



March 2021

## Temporary Marriage in Iran: Gender and Body Politics in Modern Iranian Film and Literature

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### Recommended Citation

Izharuddin, Alicia (2021) "Temporary Marriage in Iran: Gender and Body Politics in Modern Iranian Film and Literature," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 66.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss1/66>

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# Temporary Marriage in Iran: Gender and Body Politics in Modern Iranian Film and Literature

## Abstract

This is a book review of Claudia Yaghoobi, *Temporary Marriage in Iran: Gender and Body Politics in Modern Iranian Film and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

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## Author Notes

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Yaghoobi, Claudia, *Temporary Marriage in Iran: Gender and Body Politics in Modern Iranian Film and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

The title of this book appears to be a misnomer. It isn't really *about* temporary marriage or *sigheh*, a practice alternative to 'permanent' marriage or *nikah*. Rather, its focus falls squarely on the social mythology of female sexuality in narratives where temporary marriage plays an incidental part. Comprised of eight chapters, Claudia Yaghoobi's book is divided into three parts: a general overview of temporary marriage as a practice in Iran, a second part that presents an analysis of three novels and two short stories from the Pahlavi era (1924-1979) and a third part on two cinematic works produced after the Islamic Revolution (1979-). *Temporary Marriage in Iran* spans nearly a hundred years of cultural upheaval that saw significant transformations for women in the public sphere dominated by patriarchal repression regardless of the direction the political pendulum swung. As feminist scholars have long argued, evidence of direct patriarchal control over women's sexuality and reproductive capacities takes place within the institution of marriage. But conditions for temporary marriage pose unique questions to longstanding feminist arguments about marriage as a site of control. Does its temporary status reveal more opportunities for negotiation, flexibility, and escape for women? As a religiously-sanctioned practice, does it suggest an enlightened attitude towards sexuality?

*Sigheh* is idiosyncratic to Iran, a legal arrangement defined by temporal brevity during which freer interactions between women and men are permitted, including for the purpose of sexual relations. Women can enter temporary marriage of their own volition by providing details to relevant authorities about her spouse-to-be, dowry, and length of marriage in a verbal contract. Once contracted, the couple do not need legal proceedings to end the marriage and neither are bonded by marital responsibilities. Under Iranian civil law, the temporary husband is not obligated to provide financial support and his spouse has no rights to inheritance or other rights a wife in a 'permanent' marriage can claim. Although these delimiting stipulations may

arouse concerns about disadvantage for women, there are ‘loopholes’ that offer flexibility. The practice is religiously sanctioned as a workaround to maintain the appearance of public chastity when conditions for ‘permanent’ marriage are harder to secure. Moreover, as the author notes, unlike *nikah*, *sigheh* offers some ‘sexual freedom’ to women insofar as she has the same privilege as a man to initiate and terminate the marriage.<sup>1</sup>

Yaghoobi identifies *sigheh* as a state-approved instrument for managing real and imagined sexual frustrations. In practice, it legalizes and regulates intimacy and sexual relations for men seeking instant gratification and for women with diminished marital prospects. Lasting from a few days to months or as brief as a few hours, *sigheh* is much more than a temporary arrangement of suspended segregation and restrictions. Also known in Arabic as *nikah mut’ah*, *sigheh* is thought to be a practice that predated Islam, an arrangement that serves multiple purposes across historical and social contexts. As an example, *sigheh mahramiyyat* (translated as ‘permissible familiarity’) allows unrelated travel companions of different sexes to associate more freely without having to strictly observe gender segregation and veiling. *Sigheh* provides an opportunity for courting couples to meet without the presence of a chaperone. In her own definition, *sigheh* is a “form of concubinage, and requires a set of negotiations about the length, monetary exchange, and the nature of sexual relationships.”<sup>2</sup> But despite the varieties of ways *sigheh* – which refers to ‘contract’ – are put to use, the author focuses more narrowly on *sigheh* as a form of sex work to the point of conflating the two throughout the book even in instances where no sex work appears to be involved.

