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# Iranian Cinema and the New Woman: The Islamic Revolution's Impact on Female Agency in Film

Sophia Hernandez Tragesser

## Abstract

This article examines how Iranian regime, politics, and religion shaped the presence and roles of women in film. In the monarchical Pahlavi era, film followed early 20<sup>th</sup> century Western archetypes, marginalizing women to the binary role of virgin or whore. Despite misogynistic undertones of the Islamic Revolution, the "New Woman" created in the image of Fatima gave birth to honorific and deep roles for women on screen and within the industry, creating more agency for women in culture. In a complex balance between censorship and release valves, the Iranian government has allowed the film industry to deviate from their prescribed state stance on women's rights, patriarchal authority, and female involvement. This article identifies as a new genre of Iranian film, feminist realism, which is characterized by strong female performances and plotlines involving discussions of contemporary women's issues. Feminist realism has made film an important outlet for cultural commentary and debate in Iran and has attracted international acclaim, particularly for the works of directors Asghar Farhadi and Dariush Mehrjui.

**Keywords:** Cinema, Cultural history, Feminism, Film, Iran, Islamic Revolution, Middle East.

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One of the core concepts at the heart of the intellectual politics of the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution was a rejection of the nation's recent past under the ruling Pahlavi Dynasty and a hostility to cultural and social embodiments of 'the West'. The Islamists' rejection of Westernisation condemned not only the idea of Western morals and systems *in situ*, but also many aspects of urban and elite Iranian culture which followed American trends in fashion, beauty, and entertainment.<sup>1</sup> This tension between Western sociocultural trends and the Islamist ideals espoused by Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionaries culminated in a war over the 'woman question': who is the Iranian woman and what is her place in a theocratic Iran?<sup>2</sup> This crisis of state-women relations in the Islamic Republic was rooted in modern Pahlavi Iran's cultural and political struggle to adequately address the same question in the preceding decades. Following the example of Turkey earlier in the twentieth-century, Pahlavi monarch Reza Shah sought to reform gender relations in 1930s Iran along Western lines.<sup>3</sup> These measures included banning the veil, encouraging co-educational public schooling, and promoting women's suffrage.<sup>4</sup> Encouraging a Western understanding of gender and public politics served several ends. The first, as embodied in the Shah's White Revolution of 1963, was to 'modernize social and economic relations in order to build the nation state.'<sup>5</sup> By normalising male-female relations in social and political spheres and integrating women into the workforce, the Shah hoped to mirror the commercial success of the West.

The increased presence of women in the public sphere prompted the development of political, religious, and social women's organisations in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> In the 1950s, however, state-led repression of these organisations resulted in the dissolution of many of these groups and any remaining organisations for women were taken under

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<sup>1</sup> G. Nashat, 'Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Iranian Studies*, 13 (2007), pp. 165–194.

<sup>2</sup> H. Sedghi, 'Feminist Movements III: In the Pahlavi Period', *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, 9/5 (1999), pp. 492–498.

<sup>3</sup> Sedghi, 'Feminist Movements', p. 496.

<sup>4</sup> H. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897-1941* (Durham, NC., 2011), p. 147.

<sup>5</sup> S. Razavi, *Labor, Women, and War in the 1979 Iranian Revolution* (unpublished doctoral dissertation, TED University, Ankara, 2017), pp. 102–104.

<sup>6</sup> G. R. Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), p. 237.

central control by the government, often under the direct jurisdiction of the Shah's sister, Ashraf Pahlavi.<sup>7</sup> The integration of the women's movement into the state allowed the Shah to stifle discontent while making token gestures of progressive reform. This process represented a release valve of political activism for large numbers of women while also allowing the government to maintain bureaucratic control over the activities of many, potentially subversive, organisations.

After the Revolution, the Islamic Republic seized control over film content, production, and development. Just as the Pahlavi control over women's socio-political activities enabled activism without substantially threatening the state, controls over film enabled the Islamic government to dictate film content while leaving room for subtle, contained dissent on political issues. As the state could easily cease production on a particular film, those which challenged Islam or the Islamic Republic could quickly be shut down without causing significant damage. Consequently, film had the latitude to examine what womanhood meant in Iran and to diverge from the official state policy on women's rights and patriarchal authority. This relationship between censorship, the state, and the film industry has enabled twenty-first-century Iranian cinema to become a significant battlefield where debates over women's roles in Iranian society are fought out. After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iranian cinema provided a forum where a 'new woman' could be debated, constructed, and represented.

The popular rejection of the Western woman of the Pahlavi era, known critically as a 'painted doll', in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution led to the construction of a new female character-type in Iranian cinema. This redefinition along Islamist lines created an ideal characterised by piety, intelligence, and motherhood which then permeated wider society and culture. Central characters in Iranian films were now occupied by women with greater emotional depth than their Pahlavi predecessors and plotlines often centred on routine lifestyles and relationships. On top of this, censorship instated by the Islamic Republic served to phase out previously

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<sup>7</sup> A. Najmabadi, 'Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran', in D. Kandiyoti (Ed.), *Islam and the State* (Philadelphia, PA, 1991), p. 60.

male-centric content and plots, especially those with extreme violence and sex. Out of necessity, content shifted focus to relationships, daily life, and cultural identity which naturally revolved around women. The focus on women's stories and female characters created new agency for women both in film and in the broader film industry. This agency is visible in films from the 1990s to the 2010s which exhibit strong female roles, criticism of patriarchal and misogynistic aspects of Iranian society, and frequently involve female actors and directors.

