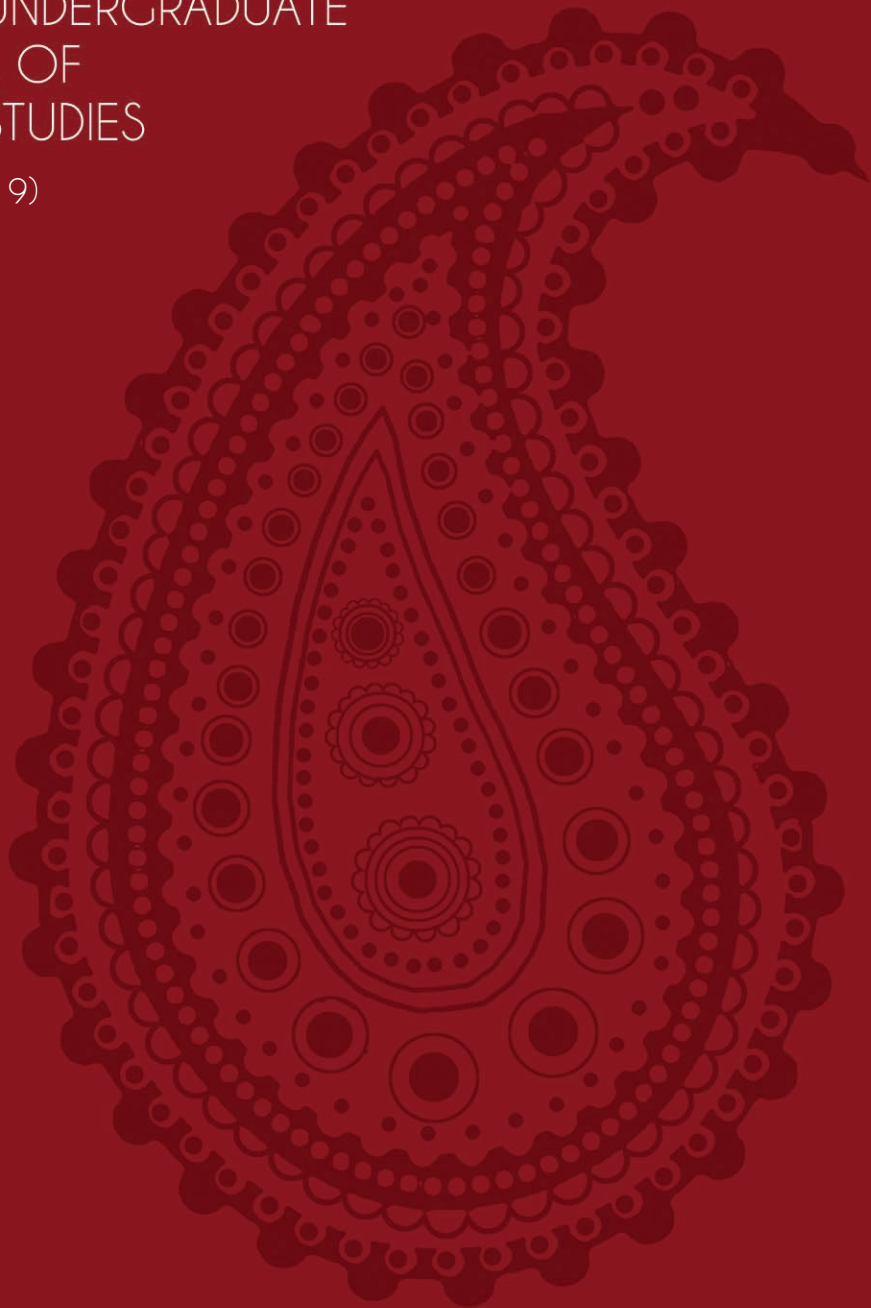


DĀNESH

THE OU UNDERGRADUATE
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IRANIAN STUDIES

Volume 4 (2019)



COLLEGE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA





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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 fourth volume of the journal was produced through the able editorial leadership of **Corey Standley** (BA, 2019) and **Kayleigh Kuyon** (BA, 2019). As with their work on volume three, 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

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Manata Hashemi

Farzaneh Family Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran

From the Editors-in-Chief

We are proud to present to you the fourth volume of the University of Oklahoma's Undergraduate Journal of Iranian Studies, *DĀNESH*. Through the past three editions of the journal we have seen wonderful presentations on varying regional topics, spanning the breadths of history and social strata. In the tradition of the meaning of *DĀNESH*, or knowledge, we present these articles as an offering to expand the collective dialogue on the understanding of the Iranian and Persian state. We are pleased to have worked on this edition with a group of driven authors to present an edition comprising of submissions focusing on both historical issues and events as well as contemporary issues that Iranians are currently facing.

