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Women in the Films of Female Iranian Directors

Iranian censorship codes have long been restrictive to what directors could and could not portray in their films. Many directors have encountered a great deal of censorship because of questionable portrayals in their films that gave the government cause for protest. It is no coincidence that many female directors have produced films that have met with such objection. Though there have been relatively few female directors in Iran, the ones that have asserted themselves in the film world have met with great accolades outside of Iran.

The three female directors that this paper will focus on are veteran directors and screenwriters Rakhshan Bani-Etemad and Tahmineh Milani as well as relative newcomer director Samira Makhmalbaf. An examination of the ways in which these women tackle issues relating to women and women's role in society will be compared with some of Abbas Kiarostami's portrayals.

A brief overview of how women have historically been portrayed in Iranian cinema is first necessary in order to understand the significance of the changes that Bani-Etemad, Milani and Makhmalbaf have made in terms of the progress of the portrayals of women in film. In a speech given regarding women's portrayals in the cinema of her homeland, Iranian women's rights activist Shahla Lahiji stated that "women's protest against their unrealistic portrayal in cinema was shown in the form of films which they made themselves" (Lahiji). Lahiji noted that female film directors were responding to the

inaccurate and one-dimensional portrayals of women that had been so prevalent in the past.

Lahiji notes that the “on the whole, films produced in the first ten years of the film industry in Iran shared a simple-minded kind of romanticism, mixed with strong tendency to moralize. In most of them, women were at the center stage as victims of male immorality. These women were not presented as examples of moral superiority, though they were the advocates of a type of simple and easily accessible morality” (Lahiji). Lahiji also notes that these early film actresses did not possess a great deal of physical beauty and also often played roles too young for them.

Lahiji notes that after the revolution, things did not improve very much. Women were cast in neutral roles, serving their husbands and fathers and “when given key roles, women played the part of upper class grumbling women with illogical, demanding characters without accepting responsibility...women were used as the scapegoats and were banished to the ante-room and kitchen” (Lahiji).

In essence, women in Iranian cinema were portrayed in an unrealistic and limited manner. Lahiji further asserts that this is “one of the reasons why Iranian cinema was not successful at the international level. This failure has, besides, damaged the place and status of women, both before and after the revolution, by presenting a distorted picture of them” (Lahiji).

However, this distortion is, in part, a direct result of the censorship that Iran imposes on its cinema. In the 1996 booklet “Rules for Iranian Cinema” the Iranian

Ministry of Culture published the detailed code of censorship of what is legal and illegal to portray in film. Certain things that are forbidden, for example, are the following:

- tight feminine clothes
- the showing of any part of a women's body except the face and hands
- physical contact, tender words or jokes, between men or women
- jokes either on the army, police or family
- negative characters with a beard (which could assimilate them with religious figures)
- foreign or coarse words
- foreign music, or any type of music which brings joy
- showing favorably a character who prefers solitude to collective life
- policemen and soldiers badly dressed or having an argument

Additionally, films should also always include a prayer scene and should exalt religion, heroism during war and denounce Western cultural invasion (Issa, 1997). Thus, it is truly significant to note the themes that female Iranian directors have tackled – often pushing the edges of these strict codes in a creative culture that seems to prohibit more things than it allows.

Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's film Nargess is one such instance of this. Nargess was completed in 1992 and was immediately banned from being shown in Iran. It was only after it won critical acclaim in film festivals abroad that the censors in Iran felt pressured to screen the film domestically. Hence, even though Bani-Etemad is a veteran director with several films to her directorial credit since 1988, she has had a great deal of trouble in gaining recognition within her homeland for the films she has directed (and in most cases written as well).

In an interview, Bani-Etemad has stated, "I still haven't reached such categorizations like feminine or masculine cinema. I don't know what is a woman's

cinema. I don't like this kind of segregation" (Tahami, 1994). This liberal viewpoint is clear in the films she has created and Nargess is a perfect example of this.

