



4-1-2015

## Iranian Women, Iranian Cinema: Negotiating with Ideology and Tradition

Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi

*University of Kansas*, najmehmr@ku.edu

### Recommended Citation

Moradiyan Rizi, Najmeh (2015) "Iranian Women, Iranian Cinema: Negotiating with Ideology and Tradition," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 19 : Iss. 1 , Article 35.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol19/iss1/35>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Religion & Film by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact [unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu](mailto:unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu).

---

# Iranian Women, Iranian Cinema: Negotiating with Ideology and Tradition

## **Abstract**

Throughout the ruptures of Iran's history, Iranian women have been at the core of any social and political changes and challenges. In this historical context, Iranian women's body, sexuality, and individuality have been confined within the constitution of religion and tradition. In recent years, however, the new generation of Iranian women is negotiating the notions of femininity, sexuality, and modernity in Iran's society. Along with this negotiation, Iranian cinema, as the visual showcase of Iranian culture and society, has recently represented an unprecedented portrayal of Iranian women on the screen. This portrayal stems from the gender consciousness of Iranian women who are transgressing the boundaries of gender segregation and inequality. This study, therefore, provides an insight into the social and sexual changes of Iranian women's lives in today's Iran and analyzes the representation of these changes in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema, especially the recent decade.

## **Keywords**

Iranian cinema, Femininity, sexuality, Gender, Modernity, Tradition

## **Author Notes**

Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi is a Ph.D. student in the Film and Media Studies program at the University of Kansas, USA. She holds a Master's degree in Film studies from the University at Buffalo, and Master's and Bachelor's degrees in Cinema from the Art University of Tehran, Iran. Her research interests include Feminist and Gender Studies, National Cinema (including Middle Eastern and Iranian cinemas), Media and Cultural Studies, and Film Spectatorship.

Every major social and cultural transformation within Iranian society, especially in regard to women, has inspired Iranian cinema. This relationship, however, is mutual and in some cases it is Iranian cinema that energizes Iranian society through its movement for advancement and freedom. This reciprocal interaction has been considerable in the last decade as it is concomitant with cultural and sexual transformations in Iranian society. In recent years, there have been many changes in the life of Iranian youth, especially among women. This young generation is rewriting and redefining the notions of gender and sexuality in Iran. Indeed, “a ‘youth crisis’— a euphemism for adult panic over sexual and gender experimentation of young Iranians — is currently gripping Iranian society”.<sup>1</sup> If we consider Iranian cinema as the showcase of this crisis, what would be the best way to study this cultural and visual alteration? Is it an ephemeral, social, and artistic approach or a profound transformation in a nation’s self-identification? I consider this sexual revolution<sup>2</sup> as an inevitable corollary of female oppression throughout the ruptures of Iran’s history. This time, however, this revolution is concomitant with a “gender consciousness” making it unique in Iranian history and cinema.

Hamid Naficy categorizes the presence of women in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema in four phases: “Phase 1: Women’s structured absence (early 1980s), Phase 2: Women’s background presence (mid-1980s), Phase 3: Women’s foreground presence (since the late 1980), and Phase 4: Veiling and

modesty as political criticism (since the mid-1990s).”<sup>3</sup> Each of these phases has its own significance and specific cinematic aesthetics with regard to addressing the female body and heterosexual desire. But, my study in this article focuses on the fourth phase, especially the last decade. Categorization of Iranian post-revolutionary cinema based on the presence and representation of women by Naficy delineates a gradual, yet firm evolution of women as they move towards liberation in Iranian society. It also gives a profound insight into the fact that Iranian cinema is closely tied to social and cultural changes within Iranian society. Therefore, in order to understand the new social and cinematic practices of gender and sexuality in Iranian cinema, a general insight into the development of these categories of analysis throughout the contemporary history of Iran is necessary. My aim, then, is to foreground the new practices of gender and sexuality in Iranian society and cinema within a historical context and analyze them in regard to a new gender consciousness among Iranian women.

### **The Articulation of Femininity, Sexuality, and Modernity in Iran’s Cinema and History**

In the history of Iran, the nineteenth century saw the pivotal exposure of Iranian society to the West through social interactions. This encounter brought a process of modernization or *Tajadodgraet*<sup>4</sup> to Iranian life “in terms of politics, education, law, custom, and culture, and including some leeway for women to participate in

