



Women, Film and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran 1979-2005; A Perspective from Learning from Experience and Performance Theory

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Abstract: Images in popular culture provide essential information about the socio-political situation and the self-realisation of gender roles in society. The transformation of women characters in Iranian films after the 1980s has occupied a certain space in scholarship, however everyday self-experiences in the streets and its relation to self realization and women figures are barely included into the analysis. Based on learning from experience, affect and performance theory, this paper focesses on two prominent female stars of Iranian cinema: Niki Karimi and Hediye Tehrani as image transformers in a period of cultural evolution and the smile of women that fades away from the streets. The analysis begins with a general examination of the interaction between politics and culture through the main currents in Iranian cinema. In this part, a periodization of the post-revolution era in Iran is presented through cultural products, especially Iranian films such as the religious era, the war and post-war era, the pastoral era, and the critical era. The last part compares two famous women's images, Niki Karimi and Hediye Tehrani, and shows how this periodization helps to understand the changes in women's self realization and body politics in everyday life after the revolution.

Keywords: Affects, Gender, Iranian cinema, Khatami, Learning from experince, Performance theory, Popular culture

1. Introduction

The present writer's sexual abuse experience on the streets of Tehran thought her to put on a snake-like face instead of her Mediteranean warm smile for self protection. She felt like she saw the woman she needs to be in order to protect herself in the streets of Tehran as she saw Hediye Tehrani acting. This article is about protective body politics of women evolved while the economy politics of Iran was experiencing a gradual transformation in the early 2000s. Such a grave experience needed to wait for two decades to be analysed as a gender history facet. The article starts with a theoretical introduction to clarify why learning from (good or bad) experiences is essential to understanding the period. It argues that, while often the body of the women is a great discussion in politics where Women's voices are barely heard learning from experience not only gives a voice to women but it also introduces another perspective to changes in everyday body politics. Moreover, it argues that an alien woman who has no problem with smiling can be

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more sensible to the absence of women's smiles in the streets than women who normalize dull faces.

2. Theory

Scott describes how the state documents the important assets and leaves out other elements as follows: "Missing, of course, were all those trees, bushes, and plants holding little or no potential for state revenue." (Scott 1990, p.12). Similar to the bushes, the representation of women in the sources is limited in proportion, and there are often male narratives or the narratives often reflect male perspectives. Even though the cultural products have higher representative characteristics, they need further methodological questioning to give voice to women. Learning from experience is a way of questioning the sources for women. Films as cultural products can help us understand the change in body politics of women by introducing the methodology that appreciates experience as a way to understand. The body politics that govern the bodies of the women actors mean a lot for women in everyday life, and the actresses who perform the everyday maneuvers of women with their body language find more appreciation. Learning from experience is a rich and necessary source for both gender studies and cultural studies (Grey, 1997, p.103). This article will show that learning from experience gives deeper insights into history that help us understand women and their role in history as a deep wave. Depending on the performance theory, the article argues that it was not only the people(men) who made the cultural politics that were actors, but it was also the women who were actors as a strong deep wave that even influences today. Learning by experience helps us understand the history of Iranian popular culture.

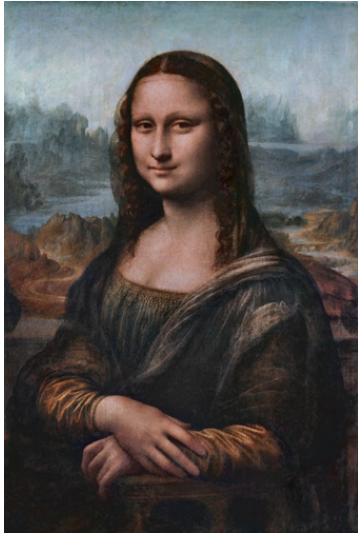
3. Learning by Experience

The experience in Tehran as an alien taught me not to smile as a woman and to govern my face in a special way to protect myself. The smile of a woman has always been an important public debate. One of the women whose smile is long been a theme in public discourse is Mona Lisa's smile.

Giorgio Vasari found Mona Lisa's smile "so pleasing that it seems more divine than human" in 1550 (Flanigan, 2024, p.183). Even though the emotional communities change according to time and place, the smile of a woman was still a "problem" in the twenty-first-century streets of Tehran. My fading smile did not make me happy, and it was not my "natural" way of behaving as a Mediterranean woman. What we call natural varies according to time and place. The article will show that the history of women's smiles in everyday life and in movies is an important indicator of the history of gender in Iran (Oelschlaeger, 1999, pp. 63-76). Women's body politics varied over time in Iranian film representations. After experiencing

Picture 1

Da Vinci's Mona Lisa, 1503



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the vaporizing of women's smiles in public spaces and the necessity to protect oneself, I understood that women had a significant role in determining this body politics since it means a lot in their everyday lives. I will demonstrate the determinant role of this deep wave in three parts. First, I will give a broad descriptive context of the events in cultural politics that shows what the politicians who ruled the state aimed to shape the film industry as a director's cinema instead of a star's cinema. Then, with a short history of the films and economic politics in Iran, the context in which women shaped their manoeuvres in public space will be described. The article will use performance theory and argue that the directors shaped their films in step with the changes in the body politics of women in the public space by showing that Niki Kerimi and Hediye Tehrani became stars who were naturalizing a kind of body politics and a manoeuvre that women identified themselves.