These films, it is argued here, constitute a new genre of Iranian cinema: feminist realism. Feminist realism is characterised by strong female performances and plotlines involving discussions of contemporary women's issues. Feminist realism diverges in significant ways from Western feminism. Rather than blatantly pushing the envelope of gender and modesty norms, Iranian feminist realism addresses questions of female identity and agency through mundane domestic plots driven by female action (and at times inaction) and consequently reveals important truths about the nature of womanhood in everyday Iran. As a result of the prominence of feminist realism, cinema has become a place for critical commentary and resistance against aspects of the Islamic Republic which restrict women. Despite the state's active silencing of social criticism and women's organisations, this genre of Iranian cinema has reached an international audience to great acclaim. Contrary to popular opinion, therefore, a more complex and nuanced portrayal of women in Iranian cinema did not accompany the modernisation of the Pahlavi period but only emerged after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. This article will begin by discussing the relationship between cinema and modernisation in Iran. From there, it will investigate the impact of twentieth-century Islamic philosophy and the Islamic Revolution on the role of women on screen and in the film industry. Lastly, this article will discuss cinema, particularly post-revolutionary cinema, as a space for feminist criticism of Iranian governance and society.

## Iran's Constitutional Revolution

The nature of modernity loomed large in the cultural and intellectual politics of early-twentieth-century Iran. The Constitutional Revolution of 1905–1909, albeit short-lived, created a parliament and restricted the power of the monarch. At the forefront of this modern expedition was an attempt to create an Iranian national identity largely based on the idea of a shared Persian history.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, notions of gender during the Constitutional Revolution were underpinned by distinctly Persian interpretations of the role of men and women in society. The dominant discourse of gender during this period has been extensively discussed by historian and gender theorist Afsaneh Najmabadi.<sup>9</sup> In particular Najmabadi highlights the practice, common in rural Iran, of using women and girls as a form of tribute payment to neighbouring villages.<sup>10</sup> The political climate of the Constitutional Revolution, however, encouraged fierce debate over this practice and prompted larger political and cultural discussions over the government's role in protecting women. Of particular importance was the case of the 'Daughters of Quchan', a group of about 250 girls from the district of Quchan who were kidnapped and sold by the local government in lieu of tax. During the Constitutional era, Najmabadi argues, the 'Daughters of Quchan' became symbols of the national homeland and their loss of autonomy was considered both a sin against the girls as individuals and the broader notion of an Iranian nation.<sup>11</sup> Those who sold and bought the girls were portrayed as savage tribes who compromised Iran's borders with Russia and exposed the government's inability to protect the nation.

This national issue popularised the idea that women and girls should be protected from sexual insult and objectification as tribute. In order to protect women from these unacceptable tribal traditions, a strong and centralised government was

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<sup>8</sup> M. Tavakoli-Targhi, 'Refashioning Iran: Language and Culture during the Constitutional Revolution', *Iranian Studies*, 23 (1990), pp. 77–101.

<sup>9</sup> A. Najmabadi, "'Is Our Name Remembered?'" Writing the History of Iranian Constitutionalism as if Women and Gender Mattered', *Iranian Studies*, 29 (1997), pp. 85–109.

<sup>10</sup> Najmabadi, "'Is Our Name Remembered?'" p. 86.

<sup>11</sup> Najmabadi, "'Is Our Name Remembered?'" p. 88.

deemed necessary to create a modern, non-tribal authority and to standardise the social and political treatment of women. This shift in popular opinion, away from tribal organisation and practices and toward a centralised modern state, set Iran on a Western path of nation-state development. However, neither a complete rejection of tribalism nor a full acceptance of the nation-state as a superior political body came to fruition for several decades.

## **Reza Shah and the Modernisation of Iran**

Although the Qajar dynasty and their brief experiment with a constitutional monarchy was put to an end in 1925 by the ascent of the Pahlavi dynasty, the question of Iran's modernity remained central. Pahlavi monarch Reza Shah launched aggressive modernisation efforts which not only encouraged the tentative development of a distinct 'national' identity, but also instituted technological leaps such as railways and radio broadcasting, which contributed to urbanisation and population growth.<sup>12</sup> This development primed the country to receive and soon produce cinema, which showcased and reinforced this nascent Iranian nationalism.

In 1924, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, the American filmmakers who later produced *King Kong*, collaborated with journalist Marguerite Harrison on an ethnographic film following the migration of the Bakhtiari Tribe in Iran. The film, *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life*, captures the tribe's seasonal trek from southern to central Iran, in addition to the filmmakers' journey through Turkey to reach the ancient and unchanged 'Forgotten People'.<sup>13</sup> In the tradition established by nineteenth-century Orientalist travellers, *Grass* is enamoured with the notion of an 'ancient people' at the heart of civilisation, struggling against nature to survive another migration. It presents the tribes as 'noble savages', living in a different historical time from that experienced in the West. The film won international acclaim for its cinematic beauty and capturing of the tribe's passage across the Karun River

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<sup>12</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 1*, p. 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Grass: A Nation's Battle for Life* (Dir: Merian C. Cooper, Ernest B. Schoedsack, and Marguerite Harrison, 1925).

and over the Zardeh Mountain.<sup>14</sup> The film reflected tribal life as it existed in Iran and demonstrated the inability of central government to gain political dominance during the Constitutional Revolution. *Grass* portrayed the tribes in a dignified and valorised manner, a presentation which contradicts the narrative pushed by liberals in the Constitutional period and by Reza Shah. In *Grass*, the masculinity of the tribesmen is showcased through both physical feats and the life-and-death decision-making which the leaders must demonstrate throughout the migration. The women of the group are at the periphery and receive no specific attention. They are, however, presented as physically fit and capable, carrying large loads and contributing to the tribe's migration. The incorporation of women in the tribe's movements and their contribution to physical tasks sits in tension with the narrative of female vulnerability presented during the Constitutional Revolution and embodied in the 'Daughters of Quchan' incident. Here women were identified as incapable of self-defence, vulnerable to the whims of men, and in need of government intervention for their protection. This story of tribal independence undermined the nationalist narrative that traditional ways of life threatened the national social fabric.

