giti and her fiancé make out behind Sarbandi's back and have sex in the elevator. His teenage son Sami secretly smokes with his friends in the storage room, where he accidentally learns of his mother's sexual liaison. He urinates in the teapot before serving tea to his family and the guests. While Giti and Sami use subtle or non-confrontational strategies to denounce their father's authority, Minoo rebels openly against the traditional structure of the family. She fights back as Sarbandi tries to regain his weakened authority and force his outdated moral values on them. Lastly, Sarbandi's mother, Farmour, is far from the sage and charismatic elder who respects others and in return is treated with reverence; she makes fun of Sarbandi for his "unmanly" job, ridicules, and dismisses him in front of his family and friends, and even hits him like a child. She has no scruples about using obscene and overtly sexual language. The iconoclastic image the film presents serves to disrobe the institution of family of its assumed sacredness and to lay bare the clashes between patriarchal values and modern families in transition. *All Hell Let Loose* depicts "the erosion of the traditional patriarchal structure of the Iranian family, as well as the weakening of traditional notions of Iranian masculinity, when they are transposed into a foreign context or culture" (Gow 111). In addition, it chooses to be explicitly unorthodox in the way it portrays its female characters and addresses female sexuality and desire to break the cultural taboo against the subject.

In its depiction of the collapsing patriarchal values in the Sarbandi family, the film portrays female characters from three generations whose daily conduct clashes with traditional gender performance and approved codes of conduct for women in Iranian culture. Unlike the general expectations, the grandmother Farmour is not a reserved and genteel old lady whose refined manners would echo her culturally esteemed position in the family. For instance, being disappointed by a suitor's economic and social status, Farmour sarcastically addresses the young

man in front of everyone in the formal proposing ceremony and says, “What are you doing here holding your dick?” Or the night before Giti’s wedding, she tells her to “go shave pussy. A girl’s pussy should be as soft and white as cheese.” Also, she is not complicit with her son’s constant attempts to preserve the patriarchal structure of power within the family. While Sarbandi does not welcome Minoo’s return, Farmour impatiently awaits Minoo’s arrival, reviewing pleasant memories of singing lullabies to her during her childhood. Later, she generously gives love to Minoo and uses all resources in her possession to protect her against Sarbandi’s harsh criticism and control. She also plays a significant role in shaping the female bonding within the family to stand against Sarbandi’s domineering behaviour.

Along the same lines, Nana and Minoo are very vocal in their disapproval of Sarbandi’s orthodox beliefs and their own rights over their private and public relations. Nana does not remain silent when Sarbandi attempts to practice his authority and confronts him whenever required. She intervenes when Sarbandi attacks Minoo, and puts scissors to his throat to stop him from physically harming their daughter. Her open sexual liaison with the mechanic reflects her displeasure with her marriage and Sarbandi’s controlling nature. Minoo lives her life as she wishes regardless of her father’s discontentment. She reunites with her effeminate friend Bijan right after she returns, and reconciles with her Swedish ex-boyfriend Pontus. Compared to Nana and Minoo, Giti is more conservative in adopting resisting strategies against Sarbandi’s controlling grip. She manages her sexual life based on her own needs and desires while giving her father the impression that she is the only obedient member of the family. In sum, the film does not portray passive female characters who are victimized by the patriarch. Rather, Nana, Minoo, and Giti practice their agency and claim their rights over their bodies, private relations, and sexual desires. The close patterns of attachment and cooperation among the four female

characters also echo the film's attention to the power of female bonding. As Gow points out, it is in the light of these strong female relationships that *All Hell Let Loose* "makes its most poignant statement regarding the potential for resistance to male tyranny … and the possibility of reconciliation between two generations" (112-113). At the same time, the film does not romanticize women's struggles; it shows how emotionally and mentally women are wounded just as Sarbandi is. Minoo is haunted by memories of abortion and sexual violence; Giti is torn between the reality of her life and her desires as a young, modern woman living in the West and the orthodox expectations of her father; Nana is emotionally drained and yet continues to be part of a dysfunctional family because of her children and for financial reasons. Their souls are scarred yet they keep challenging the oppressive power of Sarbandi and fight for their personal rights.

Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* shares with Taslimi's *All Hell Let Loose* a feminist portrayal of women's negotiating agency within power structures, yet it profiles its female characters in 1953 Tehran, during the American-backed coup that overthrew the government of the democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and returned the Shah to power. The film is an adaptation of the highly acclaimed surrealist novella of the same title by Shahrnush Parsipur, the renowned Iranian writer who now lives in exile. *Women without Men*, which is Neshat's first dramatic feature, depicts the struggles of Munis, Faezeh, Zarrin, and Fakhri, all from different socio-cultural backgrounds, as their paths cross in their journeys to break free from various repressive institutions. Surrealism serves the film's feminist agenda to challenge women's extreme limitations through its symbolic practice of dissent. It allows the film to provide some level of freedom to its female characters as the only possible alternative within a sexually repressive regime. That said, the film creates a balance between the

boundlessness of surrealism and the limiting realities of the social context. In other words, while *Women without Men* enjoys surrealist liberty when needed, it remains conscious of the social reality surrounding the characters and their struggles. Peter Bradshaw describes the film as a successful story that brings together "the personal and the political" in the story of these women and "the way their lives are affected by the turbulence of the anti-Mosaddeq coup, and revives the memory of a lost generation of Iranian politics and culture" (n. pag.). While the political milieu of 1950s Iran is present in the background and worth exploring, it is not within the scope of this chapter. What interests me the most is each woman's obsession with a certain aspect of female sexuality and desire and the way they understand their bodies in the context of their gendered roles within family and society.

Women without Men has a chronological structure which is interrupted three times, once in opening, once in the middle, and once in the end, by sequences from Munis' suicide. The opening sequence takes place on the rooftop of the house as Munis reflects on her life before jumping; her thoughts are accessible to the viewer via her voice-over as the sound of Azaan (call for prayers) is also heard. With the two other sequences, her action is completed and her dead body is shown on the ground. The suicide is far from dramatic; it is in harmony with Munis' description of it as an act in search of "a new form, a new way." A slow-motion shot captures her falling; her black chador flies away, and then her intact body lies on the ground facing the sky, as if she is asleep. Brynn Hatton describes Munis' suicide as "a tentative embrace of silence" (18). I would add that it is Munis' transgressive act against her brother's hegemonic order that constantly silences her and leaves no room for her movement. The location helps to highlight the nature of the act; the rooftop "functions as a liminal space in terms of its architectural and social displacement between home and world, private and public, and in its doubled symbolism as both

an escape route and a site of death" (Hatton 18-19). The suicide is followed by a scene in which Munis is scorned by her brother Amir for following the news on the radio and not being interested in the suitor who will be visiting them in the evening. Frustrated with her passion for politics, Amir reminds her that as a thirty-year-old woman, she might not have any chance for marriage. In response to her disobedience, he breaks the radio and threatens to break her legs if she leaves the house. Later when Faezeh comes to visit, they are both forbidden by Amir from walking out in public. Amir offers to walk Faezeh home, mentioning how inappropriate it is for a woman to be unaccompanied by a man in public. While Munis is upset at her brother's dominating behaviour, Faezeh considers him an ideal man and wishes to marry him. As Faezeh is waiting for Amir to say his prayers and then walk her home, Munis ends her life to make her brother face the burden and pain of guilt.

In her conversations with Faezeh, Munis reveals that she is sexually naïve; she knows nothing about her sexuality and sexual pleasure and believes in cultural myths about virginity and hymen; for instance, she is not sure if she is a virgin, she explains, because her hymen might have gotten "torn" from jumping and running around in childhood. Faezeh explains to her that virginity is not a 'curtain' but a hole that will widen after marriage. Their dialogue shows how their notions about female body in general and virginity in particular shape their feelings and fears about themselves and their roles and responsibilities in family and society. Munis' body is a mystery to her, an unknown world under the control and guardianship of her brother as the male authority who is culturally responsible to ensure that her virginity is saved for the man who will marry her. Munis' body is not hers; it is meant to be explored by her future husband. From this perspective, her suicide can be described as a form of rebellion that allows her to free her body from the controlling and repressive practices of patriarchy.

