

# **Transformed Image of Women in New Iranian Cinema in Post-1979**

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## ABSTRACT

The main target of this study is the analysis of the filmic representation of Iranian women in a time span of almost 40 years based on a feminist viewpoint with the main focus being laid upon the Post-Revolutionary cinema. The core of the discussion is the examination of an essential historical paradox, where a supposedly liberating revolution creates many kinds of strict limitations, which could not in turn eliminate women but to some extent transforms filmic representation of Iranian women. The clashes of tradition and transformation create an atmosphere in which the discursive and filmic representation of women changes during time. Additionally, this study analyses the way by which the patriarchal power structure genders women to frame the concept of an ideal woman, while women's resistance against this power poses serious question to the patriarchal hierarchy of society. The final findings indicate that while female characters of Post-Revolutionary films are empowered, they are still silent and unable to reverse the patriarchal structures.

In order to demonstrate a historical shift in representation of women in the mentioned time span, four films of Post 1979 revolution are analyzed from a socio-political and historical point of view: *The Mare* (1984), *Sara* (1993), *Gilaneh* (2005), and *Final Whistle* (2011).

**Keywords:** Iranian Cinema, Feminist Film Studies, Women Representation, Tradition, Power and Patriarchy.

## ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı, devrim sonrası sinemada, özellikle 40 yıllık zaman dilimi içinde feminist perspektif ile İranlı kadınların filmsel temsiliyetini analiz etmektir. Tartışmanın temeli, birçok türde katı sınırlamaların mevcudiyetine rağmen, kadınların sınırlandırılmadığı sözde özgürleştirici devrimin var olduğu önemli bir tarihsel paradoksun incelenmesidir. Geleneksel olan ile dönüşüme uğrayan arasındaki çatışma kadınların söylemsel ve filmsel temsilinin zaman içinde değiştiği bir atmosfer yaratmıştır. Bununla birlikte, kadının direnişinin mevcut toplumsal hiyerarşik yapıya karşı ciddi bir sorun teşkil etmesi ile ataerkil iktidar yapısı içinde kadının –ideal kadın konseptine göre- cinsiyetini analiz etmektedir. Nihai bulgular belirtmektedir ki devrim sonrası filmlerde kadın karakterlerin güçlenmesine rağmen, halen ataerkil yapı içinde sessiz ve yapıyı tersine çevirmede güçsüzdürler.

Söz konusu zaman diliminde, kadınların temsiliyetindeki tarihsel kaymayı göstermek için 1979 devrimi sonrası dört film sosyo-politik ve tarihsel açıdan analiz edilmiştir. Söz konusu filmler: *The Mare* (1984), *Sara* (1993), *Gillaneh* (2004), ve *Final Whistle* (2011).

**AnahtarSözcükler:** İran Sineması, Feminist Film Çalışmaları, Kadın Temsili, Gelenek, Güç ve Ataerkillik.

TO ALL MY HOMETLAND'S WOMEN WHO STRUGGLE AGAINST  
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# Chapter 1

## INTRODUCTION

This current study is on the question of representation of women in the Iranian cinema after the 1979 revolution. Since then, successive Islamic governments have imposed severe cultural restrictions on the dress code of women – the core of which is the compulsory wearing of the “Hijab”. Although this traditional restriction has influenced on and changed the way women have been represented in this cinema, it has not eliminated the active presence of them in the filmic representation.

As it will be discussed in chapter 1, the Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema has encountered with cultural and political limitations to the extent that the filmmakers were almost all confused about how to make films in order to meet the new required codes of religious laws or at least not to be in conflict with the ideology of Islamic Regime.

The revolution introduced a totally new and thus unfamiliar language that was defined by religious and political codes. This language established a new dress code – especially for women – and defined a screen relationship between men and women that was acceptable to the sensibilities of state religious codes – so, for example, screen couples were not allowed to hug or kiss or even touch each other.

Additionally, what may seem strange and unfamiliar to the audience is the fact that women actors even have to wear their Hijab (scarf) in those filmic scenes where they are depicted as being at home with their loved ones. This is in sharp contrast with the everyday life of women in Iranian society where women are free to remove their Hijabs at home, and is also encouraged being attractive and appealing to their husbands. While Iranian religious law does not encourage celibacy for men and women, it does forbid explicit or implicit reference to sexual relationships in cinematic presentations. Obviously this is because the filmic depiction of a private sphere is ultimately not “private” but accessible to the viewing public. Women “in films” are also “in public sphere” like cinemas, television screens, Posters and so on.

The exertion of these restricting censorship could have easily eliminate or at least limit the presence of women in the film. However, not only the presence of Iranian women has been continued but also their participation has been drastically increased both behind and in front of the camera (as it will be mentioned in chapter 2). There are some claims that traditional limitations (cultural and religious restrictions) can even be seen as motivating forces for writers and directors to create new forms of language to overcome challenges and resist these restrictions. This new creative language has led to the formation of a new cinema and has contributed to a changing in Iranian cinema. It has been claimed that in order to tackle all the mentioned restrictions, the filmmakers, although not collectively but individually and through tries and errors developed an innovative counter language by focusing on women’s potentials as active members of the society and their claim for independence.

What is for sure is that Iranian women have active presence in cinema industry in Iran but there is no doubt that restrictions and limitations should have marked

changes on their faces. The main concern of this thesis is then what changes and transformations Iranian women's filmic representations have been through after 1979.

In this research, through analyzing the four selected films, the representation of Iranian women in Post-Revolutionary cinema will be analyzed with emphasis on two concepts of the gaze and public/private dichotomy. In addition, where applicable some examples of the mentioned new creative language will be analyzed in these films.

In brief, the current chapter of this thesis introduces the history of Iranian cinema and socio-political changes of women in Iranian cinema and finally, clarifies the purpose of conducting this research. The second chapter will amply discuss the details regarding literature review. In the first part of the literature review, the concept of *film-e farsi* will be introduced and the representation of women in this type of cinema and also the changing quality of Iranian women's participation through the history of Iranian cinema will be discussed. The second part of this chapter establishes the theoretical framework of the thesis including but not limited to feminist film studies, the issue of representation, gender studies, gaze, etc.

In order to elaborate on the method applied to analyze the selected films, the third chapter covers textual analysis, sampling procedure, and research questions. The fourth chapter contains the analysis of the four selected films from Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema after 1979. Finally, chapter five draws conclusion according to the analysis of the films in order to provide a response to the research questions.

## 1.1 Background of Iranian cinema

Iranian cinema's lifetime is over 100 years. It coincided with two kingdom dynasties. The Qajar dynasty (1796-1925) was the last traditional dynasty of Iran before the modernization of the country in Pahlavi dynasty (1925-1979) followed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. After the Pahlavi dynasty, the Islamic revolution of Iran took place in 1979. The advent of Iranian cinema goes back to Qajar dynasty. When Mozafareddin Shah Qajar visits Belgium in 1900 (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 31), the first cinematograph came to Iran by Mirza-Ebrahim Khan Akkasbashi (Akkas-Bashi literary means camera man) (Sadr, 2006, p. 9). According to Omid (1949) under Qajar dynasty the film was only used for state propaganda and a hand full cinema hall were built at the time, which showed films for entertainment (pp. 20-61). "Until then the only kind of public spectacle in Iran had been the traditional *Taziye*, the earliest form of Iranian theatrical performance" (Sadr, 2006, p. 9). At the same year "Soli Cinema" founded by Catholics in the city of Tabriz, but due to lack of access to new films, it was closed (Dabashi, 2001, p. 12). The first two Iranian silent Film *Abi and Rabi* "*RubyBlue*" (1930) and "*Haji Agha*" (1932) were made by an Armenian, Avance Okanianice. Then the first ever Talki Film *Doktar Lor*, "*Lore Girl*" (1933) was made by Abdul-Hossien Sepanta in Bombay. The first cinema theatre in Tehran was opened in Sahaf-bashi's house in LalehZar Street. The films shown were about 10 minutes or less. During those years no films produced by Iranians were shown because there was no national cinema and most of the films were foreign productions.

The first public commercial cinema opened in 1900 in Tehran called Grand cinema. Sadr (2006) reports that Sheikh Fazlollah Nuri, one of the clergymen, who was against the 'ungodly' abomination of cinema issued a fatwa against the

commercial cinema (p. 9). Khan Baba Mozatazidi was the first film Cameraman who made silent film *Majles Moasesan* 1925. When Reza Khan becomes the king in 1926, Khan Baba made a new film about the Shah Coronation ceremony (Mehrabi, 1995, p. 18). Esmaeili (2001) says that cinema was in silence and down in 1958 to 1937. Esmail Koshan attempted to dub many European films into Persian in Turkey. Then he made the *Strom of life* with Ali Daryabeigi (Esmaeili, 2001, p. 22).

## **1.2 Socio political changes of Iranian cinema**

In this section I draw upon the pre-and-Post revolutionary work of Iranian cinema historians in order to provide a context for the analysis of the Post-Revolutionary films below. The argument draws from the work of historians including Mirbakhtyar (2006) and Omid (2009). The historical work on Pre-Revolutionary cinema helps to contextualize the discussion on the transformation of the role of women in contemporary Iranian cinema.

### **1.2.1 The Pre-Revolutionary Era (before 1979)**

There was no real cinema in Qajar era. In the First Pahlavi monarchy, also, cinema had not still become a matter of entertainment and was of little value. In the First and Second Pahlavi monarchy, the government strived to modernized the country; therefore, cinema found its importance. The second Pahlavi well realized the importance of propaganda and tried to use cinema and Television as a controlling tool. Only films were accepted and supported which were not against the dictates of Pahlavi regime. Aman Manteghi says “we were not allowed to make films depicting the real life of people. For example we could not touch the social issues” (Cited in Mirbakhtyar, 2006, p. 102).

Cinema was a state propaganda to represent Iran to the world. Iran's cinemas were at this period full of the Hollywood films while the regime would not support locally produced films, which were mostly suffering from a low budget.

Cinema was mainly a commercial phenomenon rather than a cultural event, which was controlled by the regime and *film-e farsi*, was a commercial response to cinema. However, *film-e farsi* was a local production enjoying the local language and culture. The appearance of a film named *Crosus' Treasure* led to, according to Omid (1998) a commercial success that marked the beginning of the flourish of *film-e farsi* (p. 441).

However, there was an alternative cinema advocated by intellectuals and writers. Poets such as Forough Farukhzad with *The House is Black* (1964) and Ibrahim Golestan turned to cinema as an alternative means of communication. This cinema was named the New wave.

The issues raised in these films were particularly different from those in *film-e farsi*. The first of these socially realistic films was *South of the City* made by Ghafari, which was a film about the social life of the impoverished people living in the ghettos of the Capital Tehran. Similar films dealing with social issues are *Night of the Hunch Back* by Ghafari (1964), *The Brick and the Mirror* by Ibrahim Golestan (1965) and the acclaimed *Cow* (1969) by Mehrjoui.

Most of these films were banned or censored by Shah's regime. According to Golmakani (1992) the presentation of ruins, poverty, backwardness, and the scenes that damage the state's national prestige was banned according to the articles of

censorship 1959 (p. 20). A good example of the application of this policy is the banning of the film *Cow*. The state later discontinued the budgeting of these films.

### **1.2.2 The Post-Revolution Era (after 1978); the 1980s: the Fundamentalist Period**

This new situation was similar to the one in which many lose their own sense of identity. *film-e farsi* had a history that was suddenly silenced. The filmmakers were almost all confused about how to make films, which were basically different and acceptable by the codes of religious laws. This confusion and loss of identity is a marked feature in the history of Iranian cinema.

The regime soon realized the importance of media as a force in disseminating its theocratic ideology. They consequently viewed cinema not as something corrupted but as an apparatus to consolidate their power. A famous quote by Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, clarified the situation. He maintained that, in a statement similar to a Fatwa, he was not opposed to the cinema, he was opposed to the prostitution that cinema was presenting (Cited in Mirbakhtyar, 2006, p. 106).

Figures were assigned to evaluate the cultural products to see if they are in line with Islamic rules. Also they created a department to make cultural policies aligned with Islamic notions. They established two main organizations named The Farabi cinema Foundation and The Art Institution of The Islamic Propaganda Organization to train and educate artists based on these ideologies of Islamic Regime.

As Mirbakhtyar (2006) Reports, “Clearly anyone who wanted to make films under the control and guidance of these organizations had to reflect the ideology of Islamic regimes in their films. These organizations, especially the latter one lead by one of



the most influential and prejudiced religious figures, Ayatollah Janati, would give the young revolutionary artists full supports. There was a full supervision on the processes of film production from script to screen. In this period the artistically made films were not given the proper attention by the authorities; their primary concern was Islamic cinema propagating the Islamic culture and ideology.

All these attempts made by the regime were not necessarily fruitful, since some filmmakers educated in their system started to make films reflecting negatively on Islamic dictums. A good example is Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *The Paddler* (1987).

In this situation, the filmmakers were divided into two groups; those who supported the dominant ideology enjoying the governmental budget and freedom, and were shown at home. These films were viewed by the regime as a source of propaganda in the international festivals. The second group, however, were more concerned with the critical issues, although being successful internationally, didn't have the chance to be screened domestically and received no national support.

A new language that suddenly dominated a great part of Iranian cinema was the cinema of war prompted by Iraq's invasion of Iran's borders in 1980. A great number of films were made celebrating the sense of patriotism and nationalism that were mainly accompanied by religiously views and theme of martyrdom.

#### **1.2.2.1 The 1990s: the Reformist Period**

The years 1987 to 1997 are called as the New Cinema after the Revolution and also called as the Golden Age of Iranian cinema in which several films received awards in International festivals. The *Taste of Cherry* by Abbas Kiarostami won the Golden Palm and *The Children of Heaven* was nominated for Oscar. In terms of

spectatorship, also, Iranian cinema turns to be a popular cinema globally. This, however, according to Mirbakhtyar (2006), had a negative effect of the process of filmmaking. She maintains,

Many artists were making films only to win prizes at the film festivals in the West. These films did not perform well domestically, as they were no longer representative of Iranian society and featured mostly misleading images of the people and culture, meant to impress and shock, juries and audiences with horrific stories.

However, a remarkable feature of this period is the control of the filmmakers on the process of the production. With the new democratic situation, a free atmosphere was created for filmmakers to make films that would not be limited by censorship. Another side effect was the coming back of some prominent filmmakers who had chosen to stay silent in the previous period. These included Bahman Farman Ara, and Bahram Beizai.

