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Cinema and Women's Representation: Visibility and the Making of Modern Iranian Woman

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Curator's Note

Introduction

One of the defining features of modernity in Iran is the visibility of women. Cinema has long served as the primary space where Iranian society, cineastes and, last but not least, the Iranian state have engaged in a *trialogue* shaping Iranian modernity via the representation of the Iranian woman. From popular and commercial FilmFarsi to intellectual *auteur* movies, Iranian cinema has not only created female imagery but has also acted as a laboratory where these images enter the public gaze, and their viability is tested. This recursive relation between society, state and cinema means that filmmakers have always had to navigate both audience *expectations* and state-imposed *boundaries*, considering what an “Iranian” modern woman should look like. In other words, as cineastes shape the image of the modern woman on the silver screen, which in turn influences the making of the modern woman off the screen, the public's reception and the state's policies influence the female representation in cinema. Over the past century of Iranian filmmaking, four distinct phases reflect the evolving image of the modern Iranian woman through ongoing negotiation and transformation.

Part I. Claiming Visibility in the Public Gaze

Phase 1: The Good Woman

Dokhtar e Lor (*The Lor Girl*) was the first Persian-language “talkie” feature film produced and made by Iranians for Iranians, and established a template for the much-loved genre ‘Film Farsi’ – Bollywoodesque musical love-stories (Sadr, 2006; Naficy, 2012). What appears today as a typical ‘Eastern’ musical of the 1930s was, at its time, a bold political statement supporting the radical changes introduced by Reza Shah Pahlavi. These changes were rooted in the Constitutionalist Revolution of 1906 that had, towards the end of the Qajar Dynasty (1789-1925), kickstarted the idea of a modern society and state, but were not translated into laws and state policies until the

1920s and 30s. From then on, Iran – a mainly rural, feudal and religious society -- started to move at high speed towards a modernity that shaped its identity and self-conception for the next century and beyond (Amanat, 2017). One significant manifestation of this modernity was the presence of uncovered women in public—a taboo that *Dokhtar e Lor* shattered, paving the way for the official hijab ban introduced five years later (Afary, 2009).

However, audiences needed reassurance that this taboo-breaking image of an unveiled woman wouldn't threaten the demise of their societal order. The heroine's redemption comes through her return to societal norms by forsaking her 'dishonourable' past, marrying her male saviour and covering herself – albeit loosely. The film thus unites the opposite poles of the 'modern un-covered woman' and the 'traditionally covered one', into one. Thus, the representation of the modern Iranian woman can be conceived of as a drawing traced by the pattern of cinema's pendular swinging between the two poles of covered/uncovered and bad woman/good woman. The image continually changes as the 'pendulum's' movements are never quite equilibrated. This to and fro, one step back and two steps forward, subtly asserts that being a modern, 'Westernized' woman need not upend traditional values.

Despite the backlash against its creators and the main actress, one could say that the film spurred modernization efforts, and helped the 'spill-over' of modern women into the reality of Iranian society. Additionally, in the following five decades, policies such as *Kashf-e Hijab* (hijab ban), bans on polygamy, compulsory education for girls, and progressive family and divorce laws made the 'modern woman' an everyday reality, which in turn was mirrored and amplified by Iranian cinema (Amanat, 2017; Sadr, 2006).

Phase 2: Modernity Begets Complex Women

The half-century following the making of *Dokhtar e Lor* saw the most significant socio-political and cultural shifts in modern Iranian history, largely due to state policies. After WWII the lifting of the ban on hijab by Reza Shah's successor, Mohammad Reza Shah, did not reduce the presence of women in the public gaze. On the contrary, a large number of women, with or without the veil, expanded the public and artistic space for themselves. This emancipation thus led to more challenging and complex women's roles and identities in society. This complexity in turn gave rise to the second phase of female representation in Iranian cinema. Whereas the highly popular *FilmFarsi*, whose script followed the template of *Dokhtar e Lor* (only with

larger degrees of flesh exposure), depicted a modern woman who didn't tarnish society's sense of 'honour' despite her sins and temptations, many Iranian filmmakers started to experiment with and depict a more complex female identity in *auteur* movies, which became known as the Iranian *nouvelle vague* or New Iranian Cinema. From the 1950s to the 1970s, films such as Ebrahim Golestan's *Brick and Mirror*, Forough Farrokhzad's *The House is Black*, Abbas Kiarostami's *The Report*, and Parviz Sayyad's *Throughout the Night* introduced Iranian women with agency and depth, challenging patriarchal norms (Sadr, 2006; Naficy, 2012). In these films, the modern woman observes, desires, and chooses—often at great personal cost.

What was interesting in this second phase of women's representation was the overlap between commercial movies and the more or less opposite pole of intellectual films. Kobra Amin Saeidi, aka 'Shahzad', is a good example of this phenomenon. Not only did she transition from acting in commercial FilmFarsi to playing acclaimed parts in *auteur* movies such as *Qaysar* and *Dash Akol*, but she was also one of the first women who migrated from in front of— to behind the camera. Her acclaimed film *Maryam and Mani* premiered on the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, signalling the potent visibility women had gained in Iranian cinema (BBC Persian, Sept 5, 2024).