Along with the story of Munis and Faezeh, the film introduces two other characters: a young sex worker named Zarrin, who can no longer endure her emotional pain, and Fakhri, a fifty-year-old affluent woman who abandons her loveless marriage and buys an orchard near Tehran where she takes refuge. Like Munis, the three other female characters are painfully entangled with their desire, sexuality or body. The socio-economic background of each person shapes the specificities of her interpersonal conflicts, but the experiences of all of them are rooted in a culture that serves the male order.

Unlike Munis, Faezeh has embraced her submissive position and is at peace with it. Agreeing with her male-dominated culture, she believes that women belong to the domestic realm and the public and politics are men's domains. Munis' political concerns are incomprehensible to her; she argues that those people participating in demonstrations are troublemakers. She comes to visit because she is concerned with the rumours circulating in the neighbourhood about Amir's plan to marry a woman named Parvin. Although she witnesses the siblings' argument, she remains silent after Munis' death and even helps Amir to bury his sister in the backyard. She is not as naïve as Munis, but her knowledge about virginity is very limited and based only on her reading. She is obsessed with covering her body and preserving her modesty; chastity seems to shape her interpersonal relations and her everyday conduct. Faezeh is in agony under the burden of love, but she is expected to wait for a man to want her. Suggesting that the self, the body, and desire are socially constructed, Morag Macsween writes that "feminine desire is created as responsive; it allows possession but threatens to engulf" (3). In light of this argument, Faezeh's romantic desire, illegitimate and threatening, should remain unspoken. In a culture where there is no permissible outlet for a young woman's romantic feelings, she seeks help in amulets and prayers to win Amir's love. Following a fortuneteller's

advice, she goes to bury the magic prayers in Amir's backyard, but only arrives to witness his wedding. She is surprised to hear Munis calling for help; she digs the ground to find her reviving from death. She tries to stop her, but Munis leaves the house to explore the public. Invisible to everyone but Faezeh and a young political activist whom she befriends, Munis walks into an all-men tea house to listen to the radio. Left alone in the dark streets, Faezeh is stalked and raped by two men. Ashamed to return home, she is guided by Munis to the orchard where she is welcomed by Fakhri and gradually recovers. It is only after the assault that Faezeh is able to see herself as an individual and beyond her potential role as a wife, a man's woman. In the absence of virginity, she becomes an active subject in possession of her body and sexuality. This transformation is reflected well where Faezeh is shown in a shot through the mirror as she combs her hair. She pauses for a second, gently takes off her shirt, examines her naked torso in the mirror and softly caresses her breasts, her eyes filled with acceptance and compassion. The sequence is short, yet it captures the essence of Faezeh's shift of perspective; it shows a new stage in her life as she comes to recognize herself and embrace her body. She acquires selfhood as she takes control of her body and her sexuality. Her newly-found self-recognition enables her to reject Amir when he comes to the orchard to ask for her hand as his second wife. She does not bother to answer any of his questions about her new life and the 'decadent people' around her, why she no longer wears the Hijab, and if she still says her prayers. Her silence in response to his invasive questions suggests how she refuses to acknowledge the authority he feels entitled to. When he does not receive any answers, he explains the reason why he is there: "A woman's body is like a flower; once it blossoms, it soon withers away. I came here with a plan to propose to you." It can be inferred from his description of the female body and sexuality that for him the marriage proposal is his generous offer to save Faezeh. He also adds that she does not need to

worry about his wife Parvin: “She will be your servant.” Faezeh’s faint smile dies away as she hears his words. “And when you get tired of me, I will be a servant to your third wife? Now I know how lucky I am,” she says in reply and leaves the room. Faezeh, who used to be blind to the unbalanced power relations built into her daily life and even served the male-dominated values contentedly, starts to see the injustice and questions it.

Coming from religious middle-class families, Munis and Faezeh grapple with extremely traditional values that define women with their chastity, veiling, and compliance and leave no room for their freedom. In contrast, Fakhri is a modern woman whose financial independence and social status enable her to stand against her husband’s disdainful attitude. At a military ceremony, where Fakhri’s husband Sadri is honoured as a successful general, Fakhri runs into her old lover Abbas, who has recently come back from Europe. Sadri is disrespectful to Abbas, making Fakhri feel humiliated. Getting home after the event, Sadri “reminds” his wife that as a woman turning fifty and on the brink of menopause, she is too old to flirt, referring to her friendly conversation with Abbas. “The truth is, if a woman can’t satisfy her husband, it’s his right to get another wife,” he adds, trying to threaten her and take control of their relationship. Things go against his expectations as Fakhri breaks the silence and abandons him. She moves to the orchard that seems to have a feminine spirit and become a haven for her, Faezeh, and Zarrin.

The frail Zarrin is from Shar-e No, Tehran’s red-light district; she lives in a brothel that is too busy for a city whose men are obsessed with protecting their women and preserving their honour. While the Madame repeatedly orders her to get ready for her next customer, Zarrin looks abstracted; she unwillingly accepts each customer, submitting her feeble body to them and making no eye-contact. The viewer is given brief access to Zarrin’s perspective through a shot that shows a faceless customer bending over her still body and caressing her arm. Zarrin

eventually breaks down and rushes out of the brothel, ignoring the Madame's angry calls. Zarrin does not say a word throughout the film, but her pale skin and anorexic body reveal a great deal about her morbid mental and emotional state. In the absence of love and desire, she seems to have refused to absorb and retain anything pleasant and fight against the penetrability of the female body. It can also be argued that her physical condition implies punishment; by not feeding the body, Zarrin has attempted to eliminate the source of men's pleasure and her own exploitation. If she has not had the authority to claim her rights to desire and sexual pleasure, it is at her disposal to destroy her body. Seeing her body tainted, Zarrin goes to the public Hamman where she scrubs her skin to bleeding, trying to clean away impurity. But in the eyes of the viewer, she is anything but polluted; her white chador makes her stand out among other women in public who are all clad in black.

Running away from society, Zarrin gets into the orchard where she gradually gets healed, yet the moment Fakhri decides to open the doors to host a party, Zarrin falls ill and the plants start to wither because they are both too vulnerable to the contaminated world beyond the walls; they seem to share the same soul. The party brings disappointment as Fakhri finds herself lonely among her guests. Abbas arrives with his English fiancée to break Fakhri's illusion of reviving her old love. Zarrin dies as the orchard does, and Fakhri is left with the bitterness of losing everything she had managed to build. The film goes back to Munis' suicide as the voice-over narrates that death is not difficult; it may be "a new way towards freedom."

By portraying the personal stories of the four women with the political upheavals of Tehran in the background, Neshat connects the personal to the political. As the nation's political activities for liberty and democracy fail, the female characters' struggles to claim their bodies, desires, and romantic life lead to alienation, death, and despair. *Women without Men* addresses

certain aspects of female sexuality and desire to challenge the cultural conservatism of Iranian society; it also shows that there is still a long way to go in order to achieve personal and political independence. Women's romantic and sexual desires might be recognized and respected in a society that enjoys political freedom.

In a similar fashion, Atiq Rahimi chooses to depict the romantic and sexual struggles of *Syngue Sabour*'s protagonist in the context of war and political turbulence in Afghanistan. As the unnamed woman continues to nurse her unconscious husband under the rain of bombs and missiles in Kabul, she starts to reveal dark secrets about their marriage and her sexual life. Surpassing the ideal of wifely devotion, in the first scene of the film the woman is preoccupied with prayers for her husband's revival, repeating *Al-qahhar*, one of the Qur'anic names of *Allah*. Every time she finds herself confessing to her thoughts and feelings, she rushes to the Qur'an, cries, and asks for her husband's forgiveness. Believing that she is possessed by satanic powers, she asks God to guide her and save her from vice. Terrified with the idea that her husband may be faking unconsciousness to find out her secrets, she cuts off his fluid drip and leaves him to die. She goes to her aunt's, not intending to return to her husband; yet she feels confused and hesitant. She explains to her aunt that her desire to confess to her husband is not a diabolic sensation but brings her relief. She says, "ever since he was wounded and I told him everything, I feel delivered of a burden." When her aunt says that her revelation reminds her of the legendary patience stone, the young woman returns home with a strong desire for liberation, and feels relieved to find the husband alive.

For the first time, wearing some makeup and styling her hair in an up-do, the woman sits next to her husband, pushes away his blanket, and through a point-of-view shot the audience sees

the man's wet pants sticking to his genitals. Tearing open his shirt and taking off his clothes to give him a bath, she starts talking with a sense of calm and affection:

> I realized that it wasn't your death that relieved me. It was something else; it was talking, talking to you … revealing all my secrets to you. You have stayed alive just to listen to me. You have been living for three weeks with a bullet in your neck. You are alive to deliver me of all my suffering, of everything I've kept in my heart in ten years of marriage, ten years!

