

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.

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

Iran's Others through Cinema: Ethnicity and the Politics of Representation in Contemporary Iran

Jared Johnson*

© University of Oklahoma

With all the politically issues and social animosity surrounding Iran today, the Islamic Republic has become a focus for international attention and critique, especially if one might watch Fox News on any given evening—that goes for any news outlet for that matter. However, except for the ‘Iran Nuclear Deal’ or their nuclear program, how informed are the majority of Westerners on Iranian affairs or even social concerns? Unfortunately, most press following Iran seems to maintain a negative theme; however, that is not always the case. For instance, just this year in fact, an Iranian indie film, *The Salesman* (2016), was nominated and won an Oscar for ‘Best Foreign Language Film of 2017’ at America’s annual 89th Academy Awards.¹ The film even managed to win multiple awards across the world. Yet, *The Salesman* is not the only Iranian film to make a splash into Western culture—in 1997, Abbas Kiarostami’s *Taste of Cherry* (1996) was awarded the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival and *A Separation* (2011), by the same director of *The Salesman*, also received tremendous praise throughout Western film festivals in 2012.² Thus, if these Iranian national films are increasingly becoming more popular, then what insights

* **Author’s Bio:** Jared Johnson is from Fairland, Oklahoma. He is majoring in Middle Eastern Studies and minoring in Arabic. He plans to graduate in May of 2018.

¹ “Awards: *The Salesman*,” International Movie Database: Amazon.com Company, IMDb.com, accessed April 21, 2017, http://www.imdb.com/title/tt5186714/awards?ref_=tt_awd.

² Shahab Esfandiary, *Iranian Cinema and Globalization: National, Transnational and Islamic Dimensions* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 75-77.

may these films yield when it comes to understanding the Islamic Republic?

These films, such as the ones mentioned above, otherwise known as 'art-house films,' have become enthralled with simple, humanist themes usually focusing on very limited characters and their individuality in a complex environment.³ These art-house films predominately receive celebrated receptions, especially considering that the films' overall themes often contradict the perceived societal view of the Islamic Republic. The result is a shared bitterness and hostility between the government and the films' directors.⁴ Further adding to the complexities of Iranian cinema, who is being depicted in these art-house films? Considering Iran's incredibly diverse population from centuries of invasions and intermingling and shifting ethnic communities, many ethnic groups such as Arabs, Armenians, Azeris (Turks), Turkmans, Jews, Kurds, Persians, and even Afghan refugees and black Africans (Afro-Iranians) all inhabit the Islamic Republic.⁵ Because of the many ethnic minorities in Iran, in recent years Iranian cinema has taken a highly critical stance towards society's treatment of minorities and refugees, thereby challenging the notion of 'Pure Persian-ness' that is emphasized frequently in Iranian history. This idea stems from the Indo-European hypothesis that Persians, related to the Aryan race, constitute the majority in Iran where 'Persian' is privileged above all other cultural, historical, and linguistic elements, especially Semitic or Turkish ethnicities.⁶ Then, in effect, cinema brings to light issues of human rights that Iran has continually come under pressure for.

Given this societal emphasis on the perceived superiority of 'Persian-ness,' what effect has this had on cinematic representations of ethnic minorities? In turn, how have these cinematic representations influenced societal perceptions and treatment of Iranian minorities? Because Iranian cinema has become a mirror that reflects to audiences the continual discrimination and hardships that ethnic minorities and refugees in Iran face, I will explore these unsavory portrayals of minority groups in Iran

³ Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*, vol. 4 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 175.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

⁵ Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity After Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 22; Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 191.

⁶ Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 22-23; Afshin Marashi, "Modern Iran: 1500-Present," University of Oklahoma (lecture notes, Norman, OK), September 29, 2016.

such as Kurds, Afghans, Arabs, and Afro-Iranians mainly due to their increased representation in Iranian cinema. Although Iranian cinema is implicitly critiquing their mistreatment and challenging the societal emphases on the significance of 'Persian-ness' as a defining marker of Iranian identity, these cinematic critiques are in fact working, however mildly, and leading to official government and individual reforms toward these minority groups.