4. The Broad Context

Scholars often mention three critical periods in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran: the first period is the Khomeini era, between the 1979 revolution and his death in 1989. The period of the Iran-Iraq war also falls within this period. The war years began in the second year of the revolution (1980) and lasted until 1988. The second period was the era of reconstruction, which began with the end of the Iran-Iraq war. The last period is the Khatami era, which began with the success of the Reform Front in

the 1997 elections and ended in 2005. There is debate about this success. Although the reformists won with 65.21% against the conservatives, who could only muster 19.56% of the vote, some said that this did nothing but ally the critical voices with the system (Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, p. 233). This paper argues that this success and other developments in women's daily lives challenged women's self-image, which means a change in ideological hegemony.

Cultural studies that focus on the products of popular culture, especially studies of films, show the change in women's self-image and their importance in Iranian politics. Ghorbankarimi's *A Colourful Presence* describes this change in the representation of women in films as a shift from the silent, faceless women of the early revolution to the women with an agency after the 1990s. Naficy, also describes a shift in visibility of women's (Naficy, 2012, p. 99). This article supports this idea of transformation and asserts that this change is a shift in ideological hegemony.

The structural changes in the political economy during the era of reconstruction (under the presidency of Rafsanjani) precede this ideological change in hegemony. Therefore, it is crucial to look closely at the developments during the Reconstruction Era. During the Rafsanjani period, Iran experienced an economic opening to the world, increased employment of women, and solid political repression. The Islamic Republic of Iran was severely isolated from the outside world until the war and began to open up with export-oriented economic policies. Since revenues from oil exports were less than what the Iranian economy spent on imported products, this export-oriented policy caused an economic loss. Foreign loans from Europe and Japan began in this era. By 1992, the government was unable to repay the loans (Kanovsky, 1997, pp. IX-XII). This economic failure may have been one of the main reasons for Rafsanjani's political fall.

The years of reconstruction are also crucial for understanding the change in the status of women in contemporary Iran. During these years, women's employment increased more than ever before in Iran's history, and women gained more freedom in the workforce. Two crucial factors were responsible for this increase in women's employment: the economy's need for female labour due to the vacancies created by male workers who had gone to war, and the needs of family households, which were running a deficit due to severe inflation in the postwar period (Poya, 1999, p.10). On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran changed its population policy due to the population growth and the problems caused by the migration of the growing population to the big cities. Thus, birth control, seen as a game played by the West against the Islamic Republic in the early years of the revolution, was allowed and enforced for the benefit of Islamic society (Hoodfar, 1997, pp. 220-222). In May 1993, birth control became legal. In 1994, the birth

rate dropped from 2.3% to 1.8% (Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, p.296). This birth control policy provided women with more freedom in their working lives. Consequently, women's employment increased during and after the war.

The third feature of the Rafsancani era was massive political repression. There were at least eighty-four unsolved political murders during these years. Participation in elections was low. The legitimacy of the system was in jeopardy. This crisis of legitimacy led to a strengthening of opposition groups. Unemployment, the decline in real income due to rising inflation during the war economy, and social developments to which the conservative gender policy paid too little attention prepared the background for the strengthening of this opposition. On May 23, 1997, the May 23 Front, also known as the Reform Front, was successful in the elections with an overwhelming result of 69.63 %. The Reform Front was a coalition of eighteen opposition groups. The leading organisation was the MRM (Mecme-i Ruhaniyun-u Muebariz), a group of ulema (religious scholars) that included Khatami, the leader of the Reform Front. On March 20, 1988, the ulema split into CRM and MRM. The MRM was labelled a 'left-wing religious' repressed group during the Rafsancani period. The MRM, composed of senior religious scholars, gave religious legitimacy to the reform front. There were also liberal, labour, and women's groups (Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, pp.293-294). The Khatami period began with the great, unexpected victory of the Islamic reformists over the conservative establishment.

