

Illustrating Women's Reactionary Visions of Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema

Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies student Sonia Lilja discusses the changing representation of women following the development of misleading and patriarchal cinematic tropes.

Cinema is among the most successful art forms in contemporary Iranian culture, and its importance to the Iranian national spirit has been tremendous due both to its accessibility and, as Hamid Dabashi notes, to its rebellious nature (Hamid 2001, 6). From the melodramatic and sensuous film farsi of the 1960s to post-revolution political features to contemporary arthouse festival film, cinema in Iran occupies an audacious niche. However, until the 1990s, the Iranian cinematic landscape was primarily dominated by men, resulting in patriarchal and inaccurate depictions of women. This article will first illustrate how the image of women during late Pahlavi and early post- era created inaccurate dualistic chaste/unchaste female representations in film; second, establish the rise of the "women's cinema" in the 1990s as a reactionary force against these inaccurate portrayals by offering realistic and nuanced female characters; and third, introduce this new genre's core themes in an analysis of Samira Makhmalbaf's debut film, *The Apple* (Sib, 1998).



Depictions of women in Iranian cinema before the Khatami era.

The decades prior to the 1979 Revolution can be considered the formative era of Iranian cinema, and the films on the silver screen at this time fall into two broad categories. The Westernised film farsi featuring strong male leads, dramatic damsels, and melodramatic storylines became especially popular among young men, mirroring the optimistic and progressive public image Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wanted to uphold (Hamid 2006, 131). However, film farsi did not represent the experiences of ordinary citizens, and this disillusionment inspired the birth of the avant-garde New Iranian Cinema movement in the fold between the 1960s and 1970s. This new genre, which encompassed some of Iranian film history's most iconic features while debuting some of its most prominent auteurs – most notably Abbas Kiarostami and Bahram Bayzai - began a tradition of social commentary in Iranian cinema.

As a broader cultural concept, women's bodies and their modesty have been viewed as representational of the values of the state of Iran – and nowhere is this as evident as in the way they have been portrayed in Iranian cinema. The typology of women in Iranian films is exemplified in women's rights advocate Shahla Lahiji's dichotomy of the chaste/unchaste doll. She locates two archetypes of women in pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian film: the unchaste dolls of the film farsi era, and the chaste dolls who replaced them in the New Iranian Cinema movement and particularly the post-revolutionary cinematic representations. Both, she argues, fail as accurate representations of modern emancipated Iranian women (Lahiji 2002, 215-216).

The unchaste doll, a sexualised female character who existed as an objectified image to gratify the young male audiences' 'suppressed sexual drives,' not only misrepresented Iranian women but actively damaged their social status (Lahiji 2002, 218-219). The archetype was closely tied to the Westernised consumerist image of Iranian women presented by the popular media during the Pahlavi era, and had become synonymous with women's liberation (Afary 2009, 225). Despite the scorn – or perhaps because of it – the unchaste doll was a marketable image in a country where Western-style erotic imagery was a taboo and marriage rates were dwindling due to women's emancipation (Lahiji 2002, 219). Film farsi existed primarily as escapist cinema for its target audience – young men – and sexualised female characters to appeal to this demographic (Rahbaran 2016, 12-13).

In opposition to the debased unchaste dolls, Lahiji argues that the new avant-garde movement created their antithesis: the chaste doll, introduced as a concept of a traditional housewife or a demure virgin (Lahiji 2002, 221). In the advent of the revolution, the chaste dolls were 'an acceptable norm,' weaker than men and obedient to their superior intellect (Lahiji 2002, 221). This characterisation was a reaction to the Shah's oppressive modernisation regime; the new heroines, Sadr argues, were deliberately unattractive, peaceful, platonic women, who adhered to the Islamic notions of femininity (Sadr 2006, 188-189). The chaste doll was never pursued romantically or sexually, and she did not show complexity in her character. Whilst she did act as a role model to the devout Muslim women in Iran (Sadr 2006, 189), Lahiji notes that secular urban women were misrepresented in her.

The triumph of the chaste doll continued after the Revolution. The Islamic state saw emancipated women both as victims of the Pahlavi state's forced Westernisation as well as the corrupting force of the Iranian youth, and they were to be returned to the domestic sphere to fulfil their roles as wives and mothers. Combined with the extensive censorship scheme of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance¹, a national media modesty system was created that affected female characters in particular. Notably, women were to be veiled even when in a script they were supposed to unveil, to shield their virtue from the gaze of the male audience (Mottahedeh 2008, 9-10). The ways female and male characters interacted on screen also became heavily regulated (Naficy 2012, 106). The insistence to obey these early regulations created an "auto-censorship" of sorts (Dönmez-Colin 2004, 99), an absence of any meaningful cinematic representations of women, and an avoidance of depicting female characters (Mir-Hosseini 2007, 676). However, after the election of Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khomeini's death in 1989, the atmosphere began to slowly change (Rahbaran 2016, 8).