Understanding Aryanism in the Islamic Republic

To understand the concept of 'Pure Persian-ness' and the racist and discriminatory system that it propagates, one must refer to the term 'Aryanism.' In the historical context, 'Aryan' describes a race whose origin is believed to have spawned near Central Asia, bordering the Hindu Kush on the western sector of the Himalayas, and is associated with a people of "fair complexion."⁷ Deriving from the Indo-European Hypothesis, some Aryans allegedly spoke an Indo-Iranian language, a sublanguage of the Indo-European language family, which includes Persian or Farsi.⁸ Therefore, due to this and the strong connection that Iranians have with Europeans linguistically and physically, Iranians have managed to maintain a "distinct identity with their Aryan past."⁹ Two central pieces of historical Persian literature for instance, the *Shahnameh* and the *Avesta*, are construed in a way that emphasizes the ethnocentric Persian perspective, which then marginalizes non-Persians living within Iran.¹⁰ In turn, "the dominant group interprets these classic texts based on contemporary notions of race, nationality, border, and nation-state; it then uses such interpretation to legitimize its privileged position."¹¹ This interpretation became extremely apparent in the twentieth century. Even after the Pahlavi era, a period of strict multiethnic suppression where the Aryan-Persian identity was brought to its zenith, the government of the Islamic Republic has continued to endorse Persian/Farsi and its Perso-Arabic script as the official language within Iran, despite the fact the millions of different ethnolinguistic Iranians do not have the access to nor ability to learn the

⁷ John H. Lorentz, *Historical Dictionary of Iran*, 2nd ed. (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2007), 34.

⁸ Alireza Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 75-76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁰ Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge*, 54.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

‘official’ language.¹² Therefore, a gap developed between ethnic Persians and non-Persians, contributing to the continued marginalization by the Islamic government. However, by the Khatami era, a glimpse of hopeful change began to rise as reformist cinema grows stronger.

The Iranian Kurds

The Kurds make up one of the largest minorities in the Islamic Republic. Current estimates of Iranian Kurds number between seven and ten million, or roughly fifteen percent of the Iranian population.¹³ Many Iranian Kurds reside near the borders of Iraq and Turkey, extending towards the Caucus region along the Zagros Mountains.¹⁴ However, Iranian Kurds are not exclusive to this area in Iran. Especially since the Pahlavi era and throughout the twentieth century in general, the Kurdish people have fallen victim to many types of ethnic and religious discrimination and marginalization.¹⁵ Historically, Persians’ discrimination of Kurdish minorities stems from their strong nationalistic tendencies and previous uprisings.¹⁶ In 1982, the Islamic Republic quelled the last significant Kurdish revolt following the 1979 Revolution. However, the Kurds have remained under strict regulation since.¹⁷ As portrayed in *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), a film by Bahman Ghobadi, the viewer is shown the harsh reality of Kurdish life near the Iran-Iraq border as three Iranian-Kurd musicians—Audeh, Barat, and their father, Mirza—traverse an incredibly rough terrain of dry desert landscapes, mountains, and snow-packed peaks during the Iran-Iraq War. The environment is desolate at times, plagued with dangerous bandits, and only occupied by Iraqi- and Iranian-Kurds who are either refugees displaced by the war or family members who are looking for loved ones amidst all the chaos. The film, although displaying several moments of comical wit, is a saddening yet powerful depiction in which these three men travel through Iranian Kurdistan to the Iraqi side of the border in an attempt to find Hanareh, Mirza’s ex-wife, who has been stranded there and endangered by Saddam Hussein’s ruthless violence. Hanareh had left Iran because she found a new lover, Mirza’s best friend,

¹² Ibid., 108-109.

¹³ Kerim Yildiz and Tanyel B. Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran: The Past, Present and Future* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), 3; Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 283.

¹⁴ Lorentz, *Historical Dictionary*, 182.

¹⁵ Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 283.

¹⁶ Yildiz and Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran*, 11.