*Grass*, in its original form, was banned in Iran as it critically contradicted the Shah's actions to unite the tribes and construct a modern Iranian identity. Opposing the film gave the Shah the opportunity to institute state controls over cinema and to assert his authority over cultural affairs. After the deposing of the Shah in 1941 however, the film was edited with a Persian voice-over and became a point of national pride rather than of insult or alienation. Censorship during the Pahlavi period targeted scenes which challenged or mocked Islam as well as films with anti-state messages.<sup>15</sup> The government also implemented basic permit requirements for filming in public, specifically in religious or civic spaces.

Reza Shah used film to present his vision of a modern Iran and pushed back against the presentation of traditionalism in films such as *Grass*. A significant film in the early development of Iranian cinema and cultural modernisation was *The Lor Girl*

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<sup>14</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 1*, p. 162.

<sup>15</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 1*, p. 162.

(1933), also known as *The Iran of Yesterday and the Iran of Today*.<sup>16</sup> *The Lor Girl* was the first Persian talkie, produced by Ardeshir Irani and Abdolhossein Sepanta in Bombay.<sup>17</sup> In the film, Golnar—the Lor Girl—a young girl kidnapped by the Lor tribe of Western Iran, grows up and encounters a young man employed by the Iranian government, Jafar. The two intend to run away together when Gholi Khan, the leader of the bandit tribe, intercepts their plan and imprisons Jafar. Eventually they escape again, before an altercation with the remaining bandit gang members results in the death of several tribesmen. The two protagonists then flee to India and live there until they hear of Iran's new government which has restored law and order by castrating tribal power and supplanting it with a centralised state. The film explores themes such as modernity and gender, themes which remained prominent in Iranian cinema until the 1970s. In a sense, modernity, and by extension the idea of a central state, saved the Lor Girl and delivered Iran from the grips of backward tribes. *The Lor Girl* establishes the primacy of male agency and action in film. However, Jafar is not a masculine or capable figure until he reaches India. When in Iran, the male figures appear inept and aloof, while the Lor Girl is clever and competent. When the two arrive in India, however, Jafar becomes the leading figure making decisions and taking action. The disordered gender roles in the first portion of the film are a consequence of tribalism and disappear when the setting changes to Zoroastrian India. The shift in gender relations based on setting speaks to the 'correct' cultural and political structures for social interaction. Being under orderly and structured governance enabled Jafar to become a man by taking up his responsibilities to lead and the Lor Girl was able to relinquish her more masculine qualities and take on a more appropriate secondary role once in India. At the end of the film, after retreating to Bombay, the Lor Girl only returns to Iran when a new government has incapacitated the tribes and brought the nation into modernity. Given these themes, this film supported Reza Shah's repression of tribalism and his attempts to unify the country into a modern, Persian ethno-state.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Lor Girl* (Dir: Ardeshir Irani, 1933).

<sup>17</sup> M. Mehrabi, 'The History of Iranian Cinema, Part Two', <http://www.massoudmehrabi.com/articles.asp?id=-1303821578>, (Accessed: 17/07/2020).

In the 1930s and '40s, political tensions grew between the government and clerical establishment. Reza Shah continued to embrace modern reforms which sought to further integrate women into industrial and social settings previously dominated by men. In addition to clerical resistance, rural and lower-class individuals resented the Shah's mandate of Western dress and the forced integration of men and women in schools. Ultimately however, sentiments of a strong and united Iran prospered. The narrative exemplified in *The Lor Girl* prevailed over that of *Grass*.

### **The Muhammad Reza Shah Era and Popular Cinema**

Reza Shah was ousted by the British in 1941 and his son, Muhammad Reza Shah, ascended to power. Twelve years later, Iran's Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadeq, won the rights to Iran's oil in an international court, forcing the British out and resulting in the industry's nationalisation. Muhammad Reza continued his father's modernisation efforts, bolstering educational opportunities and widening the civil service. In 1960, he launched the White Revolution which forced land redistribution, deployed students in rural areas as educators, furthered centralised state power, and promoted women's enfranchisement. These efforts disturbed the clerical establishment, from whom much of the redistributed land was taken, as well as rural farmers who disliked having modern, secular students appear in their villages to re-educate their children. Opposition to Muhammad Reza's revolution manifested itself in the foundation of organisations like the 1961 Freedom Movement, designed to oppose the regime's pursuit of Western values. Opposition political parties and actors were silenced and exiled, which gave rise to discontent throughout the nation.

Between 1936 and 1947 no films were produced in Iran. Economic issues during these years contributed to political unrest, notably the protests of 1935 which culminated in the massacre of several hundred people at the hands of government troops. These economic and political issues impacted production.<sup>18</sup> When

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<sup>18</sup> A. S. Al Sharaji, *Negotiating the Politics of Representation in Iranian Women's Cinema Before and After the Islamic Revolution* (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Arkansas, 2016), p. 14.

commercial film production resumed in 1948, the Filmfarsi genre blossomed. Filmfarsi encompassed popular films which were typically melodramatic and involved Hollywood-style archetypes, often centred on a tough-guy trope. Filmfarsi actors quickly ascended to stardom and cinema began to dominate the national culture. Among film scholars, Filmfarsi marks a shift from film as a primarily artistic and artisanal medium to cinema as an industrialised and commercial product for popular consumption.<sup>19</sup> The masculinity espoused in Filmfarsi derived from the traditional Persian literary rogue figure: the *luti*.<sup>20</sup> In the nineteenth century this figure was portrayed as a gruff man living on the peripheries of society and operating under a traditional moralistic code, which at times required him to circumvent the law in the pursuit of vengeful justice. Representations of the *luti* were restricted during the Pahlavi period, in large part because the regime considered the figure to embody revolutionary tendencies.

