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## Gender and Patriarchy in the Films of Muslim Nations: A Filmographic Study of 21st Century Features from Eight Countries

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## Gender and Patriarchy in the Films of Muslim Nations: A Filmographic Study of 21st Century Features from Eight Countries

### Abstract

This is a book review of Patricia R. Owen, *Gender and Patriarchy in the Films of Muslim Nations: A Filmographic Study of 21st Century Features from Eight Countries*.

### Author Notes

Dr. Candace Mixon is a Non-Tenure Track Assistant Professor in Religious Studies at Occidental College, teaching courses in Islamic studies and material culture studies of religion. Her research focuses on contemporary Iranian Shi'ism and representations of Fatima al-Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad.

Patricia R. Owen, *Gender and Patriarchy in the Films of Muslim Nations: A Filmographic Study of 21st Century Features from Eight Countries*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2017.

The book under review is a filmography representing films that address issues of gender and patriarchy in eight Muslim-majority countries, written by Patricia R. Owen, a professor of psychology and in her own admission, a non-specialist in Islam, Muslims, or Gender and Islam. As an outsider to humanities approaches to the study of gender as well as the Middle East, Owen sets out to write a book that she understood as filling a niche that was yet unfulfilled. Unfortunately, the design and underlying assumptions of the book are rooted in a simplistic approach to cultural understanding. The author selected Muslim-majority countries as a place to situate her study of “non-Western” films not because of her expertise in Islam but because, in her estimation, Islam is very misunderstood in the West. The book’s organization and consistent demarcations of “traditional gender stereotypes” and “nontraditional gender attributes” in the description of each film reinforce these categories as the primary means for judging the societies they represent. Through Owen’s interpretation of narrative films as realistic representations of Islamic law and cultural norms, the filmography reinforces stereotypes more than it upends them.

The preface to the book introduces the reader to the author’s journey through an assignment for her students in psychology, to whom she tasked finding “non-Western” full-length feature films to analyze, an endeavor the author found “daunting,” causing her to eventually dismiss the assignment. This premise offers a confusing start to the book, since the author and her students’ pedagogical query is based on a proposition that seems readily solved by consulting journals such as this one or any number of treatments of religion and film as will be addressed later in this essay. Many universities have Library Guides featuring resources for finding films that can be easily accessed from anywhere. Though such guides may be specific to particular university collections,

they offer plentiful resources for those who may just wish to find films to expand their horizons. In other words, it need not be a difficult task to find accessible “non-Western films.”

The scope of the book is well-limited and clearly defined. The author reviews films that are available with English subtitles, that originate in Muslim-majority countries, and whose narratives relate to gender issues. The author’s criteria also limit her films to those made after the year 2000 and that are easily accessible to viewers in the United States, leaving her with 56 films overall. The author and a “university student trained in film analysis” watched each film to take notes on “the presence of patriarchal traditions and religious laws” (4). The author and her assistant reinforce a western/non-western binary of gender analysis: “Our analysis and interpretation of the gender themes and related issues found in these films comes from a Western perspective. Neither of us is Muslim, and we do not claim any expertise on the faith of Islam” (4). The author’s goals in departing from traditionally Eurocentric course materials in psychology and inclusion of only films accessible to audiences in the United States points to her understanding of Western audiences as primarily that of the United States. The fact that Muslim-majority countries would necessarily need to produce films that must be analyzed in terms of Islam (or religious law, as Owen writes) lends me pause, not only on account of the religious diversity of Muslim-majority countries, but also that filmmakers from Muslim-majority countries may not always create art that is specifically concerned with religious action or interpretation.

Yet, the framing of the work is largely based on the importance of Islamic law for understanding and analyzing the films under consideration. For a definition of *sharia*, Owen writes, “Islam is a law-based religion, and Islamic law is concerned with all areas of human life...Sharia law is Islam’s legal system...” (5) This is a grand oversimplification, and expresses a misunderstanding of how *sharia* operates within Muslim communities. This legalistic perspective

omits the flexibility built into major Islamic legal schools while also attributing actions or choices made in the films under review to a monolithic Islamic law rather than also contingent on country by country censorship or cultural norms. There is no one book of *sharia* and no simple formula of law to be abided by for Muslims; furthermore, the author's brief discussion of law does not mention even the most basic five gradations of legality that make Islamic law far from black and white. In Owen's analysis of 56 films, her distinctions usually reflect a binary interpretation of the films as either reinforcing gender norms or pushing back against gender norms. This oversimplification may help a general audience process complex legal, moral, and nationalistic systems, but they are not of great utility for scholars in fields such as gender studies, Islamic studies, or religious studies.