Nargess tells the story of Adel, a man who is getting by with a life of crime. He lives with Afagh, an older woman who is his "partner in crime." Adel yearns to settle down though and his desire to be married and have children is expedited when he meets Nargess, a young woman who is constantly taking care of others and who comes from a poor family. Adel tells Afagh that he is leaving her and wants to get married to Nargess. The tale unfolds with Afagh agreeing to help Adel and she poses as his mother in order to trick Nargess and her family into thinking that Adel is a respectable prospect in marriage. Adel and Afagh succeed in their trick and Adel and Nargess get married.

Adel's criminal past eventually catches up with him though and after only a month of marriage to Nargess, he is arrested. Nargess learns of her husband's thievery only when a police officer comes to their home with a search warrant. She is horrified, but yet still stands by her husband and visits him in prison. He promises to change his ways when he gets out and insists that Nargess not ever talk to his "mother." Adel's worst fears come true though as Afagh comes to befriend Nargess while Adel is in prison. When Adel returns, a confrontation ensues in which Adel must admit that Afagh is not his mother, but his wife. For the first time, Nargess (and the audience) learn of Adel's polygamy.

From that point, Adel is persuaded by Afagh to return to his old ways and together they rob a home when the owners are on vacation. The film climaxes with a confrontation between Nargess and Afagh when Afagh shows Nargess the money that

was stolen. Nargess refuses to allow her husband to have anything to do with the money and seizes the bag from Afagh, locking her inside while she runs away with the money in an attempt to get rid of it. Adel comes across this confrontation and runs after Nargess to get the money back. Nargess refuses to allow him to have the money and eventually throws the bag in the street as traffic passes by. The bag lands in the middle of the street and Afagh (who has broken a window to free herself from the room that Nargess locked her in) stands on one side of the road looking at it while Adel stands on the opposite side of the road. Afagh picks up the bag and beckons Adel to come with her. Adel can only look toward Nargess running off and he chooses to pursue her, instead of Afagh and the money.

Nargess is significant for many reasons. First and foremost, the theme of polygamy goes against the strict Islamic codes. Censors of Bani-Etemad's films have cited that Bani-Etemad has presented implausible situations. In another Bani-Etemad film The Blue Scarf, for instance, she met with great resistance on the part of Iran censors because they "believed that the theme of the story, a relationship between an old lonely man and a young woman is inconceivable, according to Islamic strictures" (Zandi, 1996). Hence, for a filmmaker to focus on such issues (regardless of the gender of the director) is significant in itself.

Another element of Nargess that violates the censorship codes is the use of profanity throughout the film. Afagh and Adel constantly hurl curses at each other in their anger. It is difficult as an American to watch a film and to realize the significance of this violation. Americans have, arguably, become desensitized to cursing in films and

the significance of such violations in Iranian films is, thus, difficult to truly grasp. To truly get the full impact of how daring these films are and were, it is perhaps necessary to have grown up in the Iranian culture where such Islamic values were stressed.

Kiarostami's films, in contrast, are tame to these "rough-edged" films by Bani-Etemad. Kiarostami's use of pastoral images and children are innocent in comparison and this, most likely, makes it a bit easier for Kiarostami's films to gain greater acceptance because they aren't "as radical" and "hard-hitting" in the themes they address.

Bani-Etemad has said in an interview that in Nargess and her other films the characters "were not passive, they didn't give in. Each of them protested in some way, but how successful they were in their protest was dependent on the condition" (Zandi, 1996). In many of Bani-Etemad's films, her characters intentionally reject their social situation, yet in others they are trapped by it. Nargess seems to be an example of the former, for although Nargess has no money and no place to go if she leaves Adel, she is adamant in her morals that he cannot return to his life of crime. Indeed, she is passionate in stating that she will not let it happen, no matter what. Although she has been betrayed and lied to in finding out that Adel is first a thief and then had another wife, she is still strong in her convictions.