This work is a collective effort among our undergraduate authors and editors. We would like to extend a humble thanks to our Associate Editors, without whom we would not be able to produce such a successful and professional journal. It would also be remiss of us to not extend a heartfelt thank you to the Farzaneh Family, for without their continued support of the Iranian Studies program none of this would be possible. The University of Oklahoma's Libraries and Printing Services are the unsung heroes of this endeavor, as without their support we would not have the ability to make *DĀNESH* so accessible, both our print and digital versions. Thank you to the tireless, diligent work of our authors, who have crafted these amazing works that we are proudly sharing with you.

And finally, we are wholly indebted to the continued and unwavering support of Dr. Afshin Marashi, whose guidance and advice was invaluable in this journal's creation and continuance. This work, and so much of the growth of the Iranian Studies program as a whole, would not be possible without your faith in us, and our institution. Your academic guidance, advice, and friendship have been invaluable to us.

Corey Standley (BA, 2019), Editor-in-Chief

Kayleigh Kuyon (BA, 2019), Editor-in-Chief

Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema: Unveiling the Reality of Iranian Women under the Islamic Republic

Jocelyn Viviani*

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In post-revolutionary Iran, cinema became a medium for social critique of the prevailing issues in modern Iranian society. The problems of women under the Islamic Republic became a major focal point in these post-revolutionary Iranian films. After the revolution of 1979, Shi'a Islam reshaped the political and social landscape of Iran. At this critical juncture, the Islamic Republic under the religious authority and guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini was able to consolidate its power through the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, meaning the “the guardianship of the jurist.”¹ By implementing the concept of *velayat-e faqih* in its system of government, the regime was able to enforce a political ideology based on its interpretation of Shi'a Islam. As a consequence, the regime's ideology reshaped the fabric of Iranian society, particularly when it came to the position of women. This political ideology subjected women to the traditional roles of wives and mothers, and further Islamized the image of women through enforced veiling and cultural norms. As the Republic's ideology began to shape every aspect of Iranian society, the problems of women became more apparent. The topic of women's issues is significant in that women play an integral role in the social and political trajectory of Iran under the Islamic Republic. Without discussing and contesting the issues of women, political and social change for women in Iran becomes harder to obtain.

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¹ Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 71.

Cinema provides a medium to discuss the problems that profoundly impact women under the Islamic Republic. Even though the Islamic Republic has used cinema as a way to propagate its ideology, Iranian filmmakers have found creative ways to contest the state's censorship, particularly the government's role in the "guidance, support, and supervision of the film industry."² Post-revolutionary cinema in Iran has challenged the traditional roles of women as wives and maternal figures and the religious representation of women under the Islamic Republic through its emphasis on central female characters, depiction of modesty, and critique of morality. Specifically, Iranian cinema has challenged the traditional roles of women being wives and mothers by presenting women as central characters. Iranian filmmakers have challenged the Republic's modesty laws and cultural norms, such as the compulsory veil and averted gaze, by using metaphors and other creative ways. Furthermore, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has critiqued the regime's strict interpretation of morality, especially when it comes to women, by presenting a pluralistic understanding of morality.

Women as Central Characters in Film

Before analyzing Iranian films where women play a central role, it is necessary to examine each film within a historical framework to conceptualize and understand the significance behind cinema challenging the regime's portrayal of women as simply wives or mothers. Before the Revolution, the westernization policies of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, the Shah at the time, shaped Iran's film industry. The Shah used cinema as a political tool to propagate his regime's vision to modernize Iran within a western and secular framework. Due to the regime's political objectives, cinema reflected the changes of women entering the public sphere and playing a more visible role in society. During the 1950s and 1960s, the emergence of *film farsi* showed women having active roles on screen, but these melodramas exploited the image of women by portraying them as either "chaste or unchaste dolls."³ However, after the Revolution, women in cinema shifted from being depicted as "objects of desire and agents of

² Sussan Siavoshi, "Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 515.

³ Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 215-226.

corruption” to being represented through the regime’s religious perspective of women.⁴

The Islamic Republic made changes to the film industry that consequently impacted the representation of women in cinema. Like the Pahlavi Dynasty, the Islamic Republic has used cinema as a tool for state propaganda. However, the Republic also employed cinema to promote the political objective of Islamizing Iran. By implementing the concept of *velayat-e faqih* in governance, the Islamic Republic has been able to reconstruct Iran and its film industry in an Islamic framework based on its understanding of Shi’a Islam and Islamic Jurisprudence. Between 1980 and 1989, as stated by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “there was an almost total absence of love from the screen, and although women were present [sic] behind the camera, working even as directors, their roles on screen were restricted to devoted wives, mothers, and sisters.”⁵ In other words, women no longer played a central role in films. Instead, their roles were neutralized and confined to the home.⁶ This period of cinema depicted women in the traditional roles of wives and mothers. It also emphasized the importance of the domestic sphere to the growth and development of Iran under the Islamic Republic. From the perspective of the Iranian state, “the family is the cornerstone of society...consensuses and ideological belief in the principle that the formation of family is fundamental for the future development of the individual is one of the main aims of the Islamic government.”⁷ During the early years of the Islamic Republic, cinema’s emphasis on the domestic sphere stripped women of their agency and limited them to specific societal roles.

Even though the Islamic Republic has used cinema to promote an Islamic political objective for Iran, post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers have challenged the Republic’s depiction of women by presenting women as central characters in films. This paper will analyze three films in which women occupy a central role: *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten. Bashu, the Little Stranger* was one of the first Iranian films to challenge

⁴ Manata Hashemi, “Negotiating the Forbidden,” Lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, March 8, 2018.

⁵ Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 27 (2007): 696.

⁶ Lahiji, “Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979,” 222.

⁷ Guity Nashat, “Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Iranian Studies* 13, no. 1/4 (1980): 177.

the representation of women under the Islamic Republic by showing a strong female lead character.⁸ The character Na'i is the central character in the film. Despite being a wife and a mother of two, Na'i challenges cultural tradition and has agency in her life. For instance, she defies cultural norms and traditions by keeping the orphan Bashu despite her husband's objections. Even though she faces the ridicule of her village and disapproval of her husband for taking in an Arab orphan, she takes on the role of Bashu's mother. She integrates Bashu into her family, and they both uniquely depend on each other. She takes on the role of his mother, and Bashu takes care of her in the absence of her husband. Furthermore, it is important to note the historical context of the film. Under the circumstances of the Iran-Iraq War, the structure of roles within the family changed. Na'i takes the leadership role of the family due to her husband fighting in the war. The character's agency in taking in an orphan who is ethnically Arab and assuming the leadership position of the family challenges the Islamic Republic's representation of women as simply wives and maternal figures. The film shows that women can be wives and mothers and still take on leadership roles and have agency within their lives. Essentially, the film asserts that these things are not mutually exclusive.

While *Bashu, the Little Stranger* facilitated the shift in roles of women under the Islamic Republic, the movies of the reform period further challenged the Islamic Republic's depiction of women. They presented women to be visible and vocal actors in Iranian society. To provide context, after the 1997 presidential election of Mohammad Khatami, the discourse of reform reshaped the face of Iranian politics. During this period of reform, women began to occupy critical roles in films. The films *The May Lady* and *Ten* were social critiques of the reform movement's failure to achieve political and social change for women. These social critique films show two mothers struggling to reconcile motherhood and their own individuality.

The May Lady focuses on the female character Forough Kia. She is divorced and has a teenage son. Despite being a divorced woman and a mother, Forough challenges the Islamic Republic's representation of women being wives and mothers by showing her agency as a mother and being vocally critical of traditional gender structures.⁹ She comes from an upper-middle-class background and holds a high social standing due to her

⁸ Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 207.

⁹ Manata Hashemi, "Negotiating the Forbidden," Lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, March 8, 2018.

occupation as a documentary filmmaker. She is well-educated and ambitious. Forough has the freedom of mobility, unlike women from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds. She is not completely restricted to her domestic role as a mother. However, her role as a mother shapes her decisions in life. Even though she is a divorced woman and a mother, she wants to be an individual and be happy. Throughout the film, she struggles to reconcile her obligations as a mother and her individual desire to begin another relationship despite her son's disapproval. *The May Lady* shows that during this period of reform women may have become more visible in Iranian society, but they still experienced gender inequality under the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ The main character Forough Kia challenges the regime's portrayal of women by showing that women can have lives outside the domestic sphere.