In 1997, when the reformist's candidate took the presidency, he created a civil society and tried to develop the application of democracy in all layers of society. The cinema in the 1980s had moved toward a cinema of symbolism to avoid censorship of which *Bashu, the Little Stranger* by Bahram Beizai is an example. While in the new period, under the freer atmosphere, the language of the cinema again moved toward a realistic depiction of films. Two good examples are *The Circle* by Jafar Panahi and *Two Women* by Tahmineh Millani.

#### **1.2.2.2 The 2000s: Return of Fundamentalists**

With the return of the fundamentalist in 2005, cinema once more is highly monitored and censored by the officials creating a frustrating atmosphere in the country. The

subsidies for the cinema are lifted causing problems of budget for the industry. With Safar Harandi becoming the minister of culture of Ahmadinejad's government, the situation became even worse. He announced, "from then on distribution and exhibition of films which promoted feminism and secularism were prohibited (Cited in Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010, p. 35). Films were either censored or banned altogether. The film magazines were also closed. The directors wrote a letter to protest against the new policies, which was not welcomed by warm reactions.

The Fajr Festival, as the emblem of the cinema in Iran, excluded the films that were touching the forbidden issues and layers. The blurring of the codes of censorship and the application of the stricter codes mostly afflicted cinema as a unique form of art and a medium of communication, whose importance as an ideological tool had been recognized shortly after the Revolution by the regime.

Despite all this, several good films dealing with social issues were produced in this period including *Separation*, *Facing Mirrors*, *Hush*, and *Final Whistle*. Once more, the films tried to avoid censorship by an allegorical and symbolic language.

### **1.3 Socio-Political Changes in Women Role in Iranian Cinema from Pre to Post Revolution**

The cinema before the Revolution could be divided into two categories in terms of dealing with women issues: one was the prevalent *film-e farsi* with special type of representation of women as merely sexual objects and also the less popular cinema called New Wave Cinema which dealt with serious issues in which women were depicted more of real life characters than fantasy characters of *film-e farsi*.

Before the Revolution, the participation of women in cinema and theatre was regarded as a social taboo. It was also true of women who would go to movie theatre to watch films. However, after the revolution the situation has changed. At first, the Islamic regime made all efforts to close the cinema industry and all movie theatres. Many movie theatres were burned down and destroyed as places of corruption. The subsequent Fatwa by Ayatollah Khomeini encouraged a type of cinema based on religious codes.

Contrary to cinema before the Revolution, the representation of women in cinema has different codes. Women have to follow modest dressing codes. The bodies need to be almost completely covered. The actions and reactions of women were also to follow the Islamic codes. For years the closed shot of women were banned in cinema, especially if the characters were attractive ones. Gradually, however, women started having roles in cinema. A unique example is *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985) in which a strong female character, who was not similar to the female characters normally depicted in cinema, was represented.

Many women start working in cinema not only in front of the camera but also behind the camera, which was a differentiating aspect of the new cinema in comparison to cinema before the Revolution. Another radical change is the introduction of women filmmakers such as Tahmineh Milani, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, and Pooran Derakhshandeh to the Iranian cinema. Zeydabadi-Nejad (2010) discusses that after 1989, “when a space for a social critique opened in cinema many films were made about women’s issues as well as the taboo subject of woman’s romantic love” (p.

109). The reformist coming to offices provided a freer situation for the cinema of women to flourish.

In these period several controversial films about women such as *Red* by Fereidun Jeyrani (1998), *Two Women* (1999) by Tahmineh Milani represented a new image of women. However, many films of low quality also were made dealing with the relationship of boys and girls reminiscent of *film-e farsi*.

The films selected for this research are chronologically arranged assuming that the changing also possesses a linear nature. Hence, by watching the films in order of being listed the audience is able to follow the transformation happening over time.

*The Mare* (1984) directed by Ali Zhakan, is based on a true story, the life of Rezvaneh Taleshi shows the role of women in a rural society. The choice is because this film is one of those in which the practice of tradition is highlighted though the film's technicality and the story line. The question of objectifying women, which is by itself a traditionally patriarchal practice, is one of the main themes in this film. The fact that this film is dealing with a highly controversial issue does not persuade the filmmaker to take an open strategy to shout slogans; rather, the ideas are hidden in the different conceptual and artistic layers of the work. I find it a very suitable choice to elaborate on the traditional point of view to express the hierarchy in patriarchal society.

*Sara* (1993) was directed and produced by Dariush Mehrjooyi. The plot of the film owes its inspiration to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. Iranian cinema after the revolution, although viewed as a single entity, consists of different phases by itself

and *Sara* belongs to a period when the attention was paid to the independent role of women in the society. *Sara* is a case in which the conflict between tradition and transformation is presented from a feministic perspective highlighting the independent role of a woman who is also able to save a man who is at the state of misery.

*Gilaneh* (2005) directed by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad. This Film is set in the wartime, deals with the problems arising from war and the patriarchal attitude. The leading female character of the film has to challenge with the difficulties because his son, who was the breadwinner of the family, is away at war and also she has to tackle the problems caused by logic of a patriarchal society, in which the idea of a woman living on her own is not acceptable. The conflict deepens when she makes all her efforts to be the center of her own family and maintains her independence.

*Final Whistle* (2011) written and directed by Niki Karimi is enjoying a modern setting with the characters from intellectual level of the society, the film depicts how the highbrows still nourish from the patriarchal tradition of thoughts, while the female characters of the story try not to remain in the circle of tradition and they actively participate in the activities previously defined to be a man's job. These activities include having positions and jobs previously dominated by men, for instance in cinema. In a country where religiously women are advised to stay as faithful and responsible housewives, women have conquered many social spheres. In this film also a woman like Sahar is a director who is trying to work as a social activist as well.

## 1.4 History of Covering in Iran

According to Koch (1992)<sup>1</sup> in “*Eskündet Dareios der König*” (*It tells Darius the king*) Iranian women traditionally, historically, and culturally used to cover their body; not only after Islam but also when they were Zoroastrians in Achaemenid era and even much earlier than that. According to historians Iran was the first community in world where it viewed cover as a moral value but not as Hijab. In the ancient times, people believed that covering is a moral value both for women and men and women also believe in this fact. After the Arab invasion of Iran, Iranian people’s religion Hijab became compulsory. Since that time the form of covering has changed. They had never had such covering like chador or Veil, it was a compulsory culture imposed by Arab, which entered to Iranian culture. At the beginning women accepted those traditions and restrictions, which were the outcome of religious state.

Among these women there were still living intellectuals and wise women who suffered from the clear discrimination between men and women, so they started a movement in order to regain their lost independence. A clear example is Tahereh Qorrat-al-Eyn, an educated enlightened poet, who was the first woman to take off her veil in public in 1852 in Qajar dynasty and the government subsequently, executed her. Later on, in Pahlavi era through more communications, relations and connections between Iran and western countries, ‘Reza Shah Pahlavi officially announced that women had to be unveiled and then he forced them to do so. In line with modernization of the country and with the support of intellectuals like M. Forooqi and H. Taqi-Zadeh, Reza Shah Pahlavi passed a law in 1937, granting women freedom to unveil in public and to be admitted to Tehran University. “He

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<sup>1</sup>A German Iranologist at the late nineties

started from the royal family in 1307 (1928), and in 1314 (1935) he formally banned wearing the Hijab. Reza Shah Pahlavi passed a law in 1937, granting women freedom to unveil (Mirbakhtyar, 2006, p. 23)”. Here it is essential to point out that since Qajar dynasty, regulations and Legislations have been based upon Islamic sharia law but the main issue is the different methods of performing rules, regulations and Legislations in these two eras. When Pahlavi dynasty came to power the government for the first time gave women legitimacy. In 1979 Ayatollah Khomeini as the leader of Islamic Republic of Iran also accepted these legitimized rights. In the case of ‘covering’, the Islamic government decided to be stricter by changing voluntary Hijab to mandatory which ironically could not completely limit the women’s role in both society and cinema despite the religious patriarchal efforts by hardliners. The Islamic government was not successful to limit women’s role.

Although being restricted, women continued their activities. In order to break this limitation and restriction women started to challenge with traditions and patriarchy by joining international women movement. These movements and social activities brought them some success in both cinema and the social context.

Hence, After the Islamic revolution, some changes made in the constitution law hence the judiciary system and rules well also changed. The mandatory Hijab was announced in March 1979 by Ayatollah Khomeini Therefore, it defined a new dress code for women and due to this new dress code, women, since then, have had to cover up their whole body without any sort of offering of body components and hair, but there is no limitation on color of clothes according to Islamic sharia law. There is



no color limitation in both constitution law and Islamic sharia law (Quran)<sup>2</sup> and even recommending people to wear light and colorful dress and it is detestable to wear dark color according to Islamic sharia law. At the same time in Islamic sharia law, women are recommended to wear attractive dress with ornament for their husband at home. If women are advised to wear in dark in the public it is not because of cultural and religious restrictions and it is not forbidden to wear so, religiously the sharp colors are assumed to attract men's attention and hence not suggested. It is much better not to wear attention-seeking colors to provoke men in public.

In 1983, the article of mandatory Hijab is inserted into Article 102 of 1978 Constitution Law. Also it is recorded in Islamic Penal Code under the article 638 in 1982. The punishment which was defined for it includes "10 days to 2 months in prison, 74 hit of lashes and 50000 to 500000 Tomans" (current currency in Iran) which depends on conditions choose by authorities. 'Chador' or 'Veil' is a common cover for Iranian women, which had been used in many eras but mainly it belong to Arabic tradition.

### **1.5 Purpose of Study**

As the bodily representation of women is strictly prohibited and restricted under the new laws and regulation in the Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema, the representation of women has been through changes. The main purpose of this thesis is what changes and transformations Iranian women's filmic representations have been through after 1979.

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<sup>2</sup>The Islam holy book

In this research, through analyzing the four selected films, the representation of Iranian women in Post-Revolutionary cinema will be analyzed with emphasis on the two concepts of gaze and public/private dichotomy.

### **1.6 Limitations of the Study**

This study encountered two limitations. The first was to find Iranian films with English subtitle. Even it was hard to have access to those films, which were screened in the international film festivals with English subtitles. As the thesis main focus is the portrayal of women, finding suitable films would be harder with the relevant themes and characters.

The second limitation is that even most of the films with English subtitles lack complete and reliable translations. Should be noticed that some concepts and dialogues of the films are culture-bound which might not be able to communicate their meaning fully with the international audiences.

## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review is divided into three parts. First, we discuss *film-e farsi*, secondly women in *film-e farsi*. This is followed by a discussion on the presence of women in Iranian cinema and an overview of the theoretical framework for the analysis.

#### **2.1 *film-e farsi*, Pre-Revolutionary Totality of Cinema**

Iranian cinema is generally divided into two parts, which by themselves possess subcategories. Iranian cinema, in a broad sense, is categorized into the cinema before 1979, which is radically in sharp contrast to the one after it. *film-e farsi* is a pervasive melodrama genre in 1960s and 1970s of Iranian cinema. It is also known as *Tijarati* (commercial) or *Kolah Makhmali* (velvet-hat) film. As Mirbakhtyar writes:

Until the 1970s, most Iranian films were black and white, but the popularity of color song and dance scenes in Indian films triggered Iranian filmmakers to adapt. They began to film the dancing and singing in color, and would then edit them into the black and white films (2006, p. 33).

According to Houshang Kavooosi, an Iranian film critic, who has coined the term *film-e farsi*, this genre imitated foreign genre film so they didn't represent anything about 'Iranian culture' and 'national identity' (Esfandiary, 2012, p. 135). Jahed, however, claimed that *film-e farsi* cannot be considered as a genre because except some documentary films and some rare feature films, no other kind of cinema exist at the same time with *film-e farsi* which differ from it in style and form (Jahed, 2012).It

is believed that *film-e farsi* does not have any forms, structures and a clear plot and are not artistically and aesthetically valuable films and even those which were produced purely for the purpose of entertainment lacks any form of social criticism or worldview (Mirbakhtyar, 2006).

## **2.2 Women in *film-e farsi***

In Pahlavi era, the censorship of cinema was exerted on any explicit criticism of the regime. As Rezai-Rashti (2007) wrote, “Prior to 1979, the Iranian socio-economic and political system was connected closely to global capitalism and the shah’s regime exercised control over cultural and artistic production” (p. 195). Consequently, this rigid control and state surveillance leads into commercialization of films for the purpose of entertainment, and sensitive challenging issues and social problems left untouched by filmmakers in 1960s and 1970s.

Under the influence of Hollywood and Bollywood, the entertaining purpose of Iranian cinema at this era leads into limited representation of women. What is common to the narratives of this genre, whether in the Indian, Iranian or Turkish cultural settings is that, on occasion, a female character is portrayed as a victim who had been forced into ‘degrading’ professions such as prostitution owing to having lost her virginity through an act of rape. Consequently, a rape scene is often included in these films.

As Lahiji criticizes in her review of Iranian cinema, “the film makers of this period perpetrated the greatest insult to the Iranian women because only one picture of women appeared on the screen: the pervert woman who was easily deceived, became a cabaret dancer and a prostitute until the day when the saving angel arrived in the

shape of an attractive strong arm, velvet-hat wearing man, or a roving fist-fighter who would then wake the woman from her sinful ways with a slap of the face, take her and pour the water of repentance on her head and finally, save her” (1988, p. 4). As Zeydabadi-Nejad puts it this women after being saved from her 'unchaste life', repent, putt on Hijab and marry their savior, and finally “join the background figure of the hero's mother as an obedient housewife” (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2010).

In her analysis of 10 melodrama *film-e farsis* from the pre-Islamic Iranian cinema, Mino Derayeh mentioned this limited portrayal of Iranian women and writes, “there were only two limited female characters in the *film-e farsi* for decades; the masum (innocent) and the fasid (corrupt; in a more politically correct film narrative the term monharif or misguided is also used) with delimited functions” (2010, p. 152). According to Deraye, “the first was the naive, obedient, and chaste woman. This included mature mothers, young housewives and shy sisters who represented praiseworthy characters” (Derayeh, 2010, p. 152). As Lahiji argued “The life, suffering and joys of normal women, the housewives, women working on the farm, in factories, at school and offices, physicians, nurses, poets, authors, lawyers, and university teachers engaged in living normal lives had no place in the Iranian movies. Iranian movies were empty of real women—and real men too. What was shown on the screen included pure fantasy of the cheapest kind, without any artistic or aesthetic values” (1988, p. 4).