5. Politics under Khatami

The events of the Khatami period were diverse: student movements, serial killings, elections, and trials of reform-minded politicians. There was opposition between students who supported Khatami and conservative groups. The most active conservative group of this era was Ansar-i Hizbullah (Comrades of Hizbullah). It began its activities in 1992 and took its first action against the Iranian Islamic thinker Soroush at a conference in Shiraz in 1994. Ansar-i Hizbullah frequently carried out attacks on pro-reform students and other pro-reform movements. On the anniversary of Khatami's election, for example, the conflict was to be ended by a coup d'état. The police sided with Ansar-i Hizbullah against the students. On July 8, 2000, police illegally entered student dormitories to arrest students. This wave of arrests and student protests continued until July 13. On July 20, 23 Revolutionary Guards (Pasdaran-i Inqilab-e Islami) generals sent a letter threatening Khatami with a coup d'état if he did not stop the reform movement and student protests (Kermani, 2001, p. 32; Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, pp.244-246). The reformists immediately stopped their protests and thus prevented a coup d'état. In doing so, however, they once again recognized

their limitations and understood that they had to be careful if they wanted to protect themselves.

Reformists were suppressed. Serial murders are another critical political event of these years. On November 22, 1998, the leader of the Iranian National Party, Daryush Furuhar, and his wife, Pervane Iskenderi, were assassinated (Kermani, 2001, pp.11-12). The series of murders against secular and opposition intellectuals began with this event. Writers and politicians were victims of the radical conservative group Fedai-i Islam (Followers of Islam). Another assassination attempt was carried out immediately after the reformists' great victory in the parliamentary elections in February 2000. On March 12, two conservative activists shot Said Haccarian in the head, wounding him. Haccarian, widely considered the brains of the reform movement, escaped this assassination wounded. After a long coma, he lost most of his ability to walk and talk, but he continued to write articles as he had before the attack. He continued to give interviews to the reformist newspapers and magazines (Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, p.280).

The oppression by the conservatives came out of every area they controlled. Almost every day a newspaper was closed. But the reformists knew how to deal with these oppressions. Although one newspaper was closed almost every day, a new one immediately sprang up like a mushroom, with a new name and a new breath. One of the manoeuvres of the reformist newspapers was to wait for the new elections before publishing their first paper. They started publishing just before the 2001 elections. Before the elections, they stopped again. The reformists blamed the conservatives for hindering their press. As a result, almost every repressive measure taken by the conservatives in the process worked against them. The murders caused them to lose their legitimacy, which was in question anyway.

Arrests of politicians and court sentences against them are the other critical events of this period. They show the kind of problems that exist between the conservatives and the reformists. One of the reformist politicians arrested is the mayor of Tehran, Golamhossain Kerbashi. He was first arrested in April 1998. The case dragged on until he was taken to Tehran's famous Evin prison. The conservatives aimed to weaken the reformists through this suppression of the famous reformist mayor. Kerbashi was famous and popular in Tehran because of his works. He built many parks in Tehran and organized some public housing in the poor (southern) part of Tehran. The conservatives accused Kerbashi of stealing from the municipality's budget. The conservatives thought that the poor population would revolt against Kerbashi when they heard about the sums he was alleged to have stolen. However, this process did not go as they wanted. Those who accused him were themselves dubious. People continued to believe in Kerbaschi. When he was taken to Evin Prison in May 1999, women wore green headscarves to support him (Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, p.248).

Another reformist politician whom conservatives sharply criticized was Interior Minister Abdullah Nuri. He was the interior minister who solved most of the murders in these killing sprees. Although he was elected minister, the conservative majority in parliament put a ‘veto of confidence’ on him. Then he was elected to the Tehran City Council and edited a reformist newspaper called “Hordad”. The conservatives wanted to prevent Abdullah Nuri from participating in the parliamentary elections. So, shortly after he resigned from the city council for the parliamentary elections, his newspaper was closed and he was imprisoned for five years for activities against the Islamic Revolution. TV showed his sentencing process to make propaganda for the conservatives and weaken the reformists. But once again, this strategy worked against the conservatives. Nuri defended himself well, and this became good propaganda for the reformists. Nuri used the motives of the Shiite faith powerfully by announcing Khatami and the reformists as victims who were oppressed like the martyrs of the Shiite faith (Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, p.231).

Cultural products, the subject of the next chapter, were an essential part of the debate in Iranian political life (Siavoshi, 1997). Khatami was the minister of culture under Rafsanjani. He resigned in 1992 under immense pressure from conservatives who claimed that Khatami’s overly liberal cultural policies were weakening the pillar of Islam and the Islamic Republic and giving way to Western culture in Iran. The culture minister in Khatami’s government, Muhacerani, was among the reformers strongly criticized by conservatives. Muhacerani and Nuri were attacked when they attended a funeral service for those killed in the Iran-Iraq war. Nuri was subsequently arrested (Oğuz & Çakır, 2000, pp. 175, 216. Muhacerani continued his freedom-based cultural policy, although he was beaten up by a group belonging to Ansari-Hizbullah. He successfully received a vote of confidence from Parliament in a question and answer session of the Conservatives. All things considered, he was forced to resign in February 2000 because of the Conservatives’ oppression. He had been the head of the Centre for Dialogue between Civilizations, which was of utmost importance to the Khatami government. Thus, the political events of the Khatami period show that culture is an essential part of the debate between conservatives and reformists. On the other hand, the cultural products reflect these political debates in society.

