

**Iranian Women Unveiled (2020): a documentary film about six
Iranian women activists produced in relation to a feminist
analysis of the representation of Iranian women in cinema
Parsafar, P.**

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Iranian Women Unveiled (2020):
**A Documentary Film about Six
Iranian Women Activists Produced
in Relation to a Feminist Analysis of
the Representation of Iranian
Women in Cinema**

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Pune Parsafar

2332167

Faculty of Arts and Creative Industries
Middlesex University London

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Abstract

My PhD is a practice-based project containing a feature-length documentary, *Iranian Women Unveiled*, and an accompanying written thesis. The documentary is a portrayal of the lives and struggles of six influential Iranian women activists, now living in exile, engaged in a number of areas of political and social activism. These areas encompass the fight for women's rights and equality, for secularism, free thought and expression, for civil liberties, the abolition of the death penalty and stoning, redress for families of executed political prisoners, and for workers' rights. The six women in my film, together, thus represent important areas of social protest in the current Iranian society against the Islamic regime, institutions and laws in Iran and, more generally, against political Islam.

I made my documentary as a practical contribution to the development of a progressive and independent cinema in Iran. The choice of women activists was a deliberate attempt to leverage an empowered representation of women in cinema, as a polar opposite to the dominant patriarchal and misogynistic portrayals of women in Iran's official cinema, which are explored in the thesis.

My documentary explores representation of women in cinema around a number of key themes, such as women's bodies, women's voice, dance, music and use of colour. Women's free expression in all these areas comes

into conflict with the misogynistic laws and institutions in place in Iran. The cinematic forms and devices that I employ aim to allow an actually existing, empowered image of the Iranian women to emerge.

The thesis, as well as the film, build a foundation for further research on the representation of women in cinema in other countries living under Islamic laws. The critical perspectives and the particular practical-activist approach employed also have the potential to be applied to studies of women's rights (and wider social justice) issues in films and artistic productions in the West and globally.

Documentary submission

Iranian Women Unveiled (2020)

<https://youtu.be/oBjlla5-CKg>

Key words:

Iran; Iranian; Women; Representation; Activist; Documentary film; Official cinema; Independent; Agency; Human rights.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The idea for my research and film started from observations and then critical thinking both as a consumer of films and in my own professional life with thirty years of experience in documentary video making and broadcasting. My PhD project is a critical reflection on how Iranian women have been represented in cinema, articulating and including a filmmaking practice that seeks to challenge the patriarchal and misogynistic representation of Iranian women in mainstream cinema, whether in Iran's official or independent cinema or in the cinema in the West, by offering different forms of representation of contemporary women activists. Thus, the research comprises both a feature-length film – made of six discrete episodes – and this thesis. The research falls at the intersection of different fields of protest, feminist documentary cinema studies, Iranian cinema studies and film practice. In addition to claims of contribution to cinema studies, the theoretical and historical insights obtained through the primary stage of the research and the data collected may also be perceived and employed later as a contribution to women's studies, histories of feminist activism, an oral history of Iranian opposition, historiography of Iranian genocide and to diaspora studies. This project situates itself within a theoretical and practical emancipatory and feminist cinema of protest, activism and intervention.

I began this PhD research by considering how the portrayal of Iranian women in Iranian cinema had presented me with images I was

uncomfortable with, to say the least, and which I found incompatible with my own experience as a woman from Iran and with the reality of the lives of the women in that society. These representations are critically examined and the ideological meanings underpinning them are explored in Section 1. Based on this critical evaluation, my aim was to contribute, through my documentary film, discussed in Section 2, to novel ways of representing women, gender and sexuality in cinema, from a modern, emancipatory and feminist perspective.

In my PhD, my practice is the evidence, the core of the project and the primary method of enquiry. My documentary film as a cinematic practice aims to be the embodied knowledge and the central output of my practice-based PhD, namely a piece of research, where an 'insightful practice is submitted as a substantial part', 'a key method' and 'substantial evidence of a research inquiry' (Nelson, 2013b: 9). Section 2 describes how my documentary is made up of six discrete episodes, narrating the lives and struggles of six Iranian women activists. The film aims to challenge the dominant portrayals of Iranian women, primarily in Iran's official cinema. It aims to reinforce female agency by presenting narratives about these women as agents of change. These narratives provide an active platform to explore questions of representation, experimenting with cinematic forms and styles, and searching for and developing new, more progressive approaches. The work challenges the current patriarchal and misogynistic representations of Iranian women that dominate Iran's official cinema

described in Section 1. My principal aim was to describe how from my perspective as a socialist feminist film-maker, I would set out to challenge the traditional and conservative representations prevalent in not just Iranian cinema (fiction and documentary) but also many mainstream films in the West, which stereotypically, from an orientalist/cultural relativist perspective, depict women from Iran as timid, traditional homemakers, apparently content and at ease with 'their' culture and the sexism and misogyny they experience. The resulting documentary that I produced as a practice-based research project is an application of this counter-perspective, based on certain methodological choices in its making, for example, in the adoption of the documentary form, in the choice of participants, in the narrative design and in the particular use of colour and personal objects.

Section 1 aims to explore the following research questions: What feminist readings can be made of the portrayal of Iranian women in official Iranian cinema, in both fictional and documentary modes, after the Islamic regime established control of cinematic production? To what extent can insights be developed from the international activist documentary film practice to provide a different trajectory to Iran's fictional cinema?

Documentary was a conscious decision for this project due to my own professional experience as a documentary maker. I had applied this experience to the making of a documentary about activist women through *Nadia* (2004), a short documentary, as part of my MA project at Middlesex

University, portraying the life and struggle of Nadia Mahmood, an Iraqi refugee woman living in London. As in the film produced from this PhD research, I researched, filmed and edited *Nadia* as a one-person filmmaker, and explored different, more empowered forms of representation in cinema for Middle Eastern women. The film shows Nadia's personal life, as well as her work and political activism. It was screened at Refuge in Films Festival, BFI Southbank in 2008. I have also been making TV programmes for activist women and men (New Channel TV, 2004–12) (*Bread and Roses*, 2014-16). All these activities, along with my own life experience as a woman from Iran – where I was born and lived till my late twenties – inspired me to create a different kind of narrative about women; women who galvanise people into action, into change. The lives of the women in my film are a selection from many more lives, which reflect fragments of my own character, my own history.

In my discussion of my practice in Section 2 I explore the following research question, using the insights gained from my research outlined in Section 1: To what extent can a feminist approach to the documentary film genre be developed and employed to represent Iranian women in a feminist and emancipatory light?

Thesis structure

The thesis is composed of two main sections: 1) The Critique; and 2) My Documentary. The rationale for this structuring and order of presentation is that I have intended my documentary as a positive, practical response to the critique I provide, in the first section, of the prevalent representations of Iranian women in both mainstream fiction in Iran's official cinema (Chapter 3) and independent feature film and documentary cinema (Chapter 4). The thesis therefore begins with a critical review of existing literature on Iran's contemporary official cinema, including work on documentary, in order to demonstrate some of the critical problems regarding the representation of women.

In this thesis I have defined Iran's official cinema as films made inside or outside Iran with the financial and ideological support of the Islamic Republic of Iran, explicitly or secretly [For an example of how the Islamic Republic's Intelligence Ministry are making films abroad, see (Ghafoori Azar, 2020) about the making of one such film in Germany, Europe]. These films are wholly, from proposal to exhibition, controlled by the state, through the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). It is widely known that Iran's official cinema is a censored entity. This censorship is strictly enforced by rules published by the MCIG (Naficy, 1995). Films have to pass the specific checkpoints set out by the MCIG so they fit in the Islamic Republic cinematic framework. The filmmakers often work alone and are handpicked after a thorough vetting process. They must have proved their loyalty to the regime via specific actions, routes and references. The state-

sponsored director Dehnamaki, who is discussed in Chapter 3, is a clear example. Grade A filmmakers are given the highest level of support, including equipment, such as synch sound, extra negative stock, and so on, resulting in production of films of higher technical quality (Naficy, 2012: 228). For example, Narges Abyar (Afzali, 2020), Hatamikia (Esfandiari, 2021), Majid Majidi and Tahmineh Milani (Mehr News Agency, 2006) and many other filmmakers have been received by the supreme leader, who has given them ‘guidance’ on the ‘influential role’ of cinema and the need for the filmmaker to accept ‘responsible criticism’ from the official bodies (i.e. accept censorship) (Khamenei.ir, 2006). Even so, filmmakers may still find themselves banned from working. For example, Jafar Panahi was put under house arrest, Makhmalbaf had to go on self-exile and Farhadi had to apologise after imposition of a ban on his production (Yong, 2010).

As with all other forms of artistic productions in Iran, making a film requires “artistic licence” (Article 19, 2006: 7), whereby every facet of the product is scrutinised by a web of officials and para-officials within MCIG. En route to obtaining approval, self-censorship is tightly entrenched with the filmmakers, starting with the topic of the film. This is invariably the pre-conceived scenario for all cinematic productions in Iran, whether fiction or non-fiction, short or feature-length. However, according to Naficy, ‘[g]rade “A” filmmakers are exempted from having to submit their screenplays for approval before production’ (Naficy, 2012: 227). After obtaining a permit for exhibition, there is the issue of which cinemas the film could be screened in.

Thus, both the number of permits and the cinemas where they can be screened vary according to the permit. The cinemas and the films (mostly fiction but also documentaries) produced in Iran with permit are funded by different official and semi-official bodies of the regime. There are no restrictions for the *khodi* (insider) filmmakers. However, there is a grade even among the insider filmmakers under the Islamic regime. Following certain criteria, some films are offered 'best exhibition sites, optimal opening dates and longer runs, ... [also] granted higher budgets and lower interest loans' (Naficy, 2012: 227).

As I discuss in Chapter 2, there is a dearth of objective scholarship on the representation of women in Iran's official cinema, and much of what exists, with few exceptions, either ignores or rationalises the skewed representations of women in Iran's official cinema. Nevertheless, the review aims to critically locate the project within existing scholarship. This is followed by critical reviews, in separate chapters, of key films from Iran's official, as well as independent, cinema. Thus, from Iran's official cinema, a number of works of Abbas Kiarostami and Asghar Farhadi are analysed, arguing that in their treatment of the women characters, far from subverting the traditional patriarchal portrayals, they merely repeat and reinforce them. A comparative scene analysis of two films with contrasting gender perspectives (Dehnamaki's *The Outcasts* and Milani's *Unwanted Woman*) looks at the use of various cinematic devices in creating the intended images. A further section considers the work of four women filmmakers.

In Chapter 3, I review some key films from Iran's independent cinema. Here the difficulties that many of these films still face in moving beyond a representation of women as mere 'victims' is discussed within their wider perspectives, which often play down the role and power of the active, human agency for change.

The definition of independent filmmaking in Iran which I have adopted in my thesis includes independent productions in the Iranian diaspora and films from Iran's underground cinema. I define diaspora films as those produced outside Iran without any financial or ideological links to the Islamic Republic. An example would be *Persepolis* (Satrapi and Paronnaud, 2007). There are a very limited number of independent feature films of this kind, and they tend not to have any access to Iran's market and audience. The main reason for the small number of such productions is the complexity of production, in particular the size of the film crew and lack of resources. Apart from *Persepolis* (Satrapi and Paronnaud, 2007), other examples include *The Mission* (Sayyad, 1983), *Guests of Hotel Astoria* (1989), *For A Moment of Freedom* (Riahi, 2008), *Stoning of Soraya M.* (Nowrasteh, 2009) and *I Miss You Friend* (Nikazar, 2020). These products vary in their production mode. The collective and participatory modes, for example, are often chosen due to funding constraints. Although Iranian movies, such as *A Separation*, have been counted as independent (Film International Journal 2014), as I have explained in Chapter 3, they are not independent since they are subject to

state audit and verification throughout their production and exhibition, as well as having possible state or state-affiliated sources of funding. Mahnaz Mohammadi's *Son - Mother* is an example of a movie which was not given screen time at all, although the film had full permission (Iran International, 2021). In my classification, underground films are also considered independent. I will study *No One Knows About Persian Cats* as an example of this cinema.

There are local 'independent' documentary productions around social and political issues made in Iran. These films have limited public viewings in Iranian cinemas. A feature of these films is that they tend to approach issues from a grassroots point-of-view. This is an indicator of most documentary filmmakers' concerns with social issues in Iran. However, in spite of the untying effects of technological and digital advances on censorship, the filmmakers have to follow the demands of the censors in order to be able to work under the Islamic Republic. Examples that I have given in Chapter 3 include Raha Faridi's *Chicheka Lullaby* (2019), Keywan Karimi's *Writing on the City* (2015) and Mahnaz Mohammadi's *Travelogue (Kooch Nameh, 2008)*, which were to varying degrees affected by censorship. *Profession: Documentarist* (Abtahi et al., 2014) unusually was made collectively, while *Sonita* (Ghaemmaghani, 2016) was produced by a more conventional crew. Some examples of the latter include Mahnaz Afzali's *The Ladies (Zananeh)* and *Mother of the Earth (Madare Zamin)* (2003, 2016); *Article 61* (Madehye 61, (2005) and *Where Do I Belong? (Be Koja Talogh Daram? 2007)*, both by

Mahvash Sheikholeslami; Mahnaz Mohammadi's *Women Without Shadows* (Zanan Bedune Sayeh, 2003) and *Rough Cut* (Khosravani, 2002) which considers state control, censorship and limited or lack of funding. Many use online crowdfunding channels for their productions, such as *Mutiny of Colours* (Tabrizy and Khoshdel, 2015) and *Chicheka Lullaby*. Another consequence of censorship on local independent documentary is unsympathetic audience. This is in contrast to TV documentaries shown on Farsi-language satellite TV channels, which take a critical stance towards the government in Iran, such as Iran International, Manoto, VOA, BBC Persian and New Channel TV, which have attracted big audiences due to their political stance and their secular, modern and culturally Western outlook and content.

Negar Masoudi is one of many independent documentary filmmakers who have been harassed, arrested and imprisoned. Her film *Wet Weapon* (Masoudi, 2020) is about acid attacks in Isfahan, for the making of which she has been serving a prison term in Tehran's Evin prison. Another example is Rokhsareh Ghaem-maghami and her documentary *Sonita* (2016), which is about an Afghan teenager, who wishes to become a rapper. But she is also due to be married off by her mother. The film is interesting on many levels, including the subject-filmmaker relationship and questions of objectivity and ethical issues. The choice of Afghan women as the subject of the film is interesting as it provides the Iranian filmmakers the possibility of indirectly exploring similar issues which women in Iran are facing. *Sonita*

has thus managed to circumvent the censorship to some degree as it is ostensibly exploring a 'foreign' issue.

Another category is international independent documentary films. Since the digital revolution – around the turn of the century - more of these films have been produced and the strict control of the Islamic regime on filmmaking and distribution has collapsed. As a result, we have witnessed citizen video activism and its role in the creation and development of independent documentaries, such as in *For Neda* (Thomas, 2010). Many of these documentaries have been made in participatory mode, mostly using single-camera, low-budgets and in a self-reflective style, such as *Holy Crime* (Allamehzadeh, 1994), *All Greet You* (Yousefi, 2022), Mania Akbari's *Life May Be* (Akbari and Cousins, 2014), a collaboration with Mark Cousins, and *A Moon for My Father* (Akbari and White, 2019). Some films are shot clandestinely in Iran and are edited and screened outside Iran, such as *Voices of the Unheard* (Geramifard, 2009), *Prostitution: Behind the Veil* (*Prostitution bag sløret*) (Persson Sarvestani, 2004), *In the Bazaar of the Sexes* (Mortezai, 2009), *Epitaph* (Ghobadi and Mansouri, 1998), *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (Ghobadi, 2009) and *Execution of a Teenage Girl* (Garnsey, 2006). These films are shot secretly since the filmmakers are at risk of arrest, torture and accusation of espionage, and, therefore, possible execution. Normally, they have no access to cinemas - whether in Iran or outside – and work on shoestring budgets. Though without a direct access to an audience via cinema, these films may be viewed online or via satellite

TVs by the audiences in Iran. Some notable examples within this category include *Born in Evin* (Zaree, 2019), *In the Bazaar of the Sexes*, *Divorce Iranian Style*, *A Few Simple Shots*, *Iranian Women's Liberation Movement in the Year Zero* (Femmes du MLF, 1979), *From Scream to Scream* (Bahrami, 2004), *And In Love I Live* (Bahrami, 2008), *Marginal Road* (Ameri, 2011), *Be Like Others* (Eshaghian, 2008), Geramifard's *Iran: Voices of the Unheard* (2009) and *Forbidden Sun Dance* (Ghobadi, 2008).