the society”.<sup>5</sup> Modernity<sup>6</sup> was instrumental in bringing about dramatic gender and sexual transformations in Iran. In 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran, the sexual binary of male/female was challenged as male homosexual practices were expressed more openly, which led to non-standard gender representation. For example, figures emerged such as the “*amrad*, a young male adolescent who is not a man but not a woman, [and the] *Mukhannas*, adult men who made themselves look like amrads”.<sup>7</sup> These figures subverted the perception of beauty as a feminine feature and love as a heterosexual desire. The frequent social interactions between Iranians and Europeans not only draw Iranian men’s attention to the tangible presence of women and the free heterosocial interaction in the Western world, but they also helped Iranians to realize the Europeans’ condemnation of male-male sexual practice in Iranian society.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Iranians gradually revised their sexual lives in the nineteenth century as part of the process of modernization. Afsaneh Najmabadi in her groundbreaking study of gender and sexuality in the Qajar Epoch (1785-1925), *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*, remarks, “In Iran, the modernist project of compulsory heterosocialization was premised on the expectation that once women became “available” to men, and men treated women fairly, homosexual practices would disappear”.<sup>9</sup> This “female availability” intended to contradict Iranian women’s segregation and veiling in order to promote heterosexual desires through heterosociality and unveiling. Therefore,

visibility of the Iranian female body, due to relaxation of sex-segregated social roles and suspension of the hijab, sets the norm for the movement of a nation toward modernity. This approach is a hallmark of the naturalness of heterosexuality and the banishment of homosexuality in Iranian society persistently showing itself in today's Iran.

The attempt for modernization culminated in the compulsory unveiling of 1936 as a governmental decree authorized by Reza Shah Pahlavi.<sup>10</sup> This edict made the Iranian female body visible and defined it as an epitome of Iranian modernity. This imposed visibility helped women to participate in social life and access public spaces more easily, especially during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.<sup>11</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami writes, "In the 1950s 17 women's groups were active mostly concentrating on education and charity work."<sup>12</sup> The improvements, however, were mostly among women of the middle and upper classes. Most of the lower class women remained traditional<sup>13</sup> in their lifestyles, and later became the main advocates of the Islamic Revolution.

These social, political, and cultural transformations directly affected Iranian cinema. Cinema as a modern art has had a contradictory history in Iran, especially with regard to the representations of femininity and sexuality. Rejected by Islamic radicals at the beginning, Iranian cinema managed to become the most popular art. Hamid Dabashi claims that along with Persian poetry and fiction

defining cultural modernity of Iran since the 1930s, “it is only during the 1960s that cinema rises as the third, equally important, form of cultural creativity”.<sup>14</sup> This creativity however, was shadowed by sexualization of women in FilmFarsi, the popular genre of Iranian cinema in the pre-revolutionary period, which can be considered as the continuing act of Iranian modernity in visual art.<sup>15</sup> There was a binary in Iranian cinema at this time regarding the portrayal of women: sexualized representations or oppressed and passive representations.<sup>16</sup> These cinematic approaches were far from the reality of Iranian women in the society endeavoring to gain their rights and have an effective presence in society. Indeed, “the more men lost control over women’s bodies in real life and the more the law limited them in the courts, the more they gained control over female body in cinema”.<sup>17</sup> Iranian pre-revolutionary cinema failed to highlight the reality of women when it portrayed them on screen. Specifically, the sexualized portrayal of women in Iranian cinema augmented the pressure of “Islamization” on this medium after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, as an anti-Westernized approach by the new state.<sup>18</sup>

The intricate history of sexual and gender transformations became even more complex after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The regime put combat (*Jihad*) with Westernization at the center of its mission, in order to purify the nation from all modern corruptions of the reign of Pahlavi. Compulsory veiling was one of the main steps toward this purification. This time, the veiled female body became the site of opposition to the West and its modernity. The

coercive veiling was also used as “a shield against heterosexual desire”.<sup>19</sup> This shield, however, did not intend to entice homosexual desire or revive the carnal practices of nineteenth-century Iran. Rather, its intent was to control the female body and make heterosexual desire highly masculine. Also, this mandatory veiling accentuates the decline of the Iranian woman’s power over her own body and the rise of male authority over it.<sup>20</sup>

The approach of the Islamic Republic toward women has been as ambivalent as it has been toward modernity. Janet Afary claims that, “The 1979 Islamic Revolution was not a wholesale return to the past; rather, the new state reinvented and expanded certain retrogressive gender and cultural practices and presented them as what Foucault has called a “regime of truth” through modern technologies of power”.<sup>21</sup> During the revolution, Iranian women were politically active and had an important role in the establishment of the Islamic Republic. After the revolution, however, they were socially and publicly marginalized. The regime, aware of the strong presence of women, tried to use modern tools and strategies in order to constrain this presence. Cinema was among these modern implements that were accepted, but this was a cinema subject to strict Islamic purification.<sup>22</sup> Woman’s representation and heterosexual interactions were the major concerns of the Islamic Republic regarding cinematic and visual arts. “The Islamic codes of modesty involving dressing, looking, behaving, acting, and filming”<sup>23</sup> were in effect in 1982, to set a new form of sexual and gender