Derayeh recognizes four female characters in *film-e farsi* as Mother, Wife, Sister, and ‘a woman engaged in the sex trade’. She argues, “Mothers in the popular melodramas were loyal, tolerant, obedient, forgiving, self-sacrificing and almost always wore the chador (veil). They only worked at home, cooking and setting the

table and waiting for their men to come home...the mothers portrayed in these films filled the same patriarchal gender roles imposed upon a mother in the family as well as in the society” (2010, p. 152); the character of wives in these films, Deraye argued, “constituted an insignificant and merely complementary part; depicted as obedient, modest, thankful, and often veiled” (p. 153); the same as character of mother and wife, the persona of sister in *film-e farsi* was voiceless and “represented total chastity (virginity), obedience vis-à-vis male members of the family, modesty and innocence. She and her chastity were to be protected by her father, brother(s), and even uncle(s). She bore the honor of the family and if such honor were violated, the men of the family had to restore it by taking revenge, even if she had already taken her life (honor suicide).” (Ibid) ‘A woman engaged in the sex trade’ as another limited portrayal of women in *film-e farsi*, were mostly depicted as cabaret dancers, singers or prostitutes. “[The female characters] were often shown in provocative garments (very short miniskirts or short tank-tops) with heavy make-up, dancing while the camera zoomed in on their upper legs and breasts and singing erotic songs.” (Ibid) As Cabarets were exclusively a masculine place where the only female character was the woman on the stage, female characters not only were objectified as the target of male character’s gaze in the cabaret, but they are targeted to be looked at for the camera and for the future targeted audiences of the films. The portrayal of women in 1960s and 1970s Iranian cinema functions as what Mulvey calls “watching, in an active controlling sense, an objectified other” (1975, p. 3).

This cinema came from a male dominated culture where women were considered extremely weak and inferior. Hence, every manifestation of women in these films was to fulfill men’s desires and to consolidate the power and the traditional rules of patriarchal society. Zeydabadi-Nejad argues “while the representation of women for

the male gaze was an important feature in the films at the time, what was even more significant was the denial of agency to female characters and the films' adherence to patriarchal values” (2010, p. 108). Therefore, “apart from satisfying the voyeuristic desires of the predominantly male cinema-goers in the first part of the film, the films attempted to please them by having the male hero take charge of women's lives and direct them to 'the right path'. Basically, in these myths of transformation from unchaste to chaste or vice versa, the women were denied any agency” (Ibid).

Zeydabadi-Nejad claims that this ‘representation of women as objects of desire’ is the main reason of declaring cinema as haram (religiously forbidden) by clergies. As movie theatre was considered as a corrupting place for women, mostly movie theatres were occupied by the male cinemagoers before the revolution (Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994, p. 35).

Here are some *film-e farsis* whose Posters represent partly nude women in order to attract more male audience.



Figure 1: Beloved (Sogoli)



Figure 2: The Dancer of city

## **2.3 The Presence of Women in Iranian Cinema: From the Past to the Present**

Iranian cinema, affected by historical changes, has undergone transformations. Accordingly, The presence of women in Iranian cinema has its own specific characteristics, which are related to social and cultural transformations happening over the life of two Royal dynasties and the period of Islamic Republic; all lasting for 100 years. Iranians used to strictly believe in restrictions and tradition. Cinema as a new industry in 20<sup>th</sup> century enters Iran and has opened new discussions in conflict with limitation of Hijab and other restrictions and traditions. The patriarchal and traditional culture in both two Royal dynasties (Qajar-Pahlavai) and Islamic Republic has been the dominant discourse. Qajar dynasty was a very rigidly structured traditional society and there was no flexibility in state and male ideas and culture to accept the female to play an active role in the society. They assumed female as an object or their belonging that can only go out if a male accompanies them. The women identity as an autonomous creature was denied by the patriarchal society to the point that they were not even called by their first name in public assuming that women totally belong to a man and her name is part of the property and no stranger should even know her name. To crown it all, if they were to be called in public, they would be called by their son's name or the word "house", implying my wife. Later on, Pahlavi dynasty started modernization and westernization in the country because most of Pahlavi dynasties' government members had been educated and in relation with intellectual. In fact, the reformation era of Iran started by Pahlavi and they were willing to expand it through people. For the first time in Iran history, Pahlavi dynasty had opened discussion about and recorded women's rights in constitution law. By the fall of Pahlavi's dynasty this transition seemingly stopped. When Islamic Republic



came to power, the law highlighted the issues about Hijab while women's participation in the society including in the world of cinema increased. According to the Islamic sharia law, there are no specific forbidden occupations for women. It is a fact that, Iran has had a patriarchal structure since long ago (especial in Qajar era) so women make attempts and struggle with the society's structure to stay resilient and save their status quo in the patriarchal society. In the early years of cinema in Iran, male characters played female roles due to the fact that women's participation in the society was, to a great extent, limited and also because women's physical representation was traditionally and religiously taboo. The idea of having a woman spotlighted and highlighted by the camera or on the stage was equal to the woman's prostitution. The discourse of tradition, along with religion, imprisoned women at home to perform the domestic roles. To tackle this problem, the filmmakers or directors of dramas had to hire Caucasian and Russian women actresses to perform instead of Iranian women. It was not until fifteen years later, when cinema became more popular and common in Iran, that a performance group called 'Iranian Comedy Company' included three women actresses: Sara Khatoun, Shookoofeh, Moolook Hosseini (Omid & Omid, 2009).

Since cinema addresses a huge audience, far larger than that of the theatre, women actresses, to avoid the social stigma, refused to appear in front of camera and instead they chose to work in theater halls with small audience. *Avance Okanianice Abi and Rabi* 1930 (1308) are known as the first true product of an Iranian film industry in which the director hired Christian female characters to avoid the problems of deploying Muslim female characters, since the Christian society was more open minded toward women's issues. So Avance Okanianice left the women role to his

Coreligionists ‘Christian actresses’ and ‘Ebrahim Moradi’<sup>3</sup> (p. 5) used his special tricks to have women in his film. But with the encouragement of Abdolhossein Sepanta finally the first Iranian Muslim artists named Iran Daftari and Fakhr Jabar Vaziri experienced performing in front of camera in India in a film called *The Lore Girl* 1938 (1317). Following this period when the first film, in which a Muslim woman appears, was produced, cinema in Iran was silent and dormant for about 15 years. With the new phase of producing movies, the attitude toward women’s presence and position in cinema is still biased. The men are not interested to allow women to participate in the process of producing films in any role while women’s enthusiasm to participate in cinema increases. Men regarded women more of a decorative instrument in the process of storytelling rather than as an autonomous subject who can make any difference to the forwarding of the plot (Omid & Omid, 2009). However, gender consciousness on the part of women is not a basic question and the efforts made by those gender conscious figures such as Forough Farokhzad or Shahla Riahi cannot be considered as part of a women social movement. Although the women who entered the world of cinema in the 1970s were more educated, they were still marginalized by the hegemony of the patriarchal dominance. The fact that women could enter TV was more of a need on the part of this medium rather than the equal chance granted. While there are more women having professional jobs in TV, the attitude toward them is still biased. The women in cinema before 1970s were mostly not much educated and had learned the career from experience compared to the educated ones who were active after 1970. The revolution, as a radical change in

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<sup>3</sup>History of Iranian cinema section of Ebrahim Moradi (1900-1978)

all aspects of private and social life, effects marked transformation in the history of cinema. The clearest example is the emergence of more female filmmakers.

Women's presence in the films also drastically changes and they perform roles, which are more remarkable in the plot of the films. Although women are to a large extent, outnumbered by male filmmakers, qualitatively they rival them and this is proved by the prizes they receive from film festivals apparently designated the membership of women in pre/Post and both cinema eras (Omid & Omid, 2009). The current statistics indicate the presence of about 558 to 600 women since the advent of the cinema.

According to Fatemeh Motamed Ariya<sup>4</sup> lecture in Maryland University (2007) presentation of Iranian women in cinema are divided in three generations: presence, manifestation, and presence and manifestation:

Presence: The first generation of women actresses in Iranian cinema up to 1978 and the Islamic Revolution of Iran.  
Manifestation: The second generation of women actresses in Iranian cinema from the early years after the revolution until the late Eighties, which was the period of the brilliance of Iranians in the world.  
Presence and manifestation: The third generation of women actresses in Iranian cinema in the time of Internet and satellite. (2007)

The following is the result of the reading of the number of women's in Iranian cinema by SPSS based on the information drawn from the book, *Iranian Women Filmmakers* (Omid & Omid, 2009) which can clarify the extreme changes of participation and growth of women's role in pre and Post revolution era.

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<sup>4</sup>Motamed Ariya. Fatemeh, Iranian actress - director

### Statistics

Period

N	Valid	491
	Missing	0

### Period

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Pre-Rev.	68	13.8	13.8	13.8
	Post-Rev.	326	66.4	66.4	80.2
	Both	97	19.8	19.8	100.0
	Total	491	100.0	100.0	

According to conclusion drawn from statics in the book *Iranian women filmmakers*, women presence in Iranian cinema can be divided into three groups Pre-Revolution, Post-Revolution and both since 1900 to 2014. Some of women filmmakers are present in both era .The statistics indicates the trend for women presences keeps raising during this time. The statics manifest that the mean of statics shows that the number of women participants in Post-Revolution cinema is almost twice as many as that of Pre-Revolution cinema. Further support can be provided by different charts, which clarify the process of transformation. Despite Traditional and cultural restrictions, we can comprehend the transformation of women role in the Post-Revolutionary cinema era.

## 2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework below draws upon feminist film studies, gender studies, the concept of the gaze, the private/public dichotomy, the concept of representation and tradition, transformation and culture.

### **2.4.1 Feminist Film Studies**

Arrived in 1970, feminism established a new method by which films and the question of spectatorship could be analyzed and understood. Feminism, as a social movement touching almost all corners of life and endeavoring to manifest the ways by which patriarchal ideology excludes, oppresses and silences women, has also from a critical vantage point had a great impact on film theory by taking into consideration issues such as representation and spectatorship as central points. At the beginning, the movement was directed at analyzing and criticizing the stereotypes prevalent in cinema (Kaplan, 1983). Soon later, feminist theory made attempts to understand the patriarchal power structure manifesting patriarchal imagery in cinema.

Feminist film theory and criticism, as Janet McCabe argues, played a very significant role in the emergence of film studies and film studies also shaped the feminist concerns (2004, p. 1). Feminist film theory inspired by and formed from broader branches of knowledge. As Thornham mentions “these developments drew on emergent theories within European structuralism and semiotics, Marxist concepts of ideology, and psychoanalytic theory” (2007, p. 12).

The feminist film theory was also in line with the previous feminist movements dating back to Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) trying to reconstruct the socio-cultural structure of the society. All this led to the second wave feminism. Second wave feminism, whose importance here is the subsequent impact it had on the emergence of feminist film studies, initiated by an awareness of how the socio-cultural structure of society and the construct of femininity would lead to women’s subordination and oppression. Apart from the second wave feminism, McCabe maintains the theoretical accounts and analysis that deals with the images of women emanating from the

patriarchal and heterosexual culture was another force to frame the feminist film theory (2004, pp. 2-3).

To feminist theoreticians such as Claire Johnston cinema rather than “reflecting reality” is viewed as “constructing a patriarchal, ideological, view of reality” (Smelik, 1998, p. 491). The classical cinema, as she argues, presents the myth of ‘women’, drawing upon Roland Barthes structuralist notion of myth, turning women to a code or sign backing up the ideological implications patriarchal society offers regarding women’s position to men. Hence, cinema as a tool to reflect reality turns to be a reality-constructing machine. Feminism, albeit having various approaches, aspires to change the power structure in the society and the ways by which this power structure constructs reality. For instance, it is maintained that Hollywood has its own popular women mythology, which unconsciously holds “collective patriarchal fantasy. This fantasy does not reflect any woman’s reality but in which her image functions as a sign” (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 8).

Earlier feminist film critics mainly scrutinized, as McCabe (2004) argues, the stereotypical images of women and female body and the way gender is constructed and how patriarchal representation portrays women as object of sex. In addition, feminist film theory and its thinkers have also aspired to develop new critical methods and theories to deconstruct the classical representation of women in recent years. It is argued by Mayne that there is ample evidence of “women’s exclusion and distorted representation in mainstream cinema” (Hollinger, 2012 , p. 7).

The all-encompassing concept of women and gender viewed as a universal concept has opened new areas to investigate women position in relation to race, ethnic identity and class.

#### **2.4.2 Representation**

Any text, either printed or filmic, in M.H. Harpham and Galt (2010) words is “conceived as a discourse which, although it may seem to present, or reflect, an external reality, in fact consists of what are called representation that is, verbal formation which are the ‘ideological’ products or cultural products of the historical conditions specific to an era. A number of historicists claim also that these cultural and ideological representations in the texts serve mainly to reproduce, confirm, and propagate the complex power structures of domination and subordination, which characterize a given society (p. 245).

As German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) saw, texts are fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange. Far from being an exchange between equals, the discursive situation is more like the relationship between colonizers and colonized, oppressor and oppressed. Words and text are so much of the world that their effectiveness, in some cases even their use, are matters of ownership, authority, power and the imposition of force. It is precisely from this situation of unequal discursive relation that Orientalism as a scholarly discipline emerged (Cited in Ashcroft, 2001, p. 24).

The idea Nietzsche raises is that power is maintained through texts in a hierarchical order. The idea of representation and the subsequent analysis, albeit as old as Plato’s mimesis, is more of Postmodern concept that “must take into account”, in the words of (Cavallaro, 2001), “a wide variety of cultural phenomena, philosophical

perspectives and ideological programs” (p. 38). If the saussurean theory of the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and the signified is still tenable and the idea that the language is a construct, one, convincing that all art and any cultural phenomenon is a text, would heed the arbitrary relationship of texts available which are in turn an ideological program. When discussing representation, one addresses the relationship between two entities: the one representing and the one being represented. However, it can also be argued, the fact that an entity is represented does not guarantee if it actually exists in outer world or if that is a reliable representation. All representations are ideological constructs, which are heavily dependent on interpretation and any text, as Harpham (2010) discusses, is conceived as a discourse which, it may seem to present, or reflect, an external reality in fact consists of [...] representations [...] which are the ideological products or cultural constructs of historical conditions specific to an era” (p. 245).

What is of paramount importance in regard to representation is that language if supposedly is to express something it is more involved in the, from Foucault’s view, manifestation of the “ fundamental will of those who speak it” (Bennett & Nicholas, 1995). This will is reflected in the text and text is any system of sign, which is to convey meaning; therefore, in this sense cinema, painting, or even a sculpture can be regarded as texts. Whenever a system of sign or a text is involved in a communication then the question of interpretation comes into play as well. The importance of the text and the subsequent interpretations blurs the distinction of understanding any sign system to the point that Derrida declares that “there is no outside text” by which he means that there is nothing which is not bound up with the limitations of the context as cited in (Bennett & Nicholas, 1995, p. 30). In this sense the world is perceived, addressed, managed and subsequently ruled by the



ideological representations through language. In a world where reality is so much an elusive subject and reality is perceived by the dictatorship of language there is no wonder then that women are represented based on the hierarchy of power relations.