The Rise of Women's Cinema

Naficy has divided the evolution of women's cinematic portrayals into distinct categories: women's absence and background presence during Khomeini's time, their tentative foreground presence during president Rafsanjani's time, and post-Khatami political criticism (Naficy 2012, 111). This development links to the post-war reconstructionist political climate in early 1990s Iran, which had begun to both allow social critique and accommodate more active participation of women in society. It also exhibits the structural changes made in film and TV production while Mohammad Khatami was serving as Minister of Culture (1982-1992), which allowed female filmmakers to finally emerge in the field. The renaissance of Iranian cinema was catalysed by Khatami's election as President in 1997 with what Sadr describes as a 'platform of cultural and social change' (Sadr 2006, 238). This election allowed for reform in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and with it the production of formerly rejected projects including screenplays that addressed women's issues.

Mir-Hosseini has argued that iconic films such as Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time to Love* (1991) and Bani-Etemad's *Nargess* (1992) challenged the taboos concerning women in Iranian cinema, paving the way for what has been described as 'women's cinema' at large (Naficy 2012, 111). These new projects launched a form of Iranian women's film which I would categorise as reactionary truth representation, following feminist

¹ Although Iran's history with censorship is out of this article's scope, it needs to be noted here that film censorship was also practiced during the Pahlavi era to almost similar extent. For further information, see Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978-1984* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 153.

film critic Claire Johnston's identification of women's cinema as a countermovement. Johnston views women's cinema as intrinsically political and deliberately constructed, acting as a countermovement with the function of stripping the narrative of the patriarchal objectifying focus. In doing so, this new genre exposes conventional cinema as 'organised around male erotic privilege' (Mulvey 1989, 122-123).²

Realism became a driving force for the films that premiered in the post-Khatami years. Women in these stories were cognisant of the social issues they were facing and usually went through a narrative arc of self-discovery centred around the awareness of the injustice of the social and legal structures they inhabited. To quote Sadr, 'the subject of these stories is often revelation, and in the course of these films the woman's life is usually transformed as she moves to a higher understanding than her spouse' (Sadr 2006, 261). Dissatisfied with the caricatures of chaste and unchaste female representations of Iranian cinema, filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Rakhshan Bani-Etemad Jafar Panahi, Tahmineh Milani and Samira Makhmalbaf premiered films addressing women's issues in a critical manner, with attention to detail pertinent to the representation of truth embedded in their narratives. In the following section, I will analyse Samira Makhmalbaf's debut film *The Apple* in order to explore how the director creates nuanced portrayals of women and their realities within oppressive societal norms.

The Apple

At the debut of her first film *The Apple*, Samira Makhmalbaf, a young woman expressing counter-ideological views (Dabashi 2001, 269), already embodied the new generation of alternative Iranian filmmaking (Dabashi 2001, 262). Only 18 when the film premiered, she was 'at the open-ended entrance of her generation into a vision of reality with no claim to a monopoly on truth, an insistence on the particular, and no patience for the universal' (Dabashi 2001, 267). In this reality, Iran's growing youth population felt increasingly disillusioned and out of touch with the strict traditionalist regulations of the Islamic Republic, which often did not align with their modern Islamic-yet-egalitarian world view (Afary 2009, 322). By 1997, this dissent had led to the dawn of a new cinema to which Samira Makhmalbaf lent her vision.

The Apple is based on a true story Makhmalbaf encountered and decided to capture in a cinematic study out of compassion for the family and interest in sociology (Johnson 1999-2000, 47-48). Cast with the Naderis, the subjects of the real-life controversy, the film is a blend of documentary-style footage of the aftermath of the affair, scripted scenes, improvised dialogue, and reactions from the family (Johnston 1999, 28).

The film depicts socially impaired twins, who have been kept indoors for their entire lives by their terrified father who wants to protect them from the outside world. The twins, Zahra and Massoumeh Naderi, are visited one day by a social worker, who immediately confronts the father, demanding he allow the children to go outside and join society. Although initially promising to comply with the order, the father locks the girls up again. When the social worker returns, she detains the father in the house, freeing the twins to roam around the city. The girls, childlike in their interactions with others and curious about the world around them, encounter other children on their impromptu adventure, and acquire apples from a fruit shop. In the movie's climax, the girls struggle to free their father from the house in a role-reversal of their earlier power relations, demonstrating care and love for him. Finally, Zahra and Massoumeh lead their father to the city to look at watches, while their visually impaired mother tentatively steps out of the house, peers into a mirror, and laughs at her reflection.

