

# DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE  
JOURNAL OF  
IRANIAN STUDIES



The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
Department of International and Area Studies

Volume 3 (2018)



*The* UNIVERSITY *of* OKLAHOMA  
*College of International Studies*  
FARZANEH FAMILY CENTER  
for IRANIAN and PERSIAN GULF STUDIES

***DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies***

Published under the auspices of:  
The OU Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies,  
the Department of International and Area Studies, and  
the College of International Studies at  
the University of Oklahoma

Volume 3 (2018)

*Editors-in-Chief:*  
Corey Standley  
Kayleigh Kuyon

*Associate Editors:*  
Caleb Ball  
Jesse Hare  
Jessamine Nazari  
Michael Pugh  
Ciera Stafford  
Sydney Warrington

*Faculty Advisors:*  
Afshin Marashi  
Manata Hashemi

© 2018, University of Oklahoma. *Dānesh* is a peer-reviewed undergraduate journal published annually by students at the University of Oklahoma's College of International Studies. Correspondence should be addressed to OU Iranian Studies Program, Department of International and Area Studies, 729 Elm Ave, Farzaneh Hall, Room 304, Norman, OK 73019.

Email: [amarashi@ou.edu](mailto:amarashi@ou.edu).

Weblink: <https://commons.shareok.org/handle/11244.46/57>

***DĀNESH: The OU Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies***  
Volume 3 (2018)

From the Faculty Advisors	iv
From the Editors-in-Chief	v

***ARTICLES***

Exercising Agency: Contesting Cultural Imperialism in the Depiction of Muslim Women <b>Julia Harth</b>	1
Iran's Others through Cinema: Ethnicity and the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Iran <b>Jared Johnson</b>	13
The Question of Women's Agency in Iranian Cinema <b>Alexis Walker</b>	25
The Value of Virtue: Depictions of Class and Morals in Iranian Cinema <b>Aubrey Crynes</b>	35
The Politics of Fashion in the Islamic Republic of Iran <b>Sydney Warrington</b>	47
The Evolution of Gender Equality in Modern Iran <b>Lindsey Eisenmann</b>	59
Ritual Impurity and the Decline of the Safavid Dynasty <b>Caleb Ball</b>	71
Ideology and Reality: Afghans in Iran <b>Daniel McAbee</b>	85
Zoroastrians: Becoming a Minority in Their Homeland <b>Travis Kepler</b>	95

## **From the Faculty Advisors**

Since its founding in 2016, *DĀNESH* has sought to provide a forum to showcase the original research produced by undergraduate students at the University of Oklahoma's Iranian Studies program. This third volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As co-editors-in-chief, Corey and Kayleigh have ensured that *DĀNESH* has continued to thrive as a forum for the study of all aspects of the history, culture, society, and politics of Iran and the Persianate world.

The name of the journal, *DĀNESH*, comes from the Persian word meaning *knowledge, learning, and wisdom*. We believe this is a fitting name for a journal that seeks to foster deep and compassionate understanding of one of the world's most culturally rich and historically complex civilizations. It is with this in mind that we present this volume of *DĀNESH*.

Afshin Marashi

Farzaneh Family Chair in Modern Iranian History

Director, Farzaneh Family Center for Iranian and Persian Gulf Studies

Manata Hashemi

Farzaneh Family Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran

## The Question of Women's Agency in Iranian Cinema

Alexis Walker\*

© University of Oklahoma

Trying to pinpoint individual acts of agency within cinema can be difficult. This is especially true within Iranian cinema because agency takes different forms than viewers would assume. The term agency itself is ambiguous. It often ignores culture completely, operating on a universal Western definition that fails to encapsulate outside experiences that lead to human action. This paper seeks to explore how women are portrayed as their own agents within Iranian cinema. In order to do this, agency must be taken out of its Western context. The reason for this is that people tend to view agency through ethnocentrism, whether intentionally or not, and discount its existence in foreign works. Doing this is extremely dangerous since it marginalizes women even more by allowing the viewer to either dismiss women or to develop a savior complex, looking to rescue the "oppressed." It also provides a justification for interference that either has no basis or functions on a lack of understanding. This paper will explore the definition of agency, provide a historical overview of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, and discuss several films and the individual acts of agency within them. As I will argue, throughout its post-revolutionary history Iranian cinema has portrayed women as agents in their own right. This is especially evident in films such as *Bashu the Little Stranger*, *Time for Love*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten*. Although women are depicted as agents in these films, agency manifests itself in unique ways that stand in contrast to a Western conception of the term.