The filmic representation of women in cinema is then directly affected by power relations, and the way women are perceived by the patriarchal culture as a source of sexual pleasure; or to put in more directly, using Mulvey's terminology (1975), women are represented as "spectacles to be looked at" as cited in (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 1). De Lauretis also fully discusses the way representation affects women's portrayal as a historically specific entity and imaginary cultural representations. This dichotomy, she maintains, is essentially of a reductionist nature depicting women either as virgin or whore as cited in Chaudhuri (2006, p. 61). She, drawing upon Foucault's discussion of the way gender is a product of diverse social relationship analyses the position of women in the society and how gender is represented by powerful social technologies.

The ultimate goal of representation, it can be argued, is the homogenization of a gender, a group, or a people. Representation, by unifying the subject under one same category, treats them the same and reduce them to a simple statement of language, which in turn is an ideological objective as well. It claims universality and by defining an "other" is to apply power over another race, class, or gender. Representation aims for coherence and integrity while it is never free of the ambivalent state of the opposition between reality and illusion.

### **2.4.3 Gender Studies**

While sexy is supposedly determined based on the difference in anatomy, Hapham and Galt explain that gender is not equal to anatomy and is a social construction

(2010, p. 146). The idea of the constructedness of gender became a focal discussion after Foucault's discussion in *the history of Sexuality* on the formation of the sexual identity under the regimes of power.

The binary of male/female or masculine/feminine like all binary oppositions rely heavily on the presence of a hierarchy. Almost entirely the discussion of gender and sexuality is viewed in relation to social identity, assuming that the identity of a person is defined through the sexual role she or he plays in the society. In these discussions which are essentially antireductionist, the role of sex is not reduced only to a biological fact since, Cavallaro (2001) argues, this "crudely underplays the role played by culture in producing sexual preference and, concurrently, multifold forms of sexual activity" (p. 108). Judith Butler's discussion of the performativity role of gender is more revealing. Her discussion revolves around the fact that a person's identity is not defined by the biology and anatomy to which he or she is born but the role they perform in the society. Through the roles played and especially through the repetition, the identity forms itself and hence "repetition", (Cavallaro, 2001) draws upon Butler, "plays a vital part in this process, for it is by performing certain acts repeatedly that the individual acquires an apparently coherent identity" (p. 108). The aspiration towards a coherent identity is the wish of a dominant ideology, which defines gender and gender role in certain ways. In other words, this dominant ideology defines clear-cut gender roles and is aimed at maintaining coherent identities. Consistency is the ultimate goal of any patriarchal ideology and this consistency is achieved through the language, which is in Lacanian term the realm of the father. Discourses create gender or more precisely genders but, by no means, they are stable. Even if the idea of the emergence of opposition within the systems of power, in Foucauldian term, is taken into consideration chances are that new regimes

of gender are created within the system. Hence, gender dichotomy of male/ female is now questioned by the presence of ambiguity of, let us say, unisex names and clothes and the different forms of sexuality rather than heterosexual definitions. Societies are subject to change and hence the phenomena of which gender, gender roles and gender definition are a part are not exceptions.

In cinema, as a gendered biased form of arts that is directly and mostly addressing males, the stereotypes previously presented in other arts are forcefully produced and reproduced. The conventional presuppositions about men and women and their differences are enhanced through visual- audio *ideological apparatus* and all this depend on one concept: men vs. women. The entire cinema then can be concluded as the representation of gender and the reproduction of the stereotypes underlying that the male is strong, rational and active and the female is the total opposite. As Elaine Showalter has spoken of feminist aspiration in literature in a way to claim that women have to seek “A Literature of Their own” (1999) which is a remembrance of *A Room of One’s Own*, cinema may also need a ‘cinema of their own’.

#### **2.4.4 Gaze**

The whole construction of cinema and the inherent visual logic interwoven in all layers of the screen depend almost entirely on the representation of woman as an object of sexuality and desire, which is there to be looked upon. In Mulvey (1975), she argues that the mainstream cinema is constructed for a male gaze by which the final product is a woman, which is, in de Beauvoir’s term, objectified. Spectators are also to take an active role of the subject viewing the world through the eyes of the male hero of the movies and viewing the female heroine as a passive object of erotic pleasure (p. 3). According to Mulvey (1975) the whole screen is about male fantasies of voyeurism and fetishism and this look, in a broader sense, is a controlling agent

(p. 3) In this case, as (Smelik, 1998) argues, the male character is the agent around whom the dramatic action unfolds and the look gets organized (p. 491).

Films are not to be made and produced unless they are inherently based upon male fantasies. Mulvey's (1975) mainstream article draws upon Freud's famous term "scopophilia" or pleasure in looking proposed in his "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality". He argues that scopophilia is an act of objectifying people as a source of visual pleasure by which the object of look is subjected to a "controlling curious gaze" (Cited in Mulvey, 1975, pp. 2-3). Hence, cinema as a basically visual stimulus than an audio one is to pave the way for a one-way visual satisfaction.

Mulvey (1975) Also compares the whole ritual of sitting in the auditorium to watch a film to the Lacanian theory of ego formation arguing that the spectators identifying themselves with the hero's and stars recognize their own similarities and differences to the character and hence the screen acts as the mirror does in the mirror stage to the infant (p. 3).

Here there comes to appear a dichotomy or a binary opposition by which the male characters and the male spectators stand on one side to victimize, objectify, and passivize the female character as the object of eroticism or in Mulvey's (1975) term she will, hence, be a connotation of "to-be-looked-at-ness" (p. 4).

Also from power relationship point of view, the one who does the act of looking or in the other words spies on the objects are the more powerful ones in the structural relationships of those present on the screen. The male character is the one who takes the active role by applying the male gaze on the female character, whose presence in

the film is nothing but to be looked at. This power application is in turn passed over to the spectator who is supposedly a man. This is a relationship in which the spectator is the hero's surrogate and the hero is the spectator's surrogate.

It is not all the more then surprising that in the formation of the narrative and in the structure of the narrative this is the male character that "drives the story forward and while the female has a passive role, linked to her status as spectacle" (Chaudhuri, 2006, p. 35).

In Lacan's view the gaze is the imaginary camera and screen determines the ways by which a subject is filmed and photographed. The main issue here, argued by (Chaudhuri, 2006), is that the dominant fiction decides what to screen in and out and since the narrative cinema is a masculinized one it decides upon the desire and the ways sexual difference is presented (p. 115).

For two centuries, feminists criticize the dichotomy between private and public spheres in the liberal thoughts. As established in the liberal western culture, "the private sphere is an area that describes family, close periphery and personal matters while the public sphere is a life space of social concerns, worth and struggles. While women are besieged in their private realm, men live in the public realm freely" (Oztürk, 2003, p. 160)

#### **2.4.5 Public/Private Dichotomy**

The split between public and private is not merely a neutral distinction between home and workplace but it implies hierarchal divisions of values and importance as in compare to private sphere, the public sphere is highly valued. This form of dichotomization are tied to other dualities such as culture/nature, rational/emotional,

spirit/body, subject/object, modern/traditional, etc. according to which men are associated with the highly-valued first concepts and women are associated with the devalued second concepts (Lemish, 2015).

Focusing on this ideological separation, Carole Pateman (1983) argued that “liberalism is patriarchal liberalism and that the separation and opposition of the public and private spheres is an unequal opposition between women and men... [that] obscures the subjection of women to men within an apparently universal, egalitarian, and individualist order” (Pateman, 1983, p. 157).

Association of the women to the devalued sphere of private not only leads into exclusion of women from the public sphere but also influence the way by which women are included in the public (Chinkin, 1999, p. 389). As Oztürk argues in her analysis of private sphere in films, this duality of values is even noticeable in the realm of Art, considering devaluation of those forms, which are connected to women such as soap operas (on TV) and comedies (in the theatre or cinema) (Oztürk, 2003).

The liberal doctrine of “separate but equal”, to draw on Pateman, subjects women to men, limit women to the private domestic sphere while men rule both the two spheres and ignores the interdependency and interrelation of the two spheres. The feminists try to illuminate this interrelation and how the so-called private and personal situations are constructed and ruled by public issues such as legalization. Feminist theorists argue that through the ideological separation of private and public spheres, the private sphere is remained untouched politically and legally, for example “because the state does not incur responsibility for violations committed within the private sector, it can ignore the continued subordination of women in that arena.

Thus, domestic violence against women can be designated as a private wrong, an individual matter that is outside international scrutiny” (Chinkin, 1999, p. 392).

Therefore, as Pateman mentions, “the personal is the political” slogan, offers new opportunities to redefine the concept of political and to ‘unmask the ideological character of liberal claim’.

In my analysis of 4 Post-Revolutionary films of Iranian cinema, I am concerned with the way women are situated in relation to public/private to find out if the films succeed to break through and challenge the subjugation of women to private realm or they construct women limited into the hierarchal opposition of public/private dichotomy.

#### **2.4.6 Tradition, Transformation and Culture**

While defining tradition, one comes across several concepts emphasizing the transitional nature of the concepts, which are handed down to the new generation. This handing down of the beliefs, customs or else can stand in sharp contrast to the concept tradition is attempting to convey in a binary opposition to transition. In other words, tradition as a rigid concept is all resisting against transition, while, in order to survive, it has to yield into it. This ambivalent nature of the concept makes it all the more difficult to achieve a definition, which is agreed upon by many. However, according to most dictionaries, tradition is the handing down of the beliefs, customs, holidays and other social phenomena from one generation to the new generation. This neutral definition does not apparently get far while tradition is by itself a social construct that is deeply affected by the institution of culture and religion.

Tradition, also, stands against modernity as an event, which is to break with tradition. Although tradition cannot escape the dictum of change and is subsequently subject to change and transition, it is the institution of ideological confinement and consolidation. In this way, tradition also becomes part of a complex culture that is mostly aimed at stabilizing the conservative beliefs.

Culture is generally defined as a tool to understand human behavior and refers to the knowledge that emanates from human's life and experience. Culture is essentially productive and is reflected in the tradition, behavior and language.

It may be not irrelevant to define culture in two ways according to the definition (Said E. , *Culture & Imperialism*, 1994) proposes in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*: "First of all it means all those practices, like the arts of description, communication, and presentation, that have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political realms and that often exist in aesthetic forms, one of whose principal aims is pleasure. Second and almost imperceptibly, culture is a concept that includes a refining and involving element, each society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought as a Matthew Arnold put in the 1860s. Arnold believed that culture palliates, if it does not altogether neutralize, the ravages of a modern, aggressive, mercantile, and brutalizing urban existence. You read Dante or Shakespeare in order to keep up with the best that was thought and known and also to see yourself, your people, society, and tradition in their best lights" (p. XII-XIII)

Regarding this definition cinema is a reflection of social and political identity and it can be inferred that it is also an arena of class and gender clash. Some believe that tradition and culture can be interchangeably used while others make distinctions with the focused mostly been that tradition is simply the transition of the customs,



manners and beliefs. On the other hand the arts and collective social manifestation of people's intellectual activities are considered as culture. What is of paramount importance here is that put together, culture and tradition forms a nation's identity. In this study the importance of taking culture and tradition into account is that cinema as a foreign product stands in stark contrast with the tradition which is basically influenced by religion and the culture which is a manifestation and reflection of the tradition in different art forms which are suddenly impacted by the advent of cinema. No other art form has ever been able to dramatically influence the modern history of Iran as cinema has.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

In this part of the research, I will clarify how the study will move forward and which method will be used. Also sampling procedure and research questions will be explained.

#### 3.1 Textual Analysis

In the current research the films are going to be analyzed as texts. Therefore, the textual analysis is applied as a suitable method for analyzing cinematic technique and narrative structures of these films.

According to Bainbridge, “Textual analysis is a *toolkit* for examining the media, applicable to very simple media forms (such as advertisements), up to more complex forms such as news narratives, television series and films” (2008, p. 224). Textual analysis as a method of analyzing texts of all kinds refers to the way information is gathered about the way people perceive the world and cultural phenomena. It is a methodology, which helps one to perceive the ways by which people of a culture come into terms with their own identity, to know who they are and how they fit into a culture. This is a method which works better with media studies, with TV programs, films, and with cultural studies. While doing a textual analysis, according to Alan McKee (2004, p. 1):

We interpret texts (films television programmers, magazines, advertisements, clothes, graffiti and so on) in order to try and obtain a sense of the ways in which, in particular cultures at particular times, people make sense of the world around them. And, importantly by

seeing the variety of ways in which it is possible to interpret reality, we also understand our own cultures better because we can start to see the limitations and advantages of our own sense-making practices.

Interpretation as a cultural activity entails the use of the word text, which is regarded in literary terms as any system of sign, which is open to analysis and interpretation. Hence, a billboard, graffiti, a film or a TV program can be viewed as a text. And the reason the word text is used, according to McKee, is the fact that this word bears “Post-structuralist implications”.

Textual analysis as a research method is applied to study and interpret the features of a visual and recorded product. The purpose of this approach is to “describe the content, structure and function of the message contained in texts” (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 1999, p. 1). In this regard culture is viewed “as a narrative or story telling process in which particular text or cultural artifacts (i.e., a pop song or a TV program) consciously or unconsciously link themselves to larger stories at play in the society”.

Hence, what is of prior importance in textual analysis is the juxtaposition of the textual content to come up with a generalization about cultural and social practices. In this regard, in this thesis, a historical span of time is considered as a contextual framework to study the specific motifs and characteristic prevalent in the period. In other words, the elements that create a general meaning and signification are studied in a larger content of social, cultural and political life.

### **3.2 Sampling and Procedure**

As previously argued, the central focus of this research is Post-Revolutionary cinema in Iran after 1979, which has to be adapted to Islamic values introduced by the new regime, and as a result, the women’s representation has drastically changed. To

elaborate the influence of socio-political changes on the representation of women in Iranian cinema, I have chosen four Iranian films to analysis. All these films are selected through a non-random sampling procedure; hence, the results are not meant to generalize to all other Iranian films of the period. As I have mentioned in the introduction, I chose these four films because they represent four different decades of Iran's Post-Revolutionary period. This gives us a broad timeframe in which to consider the changes that took place on the representation of women on screen; *The Mare* from the 1980s, *Sara* from the 1990s, *Gillaneh* from the 2000s, and *Final Whistle* from the 2010s. In order to select the films, I watched many films from each decade and selected the films ultimately analyzed based upon three criteria: first, they all belong to similar genre of melodrama; second, the female characters in the selected films have leading roles and they have comprehensive presence in the plot; and third, time and place. *The Mare* has a rural settings and *Gilaneh* depicts rural women in wartime. *Sara* and *Final Whistle* are both telling the story of urban women, one in a marital conflict and the other in a legal-political one. Therefore, the analysis will cover the variety of representations of women and it will help to wider the research scale.