representation in Iranian cinema. Close-ups of a woman's face or body, point-of-view shots in a male-female colloquial scene, and any cinematic techniques evoking a direct, sexual look of a man and a woman towards each other were prohibited in Iranian cinema. These cinematic interdictions were supposed to protect female sexuality from any illegitimate heterosexual interaction and to decommodify woman. They were also the visual part of a general strategy, authorized by the government, regarding gender segregation and sexual hierarchy. In this regard, Hamid Naficy points out, "Every social sphere and every artistic expression must be gendered and segregated by some sort of veil or barrier inscribing the fundamental separation and inequality of the sexes."<sup>24</sup> The Islamic regime buttressed, and still buttresses, this gender segregation by claiming to protect women's virtue and integrity from Western commodification. If "the cultural construction of an ideal female— young, shapely, [...], fashionable, glamorous"— in the classical Hollywood cinema has been criticized by Western feminists because of its female objectification "and socially predefined visible criteria of beauty and attractiveness,"<sup>25</sup> it is the emphasis on modesty (*Sharm*) and chastity (*Nejabat*) as the ideal features of a woman that has put Iranian cinema in opposition to Western feminist discourse.

The social and visual segregation of sexes after the Islamic Revolution has noticeably affected the cinematic apparatus of Iranian cinema. Actresses (and all women working as crew members) must be veiled, even within domestic

locations, and in interactions with men who are supposedly or in some cases legally their relatives. This overpresence of the veil in Iranian cinema has shaped a new spectatorship that is completely different from the Western implication of it. Iranian women, as part of their Islamic practices, should cover their bodies and hair (except face and hands) from the view of any unrelated men (*Namahram*). But, the woman's body can be exposed to the look of male relatives (*Mahram*) and other women.

Compulsory veiling has divided the function of space in Iranian society into two major sectors, the public and the private. Movie theatres in general and filmic spaces in particular are considered public spaces. The presence of unrelated men as spectators in the movie theatre and as cast and crew members throughout the film production demands that all actresses and female crew members wear the veil. Therefore, in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema all spectators, regardless of their gender, are treated as males who must be shielded from seeing unveiled women. This compulsory gender is imposed upon the female spectators and forms a new aesthetic of perception for them in regard to the female body on the screen.

Female spectatorship in Iranian post-revolutionary cinema is completely different from its Western counterpart. Mary Ann Doane writes, "For the female spectator [in the West] there is a certain overpresence of the image— she is the image. Given the closeness of this relationship, the female spectator's desire can

be described only in terms of a kind of narcissism— the female look demands a becoming.”<sup>26</sup> Whereas the Western female spectator encounters excess in the image of Western women on screen, the Iranian female spectator faces a lack whether on screen or in the movie theatre. The veiled female body on the screen and the lack of engaging cinematic techniques, such as close-ups and point-of-view shots, detach the Iranian female spectator from the female image and banish her into a sexual exile, where her own body is inaccessible.

Although the position of the female spectator in Iranian cinema cannot be changed because of the supremacy of Islamic roles, what has changed in recent years is the representation of women on screen through a combination of a manipulation of the veil and unique cinematic techniques. This new portrayal of women in Iranian cinema, which Hamid Naficy categorizes as the fourth phase (Veiling and modesty as political criticism), is synonymous with the election of Mohammad Khatami, an Islamic reformist, as the president and therefore a relaxation of political and religious policies in Iranian society. It is also a phase in which a new Iranian generation has emerged. This generation, mostly born after the Islamic Revolution or during the Iran-Iraq War, is far from the religious and political ideas that shaped their parents’ ideology during the Islamic Revolution. As Fatemeh Sadeghi claims, “A major difference is that rather than ideological devotions, sexuality is the ideological and practical construct around which youth’s social identity is being shaped.”<sup>27</sup> The young Iranian generation has

dramatically changed the perception of gender and sexuality within Iranian society and has set its own values and lifestyle.

The semi-freedom of self-expression and heterosexual practices during Khatami's presidency made it possible for the young female generation to negotiate sexuality and gender within the social context. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that the majority of Iranian films at this time focused on heterosexual love among the young generation. This cinematic theme along with the social changes regarding sexuality highlighted a dichotomy of social and sexual preferences among the old and new generations and resulted in a "generation gap" (*Shekaf-e Naslha*). This gap has become more tangible these days and is a testament to how much Iranian society has been torn between tradition and modernity, or as Kamran Talattof calls it, has become *modernoid*, "a society that resembles a modern one in some areas but lacks other essential modern structures."<sup>28</sup>

The state on the one hand and the traditional notions on the other, attempt to block heterosocial activities of the youth, especially women, and continue to interfere in their lives. The young generation, however, unremittingly continues its own lifestyle and follows its own beliefs. The defeat of the reformist party and the ruling of the fundamentalists by the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in

2005 could not put an end to the heterosocial practices of Iranian youth. It only served to make these practices publicly invisible.