Masud Kimiai's 1969 film *Qeysar* confronts modernity and shifting gender roles in urban Tehran.<sup>21</sup> Title character Qeysar pursues the men who raped his sister (a crime which prompted her suicide) and killed his brother during a first revenge attempt, while evading the inept police's attempts to stop him. The film presents modernity as a war on women, only to be remedied by the return of masculinity in social and political structures. First, the virtuous women in the film, Fatima, Qeysar's sister, and his mother are weak characters with little agency, suffering under the modern state of gender relations. Fatima is raped while studying with a male classmate and her subsequent suicide triggers a sequence of events which results in the deaths of her first brother, Faarman, and her mother, and in the potentially fatal stabbing of Qeysar. This plot is a clear attack on the Pahlavi desire to westernise women's roles in Iranian society. While traditional gender roles would have kept Fatima at home safe with her mother, co-education, as established in the White Revolution, forced an already vulnerable young woman into an intimate position with an unrelated man who took advantage of her. Making matters worse,

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<sup>19</sup> B. Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic*. *Reform Cinema in Iran* (New York, 2018), pp. 142–143.

<sup>20</sup> Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, p. 144

<sup>21</sup> *Qeysar* (Dir: Masud Kimiai, 1969).

the modern police force is both incapable of protecting Fatima, and of finding the perpetrators after the rape. The displacement of the traditional man's role as avenger leaves Qeysar in the desperate position of having to avenge his sister in the urban landscape, under the radar of police or other witnesses.

Tough-guy films cast women in one of two ways: either as innocent unwilling victims of modernity or as sinful and complicit products of a Westernised culture. The first group encompasses most women in *Qeysar*. The second category of women is occupied by the club singer/dancer Soheila, girlfriend of the rapist and murderer Mansour. Soheila's first scene opens in a club with her singing in a compromising dress, in full makeup, and pulled-up hair. In the almost seven-minute scene her very suggestive dancing captivates the gaze of all the men in the club, including the camera's 'male gaze', reducing the character to her sexual attributes.

This virgin/whore or 'pure/impure' dynamic dominated Italian and Mediterranean film-making in this era and heavily influenced Iranian cinema. This binary character dynamic forces female characters into two-dimensional, shallow stereotypes, fully defined by their virtue or total abandonment thereof.<sup>22</sup> The virgin and whore roles both lack agency: the pure characters were dependent on men for their livelihood and the impure, though on the surface more independent than the former, still relied on men's willingness to pay for sexual services in order to survive. Within Iranian Pahlavi-era film, women's roles conformed to these categories, leaving little agency for females within plots and stifling the careers of female actors. For women portraying virgins, the available roles tended to be brief and weak, depicting women as subservient to the tough-guy, powerless and pitiful when caught up in the film's dramatic plot. Women taking on the whore role necessarily participated in degrading scenes in compromising clothing, captured with an extremely objectifying male-gaze. This role encompasses the most liberal woman possible, with little regard of who she exposes herself to or sleeps with. In later tough-guy

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<sup>22</sup> H. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984–2010* (Durham, NC, 2012), p. 96.

films, which take a very critical view of Pahlavi society, the whore is used to depict the degradation of women under the influence of Western liberal modernity in Iran.

## **The Islamic Revolution: Islamology and Politics**

*Qeysar* and other films of the late 1960s and 1970s stood on the front line of the cultural war between the Westernised Pahlavi elites and the clerical establishment, buttressed by large numbers of conservative Islamists in rural Iran. Across the Middle East the idea of Pan-Arabism as an alternative to the West dissipated following the Arab defeat in the 1967 Six Day War with Israel.

In the 1950s, the Egyptian intellectual Seyyid Qutb began publishing political philosophy grappling with the meaning of Islam in a Western-dominated world. Qutb highlighted the West's moral bankruptcy but also identified corruption and decay within the modern Islamic community. Qutb invoked the notion of *Jahiliyya* – the age of ignorance before the Prophet's earthly life – and sought to apply it to the present state of Islam.<sup>23</sup> At the centre of his proposals to reinvigorate Islam as an international force was the creation of an intellectual vanguard to repress clerical corruption and to democratise access to the Quran. Though Qutb's solution to Islamic governance utilised conservative structures, he sought to propagate Islamism as a theocratic movement across the Middle East. He was to have particular success with this project in Iran.

The intellectual Ali Shariati was one of the most significant theoretical influences on the development of the Islamic Revolution. While Shariati stemmed from the same Islamist intellectual movement as Qutb, he took a more leftist, revolutionary approach to achieving Islamic governance. After teaching, Shariati pursued studies at Mashhad University and the Sorbonne in Paris where he studied Islam in conjunction with philosophy, economics, ethics, sociology, and politics.<sup>24</sup> Shariati participated in multiple protest movements against the Shah both at home and

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<sup>23</sup> S. Qutb, *Milestones* (Cairo, 1964).