### **3.3. Research Questions**

This research is trying to analyze the changing representation of women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. In order to meet this objective, two issues of Gaze and Public/Private Dichotomy will be the main focus of analysis about representation of women. The two first questions cover these issues and the last one will be answered in the conclusion chapter based on the findings in the films analysis. The research questions are defined as follows,

RQ1. How do the issues related to the concepts of gaze and voyeurism change over the four decades represented by four Iranian films *The Mare* (1980), *Sara* (1990), *Gillaneh* (2000), and *Final Whistle* (2011)?

RQ2. How does the issue of the public/private dichotomy change for women over the Post-Revolutionary era as represented in the four selected films *The Mare* (1980), *Sara* (1990), *Gillaneh* (2000), and *Final Whistle* (2011)?

RQ3. How does the representation of women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema differ from those of Pre-Revolutionary films, and what do these changes imply regarding the issue of censorship and religious limitations exerted on Iranian cinema after the revolution?

## **Chapter 4**

### **FILM ANALYSIS**

In this chapter, I conduct a textual analysis of four Iranian films that span four decades of Iranian Post-Revolutionary cinema. In the analysis, I draw upon the concepts introduced earlier in the thesis, including the question that arise from feminist film studies including that of the gaze, representation and the public and private spheres.

#### **4.1 The Mare**

In this section I first outline the general story and then provide an analysis that draws on the concepts of the gaze, the role that women play with regard to the public/private dichotomy and consider the implications of these for the quality of life for women as represented in the films.

##### **4.1.1 Story Line**

A thirteen year old girl is married off out of poverty and destitute to an old man and swapped for a mare as the marriage portion. The girl makes attempt to escape the marriage ceremony but is soon found and hit to death by the uncle who is almost financially supporting her sister and the children after her husband's death. The girl, while being hit, is saved by the old groom-to-be and finally married to him. To tackle the problems raised by tradition, she welcomes an absolutely traditional marriage, which is bigamous, just to bring the husband a child.

#### 4.1.2 Analysis



Figure 3: Rahmat and Rezvaneh (a village man and woman)

The setting of the film is a rural area with impoverished people who have to struggle hard for survival. The film bases its discourse on the formation of social relationships on the economic conditions. The complicated economic relationships and the way women are exploited in these systems is what constitute the drive behind the formation of the plot in *The Mare*. This can be a transformation in the viewpoint of the directors after revolution to deal with the issue of poverty, which was previously forbidden to be raised in Pre-Revolutionary films. In the Post-Revolutionary era, there suddenly emerged a plethora of films dealing with the question of poverty and injustice.

Rezvaneh (Soosan Taslimi) is a widowed and she is essentially deprived of the financial security a husband was supposed to provide in a traditional culture. She loses her rice crops in the heavy storm and is unable to feed her children in the coming winter. That's why she agrees to have her young daughter marry a middle-aged man, and to receive a mare in return as her Shirbaha<sup>5</sup>. The film establishes her

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<sup>5</sup> - Shirbaha, literary means "the price for the milk", is the amount of money traditionally the groom-to-be had to pay to his mother-in-law as compensate for her endeavors in feeding and raising the bride.

intention well through depicting her harsh financial situation. Economic and cultural situation, as the film suggests, intensify the patriarchal conditions.

In a deeply traditional and patriarchal society, the survival of a family depends heavily on the presence of a woman. In such representation, a woman can maintain identity if she is married. If widowed, then the identity is retained through children. Marriage in this structure of society is completely an economic tie rather than an event from a romantic view of partnership. If the survival of the family is guaranteed, marriage under any circumstances is justified. The object, which has to be bargained, is a woman and the men are the sides of the deal.

The way the story is structured in *the Mare* reinforces the idea that the film is providing a critical perspective on the way woman's body becomes the property and objectified under the traditional patriarchal culture. Although the film successfully depicts this situation and places its characters within this patriarchal culture, it fails to break through it and instead of challenging the patriarchal orders and demands it restores them and celebrate them by the end of the film. *The Mare* lacks resource to overt criticism of political issues, and instead deals with mere description of the patriarchal structure of the society. Later I will discuss the way the film restore patriarchal values but now I prefer to focus on the other issues tackled by the film in regard to representation of women.

### **The Issue of Gaze**

The question of gaze is a complicated issue to be discussed in the cinema after the revolution. This is because the Islamic rules and the discourse of the revolution forbid any overt representation of women's body and any kind of explicit sexual



reference. However, it is still possible to argue about the issue of covert gaze in the representation of women in Post-Revolutionary cinema.

The cinema before the revolution as discussed in the literature review chapter, was inherently a cinema of voyeurism addressing men by the images almost all of great interest to men. The new cinema had to suddenly tackle the question of spectatorship when the most curious element of cinema (sex) had to be eliminated from the screen.

In *The Mare*, the camera lens does not directly address the body of a woman for the subsequent look of the spectators. There is no fragmentation of women's body and no half naked body to be displayed, and the setting is a basically different one from most of *film-e farsis*. However, this does not completely exclude the sexual role women have to play in their society. The fact that a young girl of 13 is chosen to be the wife of a middle aged man who could be her father illustrates that the main reason for the man's attraction toward the girl is an odd sexual relationship which is going to happen. A relationship, which under normal circumstances is highly detested, here is justified because the family of the girl is suffering from an acute shortage of basic necessities for life such as bread and rice, and as a member of hierarchal family in which the girl does not share an equal power with other members, she left with no choice rather than being scarified.

Through emphasizing the mare as Shirbaha, the exchange price, the film is then suggesting that this relationship under the guise of a religious bond is a relationship of prostitution. The girl is married off for a Mare; the bartering of the body for a mare is an implicit reference to a sexual relationship, which must be considered as crime.

### **Public/Private Dichotomy**

In the first level of reading the film, the narrative breaks the traditional division of labor between two sphere of home –associated with women- and workplace – associated with men. The border of public and private sphere is broken as Rezvaneh is a breadwinner of the family and alongside with her daughter not only she carries on domestic works but also does farming, and collects firewood. However, she is the breadwinner of the family only in the absence of her husband, the ‘man’ of the family whose absence is constantly emphasized as the source of the misery of the family through the film.

As it has been mentioned, this form of dichotomization is tied to other dualities such as culture/nature, rational/emotional, spirit/body, subject/object, modern/traditional, etc. according to which men are associated with the highly-valued first concepts and women are associated with the devalued second concepts (Lemish, 2015). *The Mare* constructs female characters in association to nature. The name of Rezvaneh’s daughter is Golbuteh, which literally means, “flower bush”. While the name of her middle-aged suitor is Ghodrat, literally means “power”. The juxtaposition of these two names connotes the film’s subconscious dichotomization of femininity and masculinity.

Also, the mare, as an animal is going to be swapped with Golbuteh as her Shirbaha. Beyond its immediate denotation as an animal, the mare is associated with the female characters whose presence in the patriarchal system is not considered more than a mere property under the control of male power to fulfill the specific needs of the patriarchal society. The mare is the absent-present entity. It is absent since it only

covers an almost brief part of the film and it is present since it can be understood as a metaphor for Golbuteh.

From a critical feminist perspective, *The Mare* depicts how societies objectify women as a source of sexual pleasure or childbearing machine. In order to justify Golbuteh's marriage, Rezvaneh's brother, in an exemplary scene, compares Golbuteh with a mare and said "One feeds the mare so as to make use of her one day". He implies that as the mother who fed and raises Golbuteh, now she has the right to make use of her and exchange her as a property to survive. Later, the mother, following what her brother dictates her, tries to justify this marriage for Golbuteh, and in order to convince her she sensationalizes and romanticizes the marriage as follows, "a woman is safe in her husband's arms", and "A women needs a husband to protect her." Finally, when the mother couldn't convince Golbuteh, she has a bitter confession about the real motivation behind Golbuteh's marriage: "What am I to do with the kids, if you won't marry him", "If you marry Ghodrat your brother and sisters and I won't have to leave in disgrace. We could keep the Mare and earn our living with it."

The juxtaposition of the mare and the young bride proves that the role of a woman in this society is similar to the one performed by a mare. This bargain of two female objects is to save the lives of two families. The fate and the happiness of the young girl is the least important fact to be considered. The girl is so young that she is not still ready for a sexual relationship and it is implied in a dialogue between the groom-to-be and his father saying that the groom has to wait till she is ripe enough to be touched. *The mare* is the girl and the girl is *the mare*.

In a scene when Ghodrat, the groom-to-be, his father and his brother-in-law are on the way to the Golbuteh's village to ask for her, the mare is following them obediently as the last horse in the row. She is following these three men with no objection and is ready to be exchanged by another obedient female 'property'.

Although women are depicted doing hard works outside their house shoulder by shoulder with men, the role that the male characters defines for female characters is that of bearing and rearing children with no more importance and value being attached. According to them, women are associated with private realm of house and family. In the scene in Ghodrat's shop, Golbuteh's uncle tells Ghodrat that "a woman's only function is to bear children and the only thing, which remains, is the child." This is in line with the patriarchal discourse according to which women without children are misfit. This discourse ignores the structures in which humane are not offered equal opportunities and chances to build up their identities regardless of the gender biases. Ironically enough, the traditional and patriarchal society basically believes that if a woman does not conceive a baby, it is not the man's physical and health problem but her fault, with no medical experiments carried on. A similar situation happens in *The Mare* and the presupposition comes true.

Although the film depicts this issue and its harsh consequences for the female characters it fails to address it critically. Ghodrat's wife is incapable of conceiving a baby and ironically she appears in the film for only a couple of seconds. In this short moment of appearance, she is treated harshly as if she is only a servant and this obviously emanates from the fact that she is not capable of performing her main function in the society. The film shows no more attention to her, does not follow her in the narrative, and leave her and her perspective forgotten. She just reappears in the

last scene in which she seems to be happily adapted with the new condition of living with the young bride. However, the film narrates Ghodrat's perspective and openly shows more sympathy with him. In the key scene in Ghodrat's shop, Ghodrat cries and complains about the disability of his wife and sore tongue of people. The film succeeds to depict the suffering of Ghodrat under the expectations of patriarchal society but fails to depict his wife's.

The discourse of the film, albeit attempting to question the patriarchal structure of the society, eventually surrenders to the dominant belief that life and the maintenance of a family can be guaranteed sometimes in an act of polygamy. Bigamy, if not polygamy, is a prevalent issue in traditional- religious societies as a source of satisfying the sexual needs of the male ones and as a resort to maintain the institution of family. It is almost a recurring motif in many films produced before and after revolution. To save a family, it seems to be a must for a man to remarry without divorcing the previous wife.

### **Let's Live Happily Ever After**

The first scene of the film is a shiny spring day in which Rezvaneh is going to the far village to give her daughter a visit after her first delivery. On the way, the mother asks for her brother's accompany and they start their happy journey to the far village while remembering the events of the last winter. Most of the film is narrated in the flashback and covers the story of obligatory marriage of Rezvaneh's daughter, Golbuteh.

The flashback ends, and the story continues in the present time when Rezvaneh and her brother arrived to Golbuteh's house. The happy ending of the film with the sun replacing the all-dark and wet weather suggests that the bad old days are gone.

Rezvaneh's life is saved and she has reconciled with her brother after a bitter fight. Ghodrat's first wife is another victim of a system for which women are childbearing machines. She is treated unkindly as a worker and not wife. She is talked to bitterly by the husband only because biologically she cannot conceive a baby. She is never even asked about Ghodrat's second marriage. Worse than that, she is the most absent character in the film from the beginning. She, as an object, is replaced for a new one, which functions better. In the last scene, she is happily serving the bride and welcomes her family warmly. She seems to be adapted perfectly and obediently to the new situation. The film suggests no criticism of the condition she has to live in and tolerate.

Although there are some scenes in which women's resistance is depicted and the female characters are not completely obedient, their disobedience is not enough to change their destiny. In addition, after their failure, all of them seem to be happily adapted to their new condition as the audience can easily judge their disobedience as a characters' mistake.

After her escape from the house to the forest to evade the forced marriage, Gobuteh is found and brutally hit and whipped by her uncle the way a mare might be to be another suggestion of how the mare is the girl and vice versa. She, then, surrender to the marriage and her resistance remains abortive.

Another example of women's disobedience is when after Golbuteh's marriage, the uncle tries to take the mare away from Rezvaneh. The mare is a marriage Shirbaha; it is what Rezvaneh receives traditionally for all the efforts a mother make to give birth and raise the child. She even has a physical fight with his brother to keep the mare as her right. It is against a standard expectation of a traditional woman to disobey patriarchal rules and demands. Rzevaneh, although being a villager, knows her rights and wants to get it. However, Rahmat, his brother tries to deprive her from this property by confiscating the mare by force, which leads to a fight between them.

This is another instance of resistance from a woman. They fight in the middle of the village while Rezvaneh loudly screams with no fear and no shame, and claims that his brother wants to take her and her children's absolute right. She wins this battle and gain the mare but is cruelly hit and whipped. The motif of being hit and whipped is recurrent in most films in the Pre-Revolutionary era and the later cinema when a woman resists against the norms and the rules of patriarchal power.

Another example of resistance of female characters is when after the physical struggle between Rezvaneh and her brother, the mare runs away and disappears in the jungle.

So the film successfully depicts disobedience of female characters and their attempts to challenge their situations. However, Resistance from the victimized female characters is not to the extent to change the destiny assumed for them. The patriarchal rule and domination does not leave much room for resistance. The male characters of the story harshly suppress any kind of resistance. Hitting a woman is an integral part of the logic of male's rule to punish a disobedient woman.

The film not only victimizes these female characters but also cruelly makes them welcome their suppressed condition warmly. At the end of the film, Golbuteh hugs her first child victoriously as a woman who fulfills his duty perfectly. She seems to be happy and satisfied with her husband and welcomes his uncle warmly as if she forgot all those bad days. In the last shot, as a point of view of Rezvaneh, she faces the camera and smiles to the audience happily. Rezvaneh reconciles with her brother and recall her memories of the last winter as “those bad days that we all act like children”. And finally, the mare is found and giving ride to Rezvaneh.

The patriarchal values are restored and strengthen through the happy ending of the film and not only the male characters but also the filmmaker force everybody to live happily ever after.

## **4.2 Sara**

In this section I continue the analysis of the films by again applying the concepts of the gaze, the public and the private and highlight the metaphor of the dungeon. In the analysis it becomes increasingly clear that the dungeon represents the limitation imposed upon a women and an oppressive space that must be struggled against and overcome.