Influenced by the social and sexual transformations of Iranian society, Iranian cinema provides an artistic venue for the representation of the new practices of gender and sexuality. Iranian women filmmakers, such as Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tahmineh Milani, Poursan Derakhshandeh, and Manizheh Hekmat, are the pioneers of the women's movement in Iranian cinema and have paved the way for young women filmmakers to express their social, political, and sexual concerns. Samira Makhmalbaf, Mania Akbari, and Negar Azarbaijani are among new Iranian women filmmakers who have noticeably dealt with sexuality and gender issues in their films. The renegotiation of sexuality and gender within Iranian society and cinema by women has influenced Iranian male filmmakers as well. These filmmakers, such as Jafar Panah, Asghar Farhadi, and Abbas Kiarostami, have acknowledged the efforts of women in making progress in their social and familial lives and represented them in their films. Jafar Panahi has been an advocate of women's rights beyond his cinematic career. These filmmakers seem to have realized that a society can effectively progress only if there is parity between the sexes within it and women are as socially active as men.

The novel sexual practices in Iranian society and cinema have invoked a new contingent value-system through which the boundaries of gender and

sexuality are blurring. “In a society concerned obsessively with keeping the worlds of men and women apart, with an ideal feminism as silent, immobile and invisible,”<sup>29</sup> the transgression of carnal and gender boundaries by women is certainly a valiant act. Critical perspectives on traditional, arranged marriage, patriarchal family, male prerogative laws, as well as portrayals of female self-expression and independency, heterosexual and homosexual relations, and transgender problems are some of the main cinematic themes of Iranian cinema. The roots of these cinematic themes stem from a substantial social transformation in Iran and a new attitude toward family and individualism. In this regard, the rise of female education plays an important role in the way Iranian women define themselves in familial and social structures.

The academic education of Iranian women has enhanced their self-identification and confidence. It has also altered many aspects of their lives regarding the patriarchal family. These days, many Iranian girls and women pursue their education far from their families in another city (or another country). This fact has increased Iranian women’s control over their social and carnal lives and has helped them to handle the challenges of living in a masculine society. According to the statistics, “the level of primary education enrollment for girls increased from 40 percent in 1965 to 122 percent in 2005. Female enrollment in secondary educational institutions steadily increased from 18 percent in the 1970s, reaching 78 percent by 2005.”<sup>30</sup> Within Iranian universities, “the

proportion of female students has increased from 27 percent in 1979 to 52 percent in 2009.”<sup>31</sup> Although finding jobs after graduation has been one of the main challenges of Iranian women, they have made education a fundamental priority for themselves.

*The Exam* (Emtehan 2002), directed and written by Nasser Refaie, focuses on female students who are taking Iran’s university entrance exam (*Konkoor*) at one of the Tehran high schools, where the exam is going to be taken at 8 a.m. By illustrating the events before the exam, the film meticulously reflects social, educational, and sexual challenges of the young female generation in a patriarchal society. *The Exam* works with the notion of female sexuality through various implications within an academic context. Although all of the female students are veiled, female sexuality is highlighted by external details such as sheer tights and hair combs sold by vendors on the street, near the high school. Also, traditional and modern approaches towards women’s education, struggle for breaking patriarchal gender roles through education, and importance of gender in defining an individual and her/his behavior are addressed by the film. Even a monkey in the film, the pet of a rich family, faces the question of its sex by the students. At the end, the spectator and the camera remain behind the closed doors of the school while the students take the exam inside, as if they are the only ones who can decide their educational, social, and sexual paths.

The rise of female education in Iran has had a direct impact on women's role as wife or mother. "The public census of 2006 shows that 33 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 34 are bachelors."<sup>32</sup> This report asserts that young women no longer define their sexuality within familial structure or through motherhood and marriage. This awareness among married women has also affected the stability of familial relations, especially among young couples. "According to the statistics of the National Organization for Civil Registration of Iran, in the early months of 2012, an average of 381 couples have divorced, which means in Iran, every 16 hours, one couple separates."<sup>33</sup> It is in this situation that Mohammad-Ali Eshfanani, spokesman of the Majlis Legal and Judicial Committee cautions, "The earthquake of divorce is occurring in the society."<sup>34</sup> A crucial reason behind these shocking reports is the "gender consciousness" of Iranian women and their refusal to adopt their traditional passive roles within the family and the society.