I have defined independent cinema in the particular context of Iran (Chapter 4: Independent cinema: a definition, p. 104) and employed it in that sense throughout my thesis. The term 'independent' also encompasses concepts/genres, such as 'Political', 'Oppositional', 'Radical', 'Activist' and 'Protest' filmmaking. It is similar to Presence's explanation/description of his own approach and the terms employed in his PhD thesis. For example, he chooses 'left-wing' (in the context of the UK) to define many of the terms above:

However, words themselves are sites of struggle and I therefore often describe the films here simply as 'radical' or 'explicitly political' as much as 'oppositional', with my usage of these words being part of that struggle for meaning. I also consciously eschew other potentially useful descriptors, such as 'underground', 'counter', or 'autonomous'. While 'underground' is a suitable way of describing some of the less-than-legal organisational tactics of the radical left, it is also suggestive of the mainstream portrayal of radical politics as illegitimate. (Presence, 2013: 3)

A quick comparison between the above quotation by Presence and my account of cinema in Iran shows that these terms change meaning

drastically when they enter the Iranian context. For instance, in Iran underground activity is an illegitimate concept for both the left movement and its associated cinema with potentially deadly consequences, while in the UK and US it has only had counter-cultural implications.

Comolli and Narboni (1972) argue that 'every film is political'. In Iran, activist cinema is undeniably a political cinema since for the state too cinema, which is under its total control, is a political and propaganda instrument (see Khomeini's declaration about cinema in 1979 about using it as a propaganda tool, which is still today widely referred to). Many documentaries in Iran fit the activist cinema from that perspective, such as *Our Times* (Banietamad, 2001a), *We Are Half of Iran's Population* (Banietamad, 2009), *All My Trees* (Banietamad, 2014), *Mother of the Earth* (Afzali, 2016), *Mahak: A World She Founded* (Abdolvahab, 2017) and *Touran Khanoom* (Mirtahmasb and Banietamad, 2018), all of which are mostly cinematic portraits of individual women in the fields of arts, enterprise or environmental, social and political activism (See for instance Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic, Atwood, 2016, for an account of Banietamad's reformist perspective). These are good examples of socially conscious documentaries made inside Iran concerned with mostly prominent women's lives. They are often made by women co/directors and producers (The idea for *Lady of the Roses* came from a woman and in *Mahak* Banietamad worked as the project consultant).

Independent filmmaking in the West has a long and distinct history aesthetically (in terms of content and in its mode of production) in direct contrast and comparison to the mainstream and Hollywood cinema (see for instance American Independent Cinema (Tzioumakis, 2017)). In Iran, attempts have been made by government institutions to market products of Iran's official cinema as independent, specifically aimed at a Western and international audience (See Film International 2014). However, official films such as Farhadi's are far from being independent – judged by the criteria of their sources of funding, modes of production or content. To define what is independent in the context of Iranian cinema, it is important to understand that it is a relatively new cinema, with roots in the 1979 revolution; a cinema that began to grow quickly with the birth of digital technology and, later, the social media, and which has continued to develop further with advances in the social struggles, especially the women's movement. This cinema includes documentaries by social and political rights activist women filmmakers such as Lila Ghobadi: *Epitaph* (Ghobadi and Mansouri, 1998), *Forbidden Sun Dance* (Ghobadi, 2008); Kim Longinotto: *Divorce Iranian Style* (Longinotto and Mir-Hosseini, 1998), *Runaway* (Longinotto, 2001); Pantea Bahrami: *Islam: My Identity or the Reason for My Escape* (2001), *From Scream to Scream* (2004), *And in Love I live* (2008), *Women's Right is Human Right* (2011); Sudabeh Mortezaei: *In the Bazaar of the Sexes* (Mortezaei, 2009); and Nahid Persson Sarvestani: *Prostitution: Behind the Veil* (Prostitution bag sløret, 2004), *Four Wives and One Husband* (Fyra fruar och en man, 2007) and *My Stolen Revolution* (2013).

There is a lack of research on independent radical documentary filmmaking within Iranian cinema, especially from a feminist and emancipatory practitioner perspective. My thesis steps into this gap in order to show that on the contrary this radical documentary filmmaking not only exists, but it also leads as the vanguard of the oppositional cinema among Iranians both inside (in the form of underground filmmaking) and outside (within the Iranian diaspora). Since starting my research, this movement has grown also within Iran due to the growing social and political protests. However, as demonstrated in my practice, making an oppositional film outside Iran - away from the high walls and barbed wires of censorship - lets the filmmaker explore more freely the avenues of artistic and political expression.

Section 2 (My Documentary) explains how my critique of existing representations translates into a practical project, applying an alternative, emancipatory perspective to the representation of women in cinema. In other words, Section 1 provides the critical foundations for the making of the documentary, while Section 2 positively re-affirms that critical foundation. This structure is at the same time a reflection of the two concurrent processes in the fulfilment of this project: the making of the documentary and the writing of the thesis. The chapter on theory considers the theoretical approaches (essentially on documentary and feminist film theory), which I have adopted as explanatory frameworks for my thesis and

documentary. Thus, relevant references are made to the works of Samuel Brody, Bill Nichols, Laura Mulvey, Bertolt Brecht, Claire Johnston and Annette Kuhn, among others.

As I discuss later in the thesis (under My Documentary), my decision about the temporal connection between these two processes was to have them run more or less in parallel, given the crucial link between them and how the development of one depended on, and fed back into, the other.

In Section 2, I provide a detailed commentary, reflection and analysis of my documentary film. Thus, I discuss my documentary under a number of discrete themes, from conception to completion, demonstrating the rationale for the methodological choices in both content and form. The Section discusses why I opted for a practice-based project in the first place, why the documentary format, why feature length, why I decided to centre the film on six women, why they are all women and why all activists. In this section I also talk about the film's formal, stylistic and technical choices - from self-shooting and placing myself in the frame, to the use of colour and personal objects; from first-person narrative to the interview format; from women's bodies to women's voice; from diegetic music to the dance scenes. I also reflect on the journey in the making of the documentary: from deciding on my participants, arranging the interviews and the shooting and travelling around Europe, to postproduction (transcription, translation,

editing and subtitling). The rationale for the methodological choices in the making of the documentary is discussed under each heading.

The ideological perspectives underpinning representations of Iranian women in cinema

Broadly speaking, my research has identified three ideological perspectives on the representation of Iranian women in cinema (with their inevitable overlaps): 1) Orientalist/cultural-relativist, 2) Conservative/religious, and 3) Emancipatory/feminist perspectives. In Section 1 of the thesis, in Chapter 2, I discuss these contrasting perspectives during a critical review of the literature on Iran's official cinema. Then in Chapters 3 and 4, I examine the reflection of these perspectives in the selected films and scenes from Iran's official, as well as independent, cinema. My own work (both the written thesis and the documentary) is a critique of these orientalist, cultural-relativist and religious perspectives, situating itself within, and contributing towards, an emancipatory, feminist perspective.

Orientalist/cultural-relativist perspectives

The orientalist and cultural-relativist view of the Iranian woman has been prevalent in cinema in the West. Even in films with modern settings, Iranian

women have been portrayed in a variety of roles, but overwhelmingly as helpless victims, submissive wives, concubines, traditional homemakers, devout Muslims, belly dancers, etc. At times, they have figured as mere shadows in the background, as extras, chador-clad women tucked away in homes, or they have been conspicuous by their total absence in public, in plots centred around men's lives and experiences. Even modern films reproduce these images (or lack of an image) of the women from ancient Persia or Arabia (akin to the women of the Arabian tales or harems, portrayed in orientalist paintings) (Said, 2014). One example is Zack Snyder's *300* (2007). A modern variant of the orientalist perspective is the cultural-relativist view, which offers a similarly stereotypical and anachronistic image of the present-day Iranian women as timid, religious, traditional housewives, mothers, sisters and daughters (*Argo*, 2012; *Robo Cop*, 2014). These images increasingly stand out as grotesque, stereotypical and out of place as information about Iranian society and the reality of the lives of Iranian women becomes more widespread. Dynamics such as demographic changes and interactions (migration), the global information and communication revolution and, crucially, the social protests and revolutions, since 2009, in Iran, North Africa and the Middle East, and more recently the phenomenon of the Girls of Revolution Street in Iran (Radio Farda, 2019), have helped to bring the contrast between these images and the real lives and struggles of women in Iran into full view.

Conservative/religious perspectives

These perspectives manifest themselves in the representation of Iranian woman in Iran's official cinema at two broad levels: first, there is an extreme form which is the result of the oppressive, regressive and extremely conservative legal and political-religious system in place. The typical image of the woman here mirrors the perspective and ideal of the religious and political establishment. She is conservative, a home-maker, dependent on the man, meek, god-fearing, chaste, and a sinner, if she pursues her own goals at their expense; at best, she can be a victim, saved and forgiven by the merciful and compassionate man; at worst, she is the cause of man's temptation and downfall. The second, less extreme form, is a result of a dominant perspective within Iranian cinema. It, too, portrays a meek and conservative image of the Iranian woman, which is out of step with the actual lives and outlook on life of the modern, defiant and unwieldy Iranian woman, who refuses to accept her unequal social position under a repressive, misogynistic religious state. There is an overlap here, of course, with the orientalist and cultural-relativist perspectives within Western cinema.

Emancipatory/feminist perspectives

Such perspectives are evident in the portrayal of the Iranian woman, in both documentary and fiction, but particularly documentary, within the Iranian

underground film scene and Iranian diaspora. This milieu has produced, and is producing, interesting films, with departures from the traditional perspectives that have dominated Iranian cinema, specifically in dealing with the portrayal of women and issues of religion, gender and sexuality. Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, many films in this cinema are still often unable to move beyond a “victim” portrayal of women (Chapter 4: Contrasting perspectives in the representation of women in Iran's independent cinema: victim or fighter?) (Rosen, 1973; Mulvey, 1975; Williams, 1991; Cuklanz, 2013; Haskell, 2016). There is a greater correspondence here with the lives, preoccupations and concerns of present-day Iranian woman and the key issues that make up the real discourse of Iranian society and population today; issues such as compulsory veiling, woman's sexuality, marriage, age of marriage (Center for Human Rights in Iran, 2018), child abuse, right to divorce, custody of children, equal access to employment, inheritance, the penal code, legal redress, etc. Those involved in this lively film scene are often young filmmakers (predominantly in the underground film space inside Iran) and a mix of young and exiled veteran filmmakers and visual artists outside Iran, in the Iranian diaspora. The development of this cinema has been in response to the political, social and cultural repression of the past few decades in Iran, as well as the lack of a credible and more authentic representation of Iranian life and society in the mainstream cinema in the West. My own film and research sit within this critical movement in art and cinema in Iran (both underground and diaspora cinema) and aim to give a clearer voice to it.

The practical-activist approach of my work: primacy of the human agency

The perspective adopted in my research highlights the possibilities and potential power of the human agency for change. In this I am following the method of Karl Marx's 'active' or 'practical' materialism, as outlined in *The German Ideology* (1845-46) (Marx and Engels, 2011) and more succinctly in the famous *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845) (later published by Fredrick Engels, after Marx's death). 'For the practical materialist, i.e. the communist', write Marx and Engels, 'it is a question of revolutionising the existing world, of practically attacking and changing things' (Marx and Engels, 2011). This is in contrast to old materialism (including that of Feuerbach), which conceives man only as an 'object of the senses', not as 'sensuous activity'. Similarly, in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx criticises old materialism for not conceiving 'human activity itself as *objective* activity' and for forgetting that 'circumstances are changed by men and that is essential to educate the educator himself'. The *Theses on Feuerbach* ends with the famous 11th thesis that 'Philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it'. This active, human agency-centred perspective allows for the kind of activism, which my research has been informed by and which it has tried to reflect in its exploration of the issue of

women's representation and in the documentary. The perspective adopted in my project is also informed, closer to our time, by the writings of the influential Iranian Marxist Mansoor Hekmat (d. 2002), whose works are based on a non-deterministic, active-agency reading of Marx (Hekmat, 2000, 2001). Mansoor Hekmat's Marxism has had an important impact on the political and social activists in Iran's opposition, including the women participants in my film, who make several references to him.

SECTION 1: The Critique

Chapter 2: Literature review: women and Iran's cinema

I review existing research specifically under the theme of representation of Iranian women in cinema. Under this theme, the literature dealing mainly with Iran's official cinema, but also the independent cinema, is reviewed. Although the focus is on the post-revolutionary period under the Islamic Republic, the literature dealing with cinema prior to 1979, where relevant, is also included.

The Islamic forces that later were to form the Islamic Republic, even from before the revolution condemned film screenings and attacked cinemas. In one of the attacks, just after 8pm on 19th August 1978, a group of Islamists blocked the entrance and the exits to Cinema Rex in the southern city of Abadan and set it on fire. Trapped inside, over 400 people lost their lives (Celli, 2016: 78; Tavaana, 2014). The Islamists continued to set fire to many more cinemas later that year, describing them as symbols of Western imperialism and cultural decadence, following Ayatollah Khomeini's sermons. Such attacks were ominous signs of the shape of things to come, both for social life as a whole and for the cultural and artistic institutions of the country.

The arrival of an intensely anti-modernist and misogynistic Islamic state onto the political and social stage of Iranian society completely overwhelmed and limited the cultural and artistic landscape, and with it the

space for the development of a cinema that was independent from the state. As the regime tried to consolidate itself, women, as the representatives of this “decadence” in the eyes of the religious regime, were the first victims of the attacks on modernity and civil society. Women's place in filmmaking and their portrayal in cinema were a special target of this broader regressive cultural and social onslaught. If women were to appear in film, their bodies had to be covered up with the Islamic hijab, which made them invisible or pushed them into the background. A detailed discussion of Khomeini's declaration of forced hijab post-1979 can be found in Nasser Mohajer and Mahnaz Matin's two-volume (in Farsi) *The Post-revolutionary Women's Uprising of March 1979 (Khizesh Zanan dar Esfande 1357, Tavalodi Digar, 2010)*.

The cinema that has developed in post-revolutionary Iran, in the past four decades or so, bears all the hallmarks of this systematic attack on modernity, culture, art and film.

The compulsory reveiling of women was followed in quick order by an onslaught in all areas of women's personal, legal and social rights. The Family Protection Act was suspended; the legal marriage age for girls was lowered to thirteen, and later to nine; female judges were disqualified from the bench; technical and vocational schools were closed to girls; women were banned from certain fields of higher education, such as engineering, agriculture and mathematical science; and hundreds of female professionals, teachers and government employees were purged, pressured into early retirement or forced to quit their jobs. (Moghissi, 1999: 100–101)

For Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Republic, 'Cinema was associated with the Shah's regime and film seen as an agent of western cultural imperialism' (Article 19, 2006: 20). Ayatollah Khomeini announced, 'It is the Shah who, in order to corrupt our youth has filled cinemas with colonial programmes and wants to bring up our girls and boys with unchastity and ignorance'. Khomeini declared the Shah's cinema to be 'nothing but a centre of prostitution and the educator of self-ignorant puppets' (Khomeini, 1979, quoted in Article 19, 2006: 20).