¹⁷ Lorentz, *Historical Dictionary*, 183.

and because she could no longer sing in public as a musician after the Iran's revolution in 1979.¹⁸ On the journey, the three travelers encounter Iraqi jets bombing Kurdish outposts, large camps of orphaned Iraqi- and Iranian-Kurdish children, and mass graves of fellow Kurds who died mercilessly from the chemical weapons of Hussein. However, throughout the entire film, there is never any implication of Iranian support nor their presence, except for the two Persian soldiers who randomly appear and are always seemingly desperate and in need of help. The film simply depicts the Kurdish dilemma and the harsh reality in which they had to survive between two warring nations, neither of which really wanted them.

In *The Wind Will Carry Us* (1999), a film by Abbas Kiarostami, a media crew led by Behzad, the film's main character, travels from Tehran to a remote Kurdish village in Iranian Kurdistan. The crew, doing the bidding of a mysteriously influential female, arrives at the village to observe the burial ritual of an elderly woman who is predicted to pass away. The Kurdish community, which is scarcely populated with the elderly and women while the men perform menial labor away from home, is depicted as being extremely poor with mud-bricks and wooden limbs comprising the foundation of the entire village—a setting which is uniquely different from Tehrani standards. In fact, only one child is visible during the film, Farzad—Behzad's guide. However, returning to Behzad's purpose for being in the village, the film portrays a “morbid narrative reality: the hero of the film wants this woman to die so that he and his crew can return to their worn urban lives having amassed some great ethnographic material.”¹⁹ During the film, a pivotal scene appears when Behzad, driving a teacher from the village to a nearby school, asks the teacher about his opinion on the burial ceremony. The teacher responds, “It's painful.”²⁰ He had watched his mother scar her face during the ceremonial ritual. In the film, after a person in the community dies, women will mutilate or cause harm to themselves to propel their husbands'

¹⁸ Dave Kehr, “Film in Review: *Marooned in Iraq*,” *The New York Times*, April 25, 2003, accessed April 29, 2017, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/25/movies/film-in-review-marooned-in-iraq.html>.

¹⁹ Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 126.

²⁰ *The Wind Will Carry Us*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (1999; Iran: MK2 Productions, 2000), Amazon Instant Video.

economic status or receive better employment.²¹ Accordingly, “the severity of the mutilation depends on the power that the deceased had held in the community.”²² Thus the film almost becomes this voyeuristic perspective in which Behzad, the observer, seeks out a sordid Kurdish ceremony. As though viewing a preciously foreign object, Behzad becomes an onlooker who is fascinated by these Kurdish villagers and their “exotic locales” while remaining uninterested in their past.²³ Consequently, with the exoticism of the Kurdish villagers’ rituals and locales, in a sense, their problems and societal issues become invisible or overlooked. Therefore, Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us* becomes a “scathing portrait. . . of a society that considers ceremony and appearance to be more important than simple human feelings.”²⁴

In these two films, *Marooned in Iraq* and *The Wind Will Carry Us*, the directors are attempting to reshow the Kurds, and even women, in a different light to expose the plight they are subjected to, causing a push for social reform. For many reasons, the Kurdish condition under the Islamic Republic has never been easy. During the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian Kurdistan faced military strikes from both Iran and Iraq, raising the death toll of this period to approximately 45,000 civilian casualties.²⁵ Many Iranian-Kurdish refugees were sent into exile as a result. Immediately after the war, Iranian government agents even assassinated the leader of the Democratic Party of Iranian Kurdistan (KDIP), who initially attempted to develop a truce negotiation with the Islamic Republic.²⁶ Following the assassination, many KDIP members and sympathizers were either imprisoned or executed.²⁷ According to the Human Rights Watch, approximately 300 Iranian-Kurdish villages were demolished from 1980-1992.²⁸ However, after the release of these two films in 1999 and 2002 (and even during Khatami’s presidency beginning in 1997), “the Iranian Kurds have experienced a

²¹ Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 127.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Azadeh Farahmand, “Perspectives on Recent (International Acclaim for) Iranian Cinema,” in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 101.

²⁴ Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 256.

²⁵ Yildiz and Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran*, 42.