<sup>24</sup> A. Shariati and L. Bakhtiar (eds.), *Shariati on Shariati and the Muslim Woman* (Chicago, IL, 1996), p. xvii.

abroad, including the National Movement of Iran in Europe and the Second National Front/Freedom Movement of Iran, for which he was imprisoned on several occasions. Shariati made critical contributions to the discussion of the 'woman question' in the 1970s and helped to shape the Revolution's construction of the 'new' Iranian woman. In *Woman in the Heart of Muhammad*, Shariati asserts that Islam 'emphasises equity by assigning to both [sexes] their natural places within society', though the respective rights and duties of each differs. Shariati examines the life of Muhammad, specifically his relationships with, and treatment of, women, to contradict the Western narrative that Islam treats women as inferior to men. He also chastises the Christian missionary and European orientalist treatment of women 'as a deception of the devil', and their interpretation of Muhammad as a 'Don Juan figure of the East.' In this piece he specifically defends the practices of polygamy and modest dress as inherently protective for women.<sup>25</sup> Shariati does not promote modest dress as a means of controlling women, nor does he identify it as inherently spiritual. He sees the immodest Western dress as a symptom of youthful idolatry, connected to the propagation of cultural figures like Miss Universe. This mental attachment to shallow, anti-religious icons, Shariati argued, manifested itself in modern dress. He recognised, however, that intolerantly telling the youth what to do would not solve the problem. Instead, he advocated for presenting Islamic values 'which are higher than the values represented by Miss Universe' so that young women associate with the former and will 'endure and incorporate all of those values herself' by choice and not through coercion.<sup>26</sup>

Shariati's most influential work on the 'woman question' in Iran was *Fatima is Fatima*, a lecture given at the Husayniyah Irshad and later distributed throughout the country. This piece was intended to address the identity crisis facing modern Iranian women who had adopted the 'new imported mould' of a distinctly foreign identity.<sup>27</sup> Shariati sought to find a model for Muslim women and, by expanding his source base to include several Shi'ite schools, eventually constructed the ideal heroine in

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<sup>25</sup> A. Shariati and L. Bakhtiar, 'Woman in the Heart of Muhammad', in *Shariati on Shariati*, p. 5-7, 43.

<sup>26</sup> A. Shariati and L. Bakhtiar, 'The Islamic Modest Dress', in *Shariati on Shariati*, p. 43.

<sup>27</sup> A. Shariati and L. Bakhtiar, 'Fatima is Fatima', in *Shariati on Shariati*, p. 79.

the form of Fatima. Modern Iranian culture, Shariati argued, forced women to identify with either ethnic heritage or an 'artificially imposed, imitative mask'. Instead, women want to 'make decisions through reason and choice and to relate them to a history, religion, and society which received its spirit and basis from Islam.' The lack of pre-existing theological movements which provided this basis, Shariati argues, was the fault of religious scholars and symbolised the schism between Islamic intellectuals and the Iranian people. Instead of seeing women in Muslim societies as either 'traditional' or 'European-like', the true face of a Muslim woman, and the 'new woman' of Iran, is Fatima.<sup>28</sup> Identifying with Fatima places all women in relativity to the time of the Prophet, espousing an identical standard which sits above generational time and space.

Shariati situates the new Islamic approach to questions of women and sexuality as the middle ground between the rigid, idealistic family of the religious Christian West and the short-sighted, pleasure seeking impulses of the secular West.<sup>29</sup> For Shariati, the Western notion of women – 'toys of the Don Juans' or 'female slaves serving men' – should be rejected and repressed.<sup>30</sup> Instead of seeking sexual freedom, which is fleeting, deceiving, and ultimately leads to dissatisfaction, Shariati argues that Muslim women should pursue womanhood as exemplified by Fatima and the Prophet, and that such womanhood would be best developed in a distinctly Islamic state. This authentic Islamic society would value women who are educated, virtuous, and are free to choose a life in the household, out of love for her family.<sup>31</sup> Muhammad loved Fatima and entrusted himself, his household, and his legacy to her. Shariati points to Fatima's privileged place as beloved by the Prophet and as the perfect model of daughter, wife, and mother; she was 'an outstanding example of someone to follow', the model 'for any woman who wishes to become herself [...] through her own choice.'<sup>32</sup> Fatima's personality, however, is more than a

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<sup>28</sup> Shariati and Bakhtiar, 'Fatima is Fatima', p. 80, 83, 99.

<sup>29</sup> Shariati and Bakhtiar, 'Fatima is Fatima', p. 110.

<sup>30</sup> Shariati and Bakhtiar, 'Fatima is Fatima', p. 111, 112, 119.

<sup>31</sup> Shariati and Bakhtiar, 'Fatima is Fatima', p. 139, 42.

<sup>32</sup> Shariati and Bakhtiar, 'Fatima is Fatima', p. 212, 213.

compilation of her roles in relation to Muhammad and others. Her identity can only be encompassed in herself: *Fatima is Fatima*.

Shariati's assessment of Fatima enthrones her in inherent dignity while situating her in the lives of Islam's most important figures. This analysis conveys the intrinsic value of women as understood by Shariati, as well as the dignity found in embracing Fatima as daughter, wife, and mother. This model of Fatima was rapidly embraced by Iranian women in the 1970s and underpinned the challenge to Westernised gender relations during the Islamic Revolution.<sup>33</sup> The identity of the 'new woman' did not rely on pure traditionalism or mimicry of the over-sexualised 'painted doll', but instead allowed Islam to serve as the basis of a chosen identity with intellect, agency, piety, and purpose. It was this new identity, forged in the Islamic Revolution, which challenged the role of women in Pahlavi film and provided the basis for a transformed, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. This rejection of the Western-infused Pahlavi culture transformed the film industry and repealed many of the methodological and thematic tenets associated with Pahlavi-era films.