### Agency

Agency is an extremely complex term and has a long history in social thought. When asked for the definition of agency, one might attribute many things to it. Words like self-hood, motivation, will, purpose, intentionality, choice, initiative, freedom, and creativity come to mind.<sup>1</sup> A significant

---

\***Author's Bio:** Alexis Walker graduated from the University of Oklahoma in May 2017 and is currently working for the university's Office of Admissions and Recruitment.

number of the definitions of agency that exist in Western thought today emerged out of the enlightenment period.<sup>2</sup> There is a certain line of thinking, heavily influenced by John Locke, which emphasizes the capacity of humans to shape their own circumstances. This, in turn, influenced a variety of prominent scholars like Adam Smith, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill.<sup>3</sup> In their article, "What is Agency?" Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische argue that this line of thought has "embedded agency in an individualist and calculative conception of action that still underlies many Western accounts of freedom and progress."<sup>4</sup> The problem with this view of agency is that it does not necessarily exist within Iranian cinema. This line of thought allows the viewer to discount acts of agency that operate outside of the framework of this American dream, where one's direct actions can lead to upward mobility or a direct change in status.

Additionally, a significant number of Western feminists tend to define cinema in terms of how it falls within a patriarchal sphere.<sup>5</sup> A good example of this view is the Bechdel test that was established by Alison Bechdel in 1985. This test determines the feminist value of a film by asking several questions. The first question is whether the film has at least two female characters. The second question is whether the film has at least one scene in which the female characters talk to one another about something other than a man.<sup>6</sup> The problem is that this test dismisses any representation of women due to sexism.<sup>7</sup> While there is an inherent problem with sexism by dismissing any existence of it as non-feminist, the end result is a discounting of individual acts of agency within those films as well.

Women in Iranian cinema are often easily dismissed under these Western definitions of agency. Women in Iranian cinema are not always

---

<sup>1</sup> Mustafa Emirbayer and Ann Mische, "What is Agency," *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol.103, No. 4 (1998): 962.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 964.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 964-965.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 965.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Mayne, "The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism," *New German Critique*, No. 23 (1981): 42.

<sup>6</sup> Holly Derr, "What Really Makes a Film Feminist," *The Atlantic*, November 13, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/11/what-really-makes-a-film-feminist/281402/>.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

actors trying to shape their own circumstances. Sometimes, the circumstances are fixed and instead women act in order to exist and to survive. However, this does not discount their choices as their own agents or their presence as powerful women. Likewise, one would be hard-pressed to find an Iranian film that is not influenced by, and perhaps contributes to, patriarchal ideas.<sup>8</sup> Female characters in Iranian cinema have cleverly manipulated the sexist elements to their advantage. Examples include prostitutes, like that of the woman in *Ten*, and lovers, like Gazele in *A Time for Love*. To subsequently dismiss a film because of sexism would be to discount the experiences of the Iranian women who have to interact with it on a daily basis.

Agency in Iranian cinema is shaped by experiences and is not necessarily geared towards freedom or progress, but rather towards challenging systems while acknowledging the experiences of Iranian women. While one may find elements within a film that sexualize women, there are also elements that enhance their depiction as strong women, shaped by their experiences but not made by them.<sup>9</sup> While I do not disagree with some of the feminist critiques present in both Western and Iranian cinema, dismissing these films entirely, rather than analyzing individual acts within their cultural contexts, would be a mistake. Dismissing the film dismisses the women and contributes to the “oppression” of women that concerns so many people. Not stopping to analyze individual acts of agency within a film can further push women into the background, rendering them invisible. It is important to critique, but not to the point that any positives found within the cinematic experience are not acknowledged. Crossing this line can often render one a contributor to the problem, rather than part of its solution.

In order to understand women's agency in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, it is important to have a historical background. As previously suggested, agency cannot be separated from culture or experience. Immediately following the 1979 Iranian Revolution there was a shift in cinema, emphasizing more political, anti-Western themes. This shift was partially caused by the revolution and events such as the American Hostage

---

<sup>8</sup> Minoo Derayeh, “Depiction of women in Iranian cinema, 1970s to present,” *Women's Studies International Forum* Vol 33, No. 3 (2010): 152.

