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A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night

Afsar Mohammad

University of Pennsylvania, mamoha@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

This is a book review of Farshid Kazemi, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021).

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Author Notes

Afsar Mohammad teaches at the University of Pennsylvania. He previously published *The Festival of Pirs: Popular Islam and Shared Devotion in South India* with the Oxford University Press (2013). His book *Remaking History: The Police Action of 1948 and Literary Cultures of Hyderabad* is forthcoming with Cambridge University Press.

Kazemi, Farshid, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021).

Farshid Kazemi's first full-length study of the movie, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, published in the "Devil's Advocates" series from Liverpool University Press, introduces us to various innovative approaches to understanding a new vampire fairy-tale film. The success of this film lies in its conversations with a broad range of topics related to Shi'i Islam, everyday Muslim life, religious symbolism, narrative devices, and questions related to veil, love, and eros as interpreted in the local version of Islam in Iran and in its diaspora. Made by Ana Lily Amirpour, *A Girl* is described as the "first Iranian vampire western." It is also said to be "shot in dazzling anamorphic black and white cinematography and accompanied with an intoxicating and mesmeric soundtrack." Dubbed an experimental horror movie, *A Girl Walks Home* created a sensation for its multi-layered dimensions related to film studies and the histories of diasporic Iranian communities in the US. The film showcases a fascinating blend of Shi'i symbolism and visual excellence by adapting very modern technologies. Considering the importance of this movie at various levels, it is not a simple task to draw clear conclusions, but this book is a valuable study of it for scholars of religion and film.

Kazemi's approach in his close reading of this exceptional movie brings forth many aspects including psychoanalysis, German idealism, and most importantly, a gendered narrative of an Iranian Muslim life. In addition, when watching this movie one comes across various aspects of contemporary Muslim discourses that the current scholarship in Islamic studies and anthropology have been exploring for the last three decades. How one film could accomplish such a diverse aspect of intersections between religious identities, and what makes this film a powerful vehicle of these dimensions, remains a puzzling exploration. Taking note of these connected histories

along with the interactions between religious symbolism and visual narrative devices, Kazemi's observations in this study offer fresh insights into a new set of ideas such as the weird/eerie, real/repressed minds, eros/subjectivity, and the themes of the vampire's accent and its reception. In essence, Kazemi provides a model to understand the conceptual framework of the intriguing worlds of a vampire and their connection with an immediate reality of the Muslim diaspora in the US.

The study begins by pointing out the shift in the New Iranian cinema of the 1990s and 2000s. Specific observations about the gendered nature of such a visual narrative help us to see how the arrival of a female vampire functions more as a radical departure from the previous filmic approaches. In the process, the Iranian movie transgresses the boundaries of a conventional theme and visualization of Muslim life. Nevertheless, *A Girl Walks Home* also demonstrates another shift by relocating the Iranian movie, as explained by Kazemi, within the "wider orbit of transnational Iranian cinema and within the two modalities of the weird and the eerie." As demonstrated in this study, these two modes do not collapse in a singular pattern, however, they continue to project a redefined spirit of strangeness and horror.

Along with theorizing this dramatic moment, Kazemi finds many meeting points between Islamic and Islamicate elements. While introducing a new set of theoretical approaches, each chapter delves deeper into a repertoire of innovative devices as utilized in the making of the movie. Setting up the historical context and theoretical background, Kazemi continues on this journey towards the central concepts of the movie. Following this creative model, Chapter 1 explores a few historical aspects of the Iranian horror or vampire movies. More than the history, this chapter delves into the problematics of theorizing such a moment "beyond the conventions of horror genre." Nevertheless, the very success of this chapter hinges on situating this specific aspect in the

broader transnational networks of the Iranian cinema, what Kazemi calls a “new transnational Iranian filmic movement.” As argued in this work, that movement arrived with the movie *A Girl Walks Home*. Beginning with the tag line used for this movie, “the first Iranian vampire-western film,” this study shows us how the entire visualization travels beyond the conventional limits of a horror movie.

Chapter 2 deals with another intriguing aspect of psychoanalysis by using the Freud-Lacanian’s prism which offers a captivating methodology to film studies. Kazemi’s analysis in the chapter is extremely compelling as we find several narrative/analytical devices that demonstrate the lower depths of interiority of female desire and their outward manifestations of graffiti, signs, posters, tattoos, and several other materials. A female vampire donning a black veil also plays into this riveting dimension, and the correlation between the veil and female desire is well established in the analysis. Of particular interest in this chapter are the connections between filmic discourse and the Shi’i conception of female subjectivity and desire, and Kazemi also draws conclusions from the contemporary political setting.

Chapter 3 begins with a key question: what does German idealism have to do with a vampire film? Responding to this, Kazemi opens up a broader theoretical discussion about the film, but with an emphasis on a larger picture of “the logic of a romantic love.” Exploring phantasmagorical origins, this chapter deals with subjectivity, eros, the events of love, and the reality that defines the film. As argued by the author, discussion about the movie comes full circle with these key aspects which provide theoretical connections useful for understanding the concept of a female vampire. Such ideas, articulated through the picturization of various encounters between the female vampire and Arash in this movie, show a richly detailed imagery and magical

moments. It is also quite fascinating to understand how the cinematic medium transforms into a meeting point for all of these diverse and distinctive worlds.

Towards the Conclusion, citing aptly from Walter Benjamin's essay on Romanticism from 1913, Kazemi connects different threads that make this movie extremely compelling. By invoking what Walter Benjamin calls "the nocturnal side of the nature," the analysis that runs deep into the secrets of the night offers a new approach to the trajectory of vampire, night, and cinema. Several correlations made between various figures and the concepts of classical Persian mystical poetry, too, help us to visualize the multi-dimensional lifeworld of this movie.

Written in a simple yet beautiful language, this slim book begins with the analysis of the opening scene of the movie. Starting with studying the film as "an independent aesthetic entity unto itself," Kazemi deftly connects many aspects involving both theoretical and filmic entertainment. Throughout the analysis, he takes care of a constant dialogue with the audience that emerges as a thoughtful debate beginning with the preface to the conclusion. Although the study engages with highly complicated theoretical frameworks, the narrative flow of the book remains quite pleasant. In many ways, this study also provides a model for a close reading of a movie and works well for teaching courses on Islam and gender.