*20 Fingers* (Bist angosht 2004), directed and written by Mania Akbari, has an innovative way of dealing with major issues regarding gender, sexuality and family. Besides the theme of the film, which I consider as a bold manifestation of sexuality in a patriarchal society, the cinematic techniques are also daring and impressive. *20 Fingers* consists of 7 episodes played by two characters, Mania (Mania Akbari) and Bijan (Bijan Daneshmand). Each episode addresses an issue of gender and sexuality through a conversation between the couple. Bijan is the

representative of the traditional attitude and Mania supports the modern approach to each subject. The close ups and medium shots of Mania (the actress), the sounds of a sexual affair on a black screen, and the audacious themes of the conversations such as virginity, heterosexual and homosexual affairs, heterosocial relations, dancing with unrelated men, abortion, divorce, etc. explicitly distinguishes *20 Fingers* from the techniques and themes imposed upon Iranian cinema after the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

In the fourth episode of *20 Fingers*, Mania and Bijan discuss a couple's illegitimate heterosexual affair after marriage, its reasons, and subsequent consequences. As social pathologist Majid Abhari states, "60 percent of divorces [in Iran] stem from sexual problems. A couple, however, does not say the main reason because of cultural and social context and instead makes other excuses."<sup>35</sup> In *20 Fingers*, Mania explains that the denunciation of divorce by the society forces many couples to physically live together while they are emotionally and sexually separate. In this regard, she says, "Divorce is not easy ... Suppose she [a woman] divorces, where should she go? ... Not all [Iranian] families accept it. Divorce is the biggest challenge for families and is equal to defeat and misery."

The rise of higher education and single status among Iranian women have dramatically decreased the number of marriages and childbirths, while pre-marital sexual activities have increased. "Iranian news agencies, based on the recent

statistics of the Ministry of Health and Medical Education, have reported that in 2012 more than 33 percent of HIV-positive people had been infected through unprotected sexual relations. While from 1979 to 2011, this number was only 12 percent.”<sup>36</sup> The 21 percent increase among HIV-positive people via sexual relations documents a sexual revolution in Iranian society. It also demonstrates the necessity for increasing sexual awareness in the society, especially among the youth. On the one hand, the state’s control over social and public spaces has relegated the discussions regarding heterosexual and homosexual relations to the private sphere. On the other hand, the traditional notions and social custom consider sexual education within the society to be taboo, preventing comprehensive awareness among the young generation. These pressures make sexual activity secret, augmenting the rate of AIDS and other venereal diseases.

*My Tehran For Sale* (2009), directed and written by Granaz Moussavi, focuses on the life of an Iranian female artist, Marzieh (Marzieh Vafamehr), and her journey as she defines her social and sexual identity within a patriarchal society. The film puts modernity and tradition on opposite sides and delineates how Marzieh, the representative of many young Iranian women, is the victim of this opposition. The lack of family support, the difficulties of artistic activities in Iran, the vulnerable life of a single woman, and the youth’s immigration are some of the crucial issues in the film. *My Tehran for Sale* also considers pre-marital sexual relation and AIDS as the challenges of Marzieh and highlights her

loneliness in dealing with these taboos. The shaved hair of Marzieh and her male-like costumes are visible signs of her transgression of gender boundaries while it is mostly Marzieh's resistance against traditional and governmental gender roles through which she goes beyond gender constraints.

Iranian society, based on the Islamic tradition, asserts gender roles for men and women at a specific age. According to this tradition, a girl reaches at puberty after her ninth birthday. At this time a 9-year-old girl becomes a woman. Therefore, she is required to observe Islamic gender roles such as veiling her hair and body in front of any unrelated men. This compulsory gender system is artistically represented in the first episode of three connected vignettes called *The Day I Became a Woman* (Roozi ke zan shodam 2000), directed by Marzieh Meshkini. Hava wakes up in the morning on her ninth birthday and finds herself a woman. She is no longer allowed to play with her male friend. Confused by this compulsory gender role, she tries to define what being a woman means. The following two episodes illustrate the consequences of this imposed gender norm in women's lives at different stages.

This compulsion surrounding gender confines female sexuality within patriarchal norms. It is only in this way that a normative heterosexuality based on male supremacy and masculine desire can be formed. Indeed, in this conservative culture "persons only become intelligible through becoming gendered in

conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility.”<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the statistics of sexual practices and their cinematic representations in Iran vividly show that gender segregation and the carnal surveillance of the society by the Islamic regime have not been successful. The roles of cultural and political laws in the regulation and formation of sexuality have made sexuality highly politicized. Therefore, the new practices of heterosexuality and homosexuality in Iran are intentionally or unintentionally sites of resistance against the sexual politics of the state.