The Islamic Revolution's redefinition of women's role in society was of course part of a larger movement resisting the notion of Western modernity. The Revolution heightened religious and patriotic zealotry in Iran, priming the country for intensified conflict with Iraq. Tensions over the borderlands increased as Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein openly attacked Iran's revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini and renounced the 1975 Algiers Accords, a critical agreement which previously kept the two from direct conflict over the Shatt al-Arab waterway.<sup>34</sup> On 22 September 1980, Hussein invaded Iran and embarked on a conflict which would come to embody an existential battle between the Shi'ite Islamists and the Sunni Pan-Arabs. The conflict presented the Iranian regime with the opportunity to consolidate power and Khomeini perpetuated the war despite Iraq's willingness to cease hostilities after being pushed out of Iran in 1982.<sup>35</sup> The prolonged conflict, however, came at a high

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<sup>33</sup> A. K. Ferdows, "Women and the Islamic Revolution" *International journal of Middle East Studies*, 15 (1983), pp. 283–298, pp. 293.

<sup>34</sup> R. Takeyh, 'Iran's New Iraq', *The Middle East Journal*, 62 (2008), pp. 13–30.

<sup>35</sup> Takeyh, 'Iran's New Iraq', p. 17.

price. Iraq's prolonged use of chemical weapons and Iran's reliance on child soldiers made the war particularly ghastly, requiring heavy state propaganda to maintain a stream of volunteer fighters. The war offered women a new opportunity to take part in the defence of Shi'ism by both producing sons and allowing them to be martyred. This era solidified the ideals of femininity advocated by Shariati and other conservatives prior to the Revolution. The war carved out a special place for women in society, a place of honour in line with Islamic teaching.<sup>36</sup>

### **The New Woman in Revolutionary and War Cinema**

Cinema during the war captured fighting on the front lines in a documentary style. These films featured minimalistic plots with little dialogue. Martyrdom became a central theme in war cinema and the notion of individual sacrifice for a collective or religious good was emphasised in contrast to Western individuality. The sense of collective identity was intensified by the limited focus on setting or personnel. Instead, voice-overs were added and scenes accompanied by narration and infused with religious rhetoric. Television specials and films covering the lives of war martyrs, notably a series entitled *Chronicle of Victory*, bolstered religious and patriotic devotion to the war.<sup>37</sup> In war cinema, the majority of stories centred on men in combat and were exclusively filmed and directed by men. Women only appeared as grief-stricken mothers and as relatives of the fallen soldiers.<sup>38</sup>

In terms of both production and consumption, the Revolution and subsequent war significantly harmed the film industry financially. The state acquired movie houses and implemented film content standards, mandating films to support the Islamic values of the new regime.<sup>39</sup> Both domestic and foreign-imported films required purification, something that could not be trusted to many of the industry's former, largely secular, personnel. The Hijab became mandatory for all women in film, and

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<sup>36</sup> Shariati and Bakhtiar, 'Woman in the Heart of Muhammad', p. 7.

<sup>37</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, p. 13, 15.

<sup>38</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, p. 25.

<sup>39</sup> H. Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978-1984* (Durham, NC., 2012), p. 118.

Pahlavi or foreign films featuring unveiled women were censored. Considered the first post-revolutionary studio, Ayat Film Studio ascended to the forefront of Islamicate film because they were deemed trustworthy to produce films with the desired Islamic values. Ayat Film Studio, whose creation was inspired in the late-1970s by Ali Shariati's call for Muslim youth activism in the arts, began filming documentaries of the marginalised.<sup>40</sup> Government film institutions quickly increased in number, alongside a small number of private and para-governmental studios.<sup>41</sup> In 1987, Ayatollah Khomeini relaxed the Islamic morality codes which created more artistic and political freedom for cinema.<sup>42</sup>

## Post-revolutionary Cinema

The increasing dominance of Islamic values following the Revolution of 1979 unravelled the 'whore/virgin' dichotomy at the heart of Pahlavi-era film and created space for new female characters to emerge in Iranian cinema. Film became more accessible to, and directed at, religious audiences, children, and families. Furthermore, the film industry became a viable career path which girls and women could pursue without fear of the moral and social backlash which had followed Pahlavi-era stars.<sup>43</sup> Consequently, more women directed movies in the 1980s than in all preceding decades combined. This increased visibility of women was also apparent in other social and cultural spheres, such as the previously male-dominated environments of journalism and higher education. Despite their greater prominence in the film industry, however, women remained second-class citizens due to Iran's imposition of sharia law.<sup>44</sup>

The separation of women and men in the public sphere, and the Islamic Republic's codified modesty for women, produced a three-phase women's movement in post-revolutionary cinema according to film historian Hamid Naficy. The first, in the

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<sup>40</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 3*, pp. 122–123.

<sup>41</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 3*, p. 130.

<sup>42</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 3*, p. 186.

<sup>43</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 3*, p. 187.

<sup>44</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, p. 94, 95, 96.

early 1980s, can be characterised by ‘women’s structured absence’. This was a period of purification where women disappeared as hosts and as subjects in television news, were heavily edited or entirely removed from films whenever unveiled or sexualised, and were temporarily suspended from contemporary filming until new standards of purity were adhered to in the industry.<sup>45</sup> The second phase, in the mid-1980s, saw women as a largely ‘background presence’. This coincided with the height of the Iran-Iraq War and featured minor roles for women who were often confined to the domestic sphere. In particular, women only appeared dressed conservatively and the camera would intentionally avoid displaying their bodies. These modesty requirements noticeably complicated the filming process as even intimate scenes between a husband and wife could not be captured without veiling, and only behaviour acceptable in public settings was permitted. Naficy characterises the third phase of post-revolutionary cinema, beginning in the late 1980s and continuing in contemporary Iranian cinema, as one in which women are a ‘foreground presence’.<sup>46</sup> This phase, under the influence of realist techniques and theories, successfully integrates women into the film’s main plotlines. Frequently entire films centre on the stories of women and their daily lives. Female characters in this phase are intricate, multi-layered individuals with strengths, weaknesses and mixed motives. The complexity of character and context in these films gives female characters new agency to respond to difficult situations and presents women as intelligent actors capable of understanding and responding to their environment.