The film's sense of compassion and tragic realism are its most essential features, combining absurd circumstances with social commentary. The girls' imprisonment within the house is a visual and real-life signifier of the Islamic concept of modesty in which women are traditionally kept safe and concealed inside the domestic sphere (Naficy 2012, 39). Zahra and Massoumeh's parents are utterly terrified of exposing their daughters to society, and particularly to the male gazes; the father, resigned to his fate, recounts to the social worker an old parable of girls being like flowers that will wither under the sun, which represents unrelated men. Thus, by trying to keep the twins from interacting with the outside world, the parents are trying to keep them 'chaste dolls.' However, by setting Zahra and Massoumeh free, Makhmalbaf depicts them crucially as children,

² Although Johnston's work dates back to the 1970s and functions within the western cinematic discourse, I find it relevant in tangent to post-Khatami women's cinema.

full of innocence and love but also mischief and adventure: there is nothing unchaste about their interactions with society (Johnston 1999, 28).³

A recurring symbol is the signature apple. Makhmalbaf links the apples the girls brought home after their adventure to the apple in the biblical story of Adam and Eve, but ascribes positive attributes of 'knowledge and enjoyment of life to it instead of negative signifiers of sin (Johnson 1999-2000, 48). In a pivotal scene near the end, Massoumeh hands her apple to her imprisoned father, symbolically handing him the knowledge she gained playing outside. She then proceeds to free him, signifying that the knowledge of the apple opens the door to freedom; she has, as discussed earlier by Sadr, moved to a higher understanding (Sadr 2006, 261).

While she depicts the twins' circumstances in a negative light, Makhmalbaf extends tremendous humanity to the parents in the film, using their misinformation and dread of the outside world as a framework for her critique of the Islamic modesty regulations that impair women's participation in society. By challenging these regulations, Makhmalbaf seeks to break the mould of adult women as seductresses or, more contemporarily for *The Apple*, as inactive and placid characters. The social worker is depicted as a passionate but professional young woman, who quite literally locks up the patriarchal figure and sets the girls free. From the onset, her tone and demeanour immediately contradict earlier images of women as either sexualised damsels or demure dolls, instead challenging Mr Naderi head-on. The twins' mother, Mrs Naderi, has internalised a dread of society and repressive ideals of seclusion as chasteness. Her depiction throughout the film remains rather tragic: she is frightened, angry, and pitiful, certainly a chaste doll but not admirably so. Symbolically, Mrs. Naderi stepping out at the end of the film suggests her overcoming her fears, indicating complexity and mutability denied to women in film farsi or New Iranian Cinema.

Although *The Apple* is an exceptional film in Iranian cinematography, its unique vision expresses the preoccupation with social realism of emerging women's cinema in 1990s Iran, and it acts as an excellent example of female directors breaking the chaste/unchaste doll dichotomy. By using the apple motif to signify pressing demand for women's rights and employing subversive female characters - the professional, the children, and the frightened conservative - Makhmalbaf crafts a critique of social oppression, and she has continued to advocate women's rights using a semi-documentary realist style in her subsequent films. Her contribution does not exist in a vacuum, however; with the shifting cultural norms and emergence of more female filmmakers in Iran, the cinematic landscape of the country has begun to embrace more complex narratives of women, such as Tahmineh Milani's *The Fereshteh Trilogy*, Pouran Derakhshandeh's *Hush! Girls Don't Scream* and Jafar Panahi's *The Circle*. These representations are important in crafting complex indigenous models for future generations of Iranian women.

³ Despite their half-feral state at the beginning of the film, Makhmalbaf reports that Zahra and Massoumeh have started education and improved their social interactions within their community.

This article has been edited by Violet Tinnion (MENA Editor) & Abigail Adams (Chief Regional Editor), peer reviewed by Chris Mungovan & Samantha Kichmann (Chief Peer Reviewer), copy edited by Grace-Frances Doyle, Harriet Steele, Évie Patel, Alexander Galpin, Veronica Greer and Ben Malcomson (Chief Copy Editor), checked and approved by the following executives: Robert Wlodarski (Editor-in-Chief) and Emily Hall (Deputy Editor-in-Chief), and produced by James Hanton (Head of Production).

Bibliography:

- Afary, Janet.** 2009. *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- The Apple.** 1998. Film. Directed by Samira Makhmalbaf.
- Dabashi, Hamid.** 2001. *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future*. London: New York: Verso.
- Dönmez-Colin, Gönül.** 2004. *Women, Islam and Cinema*. London: Reaktion Books.
- Johnson, William.** 1999-2000. 'Review of "The Apple" by Samira Makhmalbaf et al.' *Film Quarterly* 53(2).
- Johnston, Sheila.** 1999. 'Quietly Ruling the Roost.' *Sight and Sound* 9(1) .
- Lahiji, Shahla.** 2002. 'Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979.' *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*. London: New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers.
- Makhmalbaf, Mohsen.** 2000. 'About "Makhmalbaf Film House."' Blog. Makhmalbaf Film House. <http://www.makhmalbaf.com/?q=mfh>
- Mir-Hosseini, Ziba.** 2007. 'Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema.' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27(3).
- Mottahedeh, Negar.** 2008. *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*. Durham: London: Duke University Press.
- Mulvey, Laura.** 1989. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.
- Naficy, Hamid.** 2012. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 3: The Islamicate Period, 1978-1984*. Durham: London: Duke University Press.
- Naficy, Hamid.** 2012. *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010*. Durham: London: Duke University Press.
- Rahbaran, Shiva.** 2016. *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers Since the Islamic Revolution. Translated by Maryam Mohajer*. London; New York: I.B. Tauris.
- Sadr, Hamid Reza.** 2006. *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*. London: I.B. Tauris.