²⁶ Reza Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: The Abuse of Cultural Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2001), 39.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

renaissance of political and social thought helped along by the wider Iranian reform movement.”²⁹ Also in the 1990s, the Kurdish identity within Iran experienced the revitalization of the Kurdish national movement through artists, writers, and activists alike.³⁰ However, they still have to maintain some limitations under the Iranian government. There is even a Kurdish radio show that is aired, along with the relatively new Kurdistan University that is now present in the Iranian-Kurdish region; however, the once promised Kurdish-language courses have yet to take effect.³¹ Nevertheless, perhaps the most impactful symbol for Kurdish identity with Iranian reform cinema is film director Bahman Ghobadi himself—Kurdish poets, artists, and especially filmmakers have flourished since the revival of Kurdish national movement.³² As a previous assistant to Abbas Kiarostami in *The Wind Will Carry Us*, Ghobadi has taken off as a film producer, directing *A Time for Drunken Horses* (2000), *Marooned in Iraq* (2002), *Turtles Can Also Fly* (2004), *Half Moon* (2006), and *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009).³³ With his influence and status as a currently world-renowned director, he now has one of the largest platforms to bring light upon Kurdish minority issues within Iran and to contribute further to developing, and possibly nurturing, the Kurdish national identity.

The Afghan Refugees

Beginning in 1979, the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, ultimately displacing many Afghans from their homes and communities—nearly 3 million Afghan refugees were forced to flee into Iran, making up 90 percent of all refugees in Iran at the time.³⁴ After the Soviets abandoned their cause in Afghanistan, the Taliban regime took control of the incredibly unstable nation, which further worsened conditions for Afghans still residing there.³⁵ For many Afghan refugees, urban-industrialized cities offered better opportunities when it came to menial labor due to their lack of education and ‘per class capital.’ Therefore, many refugees would accumulate and develop ‘shantytown’ communities on the outer margins

²⁹ Yildiz and Taysi, *The Kurds in Iran*, 107.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 107 and 114.

³² Ibid., 109.

³³ Naficy, *A Social History*, 236.

³⁴ Ibid., 232.

³⁵ Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 280.

surrounding the cities.³⁶ However, for many Iranians, the influx of cheap-labor Afghan workers “created massive social problems, wage deflation, and resentments among Iranians, which made the refugees worthy subjects for socially conscious filmmakers.”³⁷ In *Baran* (2001), director Majid Majidi offers a sorrowful glimpse of the plight that has surrounded Afghan refugees for nearly thirty years.³⁸ Set outside of Tehran, the film embraces the complex relationship surrounding Latif, a young Iranian construction laborer, and a mysteriously young Afghan worker named Rahmat, Najaf’s “son.” After Soltan, another Afghan worker who happens to be a close friend of Najaf, brings Rahmat into work to replace his father, it turns out that the work is simply too difficult for Rahmat to handle. Consequently, Rahmat is given Latif’s relaxed job of providing tea and food in return for Rahmat’s back-breaking one. Latif then berates and torments Rahmat until it is revealed that “Rahmat” is actually a young girl named Baran, the daughter of Najaf. It is not much longer until Latif ends up falling in love with Baran. Latif’s love for Baran enables him to develop a close, tight-knit bond with her, which transforms him into her protector.³⁹ As Latif gets closer to Baran, her past and history begin to intrigue him, which signifies the end of her invisibility to him.⁴⁰ Majidi’s film, therefore, “is an allegory about the need to change one’s attitudes to refugees, to racism and to sexism.”⁴¹ Although Baran returns with her father to Afghanistan at the end of the film, Latif’s love for her is everlasting, which lends to the idea that “love can conquer all borders”—Majidi’s own critique of Iranian society’s inability to accept people unlike themselves, especially an exilic minority in need of support.⁴²

Examining a different perspective brings us to Mohsen Makhmalbaf’s *The Afghan Alphabet* (2002), a short documentary about several hundred Afghan children within a refugee camp located near the Iran-Afghanistan border. Most of this generation of children in the documentary has been displaced due to Taliban cruelty and the war that was being waged by the United States. *The Afghan Alphabet* is a deeply moving, incredibly sad representation of the conditions in which these young and extremely

³⁶ Naficy, *A Social History*, 234.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 281.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid., 282.