### **4.2.1 Story Line**

Although adaptation based on Doll’s House by Ibsen, Sara pictures the typical life of Iranian women who sacrifice themselves and their life for the sake of their husbands’ prospect and fortune to find nothing but reproach. Sara’s husband, a banker, is seriously sick and needs to be treated in a good hospital in a Western country. In order to provide this huge amount of money needed, Sara is recommended by her husband’s colleague and friend, Goshtasb, to receive a loan from him. To secure the



loan, she forges her recently dead father's signature and gives Goshtasb her father's check. She then works day and night to pay back the loan. The husband, Hessam, is taken abroad and is treated and he never knows how the money was provided, having the wrong assumption that the money had been given to Sara by her father before death. Back to the work and now having been promoted, he finds Goshtasb involved in a forgery and decides to discuss his dismissal with other managers. Goshtasb, knowing now that Sara had forged the signature, threatens her to force the husband not to follow his case or he will give the husband a letter revealing the case. She does not submit and Goshtasb gives the letter to Hessam. Knowing all about the loan and the forged signature, Hessam, wearing a mask of truthfulness, harshly criticizes Sara as an irresponsible, unqualified woman who cannot be allowed to bring up her children. He also blames Sara for having affair with Goshtasb. Sara, who has scarified a lot for the husband and now has seen the true image of her husband leaves Hessam, and does not accept his apology.

#### **4.2.2 Analysis**

Based on *A Doll's House*, a play written by Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906), *Sara* provides a picture of the status of a typical middle class woman in a society, which is run deeply, based on the traditional rules and the dictates of patriarchy. As Ortín mentions in her analysis of the cinematic adaptation<sup>6</sup> of *A Doll's House*, this play “shows the change in the marriage of Nora and Torvald Helmer, from the typical Victorian “happy” family headed by a male breadwinner to the new woman that Nora turns out to be when she leaves her family in search of her identity” (2009, p. 132). Similar to the original play, *Sara* portrays changes in the relationship between

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<sup>6</sup> - The analyzed filmic version in the mentioned article is made by David Thacker in 1992.

Sara (Niki Karimi) and her husband; Hessam (Amin Tarokh) as a middle-class married couple after Sara's attempts to define a subjective identity for herself.

In *Sara*, unlike *The Mare*, the leading woman character is given a voice and she is not a totally passive person who has to yield to the fate written by the masculine culture. Additionally, the filmic technicalities provide a frame by which the inner feeling, thoughts and mentality of the main woman character is represented. While in *Sara* (the film is named after the leading character), the plot is forwarded by her actions.

The representation of women in a film made after all the chaotic time of 1980s/1360s is to a large extent different from those previously discussed and at the same time similar in roots. The participation of women in the modern social activities and having a real job is what at first glance draws the attention of the spectator to the point that the country has experienced radical changes. There are women occupying different occupational position in the society, from being simply a secretary to a technician like Sima, the second woman leading character.

Similar to *The Mare*, in the first two third of *Sara*, the film tries to portrays the patriarchal society under which a woman is struggling to keep her identity and subjectivity. However, in contrary to *the Mare*, Sara does not fail to critically challenge this situation. A woman in *Sara* is represented as someone whose decisions have strong effects on the events of the film to the point that the plot is mainly forwarded based on Sara's actions and reactions.

## The Issue of Gaze

It is apparently hard to apply the question of gaze to a film like *Sara*. In the first scene, we see Sara changing her cloths to go outside the house. With the use of repeated dissolves and focusing on the close shots of Sara's hands, the film escapes the censorship limitations, does not offer gaze on her fragmented bodies, and establishes a creative artistic language by which the simple act of changing clothes become the metaphor of wearing a mask. In this scene, with employing low-key lighting, the director transforms a simple scene into a poetic scene of a women's suffering double-faced life.



Figure 4: Sara and Goshtasb (a semi Modern man and woman)

What is depicted of the femininity of a woman in the society and in relation with the husband has nothing to do with an explicit reference to a sexual bond as well as the family one. Although Sara is a beautiful woman, the camera does not offer voyeuristic gaze at her. Usually her face is half lightened; the focus is on part of her bodies with no sexual connotations. She has never worn heavy make-up and usually is in dark and dull clothes. She has, unlike the women in *the Mare* as the child producing machines, been presented in chador and in Persian expressions completes Hijab. Her qualities of a woman are almost all gender based rather than having a relation with her sexuality. She is a mother, which is naturally a sign of being

physically capable of having sexual relations to produce babies and a wife, who spends most of her time in the kitchen. However that does not exclude the fact that even in this situation she can be the victim of a male sexual standpoint. The most serious accusation made by Hessam against him is a reference to a possible relationship between Sara and Goshtasb. Hessam is accusing her own wife of being a whore (someone who takes money to sell her body). The cinema after the revolution does not and cannot objectify women and a source of sexual pleasure in an explicit manner. But the sexist language and the delicate references to the issue are not ignored all in all.

Sara traditionally wears Chador and says prayer, but she is not depicted as a religious woman, because when she meets Sima for the first time after years in the street, they start chatting and laughing loudly while Sara's Chador falls down from her head. However, she doesn't care and continues talking. Suddenly, a car passed almost close to them and interrupts their conversation. The film, consciously depict the intolerance of a traditional society when breaking it's redline. So the car connotes the first warning to Sara who is trying to redefine her subjectivity in her own way, independent from patriarchal expectations and dictations.

### **Public/Private Dichotomy**

The distinction between the private sphere (associated with women) and the public sphere (associated with men) is rooted in the socialization process and the meaning assigned to bodies. Inspired by Engels's discussions, feminists consider the split in occupations between men and women as the first 'division of labour' and they see this as an obstacle to gender equality. This entails a struggle against patriarchal gender ideology in capitalist society (Ortín, 2009).

The capitalist social relations are definite criteria to dichotomize public and private spheres in *Sara*. Hessam is a stereotypical man who is a breadwinner of the family and his relation with Sara is established traditionally in accordance to the split between public and private sphere. Whatever associated with public such as workplace, rationality, power, law, politics, etc. is attributed to Hessam.

Hessam is a successful banker, newly promoted to a higher position. He doesn't let Sara interfere into his realm of power and control as he sees Sara as "a brainless woman who knows nothing about the outside world". By accusing Sara of being a mad woman, Hessam dichotomizes 'rational' him vs. 'irrational' (emotional) Sara. The same as Rahmat, Golbuteh's uncle in *The Mare*, Hessam has the power and authority to define what it means to be rational or to be mad. Felman argued that women are assigned social roles to serve 'an image, authoritative and central, of man' and are limited to pre-defined roles as 'a daughter/ a mother/ a wife' (1975, p. 2). Felman draws on Phyllis Chesler's argument in the review of her book "Women and Madness" in order to illuminate how madness is defined in accordance with the expectations of patriarchal society: "What we consider 'madness', whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype" (Cited in Felman, 1975, p. 2).

The resistant women who have rejected their sex-role stereotypes are recurrently marked by the patriarchal power as mad and irrational in these films. Madness is a stigma to deprive somebody, and in this case a woman, from his or her properties and rights. Hessam, like Rahmat, accuses Sara of being mad and crazy, who does not suit to raise his child. In a country, where the custody of a child is already defined to be upon the man, it is very easy and simple to frame a woman of being mad to take the

custody of the child. It is traditionally speaking a resort for men to influence the court and also the women to give up their rights.

Hessam also represents the law as he insists on firing Goshtasb and bringing him to 'justice'. He is obsessed with his honor and reputation through the film and he considers himself in charge of keeping the honor of the family when he said "no man would sacrifice his honor for his love". The most important reason that Sara hides her debt from Hessam is because Hessam is very sensitive about having any sort of debt. He always wants to keep his power as the only financial source of the family, and in this point of view, women's financial activity is considered as a kind of threat for his unique position of the only protector of the family.

So, Hessam's public sphere extends from his workplace to justice, law, social values, and family integrity. Hessam, however, is not a dominant character in the plot and his presence is overshadowed by the presence and actions of Sara.

In contrary, Sara belongs to the private sphere of house. When at home, Sara is depicted cooking in the kitchen, cleaning the house, preparing a party for her husband's promotion, serving food for him, and taking care of her daughter. However, the film doesn't naturalize her endeavor as a housekeeper. Through emphasizing her works in details, the film makes her invisible works visible- the works, which are always ignored and devalued as a natural function and common duties of women.

The camera attaches to Sara most of the time and narrates her actions and emotions in details. Although the film describes Sara's suffering under the structural tyranny

of her family, it does not neglect the hidden face of Sara's life. She secretly smokes when nobody's at home, she secretly visits Goshtasb in the outside to solve their financial conflict, and finally her biggest secret is that she works as a tailor in the basement of the house. She does decoration on the bride gowns deep in the night to pay her debts. She is in debt by a complicated contract to provide the money for Hessam's treatment abroad. His husband's unawareness of this fact connotes how women's role in a patriarchal society is undermined and ignored in order to keep the superiority of men as the one who possess the powerful controlling roles. Through working in the basement Sara succeeds to create a new sphere for her. It is a sphere in which she is the ruler, and has the full authority. However, she has to rule it secretly. When she reveals her secret to her friend, Sima, she confesses the hardship of this concealment, "I want to show you something but no one must know. I have kept this secret for so long that it's stifling me. It's I how saved Hessam's life. So, that's it."

Since the beginning of the film, the narrative is constructed Sara as a self-sacrificing character, a stereotypical wife and mother who is living for the sake of others; Sara is losing her sight because of her hard work at night; When she goes shopping, she just buys small things for the others not herself. However, she has been accused of wasting money as well; Even when Hessam gives her money to buy new dress for herself she puts it in her save to pay her debt. Here once more, the woman and her identity are tied up with the institution of family.

In an argument with Goshtasb, she is addressed "how could you borrow money without your husband's permission". The word permission is an indication of the fact that a woman's life is controlled by her man even if she is to save his life. She is also

naive enough to believe that her husband would praise her after he got hold of the fact that she had sacrificed a lot for his life.

On the one hand, Sara is a representation of a middle class housewife whose main responsibility is devoting herself to the family. On the other hand, she is supposed to be the manifestation of a woman who is going to claim autonomy in the society. This tension is what prevents the film from being merely a feminist propaganda. However, it is obviously visible that a male director has made a film, which is a harsh criticism of the patriarchal mentality in a deeply religious country run by a religious regime. The paradox is that for Sara to be an ideal wife, she has to be a hardworking and affectionate family woman spending most of her time in the kitchen, while the film is aimed at differentiating independent. However, despite the stereotypical expectations and representations of a traditional woman, she is struggling to own her subjectivity. To do so, she even risks her reputation and decency.

### **Sara and the Metaphor of Dungeon**

Sara's life is depicted as if she is all trapped in a dungeon, which cannot be open to the light unless she achieves self-consciousness. As I mentioned she creates a new sphere for herself that is nor private neither public. The metaphor of dungeon can be read as a recurring motif in the film. Sara has to go into the dark and quiet basement day and night to work in order to pay off the debts she is burdened with. The basement is dark and melancholic and is dominated by a type of silence, which is more annoying than welcoming. No one knows about her solitary hours she spent there and she is also inflicted by physical consequences of working long hours down there by losing her sight. Although ruling the new sphere of her own and feeling



confident about it, as she told her friend that “she can earn money like a real man”, her imitation of manhood, brings her nothing but physical disability and psychological confusion. Sara’s dungeon is darker by the fact that her husband is completely unaware of her situation and pains. He has not even realized that she is losing her sight.

At the beginning this activity is just an attempt for Sara to pay her debt but later she finds a new financial identity for herself, which she always has been deprived of. Meanwhile if Hessam didn’t become ill and she wasn’t in the pressure, she couldn’t gain it. Even now she has to hide her new identity but at the same time has dream “he’ll know someday and he’ll.” say: “wow my little darling has finally done something”. While celebrating Hessam job promotion, her success in independent financial situation must be hidden in the patriarchal society.

The fact that Sara is hiding the truth from Hessam has created a dungeon within a dungeon; a dungeon designed and created by the patriarchal society and the dungeon she takes refuge in. She is working day and night for the husband without even enjoying any praise. To her surprise, she receives harsh criticism from the husband by the time he is informed about all the monetary issues and debts. However, when finally Goshtasb explains the situation and gives the promissory notes back to Hessam, he has suddenly changed and considered all his manly problems finished and resolved. It’s the time that the film takes stand against his patriarchal assumptions and overturns all his expectations. Through depicting revolutionary act of Sara to leave the house, the film does not restore patriarchal values and provides a harsh criticism on all its aspects. The film returns lost voice of Sara to her in the last scene when she says “I must talk to you... it has been four-five years that we haven’t

talked seriously... I have been victimized... I must first rise myself". She announces that she has to educate herself first and be independent before she comes back. While depicting Sara in a victimizing situation, the film does not victimize her at the end.

In the last scene, the way Hessam has wrapped up a sheet around him and the way he walks make a fool of him reducing him to a portrait of a man he is no more in control like Rahmat in *The Mare*. A man in a traditional society is not supposed to be covering himself in sheets signifying a skirt. Nor is he supposed to follow a woman begging her to accept her explanation and apologies.

Sara left the house and by not accepting her husband's apology, she reclaims her subjectivity and her right to choose her path. Sara's leaving the husband looks like breaking the dungeon's door open to another way of life in which a wife does not necessarily entrap herself by the dictums of patriarchal society. Sara's leaving the husband is an act of awareness expected of women experiencing modern era in a country, which has experienced a revolution. The spectators of Sara are left in a state of ambivalence deciding whether she is going to come back or she has left Hessam forever.



Figure 5: Sara (a semi-modern woman)

### 4.3 Gilaneh

Following a general description of the dominant storyline, *Gilaneh* is analyzed to highlight the way in which concepts of the gaze and the public/private dichotomy can help explain the way women are represented in the text. The analysis also explores the way in which the role of the woman/mother is transformed after a fifteen year period.

#### 4.3.1 Story Line

This is the story of a mother who suffers the catastrophe of having a veteran son back from the war. Gilaneh, a widowed, has two children, a son who is leaving for war and a pregnant daughter with the husband away in the capital city for work. There is no news of the husband so the daughter and the mother decide to go to the capital city to look for him, which coincides with an air attack and bombing. Later the war is over and the son is back, paralyzed and unmoving in bed. Before going to the war, he had been engaged to a girl who has left him and cancelled the marriage promise since he is paralyzed. The movie goes on depicting the fact that the mother has to scarify all her life for the son like many mothers in the war period.