Such reactionary protestations notwithstanding, the new regime would soon re-deploy the same institutions for the dissemination of its own ideology and for political propaganda purposes. Thus, a Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was established in 1982 to bring all cultural bodies, including the film industry and cinemas, under its control, along with the introduction of a series of political and cultural censorship laws.

A substantial piece of work tracing the development of Iranian cinema within the broader social and political history of Iran is Hamid Naficy's four-volume *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (2011-2012). Of particular relevance to the period of my research are volumes three and four, which cover the period from 1978 to 1984 and from 1984 to 2010. Although informative and quite substantial in its treatment and presentation of the factual material relating to the cinematic social history of Iran, Naficy's narrative is often slanted towards a non-critical, official interpretation of the social and

political developments in Iran and their parallels in Iranian cinema. For example, reviewing Josef Akrami's powerful social-criticism documentary, *A Few Simple Shots* (2004), Naficy disparages it as an 'emotional film, where dramatic music and editing accentuate the trauma of victimhood, replicates colonial ethnographic power relations, whereby the natives serve as informants for Westerners who engage in objective analysis; it seems as if the natives (Iranians) are incapable of such analysis and theorization' (Naficy, 2012: 464). In this disapproval of 'Westerners' trespassing into 'native' territory in analysis and theorisation, Naficy's remark repeats the usual postcolonial and cultural-relativist objection that the 'colonials' should not get involved in the issues of the countries of the South. Such objections are then glorified as gestures of 'healthy' anti-colonial resistance. In essence, however, this is no different than Khomeini's and other Islamists' anti-modernist pronouncements against the West. No wonder, then, that during the 1979 revolution and in the early phase of the establishment of the Islamic Republic, a large part of Iran's largely secular, but nationalist anti-colonial cultural elite, who dominated Iran's academic, artistic and cultural scene, worked closely with - or at least remained uncritical towards - the regressive Islamic movement, which was in the ascendant, and the person of Khomeini. Many of the same intellectuals and cultural figures later worked under the new regime, or in direct collaboration with it, to shape Iran's post-revolutionary cinema. Many filmmakers, whose films, with direct state sanction and support, have been promoted at international festivals over the years and been celebrated by Western audiences have an unsavoury record

of collaboration with the Islamic Republic and its propaganda ministries. Ideologically, too, they never abandoned the nationalist and anti-Western Islamic framework, of which Naficy's critique of Akrami's film is a prime example. Akrami's *A Few Simple Shots* is amongst those films, whether made clandestinely inside Iran or in exile, which aim to expose life under the Islamic regime, at huge personal risk and cost to themselves and their productions. Such films never receive state support, of course. Indeed, the filmmakers often have to flee to save themselves from state persecution.

Another writer on Iranian cinema, who follows an even more pro-state and, indeed, an ideological approach compared to Naficy's, is Negar Mottahedeh (2009), currently an Associate Professor at Duke University. Mottahedeh is openly welcoming of the Islamic system of protecting 'women's modesty', and, as a consequence, of the existing portrayal of women in cinema under the Islamic Republic of Iran. She equates the religious regime's misogynistic attitude to women, which is the antithesis of even the most basic critique offered by feminism and a women's rights approach, with European feminism's critique of the male gaze in cinema. She writes:

It was in its attempt to purge technology from imperialist and capitalist forces, that the post-Revolutionary Iranian film industry came to produce a cinema that is, in my view, the apotheosis of 1970s European feminist gaze theory and a surprising expression of the feminist avant-garde's stance against the voyeurism of Hollywood melodrama. (Mottahedeh, 2009: 534)

Mottahedeh justifies compulsory hijab by asserting that the Islamic dress code is intended to reflect a 'warrior like' image, in order to 'protect the nation from further contamination' (2009: 534). Contamination from what, one might ask. From progressive Western values? From more legal protections for women? From freer, less discriminatory and more equal social and personal relations? This, of course, is dismissive of the most basic values of feminism, such as the individual, personal rights of women, including the right of control over one's body. Furthermore, she claims the veil's 'ever-presence' addresses the presence of 'an unrelated male viewer in the film theatre. The veil meets his look, and foregrounds in this way, the looked-at-ness of the film itself, eschewing the voyeuristic conventions of realism inherited from American melodrama' (2009: 534). Again, this veneration of the veil reverses the actual function and the *raison d'etre* of the veil under Islam and Islamic governments. Rather than representing a supposed active challenge to the 'male viewer', the veil passively, and in shame, hides the female body. In Islam, the female body symbolizes a shame, and is the cause of man's temptation, which the veil helps to hide. The Islamic ideology behind the veil regards the woman only as a sex object, intended by God for man's pleasure and for the reproduction of the family. It therefore assumes that all male gazes are voyeuristic. And as it regards the woman the property of the husband or the male members of the family, it wants her, like all other property, to be protected under lock and key and kept out of the sight and reach of male strangers (the non-owners). Mottahedeh, likewise, in this apologetic interpretation of hijab (2009: 534)

assumes that the male gaze (in all men) can only be voyeuristic, and defends compulsory veiling of women as subversion of the male gaze. This is the same as blaming women who are victims of rape and sexual assault for not having covered themselves up properly. It normalises the male gaze, and is not critical of it; and the solution it proposes for 'protection' against the male gaze is not a change in the behaviour and the attitude of the male, but, rather, a change in the behaviour of the female - by her covering herself up. Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze' characterisation (Mulvey, 1975) could be seen as a call for change in the filmmaker and the film tradition;

Mottahedeh's interpretation, in contrast, calls for a change in the woman subject - and a compulsory one at that (2009: 534). A virtue is, thus, made out of the compulsory veil that has been violently imposed on women, adorned with phrases borrowed from European feminism. It is indeed a challenge to treat, and critique, such texts as serious academic work, even in the most basic meaning of the term, for the force of their political and ideological partisanship and rationalisation of brute misogynistic coercion. However, such texts are uncritically endorsed and published by supportive academic institutions and departments in the West.

In the wake of a decree by Khomeini in February 1979 calling for obligatory veiling in public spaces, compulsory veiling on *screen* was the key change for the Islamisation of Iranian cinema (Dabashi, 2001: 24). Veiling has been referred to as the aesthetics of concealment, specifically applied to the woman's body (Alvi, 2013). This is the screen equivalent of what has been

happening in the everyday lives of Iranian girls and women since 1979. A girl is considered mature when she turns nine, compared to fifteen for boys. Girls have to wear hijab when they start school at 7, and when they turn 9, they are taught about the 'proper' dress-code for women and their religious and legal duties, as they are considered mature according to Islamic laws; laws which are based on a 'monolithic culture of chastity, godliness, which involves the notions of shame, fear, and a general sense of concealment, all associated with the materiality of the female body' (Kazemimanesh, 2019: 84).

As Ziba Mir-Hosseini states in reference to the aim of *Divorce, Iranian Style* (Longinotto and Mir-Hosseini, 1998), which she co-directed:

The one [voice] most often heard is the legal voice: authoritarian, patriarchal and increasingly out of touch with people's aspirations and experiences. But there is also an egalitarian voice in everyday life, seldom heard by outsiders. This is the voice of women, and we wanted it to be heard. We wanted to show the anachronistic nature of the law, and how social change is daily chipping away at its monolithic authority. (Mir-Hosseini, 2002: 196)

Raha Faridi, a former student of Kiarostami, who describes herself as a documentary and experimental filmmaker, in an Instagram live interview talks about Kiarostami, his films and about meeting him in person. She compliments Kiarostami for his works with male characters. However, Faridi says, he does not understand the women characters, and fails in their characterisation; for example, the woman in his *Like Someone in Love* (2012), who is just like a 'maquette', a 'sculpture'. To Faridi, Juliette

Binoche's character in *Certified Copy* (Kiarostami, 2010) is the weakest character, clumsy and with no self-confidence, in contrast to the powerful and relaxed male character. On *Shirin* (2008), she says, this is just a 'show of power' by Kiarostami for having brought together and cast 141 renowned actresses all in one film. Her main point is that 'Kiarostami's works have power only when there are no women in them' (Maghazehie, 2020) (min 37:25).

Shahla Lahiji, in her article 'Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979' (Lahiji, 2002) is critical of the depiction of women in cinema both under the regime of the monarchy (the Shah) and under the current regime, who were portrayed as either 'unchaste' or 'chaste' dolls. Indeed, she argues that this is how Hollywood has also depicted women. She believes that in pre-revolutionary *filmfarsi* the 'unchaste dolls' dominated the screen by singing, dancing and semi-nakedness and by being a 'creature of corruption'. This view, based on the religious look at the body of the woman as a taboo and a site of temptation and potential sin for the man, is the main foundation of criticism offered by almost all literature in this field. Emanating from before the Iranian revolution, this kind of criticism was the basis for censoring the woman after the revolution and the flimsy rationale for introducing an Islamic image of the woman on the screen. *Filmfarsi* needs to be critically examined in its own right for its glorification of the violent male outlaw and its disparaging depiction of the woman, especially as a site of sexual fantasies for the male

gaze. However, much of the current literature, Lahiji's included, criticises *filmfarsi* from the same patriarchal Islamic angle for this cinema's "loose", "wanton" women, women who are cabaret dancers and prostitutes, and for its scenes of female nudity. In the Islamic mindset, and in this quasi-religious criticism, cabaret dancers and prostitutes are sinners and fornicators, loose women, sluts and temptresses, corrupted by Western influences. They are not 'chaste', as it were. From a progressive and feminist perspective, on the other hand, *filmfarsi* can be revealed to be a site of misogyny, glorification of man's so-called honour (i.e., woman as man's 'honour') and advocacy of violence against women.

While Lahiji detects a change in post-revolutionary cinema and TV, from an 'unchaste doll' to a 'chaste doll' (with the Islamisation of the cinema), another writer, Majid Mohammadi (2019), finds that the outlaw *woman* is a recent favourite creation of the Islamic Republic cinema. He attributes this invention to Masoud Dehnamaki (former vigilante mob organiser against protesters and advocate of extrajudicial killing of dissidents, later turned film director) and his film, *Scandal* (2013), in which the female protagonist both keenly observes the hijab and abides by sharia laws and is also chivalrous and manly (supposedly positive male traits). She has a family and constantly talks to God (Mohammadi, 2019: 118). In some ways, this type is a female version of the *luti* and *kolah-makhmali* in *filmfarsi* - thuggish outlaws, who fanatically, and often with lethal force, defend their 'honour', i.e. their woman. However, the main difference is that the female *luti*, unlike her male

counterpart in *filmfarsi*, acts within the law, and like all 'good' Islamic women, is obedient and knows 'her place'. Incidentally, precisely this kind of thinking is the basis of many honour killings of women by male members of their family in many countries and communities under Islamic and/or tribal-patriarchal laws and practices. However, this extension of the *luti* persona to females in the Islamic Republic cinema, which Mohammadi highlights, has a political and ideological message too. The *luti* woman is a warrior for the state, just like the 'Sisters of Zeinab', the female police patrol, who are tasked with the harassment of women who do not observe the rules on compulsory hijab in public places.

Iranian playwright Parvaneh Soltani observes not only that 'the real face of women, her [sic] true presence and being in the cinema is still absent' but also that it 'has been cut up and this has really damaged the image of Iranian women, which has become deformed, censored, half there, half absent.' (Article 19, 2006: 26). What Soltani is referring to is an example of the work of the first generation of Islamic Republic filmmakers, who were fundamentally opposed to the depiction of women in cinema. As a result, the first Islamic cinema productions (between 1981 and 1983) had virtually all-male casts and almost no women, and when the latter later appeared, it was on condition of observing 'Islamic values' (Amini, 2013). As a good example, Farzaneh Ta'idi, a well-known woman actor, who left Iran with difficulty seven years after the revolution, in an interview with Sheida Golestan in the feminist journal *Nimeh-ye Digar* (The Other Half), describes

in detail how working in the Islamic Republic cinema became virtually impossible. For instance, Ta'idi says, the roles she was offered were only for a propaganda cinema, aimed at deceiving the public, such as the characters in the narrative having to shout statements in praise of Ayatollah Khomeini; or roles which repeated and reinforced dangerous religious superstitions (*Nimeh-ye Digar*, 1988: 63–73).

Jamileh Nedai, in her article ‘A Political Definition of Iranian Cinema, Which Woman?’ (2020), blames not only the age-old traditions of patriarchy but also the intrusion of religious ideology for the misogynistic depictions in Iran's official cinema:

If we inspect more closely the institutionalised patriarchal ideology, we'll see that films' subjects and the relationships run in those films, is not only springing from the ever old tradition of patriarchy in Iran but more than tradition, it is alongside and harmonised with the new misogynistic and regressive religious ideology, which has clawed on everything with further daily misogyny. (Nedai, 2020)

In the past two decades, the rising social and political protest in the country, generally, and specifically women's struggles, have pushed the woman question and demands for equality to the top of political discourse in the wider population and among activists. Women have increasingly flouted the laws on compulsory hijab, for example, and the regime generally finds itself cornered in the face of rising social discontent from nearly all sectors of the society. Its options, therefore, for the brutal implementation of its laws (as, for example, in the period of its consolidation in the 1980s) are becoming

more limited in the face of rising protest. The growth of radical critique and protest in the wider society has concurrently led to a growth in progressive studies and scholarship, especially on women's rights issues, within activists' circles inside and outside Iran. Especially in the last two decades, more women have taken on research studies on issues of gender and equality. Pantea Bahrami (also a former political prisoner under Islamic Republic), for example, in her doctoral thesis titled: 'Das Weiblichkeitsbild im iranischen Film: ein Vergleich der Frauenidentität vor und nach der Revolution' ('The image of femininity in Iranian films: a comparison of women's identity before and after the revolution', 2002) studies the Iranian woman's identity historically, theoretically and empirically before and after the 1979 revolution. For example, her study shows that although there are a number of women directors and cinematographers under the Islamic Republic, the traditional roles and the power structure still prevail. She rightly relates the dominant misogynistic portrayal of women (both under the Shah and the Islamic Republic) to orthodox Islamic figures, who were especially against reforming the traditional regulations regarding women, such as the right to vote (Khomeini as early as 1963 had declared war against changes in the law allowing women to vote), polygamy and the veil. Bahrami argues that the dominant portrayal of women in film before the revolution was mainly traditional, in spite of many women being in work during this period (Bahrami, 2002). The concept of women's identity had already changed since the 1960s and 1970s, and despite all the repressive and discriminatory measures against women, they had managed to develop

some form of a relatively independent identity, which is also, to some degree, reflected in the films of the period. Even this slight improvement in women's status, however, suffered a drastic setback after the revolution under the Islamic Republic. Even with the increased presence of women in films, over the years, the image of women in official cinema is still shaped by religion, patriarchy and misogyny.