On the organization of the filmography, eight chapters profile the films of a single country (Afghanistan, Algeria, Bangladesh, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, and Turkey) that includes demographics, religion, legal codes, and a separate chapter that discusses the ratification status of CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). These are useful statistics, but belie the complexity of making films in certain countries, such as in Iran. As noted in Negar Mottahedeh's *Displaced Allegories*, Iranian filmmakers, because of and in spite of complex censorship laws, became masters of creativity in order to make films that could pass the tests of censorship while often critiquing the government issuing such stringent requirements. To offer the statistics at the beginning of each country section would be more useful for secondary education, but for undergraduates or above, we must question the reliance on knowing facts about a country to describe what or why filmmakers make the creative choices they do. How do statistics about women's education levels in a particular country, for example, help us process a filmmaker's

interpretive decisions (or their responses to institutional and social demands) in depicting a particular father-daughter relationship?

The book is useful for bringing to light both obscure films of limited release or acclaim, and others that have received wide reception and press, such as *A Separation* (2011) by director Asghar Farhadi (Iran). The author's assessment of *A Separation* concludes that the film demonstrates traditional roles of a pious woman in the film while also reinforcing binaries such as "an Iranian society that tolerates both traditionalist and moderate Islamic voices" (104). While the chapter on Iran is the longest in the book, it is not until the later pages that the author mentions a key concern; "a discussion of Iranian cinema must start with a discussion of censorship" (147). The intricacies of film production and censorship in each of the countries profiled should warrant discussion at the beginning of each country's profile, considering these rules do have a major role in how gender, performance, and a whole host of issues are presented in film. In another section within the Iran chapter, a section titled "Domestic Violence," relevant to the movie under discussion, *Under the Skin of the City*, includes statistics on accounts of domestic violence in some other Muslim-majority countries surveyed in the book. The author has placed this information, relevant to many countries discussed and the author's broader claims concerning patriarchy in Muslim-majority countries, nested within a chapter concerning Iran, which reinforces the connection with domestic violence as a specifically Iranian issue.

While Owen cites some foundational works in Islamic Studies, such as from Fatima Mernissi, Kecia Ali, and Wael Hallaq, the author frequently relies on materials that are not sufficiently durable for scholarship. For example, resources in the notes come from places like the CIA World Factbook and a site called Islamfromtheinside.com, and other references are quite dated. Some slippages of language, such as describing a famed Islamic law professor as a

“religious scholar” instead of scholar of religion, demonstrates the unfamiliarity with the field (188). Overall, a reliance on statistical models concerning data such as literacy rates, instances of domestic violence abuse, or female genital mutilation overdetermines the cause for patriarchal systems in real Muslim-majority societies while ignoring issues of aesthetics, creativity, imagination, or censorship in the production of narrative films.

Owen’s analysis often follows a pattern of conceiving of “Islamic law” as a kind of rulebook, which sets the criteria to judge her films. She categorizes evidence from films in groupings such as “Traditional Gender Stereotypes” or “Nontraditional Gender Attributes.” This is usually followed by a particular situation related to cultural norms or patriarchal traditions, such as in the discussion of the Turkish film *Mustang* (2015) in a section titled “Virginity Tests and the Hymen” (207). This section begins without citing any sources: “In many countries, both Muslim-majority and non-Muslim, women and girls have been subjected to virginity tests to verify their sexual purity,” then continues to note all possible objections to the “hymen test” and ways people can bypass the test through other means of drawing blood (208). In analyzing the Turkish film *Watchtower* (2012), the author assumes rigid boundaries of particular gender responsibilities in Muslim patriarchal societies that she uses to examine the film, noting, “roles prescribed to mothers and fathers in patriarchal societies are precise.” The essentialized presumption of the author becomes strikingly clear when her thesis was disproven by the film. She concludes that, “The gendered stereotypes of feminine helplessness and masculine callousness are not found in *Watchtower*.” Yes, gender stereotypes exist. Yet, for a book purporting to introduce people to the “unknown” Middle East in order to educate them on diverse cultures, the examination is based too much in its own reliance on “gender stereotypes” to make accurate judgments.

In her concluding chapter, Owen continues to conflate diverse Muslim populations and regions, essentialize individual experiences to a broader community, and interpret narrative film through the assumption of documentary realism. For example, the author conflates the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region with all countries represented in the book, including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, which are not included in the MENA region. Using Zahia Smail Salhi's research on the level of gender-based violence experienced by women in the MENA region to stand-in for the categorization of Muslim-majority countries, she asks if "Salhi's summation of gendered violence in MENA countries [is] reflected in the films analyzed in this filmography? An analysis of the gender themes found in contemporary films supports her conclusions" (215). The acknowledgment section of the book also represents a singular view of the many societies represented; "we learned an enormous amount of information about a fascinating part of the world" (v). The countries represented in the book range geographically from Algeria to Bangladesh and cannot be considered as one "part of the world." These statements reflect the author's interpretation of the 56 narrative films reviewed through assumptions of cinematic verism by demonstrating that the films validate specialized sociological research on gender-based violence in a particular region, or accurately convey presented dictums of Islamic law.