Regardless of the gender impositions of the regime in Iran, Iranian women have gained a salient autonomy over their bodies. The veiled figure of the Iranian woman is not just a representation of passivity and taciturnity. Within the past decades, Iranian women have repurposed the functions of the veil according to their own demands and used them as forms of bodily expressions. As Doane writes, “The veil incarnates contradictory desires— the desire to bring her closer and the desire to distance her.”<sup>38</sup> The awareness of these contradictory implications of the veil among Iranian women has helped them to be more visible within public spaces. It has also let them transcend gender boundaries. Shaved hair, loose veiling, short-sleeve manteaus (long jacket or shirt), hats, colorful pants, etc. have been used by Iranian women to blur the visibility of gender distinctions. These practices have affected Iranian cinema as well. Although

Iranian cinema is heavily under governmental scrutiny, Iranian filmmakers have moved forward with the social and cultural transformations.

Sexual, social, and technological changes, as well as their cinematic representations, confirm the performativity of gender in today's Iran. The young generation uses new media technologies to challenge the boundaries of gender. The ubiquitous use of social web media, cell phones, light cameras, satellites, internet, and weblogs has broadened the range of sexual and personal expressions of Iranian women. This sexualization of technology is strikingly expanding within the social web media. Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi writes that "The absence of the body in virtual space generally allows more freedom of expression and at the same time security through the possibility of concealing gender, age, and personal positions on political, social, and cultural issues."<sup>39</sup> It is in this situation that the Cyber Police has been established by Iran's government to supervise the youth's virtual activities, especially political and sexual ones.

New media technologies have also provided easier ways for filmmaking, film exhibition, and film distribution that are now more self-governed. Independent and underground filmmakers are the main users of new media technologies. *Tehran Without Permission* (Tehran bedoune mojavez 2009) was entirely recorded with a cell-phone camera. *My Tehran for Sale* (2009) and *No One Knows about Persian Cats* (Kasi az gorbehaye irani khabar nadare 2009)

used video cameras and handheld recorders in order to prevent the governmental restrictions through a covert process of film production.

Besides media and digital technologies, ambiguous cinematic redlines in Iran affect the aesthetics and configuration of films. Some films may be entirely rejected by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, while other films may get permission for production but be blocked from public screening. Still other films might be fully supported by the government in their production, exhibition, and distribution. Whether supported by the government or not, it is the tight connection of Iranian cinema with the society that inspires this medium. In today's Iran, similar to the nineteenth century, the binary of sexes is being challenged. This time, however, the challenge is not through the external forces of Western world or governmental decree. Rather, there is a gender consciousness within Iranian society itself that stems from an essential need of Iranian youth, especially women, in regard to defining themselves in the society and practicing their freedom. Therefore, the notions and practices of gender and sexuality are no longer stigmatized among the Iranian young generation. They might be covered or controlled by the Islamic regime, but Iranian youth steadily continue to explore sexual practices and challenge the fixed gender boundaries. This gender consciousness has been concomitant with its cinematic representation in Iranian cinema and has empowered Iranian women to confront discriminatory gender laws and traditional notions that have haunted Iranian society for centuries.

Indeed, Iranian cinema has been the aesthetic site and the showcase of Iran's sexual revolution. Although Iranian society is still far from gender equality, the visual and cinematic representations of gender and sexuality are significant steps toward transcending the binary of sexes and bringing about gender parity.

---

<sup>1</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 244.

<sup>2</sup> By 'sexual revolution,' I mean unprecedented sexual activities and gender awareness among the Iranian young generation that no longer can be denied or kept secret. Even the Islamic regime of Iran has come to a point that acknowledges this sexual revolution and conducts some researches on this matter. "An 82-page document recently issued by Iran's parliamentary research department is stark in its findings. Not only are young adults sexually active, with 80% of unmarried females having boyfriends, but secondary-school pupils are, too. Illicit unions are not just between girls and boys; 17% of the 142000 students who were surveyed said that they were homosexual." "Sexual Mores in Iran: Throwing off the Covers," *The Economist* 412: 8899 (August 9-15, 2014), 37.

<sup>3</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 4 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 111-135.

<sup>4</sup> Some Iranian scholars argue that *Tajaddodgraei* may not be an exact synonym for Western modernization if we consider the contexts (Western or Iranian) from which these terms have emerged. In this regard, Jamshid Behnam explains that "... Iranian intellectuals' desire for *tajaddod* was derived from Iran's lagging behind and Western civilization's advancement, and *tajaddod* was intended to create the best incorporation of national culture with modern values and beliefs. In other words, one should define modernization in Iran as the desire for change and innovation, shaped by temporal conditions and national identity." Jamshid Behnam, "Iranian Society, Modernity, and Globalization," in *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 9.