She kisses his forehead and then his lips, and continues, "I can talk about everything, everything, my patience stone." Then she touches her own lips with excitement and joy. Highly sexual, this scene is the first of two in the film showing her physical intimacy with her husband, and it is in absolute contrast with the story of their first night as a married couple, which she then begins to describe: "Do you remember our first night? Without a word, you pounced on me, excited, panicked." The day after she confides this to her husband, she is raped by a teenage militant. The scene brings to mind her description of the husband's first experience of intercourse with her. The teenager excitedly and clumsily pounces on her without a word, then throws money at her and leaves. Ashamed and broken, the woman weeps, screams, and washes herself after the rape and goes to her husband, who is still in a coma. She says, "The poor boy, he made me think of you. His heart was beating so hard. You were as clumsy as he was. I didn't know what to do. I had no idea of what I had to do. I thought the way you did it was the right way. I felt nothing, only pain.… My aunt is right. Those who don't know how to make love make war."

The teenage militant, who thought that the woman was a sex worker, returns the next day with more money. Feeling sympathy for the inexperienced boy, she welcomes him with hesitancy at first but then finds joy in his companionship. Her joy is reflected in her pleased eyes and bright smile in the slow-motion scene when she looks at herself in the mirror, walks to the kitchen, eats with joy, and takes steps lightheartedly. Acting as his guide, she teaches him how to make love and he, in return, becomes her companion in her journey to the bodily pleasures that she has been deprived of in her marriage. She says to her husband, "The boy is a fast learner. He isn't like you. He accepts everything that I teach him. It doesn't anger him. You would have killed me if I had said such things…. With that boy, I take his hand, I put it on my breasts, between my thighs. He doesn't resist." In walking the militant through the path of lovemaking, she rejects the loveless patriarchal discourse that leads to war and violence and which is tearing Afghan society apart. On this path, she ironically plays the mother role for him, teaching him the alternate way of mutual physical pleasure away from male violence.

As she discovers her body as a source of pleasure, she gradually finds her inner voice and interpretation, and in this way her aunt becomes her guru; her aunt shows her how to think and imagine beyond the restricting male-oriented reading of religion. During her journey of self-discovery, a significant transformation happens to her regarding her relationship with the Holy Book. In earlier scenes of the film, whenever she is distressed, she turns to the Qur'an, holds the book, and blindly repeats words and sentences from it. But gradually, as she gets to know the healing power of narration, she manages to find her inner voice and, in a way, turns away from the Qur'an. This shift of perspective is well-depicted in one of the scenes when she returns to her husband determined to find liberation. She walks to the shelf, opens the cover of the Qur'an but

changes her mind, walks away, and, instead, starts her own story, using her own words as a substitute for the healing words of the Qur'an.

The Qur'an, believed to be the words of *Allah*, and revealed through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad, is considered the Prophet's main miracle. The Qur'an promises to guide believers to the straight path of *Allah* through both stories of the past and moral lessons. For instance, *surah* (chapter) *Yusef*, begins thus, "We narrate to you the fairest stories, through what we revealed to you this Qur'an" (12:3). The young mother in *Syngue Sabour* does not find peace in the stories of the Holy Book but discovers it in her own narratives. If the Qur'an is seen as an external manifestation of Islam, which has been used by men to justify discrimination against women, the young woman's increasing distance from the Qur'an can be read as her own self-actualization against the imposed male-dominated sacred narrative. In the room, where she sits with her husband, along with the Qur'an there are two other objects: a dagger (a phallic symbol), and the husband's picture, both hanging on the wall. The combination of the three illustrates the context of Afghan society: men, their patriarchal interpretation of religion, and violence. In the absence of the husband at their wedding, his dagger and picture are present to represent him. At the end of the film, the Qur'an is missing—the woman does not try to find it—and the husband's picture is broken. But the dagger is still there; in the final scene the woman stabs the husband with it to free herself.

During the relation of her narratives, including the moment she is raped by the militant teenager, her husband lies motionless. He comes out of the coma and reacts only after the woman says the children are not his; in other words, he is moved only when his fertility is questioned. His eyes filled with hatred, disbelief and fear, he tries to strangle the woman who feels joyous and relieved by her cathartic confessions, but she manages to stab him with the dagger. Having

brought her husband to life with the story of her betrayal and having released herself from the burden of secrets through her narratives, she states, “I have become a prophet who has accomplished a miracle.” This miracle is brought to pass as the woman, having assumed the role of the narrator of her own life, rejects the misogynistic portrayals of women and male-dominated voices and replaces them with her personal story of suffering and redemption.

Conclusion

Domestic and émigré filmmakers from Iran and Afghanistan have chosen different strategies in the way they have grappled with the topics of female desire and sexuality and women’s love lives in their works. Domestic films share a veiled language that makes it possible for them to address these sensitive subjects in a critical way and abide by governmental regulations. Émigré films on the other hand contribute to the dialogue while enjoying the freedom to be bold or at least less compromising. Despite the differences of the two categories that I closely examined and discussed in this chapter, all the films work to question the orthodox sexual politics of their society that control women’s desire and does not recognize their rights of love and sexuality. They draw attention to the inequalities ingrained into family relations, gendered roles, and embodied experiences of women and men.

Chapter Four: From Gender to Politics: Imaging Women and Political Activism

There are many domestic writers, artists, journalists, activists, and university professors who wish for the separation of religion and government institutions, yet the open expression of such an opinion is against the constitutions of both Iran and Afghanistan. For instance, according to articles 1 and 3 of the constitution of Afghanistan, the government is an Islamic Republic in which every law must be in accordance with Islamic beliefs and principles[4]. Correspondingly, in the introduction of the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran it is clearly stated that all the cultural, social, political, and economic institutions of Iranian society must be based on Islamic principles and norms[5]. Since Islam is the foundation of both states, any act of critiquing theocracy, promoting secularism, and calling for the implementation of international human rights is against the law and hence has grave repercussions. In this context, all forms of arts, including cinema, have been used--as an indirect and relatively safe tool--to shed light on the social and cultural issues that are closely linked to the dynamics of the religious state.

I argue that most Iranian and Afghan independent films reflect the social and political anxieties of the secular citizens who are critical of the dominant conservative politics in their society. Among them there is a small number of films that focus on women and political engagement, a controversial issue in both countries. In highly politicized societies, every civic or cultural act that does not go along with the state's approved policies and/or dominant social values carries strong political implications and can have costly consequences for the individuals involved. It should be noted that while in the Islamic Republic of Iran the main threat for

[4]. http://moj.gov.af/fa/page/legal-frameworks/168329941684

[5]. http://www.nm.umsu.ac.ir/uploads/ganoon-asasi-iran.pdf

nonconformist citizens is from the side of the state, the social rights of individuals are recognized by the Afghan state but not acknowledged by highly influential conservative tribal values that shape power relations within communities and government organizations.

This chapter examines the following films whose central theme or one of the main ones is women's political engagement and the way it affects their private and public relations: Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2009), Tahmineh Milani's *The Hidden Half* (2001), Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Tales* (2014), and Samira Makhmalbaf's *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003). It explores the relationship between the image of women and the concept of nation, the place of political engagement in the Islamic model of womanhood, and the cultural and legal consequences for those politically active women who do not belong in the formal structures of politics. But before discussing the films, it is necessary to understand the position of women in the context of contemporary political and social changes in these two countries and the cultural values around women's roles in family and society.

Women, Nation, and Socio-Political Engagement

Let us begin with a historical overview of the effects of political change on gender and political engagement. Contemporary state-building attempts and revolutions show that women generally become the markers of national and cultural identity. Valentine Moghadam sums up the place of women in the discourse of various political movements when she writes, "Representations of women assume political significance, and certain images of women define and demarcate political groups, cultural projects, ethnic communities. Women's behaviour and appearance – and the acceptable range of their activities – come to be defined by, and are frequently subject to, the political or cultural objectives of political movements, states, and leaderships" (*Gender and*

National Identity 2). Both the Iranian and Afghan cases show that women have been the markers of social change: the ideal image of womanhood has been dependent on the dominant political discourses of the time, and religious structures have had a principal role in shaping that image.