### **Case Study One: *Leila***

The 1997 film *Leila* is a key example of the complexity and agency of women in post-revolutionary realist cinema.<sup>47</sup> The film follows Leila, a young woman who learns that she is infertile and comes under pressure from her mother-in-law to allow her husband, Reza, to take a second wife. Though Reza continually insists that he loves Leila and does not want a child, his female relatives pressure her

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<sup>45</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, pp. 111–112, 114.

<sup>46</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Vol. 4*, p. 121.

<sup>47</sup> *Leila* (Dir. Dariush Mehrjui, 1997).

throughout and Leila eventually decides to allow Reza to pursue other potential partners. Reluctantly he does so but insists that if Leila later objects to the idea, or to a particular woman he chooses, he will stop the pursuit. Despite Leila's internal anguish, she does not resist the pressure and in turn actively contributes to the search for Reza's new wife. After the wedding, Leila cannot handle the reality of having another woman in her home and flees to her parents' home to live separately. Reza and his new wife have a child and shortly thereafter divorce. Despite Reza's appeals to Leila to return to his home and restore their marriage, she declines. Reza and his daughter appear at a family gathering as Leila watches from a window. Leila sees the girl and says, 'maybe one day, when someone tells Reza's daughter Baran this story, she might laugh when she learns that if it hadn't been for [Reza's] mother's persistence, she might never have been born.'<sup>48</sup>

*Leila* stirred up considerable debate among audiences and film critics over its feminist credentials. Director Dariush Mehrjui is often regarded as a feminist film-maker, though Western audiences tend to view *Leila* as displaying misogynistic tropes due to Leila's lack of agency in the face of an antagonistic mother-in-law.<sup>49</sup> The film should be read, however, as neither misogynistic nor feminist—at least in as far as these terms are commonly understood in the West. All of the central action of the film relies on female characters. There is only one significant male character, Reza, who makes no independent decisions and defers to Leila and his mother to address every issue. It is clear that all the women have the ability to navigate either alongside or around their husbands, and in many ways have more influence over the situation than many of the men. In this respect, *Leila* affirms female agency and presents it as especially powerful in domestic politicking. The film does not, however, take a stereotypical feminist stance, as Leila is far from the archetypical heroine. She is passive, quiet, indecisive, and allows her mother-in-law to intervene and dictate, despite numerous opportunities to stop her. The film pits Leila and her mother-in-law against each other, showing one as a powerful agent and the other

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<sup>48</sup> *Leila*, Minute 2:03:14.

<sup>49</sup> D. Totaro, 'Leila: Dariush Mehrjui's Post-Revolution Masterpiece', *Off Screen Journal*, 6 (2002).

as a passive onlooker on her own life. The contrast between these two women speaks to the contrast between conservatism and progressivism in Iran, and how the former is maintained despite shifts in popular opinion. The mother-in-law, representing tradition and conservatism, actively pursues a second wife for her son so that he may have a child, and she a grandchild. Conversely, Leila, who represents a progressive understanding of marriage as primarily for love and satisfaction between spouses and not for the purpose of childbearing, chooses to quietly watch as the conservative agents successfully promote their cause.

The film presents women as the enforcers of culture standards, including practices considered patriarchal such as polygamy and divorce as a response to female infertility. It is the mother, not Reza, who insists that the marriage is unsatisfactory without children and that the remedy is to be found in polygamous arrangements. The film also portrays Leila, a cipher for young progressives, as the reason why Iranian culture remains traditional. Leila needed only to speak and the entire situation would be derailed. The film's symbolic conversation between conservative and liberal women identifies women – not men – as significant perpetrators of patriarchal culture. This is an uncomfortable accusation. *Leila* highlights particular issues which dominate women's lives in Iran, the pressures to have children, to permit divorce when infertile, and to consistently please in-laws, and identifies how these issues persist at the fault of multiple parties. Rather than deploying a conventional feminist argument, *Leila* presents the question of how women, who are agents with choices, can change their circumstances or submit to contextual pressures.

The strong female roles, domestic plot, and direct examination of womanhood in Iran exhibited in *Leila* is largely representative of Iranian films from the late 1990s until the present day. By engaging directly with the core of Iranian culture, these films both identify issues faced by women in daily life and pose the question, 'what should, and could life in Iran be like for women?' The boldness of these films in addressing both traditional cultural standards and political actions which oppress

women is striking, especially when considering the Iranian state's capability and willingness to censor and control the film industry.