Hence, Bani-Etemad's female characters are different than those in Kiarostami's films. Bani-Etemad's women are multi-dimensional. They are passionate and get hurt and show emotion. In Kiarostami's films, women are simply obstacles that deter the main character from getting what he wants. In Where Is My Friend's Home?, for instance, Ahmad's mother is an unreasonable woman who does not even listen to her

son's concerns. She repeatedly tells him to do his homework, despite his attempts to explain to her that he has a problem. Likewise, the character of Tahereh in Through the Olive Trees is an obstacle that the main character Hossein must overcome. For him, the challenge is to get Tahereh's attention. It is not important for the audience to get to know her. She is only known by the audience as the woman that the main character desires – as far as her personality and her wants and desires, she is completely “flat.”

In contrast to this, Bani-Etemad's female characters are completely human. This is most evident in the scene where Afagh breaks down after Adel tells her he is leaving her for good. She yells at him to leave and pretends to care less, but once he is gone, she collapses in grief clutching an article of his clothing. It is clear from this scene that she is deeply in love with Adel and that she is experiencing a wide range of emotions. Furthermore, we, the audience, see her pain as she must pretend to be Adel's mother and give her “son” away to Nargess when it is clear that she is miserable. The only reason she agrees to help him in this charade is so that she does not lose him altogether. If Afagh helps Adel to obtain permission Nargess, Afagh has made Adel promise to still let her “belong to him.” Hence, it is an act of desperation for her to help the man she loves obtain a wife and this desperation further adds to the depth of the character of Afagh.

In addition to the treatment of the characters, Bani-Etemad also differs dramatically from Kiarostami in terms of the style she uses to shoot her films. Whereas Kiarostami's visuals are relatively “straightforward” and uncomplicated, Bani-Etemad's filmic style is very dramatic and shots are constructed from a variety of angles. An early shot in the film, for instance, is looking down at Adel from above. The shots are

sometimes severe in where the camera is placed, but this serves the purpose of creating a heightened sense of drama in the film. Whereas Kiarostami would leave it to the viewer to imbue the film with meaning, Bani-Etemad goes out of her way to include dramatic shots and music to manipulate the viewer into feeling certain ways about the characters and the story.

Furthermore, also unlike Kiarostami's films, there is a definitive climax to the story. In Nargess, this occurs when the three main characters "fight it out" regarding the satchel that contains the money that Adel and Afagh have stolen. Adel must clearly decide whom to choose – Afagh or Nargess. He chooses Nargess and in the final shot it is implied that Afagh gets hit by a truck. She, in effect, "got what she deserved" because she is clearly the "bad guy."

In addition to having Afagh constantly cursing and berating those around her, Bani-Etemad clearly asserts the "evilness" of Afagh through the use of color. In several scenes where Afagh and Nargess are present, Nargess is clad in a white veil while Afagh is always in black. Nargess is kind-hearted and cares for elderly neighbors. Afagh is bitter and full of hate from having been left by her first husband and then by Adel. In many ways, Bani-Etemad is telling a Cinderella story of sorts with the virginal, pure Nargess fighting against this evil "mother-in-law" (or so she thinks) who has no qualms about lying and stealing to get what she wants.

The difference, however, is that Bani-Etemad's "evil" character is written in a sympathetic way. We, the audience, feel sorry for Afagh in many ways. When Afagh spends time talking to Nargess when Adel is in prison, she reveals that she was married

off to a fifty year old man when she was only nine years old. She further relates, “Had my first kid when I was 14. He took my baby away ruined my name and kicked me and kicked me goodbye. He let me loose in the big city. When I came to, it was too late.” Hence, it is implied that Afagh is merely a product of her circumstances. Her life of crime and bitterness was determined by her situation, not necessarily because of her character. Though she is “evil,” Bani-Etemad presents her in a multi-dimensional way. Though she is the antagonist in the film, she is also constructed as a deeply human character – something that Kiarostami has not managed to do in his films.