In *Temporary Marriage in Iran*, Yaghoobi establishes the means through which representations of temporary marriage in Iranian literature and cinema build a bleak social commentary on the extreme power imbalances in Iranian society. From start to finish, the reader is introduced to fiction and films, well-known mostly to audiences familiar with Iranian culture, but each more depressing than the next. In them, women in transient marital

relationships bear the most abject iterations of injustice, abuse and violence. The tenuous bonds between temporary husband and wife can offer more opportunities for women to contract more casual relations with men. But fictional representations highlight a practice situated precariously between what is thought to be morally ambiguous and a state-sanctioned social necessity. And as the examples in Yaghoobi's book show, women bear the brunt of that precarity.

For viewers of Iranian films familiar with their sublime artistry and at times elliptic messaging, the cinematic examples in *Temporary Marriage in Iran* can be jarring in their abrasiveness. In the chapter on *Zendegi-ye Khosusi* (2011, *Private Life*) directed by Mohammad Hossein Farahbakhsh, Yaghoobi describes a horrifying scene that would shock audiences anywhere both inside and outside of Iran. It is from a film that follows the transformation of an extremist zealot whose moral vigilantism involves attacking women who he deems improperly veiled. In an attack on one unfortunate woman, he pushes a tacking pin onto her forehead as punishment. The same zealot later experiences an ideological change of heart and self-identifies as a reformist. In his new political identity, he meets a woman who embodies the liberal politics of choice and pleasure. She is a writer of erotica and sees in him a potential lover who could offer companionship and children. As with all men who contract *sigheh* relationships discussed in this book, he is only interested in transient, no-strings-attached sex and summarily leaves the woman after she announces her pregnancy. To be rid of her, he violently murders her with impunity and carries on with life, untouched by remorse.

The transformations of meanings attached to marital institutions occur in situations of social change in which the dynamism and tenacity of gender constructs are revealed. But these issues are left largely unaddressed in Yaghoobi's book. At approximately three hundred pages, the reader is left with quite reductionist arguments about temporary marriage in Iran: that it is relentlessly misogynistic and has no redeeming qualities for women at all. Yaghoobi writes

about how men ‘abuse’ *sigheh* for their own personal benefit, but it isn’t clear how *sigheh* can be done ‘well’ and therefore be mutually beneficial for both parties involved. The overdetermined analysis in *Temporary Marriage in Iran* raises another question about whether or not fiction and cinema should be read as text or as a mirror reflection of reality itself. The author makes the Sontagian mistake of collapsing the distinctions of form and genre, precluding any possibility of *sigheh* to be unpacked and made unfamiliar by the particular aesthetic differences between fiction writing and cinema. In fact, the author takes a step further and overlays representations of temporary marriage with repetitive and universalising interpretations in all the novels, short stories, and films across the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries: that *sigheh* is a patriarchal tool used to dominate women, that *sigheh* is a shorthand for legal sex work in Iran, that *sigheh* causes unwanted pregnancies, and that it causes venereal disease.

A cursory glance on adjacent scholarship provides better illumination. In her commentary on Iranian cinema, Ziba Mir-Hosseini writes that female protagonists are caught between a poetics of ambivalence and the political.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, ancient and deeply ingrained cultural ambivalences about women’s bodies in Iranian culture find expression in poetic forms. But on the other hand, women’s bodies are ‘battlegrounds’ upon which contemporary political ideologies are fought. These tensions are played out in the stark terms in which clothing and gender segregation practices in the country are regulated. In cinema, these ambivalences often become distilled into typologies rather than being documentation of real life.

The author’s heavy-handed interpretation of what *sigheh* means in these fictional stories becomes much less plausible when she argues that they are depicted in ‘realistic’ ways. Yaghoobi’s insistence that fictional portrayals of temporary marriage in early 20th century Iran are ‘realistic’ (mentioned at least seven times) indicates a misunderstanding of what fiction does. But perhaps most curious of all in Yaghoobi’s book, *sigheh* appears to be a minor element

in the chapters. In nearly all chapters, female characters in *sigheh* relationships play incidental roles who meet a deadly end. This is perhaps because the kind of woman who dies after being in a *sigheh* arrangement with a man, who walks away morally unscathed, is more a perennial moral scapegoat than a character worthy of development or complexity. During the Pahlavi era, she is a mistreated sex worker abandoned by society. In the post-Revolutionary era of the 2000s, she is an independent, western educated woman who is comfortable with her sexuality.