The book *Role of Women in Iran's Film Narrative: From the Beginning Until 2005* (Nazokkar, 2015) provides a comprehensive list of the type of roles for women in Iranian films, especially in pre-revolutionary Iran. There is less material, however, in the book on the post-revolutionary period (138 out of 539 pages). In the section on post-revolutionary Iran, the main events affecting women are reviewed chronologically and historically, starting with hijab and so-called modesty and ending with women ignoring both a couple of decades later (pp. 402–403). Nazokkar proposes three phases for the presence of women in cinema since 1979, governed by changes in the regulations: *absence*; *pallid presence*; and *powerful presence* (pp. 203–204). She describes *powerful presence* as the 'exciting presence of women on the silver screen' in the 1980s and a 'recognition of their powerful presence' because of their key roles before and behind the camera. This led, for example, to the allocation of a specific section of the Fajr Film Festival (the annual ten days of film festival to celebrate the founding of the Islamic Republic) to 'women's cinema' (p. 407). However, in relation to the 1980s, Nazokkar only mentions the works of four women filmmakers: Pouran

Derakhshandeh, Rakhshan Banietemad, Tahmineh Milani and Ensieh Shah-Hosseini. More interestingly, the *powerful* roles, which are cited as testimony to the more powerful presence of women on screen in Iran's cinema, include the usual traditional roles assigned to women, namely, as mothers, wives (obedient or disobedient) and daughters. For example, *The May Lady* (Banietemad, 1997) is praised because it represents in a delicate and poetic style the 'shame and chastity of the woman of the East' (p. 291). Or praise is bestowed on the films of writer/director Ensieh Shah-Hosseini, whose work mostly revolves around the Iran-Iraq war, where women are absent, e.g. as the co-writer in *Injured at War* (Nassiri, 1998) and *Penalty* (Shah-Hosseini, 2008); and when women do appear, their roles are secondary and dependent on the male characters, such as in *More Beautiful than Life* (Shah-Hosseini, 2011) and *Goodnight Commander* (Shah-Hosseini, 2006), where the woman's main role is as an emotional, fragile being, trying to commit suicide.

Although the literature on women and cinema in Iran addresses problems with the representation of women on the screen, often the blame is innocuously laid at the door of enduring patriarchy and social attitudes within the wider society (which is true, at different levels, of most societies, even those with the most progressive legislation protecting women's rights), rather than the harsh systematic attempt by a specific state to deny human status to half the population. Some literature, as we have seen, is openly apologetic about this representation of women in cinema and seeks to

rationalise it in a language and using terms intended to make it more palatable and marketable to a Western audience. The misogynistic representation of women in Iranian cinema, however, is a direct result of systematic sexual violence by the state in Iran, the Islamic Republic, starting with the introduction in March 1979 of forced hijab, which played a key role in this strategy.

Chapter 3: Critique of representation of women in Iran's official cinema: Selected film and scene analyses

Introduction

In this section I analyse in more detail a selection of films from Iran's official cinema around the theme of representation of women in Iranian cinema. The analyses include films by two of Iran's internationally known directors, Abbas Kiarostami (d. 2016) and Asghar Farhadi, whose works are critically reviewed as examples of the dominant portrayals of women in Iran's state-sponsored cinema. Kiarostami's works, particularly, are given a more detailed examination due to the latter's impact internationally within the film and cultural circles outside Iran. This is followed by a fairly detailed scene comparison, as a microstudy, of works by two directors, Masoud Dehnamaki and Tahmineh Milani, with contrasting perspectives on the representation of women in cinema. In the next chapter, a selection of works from Iran's independent and underground cinema, whose works offer a more inclusive approach on the representation of women in cinema, are analysed.

Abbas Kiarostami

This section looks at examples of films by Kiarostami and the problem of representation of women in his films. Abbas Kiarostami is the most well-

known Iranian director in the global film milieu. He has been praised for his documentary-style fiction films, such as the *Koker* trilogy (1987-1994) and *Close-Up* (1990a). His works go back to 1970, before the revolution, when he worked with *Kanoon* (The Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults - a government institution in Iran), when his characters were usually children and men. Kiarostami, who for years, even before the revolution, avoided casting women in his films (e.g. the 50 all-male adverts for TV and several short films with children and adolescents in the 1970s) (Zeydabadi-Nejad, 2009: 125), has received praise by some critics (e.g. Naficy, 2011) for giving presence to women in his films post-1979, e.g. *Ten* (2002) and *Shirin* (2008). However, the issue of representation of women in cinema was never simply one of women's presence in film. Even when women are included (which Kiarostami finally decided to do), the more fundamental issue is how they are represented, and the perspectives on, and perceptions of, women underlying such representations.

Ten (Dah, Kiarostami, 2002)

Ten (Kiarostami, 2002) is an account of the conversations of a female driver (Mania) with her passengers, in 10 scenes, as they ride with her around the capital, Tehran. It has been celebrated as 'one of the greatest challenges taken by the director ... to minimalism' and as 'one of the bravest film projects of recent years' for suggesting 'new directions' (Elena, 2005: 175).

However, as far as the representation of women is concerned, the film's handling of the women characters is highly problematic, to say the least.

Here I will focus on just one of the vignettes, the conversation with the prostitute. The prostitute character is picked up by the driver out of the driver's own curiosity and playfulness. The sex worker had not planned to get in the car, but ends up in it, mistaking the driver for a punter. When, later, she realises she has been picked up by a female driver, who only wants to talk to her, she repeatedly asks to be let out. The driver, however, refuses and carries on asking her questions, but promises to bring her back to where she found her. What is striking already at this stage is the attitude of the driver towards the sex worker. Apparently, the prostitute who is already regarded as someone without rights and harassed, could be fair game for anyone who wants to use her time, against her will, for their own curiosity and satisfaction. The first action of the driver thus reinforces the prostitute's already maligned and abused position in society. Mania gives herself the right, as a matter of course, to abuse the vulnerability of the disenfranchised prostitute. Would she feel she is entitled to do the same to any other, more protected, member of society? Secondly, although the driver says she does not mean to lecture or admonish her, she subjects the prostitute character to a series of presumptive questions, which implicitly disapprove of her work, as if it's an unfortunate 'career choice' she has made voluntarily. Mania asks: 'I'm interested to know why you do this'. The question, and the answers she gets, reveal the driver's perception of

prostitution: as if it's a simple choice for the woman; that she chose prostitution because she didn't want to be tied down to one man; as if prostitution is promiscuity and free love. The prostitute character compares the monogamous relationship of the driver to her own work, as if they are both simple relationships and comparable as such, even if she is critical of both relationships as monetary exchanges. She says: 'You sell your body to one man; I sell it to lots of men'. Overall, the impression the viewer gets from the conversation is that the prostitute has gone into prostitution because she did not want to be in a one-man relationship and is completely happy with her work and situation. This, however, is a gross simplification and reduction of a complex of social and economic factors that drive women into prostitution, which is rarely a matter of free choice for the woman. A positive reading of the prostitute's statement – i.e., a possible defence of Kiarostami - would be that through her, Kiarostami is offering a feminist critique of the institution of marriage, as another pecuniary relationship, where the woman is still having to sell her body in exchange for economic gain and protection. Feminists and radical writers, such as Emma Goldman in *Anarchism and Other Essays* (1910) and Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (2010), have criticised marriage for the economic dependency it creates and its alienating effect, especially on women. However, equating prostitution to marriage for both being grounded in an economic relation is hardly a feminist critique. There is a world of difference between a 'relationship' where the woman, maligned, unprotected, demonised, often out on the streets, often through a middleman or boss

(the pimp), risking physical harm and even death, is having to sell her body, literally piecemeal, to many strangers in order to survive from day to day, and a bourgeois marriage - even one purely based on economic gain and necessity, without any form of affection or love. The institution of prostitution, especially in countries like Iran, is a site of brutal exploitation of and violence against vulnerable women, many of whom have run away from abusive families or relationships or have had to resort to working as prostitutes for economic survival. Even if this were to be read as a feminist critique of bourgeois marriage, the context in which it is likened to the work of the prostitute through her statement is more revealing of Kiarostami's view of women and his romanticisation of prostitution than a critical insight into the institution of marriage.

In another scene, when she is bringing her son (played by the actor Mania Akbari's actual son) back from a visit to his dad, Mania is shown conversing with her son, and opens up the subject of her new relationship with another man, having recently divorced from her husband. She says, insensitively, 'I'm going to bring you another dad'. The boy covers his ears, saying he doesn't want to hear. Mania, however, over several, long disturbing minutes, keeps on with the subject, which adds to the boy's fury and exasperation. The whole scene is an intense exchange between the son and the mother, where the boy, being in a moving car, has no way of escaping and is totally helpless. The scene again reveals problems with Kiarostami's handling of the woman character, this time as an insensitive and abusive mother. This

characterisation does not appear to be a simple casting of Mania in the role of a bad mother, but, rather, is a study and representation of a 'typical' (in Kiarostami's mind) Iranian woman, who acts in this way, as a matter of course, just as she did towards the prostitute character. The result is a reinforcement of a perception and representation of the Iranian woman, which Kiarostami appears to consider as accepted and normal.

Shirin (Kiarostami, 2008)

A second film by Kiarostami is just as problematic in its portrayal of women. *Shirin* (Kiarostami, 2008) is a film about 140 Iranian, and one French (Juliet Binoche), women, all actresses in real life, as mute spectators of a romantic/tragic film based on an old Iranian poem, *Khosrow and Shirin* by the poet Nezami Ganjavi (1141-1209). The whole film is made up of only close shots of the faces of the women sitting in the cinema watching the film. The film they are watching is not visible to us, the viewers of *Shirin*, but we can hear the sound of the movie from the beginning to the end. The romance is told in an old poetic-style of the Persian language. The women characters are static spectators making no sound, and only engaged in occasional hand gestures (e.g. adjusting their hijabs), eating, and maybe glancing at the (invisible, but presumed) member of the audience to their right or left. They merely show emotions, mainly sad emotions, expressed through the changes in their facial features and by their tears. No words are spoken by the women in the movie. There are also a few men present in the

cinema, but only in the background. There are no closeups of them, and they are also mute.

The women are represented as being simply movie watchers, sitting in a cinema hall, a situation which of course gives the women little reason to utter any words; the location and the *mise-en-scène* already justifies their silent and inactive status. The question, however, is why the director has made the choice of putting a huge all-female cast in such a location and for the entirety of the movie. Under a system in which women, from childhood to adulthood, are constantly reminded not to talk too much and be on their best manners to conform to what it means to be good wives, daughters and sisters this depiction merely feeds into the same patriarchal narrative. Even given the limitation that the topic of the film (women watching a movie in a cinema) imposes on the production of sound and speech by the women characters, Kiarostami did not have to opt for this extreme choice of keeping the women in total silence. Numerous films around the world, with similar themes (showing a cinema audience), have not felt obliged to keep members of the cinema audience totally silent, but, rather, have shown them engaged in conversation and interaction and vocal expression of emotion (loud laughter, shouts of anger, spoken words, etc.)

When the women are all silent throughout the film, and mainly gazing at the cinema screen, what remains for the viewer to perceive are just 141 women's faces, along with changes in their facial features and occasional

hand gestures. This is a reduction of the female individual to a passive body, which again feeds into the narrative of women merely as physical bodies, which is particularly an issue for women under Islam. Once the woman is viewed as merely a female body and not a human being - one, furthermore, defined only in relation to man and as his property - then the ensuing misogynistic behaviour and actions can be justified. This is, of course, an issue for women under all patriarchal practices and attitudes; however, it becomes a more fundamental, political issue when the whole establishment, the political regime and the public institutions are built on that perspective. For a male Iranian director, instead of challenging these narratives and systems using critical and alternative forms of representations, to focus on 141 beautiful, mute, women's faces only reinforces such patriarchal portrayals and perceptions, which are already dominant in Iran's official cinema. Kiarostami's portrayal of women sits comfortably within - indeed, is an epitome of - the same dominant patriarchal framework of Iran's official cinema.

Asghar Farhadi

Farhadi's films are good examples of how women, whether central as in *About Elly* (Farhadi, 2009) or in supporting roles as in *A Separation* (Farhadi, 2011), are subordinated to male power intellectually and physically. Farhadi is not afraid to depict violence against women in his films, but he presents its presence in women's lives as the consequence of the woman's

emotional and irrational behaviour and decisions. In *About Elly*, the main female character Sepideh and her decisions (e.g. in trying to be a matchmaker for Elly and Ahmad) are blamed for the problems and the tragedy that follows. Her actions are presented as irrational, crazy and whimsical, through the eyes of her husband, which apparently also justify the husband's verbal abuse, and even physical violence, against a distraught Sepideh (he is shown beating her up in one scene). The film also reinforces the patriarchal codes and conventions throughout, as, for example, in a key scene in which the group is discussing whether to stay in the deserted, disused house by the seaside, the women in the film (with the notable exception of Sepideh) are shown leaving the decision-making to their husbands ('Whatever my man says'). When one of the men reverses the roles and says, 'Whatever my man [referring to his wife] says', this is greeted as a sign of weakness, and Sepideh herself jokingly comments: 'Shame on you!', implying he is not man enough, or not a real man. In the same scene, Sepideh's husband is shown reluctantly agreeing with Sepideh, who had already made up her mind. Later in the film, after the near-drowning of Arash - one of the children – we discover why he is “justified” in not trusting Sepideh's decisions, and that he in fact considers her 'mad'.

In *A Separation*, the wife is inconsiderate about the illness of her father-in-law and prefers to pursue her own will (by moving abroad), which may result in her leaving her teenage daughter behind. In the opening scene, in front of

a family court judge, where their application for divorce is being heard, the main female character's (Simin's) reason for asking for a divorce is that her husband does not want to follow her and leave his disabled father behind, but these arguments are made to appear unconvincing and selfish. The viewer is persuaded to sympathise with the husband, who appears more caring and concerned with the wellbeing of the family. Simin argues that they had planned to move out of the country for ages, and now that the papers have come through, they should do so as a family. However, her husband (Nader) says he can't leave his father behind. Simin ripostes, insensitively, 'He has Alzheimer's and doesn't even know who you are', to which Nader replies, 'I know who he is'. Simin appeals to the judge: 'I don't want to bring up my daughter under these conditions', referring to the situation in the country. The judge asks rhetorically: 'What's wrong with these conditions?' Simin does not seem to have a response. The judge is in fact rebuking her for criticising the system. Simin either has to take back what she just said so as not to appear critical of the system, in which case her argument for wanting to raise her daughter in another, better, country, would collapse, or she would have to pursue her argument and elaborate what is wrong with the system, in which case she might invoke the wrath of the judge for criticising the system, thus jeopardising her chance of winning the application for divorce. So, she has to remain silent, with the result that the judge's unanswered rhetorical question (in fact statement) effectively works as a defence and endorsement of the system. Indeed, she has been silenced by the force of argument of the judge. It is enlightening to compare

this narrative setup of Farhadi's fiction with an equivalent scene from the independent documentary *Divorce Iranian Style* (Longinotto and Mir-Hosseini, 1998). In place of the timid, unsure and unconvincing Simin we meet in *Divorce Iranian Style* the vocal, confident, outspoken, scheming and brilliant 16-year-old Ziba (among other similarly strong women characters) who cleverly resorts to every trick in the book to defend and win her divorce application against her much older husband. The woman in a similar setting in Farhadi's fiction is insecure and fragile, has lost the argument and is unable to effectively fight and defend herself.

In another scene, Nader discovers that a female carer (Razieh), who looks after his disabled father, had left the house during the day, leaving him alone and tied to the bed. Nader, furious with what has happened, aggressively rebukes the carer (in the presence of her little daughter), accuses her of having stolen money, and with some force pushes her out of the flat, into the staircase landing. We later find out that the push has resulted in the carer falling on the stairs. This is the beginning of another subplot in the story, with the carer, who at the time was four months pregnant, accusing Nader of having caused the loss of her baby, with Nader denying, maintaining that she had already lost her baby in a prior accident. The scene is disturbing for its depiction of violence (both verbal and physical) by a male in a position of power, and of higher social/class standing, against a female worker from the lower classes (even if she has been negligent towards a disabled individual). As in *About Elly* (2009), however, the male

violence is justified by the wrongdoing of the female, and presented as if it were a matter of course. Overall, the two main female characters, Simin and Razieh, are presented as uncaring, selfish, irrational and irresponsible, while Nader (who is no angel) appears reasonable and caring and better able to manage the mess created by the selfishness of his estranged wife and the carelessness of the carer amidst all the mayhem. The film closes with a scene outside the court room, showing Simin and Nader seated separately and at a distance, both looking brooding and sombre. Nader is nevertheless sympathetically and prominently foregrounded, close to the camera, while a guilty-looking Simin, with her head down, is placed in the background, in a small frame, amongst the crowd, behind a cracked glass partition in the hallway.