<sup>5</sup> Mahnaz Afkhami, "Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran: a feminist perspective," in *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 9.

<sup>6</sup> In nineteenth-century Iran "the conceptualization of a future modernity was part and parcel of the modernization process. This imagining of modernity in nineteenth-century Iran constituted the evaluation and choice of possible pathways of change. In the broadest sense, society must

---

determine the casual prerequisites of change, impediments to change, and the form that such a change should take. This necessarily involved an assessment of the continued viability of existing administrative, legal, and educational institutions. It also necessarily involved an assessment of existing cultural and religious traditions from a similar standpoint ...” Monica M. Ringer, “Negotiating Modernity: Ulama and the Discourse of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” in *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), 40.

<sup>7</sup> Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iran,” in *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, ed. Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 276.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the gender and sexual history of nineteenth-century Iran as well as Europeans’ accounts and travelogues on this subject see part 1 of Najmabadi’s *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*.

<sup>9</sup> Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards*, 57.

<sup>10</sup> This decree mandated Iranian women to unveil their *Hijab* (headscarf or chador) in public spaces and tried to impose upon them European female dress codes of that time such as European hats and skirts.

<sup>11</sup> “In 1976 only two countries in the world had Minister of Women’s Affairs in the government, France and Iran”. VOA. “Portreh.” Voice Of America, 2013. Web. 1 May 2013, <<http://ir.voanews.com/media/video/1652719.html?z=0&zp=1>>.

<sup>12</sup> Afkhami, “Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran,” 11.

<sup>13</sup> By ‘traditional’ here, I mean the unawareness of lower class women in regard to their rights (due to the familial and cultural restrictions imposed upon them) and in some cases their unwillingness to participate in public and social life (due to the notion that the best role for a woman, especially a Muslim woman, is to serve the family as a mother or wife within the domestic space and familial structure).

<sup>14</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 215.

<sup>15</sup> As Hamid Naficy in Volume 2 of *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* explains, actresses and movie stars of FilmFarsi usually appeared “in lightweight roles in which they danced and sang, sometimes, in cafes and cabarets ... A leering, voyeuristic, male-driven camera gaze filmed their performances, which either isolated their legs, breasts, and faces into fragmented fetish objects ...” (Durham, Duke University Press, 2011) 207. This cinematic sexualization of Iranian women in FilmFarsi caused religious authorities and traditional people to oppose this genre. But, the

---

popularity of the FilmFarsi movies among people made this genre one of the productive film categories prior to the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

<sup>16</sup> A research based on gender typology in FilmFarsi by Hamid Naficy shows "... the limited range of women's representation as primarily sexual and that of the men as primarily muscular. Independent women were portrayed as bad and whorelike; if good and pure, they were dependent on the men." Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 4 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 97. The best example in this regard is *Gheisar* (1969), directed by Masoud Kimiai. In this film, the girlfriend of antagonist (Mansour), called Soheila, is an independent woman who works as a singer and dancer in a cabaret while the good woman is the protagonist's (Gheisar) sister whose virtue is violated through rape and Gheisar must restore it.

<sup>17</sup> Kamran Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran: The Life of a Popular Female Artist* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 125.

<sup>18</sup> "Ayatollah Khomeini linked cinema directly to the onset of corruption, licentiousness, prostitution, moral cowardice, and political dependence. According to him, cinema and other manifestations of Westernization (theater, dancing, and mixed-sex swimming) 'rape the youth of our country and stifle in them the spirit of virtue and bravery' " Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 5.

<sup>19</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>20</sup> In today's Iran, the authority of the Islamic state over the Iranian women's bodies explicitly shows itself in the establishment of "Moral Police." The Moral Police appears on streets of Iranian cities and monitors the veiling of Iranian women according to its own Islamic criteria. If a woman does not meet the criteria, she will be fined or condemned to prison.

<sup>21</sup> Janet Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 265.

<sup>22</sup> "Ayatollah Khomeini in his first post-exile speech [in Behesht-e Zahra cemetery of Tehran] announced: 'We are not opposed to cinema, to radio, or to television ... The cinema is a modern invention that ought to be used for the sake of educating the people, but as you know, it was used instead to corrupt our youth. It is the misuse of cinema that we are opposed to, a misuse caused by the treacherous policies of our rulers.'" Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 3 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 7-8.

<sup>23</sup> Hamid Naficy, "Veiled Vision/ Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema," in *In the Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 132.

<sup>24</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 4 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 102.