6. Cultural Life under Khatami

As political events after May 23, 1997, show, culture is at the centre of the debate between conservatives and reformists. After the Islamic Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war, the government suppressed all arts, and people found byways for art. For example, the government banned most types of music except religious and traditional music. It banned women’s singing. Modern dance and traditional dances were

also strictly forbidden in public places. Similar to other countries, people in Iran showed their feelings by performing traditional dances and modern dances during indoor celebrations. Although many arts suffered during this period, cinema, painting, and literature were able to develop despite these prohibitions. Painting in Iran is one of the most developed branches of art. The Museum of Modern Art in Tehran hosts exhibitions of high quality. Painters have found ways to circumvent the prohibitions of the Islamic Republic. In painting, focusing on the details of everyday life is an obedient resistance (Scott, 1990). All arts show resistance in one way or another.

Modern literature has also undergone a similar development. Talattof calls the last period the feminist literary movement or a period of critique (Talattof, 2000, pp. 4-5). Similar methods of resistance can be seen in other fields, such as cinema. The era just before and after Khatami is an era of critique. Although cultural products, women's daily lives, and political events have uneven paths of development, changes in cultural life went hand in hand with political changes in Iran at different paces. This difference helps us to develop a different perspective on the era when we periodize the cultural products instead of analysing only the politicians. In general, the cultural history of the Islamic Republic of Iran can be roughly divided into three periods: First, a beginning with bans in almost all fields of art with the Islamic Revolution and continuing in the wartime period; second, the period of depoliticization under Rafsanjani; and third, the period of criticism under Khatami.

7. A Short History of Cinema

Since the Pahlavi rule, cinema has played an essential role in the disciplinary strategies of the state and the governance of the self (Rekabtalaei, 2018, p.248). Both female and male film stars were gender role models for Westernization and nation-building. Gender roles were a central theme in the media. Gender roles also played an important role as metaphors in discussions of Westernization and independence. After the Islamic Revolution, Hollywood films were banned (Mir-Hosseini, 2001, pp.26-29). Women became invisible in both media and cinema. The central idea of Iranian cinema in the Islamic Revolution was to create a film industry that focused on directors rather than stars, unlike Hollywood. The state used films as propaganda to support the regime (Haghighat, 2000, p.26). In this way, the Iranian film industry received economic support for technical development. In the history of art in the Islamic Republic of Iran, cinema became the most developed branch of art, and Iranian cinema led by directors produced female stars. These stars became role models who criticized gender roles in society. Cinema became a medium for women's self-determination. Rising female stars became role models for women's everyday strategies.

Before focusing on a seminal change in gender roles by pointing out the change in the character of female stars in the movies, an analysis of the change in cinema is essential. A brief history of cinema and its parallels in everyday life and politics can be divided into religious films, war films, children's and village films, and critical films.

7.1 Revolution Years and Religious Films

Instead of shutting down the entire film industry, the system used this industry as propaganda during the first period of cinema in the Islamic Republic of Iran. All films of this first period were either religious films or religious revolutionary films. This era of Iranian cinema is significant. Since support for cinema for the regime's propaganda meant economic support for cinema in return, this economic support was crucial for the technical development of the domestic Iranian film industry. Mir-Hosseini sees the first period as a marriage between ideology and art that hindered Iranian cinema (Mir-Hosseini, 2001, p.5). The technical developments that accompanied this "marriage" are significant. Incidentally, the government's intense economic support for the film industry has created a background that is difficult for developing countries to achieve. Intention and destiny do not go hand in hand. Technical and intellectual developments in the film industry have produced Iranian cinema, which is now known for its creative techniques, critical realism, and hard-to-digest realities of life. Thus, the gradual development of Iranian filmmaking had a fate other than being just a state apparatus.

7.2 The Iran-Iraq War and War Films

With the beginning of the war in the second year of the revolution, a new theme entered Iranian cinema: the Iran-Iraq war. A number of war films were produced during this period. These films have two crucial characteristics: First, they reflect the rising nationalism within society. The nationalist groups that were strengthened by the hegemonic national ideology of the war years later took their place on the reform front and were important partners in the Khatami government. Gender roles played an essential role as metaphors in discussing Westernization and independence (Amin, 2001, p. 335). Second, they reflect the changing status of women and, in parallel, the changing emphasis on Islamic state ideology in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Two images of women are most emphasized as the ideal type of woman: Zainab and Fatima.