What I found most interesting in Nargess, as well as the other two films I examined was that the theme of loneliness was of paramount importance. When Adel is in prison, Nargess tells him that she has never been lonelier in her life without him at home. Afagh touches on this theme as well when she tells Nargess “I had a whole life before me at your age. You can’t open your heart to anyone. This is an answer to everything except loneliness.” This is of importance to note because, as previously mentioned, the censorship codes “frown” on portraying any characters that prefer a life of solitude to collective living. In this regard, many of these female directors are reflecting traditional Iranian values, while at the same time challenging them in other ways.

Looking at Tahmineh Milani’s film The Legend of A Sigh, the theme of loneliness of paramount importance to the story. The Legend of A Sigh deals with the myth of a character "Sigh" who is summoned whenever someone "sighs from the bottom of the heart." He comes to alleviate the distress by granting one thing – the ability to change places with someone else.

The main character thus chooses a person who she thinks has a better--or at least an easier--life than she does. Yet, each time, it turns out the person whom she thought had it easy, had unforeseen difficulties in her own life. The main character progresses through five different “lives” in total. First, she begins as herself – a wealthy widow who was married to a merchant who has the potential to be a great writer, but has not managed to be successful in getting published. She is alone and without any children. She wishes to die because the pain of her unhappiness is so severe.

The widow wishes to trade places with her housekeeper who has six children and who just became a grandmother. When in this role, however, she learns that this life is fraught with hardship as well because she cannot make ends meet and her husband spends all their money without any regard for the rest of the family. She wishes she could just die to escape the misery she is living in.

This woman then asks “Sigh” if she can trade places with her sister who lives in a village with her husband and child. When she enters this character’s “being” though, the problems inherent in this life soon become apparent as well. This woman is trapped in an unhappy marriage that is only kept together by their only son. When the son is trampled to death in a horse-riding accident, there is nothing left for her and she, too, expresses the wish to die.

She wishes to trade places with a university student she saw in town taking photographs for an architecture project. This life, she assumes, is carefree and revitalizing. Again, the audience eventually sees that this life has its own problems and

that she hates architecture because she cannot get ahead in the male-dominated field and that she truly wishes to be a writer like her friend Maryam.

This is the woman she wishes to trade places with – a successful writer who has a degree of fame, but the publishing world does not reward her as much as she feels she deserves. She is also a divorced mother who is alone and who wishes for fulfillment in her personal relationships.

It turns out that this woman is the same as the first woman (the wealthy widow), but this successful (but unhappy) writer represents the “path” that she would have followed if she married the artist that proposed to her instead of the merchant.

Thus, like Nargess, this film has a clear “moral of the story.” Clearly, we, the audience are meant to realize that “there is no life that is perfect” and that everyone has problems. Specifically, though, this film reveals that every woman has problems – be she rich or poor, young or old, married, divorced or widowed. Unhappiness and loneliness are everywhere.

Like Bani-Etemad, Milani is a director who serves as both a director and screenwriter for the films she helms. Also like Bani-Etemad, Milani’s films have encountered a great deal of objection by Iranian censors. As recently as 2001, Milani was arrested and faced the possibility of getting the death penalty for a film she directed because censors cited she was using her films to espouse anti-government messages.

In looking at The Legend of A Sigh in the context of the Iranian censorship codes, this film struck me for many reasons – the first of which was the way in which the character of “Sigh” is portrayed. He magically appears from nowhere whenever the main

character sighs. The first time the audience sees him, the viewer may mistake him for Jesus Christ. He wears a long white robe, has long hair and has facial hair. The religious imagery continues when he reveals that he was “born when the first human heart suffered” and that this first “human heart” was Adam when he was driven out of paradise.