The many interpretive difficulties in the book seem to stem from the author's insufficient training and background (whether linguistic, cultural, or religious) required for the immense task the book set out for itself. However, Owen could have taken a stronger lead from the robust scholarship about these cinematic domains. For example, Iranian cinema, which received the most coverage from Owen, has been placed within the social constraints and imaginative possibilities existing in the Iranian political and religious environment by several scholars whose work is



relevant for the study of religion and film. Namely, it is with abundant creativity that cultural production in the Iranian Republic of Iran has developed cinematically and materially. In the transformation of the film industry after the Iranian Revolution, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini declared, “We are not against cinema; we are against prostitution.”<sup>1</sup> Censors obsessed over the regulation and control of the female body in film, leading to presentations of women wearing hijab or chador in home scenes where these coverings are not required, or even using men to play women to avoid women on screen unless the portrayal was supposed to relate to pregnancy. Since 1982, the Ministry of Islamic Guidance issued permits for screening of films. Additionally, laws require a ministry representative to be present during the shooting of the film and scripts, casts, and crews should all be pre-approved. Negar Mottahedeh has argued that “innovations in film language have emerged around the post-Revolutionary film industry’s figure of the veiled woman fixing her modest body as the index of Iranian cinema’s address.”<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, “in the attempt to cleanse its technologies,” the Iranian post-revolutionary film industry would also become radical in a different way, as a cinema that embodied “1970s feminist gaze theory.”<sup>3</sup> The censorship and obsession over what could be done with and around the female body yielded new results in post-revolutionary film in Iran.

Nacim Pak-Shiraz’s *Shi’i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* offers an overview of the treatment of clergy in Iranian cinema, highlighting a change from the absence of clergy members featured in Iranian films in the immediate decades after the revolution to a heightened role after about the year 2000. Prior to 2000, she writes, “There were only deferential references to the clergy in cinema. Other than leading ritual acts such as prayers, marriages, deaths and sermons, these men of God were removed from the quotidian concerns of ordinary people, and they remained largely peripheral to the main characters of the film.”<sup>4</sup> But after 2000, the

production of films increased that brought the clergy front and center as protagonists. Pak-Shiraz argues that such films have as much authority and stake in intellectual debates over the role of clergy in Iran as do written debates.<sup>5</sup> As such, she notes, “these filmic narratives provide a space for the articulation of debates on the role of the clergy within society, including some of the more contentious issues that have otherwise been difficult to discuss publicly in Iran.[...] These filmmakers have creatively employed the medium of film to actively engage in some of these debates;” therefore, debates over the role of clergy and power in Iran are not only described and narrated in this type of film but also situated within a larger discourse.<sup>6</sup>

Through a reading and understanding of Persian language and poetry, Fatemeh Keshavarz’s *Jasmine and Stars: Reading More than Lolita in Iran*, offers an easily digestible and beautifully written perspective on the integral role of language, poetry, and the visual image as part of creative expression even in today’s Iran. And Negar Mottahedeh argues that, “Iranian film narratives became secondary to the religious and political task of nation building approached through the senses. Building on Shiite prohibitions on the desiring look, a new narrative cinema emerged as a displaced allegory of the determining conditions of the post-Revolutionary film industry.”<sup>7</sup> Keshavarz, Pak-Shiraz, and Mottahedeh, among others, situate the arts of Iran within their broad cultural and historical contexts, offering thoroughly complex histories, defying easy stereotypes of western versus non-Western, or monolithic Muslim societies. These are just some of the works that can offer a context for the films of Muslim-majority nations.

In his acceptance speech of the 2020 Golden Globe award for best foreign film, Bong Joon Ho said (in his native Korean, reproduced here from subtitles), “Once you overcome barriers of subtitles, just that one-inch barrier, you will be introduced to so many more interesting films.” It is true that many audiences, from publics to undergraduates or fellow scholars should overcome

the barriers of subtitles to engage with narrative film as a means to learn about and appreciate other cultures. However, they should be understood through their own internal logic generated within the local social, political, and religious contexts and not as documentary realism. Scholars with the appropriate training in cultural and linguistic skills would be the most useful resources for obtaining the background to process such films. In *Gender and Patriarchy in the Films of Muslim Nations*, the filmography is helpful for accessing some titles of films across a variety of Muslim-majority nations, but more targeted studies exist that offer the required nuance for the details of daily life and the ways political or historical movements affect and produce societal norms and how they can be presented through film. *Gender and Patriarchy in the Films of Muslim Nations* is an achievement for its resourcefulness in providing a handbook of films from eight Muslim-majority nations, but it is not recommended for its analysis of gender or patriarchy, for which we would be advised to consult other resources.

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<sup>1</sup> Jamsheed Akrami, "Cinema iv. Film Censorship," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, V/6, pp. 585-586; available online at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/cinema-iv> (accessed on 23 October 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *International Library of Cultural Studies: Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film* (London, US: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 68, ProQuest ebrary.

<sup>5</sup> Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 70.

<sup>6</sup> Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 70.

<sup>7</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 3.