Figure 6: Gilaneh (a village woman)

### **4.3.2 Analysis**

*Gilaneh* consciously combines women issues with war tragedies to picture the solitude and agonies of a widowed mother living in an almost isolated place in the countryside. The physical seclusion of the house juxtaposed with her solitude creates a gloomier picture of the life, which seems to have nothing but pains. The film is one more time named after a woman, the main character of the Film. However, like *Sara*, it is not explicitly referring to gender issues. There is one more factor, which needs to be considered. The film is directed by a woman film director in a country where men by far outnumber women in this occupation. While the film, ironically, begins with the victory music (played in the time when soldiers made attacks) the story line foreshadows no victory. What remains of war for a mother whose only asset is her son is a paralyzed person who has to stay in bed for the rest of his life. In all films discussed so far, women have to suffer the dire consequences of the situations for which they are neither to blame nor responsible.

### **The Issue of Gaze**

*Gilaneh* is portrayed as a mother. Being a mother is systematically different from being a woman in the developing countries. A mother is not an autonomous entity anymore; she is defined by her position as a mother in the society. The motif of motherhood is recurrent all through the films discussed here. Even it can be claimed that *Gilaneh* is the representation of a mother rather than a woman. She does not bear the qualities of a woman in the usual sense. She is deprived of those opportunities, which can make her be a woman in the society. There is only one reference in the film to her quality of womanhood, when her daughter makes a joke about her mother's marriage. *Maygol* and *Gilaneh*, although being a traditional mother and daughter, speak about *Gilaneh*'s marriage openly.

The film starts with non-diegetic war sounds such as bombing and warning alarm in the background of a black empty shot. The black shot cuts into the first shot of the film in Gilaneh's house where Gilaneh and her daughter, Maygol are asleep while Maygol is moaning in sleep suffering from a nightmare. In this scene, unusual to a normal setting at home in which women do not wear hijab, the two women are wearing scarf while sleeping because of censorship limitations. However, the same as the scene in which Sara was changing her cloths, a creative cinematic language is used to hide the abnormality of their dress. With employing a low key lighting, which is also a suitable lighting for the wartime and hard situation the characters are trapped in, the film escapes censorship. As the characters have to wear scarf at home, while even sleeping in their bed and it could make the mise-en-scene to look unfamiliar and odd, the lighting is in the way that their bodies and their head veilings are hidden in darkness and their hair and earrings are emphasized. This scene is an example of new cinematic language that Iranian filmmakers use to skip the censorship.



Figure 7: Gilaneh and Miygol (village women and her daughter)

### **Public/Private Dichotomy**

Gilaneh's son, Ismail, is the man of the family before going to war. Ismail in his first depiction in the film is cutting firewood outside the house while his mother is

looking at him from behind the window and praying for his health. In this scene Ismail is portrayed in a low angle shot to emphasize his masculine power and his position as the pillar of the family who is responsible for all 'masculine' works.

Since the beginning to the end of the first half of the film, then, there is a clear boundary between public and private spheres, which is repeatedly re-established. The same scene repeats when Ismail meets his fiancé, Atefeh, in a scene that young soldiers depart for war. He is riding a horse and gets to half-made building which is their date place and Atefeh is inside and the door is closed with a piece of wood. Ismail approaches her; he jumps from the closing wood in a confident masculine way while Atefeh is standing with no clear reaction with a complete passive behavior. The half-made building connotes their future house in which the same boundaries and power relations is supposed to be repeated and established. Later, it becomes clear that an unfinished building is Ismail's future restaurant. Therefore, Ismail is portrayed in full control of his current and future family both in private and public spheres.

Ismail is depicted with in full authority over mother, his fiancé, and his sister. The film depicts a traditional patriarchal society and relationships. After Ismail's departure for war, he has no more physical presence in the film. However, his absence turns into a motif, which shapes characters' motivations and actions. Gilaneh keeps reviewing his memories and talking about him all the time.

War is basically a masculine concept, which is aimed at consolidating masculine power. War and politics are left for men to be engaged in and fought while women have to simultaneously suffer the pains. Being essentially a concept of power and domination, it afflicts the lower levels of hierarchy more than the rest. Women in the

society especially in the developing world occupy the lower levels of the society and are mostly the victim of a game for which they are not prepared, nor are they willing to participate in. What is important about this film is that at first glance, it seems that Gilaneh is a stereotypical mother who takes care of her children and sacrifices her life for them. But actually she is a picture of mother in wartime. At the same time she is both mother and father. She is both house maker and breadwinner so she is depicted beyond traditional picture of motherhood being limited at private sphere of home. Although being isolated in a remote area, Gilaneh is not an isolated women and she is trying to be in touch with the harsh outside world. The leading woman actor in this film is portrayed to have no political touch of the reality of war. There is no discussion of war and she turns the TV off if there is news about war. The only sign of war for her is the tragedy of her injured son.

The woman in *The Mare* is also a victim of the social and economic structure of a society in which, a woman without a man is destroyed. In Sara, albeit picturing a modern life style in which people do not have to fight over bread and daily necessities of life, women are discriminated against, and their efforts are not fairly valued.

### **15 years later in last days of 2001**

In the second half of the film when Ismail returns from war, his place as a pillar of the family has changes. He is a veteran unable to move and limited to the private sphere of home. All his previous responsibilities have been entrusted to Gilaneh. She is depicted as a self-sacrificing mother who is now working hard inside and outside the house. Although she has the opportunity to send her son to a hospital and stay with her daughter in Tehran, she chooses to carry on all the responsibilities

Getting old, she is, deprived of physical beauties and attractions. The way she talks also lacks the feminine qualities of delicateness. Once a mother in the Iranian society, a woman has to deprive herself of the joys a woman is naturally entitled to. Gilaneh once in a dialogue say that “One had better to be a dog than a mother,” We have already talked about the question of being a mother and ... and there is more analysis to come suggesting that being a mother is a very hard job. The fact that a woman is defined as a mother is an indication that her identity is defined in relation to her children. Being a mother, more than offering an autonomous identity, attaches her being to others; it is a guarantee to be accepted by the society.

The theme of being left alone by men is also repeated once more in this film. All the women in the films discussed so far are forsaken in one-way or another. In *The Mare*, the lady is widowed and hence all on her own to be supported by a man (her brother). In *Sara*, when Hessam gets hold of the all fact, does not return home at night to force Sara to ask for mercy. In *Gilaneh*, the mother is a widow, while her daughter is again left alone by the husband to seek jobs in the capital city. However, a transformation is also worth considering. The women depicted historically are moving toward more independence and self-reliance.

Gilaneh, like Sara is a strong woman who can manage a life with or without a man. In *Sara*, the woman saves the husband’s life with different legal and illegal measures. Gilaneh also devotes all her life and energy to her son to keep him alive. These women are not to submit to the fate. Sara’s leaving her husband, considering Iranian society in that time, is an act of rebellion, which was uncharacteristic of women earlier. The fact that Gilaneh does not take any political or national position regarding the war question is not because she is an uneducated woman. It can be as



sign that her position as a mother is beyond the issues of the society. She never seems to lose hope; she is worn out but still hopeful to see her son married. She is highly protective of her children: protective both of her daughter and her son.

The women in the films already discussed, do not receive social protection and support. Neither in *The Mare* and *Sara*, nor *Gilaneh* receives social welfare and support. Their survival in the society, to a great extent depends of the presence of men. However, as one moves forward chronologically studying the films as arranged, she notices that women are portrayed as those who can claim independence and autonomy themselves. They are not financially all dependent on the presence of a man but they are also at points the financial supporters.

A woman, a wife or a mother is also in the traditional point of view expected to make a lot of sacrifices. In the Iranian society, the concept of sacrifice is not regarded as an extraordinary attribute but a normal one, which almost all women have and are expected to have. A woman who does not make the sacrifices is labeled as irresponsible and uncaring and not suited to be a mother. From *the Mare* to *Gilaneh*, women presented make sacrifices while men look for their personal benefits. In *the Mare*, additionally, the uncle forces Golbuteh to marry in order to get rid of a financial burden from her sister's family and also fights bitterly over the mare. On the other hand, Rezvaneh is desperately accepts her daughter's marriage in a sacrificing act. The case with Sara is crystal clear; she hides her secret from her husband and saves his life to be later blamed of being mad, irresponsible and adulterous. With *Gilaneh*, the concept is explicitly pictured. The mother is all absorbing herself in pain to look after her son.

In her groundbreaking essay titled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey discussed about the constructive nature of film and the watching experiences of the audiences. She criticizes the way male are constructed as subjects and females as objects 'to be looked at'. While drawing on Mulvey, E. Ann Kaplan (1983) argued that films suppress mother's experience as objects, but contemplate more on her children's experiences. The denial of subjectivity of mother is in question then. However, in *Gilaneh*, although portrayed as a stereotypical self-sacrificing mother, Gilaneh not only forwards the plot but also is not deprived of her subjectivity. She and her motivations are all fully present and elaborately constructed. She is not an absent entity as a mother.

Gilaneh is a woman who is all alone and unprotected but strong and determined. She is not represented as a sexual object. She is the representation of a woman who tries to remain hopeful and faithful to life. For her, his son marriage is not a way of reassuring financial status of the family but a touch of life and survival. She is unaware of the political and social side of the world and does not seem to be willing to know about it. She is a mother all being left alone and unprotected. This can be read from her last far-fetched look in the last scene in the film.

#### **4.4 Final Whistle**

*Final Whistle* is the fourth in the series of films under analysis and clearly highlights the way in which filmic representations of women is transformed in Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. The analysis engages the concepts of the gaze, the public and private and role of the woman/mother in terms of self and sacrifice.

#### 4.4.1 Story Line

Directed by Niki Karimi brings into sharp focus the very challenging issue of women facing the question of rape, revenge and capital punishment. Sahar, a director, finds out that one of her minor actresses, Malihe, is involved in a case of rape, revenge and punishment. She had been a target of sexual abuse by her stepfather and to protect herself and the mother has killed the stepfather. In order to save the daughter, Malihe's mother, confesses falsely to be the murderer and is awaiting her death. Sahar, tries in a complicated process to provide the blood money to save the mother the film ends in the dawn, when the capital punishment is due, leaving the audience in a state of ambivalence whether the hanging has been done or stopped by the family of the murdered stepfather to forgive her.

#### 4.4.2 Analysis

*Final Whistle* is a film about women. The main character, Sahar (Niki Karimi), is a modern woman, a filmmaker and artist who tries to overcome the injustice imposed by patriarchal society.



Figure 8: Sahar and Saman (modern couple)

Sahar is an educated active member of the society and stands in stark contrast to the previous films. Not only does the leading character in this film has a real job in the

society and is financially independent, but also she is someone with the power of self-representation. She possesses a clear voice all through the film.

While the main plot of the film is focused on the story of women and their struggle to overcome their harsh and unjust conditions in a patriarchally ruled society, there are some other subplots such as the emerging changes in the relationship between Sahar and her husband, Saman (Shahab Hosseini). Saman is also a filmmaker and a director who is not as successful and artistically intelligent as his wife. Sahar's documentary is broadcasted from BBC Persian, an internationally recognized channel, while Saman's scripts are left unfinished, and he has been engaged in commercial projects and cheap Telefilm production.

### **The Issue of Gaze**

Being of a very complicated and elusive nature in the Iranian Post-Revolutionary era, the question of gaze in a Hollywoodian sense is difficult to apply. In a cinema, which is under strict restriction by an ideological religious regime, the body of the woman is pushed to very private spheres like the one before the advent of *film-e farsi*. However, sexual references and issues are never totally absent from cinema. The case for gaze here is the sexual dictates of a religious traditional society for which a woman is only a source of sexual pleasure or slavery at home. Maliheh is the victim of rape and the mother, awaiting capital punishment, is the immediate victim of this event. According to the Iranian Islamic law, if a woman defends herself in an attempt to save herself from rape and kill a man, she does not deserve punishment. While, according to the statistics, very few cases would be regarded as such and the justification for the punishment is that the temptation is always initiated by the woman. Maliheh, as a young orphan girl, is constantly subject to sexual harassment.

The head of the cleaning agency, old men, is trying to take her while she has been also the victim of a bloody rape. All this is only talked about in a very implicit way and never pictured; the entire story told by Maliheh also leaves the spectator in doubt whether the actual rape has happened or was it a sexual molestation. The spectator is left alone with his/ her own imagination to picture the scene. However, compared with other Iranian films after the revolution, *Final Whistle* is among those few films, which address the issue of sex in one way or another. It is a taboo issue rarely addressed or approached by Iranian filmmakers as sex and sexual relationship is not an issue in this society, while the reality outside proves it to be completely wrong. The question of sex addressed here is not also of a tempting nature since it is associated with death and murder. It does not involve women body in the way Hollywood films do and it is a question of subject, which has better to remain silent than talked.



Figure 9: Sahar (a modern woman)

Here in *Final Whistle* we can touch a little freedom for women in their appearance. Hijab is not a very severe issue in this film as in the most scenes the women -even Malieh and her friend who are from lower class of the society- almost cover the half of their head. They don't wear traditional costume. Actually their dress code changes

within different social places and position. As an example in the court they all are fully covered in black as a dress code defined by the regulations. In the most scenes we can see a close up of women's face, which, as I mentioned on page 10 of this research, was previously forbidden to be shown in close shots. However, the camera does not offer sexual gaze on them. The voice of women heard through all the film and the same as Rezvaneh in *the Mare*, Sahar takes stand against patriarchal orders and her husband's demands. This time this denial is more serious because in patriarchal society woman has to obey man but Sahar as a modern woman who believes in equality helps the women who are in trouble with no kinship just as women responsibility.

### **Public/Private Dichotomy**

More than the three other analyzed films, *Final Whistle* tries to challenge the duality between feminine and masculine attributions such as public/private, rational/emotional, law/nature, etc.

The distinction between home and workplace is vanished as Saman is most of the time working at home on his script and they convert a room to a working place in which they edit their films. In two exemplary scenes Sahar arrives home while Saman is at home working on his script. In both the mentioned scene Sahar is physically and more mentally tired as in the first one, she directly asks her husband for a cigarette. This relationship between married couple breaks the normal cliché and became in contrast with Sara who can just secretly smoke when she is alone. In the other scene when Sahar arrives home, she starts blaming her husband harshly for not having the car fixed. Husband's reaction in this situation is another break in the hierarchal gender relations as he accepts the blames and apologizes her conciliatory.