Just as Bani-Etemad pushed the limits of the Iranian cinema codes, Milani appears to have done the same in this film by including such an overtly religious character. Additionally, it is significant to note the ways in which both Bani-Etemad and Milani have used close-ups of women in their films – something that had been unthinkable by directors prior to them. There is one scene in The Legend of A Sigh, for instance, that shows an extreme close-up of the main character’s face. Again, though it is difficult for a Western viewer to truly comprehend the significance of such a shot, viewing it in the context of the censored climate of Iranian cinema, this shot is extremely daring.

Furthermore, according to the censorship codes, it had been banned (until recently) to show a woman running in Iranian films. This, again, is something that both Milani and Bani-Etemad have included in their films with the main female character running in several scenes.

Like Nargess, The Legend of A Sigh also had an extreme melodramatic quality to it. To me, the film almost seemed like an American soap opera at times with dramatic piano music in the background to emphasize the character’s grief and longing. Again, unlike Kiarostami’s style, there is little room for interpretation on the viewer’s part.

Milani clearly is trying to evoke a certain emotion in her audience and the use of this music is a means to this end.

There are a few similarities between The Legend of A Sigh and Kiarostami's films – albeit extremely subtle ones. Though the visual styles of Milani and Kiarostami could not be more different, I found it interesting that the idea of “wanting to die” arises in both The Legend of A Sigh and Taste of Cherry. In Kiarostami's Taste of Cherry, the theme is quite blatant with the main character actively pursuing his own death, but in The Legend of A Sigh, the references to wanting to die are constantly present as each character wishes to escape her life through death, but this wish is never pursued. Instead, Milani circumvents dealing with this issue “head on” as Kiarostami did, by allowing the character to “escape” her life via being granted a wish by “Sigh.” Hence, the fantastical nature of the film's story counteracts the seriousness of this issue of wanting to escape life altogether.

Though Nargess and The Legend of A Sigh presented a few similarities with Kiarostami's films, it was Samira Makhmalbaf's 1998 film The Apple that reminded me most of Kiarostami's style. Like Kiarostami, her takes are long and her camera lingers on characters for long amounts of time, leaving the viewer to think about what is going on in these characters' minds. Also like Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf's use of children in the film to circumvent some censor issues is also quite effective in telling her story.

The story of The Apple is an interesting one – even more interesting to learn that it is based on a true story and that the actors in the film are portraying themselves. The story revolves around two twin girls who are eleven years old. They had been locked in

their home by their entire lives by their father and blind mother. A group of neighbor women submit a petition to have these girls taken into the care of social services, citing they have not been bathed in years and that they are not receiving any education.

Social services intervene and bathe the girls, cut their hair and tell the father that he must promise to not lock them in the home any longer if he wants to keep them. He agrees, but breaks this promise and again feels it necessary to lock his daughters in the home while he goes out to get food.

It is interesting to note that, with the exception of the father and a boy who eventually befriends the girls, every other character in the film is female. It is further interesting to see how the father is treated in the course of the story. The female social worker comes to check on the girls and find them locked up again and chastises the father for breaking his promise. To teach him a lesson, she locks him in his home and takes the key to show him how it feels to be trapped inside. She then tells the girls to go off and make friends in the street, even though the father again objects saying that they will get hurt without supervision. The social worker responds by saying “If anything happens, too bad, it's better than their life here.”

We, the viewer, then watch as the girls go out to explore the world together. Makhmalbaf's camera lingers on the girls, forcing the viewer to painfully watch them as they hobble along and try to communicate with their limited communication skills. In essence, they are like animals and Makhmalbaf emphasizes this in her choice of shots. In one scene, for instance, one of the girls gets some ice cream and begins to share it with a goat in the street. The camera then focuses on the mirror that the girls have (that the

social worker gave them) and the goat's face fills the mirror. In essence, Makhmalbaf seems to be inferring that the girls are the equivalent of these goats. The reflection of the goat is the reflection of what these girls have become in their imprisonment. I felt that Makhmalbaf's choice to include this scene in the film was especially touching and, again, a way to get around the censors by subtly equating the girls to animals.