⁴² Ibid.

innocent Afghan children had to endure while not being allowed to have a proper education; they lived in a very poor community in which they are just being taught to brush their teeth at nearly seven or ten years of age. Compared to the Iranian Kurds discussed earlier, these Afghan children were not permitted to attend Iranian school systems due to their “illegal status.”⁴³ Because many children in the documentary did not have any forms of identification, they were not allowed to be a part of any formal, educational lessons that were provided—without legal identification, they had to remain away from the lesson, listening from a distance.

However, to people like Makhmalbaf, the children of the nearly 7 million Afghan refugees without access to proper educational schooling represented an obvious problem for the Islamic Republic and a violation of basic human rights.⁴⁴ Both Majidi’s and especially Makhmalbaf’s efforts ended up paying off. According to film scholar Hamid Naficy, after *The Afghan Alphabet*’s release,

The movie and its subject became controversial enough for the Iranian parliament [*majles*] to approve a bill removing the ban and mandating education for Afghani children. This is one of the rare documentaries leading to legislation improving the cause it espoused.⁴⁵

Furthermore, Makhmalbaf went on to write and direct several other films dealing with the Afghan refugee dilemma, and he even wrote several public letters to President Khatami in which he criticized the government’s “forced repatriation of Afghani refugees after twenty years of ‘hospitality’” and advocated for “literacy classes for refugee children.”⁴⁶ Makhmalbaf then went on to establish a “five- month pilot literacy class” for as many Afghan children as he could fund on his own budget from the proceeds of his film, *Kandahar* (2001); following that venture, with the help of President Khatami and support from other governmental agencies, Makhmalbaf established an elementary school in Herat, a large city in western Afghanistan near the Iranian border. In addition, he founded the Afghan Children Education Movement in 2001 and began “promoting literacy and culture in Afghanistan, including the training of film

⁴³ Naficy, *A Social History*, 234.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ Naficy, *A Social History*, 234-235.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 242.

personnel.”⁴⁷ Correspondingly, in mid-2001, President Khatami even went so far as speaking out publicly against the Taliban while simultaneously announcing support for the Northern Alliance (Afghanistan's new government under Hamed Karzai) and U.S. military operations in Afghanistan against the Taliban.⁴⁸

The Arabs and an Introduction to Afro-Iranians

Many Iranian Arabs, especially from the Khuzestan Province, have maintained their traditional values and unique cultural practices after the Iran-Iraq War.⁴⁹ Although the war did not impede upon their culture, Khuzestani Arabs were left in socioeconomic turmoil due to the destruction caused by Saddam Hussein's forces—resulting in a lack of infrastructure, health care, and even “educational facilities.”⁵⁰ In the realm of Iranian cinema, other than *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1989), few Iranian reformist films have depicted the struggle of the Arabs under the Islamic Republic. Directed by Bahram Bayzai, *Bashu, the Little Stranger* depicts a dramatic dynamic between a young, war-inflicted child (Bashu) who was left to suffer in his loneliness after his entire family was killed in an airstrike and an independent, strong mother (Na'i) who was willing to take a chance and let the young boy enter her family, even though she has encountered enough adversity with the two children that she has already. Throughout most of the film, Bashu encounters the hardship of being ethnolinguistically and culturally different—at first, he cannot read or speak Persian. He is from Khuzestan and speaks Arabic, whereas Na'i is from northern Iran and speaks the Perso-Gilaki dialect.⁵¹ *Bashu* is an anti-war film, and even today it “remains a sincere, sometimes shattering and often courageous attempt to depict the scars of war through human relationships.”⁵² In the scene when Bashu reads in front of the other Persian children, hope becomes the theme that will push minorities past their ethnolinguistic barrier—opposite of the literacy standard of the Islamic Republic.⁵³ Also, when Na'i refers to Bashu as “charcoal” or says, “You

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ghoncheh Tazmini, *Khatami's Iran: The Islamic Republic and the Turbulent Path to Reform* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 91.

⁴⁹ Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 69.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 70.

⁵¹ Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 127.

⁵² Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 207 and 209.