Scene analysis: *The Outcasts* (Ekhrajiha, Dehnamaki, 2007) vs *Unwanted Woman* (Zane Ziadi, Milani, 2005)

The Outcasts (Ekhrajiha): from 04:15 to 05:51 (The garden scene)

Unwanted Woman (Zane Ziadi): from 05:09 to 08:27 (The garden scene)

The aim in this section is to compare two film scenes from two other directors, Dehnamaki and Milani, to show a broader range of representations of women in Iranian mainstream cinema, through a microstudy of two scenes. Two films have been chosen to do this: *The Outcasts* and the *Unwanted Woman*. Studying their portrayal of women, I

explore the differences and commonalities in their use of cinematic forms and elements. While Dehnamaki's *The Outcasts* sits at the extreme conservative/political end of Iran's establishment cinema, Milani's *Unwanted Woman* could be characterised as an attempt to question the current status of woman, but still suffers from the influence of the traditional perspectives.

About Dehnamaki and Milani

Masoud Dehnamaki, the director of *The Outcasts*, is a former founding member of *Ansar-e Hezbollah* (Supporters of the Party of God). As a leading member of *Ansar-e Hezbollah*, he organised vigilante mobs to attack and beat up students and other anti-government protesters. He has been an advocate of extrajudicial killing of dissidents (the so-called 'Serial Murders' of dissident writers and political critics in the 1980s) (Global Security, 2011). He also edited some Islamic magazines belonging to the political hardliners, such as *Shalamcheh* (Dehnamaki, 2019). *The Outcasts* was his debut feature film.

Unwanted Woman is directed by Milani, who is famous for her feminist ideas and radical topics in her movies, but these films still remain within the Islamic Republic framework. Her movies include *Children of Divorce* (*Bache-haye talagh*, Milani, 1990), *The Legend of a Sigh* (*Afsane-ye-ah*, Milani, 1991), and *What's New?* (*Digeh che khabar?*, Milani, 1992). Niloofar Beyzai has criticised those movies for projecting 'a male point of view', remaining

at a 'superficial level' and with their endings often affirming 'the same conventional norms' (Beyzai, 2020). *Cease Fire* (*Atash bas*, Milani, 2006), another film by Milani, which was a box office hit, looks at the subject of divorce. *Unwanted Woman* addresses the issue of betrayal, from a woman's perspective.

About the plot of The Outcasts (Ekhrajiha) and Unwanted Woman (Zane Ziadi)

Masoud Dehnamaki's *The Outcasts* (2007) is an Iranian comedy war movie. It is the story of Majid, a local hoodlum – similar to the *luti* (outlaw) character in *filmfarsi* – living in a deprived area of South Tehran. Majid is in love with Narges, the daughter of a respected traditional shoemaker (who makes 'giveh', a very traditional type of shoe) and a believer in Sufi (Sufism is a mystical offshoot from Islam). The father has promised to approve of their marriage on one condition – that Majid changes and becomes an 'honourable', 'respected' man. Majid, in pursuit of becoming worthy of Narges's hand in marriage, decides to join the armed forces fighting the Iraqi army.

Unwanted Woman (2005) is an Iranian social drama movie directed by Tahmineh Milani. It is the story of a woman named Sima, a teacher, who also works with some of the local women and is the sole financial provider of her household. Her husband, Ahmad, does not seem to have a proper

job, yet spends lavishly on himself. One day, her husband tells her that one of his friends has died and he is taking his widow to her village. Sima insists on accompanying him, but he refuses and goes alone. However, the police stop Ahmad and his companion, Saba, who is a teenager, and Sima is summoned to clarify their relationship. All three start a journey to Saba's village. They are stopped due to a road closure and have to spend the night in a hotel. There they are told that a murderer, Rahim, who has killed his wife and her lover, is on the run. Sima, under stress, cannot sleep and goes to the car, and later is surprised by Rahim. She sympathises with him, helps him escape and drops him off by a shack in a farm. The next day, a deadly confrontation takes place between Rahim and Ahmad.

Female characters in these films

The women in *The Outcasts* are introduced only wearing the Islamic head-to-toe costume, the chador. This is to signify their piety and chastity in the traditional, conservative Islamic perspective. Narges, the female protagonist, wears, by contrast, a lighter-coloured chador. This may be to highlight her innocence and purity as a bride-to-be.

Unwanted Woman starts with an all-female classroom followed by a scene of men on the street arguing over a car accident, and overcrowded, women-only sections on the bus. It concludes in Sima's home where there is a gathering of women. The chain of locations conveys a sense of women's

communality, their need for support and a common destiny. This is in contrast to *The Outcasts* where a group of women, including the main female characters, are only shown in an old and traditional house, busy with housework, especially cooking.

A comparison of the garden scenes

Mise-en-scène/props

In the garden scene from *The Outcasts*, the red Suzuki motorcycle in the corner of the garden is an object metaphor for the protagonist of the story, Majid. The camera ensures that it is in the frame when women are interacting with each other. The red Suzuki is unmissable and striking. It is an important part of Majid's character, enough to give him his nickname, 'Majid Suzuki'. In many *filmfarsi* movies, such as *The Companion (Hamsafar, Asadollahi, 1975)*, owning a motorcycle amplifies the masculinity of the protagonist or antagonist. Dehnamaki borrows this and many other recognisable cultural and cinematic traits, such as shoes with flattened heel, which is the way *lutis* (Chapter 2: Literature review) tend to wear their shoes, the shape of his moustache and his hairstyle to identify him as the ultimate macho. These symbols, together, create a character that the audience feels they already know and can identify with from *filmfarsi* movies. This is in striking contrast to the cauldrons in the garden in which women are doing their cooking, in stereotypical women's roles. Another female figure in *The*

Outcasts, the sister, is shown ritually waving around burnt, smoking *esfand* (wild rue) in the garden, reading out traditional and religious verses, in order to keep away the evil eye from her brother, who is coming back home. She waves the *esfand* smoke in circles also around the Suzuki motorbike, which symbolises Majid in his absence.

In contrast to this familiar representation of a certain type of masculinity and how women characters support it, Milani does not hesitate to highlight the flaws of the male character. Unlike Sima, Ahmad comes home without carrying any shopping bags. He mysteriously hides his eyes behind his sunglasses and pauses to say hi to an attractive young woman, one of Sima's friends. The function of the sunglasses is perhaps to imply that he has secrets to hide, maybe an affair. Milani depicts Ahmad's uncaring attitude towards his wife and daughter, by prioritising how his actions serve his own needs over and above those of his family's and by living off his wife. His new shoes, the sunglasses, his constant use of the mobile phone, and the new cologne he's wearing suggest a man who is far from a devoted family man, leaving Sima alone in this relationship to support her family.

Sound

The garden scene in *The Outcasts* is devoted to women. In the previous scene in prison, a man's voice is heard chanting traditional slogans, repeated by a group of male prisoners praying for the protection of the

protagonist of the film from the evil eye. Significantly, the chant is carried over to the film's opening credits, giving the film as a whole a distinctly male voice. Dehnamaki then cuts directly to a splash in a pool of water in the garden scene filled with a commotion of female voices. The sound of the water splash, in addition to signalling an abrupt change of mood and occasion, clearly separates off the previous male scene from the female garden scene. Specifically, Dehnamaki decides to keep the female voice confined in its own separate space (the garden, where the women are cooking), with no sound spill-overs from the previous or to the next scene, in contrast to the male voice from the prison scene which continues over the opening credits. However, there is male intrusion into the female space in the garden: firstly, when a male jester enters the garden announcing Majid's arrival; secondly (and simultaneously), when music from the street by a blind male accordionist enters the garden scene, anticipating the next street scene. The choice of a harmless jester (perhaps a eunuch) and a blind accordionist provides some justification for this intrusion into the women's space. Nevertheless, male intrusion does take place.

The male/female voice separation establishes a gendered segregation and creates a noticeable audio contrast between the all-male prison and the all-female house. In addition, the voice plays an important role in linking these two different worlds ideologically, and for aesthetic continuity, by repeating the same chant. The female voice is following the male voice praying for the wellbeing of, and keeping the evil eye away from, the protagonist, Majid.

Such filmic devices are meant to naturalise and normalise forced gender segregation.

In both films, dialogue is employed to introduce and convey the physical, emotional and social relationships among the characters. Until this point in *Unwanted Woman*, Sima is represented as a complicated woman with many layers, each of which are depicted through the many responsibilities she has. She is a teacher who is considered by her students as the only one they can talk to and trust. She is an educated woman whose peers come to her for guidance as they ask her about women's rights. She is an attentive mother even while participating in a group conversation (she unwraps the lollipop when her daughter asks for it). However, her personal relationship seems to be on the rocks. She asks her husband if he is wearing a new aftershave – an implication of a new affair – and gets upset when he asks about the marital status of one of the women from the gathering.

The music in the opening credits of *Unwanted Woman*, which starts from the previous classroom scene, stops before the start of the garden scene. In this scene Milani seeks to establish some of Sima's key social and personal relationships with other women. Here the dialogue takes the narrative forward; that is why, as the scene starts, the non-diegetic music stops in order to focus on the conversation. The group of women, including Sima, are busy dealing with what could be viewed as basic everyday issues. However, Milani manages successfully to create a concern, that is raised by

Sima's young female students and also by her adult female friends, namely women's rights. Milani does not try to imply this, hidden in fables and symbols, but the dialogue is explicit, using those two words, 'women's rights' – even though the scene lacks a sophisticated treatment/discussion and a more innovative use of cinematic devices.

Camera and editing

In *The Outcasts*, the initial close up of a splash in the pool of floating summer fruits is followed by a camera pan showing a garden full of women and children, conveying a fun and happy atmosphere. The pan stops as soon as it includes the elderly mother in the frame. There are metal bars dividing the mother, seated in an elevated position (the terrace), from the rest of the women. The direct cuts between the mother and Majid's sister (Marzieh) reinforce the differences in their opinions on Majid. Interestingly, the mother is dressed in more colourful clothes, is not wearing a chador and smokes. The implication here (from a patriarchal Islamic male perspective) is that a woman when no longer young is permitted to dispense with Islamic coverings and restrictive codes for women as she is no longer deemed 'attractive enough' for the male viewer. She is given a special position by the low camera angle, which signals her status as worthy of respect and trust due to her age and wisdom.

In *The Outcasts*, the camera pans across the garden and then follows Marzieh, Majid's sister, amongst the all-female characters in this setting in order to establish how their relationships work. She is ritually carrying burning *esfand* and waving it in circles. She waves it around Majid's motorbike in a symbolic act, as if it were for Majid, who is absent and clearly being missed. She is depicted as a devoted sister, who expresses her endless love for her brother and becomes the central figure in this scene. The camera follows her moves and highlights her actions. It pays attention to her and shows her in a medium shot and focuses on her when she speaks with the mother. It builds the scene around her and allows us to identify with her. The story is unfolded from *her* point of view, complemented with the mother's assenting opinion of Majid. The long shot shows the women and how they interact through their labour of cooking and washing. Significantly, and in contrast to the shots in *Unwanted Woman*, the camera does not get close to the women, so we do not get to know any more about them. It keeps its distance from them. Most of the time, it looks down on the women by choosing a high angle view, which as Pramaggiore and Wallis indicate, may have the effect of 'minimis[ing] the subject', resulting in a less powerful depiction (Pramaggiore and Wallis, 2008: 140). In *The Outcasts*, the quantity and quality of the presence of women before the camera is interwoven with the nature of their relationship with the male characters.

By contrast, in *Unwanted Woman*, the camera directly cuts inside Sima's house, showing her through a long shot. She enters the garden where the group of women are sitting. The camera follows her across the garden in a relatively long take until she sits down next to the women and offers them tea. The camera movement here links the heroine with a collective of women. This conflation of the camera (with its long take), mise-en-scène and performance may be an implicit reference to the commonality of her story and the communality of the women in the garden. In *Unwanted Woman*, Sima may be anybody in the crowd, any one of us. Through a long shot of her in the streets of Tehran, the audience sees Sima easily blending in with the crowd.

As we have seen, the different perspectives of the filmmakers on the representation of women are reflected in a range of cinematic choices that they make, from sound, male/females voices to mise-en-scène, camera angles and editing. It is revealing that even in the opening credits of *The Outcasts*, the female and male cast members are presented separately as if to further underline the idea of gender segregation underpinning the thinking and work of its director. My film, in contrast, employs cinematic devices to break down the walls of segregation and the gender apartheid that work to keep women isolated and imprisoned in the disenfranchised 'women's world'.

Four Iranian Women Directors: Tahmineh Milani, Rakhshan Banietemad, Samira Makhmalbaf and Marzieh Meshkini

My aim here is to take a brief but critical look at a number of films by four Iranian women directors, namely, Tahmineh Milani, Rakhshan Banietemad, Samira Makhmalbaf and Marzieh Meshkini. I have chosen these women directors specifically because their films have been discussed widely as examples of fictional films by Iranian women filmmakers both in Iran and internationally (Decherney and Atwood, 2014). My aim is to find out to what extent and whether their portrayal of women depart from the official view, challenging the dominant patriarchal, religious and conservative views in Iran's official cinema.

The films by these directors, in common with their male counterparts, revolve around certain issues which the character of the political and religious regime imposes on all social and cultural life, and thus on cinema, in Iran. In the following I will examine representative films of each of these women directors under specific themes, such as the question of hijab and how it functions and is portrayed in film, the inclusion of women in the films and the true significance of this in judging a film, and how these films have handled the women's question, as well as the wider social issues.

Hijab and its function and portrayal

Hijab is central to the ideology and politics of the Islamic Republic, which has considered it a 'red line' (Radio Farda, 2017) and as its identity, maintaining it by force in the society from the very start (Radio Farda, 2019). Feminism and women's rights issues are considered inimical to the state. Accordingly, it is a concept whose relevance and existence filmmakers close to the regime deny (See Banietamad (Laurier and Walsh, 2005)). Some even renounce it (see Narges Abyar (Diamond, 2018)). In Iranian cinema, hijab is a concept pervading the female character on many levels, hiding her body and voice, her personal desires and her public presence. She is defined in relation to the male characters, just as she is to men in the wider society, according to the Islamic laws. That is how women's roles are expected to be written in Iranian films (For an account of censorship on women and their official representation in Iranian cinema, see Volumes 3 and 4, in particular Volume 4 Chapter 2 of Naficy's *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (Naficy, 2012a, 2012b)).

Women in Samira Makhmalbaf's films are often doomed as inferior and as objects of failure; they lack agency and tend to be incapable of expressing themselves and communicating clearly. Makhmalbaf has stated that she does not judge (Johnston, 1999); however, understanding the human character and exhibiting empathy are not one of her strengths. For example, in *Apple (Sib)* (1998), a father (along with their blind mother) has imprisoned his twin daughters at home for twelve years, so the girls have never been in contact with the outside world. Makhmalbaf made this film when she was

seventeen and still a student at her father's film school. However, her father Mohsen Makhmalbaf, along with the rest of the family and his production company, were behind its making (he is credited as the writer, as well as the editor). Makhmalbaf's camera is rather sympathetic towards the 'patriarchal percepts' (Moore, 2005: 17) of the father who jailed his daughters, denying them a normal life. He is shown as an illiterate religious man who did this out of concern for his daughters and their protection from the corruption and the vice 'outside'. However, he blames the mother for locking the door and imprisoning the girls (and the mother). Similarly, the film is irritatingly a display of cruelty towards the disabled mother.