- 
- <sup>25</sup> Annette Kuhn, *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (London: Verso, 1994), 5-6.
- <sup>26</sup> Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 22.
- <sup>27</sup> Fatemeh Sadeghi, "Negotiating with Modernity: Young Women and Sexuality in Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 28.2 (2008): 261.
- <sup>28</sup> Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, 21.
- <sup>29</sup> Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), 2.
- <sup>30</sup> Roksana Bahramitash and Hadi Salehi Esfahani. "From Postrevolution to the Reform: Gender Politics and Employment," in *Veiled Employment: Islamism and the Political Economy of Women's Employment in Iran*. ed. Roksana Bahramitash and Hadi Salehi Esfahani (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 100.
- <sup>31</sup> Saeed Peivandi, "Education of Women the Factor of Society's Evolution," BBC Persian, March 9, 2011.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/03/110309\\_125\\_peivandi\\_women\\_day\\_iwd2011.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/03/110309_125_peivandi_women_day_iwd2011.shtml)
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>33</sup> BBC Persian, March 10, 2013.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/03/130310\\_nm\\_divorce\\_statistic.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/03/130310_nm_divorce_statistic.shtml)
- <sup>34</sup> BBC Persian, May 5, 2013.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130505\\_nm\\_marriage\\_divorce.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130505_nm_marriage_divorce.shtml)
- <sup>35</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>36</sup> BBC Persian, April 28, 2013.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130428\\_157\\_iran\\_aids\\_newdata\\_sex.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130428_157_iran_aids_newdata_sex.shtml)
- <sup>37</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 22.
- <sup>38</sup> Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 54.
- <sup>39</sup> Masserat Amir-Ebrahimi, "Transgression in Narration: The Lives of Iranian Women in Cyberspace," *Middle East Women's Studies* 4.3 (2008):102.

### References

- Afary, Janet. *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Afkhami, Mahnaz. "Women in Post-Revolutionary Iran: a feminist perspective." In *In The Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, edited by Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl, 5-18. Syracuse: Syracuse University, 1994.
- Amir-Ebrahimi, Masserat. "Transgression in Narration: The Lives of Iranian Women in Cyberspace." *Middle East Women's Studies* 4.3 (2008): 89-115.
- Bahramitash, Roksana, and Hadi Salehi Esfahani. "From Postrevolution to the Reform: Gender Politics and Employment." In *Veiled Employment: Islamism and the Political Economy of Women's Employment in Iran*, edited by Roksana Bahramitash and Hadi Salehi Esfahani, 83-122. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.
- BBC Persian, March 10, 2013.  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/03/130310\\_nm\\_divorce\\_statistic.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/03/130310_nm_divorce_statistic.shtml)
- BBC Persian, May 5, 2013  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130505\\_nm\\_marriage\\_divorce.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/05/130505_nm_marriage_divorce.shtml)
- BBC Persian, April 28, 2013  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130428\\_157\\_iran\\_aids\\_newdata\\_sex.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130428_157_iran_aids_newdata_sex.shtml)
- Behnam, Jamshid. "Iranian Society, Modernity, and Globalization." In *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, edited by Ramin Jahanbegloo, 3-14. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Dabashi, Hamid. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future*. London: Verso, 2001.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- The Economist*. "Sexual Mores in Iran: Throwing off the Covers." 412:8899 (August 9-15, 2014). 37.
- Kuhn, Annette. *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema*. London: Verso, 1994.
- Milani, Farzaneh. *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992.

---

Mottahedeh, Negar. *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.

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

---. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Islamicate Period (1978-1984)*. Volume 3. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

---. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Industrializing Years (1941-1978)*. Volume 2. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

---. "Veiled Vision/ Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema." In *In The Eye of the Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, edited by Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl, 131-150. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994.

Najmabadi, Afsaneh. "Types, Acts, or What? Regulation of Sexuality in Nineteenth-Century Iran." In *Islamicate Sexualities: Translations across Temporal Geographies of Desire*, edited by Kathryn Babayan and Afsaneh Najmabadi, 275-296. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.

---. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Peivandi, Saeed. "Education of Women the Factor of Society's Evolution." BBC Persian, March 9, 2011. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/03/110309\\_125\\_peivandi\\_women\\_day\\_iwd2011.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/03/110309_125_peivandi_women_day_iwd2011.shtml)

Ringer, Monica M. "Negotiating Modernity: Ulama and the Discourse of Modernity in Nineteenth-Century Iran." In *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, edited by Ramin Jahanbegloo, 39-50. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004.

Sadeghi, Fatemeh. "Negotiating with Modernity: Young Women and Sexuality in Iran." *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 28.2 (2008): 260-269.

Talattof, Kamran. *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran: The Life of a Popular Female Artist*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011.

Voice of America (VOA). "Portreh," May 1, 2013. <http://ir.voanews.com/media/video/1652719.html?z=0&zp=1>