Ten challenges the traditional roles of women in the Islamic Republic by presenting strong female characters. The film explores ten interactions between the central female character, an unnamed female driver, and her passengers. Despite one of her passengers being her younger son, the other passengers are all female characters. As mentioned previously, the films produced during the reform era were critical of the social and political order under President Mohammad Khatami. Even though the discourse of reform emphasized civil society and democracy, the conditions of women under the Islamic Republic did not significantly improve. The film touches on themes of struggling to resolve one's individuality and motherhood. It also explores themes of gender inequality and the repression of women's rights under the Islamic Republic.¹¹ For instance, the unnamed female driver challenges the Islamic Republic's representation of women by being vocal about her individuality as mother and her right to be remarried despite her son's disapproval. During her interactions with the women in her car, the female driver learns how each one of them struggles with traditionalism and modernity. The issues of women include motherhood, religiosity, prostitution, and being a wife. Each of these characters in *Ten* operates within a patriarchal paradigm. By presenting women as central characters in the film, *Ten* demonstrates how social constructs shape our roles in society.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Manata Hashemi, "Women and their Representation," Lecture, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK, March 6, 2018.

¹² Ibid.

Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema's Depiction of Modesty

Post-revolutionary cinema in Iran challenges the religious representation of women under the Islamic Republic through its depiction of modesty. After consolidating power, the Islamic Republic used enforced veiling and cultural norms to not only Islamize the image of women but also to restrict women to traditional roles in Iranian society. One of the significant acts of the Islamic Republic was that it “abrogated the Family Protection Law before any other law and reestablished sharia law.”¹³ By framing Iran’s political structures with the Islamic concept of *velayat-e faqih*, the Islamic Republic was able to reshape the fabric of society to fit its interpretation of Shi’a Islam. This was especially true when it came to women wearing the *hijab* and adhering to codes of modesty. According to Hamid Naficy, “the constitution of the self as dual (both private and public) necessitates the existence of a boundary or veil—however amorphous—separating interior from exterior. Veiling and the codes of modesty that attend it, therefore, are operative within the self and are pervasive within the culture.”¹⁴ Put differently, the Islamic Republic believed the veil and codes of modesty create a barrier between the private and public sphere. As a consequence, the Islamic Republic made the veil compulsory for all women and enforced these cultural norms, such as averting one’s gaze, to preserve and strengthen the regime’s Islamic image.

Even though the Islamic Republic has employed political structures to enforce veiling and codes of modesty, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has used metaphors and creative ways to challenge the depiction of modesty. This paper will use the post-revolutionary films *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten* to analyze the depiction of the *hijab* and the significance of depicting the direct gaze of a female. In the film *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, the leading female character, Na’i, challenges the Republic’s religious representation of women through the depiction of her *hijab* and direct gaze. At the beginning of the film, the viewer sees Na’i staring directly into the camera. She almost exposes her hair to the audience. This controversial scene arguably breaks the barrier between the private and public sphere. It shows that, despite Na’i being a wife and mother and wearing the *hijab*, she is attractive. Her direct gaze forces the viewer to look at her and witness the unveiling of her sexuality as a woman. Her eyes, in

¹³ Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006), 292.

¹⁴ Hamid Naficy, “The Averted Gaze in Iranian Post Revolutionary Cinema,” *Public Culture* 3, no. 2 (1991): 30.

essence, become a metaphor for unveiling. As stated by Hamid Naficy, “women’s sexuality is thought to be so excessive and powerful if it is contained or if it is allowed unhampered visual gaze through the gaze (unveiled), it is supposed to lead inevitably to the wholesale moral corruption of men and of society as a whole.”¹⁵ This film touches on how the patriarchal attitudes of the regime shape the codes of modesty. By directly gazing into the camera and panning the camera away before Na’i exposes her hair, the film challenges the patriarchal authority of the Islamic Republic. *Bashu, the Little Stranger* challenges the legitimacy and patriarchal structure of the Republic by using Na’i’s direct gaze as a metaphor for unveiling.