Sahar is never depicted cooking or washing dishes in the kitchen. She is present in the kitchen twice through the film. The first scene is when Saman and their friends are watching football in the living room. Saman called Sahar to join them but Sahar stands in the kitchen being drowned in her thoughts about Maliheh's problem. Her hands are slowly moving out of the frame and we can't see what she keeps herself busy with. Finally, when she leaves the kitchen and joins the guests, she doesn't bring anything to offer to them. So her presence in the kitchen was just escapism to find a quiet place to think. In the second scene in which Sahar is in the kitchen, she enters the kitchen while Saman is already there, having his own tea and working on his script on the kitchen table. Therefore, unlike Sara, Sahar is not in the kitchen all the time to serve the others.

Also the distinction between masculine and feminine activities is vanished as well. For example, watching football, which is usually attributed to men, change into an activity in which both men and women in a group of friends are participated actively. Another example is car driving. Out of 13 scene of car driving, only 3 times a man drives the car and in the rest, Sahar is the driver. Considering the choice of car which is a SUV one, there is clear connotation to refer to her power and control over her life. She has even sold her car without getting any permission from her husband.

Broadly speaking, in this film Sahar carries on the most important social and narrative role. The first depiction of her at the beginning of the film is when she is watching her own documentary film on BBC Persian at home. She has the opportunity to be known globally; she is not the secluded, victimized, and ignored like women in other films were.

However, through the course of the film, she experiences emerging changes in her relationship with her husband. Unlike the film of *Sara* in which husband/wife relationship is a central issue, in *Final Whistle*, this is considered as subsidiary or a subplot. At the first third part of the film, Sahar and Saman seem to match perfectly as a modern artist couple that is in equal power-relation at home and at work. Later, when Sahar gets engaged in the story of Maliheh's life, she received no help and support from Saman. While Saman considers Maliheh and her mother merely as perfect subjects for a documentary film, Sahar gets involved with their real condition as a human being who cares and shares responsibility. Saman is portrayed as someone for whom logic is logic and he doesn't see another side to the question of crime and punishment as he said, "she [Maliheh's mother] is a murderer and must be punished, that's the law." The background to the crime and the social injustice arising from the patriarchal discourse of the society is not a consideration for him. That's why Sahar starts feeling departed from Saman and tells him "Sometimes I doubt you! Are you still the person I met in the college or you've become like others."

In this film we have two type of representation of women; the first one is Sahar, she is a middle-class, well-educated woman who has been successful to elevate herself in the society and is now enjoying a prestigious career. The second one is a woman from lower class who lives in poverty and misery trying to make ends meet. These women are the victims of the social and economic conditions. While Sahar is depicted as an independent successful woman who has voice and subjectivity in the society, women from the lower class are depicted as voiceless objects, limited silently to the sphere of home, cooking, watching TV and talking on the phone.



Maliheh, is the second female leading character who belongs to the economically lower section of the society. She had been molested by her stepfather and has killed him and now, her mother is expecting execution as she gave up herself instead of her daughter. Maliheh is a girl all desperately alone in the world. She works in a cleaning agency and lives with some other girls, who for one thing or another are without their family.

### **Self-Sacrificing Mother, Again!**

The innocent mother confesses to be the murderer and subsequently sent to prison to await her capital punishment. This event, which is at the center of the all events and the force behind the forwarding of the plot, causes many consequences. The theme of motherhood and sacrifice is to be regarded as a main issue where the mother consciously accepts being hanged to save her daughter's life that was subject to sexual harassment. The film, however fails to question this reaction; assuming that this is the most natural reaction a mother has in such situations. Unlike Gilaneh whose motivations as a mother were clearly elaborated on the film and the narrative constructs her viewpoint without being depended on her children's perspective, Maliheh's mother is silent, and her reaction to the catastrophic event is not questioned through the film. Mothers are initially represented as mothers having sacrifice herself for the husband and family than a woman who can consider her own benefits while making choices. Motherhood is prioritized to womanhood in the definition well established by the prevalent discourse.

For a woman in the society, who has become a mother by fortune, the only defined role is being at the service of family and children. This has gone so far to the point that the mother is to take the punishment for the crime she has not committed. The

role of a mother is stereotypically to sacrifice herself for the children. The film's concern is not why the mother should be punished while she is not the murderer. It seems the act of accepting the penalty for the act the daughter has done is a natural act expected of mothers. The film never addresses this issue and the daughter never confesses.

*Final Whistle* can be read as an attempt by an Iranian filmmaker to produce a cinema of their own: a cinema, which speaks for them. The view of the film on the women issues is not done by a male filmmaker such as that of *Sara*, but it is a film made by a woman about women. The representation of women and also men is from a lens adjusted by a woman. In this process, the question of murder is analyzed from this specific point of view. However, this narrative seems to be incomplete. The story of the murder is narrated from the woman's side, which stands against the logical framework of murder and punishment. The filmmaker also accepts the binary of rationality and emotion. The only difference is that in this hierarchy, it seems that, emotion stands above the rationality for which Sahar's husband is the emblem. Sahar is making all efforts to help save a human's life, while her husband claims that this issue has nothing to do with him.

It can be claimed that the women are given a voice in this film while men are to some extent deprived of it and the reason is the incomplete narration in which the story is retold from the woman's side. The stepfather is dead to defend himself and their relatives are not given the chance to speak. There is only one reference to the issue by the stepfather's uncle looking at the story from another standpoint which is immediately silenced by the Maliheh's jumping out of the car. Considering semiotics and signs, the stepfather as the antagonist is also silenced in all respects. He is only

present in one frame showing his picture on the wall. All is for the spectator to judge him. *Final Whistle* is claiming that women are the ones who can help each other and they are alone in this process. In the final scene, Sahar, Maliheh, and Maliheh's friend are standing all alone in the frame with a far-fetch look at the car going away.

## Chapter 5

### CONCLUSION

Iran's Revolution in 1979 can be regarded as a very complicated event in the history of twentieth century where a socially democratic system is ironically replaced with a totalitarian religious regime with the help of all those who were aspiring for political freedom. This dramatic change affects all layer of the society pushing the boundaries of freedom far back and putting the clock back for many years. However, the dynamic of change does not essentially lose its power, culminating in a more complex situation in terms of social changes. One main issue, in this regard is the question of women and cinema. Cinema and women closely paves the way for a potential by which women are represented in a completely different way from that of Pre-Revolutionary era.

Cinema before revolution is mainly a cinema at the service of patriarchal structure of society in which if there are changes they have to be in line with the consolidation of the power of patriarchal system. The question of masculinity and the issue of being a real man is a recurring motif in *film-e farsi*. These themes are raised and propagated based on the values of a society, which is deeply masculinized and patriarchal. Men are the center of the society and all the actions and reactions revolve around their action. As it has been discussed in chapter 2, the representation of women in this cinema was so limited in melodrama genre of *film-e farsi*. The dichotomized picture of innocent (masum)/ corrupt (fasid) women were occupying Iranian cinema for

decades. The roles attributed to women were also limited to obedient mother, sister, wife and 'women engaged in sex trade'. It can be argued that the question of sexual pleasure and cinema which is discussed by Mulvey is finely applicable to the cinema before the Revolution in which there is paradox of incompatibility between the real life of the majority of people and the kind of life which is mainly screened in Iranian cinema, and it is mainly based on the fantasies than the world outside. Therefore, in Mulvey's term, Iranian women were 'objectified others' in this cinema 'to be looked at'. However, after the revolution, with the exertion of new laws and regulations according to Islamic Sharia, the sexualized representation and manifestation of women have been forbidden as it has been discussed excessively in chapter 1.

Four selected films from Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema have been chosen and analyzed in this thesis for the purpose of examining the changes and transformation in Iranian women's filmic representations after 1979. The analyzed films are *The Mare* from the 1980s, *Sara* from the 1990s, *Gilaneh* from the 2000s, and *Final Whistle* from the 2010s. The main focus of the analysis is two issues of Gaze and Public/Private Dichotomy. The first research question tackles the issue of the Gaze as follows,

RQ1. How do the issues related to the concepts of gaze and voyeurism change over the four decades represented by four Iranian films *The Mare* (1980), *Sara* (1990), *Gillaneh* (2000), and *Final Whistle* (2010)?

With the Revolution and its aftermath, a radical transition occurs which is forced by a new discourse. While in the cinema before revolution, women were sexually objectified, the new Islamic ideology apparently believes that the sexual use of

women in cinema is banned based on sharia. The mere banning of the use of women as sexual objects 'to be looked at' suddenly transformed the manifest way women were represented in films. According to this change, the issue of gaze is not easily applicable to Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. However, as it has been discussed in the analysis there is still possible to talk about 'desexualized gaze' in Iranian cinema. In none of the analyzed films the camera offer voyeuristic gaze on women's body. There is no sexual fragmentation of women's body but almost in all of the discussed films the issue of sexual abuse of women is forwarded. However, not all are successful to challenge and overturn it.

*The mare* successfully describes suffering of women under the patriarchal demands and pictures the objectification of a young girl through juxtaposing her with a mare as two profitable properties to be exchanged in a deal conducted by men. However, at the end, the film itself acts as a complicit to the structural domination of women's body and subjectivity. The film restores all the traditional values it was supposed to revolt again.

When consider the filmic representation chronologically, there is considerable development in regard to the issue of gaze. None of the other three films restores the patriarchal values they have been trying to challenge. Sara although being accused of having affairs with her husband's colleague and being objectified as a beautiful 'doll' at home, manages to break her dungeon and defines her new identity. Gilaneh, although portrayed as a stereotypical self-sacrificing mother represent the first picture of voiced women in the war genre of Iranian cinema. As Derayeh argued the women in 1980s and 1990 war cinema were 'invisible', 'desexualized', and 'submissive'. This invisibility has broken in 2005 by Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's

*Gilaneh* in which female protagonist independently outspeaks (2010, p. 151). Finally, *Final Whistle's* Sahar is the depiction of an empowered woman who is economically and socially independent and visible.

Therefore, it can be concluded that there have been a progressive construction of new identity for women in the Iranian cinema, and cultural and religious traditions under the patriarchal orders have been challenged in different levels and to different extends. Physical and psychological abuses of women have been forwarded and questioned through breaking the idealistic romantic image of 'happy family'.

The second question of the research is concerned with Public/private dichotomy:

RQ2. How does the issue of the public/private dichotomy change for women over the Post-Revolutionary era as represented in the four selected films *The Mare* (1980), *Sara* (1990), *Gillaneh* (2000), and *Final Whistle* (2010)?

In the cinema before the Revolution, the body of a woman was not apparently a personal and private asset. It belonged to the public: the characters of the film as portraying real people and the spectators. The cinema after the Revolution, suddenly denies the body and a woman is not a woman because of the physiological differences exposed to men's physical pleasures. A woman is only a woman in relation to her husband and children.

If before the Revolution there was a paradox of the way people treated womanhood as a private asset and the way they were represented in cinema, after the revolution there is another kind of paradox emerging as an antithesis. The religious regime makes all the efforts and imposes all the reactions to define the ideal woman as someone who is deeply religious and at the service of the husband and family.

Nonetheless, cinema and the artists do not necessarily follow the dictums of authorities. Iranian society had started its transition before the revolution and there is introduced a type of cinema which represent women in a different way. The representation of women does not overnight become a very modern one in regard to women issues. However, films are produced in which women are given a new voice. Women in the new cinema enter the economic structure of the family. In films such as *The Mare*, *Sara*, *Gillaneh*, and *Final Whistle* women have a very determining character in the economic and financial status of the family to the extent that family is sometimes run and saved by them while before the revolution the economy of the family merely depends on the man. In the cinema before the Revolution women always had to depend on the men for survival, while in cinema after the Revolution it is sometimes completely opposite. When financially independent, women claim their autonomy and independence.

In the transition of the women issues in Iranian cinema, one can notice a type of change in the way women aspire to have their own voice and stay resilient against the patriarchal norms of the society. Resistance against the male dominance is not essentially an issue presentation in the cinema before revolution. While with the cinema of the late 1990s onward, an intellectual cinema begins to flourish addressing more serious issues of women. The question of struggle and resistance to claim one's own rights becomes a main issue in films and other cultural events. In *Final Whistle*, for instance, women are the main voice of the film trying to defend themselves against injustice. This is a cinema, which is aimed at creating a new type; which is belonged to women and addresses women's issues.

The third research question is as follows,



RQ3. How does the representation of women in Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema differ from those of Pre-Revolutionary films, and what do these changes imply regarding the issue of censorship and religious limitations exerted on Iranian cinema after the revolution?

There is no doubt that tradition and religion have not been able to eliminate the presence of women. Additionally, it has had an impact on the process of film production revealing the fact that there has been a considerable rise in the number of women crew entering the world of cinema. It has also affected the process of communication with audience changing from a previously male dominant audience to both female and male one after the revolution because cinema was not regarded as place and symbol of corruption and deviance. Cinema, previously being mainly the entertainment for the lower classes of the society changed to be a hobby for all levels of society. As Omid (2009) mentions the presence of actresses in films has also undergone dramatic changes by having women frequently playing different roles (p. 6).

It can even be mentioned that tradition (cultural limitations and religion) not only has not eliminated women's roles but also has introduced new opportunities to writers and directors to create a new language to overcome these restrictions, and this is due to the fact that restriction and censorship sometimes lead to an artistic expression which is more indirect, implicit and hence aesthetic. This new creative language has led to the emergence of a new Iranian cinema, and represented a transition within it. A symbolic language is open to different interpretation and hence difficult for The State to directly point finger at to apply censorship. Some examples of this artistic language have been previously mentioned in the analysis of the films.

Tradition, culture, limitations and restrictions have ironically paved the way for transformation in Post-Revolutionary era especially in the case of women filmic representation as autonomous characters. The representation of women in films also underwent radical changes in terms of the length of women characters' presence on screen, their occupations, their dress code, their social status, their skills, enriched on-screen dialogues and their educational levels. Undoubtedly, the characterization of female characters has been deepened, and varieties of non-stereotypical identities and roles have been attributed to women. For example, in the last analyzed film, Sahar is represented neither as a wife nor a mother and mistress. She is an independent artist with visible fully-constructed identity.

The empowered image of new Iranian women in cinema is a great achievement not only for Iranian cinema but also for Iranian women. However, Filmic representation of women still has a long way to transform from within in order to break the silence of characters and overturn the patriarchal structures.

The cinema after the Revolution, and especially the women cinema, is a dynamic cinema. Despite all the restrictions imposed by a totalitarian regime, the cinema never stopped to transform itself from within. This was accompanied by the world's movement toward a globalized world by which the people and artist could enjoy cultural interactions. Millions of Iranian immigrants, among whom there were hundreds of artists, also helped the transformation. However, the word transformation is a problematic one. Although it denotes changes, it is also associated with tradition. Hence transformation has always been part of the tradition. One cannot claim for certain that all the changes during decades have been totally

positive. Nevertheless, it can be witnessed that the society and the cinema as a part of the society is moving forward despite all the restrictions.

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