The film is considered a documentary since the cast are 're/playing' themselves so the mother who is blind and hard of hearing in reality is not an actress. Samira Makhmalbaf has admitted that since the mother didn't speak Farsi (the dominant, ruling language in Iran) and only speaks Azerbaijani Turkish, and since she was blind and also nearly deaf, and 'so pessimistic' and constantly cursing, she didn't bother to ask her for consent and only approached the father for permission. To the question of the possibility of exploitation of her subjects, she responds that she lets people 'look at themselves and see what is wrong and what is right; if they want to change, they can' (Johnston, 1999). In the case of the blind mother, it is literally distasteful to pass such judgement; there is also no equal power relation between the filmmaker and the twin girls, who lack any social knowledge - and even with the uneducated naïve father - to expect them to

change themselves. From the outset, the closeup of the hands of the mother grabbing the daughters' hands is implying 'an incarcerating rather than liberating force' (Moore, 2005: 18). The mother puts scarves on her daughters' heads, also covering their eyes, which has been interpreted as protecting them from the outside gaze, as well as from their own gaze (Moore, 2005). But this is not much more than a practical gesture by the mother, invoking her own daily experience as a blind. She has no concept of her own face since she is blind. Similarly, the audience never sees her face - especially her eyes - so as to perhaps identify with. In addition, she is physically displayed like a ghost coming out of the dark from within, hovering over the house, and over the father, ordering him to keep the door locked. She seems to be the culprit in the suffering of the girls.

The mother only speaks Turkish, so she has obviously been brought to Tehran by her husband from, probably, Azerbaijan Province, away from all she would be familiar with, including her family. Now in Tehran, she has no one to find safety and comfort with but only her husband and her daughters. This is a very poor family, and she only has her basic means to live on. Most probably the routine to lock the door started long before, when the mother was brought in by the man. She is also a prisoner here. It reminded me of *Room* (Abrahamson, 2015) in which a woman is abducted and held captive, during which she gives birth to a son, who in turn becomes her only hope, her saviour. The difference is that *Room* sees the world from the woman's point-of-view and in *Apple*, the filmmaker remains alien to the suffering of

the mother, to her expressions of fear – probably fear of being left alone, of losing her daughters (she repeatedly says that she's scared). It seems that she has escaped (or been pushed) into the shadows inside the house; a space which we as the audience never 'see' (The indoors, or the 'andaruni' in Farsi, which has traditionally segregated and hidden the women folk from the men outside, has repeatedly been positively praised in literature - including in architecture and cinema - as a genuine vernacular Iranian cultural product, rather than being critically assessed for its true discriminatory and grim function (Mottahedah, 2008; Rahbari, 2016). The mother's world is thus left like a black hole in the narrative. Inside the house, her space is off-limits to the world of the film. The film has no empathy with the mother. When the mother is outside, she curses constantly (in real life, not acting), which shows her objection to be filmed. However, this is ignored by Makhmalbaf. The last scene is the climax of this real-life tragedy, where the blind woman is being teased by a boy bobbing an apple on her head, which she thinks is her daughters'. Makhmalbaf has stated that she propped the scenes, so one can only imagine how long she has kept that poor woman in that state for how many takes and from how many camera angles. This insensitivity might be somewhat excused, given Samira Makhmalbaf's age at the time (she was seventeen); however, her father Mohsen Makhmalbaf, who was a key participant and guide in the making of the film, is notorious for abusing participants and actors in his films, such as *Salam Cinema* (1995) (Ridgeon, 2000: 18).

In Marzieh Meshkini's *The Day I Became a Woman* (Meshkini, 2001), an eight-year-old girl (in the first episode) learns that she is now 'a woman' (on her ninth birthday) and tries to negotiate and buy some time to enjoy a bit more of her 'childhood' before going through the Islamic rituals of becoming a woman. At the end of the film, she is shown wearing a black chador. Hijab is the sign that she is considered a woman and has all the duties of a woman, for example to cover herself from the male strangers, since now she is considered attractive to men. That is why she is stopped from playing with her male friend. In the second episode, the woman is a young woman who loves cycling and because of that her husband divorces her. She cycles, keeping her black chador firmly on. In the third episode the woman is an elderly who is seemingly senile. Compared to the other characters, she is free to do whatever she wants, presumably because at this age from the viewpoint of Islamic male chauvinism she is not considered attractive anymore and is allowed to enjoy her 'freedom'. So, her bucket list is buying a new wedding gown, white goods and furniture. These are seen on a floating cart, which disappears into the sea, while the rest of the cast are watching her. She is still wearing a chador but in a light colour. The women in the film do not talk at length, so the events are wrapped in mystery. The last episode, particularly, is set in a surrealistic style and far removed from the everyday lives of Iranian women as if to add a sense of ethereal piety to the story. Hijab is not just a piece of cloth in this film; the narrative is also covered under layers of symbolic props, actions and setup shots.

The paradox of hijab, realism and the concept of independent cinema

It has been claimed that Iranian cinema owes its appeal to its 'realistic' aspects within an 'Iranian context' (Eyvazi, 2011). This claim to realism in 'Iranian context' unfortunately ignores the violent and forced nature of this 'reality'. Quite apart from that, it also fails to see that showing women wearing the hijab even in the privacy of their homes undermines the film's realism as that is not how women in Iran are dressed in their homes, free from the requirement of obligatory hijab in public. Thus, a constant concern for those filmmakers is how to resolve the contradiction and find strategies to divert the attention of the audience and/or circumvent this restriction through content, or formally, technically and aesthetically. Some film theorists and writers have tried to formulate the issue of hijab in films as the "poetic language" of Iranian cinema, an Iranian female culture and so on. On this, see, for example, Negar Mottahedeh's *Displaced Allegories: Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (2009a), which finds 'creative' grounds used by filmmakers and 'feminine' filmic techniques, creating an Iranian national 'women' cinema. Also, Naficy devotes a good part of a chapter to a detailed discussion of the philosophy of veiling (including from a mullah's, an Islamic preacher's, point of view) in *Under Cover, on Screen: Women's Representation and Women's Cinema in A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume Four* (Naficy, 2012b).

Thus, in Iran many (if not all) filmmakers have been looking for ways to deal with the issue of hijab in their films. Some filmmakers limited their characters to children (*Where's The Friend's Home?*, (Kiarostami, 1990) and *Mirror*, (Panahi, 1998)) or their locations to public places (*Ten* (Kiarostami, 2002)). Some others wrestled with formal and stylistic elements, such as adjusting the frame, camera angle and movement and editing (*The Blue Veiled* (Banietamad, 1995)). Although they may claim to the contrary (Kiarostami and Mehrjui interviews), in my view this is a form of self-censorship and working according to the censors. If in defence the claim is made that this creates a form of aesthetics, it should be called aesthetics of invisibility and oppression of women as segregated beings on screen.

This is a key issue as it basically makes these works a co-production of censorship and the filmmaker, rather than the filmmaker's autonomous product. It restricts the conditions of making the film and problematises its independent status from the start.

Films by Iranian filmmakers often tend to be rather gloomy with few happy stories or endings. This is the case, for example, in *The Unwanted Woman* (Milani, 2005), which in its ending shows women, who are leaving, getting smaller and smaller in the horizon. *Five in the Afternoon* is a more recent example when the women disappear in the desert with their father/in-law. Another example is Milani's *Fifth Reaction* with an ending in a dark prison cell.

It could be argued that the filmmaker is leaving the narrative open, allowing the audience to imagine an ending for themselves. However, in the absence of much prior development in the story, there is little scope for audience imagination. The end result is only to reinforce a dominant patriarchal narrative of women under extreme oppression and discrimination with no way out.

Inclusion of women

Women's issues have been the subject of many Iranian films by both men and women filmmakers, fiction and documentary. Fictions such as *Bashu the Little Stranger* (*Bashu, Gharibeh Kuchak*) (Beyzai, 1989), *Red* (Ghermez) (Jeyrani, 1999) and *I'm Taraneh, 15* (Sadrameli, 2002) are made by male filmmakers and have revolved around women's issues: about a woman taking on a child war refugee, a single mother dealing with a jealous husband, child marriage and child pregnancy. However, the key issue here is that making a film about women and inclusion of women doesn't necessarily make it a feminist film. A feminist film is first and foremost about *how* it deals with the women characters and the women's issues in the film; in what light it depicts, for example, the female characters: are they shown as independent subjects or identified only in relation to men? Are they vocal or silent? Meek or rebellious? Victims or fighters? Are they submissive or engaged in changing their circumstances? While working on my film

practice (having in my mind Mulvey's concept of male gaze and Johnston's women's cinema as counter cinema), I understood feminism in film as something that is reflected, first and foremost, in its choice of aims and approach, and then in being applied and expressed in the narrative and in the film's audio-visual formulation and execution.

In my own experience, many of the Iranian films with women in them and which deal with women's issues tend to merely retell the everyday condition of the women, with their problems and pains, without an empowering narrative of women as agents of change. This is partly explained by the heavy hand of censorship and state repression; but partly also by the ideological angle of the filmmakers themselves and their views on women. Making films with women as subjects and dealing with women's issues faces additional difficulties (longer waits to gain a permit and harsher restrictions for those films from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG). Naficy (2012) provides numerous examples of this, for instance *My Tehran for Sale* (Moussavi, 2009), an Australian-Iranian production regarded by many as an independent film (Naficy, 2012b: 69). On the other hand, self-censorship and the filmmakers' own conformist thinking and approach to women's issues tend to prevent production of radical feminist films within the Islamic Republic system, but even within the diaspora.

Men as determinants of the world inside the films

In Tahmineh Milani's movies, women have the central roles and many of her narratives involve women's issues. Her *Two Women* (Milani, 1999), part of Fereshteh trilogy, was praised outside Iran for its feminist approach (Langford, 2010). In *Two Women*, Fereshteh (Niki Karimi), the central character, although she is a bright woman and a former university student, is portrayed as a victim. She hasn't been lucky in life, is being stalked by a vile man and her life is loveless - a jealous husband who didn't let her continue her studies, learn driving or learn to use a computer. The film ends with the stalker killing her husband who is trying to protect her. This frees her to be her own woman. Fereshteh is a passive victim throughout the film and is freed only by the violent actions of a man obviously with mental health problems.

In Milani's narratives, men make the key decisions and determine the story lines, and women follow. Fereshteh doesn't show agency to change her situation; she either escapes, asks for help or gets lucky, which in this case involves her husband getting killed. Her actions have disastrous consequences, like car accidents and fights between men in which people get seriously injured or killed. In *Two Women*, the woman's life is defined and changed by the presence of the men's roles in the narrative. It is men's actions that affect the existence and development of the other roles, both men's roles and women's roles. At the end of the film, the stalker (a man) erases the role of the other man (the husband) from the narrative by killing him and in return he's erased by law. Fereshteh's role moves the narrative

forward by being the cause of the temptation and fall of the men (she is the reason that there is a stalker, who fights with the husband, during which the husband gets killed). This is similar to the ending in *The Unwanted Woman* (Milani, 2005), where the husband - even though accidentally - kills the felon who is on the run for honour-killing his wife. Following that, the women walk away without a word.

The Fifth Reaction (Milani, 2003) is the story of Fereshteh (Niki Karimi), a young widow whose father-in-law is forcing her to marry her brother-in-law to keep her and his grandchildren in the family. She tries to escape from the situation by going abroad; however, she is arrested and ends up in prison. The woman in the film is depicted as a victim and her life under the patriarchy is doomed even before she takes a step to change her situation. Her father-in-law, who is portrayed as well-connected to the regime, gets her arrested, and when she is in prison, he goes to her cell easily. The film ends with a freeze frame of her silently sitting on the floor in a dimly lit prison cell, looking frightened, with the shadow of her father-in-law's hand penetrating the frame, pointing at her in an authoritative and threatening manner. He says the last words, leaving the audience wondering what the future holds for her as he is letting her have the custody of her children 'conditionally'. What does he want in return?

In Iranian movies, the ruling system is identified as male and powerful, as in *No One Knows About Persian Cats*. Milani's films show the same

identification. In *Fifth Reaction*, the father-in-law has the legal system on his side, and Fereshteh is punished when she disobeys him. In *Two Women*, the husband is connected to the system. *The Hidden Half* (Milani, 2001) is the story of a woman (Niki Karimi as Fereshteh) asking her husband – a high-ranking figure in the judicial system – to review a female political prisoner's appeal, who has been sentenced to death. That is done via revealing her own hidden political/romantic past. The story is told in flashbacks while her husband is reading her letter/diary. Milani has given the husband, who is a prosecutor, the role of telling the secret political story of his wife. She does not show the power to stand up and tell her own life story. She is remorseful, ashamed and frightened of her past, and by her confessions she is asking for forgiveness – not only for the woman political prisoner in jail now, but also for the woman political activist that she was in the past. Her voice is shaken, quiet and uncertain, coming out of layers of papers asking for the man's verdict. Fereshteh could be a filmic doubleganger of Milani herself, who was a political activist during the revolution. Milani is painting a humane picture of a judicial system which has been an execution machinery of tens of thousands of political activists, including women who were raped (if found to be a virgin) before being executed, then buried in unmarked mass graves. These crimes against humanity are documented in such documentaries as *Dream of Freedom* (Bolandpaz, 2013), *A Few Simple Shots* (Akrami, 2004), *And In Love I Live* (Bahrami, 2008) and *The Secret Fatwa* (Abadi, 2018).

This is not Milani's first woman character without a voice. Her earlier film *The Legend of A Sigh* (1991) is the Dickensian story of a rich depressed woman who is about to commit suicide when she sighs and a (male) fairy appears. He takes her on a journey, showing her four women with different social backgrounds but who are in worse situations than her. She thus learns to be stronger! The film is based on a mythical story from Azerbaijan, but, although the characters are portrayed in present-time Iran, there is not much development in the characters, especially from a feminist perspective. The woman who is educated and accomplished in her life is incapable of expressing herself, except by a sigh, which summons a man to guide her through her life.

Cease Fire (2006), another film by Milani, is in the genre of comedy which was successful in the box office. *Cease Fire* is the story of a young couple full of 'misunderstandings'. The main woman character by mistake ends up at a psychiatrist's surgery when looking for a family lawyer to divorce her husband. The psychiatrist tells her they do not need to divorce but to talk and behave maturely. This is how Milani, who is widely considered as a feminist, treats the subject of divorce from the point of view of an Iranian woman, whose struggles are shown in documentaries such as *Divorce Iranian Style* (Longinotto and Mir-Hosseini, 1998). The film ends with the woman both keeping her job and also looking after the house. The treatment of divorce in Milani's *Two Women* is more radical, when Fereshteh asks for a divorce but is denied because her reasons are deemed

unacceptable (a man's barring of his wife from development is not considered a basis for divorce, according to the laws of the Islamic Republic).

The handling of women's question and the wider social issues

Rakhshan Banietemad is a veteran filmmaker, who is a familiar face in international film festivals for both fictional and documentary films. Along with Tahmineh Milani, she is considered amongst the few women directors from Iran (Moruzzi, 2001) to be paying more attention to women and their issues. Most of Banietemad's films have women characters who come from the working class and struggle to provide for their most basic needs; an exception in her work is the woman filmmaker in *The May Lady*. This characterisation of the female roles by Banietemad, for example in *Under the Skin of the City* (Zire Pooste Shahr, 2000), *Narges* (1991), *The Blue Veil* (Roosari Abi, 1994) and *The May Lady* (Banu-ye Ordibehesht, 1997), have been highly praised as movies about women from a woman's point of view (See, for example, *Cinemas of the Other: A Personal Journey with Filmmakers from the Middle East and Central Asia* (Donmez-Colin, 2006)).