The May Lady challenges the regime’s portrayal of women through the central character Forough. Throughout the film, Forough reaches for her scarf and the camera pans down. In one scene, as her son’s teenage friends are leaving Forough’s home, they see Forough without her veil. The men look back at her as they leave. Even though the audience cannot see Forough, they are aware that she is without her scarf. The depiction of modesty in this scene is significant in that it shows the unrealistic expectations of women under the Islamic Republic, especially in the private and domestic sphere. From an Islamic standpoint, a woman would not have to cover in the comfort of her home and in front of her family. By showing a woman adhering to Islamic dress code in the privacy of her home, *The May Lady* challenges the extreme lengths the Islamic Republic goes to preserve this Islamic image of women and Iranian society as a whole.

Ten challenges the Republic’s religious representation of women through two characters: the main female driver and one of her religious female passengers. The unnamed female driver wears a loose scarf. Throughout the film, she is vocal about women having the right to make their own decisions and be individuals without the permission of a man. The looseness of her scarf could arguably symbolize her resistance to the Islamic Republic’s enforcement of patriarchal structures. That being said, it is necessary to understand that the compulsory veil is one of the most visible symbols of the state’s authority over women. By loosening her scarf, she can show resistance and contest the gender inequality perpetuated by the state. One of the most significant scenes in the film shows a religious young woman removing her veil completely and revealing that she has shaved her head. Once she removes her veil, it conveys the artificiality of the *hijab*. While we have discussed the Islamic Republic’s artificial construction of a

¹⁵ Ibid., 34.

private and public sphere through its politicization of the *hijab*, *Ten's* depiction of modesty highlights the artificiality of the veil and the veil being used by women as a form of resistance under the Islamic Republic.

The Critique of Morality

Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has challenged the regime's strict interpretation of morality, especially when it comes to women, by presenting a pluralistic understanding of morality. To provide context, Iran underwent a turbulent period after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini and the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Due to this period of increased factionalism in Iranian politics and political uncertainty about Iran's future without the guidance of Ayatollah Khomeini, "the Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance gradually began to relax the strict policies that had determined artistic production for nearly a decade."¹⁶ With the relaxed censorship rules and Mohammed Khatami as head of the Ministry of Cultural and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), Iranian cinema gradually began to tackle taboo subjects. Post-revolutionary Iranian films like *Time for Love* and *The May Lady* have challenged the traditional roles and representation of women under the Islamic Republic by critiquing the regime's singular interpretation of morality.

Time for Love was one the first Iranian films to touch on the taboo subject of women committing adultery. This film explores the multiple ideas of morality by focusing on three versions of the main female character Guzel's extramarital affairs. In each version, the lover and husband change roles. Blake Atwood states, "In the first section, a married woman, Guzel, has an affair, which her husband ultimately discovers. Outraged and angry, he kills her lover, and the episode ends with the judge sentencing him to death."¹⁷ In the second section, the husband becomes the lover, and the lover becomes the husband. The lover then kills the husband. In both of these versions, Guzel kills herself. In the final section of the film, the husband eventually allows Guzel and her lover to get married. At the end of the film, at the wedding, the judge states that he had to suspend his judgment before knowing the full context behind the husband's actions. The judge states, "Judging is good for a person who only thinks of the consequences of a crime, not of the reasons for doing it. In every trial, when I heard the guilty

¹⁶ Blake Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 28.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

person's reasons, I thought to myself, if I were in his situation..."¹⁸ Even though the judge doesn't finish his sentence, the message of suspending one's judgment before knowing the story behind one's actions is evident. By presenting multiple scenarios of morality, *Time for Love* challenges the regime's singular interpretation of morality. Through the character of the judge, the film emphasizes that one must suspend judgment before knowing the context behind a person's actions. Instead of conforming to the regime's conservative understanding of morality, the film fails to condemn a woman's infidelity. *Time for Love* instead relies on Persian mystical traditions to convey a pluralistic understanding of morality. For example, Sufi thought encourages one to appeal to emotional logic and the logic of love, specifically divine love.¹⁹ Instead of casting moral judgment so quickly, the film is asking the audience and the regime to view Islam in a more empathic way.