Makhmalbaf also does this through the choice of music as well. In many scenes where the girls are walking along, the music that accompanies the scene is a grating, moaning sound that sounds much like the bleating sound a goat would make. Watching the girls mesmerized by a plastic bottle that a boy drags along the street to coax them to follow him, also serves to remind the viewer that the girls are no different from animals – they will follow anything or anyone that catches their attention.

This theme is repeated again when a boy who is about eight or nine years old sits on the second story of his home with an apple attached to a string. He taunts the girls down on the street to try to catch the apple as he pulls it out of reach just as they get close to grabbing it. There is a glee to this action for him and he says to them ““Even if you jump higher than a horse, you won't make it!” Again, this scene is seemingly innocuous in that it is presenting children being children. The action is not overtly cruel, but rather playful and humorous in how it is presented.

However, this scene echoes a greater message in my opinion. These girls have gained a newfound freedom and are trying to obtain something by truly striving for it. Their frustration in trying to jump for this apple is clear as Makhmalbaf keeps the camera on the girls for several minutes as we watch them exert a great deal of energy to attempt

to grab the apple. To me, I interpreted this scene as representing the plight of women in Iran in general though. They have a newfound freedom but are still doomed to be “jumping” for their goals as men hold the “apple” just beyond their reach. Hence, this freedom is specious in many ways, for the freedom is something that the girls are not prepared to handle.

It is interesting to note that Makhmalbaf has noted in an interview that she regards the boy with the apple as being a combination of both the God and the devil in one (Darznik, 1999). He both taunts the girls, but also is instrumental in taking them to a store where they can buy their own apples. I found it further interesting to see how Makhmalbaf portrayed the primary male character in the film – the girls’ father – in a similar “dual” way. While she never exactly exonerates the girls’ father, she gives him a humanizing complexity by foregrounding his poverty, poor education and his undeniable love for his daughters. In one scene, for instance, the father is squatting on a rug, singing to God about his sufferings. He is brought to tears and expresses great pain in being humiliated by the widespread media coverage of the story throughout Iran, and this serves to counteract his vilification by the audience.

The father is also presented as being a complicated, human figure in the things he tells the social worker. He tells her, for instance, that “God made woman for her to marry...she mustn’t remain alone” in one scene and then states that “A girl is like a flower, if the sun shines on her she will fade.” Hence, he apparently wants his daughters to not be alone, but he prevents them from having any knowledge of life outside their home. His ideas is contradictory in a way, but it is clear that he loves his daughters even

though he has kept them locked up for their entire lives. Indeed, Makhmalbaf has portrayed him in an extremely complicated and multi-dimensional way. Hence, like the Bani-Etemad and Milani, Makhmalbaf has illustrated her care to show her characters in a complex and profoundly human way.

On the whole, what all these female directors have in common is that they force the viewer to consider the lives of Iranian women. Women are not ancillary characters as they are in Kiarostami's films; instead they are the protagonists. We, the audience, make an emotional connection to them, be it in feeling their pain or their joy. The women in these films diverge from how women had been portrayed in the past and are now multi-dimensional characters that have personalities, hopes, dreams and experience sorrow. In Kiarostami's films, this is rare. The women are either obstacles to the main characters (e.g. the mother in Where Is My Friend's Home?) or "things" to be obtained (e.g. Tahereh in Through the Olive Trees).

Lahiji asserts that "if we accept the rule that the Muslim Iranian woman must be covered, we must at the same time, try and draw up plans so that the limits of this covering does not conceal her real identity and role" (Lahiji). Though Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Tahmineh Milani and Samira Makhmalbaf all have different directorial styles, they are instrumental in adding a sense of "reality" to how women are portrayed in Iranian cinema that had been neglected by many of their male predecessors.

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