Under the Skin of the City tells the story of a woman, Tuba, who is the main breadwinner of her family as a textile factory worker. She has to deal with the financial and personal plight of the members of her family, including an abusive son-in-law and a drug dealer son. *Narges* is the story of a middle-

aged woman, Afaq, who lives with Adel, her young husband; they are both thieves. Adel falls in love with a younger woman, Narges. In an act of love and selflessness, Afaq – pretending to be Adel's mother – asks for Narges' hand in marriage with Adel. Later, Adel and Afaq's secret is revealed to Narges, who tries to return the money from a recent robbery. Afaq then dies in a car crash by a lorry. Thus, in *Narges*, the "problem", which is Afaq, is resolved when she is killed in a car crash. *Narges* is about the problem of polygamy, and Banietamad's camera shows Afaq, the first wife, even though she is strong, as morally and age-wise inadequate for him as she has no background or family. She is a barrier to her younger husband's 'progress', i.e. his getting married again to a young, virgin woman. Afaq's acquiescence to her husband taking a second wife, and even assisting it, which from a women's rights view ought to be reproached as conforming to patriarchal dominance, is, on the contrary, positively portrayed as an act of love and selflessness. Much as the film has been claimed to be a story of a love triangle, Afaq is not part of this endeavour. In a country where polygamy and child marriage are legal, this interpretation ignores the actual life in Iran. This kind of plot description necessitates a broader debate about what one sees as the inadequacies of realism and naturalism – i.e. fiction depicting a tragic situation without dramatizing a political strategy for transforming it. Overall, Banietamad's narratives show no way out for the women characters. The open-ended style of her narratives leaves us with just doom and gloom.

In other films by Banietamad, women use marriage as a means of earning a larger income or finding security. In *The Blue Veil*, Nobar, a woman who is the guardian of her siblings, works in a factory to make ends meet. She enters into sigheh (a temporary marriage in return for an amount of money) with her rich widower boss (the elderly factory owner). Nobar in *The Blue Veil* becomes the 'sigheh' or temporary wife of an elderly man to gain male support for herself and her family as if she's not good enough. *The May Lady* is about a divorcee documentary filmmaker called Forough, who lives with her son, Maani. She is making a documentary about role-model mothers. While interviewing women (single/head of the family mothers) for her documentary, she starts hesitating and is about to quit. However, doctor Rahbar (a male voice throughout the film, who seemingly is her boyfriend/fiancé/suiter) encourages her to continue. Finally, she decides to go against her son's will and to marry doctor Rahbar. These women characters appear to make progress from their current situation and predicaments (financial progress, finding security) by marrying men who are richer, older, more confident and in higher positions of power, which reinforces the stereotype of the dependence of the woman on the man in these films.

Another point that needs to be noted is that even though, in these selected films, Banietamad portrays women as the main characters, their repressed status under the Islamic Republic tends to be blamed on the society and relatives, rather than the misogynistic legal and political system in place.

Milos Stehlik, in an interview with Banietamad, remarks that her films should 'not ... be confused with having feminist undertones. Banietamad is more interested in the universal struggle of the lower rungs of society, regardless of gender' (Stehlik, 2006). However, even the working-class women do not seem to have the power to change their situation and end up yielding to it. Banietamad's women tolerate the intimidations and violence, as if there is no other way out. When Hamideh in *Under the Skin of the City* is beaten up by her husband, she goes to her mother, but there is no place for her there either due to their poverty. So, she returns to her abusive husband. That 'universal struggle' of the working-class woman is not depicted either.

In her more recent film, *Tales* (2014), Banietamad revisits the characters from some of her previous films. *Tales* is in 7 parts in the drama genre and seeks to find out what happened to the characters in her open-ended films. Narges is wandering the streets, escaping her husband, Saber (probably her second husband after Adel in *Narges*), who is a drug addict and violent towards her. Nobar in *The Blue Veil* has been thrown out of her temporary marriage and is now married to a co-worker. Masoumeh, the daughter of the neighbour in *Under the Skin of the City*, has a child and is still wandering the streets, working as a prostitute. She was the girl who dared to escape domestic violence, but for whom Banietamad does not seem to have conceived a better future. Even Tuba (the mother textile worker in *Under the Skin of the City*) is looking for alternative ways (such as a middleman) to receive her delayed wages from the factory owner instead of joining the

workers' strike and protest for her rights. Not only that; she also thinks their protest is futile. Again, Banietemad decides to portray Tuba as a victim rather than a fighter in this situation, even though a fight is going on and she could have joined it. Indeed, a character in *Tales*, playing an authority figure, states that people should look for the problem in themselves. This is a point that runs through Banietemad's films; the problem is within the society itself, with its binary class system, an upper class and a lower class. This class system is portrayed stereotypically as one based on the characters of the individuals making them up (rather than the more fundamental systemic and structural issues), and we never get to the bottom of the problems. On the whole, the women from the upper class are not much different either. They are rarely shown as working women and public activists, but, rather, more often as women just concerned about their appearances. This type of portrayal reminds one of the early censorship regulations set by the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance which required that poverty be portrayed as a virtue (Naficy, 1995).

Banietemad's stories combine the elements of factual life (for example interviews with real people) with fiction (Decherney and Atwood, 2014: 98). Banietemad herself has said that her stories do not have a hero: 'anyone who moves towards change can be a hero' (IRNA, 2020). However, there is not much change in her stories, at least not for the better. The women in her films tend to be virtuous and follow the cliché of a 'good woman' as mothers, sisters and daughters. Tuba, as this ideal woman, works in the

factory, in addition to fulfilling her familial and household duties. And she does this with patience and forbearance (further virtues of a 'good woman'). Forough in *The May Lady* is a major change from previous characters. She belongs to the middle class of the society and is shown as an independent, modern, educated and intellectual working woman. In some ways, she seems to be the filmmaker's doppelganger. She manages her work, as well as her home, perfectly. Forough is an example of many single mothers, who are the breadwinners and heads of their families. However, the happy ending for Forough is getting married and completing her family with a man, who is outside the frame, but present with his voice, like the voice of God; a voice which tells the woman what to do.

Banietemad is also well-known as a documentary filmmaker, including in *The Financial Tactics of the War* (1986), *We Are Half of Iran* (2009) and *Our Times* (2002). She has made many of her documentaries while researching for her fictions, such as *Under the Skin of the City* (1996). She has also been the producer and/or consultant on many other documentaries, such as *Second Home* (Mahvash Sheikholeslami, 2008), *Mother of the Earth* (Mahnaz Afzali) and *Mahak: A World She Founded* (Mohsen Abdolvahab). As in her fictions, her documentaries are predominantly around social issues and women's lives. *Tooran Khanoom* (2018) is a documentary by Mojtaba Mirtahmasb and Rakhshan Banietemad. It is the story of the final years of Tooran Mirhadi, an Iranian educator, author and researcher. *Mahak: A World She Founded* - directed by Mohsen Abdolvahab, with Banietemad as the

project consultant - is about the founder of an NGO supporting children with cancer and their families. The NGO was established by Saideh Ghods whose daughter was diagnosed with cancer, who due to a timely diagnosis fully recovered. *Mother of the Earth* by Mahnaz Afzali, with Banietemad as the artistic consultant, is about Hayedeh Shirzadi's recycling business in Kermanshah in the west of Iran. She, along with her husband, aims to reduce the amount of waste to a minimum. *Our Times* is a documentary focusing on the second run of Khatami for president and Arezoo, a woman who tries to nominate herself for the presidential election.

Those documentaries (except *Our Times*) focus on women who are unique in some ways and not many can compete with them. They all have managed to achieve high goals in their lives because of their starting point in families with means. For instance, Saideh Ghods can run a successful charity since she receives large amounts of grants, which many charities do not enjoy. Or, Hayedeh had the resources to study recycling in Germany and now her German husband is helping her in the business. They are lovely role models, but not very realistic and achievable for the ordinary Iranian women.

The second half of *Our Times* tells the story of Arezoo, a single divorcee, who is also looking after her blind mother. She only has three days to find a new home as she is being evicted by her landlord. She is trying to nominate herself to run for the office of president against Mohammad Khatami. Earlier

in the film, 48 women candidates are shown to have been rejected on grounds of being a woman. This is a doomed story for the viewer, right from the beginning in a country where, by law, women are barred from many professions, let alone becoming a president.

This is similar to Banietamad's *Under the Skin of the City* (Banietamad, 2001b), which is the story of an elderly textile factory worker. The film starts with her set up TV interview to express her views and demands as a factory worker. She stumbles and doesn't have anything to say, so it is cut undone. In the ending, she has an opportunity to talk on TV again when she is voting in the presidential election. She announces she's voting for someone whom she can trust and who can change things for the better. Banietamad's factory woman stumbles again in expressing herself. This is at odds with the real experience of women workers in Iran, who have been at the frontline of many labour struggles, articulate and giving speeches. As an example, see the documentary *A Look at the Labour Struggles in the Past Three Decades in Iran* (2011) by Pantea Bahrami.

Blue Veiled (Banietamad, 1995) is another film by Banietamad with a farm worker as her leading woman. Nobar (Fatemeh Motamed-Arya) is a young single woman who is the breadwinner of her family (a drug-addict mother and a brother and a sister). She starts a secret relationship with her boss, Rasoul, the owner of the farm/factory who is decades her senior and rich and able to support her. Banietamad focuses on the romance and the

apparently loving relationship. The man's daughters are against that since she is poor and much younger than him. Banietamad claims that her focus is class and gender (Laurier and Walsh, 2005). Nevertheless, her approach seems slanted on Rasoul's side, showing him in a more positive light, whose real motive is not clear, whether feeling sorry for her, admiration, love or lust. Banietamad disregards the reality of the unequal relationship between the woman and the man: the young, poor woman employee agreeing to a sexual relation outside marriage with her rich, much older boss in the traditional rural Iran, passing it off as love. Banietamad chooses the man's daughters to play the stereotypical role of selfish, irrational villains opposing his "love"; they embarrass him in public by inviting the elders to arbitrate and make him leave her. However, Rasoul behaves 'maturely' and stands up to them. He leaves his wealth to them and goes after Nobar. As in Milani's films, the man makes the key decisions and takes the narrative forward; otherwise, the women would be hanging in uncertainty, as in the ending when Nobar is waiting for the passing train with her two siblings while Rasoul is driving towards them.

In *The May Lady* (Banietamad, 1997) Forough is a divorcee with a teenage son, working as a documentary filmmaker for the TV. She also has a lover in her life whom we never see but only hear through different devices such as telephone and the entrance call. His disembodied voice feels omnipresent like a god. We know him by his surname Dr Rahbar, meaning leader. He guides, advises and supports her. Banietamad has claimed that he is never

to be seen in order to circumvent the censors, as it is taboo and illegal to be in a relationship outside marriage (Naficy, 2000). However, similar characters and relationships have been shown before in Iranian movies (e.g. *Narges* and *Ghermez*). In a scene where she is driving down the road, Dr Rahbar is reading out a love letter to her, which she recites along with him. Overlaying their voices may imply a sexual interaction; however, acoustically, in this duet, his voice leads her, and she closely follows his every word.

The more important point to be noted here is the filmic realism performed in a manner that rarely has been executed in other Iranian films. Founding on her skills as a documentary filmmaker, Banietamad does this through the narrative structure and the women's social and political positions and standings in the film: 1) the political presence of the privileged women of the Islamic Republic; 2) Banietamad situating herself by their side; 3) her/the film's interpretation of a woman as a documentary filmmaker; 4) a woman and mother; and 5) her national/religious duty when reflecting on the issue/s.

As mentioned, Forough is a doubleganger for Banietamad herself. She is a filmmaker and physically looks like her too. As this blurs the boundaries of fiction and reality, the audience is pulled into the story more quickly and believes the events and messages more easily. Banietamad uses this deftly to encode an ideological message and meaning: the Islamic Republic's

model of ideal mother or in fact ideal woman. Banietemad conveys the questions as her own dilemmas about identity (motherhood and a career woman) and lays down the responses too. Her response to what/who is an ideal mother is written carefully throughout the film by segregation of women in her filmic world, (real) Islamic 'expert' women testimonies, actual cases of good and bad mothers aiming to reinforce a filmic Islamic exemplary woman. Examples of her formal and stylistic cinematic choices include:

- The visual absence of the male character of lover/partner in her own home until the end – she is mindful that her son doesn't like the idea of another man in her life;
- She shows us a selected range of mothers; the mothers of the "martyred" and injured in the Iran-Iraq war and those in prison for a crime all wear a hijab;
- All women wear full, 'proper' hijab (unlike how it really is on Iran's streets) whether chador or not;
- She does all the house chores herself, while working, and her son only lays the table;
- She wears a hijab all the time, e.g. even when at home with her son and even in bed;
- The majority of the locations (some documentary footage, such as of the cemetery and the courts) are shown to be women-only; some also have segregated entrances; overall,

the segregation image in the film is quite pronounced; e.g.

early in the film, the film crew is shown filming a huge crowd of children in an open space; the shots are predominantly divided into separate shots of girls and boys;

- She promotes the Islamic ‘model woman’ by interviewing Islamic women politicians such as Faezeh Hashemi, Mehrangiz Kar and Shahla Lahiji.

Concluding observations and commentaries

The problem with most Iranian films, in particular when it comes to woman’s question, is their faithfulness to the Islamic Republic’s rules and restrictions and not challenging them.

Women cover their bodies strictly and maintain their hijab perfectly according to the codes of each film. For instance, in films by women filmmakers studied in my thesis, women can be read as ‘good Muslims’ only by their hijab and dress code. This is the case, from the housewife Fereshteh in *Two Women* to the factory worker Tuba in *Under the Skin of the City* and the documentary filmmaker Forough in *The May Lady*.

The women do their duties at home even if they work outside as well. The perfect examples are *Unwanted Woman* and *May Lady*. And if they don't, they will learn and develop it during the film, like in *Cease Fire* (Milani, 2006).

In these narratives women rarely achieve their goals, and the blame is put on individuals - mostly within their family who suffer from a long tradition of patriarchy. The latter is not criticised or rejected but sympathised with, understood and excused. In *At Five in the Afternoon*, the father is an extremist Taliban supporter who controls his daughter's life, for example by denying her having a normal education. In *The Day I Became a Woman*, Hava is introduced to the supposedly 'traditional' and 'homegrown' ritual of womanhood by the female members of her family, whereas in fact these misogynistic and child-abusive rituals were introduced by the Islamic regime after the revolution as part of the schooling system for girls. Ahoo, the young woman, dreams of cycling, but it is denied by the male members of her family as a matter of course. In *The May Lady*, it is her son who doesn't want her to be with her man. In *Apple*, based on a true story, the girls were jailed because their father was poor and illiterate; interestingly, while the neighbours (in a poor area in Tehran) condemn him (in fact the neighbours reported them to the social services), the film is understanding. These movies never point at the real culprit, which is the state and its Islamic legal system, which has set the scene for much of the oppressive and misogynistic behaviour. Indeed, the society, notwithstanding the anti-woman Islamic laws, has moved in the opposite direction, with many men

and families in fact fostering more progressive and equal relations and attitude towards the question of woman and the position of woman within the society and the family. That is why the actually empowered standing of the woman in Iran (despite the discriminatory laws) is so much at odds with the picture presented in most of Iran's official movies. What those movies are reflecting is not the wider society, but the small world of the religious and political establishment. These are two totally contrasting worlds, which by the way goes to explain the social clash going on in present-day Iranian society - with daily protests by workers, women and the youth as one manifestation of it - towards resolving this incompatibility and contradiction.