Zainab and Fatima are the daughters of Muhammad (Pbuh) Fatima is a mother image in the domestic sphere. Zainab, on the other hand, is an image of a woman who participates in a holy war with men outside

the domestic sphere. The militant type of women of the revolutionary years was identified with the image of Zainab (Poya, 1999, pp. 11-12). However, with the success of the Islamic Revolution, women were pushed back into the domestic sphere. In the early years of Iranian cinema, women were only seen in religious films in the domestic sphere. These war films also reflected a change in women's everyday lives. The need for women's labour in the economy during the war years promoted an active image of women. Thus, the image of Zainab was used extensively in war films in place of the image of Fatima. A recent example of this type of film is "The Saved Ones" by Rasul Molagpour (1996). The difference between this Zainab image and the Fatma image of the revolutionary years was that this image reflected women's long-term participation in the workforce more than ever before in Iran's history. Ghorbankarimi adds that the portrayal of women by strong female directors after the 1980s is an important factor that initiated the change in women's representation in films. (Ghorbankarimi, 2015, pp. 64-96).

7.3 Depoliticization, Children and Village Film

After the war years, during the years of restoration, films were produced that are called Iranian film classics. The most important factor that determined the films of the Restoration period was their political context: these years were the years of Rafsanjani's oppression. This oppression pushed the directors into the details of daily life. Through this depoliticization of the years of oppression, directors produced children's or village films. In line with the central idea of the Islamic Revolution, Iranian cinema created a film industry based on directors rather than stars; Iranian directors used real actors rather than professional actors and actresses. This led to the emergence of "Iranian realism" in cinema. Directors technically danced to the tune of the Islamic Revolution, but they touched on universal values rather than emphasizing collective Islamic values.

Majid Macidi, for example, is a successful director who has produced children's films. Two of his films, "Children of Heaven" (1997) and "Colour of Paradise" (1999), are characteristic examples of this type of film (A Selection, 1997, pp. 14-15; A Selection, 1999, pp. 16-17). In "Children of Heaven," he narrates the relationship between Zohre and Ali, the children of a low-income family in Tehran. Although the situation of this family shows the socioeconomic conditions of the Restoration period with its strong population movement from the villages to Tehran and unemployment, the film focuses on the relationship between brother and sister. The brother loses his sister's shoes. In order not to tell their poor father, they exchange the shoes they own every day to go to school. With the choice of theme and real-life actors, this film is a characteristic example of the Iranian style of realism in the era of depoliticization. Although the subject is cute and political, it is hard to criticize it as political because it is only about the everyday

realities of the bad economic policies of the Rafsancani era that led people into poverty, but that is not mentioned. Fraternal solidarity in poverty is universal.

The other type of film of this realistic cinema is the village film. The fact that the directors use actors from real life gives these films a semi-documentary character. One of the finest examples of this type of film by the famous Iranian director Mohsen Mahmelbaf is “Gabbeh” (A Selection, 1996, pp. 22-23). This film is about the making of Gabbe and the love story of a Qashqai girl. Gabbe is a woolen carpet made by the Turkmen Qashqai nomads in Shiraz province. The film shows fragments of daily life: the role of oral tradition in daily life and the facets of carpet making. Image quality and intelligence have produced a perfect picturesque film. It shows how the Qashqai people live and how their lifestyle is reflected in the images of “Gabbes” through the love story of a Qashqai girl. This groundbreaking film reflects a universal love story, as a true love that contrasts with the obedience to Islamic practices that often put girls in the situation of accepting a man as a husband, even though they neither love nor know him. Gabbah is an anthropological bridge between village and critical films.

7.4 Reform, Critical Films/Women Films

Since the 90s of the last century, criticism of the system has increased and critical films have been produced. However, these films were banned and had no chance of being shown in Iran. In the 1997 presidential elections, most filmmakers and directors openly supported the reform front, which was supported by various professional groups (Mir-Hosseini, 2001, p. 5). After that, the Khatami government allowed many previously banned books and films. Criticism, which increased in the 1990s, was able to reach the public—and thus began the period of criticism of Iranian cinema.

These critiques refer to the people whose lives have become challenging under the Iranian Islamic system. They are generally about the “others” and the “other Iranians” who are at the center of the debate between the reformists and the conservatives: the “Hodi gayri Hodi” debate (the self and the other). the “Hodi gayri Hodi” debate was the most critical debate between the conservatives and the reformists. Sciolino explains the reformists’ gains from this debate as democratization: “Iran today is more democratic than at any time in its history. The era of exclusionary politics that had dominated Iranian life since the beginning of the Revolution, when Khomeini and his lieutenants marginalized all those who did not adhere to their vision of an Islamic state, is over. The slogan “Iran for all Iranians” adopted by reformists during the parliamentary elections of 2000 is the ultimate symbol of that trend. It means that Iranians who don’t believe in the Supreme Leader, Iranians who are not religious, Iranians who left the country years before-

all have a place, however limited, in their country.” (Sciolino, 2000, pp.360-361).