### **Case Study Two: *A Separation***

The films of the internationally acclaimed director Asghar Farhadi serve as another excellent case study of feminist realism in contemporary Iranian cinema. Farhadi's films are characterised by strong female characters in mundane yet complex situations speaking directly to the state of gender relations in modern Iran. His 2011 film *A Separation* directly confronts the gulf separating Western and Iranian understandings of female identity.<sup>50</sup> The film opens with a couple arguing before a judge; the woman (Simin) is seeking to flee to the West to raise her daughter (Termeh), and is requesting a divorce since her husband refuses to leave the country. Simin argues that, 'as a mother, I'd rather she [Termeh] didn't grow up in these circumstances.'<sup>51</sup> This dialogue characterised Iran as a country short on opportunity, a difficult place for girls to grow up, and ultimately as inferior to the West. After the opening scene, Simin and her husband Nader return to their home where Simin packs her clothes and leaves for her parents and Nader nurses his father, who suffers from advanced Alzheimer's. Termeh, from the beginning, is trapped between her parents. As Simin pulls the last things together before she leaves she walks right past Termeh, asks her to do her laundry, and at no point addresses her departure.<sup>52</sup>

Once Simin leaves, Nader meets with a prospective caretaker (Razieh) and hires her to watch his father during work hours. Razieh is always pictured with her four year-old daughter Somayeh and is clearly from a lower-class background. When Razieh returns the next day it is revealed that she is pregnant as well as from an

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<sup>50</sup> *A Separation* (Dir: Asghar Farhadi, 2011).

<sup>51</sup> *A Separation*, Minute 03:28.

<sup>52</sup> *A Separation*, Minute 08:57.

orthodox religious background. In these circumstances she faces the dilemma of caring for Nader's father without making herself ritually impure. On a later day, Nader and Termeh return home early and find that Razieh and Somayeh are gone and his father is on the floor, tied to the bedpost. After frantically aiding his father, Razieh returns and apologises for leaving but the conversation quickly escalates with incendiary language. Nader tries to get Razieh out of the house so he can help his father, but she resists and will not leave until he takes back some of his accusations. This results in Nader closing the door on Razieh as Somayeh and Termeh watch silently. Later, Simin and Nader hear that Razieh has been taken to the hospital for a miscarriage, and Nader insists he did not know she was pregnant. Razieh's husband takes Nader to court where the three explain the case before a judge, who eventually charges Nader with the murder of the unborn baby. Outside of the courtroom, Simin tries to settle with the family and the class differences between the two families become evident. Nader's mother-in-law tells Razieh: 'you're young [...] you can try next year.'<sup>53</sup> At the centre of this dispute is a discrepancy between two families from different class families over the value of an unborn life. For the middle-class family, the miscarriage is no more severe than the harm done by Razieh to their grandfather. But for the poor family, the loss of a child entails earth shattering material and spiritual consequences.

As the film progresses, Simin and Nader navigate their fraught relationship and despite Termeh's pleas are unable to reconcile. Razieh has equally troubling times with her husband, who dodges creditors and resents her for working behind his back. After more clashes in court, Razieh approaches Simin in private and reveals that she most likely lost the baby prior to the incident with Nader, when she was hit by a car while rescuing his father from a busy street.<sup>54</sup> This scene emphasises women's ability to get to the truth outside of the legal system and without their husbands. Despite their mutual desire to settle the dispute, Razieh is unwilling to take the blood money for fear of spiritual implications and her husband lashes out at this refusal. The two young girls are caught between their warring parents.

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<sup>53</sup> *A Separation*, Minute 1:06:08.

<sup>54</sup> *A Separation*, Minute 1:48:20.

Throughout the film, similar shots of the two girls emphasise their innocence and express their mutual helplessness. The presence and connection of the two girls' quiet stories speaks to the opening claim: Iran is not the optimal environment for young girls. However, the precarious situation of the girls is the result of their mothers' actions, not just the socio-political situation of their country. The relationship between Simin and Termeh is strained from the start, and ultimately Termeh is a victim of her mother's use of agency while disregarding the needs of others, including her family. Simin's agency, exercised through leaving the family home, results in the appointment of Razieh and ultimately the conflict between the two families.

*A Separation* articulates bold critiques of class, divorce, and the position of women in contemporary Iran. Should *A Separation*, however, be classified as a feminist film? On one hand, the entire plot is propelled by the actions of women. On the other, the film also reveals how unbridled agency can disrupt family life, alienating children who do not have the agency to self-advocate. In a similar way to how *Leila* asserted female agency and strength, *A Separation* clearly affirms that Iranian women are capable, intelligent, and independent decision makers. However, the film does not overlook the consequences of strong, inward-looking women who fail to recognise the needs of others. *A Separation*, along with *Leila* and other contemporary Iranian films, exhibits a unique characterisation of women which this article has described as feminist realism. The film simultaneously portrays the damaging legal and social restrictions afflicting women in Iran while highlighting the profound consequences of challenging deeply embedded assumptions, traditions and systems. This feminist realism leaves room for the concept of the 'new woman' established during the Islamic Revolution – a woman with a strong religious identity – and for a female identity influenced by the West.

## **Conclusion**

The Islamic Revolution led to the removal of the 'painted doll', the overly-sexualised Western image of women, from Iranian film and culture and replaced it with the image of Fatima, a figure present at the foundation of Islam and capable of transcending time and place. This 'new woman' was to exist within religious structures and expected to uphold the principles of dignity and piety. The Western interpretation of the Revolution, and the Islamic codes which followed, almost exclusively highlight the misogynistic, oppressive and patriarchal structures it imposed. An exploration of the film industry, however, tells a different story. Iranian cinema in the post-revolutionary decades is characterised by increased dignity and agency for both female characters and actors. It was the identity of the 'new woman' which destroyed the 'virgin/whore' dynamic that had dominated Pahlavi film and which had confined women to either weak or overly-sexualised roles. Post-revolutionary censorship demanded women take on asexual roles and refocused cinema around mundane, relationship-based plots. Increasingly these plots centred on the lives of women and enabled a deeper examination of gender relations across Iranian society. As a result of the increased presence of women on screens across Iran, cinema has become a place for commentary and resistance against the aspects of the Islamic Republic which restrict women. It remains one of the most important outlets for cultural commentary, debate and social resistance.

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