In the political changes throughout the 20th and 21st centuries in Iran and Afghanistan, women's veiling has been a major concern for politicians and those in power. As Naghibi writes, "The manipulation of veiling practices to reflect the aspirations of the nation remained a powerful political tool, first used by the monarchical state and later by the Islamic Republic" (44). Reza Shah Pahlavi's (1925-1941) Unveiling Act in 1934, which ordered the army to arrest veiled women in public or take away their veil with force, was meant to emancipate women and "democratize gender roles" (Naghibi 45), yet it led to the seclusion of a large number of women from traditional families and lower classes who simply were not able or willing to appear unveiled in public. After Reza Shah's son Mohammad Reza was enthroned as the new king in 1941, the Unveiling Act was revoked and women found the freedom to choose their attire in public. However, as Homa Hoodfar explains, "The government, through its discriminatory policies, effectively denied veiled women access to employment in the government sector, which is the single most important national employer, particularly of women" (263). A few decades later, the Islamic state adopted similar discriminatory policies, this time to exclude unveiled women from the public.

Studying the acts of veiling and unveiling in the context of nationalist discourses helps us to understand the complexities of women's symbolic significance in relation to the concept of nation. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's interpretation of nationalism, Moghadam explains why in most contemporary political movements women have been presented as carriers of cultural values and traditions. She notes that in the light of patriarchal family structure, "if the nation is

an extended family writ large, then women's role is to carry out the tasks of nurturance and reproduction" (4). She adds that "if the nation is defined as a religious entity, then the appropriate models of womanhood are to be found in scripture" (4). Redefining the Iranian nation under the name of Shi'a Islam, the Islamic discourse that dominated the political upheavals in the late 1979s offered female citizens alternative models that were rooted in Islamic values. For instance, Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic sociologist Ali Sahriati proposed the Prophet Mohammad's daughter Fatemeh and his granddaughter Zaynab as role models for Iranian women. In this context, many women adopted veiling as a political act against the state's attempts to westernize the society, and expressions of female modesty unified groups of women, from seculars to communists, who held different political viewpoints yet shared anti-Shah sentiments.

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic, gender-based discrimination did not disappear but changed direction. About two months after the Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini announced that "There is nothing wrong with women's employment. But they must be clothed according to religious standards" (qtd. in Naghibi 59). In 1980 the state prohibited unveiled women from working in government offices, and in 1983 it passed the Veiling Act that made women's Hijab compulsory. The penalty for unveiled women showing in public was seventy-four whip lashes (Naghibi 60). While under the Pahlavis the state-supported ideal woman was unveiled, westernized, and highly sexualized, under the Islamic state this image changed to a modest veiled figure whose presence in the public space and social participation served Islamic values.

One can trace a similar pattern in the life of Afghan women. An enthusiastic advocate of modernization, Habibullah Khan, the Amir of Afghanistan from 1901 to 1919, attempted to

broaden the education and improve the lives of Afghan women, but the tribal patriarchy stubbornly resisted his reform programs. After Habibullah's assassination, his son Amanullah Khan continued to seek developing secular values in Afghanistan. For instance, he banned the practice of polygamy among the government officials, an action that "caused an uproar among the religious establishment" (Moghadam, "Reform" 94). His only wife, Queen Soraya, publicly advocated for women's rights of education, employment, and divorce (Burki 46). The royal family's acts in defense of women's rights "challenged the embedded religious and cultural beliefs of a tribal society that did not view women as equals but only as property" (Burki 46). These un-Islamic reform plans were too fast and outrageous to be tolerated. Under the increasing pressure of organized resistance, the king was forced to cancel his plans and yet failed to mitigate the situation. The rebels attacked Kabul, the king left the country, and the tribal power system was restored.

From 1929 to 1978 Afghanistan witnessed the rule of three kings, Muhammad Nadir Shah (1929-1933), Muhammad Zahir Shah (1933-1973), and Muhmammad Daoud Khan (1973-1978), whose policies reflected "a pragmatic, cautious approach to progress for women" (Burki 50). Avoiding radical reform plans and including the clerics in the design and implementation of school curricula, the state made sure that its projects for educating women would not seem contrary to Islamic values. However, gender equality programs and enacted laws that focused on women's rights were implemented among a very small elite population in Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-i-Sharif, while "tribal customs regarding marital and childrearing issues remained in place" among the majority of Afghan families (Burki 53). Women's situation in larger cities gradually improved; women had access to university education and employment resources.

During the period of Zahir Shah's rule, women were given the right to vote and to hold public office (Burki 52).

The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan, which ruled from 1978 to 1992, adopted progressive social reforms, but ironically it used force and repressive methods to implement them. The communist government's reckless approach in its enforcement of women's rights as well as public education and health led to the uprising of Islamist groups and the overthrow of the government. With these political changes, urban women, who had gained some civil rights, "witnessed an overnight reversal of their status" under the rule of Mujahedin-coalition government that "began instituting a series of measures designed to 'Islamize' an already conservative society" (Burki 54). When the Taliban gained power in 1996, all the progressive gains of previous years in the areas of public education and women's rights vanished, and the nation faced large-scale violence against women, ethnic minorities, and children. Schools were closed; and women lost their jobs and were prohibited from appearing in public without the company of a related man. Following the removal of the Taliban from power in 2001 and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan under President Hamid Karzai, the quality of life improved especially for women. In the 2014 presidential election, the turnout of thousands of women at polling stations reflected women's will to take part in shaping their future. They voted along with their male counterparts to reject the Taliban's attempts at destabilizing the country. Women's loud and clear participation in the practice of democracy meant that the new government had to "prioritize and reflect the needs and demands of women, and address them in an effective and appropriate manner" (Athayi n. pag.). The current president's public behaviour in regard to his Christian-born Lebanese wife Rula Ghani shows the conspicuous changes in the government's official approach to women's status. In rallies and political events, Ahmad Ghani

Ahmadzai was accompanied by his wife, an unorthodox gesture in Afghan politics. In his presidential inaugural, Ghani thanked his wife, by her adopted Afghan name Bibi Gol, for her support[6]. It was a rare moment in the political history of Afghanistan and a big step towards women's political participation.

Afghan women still have a long journey ahead to achieve equal rights. Although they have the support of the state, tribal values and customs are hard to change. The modern history of the country shows how women have been the major targets of religious and political tensions. Yet it is a fact that change is inevitable; sixteen years after the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women are more socially and politically engaged than ever; they have representatives in the parliament; they have founded NGOs and organizations to promote education and women's rights and to end gender violence.

Women without Men: Death, Freedom, and Political Activism

One of the four female characters that Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* profiles is Munis, the thirty-year-old single woman whose interest in politics goes against her roles in the family and whose longing for public presence and political activism contrasts the fact that she belongs in the private realm. The film unfolds Munis' personal struggles in the context of the political turbulence of 1953 when the democratically-elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq was overthrown through a coup plotted and funded by the United States and Britain[7]. The many traumas of the coup remain as deep scars on Iran's body politic and within the nation's collective

[6]. http://english.alarabiya.net/en/perspective/profiles/2014/04/05/Afghanistan-s-next-first-lady-a-Christian-Lebanese-American-.html

[7]. See Stephen Kinzer's *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror* (2003) for a detailed analysis of the event and further sources on the topic.

memory. It is no exaggeration to argue that the country never recovered from the damage of the coup and its aftermath. The film skillfully portrays the Iranian society that, in Farzaneh Milani's words, is "concerned obsessively with keeping the world of men and women apart" (*Veils and Words* 2). Munis' suicide opens doors for her to the outside world, which is not ready yet for women's public presence and participation. The location of her suicide is important. The rooftop is a liminal space that stands between the private and the public; in the past women used it for indirect and distanced access; going to the rooftop, they were still within the house but also had an elevated view of the public space. When Munis jumps from the rooftop to the alley, she takes her body to the public and turns her suicide from a personal act into a political one.

Women without Men is undoubtedly a political film that sees a close connection between women's private challenges and the socio-political structures that shape their rights and roles in family and society. Neshat depicts the female characters' struggles with sexuality and desire in the context of immense political unrest in the country. Moreover, the film is dedicated to the Green Movement and all democratic movements since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906. In an interview with Leila Darabi, Neshat states that the Iranians protests after the 2009 presidential election fraud showed that there was "an incredible resemblance to the 1953 protests and how Iranians were shouting the same slogans in that time, demanding justice, democracy and freedom" (n. pag.). Although Neshat had finished editing the film before the election, the post-election uprising and the inception of the Green Movement motivated her to use different international film festivals as a political platform to raise awareness about the political oppression in Iran and become one of the many voices of the Green Movement outside Iran.