The conservatives are for a system for the “self,” but the reformists are for a system that could be liable for the “others.” The question is: “Is this system only for Islamists or is it for everyone?” Khatami’s books and speeches are also mainly about this debate. These books are a search for a democratic Islamic regime, a regime that can be good for “others” as well (Khatami, 2001; Khatami, 2000). The main message of the reformists in the presidential elections revolved around this idea: “Iran for all Iranians”. The definition of this “other” is not uniform. In general, however, it can be divided into two groups: First, the Iranians who did not accept this regime dominated by religious rules and left the country at the beginning of the revolution; second, the Iranians who live in this regime and are uncomfortable with it.

The history of this first group of “others” can be summarised by a few examples: The films about people who want to leave the country were banned. “Snowman” (1995) by Davud Mir-Begheri, which was banned before Khatami, was allowed. This film is about a man trying to get a visa to America (A Selection, 1996, pp. 48-49.). The people who could not feel comfortable in their country were the others of the system. On the other hand, a new issue emerged: Iranians returning home through the reformist government’s policies to make Iran for all Iranians. *Strangers* (2000) is a film about a young Iranian boy who comes to Iran to search for the childhood home of his recently deceased and estranged father. This film is half autobiography by the U.S.-born director (A Selection, 2000, pp. 42-43). The film reinforces the question of others, as opposed to the stereotypical one-sided Islamic lifestyles.

The second group of “others” can be generalized as follows: The most “unpleasant” group in the Iranian regime are the women, who are the most oppressed by the Islamic Republic’s policy of gender segregation, and the youth, for whom the legitimacy of this system is questionable (Mir-Hosseini, 2007, pp. 673-679). In *Zen u Cevanan* (The Women and the Youth), Khatami addresses the youth and women who form the basis of Khatami’s electoral support and who are the unpleasant “others” in this system (Khatami, 2000). Both groups criticize the gender segregation policy of the system to such an extent that the rules of this segregation policy became one of the central topics for jokes among the youth. Incidentally, the central theme of the period of criticism of Iranian cinema became women. In parallel, in the literature, this period of politicization or criticism is called the women’s period (Talattof, 2000, pp. 4-8).

In the period of criticism, the defeminisation of the films with the bans on women and themes such as love with the Islamic Revolution was also criticized. “A Time to Love” (1991) by Mohsen Makhmalbaf is one of the films that deal with the taboo subject of love (Mir-Hosseini, 2007, pp. 673-679). Makhmalbaf has approached the revolutionary subject of love from different perspectives, as in his film *Gabbah*

mentioned above.

Gender segregation was such a central issue in the politics of the Islamic Republic of Iran that politicization in this period of criticism meant criticizing this gender segregation. This challenging context is one reason why there are female stars and no male stars after the Islamic Revolution. Directors who made children's and village films during the depoliticization of the Rafsanjani era began to make political "women's films" Cafer Panahi, for example, who began his career making children's films, turned to politics with "The Circle". "The Circle" is a harsh critique of the situation of women who cannot find a way out of prostitution unless they abide by the rules of this system (Haghighat, 2000, p.27). Another example is Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, who was also not political or uncritical but set a turning point with her film *The May Lady* (1998) (A Selection, 1998, pp. 48-49). This film is about the problems of a divorced, single woman who lives with her son and loves a man (Naficy, 1995, pp. .548-558; Naficy, 2000, pp.559-577). In these women's films, the highly complex issue of a woman living alone occupies an important place.

A woman living alone, without a husband, may encounter many problems in the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Islamic practices, a woman must live in her father's or husband's house. Independent women are the most feared "others" of the system. For women who escape from their father's or husband's house, there is often no other way than prostitution. *The Girl with Sneakers* (1999), for example, is about a girl who runs away from home at the age of 15 (A Selection, 1999, pp. 20-21). Even more critical is "Runaway" (2001) by directors Kim Longinotto and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, because in this film the woman who runs away is seen as brave enough for such a dangerous activity. Gender roles that have been accepted as unchangeable fates are challenged by the courage to change the imposed conditions. This alternation between the acceptance of fate and the courage to change reflects the socio-political and economic developments that have changed women's lives. Iranian film stars are role models for women who want to survive. To avoid being harassed on the street, a woman must learn to look as cold as Hediye Tehrani. This experience of the present author has helped her to realize the importance of the role of female stars in Iran.

8. From Niki Karimi to Hediye Tehrani Women Audience Make Stars

As mentioned earlier, although the idea of Islamic revolutionary Iranian cinema was to produce a cinema of directors, some of the actresses became so famous that they began to be called the stars of Iranian cinema. The films were produced for women. In this way women audience made stars that they

identified themselves. This is a self exhilarating process. They became role models for women in their actions in everyday life and in their way of life. In this part, two female stars of Iranian cinema are compared to understand the changes in the lives of Iranian women from the post-war period (the 1990s) to today: Niki Karimi and Hediye Tehrani. Their popularity is based on their representativeness of the type of women of their time. Looking at these two images, we simultaneously examine the progress of women in the postwar period: Karimi's sadly smiling face gives way to Hediye Tehrani's self-confident face (see Pictures 2 and 3).