<sup>9</sup> *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, directed by Bahram Beizai (1989; Iran: The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults).



crisis of 1979.<sup>10</sup> Women were also experiencing a change within cinema and, due to the Islamic Republic's forced veiling, filmmakers were struggling with how to portray women. Unfortunately, one of the easiest solutions was to leave them out all together or to relegate them to the background.<sup>11</sup> A shift was seen during this time, moving from beautiful, delicate Iranian heroines to a more rugged, unattractive heroine drawn from the peasant class.<sup>12</sup>

### Historical Context

The Iran-Iraq war began in 1980 and lasted for eight years. Cinema, most impacted by the war, served many purposes during this time. Among these was to serve as a platform for the vilification of the Iraqi enemy in order to rally citizens around the idea of a war. Another purpose was to promote patriotism, friendship, and martyrdom.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, the Iran-Iraq war affected all aspects of society, particularly the country's gender dynamic. With men away at war, women were suddenly thrust into extreme visibility, entering into the workforce and becoming breadwinners on the home front.<sup>14</sup> This can be seen in the film *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, which will be discussed later in the paper.

The year 1989 was a turning point in Iranian cinema. Not only did it signal the end of the Iran-Iraq war, but it also happened to be the year Ayatollah Khomeini died of a heart attack. The death of Khomeini left an opening for filmmakers to begin critiquing the government. A period of reform took place under the new supreme leader, Khomeini. The political landscape spilled over into film under the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, or the MCIG. Mohammad Khatami, previously the President of the MCIG, became the President of Iran in 1997, running on a platform of inclusivity for youths and women.<sup>15</sup> Khatami's reign, starting in 1989 as head of the MCIG and then as president in 1997, led to the Golden Age of

---

<sup>10</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 174, 183.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>14</sup> Elaheh Koolaei, "The Impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Social Roles of Iranian Women," *Middle East Critique* Vol. 23, No. 3 (2014): 278.

<sup>15</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (London: Duke University Press, 2012), 42.

Iranian cinema. One of the films to emerge from this period was *Time for Love*, which will be discussed in detail later in the paper.

Khatami came under intense criticism in the late 1990s for the ineffectiveness of his reforms. This was punctuated by President George W. Bush's speech in 2002, when he referred to Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil." This hurt Khatami's political image because he had long been advocating for elements of democracy.<sup>16</sup> Criticism abounded from conservatives and liberals alike.<sup>17</sup> Women were also a significant part of this critique as the reforms of cinema had opened the door for women to have a voice.<sup>18</sup> It is out of this landscape that the last two films analyzed and discussed within this paper emerged, *The May Lady* and *Ten*. Both films are ultimately important representations of this social commentary and of women's agency.

### ***Bashu, the Little Stranger***

*Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1983) was a film by Bahram Beizai made directly in the middle of the Iran-Iraq war. In *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, one gets a picture of a war-torn Iran. The film opens with Bashu, an Arab Iranian, desperately running away from the bombs all around him. We know from the beginning that Bashu is alone, with flashbacks of his family following him like ghost victims of the war. Early in the film, Bashu encounters Na'i and her children. Na'i is the most important character with regards to this paper, as Na'i was a break from the regular heroine of this period, which were usually characterized by unattractiveness. In opposition to this, Na'i was very beautiful, and her beauty is even emphasized in a scene that could be seen as problematic, where the camera pans in on a close-up of her face underneath the veil. If looking at this film from a Western viewpoint, it would be easy to dismiss the movie right thereby making an argument about the sexualization and orientalizing of the female figure. However, throughout the course of the film, there are many instances where Na'i is consistently portrayed as a strong female figure with her own agency.

One prominent example of this is her decision to take Bashu into her family. While this could easily be overlooked, it is an important act of cultural agency. Normally to make a decision like this Na'i would have to

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>18</sup> Elaheh Koolaei, "The Impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Social Roles of Iranian Women," 277.

get her husband's permission despite the fact that he is away, presumably at war. The film alludes to this repeatedly, with disapproval resonating from the neighbors and a critical scene where Na'i, knowing Bashu can overhear her, reads a letter from her husband where she adds, "As for the newly arrived boy whose name is Bashu, he is welcome."<sup>19</sup> It is clear from the film that Na'i has not told her husband about the boy and that he would not be pleased that she took him in. Despite this, Na'i makes the decision to take Bashu in, an extreme act of agency.