Compared with Neshat and other émigré artists who have had the privilege of freely expressing their opinions about culture and politics through their work and interviews,

independent domestic directors have gone through various difficulties to survive the consequences of dealing with socio-political concerns in their work. Governmental supervision and continuous pressures from conservative political powers have affected the works of filmmakers, but they have not silenced them. Tahmineh Milani is one of the directors who have strived to advocate for political consciousness in her films.

Milani does not hesitate to identify as a feminist filmmaker, a label that has caused a backlash against her work. As Langford has noted, "To be described as feminist in the Islamic Republic of Iran is problematic" (342); feminism, which is closely linked with Western thought, is perceived as anti-Islamic. Thus, many women reject the label while they are actively engaged in and fighting against gender-based discrimination. Moreover, the general bias against feminism has made many women avoid the term and promote women's rights in light of human rights. I once mentioned Milani in a conversation with a group of writers and artists, and a secular male poet and journalist said he could not even stand the name of Milani let alone watch her films. I wanted to know the reason for his resentment; he explained that art is universal and genderless, and that he could not take any artist seriously who preached feminism. For conservatives, Milani is a westernized woman whose work is against Iranian national and religious traditions. Milani, in my opinion, is a notable filmmaker in the history of women's cinema in Iran, yet her one-sided approach to women's issues has created flat characters in most of her films; most men are mainly cruel and despotic and women are simply victims because Milani fails to explore the complexities of gendered power relations. *The Hidden Half* is her most successful film that manages to depict multi-faceted characters beyond the black and white oppressor / oppressed dichotomy.

The Hidden Half: Love and Politics

The film initiates an important dialogue about the political conflicts in late 1970s and early 1980s Iran; what makes it a suitable case study for this chapter is that it explores the political climate of those years along gender lines. The film addresses women's political activism and its perils in the context of the 1979 Revolution and the way it affects women's personal and social lives. It is ironic that the screening of the film led to Milani's arrest and the two-week detention that came to an end through the president's direct intervention following international protests. Milani's bold approach to political issues in this film was part of the relatively open socio-political milieu during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami and his reformist agenda. But, as Fakhreddin Azimi maintains, the fact that Milani was the first filmmaker arrested in years was a result of the ongoing friction between conservatives and reformers as well as "a warning to other filmmakers not to transgress political and social limits in their work" (63).

The film begins as Fereshteh, a devoted mother and wife who will soon be 40, learns that her husband Khosrow, a successful judge, is about to travel to Shiraz to meet with a woman who faces the death penalty. In response to the prisoner's letter to the president, Khosrow has been appointed as the presidential unit representative to hear her story and make a decision. Learning that the prisoner is about her age, with a long history of political activism, Fereshteh is deeply unsettled when Khosrow denounces her sympathy and reminds her that not all women are as modest and pure as she is. Feeling a strong sense of connection to the woman, Fereshteh packs her memoirs in Khosrow's luggage, inviting him to a part of her life she has concealed for so many years. There is indeed the risk that Khosrow's exposure to her repressed identity might affect their marriage, yet Fereshteh feels responsible to challenge her husband's judgment, reveal her own past, and become the voice of the woman whose political activism haunts her present

and threatens her life. The film offers female solidarity outside the conventional notion of friendship and through anti-oppression dissidence. Fereshteh's narrative pattern is meant to enable the husband to see the story of the convicted woman from an alternative perspective that does not correspond to the logic of the ruling discourse. In other words, Fereshteh uses her personal narrative to communicate her struggles as a former activist, challenge the dominant views about women and political agency, and intervene in the ideological processes that ignore marginalized experiences of women in their judicial and constitutional policies. Storytelling becomes a tool in Fereshteh's hands to communicate these experiences beyond a personal level and challenge the social prejudices that affect the lives of women. By revealing personal secrets, Fereshteh puts her marriage at risk. In the end, it is Khosrow who has the privilege of judgment; he is the judge for the prisoner's case as well as Fereshteh's.

As Khosrow begins to read the memoirs in his hotel room, Fereshteh's voice-over narrates her story of love and political activism. Fereshteh's words and Khosrow's imagination work together to visualize flashbacks to the life of the 18-year-old Fereshteh who had moved to Tehran right after the Revolution to study philosophy. Joining a leftist group, Fereshteh attends meetings, distributes pamphlets, and participates in political rallies, activities that jeopardize her position as a university student. She is chased by a mob working for the state, and she is under the scrutiny of Islamist figures such as Rastegar, who closely monitors and records her activities.

Besides all the anxiety caused by her political activism, Fereshteh is disappointed with the restrictive guidelines her political group imposes on the personal life of its members. She is dissatisfied by the party's reasoning when she or her friends raise questions about the group's policies or moral values. For instance, she cannot accept the party's rejection of romantic love because it "distracts" the members from their political duties; nor is she is convinced why the

party denounces femininity and fashion in the name of political commitment. Although she does not fully embrace the party's principles, she keeps following the rules and risking her life for the group's ideological goals. Her idealism is eventually questioned by the middle-aged Mr. Javid, the chief editor of a literary magazine who has a crush on her. Javid, representing the educated secular intellectuals, criticizes Fereshteh's political poems as sentimental pieces with an expiry date and no literary value. In response to Fereshteh's defence of her political activism, Javid shows her how his generation's experience with the 1953 coup and overthrow of Mosaddiq's government parallels her generation's struggles with freedom and justice after the establishment of the Islamic state.

By adding Javid's narrative of the political upheavals of the 1950s, the film explores side by side the stories of two generations and the main political turning points in the modern history of the country; in other words, it shows these socio-political incidents as a continuum and not as self-standing structures. Through the character of Javid and the love relationship between him and Fereshteh, the film makes possible a conversation between the two generations who would normally undervalue the experiences and expectations of one another and fail to see the progression of their values. Considering that the film came out when the Reformists were in power and encouraged political freedom, Milani calls for conversations about the contemporary socio-political changes in the country, an act that conservatives had resisted; they had silenced their critics in the name of religion and national security since the establishment of the Islamic Republic.

The Hidden Half reflects Milani's opinion about the necessity of a comprehensive examination of our recent history. The film does not sympathise with any of these political groups but acknowledges their right to co-exist. Throughout the film, both the radical ideas of

the leftist groups and the repressive strategies of Islamists in power are revealed and questioned. The failings in the socio-political beliefs of intellectuals, Islamists, and guerrilla groups are exposed in the same manner. The film is sympathetic to individuals and not ideologies. It sketches the similarities between the Islamic state and the Shah's oppressive methods in their intolerant response to their critics.

The character of Javid enriches and complicates the narrative in other ways as well. First, his presence complicates the political discourse wherein Fereshteh finds herself, and their dialogues help her find her voice. Also, her love for Javid and her encounter with the reality of his life as a married man plays an important role in her emotional growth. She has remained silent about her past, but it does not mean that she is voiceless; when she finds it essential to speak out, it is revealed that her political activism and romantic experience in the past are important parts of who she is today, and that Javid is in fact an influential figure in her life and the formation of her identity as a mature woman who wisely warns her husband against the danger of a single story and its inherent prejudice.

Second, Javid's presence in Fereshteh's hidden past works hand in hand with her political life to create a real challenge for Khosrow, an educated man who has supported his wife's educational and professional endeavours. When women's political activism goes against Khosrow's image of ideal womanhood, it is a struggle for him to digest the realities about Fereshteh's unorthodox political life. Thus, Fereshteh's past with Javid complicates the already shaken image. As Fereshteh mentions in her journal, it is normal for her to know a lot about Khosrow's past because he has shared with her so many memories, including the stories of his student life in the U.S. Free from being judged for their everyday conduct, men can openly talk about their adventures and express their thoughts and desires. This one-sided freedom is

challenged when Fereshteh shares her memories and brings to light her past that had been sitting in the dark for years. Nonetheless, the medium she has chosen—the memoirs--exposes the uneasiness that is connected with the cultural norms and expectations around her role as a woman. Khosrow's response to his wife's romantic past is not neutral; he breathes heavily every time he reads a section describing Fereshteh and Javid together or explaining their feelings for each other. Her romantic past is indeed a difficult test for their marriage and Khosrow's ability to understand Fereshteh outside the limiting cultural norms that have shaped the gender relations in family and society.