One of the key scenes that tests the regime's concept of morality is the symbolism of sexual love through the use of scarves. During the first section of the film, Guzel and her lover are seen sitting in a horse-drawn carriage. As the scene progresses, the audience hears the galloping of the horse and see Guzel and her lover raising two scarves in the air. As stated by Atwood, "The two scarves dance in the wind, and the long take emphasizes the intimate entanglement of the fabrics as they move through the breeze."²⁰ The harmony between the galloping of the hooves and the scarves is meant to symbolize sexual love. Since the Republic's censorship forbids sexual love and physical intimacy from being openly expressed on screen, *Time of Love* challenges the moral authority of the regime by cleverly using scarves to express "carnal love."²¹

Additionally, *The May Lady* critiques the regime's strict interpretation of morality by addressing the taboo of motherhood. According to Hamid Reza Sadr, "this film act as a magnifying glass on the 'moral,' traditional social that views with distaste a middle-class widow and mother embarking on a new relationship."²² Even though the Islamic Republic emphasizes the importance of family in Islam, the film demystifies the notion of the perfect family and the perfect mother. Forough's son Maani is openly critical of her desire to date Doctor Rahbar and believes that his mother is attempting to

¹⁸ Hosseini, "Negotiating the Forbidden," 696.

¹⁹ Atwood, *Reform Cinema in Iran*, 44.

²⁰ Ibid., 45.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Sadr, *Iranian Cinema*, 260.

replace his father. The main character Forough “is conflicted and confused regarding the cultural propriety of her love as a mother, and her love as a woman for a man who is not her son’s father.”²³ Forough’s character is battling the taboo of wanting to fulfill her desires and still being a good mother to her son.

The Iranian filmmaker Rakhshan Bani-Etemad further confronts the Republic’s conservative interpretation of morality by interweaving the voices of Forough and Doctor Rahbar “to convey the impression of intimacy and closeness.”²⁴ Due to the Islamic Republic’s censorship laws, Iranian filmmakers are unable to show intimacy between males and females openly. Bani-Etemad instead creatively expresses the love and physical intimacy between Forough and Doctor Rahbar through their voices. The audience never sees the male lover. Instead, the audience only hears the echoed voice of Doctor Rahbar reading love letters to Forough and speaking to her on the phone. If the characters had directly addressed each other, they would not have been able to express any form of intimacy due to the Republic’s authority over the film industry. By interweaving the voices of the two characters, the film shows that Muslim women under the Islamic Republic can experience intimacy and love outside the institution of marriage. *The May Lady* challenges the Republic’s narrow understanding of morality by exploring the taboo subject of love and motherhood with a pluralistic understanding.

Conclusion

Post-revolutionary Iranian cinema explores and challenges the traditional roles and representation of women under the Islamic Republic through its focus on central female characters, its portrayal of modesty, and its criticism of the Republic’s strict interpretation of morality. This paper first provided a historical context for understanding the shift in women from being neutral characters to central characters in films. By presenting women as central characters, the post-revolutionary Iranian films *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, *The May Lady*, and *Ten* show that there is a middle ground in which women can be both wives and mothers and still have agency and individuality. Secondly, these films challenge the Republic’s religious representation of women by using metaphors and creative ways to test the state’s enforcement of veiling and cultural norms. Finally, *Time for Love* and *The May Lady*

²³ Shahla Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 124.

²⁴ Ibid.

confront the regime's conservative interpretation of morality regarding women by presenting a pluralistic understanding of morality. They display that morality is relative rather than absolute.

By exploring the social problems of women, Iranian cinema expresses the implications of Iranian women living under the Islamic Republic. In the modern day, women are navigating the political and social spheres of Iranian society. They are doing so by contesting the enforcement of the *hijab* and the Republic's prescribed gender roles. Additionally, Iranian women are challenging the regime through protests and demonstrations. Through the medium of cinema, domestic and international audiences can see the conditions of women living under the Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic's strict gender roles, reductive representation of women, enforcement of the *hijab* and codes of modesty, and single definition of morality create further problems for women. These factors suggest that women cannot engage and actively participate in society without the consent and approval of the state. By focusing on these specific issues, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema forces the Iranian government to recognize and examine the hardships Iranian women face. It also applies these issues of Iranian women to broader, universal issues of gender inequality and the dominance of patriarchy in political and social structures. Through the medium of cinema, political and social change for women in Iran becomes a fundamental part of the discourse between Iranian society and the Islamic Republic.