Other examples of Na'i's agency are extremely subtle, such as every time she gets up in the morning to make sure the crops are safe or when she goes to the market and sells her wares.<sup>20</sup> It is an agency that exists because of, and in spite of, a present patriarchy. To explain this, gender roles must be examined. Men were seen as the providers and women were relegated to roles of the victim or mother figures. Na'i is a mother, and a good one, to her children and to Bashu. She is also a victim of the situation surrounding her, forced to work because of the war and to take over a "man's" role, as it were. Despite this, there is no doubt that Na'i is a strong, capable character. She handles the work effortlessly and, while Bashu helps her out later in the film, Na'i would have been fine without the presence of any male character. Agency here is not a set of human actions working to change circumstances; instead, her agency lies in the reinvention of gender in the confines of patriarchy. Overlooking these as acts of agency undermines Na'i's presence as a powerful, capable woman, effectively relegating her to the background.

### ***Time for Love***

*Time for Love* (1990) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf was released in the Golden Age of Iranian Cinema. The story follows three different scenarios with characters in fluctuation, and one of the only constant characters is the main character, Gazale, who in all three scenarios is having an affair.<sup>21</sup> In the first scenario, the brown haired man is her husband and she has an affair with the blond haired shoeshine boy. Her husband finds out and kills her lover, leading Gazale to suicide. In the second scenario, the actors for the husband and the shoeshine switch places, but the affair stays the same.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> *Time for Love*, directed by Mohsen Makhmalbaf (1990; Iran: Green Film House).

In this one, the lover kills the husband and is sentenced to death. Again, Gazale kills herself. By making Gazale promiscuous, the viewer is in danger of viewing her as an inherently problematic character, which reinforces stereotypes and patriarchal ideas. Looking deeper, Gazale's actions are the driving force within the story which is ultimately focused on the question of Gazale's happiness.

The most obvious example of this motivation is in the third scenario, when Gazale has an affair with the shoeshine boy. Her husband finds out about the affair and decides to go after the shoeshine, and in the process of the confrontation the young man gets the upper hand over the husband.<sup>22</sup> With the weapon in his hand, he gives it back to the husband saying that love was worth it. The husband, seeing the love that the boy has for Gazale, decides to pay for the wedding.<sup>23</sup> While Gazele remains unhappy afterwards, hinting towards a perceived fourth scenario, the point is made. Rather than viewing Gazele's acts as negative and vilifying Gazele, the film has a very different message.<sup>24</sup> Gazele, as an agent, is a powerful character. She follows her own desires and, rather than being condemned for them, the film portrays them as necessary for the journey to find the happiness that eludes her. If this film were examined on a surface level under a Western ideal of agency, it would be easy to dismiss Gazele as a frivolous, selfish character whose actions revolve around the men in her life. Within an Iranian context, Gazele is more complex, perhaps flawed, but ultimately strong and in charge of her own happiness.

### ***The May Lady***

*The May Lady* (1998) by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad was made in in the midst of Khatemi's critiques. It follows the main character, Forough, a very successful documentarian. Throughout the course of the film, there is a tension between Forough and her son, Mani. This conflict stems from her love and desire for her lover, whose physical presence is completely absent from the film.<sup>25</sup> Forough is portrayed as extremely capable and her own agent. Despite this, it would be shockingly easy to read the film as sexist. Her son, Mani, appears to have control over Forough. He seems to be the main obstacle between his mother and her happiness with her new lover.

---

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> *The May Lady*, Film, directed by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad (1998; Iran: Mahammad Atebbai, 2000).

He does this by leaving at alternative times, forcing her to bail him out and readjust her own wants in order to satisfy his.

While Forough is conscious of Mani's wishes, her ultimate internal struggle is with the concept of physical desire on one hand, and motherhood on the other, and whether they are mutually exclusive.<sup>26</sup> One such scene that illustrates this is when Forough gives a diary filled with all her intimate thoughts to Mani.<sup>27</sup> Forough knows that Mani is hostile towards her lover yet, despite this, she chooses herself over the belligerent wants of Mani; the diary, then, is a representation of her own desires. By giving it to Mani, she is forcing him to acknowledge that she exists as more than a mother and that she has wants and desires of her own. Recognizing the giving of the diary as an act of agency is important because it juxtaposes the traditional, patriarchal narrative with a more real understanding of Forough's positionality. Forough recognizes the hostility within the situation, but consciously chooses to put herself first. This may seem trivial, and could even be missed; however, it is a distinct act of agency within the narrative. Forough abandons cultural expectations that have been set because of the dichotomy of motherhood and desire, and she ultimately chooses herself.