Learning from Javid's wife about his love for a young woman whom Fereshteh had an uncanny resemblance to, Fereshteh decides to disappear from Javid's life regardless of the emotional pain this decision has for her. Fereshteh hears the wife's story about their loveless marriage and the politically active beloved who had been killed during the 1953 protest, and she leaves. She confides to Khosrow that she recently ran into Javid, who reminded her of her one-sided judgement; she admits that if she had also listened to Javid's story, she might have had a totally different decision. The romantic relationship between Javid and Fereshteh sheds light on certain gender issues in private and public realms. Javid has gained his secure economic and social status through his marriage to a wealthy woman, yet he easily appears at cultural events without her and openly has casual relationships with younger women. Fereshteh is different only because she reminds him of the woman he loved in his twenties. Even so, Javid does not hesitate to be condescending and arrogant in his conversations with Fereshteh; he calls her "the little lady," frequently commands her to behave in certain ways, and talks down to her. During their short relationship, Fereshteh is under the spell of his masculine charisma, social class, and patronizing behaviour. Her age, inexperience, and social class seem to play a role in her sense of

inferiority towards Javid. Yet it seems that, like the film critics, Fereshteh fails to see this uneven relationship, even in retrospect.

Fereshteh and Munis, the protagonists of *The Hidden Half* and *Women without Men* come from two different time spans in contemporary Iran when women stepped out of the private realm to strive for freedom, justice, and equality. While Munis' brother does not tolerate her interest in politics and deprives her of the radio that connects her to the outside world, Fereshteh moves from a small town to Tehran to pursue a university education. The price each pays for practising political agency is different, yet there exist similarities that connect the two women: Through the film's surrealist moments, Munis' death enables her to attend a protest; Munis must die in order to be set free of her enclosed life. Fereshteh seems to have more freedom of action than Munis; she is able to join a political group, but she must abandon her political activities in order to save her life. The similarities and differences between Milani and Neshat are interesting as well, and have a similar pattern to the lives of their protagonists.

Neshat has the liberty of making films outside governmental regulations at the price of losing the right of residing in or visiting her homeland. Living in the United States, she can freely explore any controversial topic of interest, including sexuality and politics, through visual arts, but she has become an outsider. Neshat used every opportunity to vocalize her concerns and criticise the Islamic state; however, she does not have the influence of a domestic artist or activist. Milani does not enjoy a similar freedom; she has to work with confining rules that control and curtail artistic productions. She goes to jail for her films and is continuously attacked by conservative politicians and critics alike. She remains an insider who is considered a real threat by the state.

Bani-Etemad and Her *Tales*

Like Milani, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad has been a troublemaker in the eyes of the state officials. From documentaries to feature films, Bani-Etemad has focused on working class issues, prostitution, addiction, bureaucratic corruption, and domestic violence. Her cinematic career has not been a smooth one especially during conservative governments. Her film *Tales* was made during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, but did not receive a screening permit. It was released a year after the victory of Hassan Rouhani in the 2013 presidential election. After the film was screened at the Venice International Film Festival, radical conservative media outlets, including Fars News Agency and *Javan Daily*, accused Bani-Etemad of demonizing the Islamic Republic in her films and showing the West the exact dark image they expect to see from Iran.

Tales (2014) is a collage of seven stories that are connected through the work of a documentary filmmaker in Tehran who aims to reflect the everyday challenges of the working class in a socially corrupt society. Bringing together characters and themes from Bani-Etemad's previous films, it has a dark ambience and is emotionally heavy especially for those viewers who are familiar with the filmmaker's work. It is agonizing to watch the familiar characters' rage and despair as they struggle to survive the everyday tragedies of lives that look worse than before. The assertive young woman Nobar from *The Blue-Veiled* (1995), whom the viewers left with hope and optimism, is no longer with the man she loved. It turns out that she was forced into a divorce by Rasoul's daughters after Rasoul had a stroke. Carrying the burden of the past and crushed dreams, Nobar is repeatedly rebuked by her suspicious husband for her previous marriage. Tooba, the strong-willed mother from *Under the Skin* (2001), who worked long shifts to support her children's education, goes from office to office to get backpay from her former employers who sold their factory and left all workers unpaid. Torn by her son's arrest for

participating in student protests and struggling with poverty and unemployment, Tooba joins her former colleagues for a labour protest, but they are stopped by the police for causing political turmoil. The righteous Nargess from *Nargess* (1992), who did not sacrifice her ethical values for a financially stable life, has been hiding from her abusive drug-addicted husband who burnt her face with boiling water. Sarah from *Mainline* (2006), whose mother saved her from addiction, now volunteers at a non-profit organization that helps vulnerable women. She stays away from the driver Hamed, who is fond of her, and seems unwilling to let anyone in her life. Hamed works part-time for the organization; he is a former engineering student who was expelled from university for his political activism. The viewer can feel a strong sense of fury and frustration in the dialogues and interactions between characters. Men, unemployed or underpaid, cannot fulfil their traditional role as breadwinners and pitiably fight for their already lost status as the head of the family. Women, working relentlessly to make ends meet, are upset at men's violence, the economic situation, and the systematically forced silence.

The gloomy atmosphere reflects the collective frustration of Iranians whose votes against Ahmadinejad were denied and whose widespread protests after the election were brutally repressed. The film is also a loud and clear remonstration against the state that has silenced almost every civic and social dissatisfaction or movement in the name of religion or national security. Just like her characters, who emphasize their rights as citizens and repeatedly state that their demands are not political, Bani-Etemad has mentioned several times in her interviews that she is just a social filmmaker, probably to protect herself from political-based accusations. But the fact is that in such a highly-politicized milieu, where individuals and groups face extreme judicial consequences for any attempt to communicate their expectations and concerns, every socio-cultural act that does not fit into the state's prescribed structure is inevitably political. Just

as workers in the film are stopped by the police and threatened with arrest, Bani-Etemad and her colleagues have faced various obstacles; they have been silenced, arrested, or forbidden to work.

Like any other non-democratic state, the Islamic Republic is afraid of independent media, social media, and any outlet that would facilitate the free circulation of information; it uses all resources to control cultural events, social gatherings, media, cinema, and literature. The scene that shows the unemployed workers stopped by the police vividly illustrates the state's iron fist and the claustrophobic situation it has created for the citizens. The minibus is packed with the workers, accompanied by the documentary filmmaker who is filming the event with his digital camera. Set inside the minibus, the scene comprises medium shots from the documentary filmmaker's DV camera and the movie camera. The workers talk about their financial problems and futile attempts so far to get their backpay. Tooba is encouraged by other workers to talk in front of the camera as their representative; she lists their problems but also asks the filmmaker who will see the film in the end and if it can really make any change. Not everyone in the crowd is as outspoken as Tooba; a couple of young workers are worried about the consequences of their protest; they also ask Tooba and others not to say anything about politics because it will make everything worse. The conversation among the workers reflects their fear of the state's intolerance. The police officers stop the minibus before it arrives at the factory and do not allow anyone to get off. Shouting at them disrespectfully, accusing them of political sedition, and threatening to send them all to jail, they hold the doors and order everyone to sit down. The movement of the camera along with the extreme tension among the characters creates a stifling space inside the minibus that can be interpreted as a microcosm of Iranian society and the conflicts people face in their pursuit of freedom and justice. The scene ends as the officers notice the filming camera and hastily intervene to stop it. The filmmaker comes back in the closing

scene as he walks over a bridge at night talking on the phone. We realize that he was arrested that day, but he assures the person on the phone that no film will remain unseen, echoing Bani-Etemad and her unyielding attempts to keep working despite regulations and hindrances.

Tales explores the themes of oppression and violence simultaneously at the two levels of private and public or personal and political consciousness; it depicts the uneven relationship between men and women along with the relationship between citizens and the state, and it shows how any form of constructive interaction becomes impossible because of widespread violence. The film suggests a connection between political oppression and gender discrimination, and shows how change is inevitable no matter how slow and difficult it may be. As women fight for their respect and dignity in the family, citizens ask for their basic rights and speak out against the state's oppressive attitude.