Picture 2

Niki Karimi



Note: Mohammad Kourehpaz, Niki Karimi Date 24 November 2021, 17:42:15, Creative Commons Licence

Karimi began her career at the age of 18 in 1990 with “Temptation.” Her fame spread quickly after “Sare” in 1993, and she was so famous that she became the first female star of the Islamic Republic of Iran. She starred in twelve more movies, of which she also won some awards until 2001 (Muradi-i Kuchi, 2000, p.181). She is a beautiful woman and a good actress, but her popularity stems from the type of woman she embodies. This personality reflects the tragedies of Iranian women in the postwar period, which challenged their lives. First of all, after the death of many men in the war, more women began to live alone.

On the other hand, more women had also started to work. Women found more opportunities to finish their education during this time of war (Poya, 1999, p.105). The rise of education among women is another

important that enables women to challenge the gender roles imposed on them (Rizi, 2015, p.14). The economy's need for female labour was increased by the decrease in male labour. This socioeconomic change in women's lives came into conflict with the Islamic Republic's policy of gender segregation and also with the patriarchal rules of society. This contradictory situation led to tragedies in women's lives. In these contradictory situations, women needed new rights. Poya states, "Thus I show that women's employment, even within an Islamic framework, has undermined the Islamic state's ideology of female seclusion and its gender relationships." adding that the level of gender consciousness in the 1990s is more significant than in the 1960s and 1970s (Poya, 1999, p.159).

Karimi's personality reflects an effort to legitimize women's rights with the duality of "bad men" and "miserable women." For example, she embodies a woman who tries to finish her education but keeps having problems with the "bad men" around her. Or she gets married and has a bad husband and the hard days of the "miserable woman" are portrayed that way. In order to legitimize women's rights, ideal types are used in a didactic way. For example, this type of "bad man" is horrible in an exaggerated way. He is so bad that even the most conservative people cannot feel close to him when they see these films (Naficy, 2012, pp.167-168).

On the other hand, this type of "unfortunate woman" is like an angel, innocent. This type is a Fatima image, a semi-sacred image with all its innocence. Karimi's babyish, fragile facial contours fit this personality perfectly. Ghorbankarimi points that the directors chose Niki Karimi because of her angelic face (Ghorbankarimi, 2015, pp. 128-130). Derayeh thinks that Karimi represents "the late 1980s and early 1990s war film genre; women remained invisible, desexualized, and submissive" (Derayeh, 2010). In an interview about *Two Women (Do Zen)* (1999), Karimi says that the girls who have such a terrible fate are not few (Ashteri & Musevi, 1999, p. 160). The words she chooses also explain a lot about these films. These films are not a direct criticism of the rules. This indirect way is a strategy of the oppressed playing the unfortunate ones. Therefore, what happens to these women is not treated as a criticism of the rules, but as a terrible fate for some women.

In the late 1990s, women became more integrated into the workforce and had more power than in the past. They were no longer just playing hapless but began to see their rights as natural rights of women. This change in the manoeuvres of the oppressed women is a change in the ideological hegemony of the Islamic Republic of Iran resulting from the new position of women in the economy. This process has produced a new star: Hediye Tehrani.

Tehrani began her career at the age of 24 with "The King" (Sultan) in 1997, and she rose to prominence

Picture 3

Hediye Tehrani



Note: Azin Zanjani, Creative Commons Lisence 14 June 2005.

in 1999 with films such as *(Siavash)* and “Red” (*Ghermez*). With “Red” Tehrani won the “simorg-i bellurin” for best actress (*Muradi-i Kuchi*, 2000, p.54). With her last films, she became more and more popular. She became the new star of Iranian cinema. On October 16, 2001, the daily newspaper *Mellat* put Hediye Tehrani in first place among the ten best women in Iranian cinema and Karimi in third place (*Mellat*, 16 October 2001, no.136).

In second place is Leyla Khatami, who also embodies a more confident woman than the Karimi type (*Mellat*, 3 July 2001, No.49, 10.). Moreover, Tehrani was declared the most successful actress after the revolution in *Millet* on August 5, 2001, and her films achieved sales records (*Millet*, 5 August 2001.). But why has the image of famous women changed? Why do so many women adore Tehrani?