Yaghoobi illustrates the latter with Behrouz Afkhami's 2000 film *Showkaran* (*Hemlock*). The film has an interesting backstory, albeit unmentioned in her book, that can explain its treatment of female characters. It is produced by Howzeh Honari, which is linked with religious organisations established in the early years of the revolution to make films more Islamic. In his association with Howzeh Honari, the filmmaker Afkhami operates under the aegis of Islamic visual ethics combined with an unlikely admiration for the Hollywood erotic thriller, *Fatal Attraction*.<sup>4</sup> There are echoes of *Fatal Attraction* in *Showkaran* including its misogynistic ending: the dramatic death of a woman who vows but ultimately fails to destroy the life of the married lover who had spurned her. But in *Showkaran*, a *sigheh* marriage is contracted in secret and the 'other woman' causes her own death in a car crash, letting her lover off the hook. Sima, the female protagonist who dies, bears the clichés of the cigarette-smoking socially liberal woman who is relaxed about religious practice in contrast to her more observant married lover, Mahmoud. Mahmoud is a married philanderer who shows no contrition when Sima dies. No sympathy is spared for Sima even in her mission to register her child and Mahmoud as the father so that the child will not be stigmatized. Clichés notwithstanding, they mobilise Afkhami's message on the 'social problems' of moral hypocrisy and consequences of temporary marriage that plague Iranian society.

In *Zendegi-ye Khosusi* and *Showkaran* one finds the depressing social mythology of the 'modern' woman who is punished for pursuing personal and reproductive fulfilment. They

make the mistake of meeting men who honor the terms of a temporary marriage to the letter, which release the men from the emotional and reproductive consequences of the arrangement. The films also twist the Madonna-whore complex into a more misogynistic iteration; a woman who is deemed a whore cannot be a good mother, as the scarlet letter of *sigheh* denies her the redemption of motherhood. But these cinematic examples do not support the author's association of temporary marriage with sex work, unwanted pregnancies, and sexually transmitted infections.

*Temporary Marriage in Iran* suffers from structural issues towards its closing pages. The epilogue is a digressive detour into literature written by Iranian women, but not about temporary marriage, presumably as a remedial counterbalance to male authorship of misogynistic narratives. This makes the discussion at the end of the book seem out of place, not least because it is perfunctory, but really because it is a case of counterbalancing apples with oranges. For one thing, the new materials introduced in the epilogue are not engaged with the same theoretical lens applied to the rest of the monograph.

Yaghoobi argues that *sigheh* relationships reveal much about the mechanics of power throughout Iranian history but does not expound on how they flow between subjects in the stories and films. Without an explanation of what power is, the reader encounters some unsettling descriptions of power that sound like anything but. To illustrate, Yaghoobi describes the obsessive fixation with the body of the female sex worker in a novel that haunts the male mind as a certain kind of 'power' she possesses. Much more unsettlingly, she continues to assert this form of power even after the woman dies a terrible death, so her spectral memory becomes impossible for men to escape. For the author this is 'power,' the posthumous ability to invoke memory and thoughts, but not necessarily in the respectful terms the dead are customarily granted.

*Temporary Marriage in Iran* would be a serviceable introduction to the portrayal of the practice in literature and cinema for its historical scope and overarching, if frequently reductive, analysis. It brings wider attention to more obscure film and fiction titles that would be of interest to audiences less familiar with Iranian literature and popular culture. But it has significant weaknesses – in argument and depth – to stand on its own as a main reference on the subject. The book is a missed opportunity to address a practice that is much misunderstood—especially in Sunni Muslim societies outside Iran—or to examine the kinds of accommodations that made around sexual relations in Islam.

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<sup>1</sup> Claudia Yaghoobi. 2020. Pg. 48.

<sup>2</sup> Yaghoobi, 2020, pg. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Ziba Mir-Hosseini. ‘Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema.’ *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Volume 27, Number 3, 2007, pg. 673.

<sup>4</sup>Ziba Mir-Hosseini. 2007, pg. 677.