Forough is a strong character, despite being torn. Her choices throughout the film show a clear understanding of herself and of Mani as well. Her actions do not necessarily shape her own circumstances, because in the end she still remains in a limbo between desire for her lover and desire of perfect motherhood. However, that does not negate that at definite points she clearly makes a choice for herself, breaking through that dichotomy. Ignoring her choices is doing her a disservice and, as a byproduct, doing a disservice to Iranian women dealing with the same struggle. The tendency is to want to save them, seeing them as a victim. Forough is not a victim, and her struggle is not ours to fix.

### ***Ten***

*Ten* (2002) by Abbas Kiarostami follows Mania Akbari through a series of ten scenes. These scenes are everyday encounters with her son, a prostitute, her sister, and others. Mania is an extremely strong character and, like Forough from *The May Lady*, she was at a crossroads between motherhood and desire. One of the prominent acts of agency within the film is Mania's unapologetic happiness with her new husband, even when

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

faced with constant aggression from her son. The expectation would be for her to “value” her son’s opinion more than some carnal desire. Mania’s agency within the film is that she understands her own value and wants. At one point she states, “I did not get married again just to give you another father, he is a good companion to me - a friend.”<sup>28</sup> It is clear from this instance and others that Mania is extremely happy with her new husband, and choosing him, then, was an act of agency. She refuses to take criticism without being vocal, even deciding to lie about what her husband had done in order to gain a separation in court; she does what she knows will give her the separation she desires.<sup>29</sup> She is an unapologetic, strong character, even when she is met constantly with criticism from her son. At no point does she waver. This is an act of agency, albeit one that exists within a cultural context, where motherhood is sometimes perceived to be at odds with desire. Viewed from a purely Western perspective, one would miss this act of agency altogether.

Another important scene happens later in the film, when Mania picks up a prostitute and they strike up a conversation. Mania asks her the reason why she got into prostitution. In response the woman states, “Sex, love, sex it is a trade and it is my job and I like it...My life is easy I do not need anyone or anything.”<sup>30</sup> Choosing prostitution was not because she was a victim of circumstances, but rather an act of agency. It was a way to take control of the system and to take control of her own destiny. While the film is not necessarily advocating for prostitution, it is putting in perspective the acts of agency that are easily dismissed. Viewing this woman as a victim in need of saving is ultimately taking away the agency that she has worked to attain and, in her own words, that she likes. The whole time that Mania is questioning her, she asks the same questions that initially pop into a viewer’s head: “What about love? What about guilt?”<sup>31</sup> These questions are natural, but they are also dangerous; they discount acts of agency, even the ones that make us uncomfortable and perpetuate the savior complex.

## **Conclusion**

Acts of agency within Iranian films, and their understanding, should not be limited to a Western understanding of agency. There is a cultural element, and dismissing patriarchal or sexist ideas within films means

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ten*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (2002; Iran: Zeitgeist Films, 2002).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

dismissing individual acts of agency. We saw this through the analysis of films from the post-revolutionary era. However, the bigger issue that comes from dismissing agency is that it becomes a justification for political and individual acts. In other words, these issues are being looked at through an ethnocentric lens, with cinema informing our opinions. We end up with an intrinsically-biased view of a foreign "other" that is oppressed and needs saving. Cinema is one of the few mediums that transcends national boundaries, and because of this it wields much power. Watching a film like *Ten* or *The May Lady* without a nuanced understanding can become justification for interference. It is only a small leap from watching a film like the ones discussed above to deciding that these women are oppressed and not in control of their own destiny. This leads to a Western savior complex, propelling people to step into situations where they have no understanding and arguably no right to enter in.

People have watched these films and felt the need to punish a society that pushes women to the background, not realizing that they have essentially done the same thing by failing to recognize agency in a context that was not their own. With regards to contemporary debates toward Middle Eastern women this is heard over and over, pushing a victim complex upon Middle Eastern women.<sup>32</sup> Watching cinema and discounting agency contributes to this over-arching narrative. The point of this paper is not to keep people from being critical of what they see and hear in films, as there definitely are issues that exist with the portrayal of women in Iranian Cinema. Rather, the point is to fill these critiques with an understanding of agency that extends beyond ethnocentrism and allows for understanding of the subjects themselves.

---

<sup>32</sup> Leila Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others," *American Anthropologist* Vol. 104, No. 3 (2002): 783.