Tehrani embodies a lonely and strong type of woman in most of her films, and it is no coincidence that such a personification becomes a star. As explained in the previous pages, one of the most important themes of the period of criticism is the problem of a woman living alone. Tehrani’s fame is not only based on her representativeness of the socioeconomic situation of many women in Iran, but she is also an image that they want to be themselves. She does not embody an unreal image like Karimi, who is sacred like a modern Zeynep image, and Tehrani is an image of real hope.

It is the hope to be as solid and self-confident as she is. This strength comes from two aspects: Economic and ethical. Tehrani represents a woman who is rich enough not to have the burden of a bad

husband. When women do not work and earn money, they are more dependent on their husbands. In her case, there is no such dependence because she is almost always a working woman. As mentioned earlier, money gives women some freedom in Iran. For example, a bribe can save a woman from a bad position due to gender segregation. Her moral strength (which comes from her self-confidence) shows the change of ideological hegemony regarding gender segregation. For example, it is her right to love, divorce, or work with a man, which is not in line with the ideology of the Islamic Republic, where women must first seek permission to work or divorce their husbands.

On the other hand, Tehrani is a model of women's manoeuvring against oppression in the streets. According to the idea of gender segregation in the Islamic Republic of Iran, "women" dress to protect themselves from the harassment of men" on the street. However, the *ruseri* cannot serve as a protective garment in everyday life. On the contrary, it gives men the right to harass women by making them "things". This dilemma is one of the important ethical issues that undermine the conservative Islamic ideology in Iran. Why is a woman sunbathing in a bikini or naked on a lake beach in Germany is not harassed, but a woman wearing a black *ruseri* and manto is harassed in Tehran streets?

And against this oppression on the street, women behave just like Tehrani, like a snake on the street, which must not be disturbed. One paper also says that the interesting thing about her is that she is a woman who is not afraid of men (Mellat, 3 July 2001, No.49, 10). This strong, confident type of woman is a type that Iranian women have to mimic every day in order not to be bothered on the street. The way she walks on the street is characteristic, and she looks at the men on the street like small animals. The survival story of women in the streets of Iran, their power, and their strategies against oppression forced them to learn to mime a snake-like face on the street, which is the existential strategy of women who are made into "things" with the chador or the *ruseri*.

The films for which Tehrani became famous can tell a lot about her image. For example, "Siavash" is about a single woman who has a relationship with a married man. At the end of Showkeran, the director explains why he chose Tehrani for this role. He says that Tehrani, whom the Iranian people love so much, was the only one to whom the Iranian people could show more tolerance. But it is not only the people's love for Tehrani that contributes to the tolerance for such a role but also Tehrani's confident face.

On the other hand, "Red" is about a married woman whose husband is a madman. She tries to get a divorce, but cannot because of governmental and social regulations. In the end, she solves the problem herself by killing her husband. This behaviour is the difference between Karimi and Tehrani. Karimi is an unhappy woman who understands events as misfortune. Tehrani, on the other hand, is a woman who

is convinced that she has every right to divorce her husband, no matter what the state regulations or her family say. She tries everything to change the bad things in her life, even killing her husband.

9. Conclusion

The idea that Iranian cinema was designed as an ideal image of Iranian society by the state and that it does not appear as the anthropological mirror of society is often mentioned (Devictor, 20004). It is a crucial debate in Iran whether reformists could or can change anything. Various groups support Khatami, who is also a mollah. Is this another failure? The mollahs, who do everything they can against Khatami's supporters, declare after the elections that the votes for Khatami show popular support for the regime. They are trying to use this as a legitimizing factor. Was Khatami a legitimizing factor for the system or hope for change? A satirical critic of Khatami, Nebevi, says that Khatami could not change the fact that newspapers were closed and writers were arrested, even though he was elected for four years (Nebevi, 2001).

In contrast to these discussions, this paper makes the state-centered perspective upside down by learning from experience and turning to performance theory and shows that the needs of the women audience influenced the actresses and the actresses who could respond to the everyday needs of women to govern their mimics became stars. This was a process that changed hand in hand with the socio-economic developments. Hegemonic ethical values and "naturalizations" of women changed with changing socioeconomic conditions. The change in the image of women from Niki Karimi to Hediye Tehrani is one facet of a challenge in women's everyday lives, the turning point where they no longer have to play the innocent plastic dolls, patience stones, honour bearers, homemakers, and "commodified others" but become free actors, who may dare to smile. Dönmez-Colin also points out that there are parallels between the Iranian and Turkish films "stereotyping or victimizing women, from inflated plastic dolls, patience stones, bearers of honour bearers, housewives and "commodified others" to free agents." (Dönmez-Colin, 2020). All in all, we can understand the change in history through various facets of everyday life, the change in actresses, and even the history of smiles on the street. The actresses in the movies and the women on the street change their places in the history of Iran. A look back at history can help us understand that women make history every day on the streets as if it were a pride parade. This history took Taraneh Alidoosti from the cinema to the street and will continue to bring the participants of the parade to the movies in the future.

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