Tales deals with the issue of women and political engagement beyond its narrative world. As a female filmmaker who explores social problems along gender lines, Bani-Etemad is politically engaged, even though she insists that her work is not political. In a country where poets, novelists, actors, and filmmakers are penalized for their creative work, filmmaking is indeed a political act, and directors such as Bani-Etemad and Milani are activists who pursue change in the realm of culture and politics. Among the film's cast and crew, Bani-Etemad is not the only one who has faced difficulties in her work. Fatemeh Motaded-Aria (playing Nobar) and Baran Kosari (playing Sarah) were blacklisted from 2009 to 2013 because of their political views. They were both banned from appearing in TV shows, and none of films they starred in received screening permits in those four years. In October 2009, Motamed-Aria was barred from leaving Iran and attending a film seminar series in Los Angeles (Simpson n. pag.). It has not been easy for independent filmmakers and actors, but women in particular have been targeted for

their objections to the government's cultural policies. In 2011, in an interview with PANA (Pupils News Agency), the radical conservative filmmaker Farajollah Salahshoor described the Iranian cinema as a brothel and called Iranian actresses a group of whores[8]. His words provoked an extensive reaction among actors and filmmakers; for instance, five young actresses, including Baran Kosari, wrote a public letter to Salahshoor and condemned his statements. This was not the first time that conservatives have used sexual insults against women; in fact, state officials, conservative public figures, and media have used sexual accusations to belittle female activists, writers, filmmakers, and artists who are deemed to promote non-Islamic women's rights or secular values.

Women without Men, *The Hidden Half*, and *Tales* revolve around personal stories of women (and men) under the influence of major political changes. The development of social and political consciousness among citizens can be traced in the past 60 years of Iranian history. Munis comes from a middle-class family in Tehran. Her interest in politics in the 1950s is contrary to her role as a woman and thus is not tolerated by her brother. Only women like Fakhri, who belong to a small elite group, can appear in public and participate in social events. By 1980 the small-town woman Fereshteh can live in Tehran and pursue a university education and political activities. Only 35 year later, in the 2010s, advocating for social, economic, and political rights is not limited to educated women or those from the middle and upper-middle classes. Working-class women like Tooba speak out and strive for their rights. The three films show how the states have remained more or less non-democratic during all these years, but

[8]. http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/165582/%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%B3%DB%8C%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%B4%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D8%AE%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%87-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA

women display more resilience and notable social and political awareness. In other words, people, especially women and the younger generation, are intellectually prepared for social progress, yet their demands clash with the state's regressive policies and authoritative methods.

Time and the Question of Afghan Women's Political Engagement

Samira Makhmalbaf takes the same issues across the border and explores the question of women and political engagement in Post-Taliban Afghanistan in *At Five in the Afternoon* (2003). With a touch of humour, the film explores if the society is ready for women's political participation. The film takes the viewers amidst the chaotic influx of refugees who have returned from exile after the fall of the Taliban and hope to find shelter in the ruins of bombed-out Kabul. The story centres on the young woman Noqreh, who is thirsty for knowledge now that Afghanistan has a democratic government that supports women's education. She lives with her desperate sister-in-law, who has a malnourished infant to look after, and her highly conservative father, who is upset at the public presence of not-fully covered women. Noqreh pretends to attend a religious school for her father's sake, but she secretly goes to a secular girls' school that recently has reopened. Changing from black shoes to white heels every time she is out of her father's sight symbolizes the fundamental difference between the world of her father and the life style that she aspires to. In response to an assignment at school, Noghreh is one of the two students who dare to dream of becoming the president of their country, an idea that the majority of students find impossible to imagine and contrary to the role of Afghan women. As the project is meant to help students have a better understanding of democracy through practice, the two girls are expected to prepare speeches, clarify their goals and policies, and advertise to win their peers' votes and serve them as the president. The poorly formatted story is shaped around Noqreh's involvement

with the school project, her father moving his family around the city in the hope of finding shelter away from other returned refugees, and the amusing relationship that develops between Noqreh and a young poet who has just returned from Pakistan. Attracted to Noqreh, the man jokingly supports her political ambitions, brings her newspapers and takes her to a photographer for her campaign photos. He also recites to her Federico Garc a Lorca's poem "At Five in the Afternoon," from which the film borrows its title. He teases her and jokes about her political dreams, testing her tolerance. They both enjoy each other's company away from Noqreh's father and other judging eyes. Bringing elements of romantic comedy into a dark and dismal atmosphere serves the film's casual flirting with the notion of women's political participation.

Compared with the three other films, *At Five in the Afternoon* contains many flaws; it has a very loose structure, the scenes are inconsistent, the dialogues are superficial, and the story is not gripping. The non-actors' raw performance worsens the random and unconvincing encounters and conversations. For instance, every time the sister-in-law complains that her baby is suffering from hunger and thirst, Noqreh asks her to breastfeed her child and hears in response that her milk has dried up. The film's overload with images of hunger and poverty is already distressing, and the same repeated conversation between Noqreh and her sister-in-law about the ailing infant seems to be a disproportionate attempt to gain the viewer's sympathy.

Makhmalbaf aims to show that while the Taliban are gone, the mentality is still prevalent among the people. In different scenes, older men are shown in the streets as they turn their back to unrelated women, close their eyes not to see them, and ask for God's mercy and forgiveness; young women laugh at the thought of having female politicians in their country; fathers and husbands are obsessed with protecting their women from unrelated men; and religious schools make girls recite misogynist verses from the Qur'an. Makhmalbaf also tries to show that

ignorance is a major problem; when Noqreh talks to people who are back from Pakistan and asks them about politics in the neighbouring country, it is revealed that they know nothing about Binazir Bhutto or other Pakistani politicians; at school, the girls who reject the idea of women's presidency view politics in contrast with women's responsibilities as mothers and wives. The main problem with the film is that Makhmalbaf fails to explore these ideas without preaching. Everything remains at the level of telling rather than showing, and the narrative lacks a sophisticated structure. Yet, it is the only Afghan film that directly plays with the concept of women's political engagement, and therefore it fits into this chapter despite its numerous imperfections.

As Noqreh prepares for her campaign at school, it becomes more and more clear that Afghan society has a long way to go before it is mature enough to accept women in major political positions. The democratic government of Karzai, which is only once mentioned in the film, is not a national achievement; it is a political structure established with comprehensive support from the West and maintained through the extensive military presence of the U.S and NATO. These facts shape the political context of the narrative that mainly focuses on the adverse situation of people struggling to survive upon arrival in war-torn Kabul. In this context, the film is not optimistic about women's situation and the possibility of their political engagement. The ending scenes clearly reflect a strong sense of despair when the father decides to take his family across the desert to keep them away from crowds of returning families, some of whom are less religious or traditional than he is, and to find safe shelter in a remote place. As Noqreh and her family walk away from the camera in the closing scene, Noqreh's voice-over recites García Lorca's elegy, echoing the opening scene and creating a cyclical structure.

Conclusion

In societies where women are markers of national identity and traditional notions of female devotion and sacrifice shape ideals of womanhood, women are the main targets during periods of political change. The modern history of Iran and Afghanistan shows that religious and non-religious political powers have forced their ideological values on women and have curtailed their freedom of choice. During some political eras, Islamists have veiled women and forced them out of the public realm in the name of serving the family and fulfilling their true role as mothers and wives, and during other periods monarchs have unveiled women in the name of modernization and freedom. Some states have rejected women's social and political participation, seeing it against women's nature, and others have promoted it only if it serves the dominant power.

All the four films discussed here reveal the close connection between the political structure and women's public presence and socio-political engagement. Education and political awareness are essential but not sufficient to guarantee the possibility of women's participation in public issues. If seen in a sequence, *Women without Men*, *The Hidden Half,* and *Tales* are stories of the development of Iranian women's political consciousness in the modern history of the country. Today women's rights are not recognized within the nation's social and civil rights because there is a lack of balance between people's demands for freedom and justice and the state's gender-based political and cultural values and policies. In Afghanistan, the situation is reversed. The state acknowledges and promotes women's rights yet the tribal values are still intact in different areas of the country and among many families, and the nation still needs time to accept women as citizens with equal rights whose voices and views are essential in the public realm. The films draw attention to the uneven relation between men and men and the continuous tensions that are rooted in women's demands for freedom and men's fear of change. By

addressing the characters' personal conflicts in the context of large-scale political changes, the films show how the personal and the political are entangled, and how women's rights in one domain are almost impossible to exist in the absence of their rights in the other domain. They all contain dark moments from the lives of their female characters, but they also suggest the inevitability of change and women's increasing attempts to shape their future as individuals and citizens.