Part II. Losing and Reclaiming Visibility

Phase 3: The Islamic Revolution and the (Failed) Attempt to Erase Women from the Public Gaze

The Islamic Revolution marked a drastic shift in women's representation, ushering in a new era: the era of non-representation. Whereas Iranian Cinema had initially come into being by *claiming* a space for women's visibility, the Islamic regime sought its *raison d'être* in women's invisibility. The regime now valued cinema that removed women from the public gaze, thus creating a paradox: how to fulfill this mandate of invisibility? A new phase of struggle and negotiation began— a phase that required cineastes to find innovative cinematic languages to depict modern women subtly (Rahbaran, 2016 pp. 16-17 and 24-25). The depiction of modern women could now only happen in pockets carved out by filmmakers and presented to an audience that understood that secret language. Now cinema was the arena where cineastes and viewers collaborated to *reclaim* the public gaze by skirting and bending censorship rules and navigating them creatively. Depicting women thus became a clandestine act in plain sight.

The challenges were multiple. Actresses and filmmakers who had been vital for creating the image of the modern Iranian woman before the revolution were now banned from screens and ostracised, their belongings often confiscated. Images depicting women were cut out of films. Scenes that showed men and women touching, holding hands or kissing were censored. Close-up shots of actresses' faces and their bare arms and legs were blackened (Rahbaran, 2016).

The (impossible) mission of removing women from cinema wasn't without its funny moments. The black patches that didn't move in step with the images that they were supposed to cover, or the female background actors who were actually men in chadors were cause for merriment. None of this, however, could hide the sad state of New Iranian Cinema. In such a hostile environment, the resurrection of Iranian cinema seems almost like a miracle (Rahbaran, 2016, pp. 127-130).

Many believe that Ayatollah Khomeini's *fatwa* saying human presentation was not *haram* as long as it propagated the cause of the Islamic Revolution, saved the cinema from disappearing altogether. Iconic films like Mehrjui's *Cow* (which lacked 'desirable' female images) set a precedent for *sharia* and state-approved narratives (Rahbaran, 2016, p.82, 2016). In the absence of commercial movies (both foreign and Iran-made) makers of children's films, war films, and ideologically committed films—aka *engagé* cinema – could hope for funding and release permission if they conformed to the byzantine guidelines of the Ministry for Islamic Guidance (Rahbaran, 2016, pp. 1-26). The complexity of rules, the 'personal taste' and last but not least the corruption of the authorities often allowed for some room to 'manoeuvre' and find a new language, which could depict the image of women on screen. The late doyen of New Iranian Cinema, Abbas Kiarostami thus compared his work to that of an architect on a disproportionate plot, and Rakhshan Banietemad, the renowned Iranian woman director, believes that without the 'holes' in the mesh of censorship regulations, she couldn't have presented the contemporary Iranian woman on the screen (Rahbaran, 2016).

Additionally, the attention and fascination of international film festivals for a cinema growing in such adverse conditions proved useful to a certain degree for both the regime and the filmmakers. The foreign attention was often welcomed (albeit backhandedly) by the new regime as a possibility for propagating a 'good' Islamic order, and at the same time, it allowed directors to leverage that attention to secure additional space within Iran's cinematic landscape and depict women, even within restrictive 'sharia-conform' guidelines. It should however be noted that films that

celebrated women's agency abroad were frequently pulled from Iranian theatres shortly after their release.

Phase 4: Women Go Underground

In the present phase of women's representation, Iranian *auteur* filmmakers depict and thus enforce the reality lived by women under the Sharia-conform rule: i.e., they depict the *subversion* and *inversion* of the Sharia-conform rules. For these filmmakers, the image of the modern Iranian woman can only be depicted in an underground, inside-out world, where she resembles herself inside her private space and outside the public gaze. That's a space where she curiously looks similar to the Iranian woman *before* the Islamic Revolution. Watching the image of the revolutionised Iranian woman today, thus, feels like a trip to her past in a time machine.

After the Islamic revolution, Iran's society and the arts saw multiple contractions and dilations of state-sponsored laws that regulated artistic activity depending on whether reformists or hardliners were elected to office. The size of the space that filmmakers and actresses carved out for depicting modern women on the silver screen depended on the power struggle between those fractions. Since the national uprisings of 2019 and 2022, however, the gap between society and the Islamic regime on the one hand, and the nation's distrust of numerous 'reformist' politicians on the other, has widened. This gap is growing because of the increasing hurdles and punitive measures for filmmakers and is consequently leading them to either go 'underground' or in exile in order to find the space needed to make their films and depict the modern Iranian woman in the public gaze. This underground exiled cinema embraces the oxymoronic 'public gaze in private,' leveraging digital platforms to showcase internationally recognized films like Ali Ahmadzadeh's *Critical Zone* (2023) and Mohammad Rassoulof's *The Seed of the Sacred Fig* (2024). These works depict Iranian women as they are in real life, beyond the regime's regulated portrayals, effectively challenging the Islamic order's version of womanhood through the eyes of a global audience.

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