⁵³ Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge*, 108-109.

need a bath,” the film points out a more modern idea of the Afro-Iranian identity that is currently becoming a ‘hot-topic’ in southern Khuzestan today.⁵⁴ Although I am not examining these Afro-Iranian films, the Afro-Iranian identity is important to mention. According to scholar Hamid Naficy, a documentary such as *Afro-Iranian Lives*

....contributes to our understanding of an important population in Iran that has rarely been examined on film. Some documentaries, such as Naser Taqvai’s *The Sorcerer’s Wind* (1970), dealt with the *zar* ceremonies of African Iranians living on the shores of Persian Gulf, but they did not delve into the history of the people and tended to exoticize them.⁵⁵

As for societal reform as a result of *Bashu*, not many actions can truly be spoken of. However, in the early 2000s, President Khatami did make a point to meet with Hafez al-Assad of Syria and the Crown Prince Abdullah—two influential Arab leaders—which could point towards improved relations between Iranians and Arabs.⁵⁶ In 2005, newly elected President Ahmadinejad began traveling throughout Iran’s periphery, including Khuzestan, to preach about the equality of humans under Islam. He advocated for the idea that race, ethnicity, and nationality should not prevent Iranians from uniting as a whole.⁵⁷

Conclusion

With these few ethnolinguistic identities which I described above—Kurds, Afghans, Arabs, and Afro-Iranians—there is at least some evidence of the Islamic Republic of Iran minimizing their harsh treatment of minorities. Persian-centric nationalism has maintained a ‘heavy-handed’ or influential role in past ordeals when situations have revolved around the Kurds, Afghans, and Arabs. Except for Iranian Arabs and Afro-Iranians, minority conditions show some improvement under a dominant Perso-Iranian majority; Persian Arab conditions yield some improvement, considering the attitudes surrounding public speaking events and leading

⁵⁴ *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, directed by Bahram Bayzai (1986, Iran, New York: International Home Cinema, 1990), YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5v2Z33tW1fU>.

⁵⁵ Naficy, *A Social History*, 427-428.

⁵⁶ Tazmini, *Khatami’s Iran*, 86.

⁵⁷ Elling, *Minorities in Iran*, 100.

government figures, especially government reformists. As for Afro-Iranians, their condition is hard to interpret due the lack of academic evidence and its relatively new understanding. However, I do not believe Iran's many minorities are free from government marginalization and discrimination. I understand that centuries-worth of minority and ethno-cultural clashes do not disappear within two decades. Additionally, my research focused on Iranian ethnic minorities who have a larger presence in contemporary Iranian national and reformist cinema. However, Iranian cinema does not appear to be exploring the issues of other ethnic minorities such as the Azeris, Armenians, Jews, Turkmans, Lors, Baluchi, and even the ethnoreligious Zoroastrians. Just as Mohsen Makhmalbaf did for the Afghan refugees, the 'burden of representation' falls upon the world-renowned directors of Iranian national cinema to depict the 'others' currently living in Iran, not just the groups of ethnic minorities who draw specific audiences or who obtain a certain amount of international acclaim and attention. With these directors becoming a part of such a unique national cinema like the case in Iran, they have taken on the duty to depict the plight and conditions surrounding all peoples and cultures within their country.

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.¹ 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.² 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.³ 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."⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ The problem is that this test dismisses any representation of women due to sexism.⁷ 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

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

² Ibid., 964.

³ Ibid., 964-965.

⁴ Ibid., 965.

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

⁶ 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/>.

⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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

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

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

crisis of 1979.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ A shift was seen during this time, moving from beautiful, delicate Iranian heroines to a more rugged, unattractive heroine drawn from the peasant class.¹²

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.¹³ 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.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ Khatami's reign, starting in 1989 as head of the MCIG and then as president in 1997, led to the Golden Age of

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

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹² *Ibid.*, 189.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 194.

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

¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ Criticism abounded from conservatives and liberals alike.¹⁷ Women were also a significant part of this critique as the reforms of cinema had opened the door for women to have a voice.¹⁸ 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 orientalization 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

¹⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸ Elaheh Koolae, "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."¹⁹ 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ *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.²² 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.²³ 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.²⁴ 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.²⁵ 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.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ *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.²⁶ One such scene that illustrates this is when Forough gives a diary filled with all her intimate thoughts to Mani.²⁷ 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

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ 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.”²⁸ 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.²⁹ 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.”³⁰ 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?”³¹ 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

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

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *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.³² 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.

³² 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.