Conclusion

"Film is the meeting place of cinema and many other elements that are not specifically cinematic," writes Jacques Aumont (5). The cultural and socio-political conditions of a society are present in the backbone of the cinematic narratives, especially those that deal with social issues. Post-Revolution Iranian and post-Taliban Afghan cinemas are no exception; the selected films from these two countries that are examined in this thesis are built around intricate networks of dialogue with their society and culture.

Contrary to the superficial Orientalist image of Afghanistan in Western media, of an exotic and backward country that desperately needs our help, Afghan cinema has managed to present the complexities of life in Afghanistan from within. Also, in a country with a very high rate of illiteracy, cinema is starting to play a significant role; as Mehovic argues, "the screen medium has a unique potential for storytelling surpassing that of any other medium or art form" (n. pag.). Iranian cinema has developed a unique visual language that allows filmmakers to work under the rule of modesty. Iranian and Afghan cinemas are simultaneously rooted in the local and have strong cross-border connections. The former continues to flourish under an oppressive theocracy, and the latter is frequently in struggle with radical Islamism.

Regardless of all the political fluctuations and altering cultural policies within the Islamic state, the sensitivities of supervisory institutions that oversee cinema have never relented for certain topics. Afghan filmmakers also have to be cautious about their traditional society and its massive body of cultural restrictions. Strong taboo has always enclosed issues of body and sexuality, and any questioning of the "holy" institution of family, motherhood as women's primary role and religious duty, hetero-normative gender roles, and female virginity has not been

tolerated. Yet, all these constraints have not succeeded in stopping filmmakers from both countries from addressing such topics. Forming the thematic core or appearing in the underlying structure of films or in the background, women's issues have an increasingly strong presence in films, and has been addressed repeatedly from critical perspectives.

Studying the diverse body of films, which deal with female protagonists in different stages of their life and from various class and cultural backgrounds, shows that independent filmmakers critically engage with their culture, reveal the complexities of gender-based discrimination, and question hegemonic gender politics. They use cinema as a medium to negotiate or challenge women's traditional rights and duties in family relations and in public, and even take a step further to offer alternative strategies of resistance. Under the rules of modesty or governmental regulations, domestic filmmakers have adopted indirect and veiled approaches to these controversial topics. These cinematic strategies are evident in the films I examined in each chapter. For instance, images of girlhood in *Buddha Collapsed out of Shame* (2007), *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), *Osama* (2003), *The Apple* (1998), and *Offside* (2006) show that child protagonists play a significant role in the context of censor and cultural restrictions. By focusing on children rather than adult characters, directors have more freedom in the way they draw attention to the gendered experiences of selfhood. Following Bakhtay in her journey to school, reviewing Osama's sudden loss of childhood, watching Zahra's and Masoumeh's malformed bodies, recounting Havva's attempts to enjoy the last minutes of childhood before stepping into womanhood, and depicting the teenage girls' transgression in the stadium, the films reveal that girlhood is a social construct, and that location, class, and culture shape the girls' relations and roles in family and society. They show that patriarchal power blurs the line between girlhood and

womanhood in the name of tradition or religion, and as a result interrupts the experience and practice of girlhood.

Depending on the ruling government and its cultural policies, filmmakers have experienced different levels of liberty in their work on social issues. The 1982 Cultural Revolution in Iran and the dominance of religious and nationalist sentiments during the eight-year war influenced the image of women in Iranian cinema; women's presence was marginal and women's issues were barely the focus of attention for filmmakers. Dealing with gender politics through child protagonists should be understood as a transitional phase in the cinemas of Iran and Afghanistan. In fact, I argue that these films are part of the filmmakers' contribution to the cultural dialogue around the role of art in promoting social change. The history of these cinemas shows that as the political situation improves and the cultural milieu opens up, the woman question moves from the margin to the centre, and women's cinema as a sub-category of social cinema, finds the opportunity to expand beyond a mere depiction of women's subordination. Of course, the process of socio-cultural changes has not been smooth or steady; both countries have witnessed frequent waves of political turmoil, which means arts and cinema have not enjoyed a consistent growth. Let us consider the case of Afghanistan after the Taliban. With the establishment of the Republic of Afghanistan and under a democratic government, artists and activists alike found a relatively safe space to address the everyday issues of their nation and fight for freedom and social justice. But the tribalist and Islamist groups have been working relentlessly to disrupt the course of democracy. As a result, pursuing cultural activities in the country has been quite challenging. In this context, it makes sense that the Afghan filmmaker Jamshid Mahmoudi accepts the rules of censorship in Iran and finds it easier to work there rather than in his homeland.

In a similar fashion, the reformist government (1997-2005) created an open cultural space in which Iranian filmmakers found the opportunity to address with more freedom controversial topics such as politics, gender roles, and female sexuality. The five Iranian films examined in chapter two were produced in this period; they are resisting texts that portray the ways in which women practice their agency to take hold of their life and gain independence. Taraneh, Reyhan, Ahoo, Forough, and Mania are all active subjects, each breaking or negotiating the rules in one way or another. They are realistically imperfect individuals who call into question the cultural myths of ideal motherhood/womanhood.

But the political climate affected the world of cinema, and independent directors suffered from the rule of radical conservatives during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013). Jafar Panahi, for example, was arrested in March 2010 for trying to make a documentary about the political unrest following the 2009 presidential election.[9] Abbas Kiarostami described Panahi's arrest as "an attack on art." [10] Panahi's passport was revoked and he was later convicted by the Islamic Revolutionary Court and sentenced to six years imprisonment and a 20-year ban on making any films or writing screenplays (Hudson n. pag.). Panahi's severe sentence, which provoked domestic and international criticism, is one of the many examples of the state's hostility toward filmmakers. Panahi is officially not allowed to make films or leave the country, but he has broken the ban a few times by using cunning strategies to circumvent the restrictions. For example, his movie *This Is Not a Film*, which was smuggled out of the country, was screened at the 2011 Cannes Film Festival. Panahi did not write the screenplay or use a full-size

[9]. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/mar/02/jafar-panahi-arrested-in-iran

[10] . https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/may/18/cannes-kiarostami-iran-panahi

camera; the film shows him at his house as his interlocutor Mojtaba Mirtahmasb (listed as the co-director) comes to visit; Panahi makes phone calls and records with his cellphone, discussing ideas for future film projects. Anthony Oliver Scott describes the movie as "a statement of creative resistance in the face of tyranny and a document of intellectual freedom under political duress" (n. pag.). The story of Panahi is more than a personal narrative; I suggest that it is a parable of filmmaking under oppression; it encompasses the endeavours of Iranian and Afghan filmmakers, who have kept independent cinema alive. Panahi's resisting strategies remind us of the provocative nature of art. Of course, Panahi is not alone in this task; most of the filmmakers, whose works I have examined in this thesis, have contributed to the development of critical filmmaking.

My findings show that through a veiled or unveiled visual language, domestic and émigré filmmakers respond to the cultural pressures and legal regulations that shape women's roles and rights in family and society. While Bani-Etemad, Milani, Partovi and Mahmoudi use symbolism to address the issues of women, Rahimi, Neshat, and Taslimi enjoy the freedom of exile in the ways they depict their protagonists and criticize traditional norms of gender and sexuality. They find different approaches to question the conformist sexual politics of their society. Unfolding the female characters' private conflicts in the national context of political changes, the films highlight the interconnectedness of the personal and the political. They do not attempt to sanitize the ugly patriarchal realities that affect their protagonists' personal lives on a daily basis, but they also suggest that change is unavoidable.

Independent filmmakers, I contend, are activists who play an important role in the ongoing discussions about social change, women's rights, and political freedom. They draw attention to power structures that work constantly to protect the male order and to perpetuate the

patriarchal norms of gender politics. Cinema is a political tool that can actively participate in reforming and reshaping the culture of its production. Islamist figures and politicians in Iran and Afghanistan are well aware of the power of cinema in revealing the cultural and political dogmas of the closed society, problematizing the conventional gender politics, and giving voice to the marginalized groups, including women, who have been systematically suppressed. The interests of the state officials and radical conservative groups will continue to clash with the works of independent filmmakers, but the history of cinema in the two countries shows that censorship and strict rules might have a negative effect on filmmaking, but they cannot halt the growth and development of cinema.

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