The central character, Noghreh, in *At Five in the Afternoon* (Makhmalbaf, 2003) is a young Afghan woman living in Kabul, who secretly attends school against her strict father's wishes. Following an exercise in school, she aspires to become Afghanistan's president. But throughout the film, we never believe she may have a chance of achieving her dream, as in *Our Times* by Banietamad. Makhmalbaf is not successful in making us believe Noghreh may actually have a chance. Noghreh's life is restricted on every level, from the clothes she wears (she wears the burqa and changes her shoes when she's far enough from her home and the neighbourhood) to having access to basic education and literacy (she is much older than her classmates). Even if the audience believes a woman in this situation can dream of becoming the president, the filmmaker does not open any possibilities to realise it. Makhmalbaf's take on Noghreh is as a naïve young

woman with big dreams, not many abilities and skills to lead her own life independently, let alone become a politician. She cannot write her (exercise) texts, nor take the first step towards advertising herself, so she asks a young refugee man to assist her. The film ends showing her following her father - leaving the town behind – into the desert.

When these films are criticised for being misogynistic and showing women as victims, a usual argument is that they are simply a reflection of the reality of life for women in Iran. However, as I have shown above, these official films reflect not the real, actual, living women in Iran, but in fact the ideal Islamic woman, a woman that apparently willingly has accepted her unequal and repressed position, following the edicts of Islam, which is the false, fabricated and violently imposed narrative by the Islamic government. The question then is, what is the role of women as filmmakers? On this I find myself agreeing with Grierson, who has said: 'In a society like ours, art is not a mirror but a hammer. It is a weapon in our hands to see and say what is right and good and beautiful, and hammer it out as the mould and pattern of men's actions' (Art in Action, 1940).

Chapter 4: Critique of representation of women in Iran's independent cinema - underground and diaspora

Introduction

In this section, I look at Iran's emerging independent cinema, specifically its representation of gender in male/female roles. Gender representation is an important issue for all artistic productions in Iran, including cinema, due to the existing political and religious restrictions by the state on the free expression of one's gender and sexuality. For this reason, efforts to enter this domain, with any degree of freedom, have had to be made outside the current political and religious establishment. Quite well-known films that have come out of Iran and been showcased in international film festivals are often only permitted and approved productions, which are either supportive of the dominant narrative and therefore directly financed by the state, or have had to self-censor to comply with the political, cultural and ideological impositions of the state.

Iran's independent cinema, therefore, is necessarily a development outside and against Iran's established cinema. Lacking legal and financial support, this cinema is inevitably hampered by financial, technical and legal constraints. Often (especially when it is more vocal in its critique of the establishment), it is persecuted and, therefore, has to operate as a covert cinema. For these reasons, its access to both the home and international

market is severely restricted. The physical space for such films is, therefore, either the underground inside Iran or in the various cities in the West, making up the Iranian diaspora, where the exiled filmmakers work on their productions. These films rarely get to the stage of receiving a permit for public screening inside Iran without heavy changes and cuts, as dictated by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance, and often have to be shown outside the country in alternative venues, festivals or special screenings, or streamed online.

Iranian satellite TV channels that broadcast towards Iran have provided another means to reach Farsi-speaking audiences and this is where many independent films circulate. These films sometimes reach an even larger audience thanks to the popularity of the opposition satellite TV channels among Iranians (in contrast to Islamic Republic National TV channels). This is because the satellite TVs provide a rather fresh and uncensored, but also alternative, version of current affairs and journalism.

Since 1979, Iranians have seen repeatedly the same picture of themselves portrayed in the local and international mainstream media as both religious fanatics and devout followers: Friday prayers, US-flag burning, shouting men and women covered in hijab. In response, in independent cinema, a contrasting picture has developed, showing Iranian women as rather resilient, defiant and more conscious of their rights. This image has been produced by grassroots activist – mostly women – filmmakers. By providing

an alternative take vis-à-vis the official cinema, this cinema, which is by no means a uniform phenomenon, mirrors, culturally and cinematically, the broader social, cultural and political movement of protest in Iran against the political and ideological regime in place, in particular the struggle for women's rights in Iran.

Below are a number of independent activist films on and about women circulating since the 2000s:

- Lila Ghobadi: *Epitaph* (Ghobadi and Mansouri, 1998), *Utopia* (Ghobadi and Mansouri, 2002), *Forbidden Sun Dance* (Ghobadi, 2008)
- Pantea Bahrami: *I belong to Nobody* (1998), *Islam: My Identity or the Reason for My Escape* (2001), *From Scream to Scream* (2004), *And in Love I Live* (2008), *Women's Right is Human Right* (Pantea Bahrami, 2011), *Budding Grief* (2015)
- Sudabeh Mortezaei: *In the Bazaar of the Sexes* (Mortezaei, 2009)
- Kim Longinotto: *Divorce Iranian Style* (Longinotto and Mir-Hosseini, 1998), *Runaway* (Longinotto, 2001)
- Nahid Persson Sarvestani: *Prostitution: Behind the Veil* (2004), *Four Wives and a Man* (2007), *My Stolen Revolution* (2013)

In the section which follows, I focus on several examples of filmmaking which offer counter-narratives to the dominant representation outlined in Chapters 1 and 2.

I also wish to acknowledge a number of Iranian activist films, which include both women and men within their narratives, such as:

- Josef Akrami: *A Few Simple Shots* (2004), *Protest* (2018), *The Purple Time* (2013), *Broken by the Wind* (2022)
- Nima Sarvestani: *Those Who Said No* (2014)
- Masoud Raouf: *The Tree that Remembers* (2002)

In this chapter, following a definition, I will first discuss the contrasting perspectives on the representation of women in Iran's independent cinema around the roles of victim and fighter. This will be followed by a discussion of the rationale for, and significance of, home movies in Iran's independent film productions, in the context of the indoors/outdoors division and dynamics. In a final section, I will critically review a number of representative films from Iran's independent cinema around the theme of representation of women. Where relevant, essential features of these films will be contrasted with those of Iran's official cinema (critically reviewed in the previous chapter) and comparisons will be made with my own film.

Independent cinema: a definition

By independent cinema in Iran I mean a cinema oppositional to the state, which is at the same time, and as a result, independent from the state in its funding, control and influence. Independent cinema in Iran encompasses both the cinema in the Iranian diaspora and Iran's underground cinema. Iran's independent cinema, and especially underground cinema, following Claire Johnston's characterisation (1973b), could be described as a 'counter-cinema', which, as a progressive and forward-looking cinema, contributes towards an actually existing social and political movement of protest, including the movement for women's rights. Also, adopting, and adapting Raymond Williams' terminology in classification of discourse, Iran's independent cinema could be described as still an 'emergent' cinema (1977, pp. 121–127). This cinema has been formed in reaction to the obliteration of the space for the development of a free cinema since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, and by definition does not seek recognition or expect support from the state, functioning and remaining, therefore, as an oppositional force. The definition here adopted, while distinguishing the independent cinema from the official cinema in broad outline, cannot claim to preclude overlaps when classifying productions which occupy a grey area. For example, *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (Ghobadi, 2009), analysed below, meets the criteria of independence (in relation to funding, control and influence); however, its oppositional status and edge is rather measured. Thus, even within the spectrum of what

qualifies as an independent cinema, there are considerable variations - from political documentaries sharply critical of the regime to productions which had to remain independent merely to exercise a degree of aesthetic freedom and retain a semblance of artistic integrity.

Contrasting perspectives in the representation of women in Iran's independent cinema: victim or fighter?

On a very broad level, the existing representations of women in Iran's independent cinema, which aim to provide an overall positive image of women, may be divided into two categories or roles: a victim or a fighter. This is of course a simplification of a more complex and nuanced picture. However, it helps us to understand the way women and the woman question are presented in this cinema. Although an advance, compared to the traditional patriarchal or openly misogynistic representations of women, the role of victim remains within the same framework of traditional and patriarchal representations, which dominate Iran's official cinema and also many of the films depicting Iranian women made in the West. Nahid Persson Sarvestani's *Prostitution Behind the Veil* (2004), for example, retells the story of prostitution in Iran and the misery of the women - often abused single mothers - trapped by drug-dependency and poverty. Despite its depiction of these horrors, the film does not offer any hope for these women, just a very dark abyss. Lila Ghobadi's and Moslem Mansouri's *Utopia* (2002) portrays the life of mostly women and children refugees from the Iran-Iraq

war (1980-88), who have found shelter in vacant buildings in major cities. However, with the film being confined to a narrative of miseries, the result for the viewer is a feeling of dejection and utter helplessness. The downside of such portrayals of multiple devastated lives is to reinforce a sense of demoralisation, a passivity, in the face of conditions which seemingly are too hard to change, and of powers, too mighty to confront and vanquish. Films with such victim subjects often accurately and conscientiously reflect the everyday crises many people go through; however, they fail to either include the efforts by people, individually or collectively, to change their lives, or explore the *possibilities* for change in the absence of any tangible, ongoing struggle for change. Raising awareness about oppression, discrimination and the plight of the people is a worthwhile endeavour; however, in the absence of a depiction of people's defiance and struggle (which is also equally part of the reality), the picture that is given is one-sided, and often only results in resignation and despondency. This is not at all a question of merely, triumphantly, providing hope in the face of a hopeless situation and 'keeping the morale up'. Often, struggles for change may be absent. However, the narrative can still delve deeper into the topic, go beyond a mere description, and while looking for the causes of the calamities, identify the - equally real - possibilities, potentials and forces for change.

The wider perspective informing such representations often plays down the role and the power of the active, human agency for change. The perspective

adopted in my research, in contrast, highlights the possibilities and potential power of the human agency for change (See Chapter 1: Introduction: ‘The practical-activist approach of my work: primacy of the human agency’).

Women and home movies

Independent films by Iranian filmmakers, in particular women, after the revolution made generous use of home videos, shot in the format of VHS or Beta mostly, in the 1980s and 1990s, often showing women and children listening and singing to upbeat music produced in Iran and outside Iran before 1979. Use of home videos, or filming in homes as the main location, is part of an alternative image produced by women inside Iran, such as in the film *Profession: Documentarist* (2014) by Shirin Barghnavard, Firouzeh Khosrovani, Farahnaz Sharifi, Mina Keshavarz, Sepideh Abtahi, Sahar Salahshoor and Nahid Rezaei, or by women filmmakers in the Iranian diaspora, as with *Marginal Road* (Ameri, 2011). These filmmakers have used the home video to create autoethnographic documentaries to tell their own and/or their families’ stories. Rather than limiting themselves to an exclusively oral history, these filmmakers have taken advantage of any audio-visual material, which takes them and the audience closer to the mood and emotions of the time. A sub-theme of many of these videos is the interrelationship between their lives and modern culture and arts, such as films, music and dance, much of which - and free expression of which - has been banned under the Islamic Republic.

In one of the episodes of *Profession: Documentarist* (2014), for example, each member of the family is a fan of a different banned singer. Thus, music, and listening to it, serves as a trope for portraying opposition to the political establishment. Also, the location, the relatively safer indoors (the home), where normal human pursuits, such as listening to music, of whatever kind, are allowed, stands in opposition to the public sphere (the streets, outdoors). Such oppositional tropes around both space and status/activity could usefully be arranged as a series of binary, contrasting, pairs, such as:

- The illegal music of happiness vs The official music of mourning
- Women without hijab vs Women covered by hijab
- Women visible vs Women absent or invisible
- Women in the foreground vs Women in the background
- Vibrant colours vs Plain saturated, preferably dark, colours
- The sound of women and children laughing vs Masculine, austere male voices
- Men and women together vs Segregated people and places

In the course of my research, I have often been asked why women filmmakers in Iran insist on taking the camera into their homes. I hope the above helps to explain why this is the case. Below, in the specific context of Ghobadi's *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (2009), I discuss the

indoors/outdoors division and tension, and how it works both to entrench and reinforce cultural subjugation, generally, and gender segregation - a 'gender apartheid' against women - specifically. However, in relation to the discussion here, it is clear how over the years the relative safety of the home has provided a refuge for unhindered artistic expression and cultural resistance of the kind seen, for example, in production of home movies and documentaries. The point should also be made that, as the social protest movement against the Islamic Republic has progressed over recent years, resulting in full scale uprisings (summer 2009, Dec 2017/Jan 2018, Nov-Dec 2019, Jan 2020), the cultural *resistance* of the home (indoors) has increasingly ascended to the level of radical *protests*, spilling over onto the streets. The battle of Girls of Revolution Street in 2018, for example, where women individually climbed onto utility boxes in broad daylight on main streets, unveiling and waving their hijabs on sticks, as a powerful public form of protest against compulsory veiling and the system of gender apartheid, was fought 'outdoors', on the streets.

In the following, I critically review three representative films from Iran's independent cinema around the theme of representation of women.

Film analysis

No One Knows About Persian Cats (Kasi az gorbeyehaye irani khabar nadareh, Ghobadi, 2009)

Struggle and protest is the central theme of *No One Knows About Persian Cats* by Bahman Ghobadi. The film could be viewed as a social and cultural product of Iranian society in 2009, a battlefield of competing social and political forces between traditional and religious groupings, on the one hand, and modernist and emancipatory ones, on the other. The film was shot in 17 days in Tehran without authorisation from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The film is a form of protest in its own right, as an underground film made in Iran and an example of the struggle for an independent cinema. It is about an underground music band that aspires to perform in front of an audience. The film establishes early on that many types of music are not legal in Iran due to their non-Islamic nature. The film won the Special Jury Prize Ex-Aequo (*Prix spécial du jury ex-aequo*) in the *Un Certain Regard* section of the Cannes Film Festival, 2009. On its release, Ghobadi had to leave Iran and still lives in exile, for fear of persecution.

Negar, the main female character, is a member of the indie rock band 'Take It Easy Hospital', an underground music band based in Tehran. She is a strong woman, who carries half the work of her band. Throughout the story, she brings up new ideas, writes lyrics, develops and manages projects,

such as follow-ups on the band's travel to Europe, negotiates music styles and executes them, as when she decides about the lighting during the gig and lights the candles herself. In the film, Negar is arrested during a raid and imprisoned, along with the rest of the band. She has clear goals and is determined to make her band succeed. Prison could not stop her from writing, although it made her lyrics dark, as her friend, Ashkan, the main male character, observes in the kitchen scene after her release.

In the film, the public spaces are naturally established as male-dominated, fierce and hostile. Negar enters the recording studio, where all the musicians are male. This is quite daring, since if a woman is caught by the police in a similar situation (one or more women in a private enclosed area with one or more men), they would be accused of moral corruption and indecency and face harsh punishments. Negar, just by being there, is risking another arrest. The threat is from the security forces, not from the men in the studio; Ghobadi's narrative never shows an indication of threat to Negar from her male co-workers. Her body language and posture show her confidence and professionalism. Her position in front of the camera is equal in relation to the male characters.

Ghobadi also uses the unwritten, established codes of sexual relations and intimacy operating in Iranian cinema under the clerics. Scenes of a sexual nature have been barred from Iranian cinema under the Islamic regime. Thus, when Ashkan is with Negar on the rooftop in Tehran, whispering,

enjoying the sunset in the background, this could be a code that their relationship is also sexual. Ghobadi employs very low lighting when Negar and Ashkan are alone at home and whispering in the dark. Ghobadi has included this romance of an unmarried couple as a subplot. Ashkan is introduced to the audience as Negar's live-in 'friend'. It is reflecting the fact that in recent decades, against the Islamic laws, it has become more of a norm for unmarried men and women to co-habit and have a relationship. Ghobadi, by including this, is implying a protest, a protest against the imposed sexual restrictions.

In a car scene, the space is shown as belonging to Negar and Ashkan, presented as a harmonious component within the structure of the scene. Ashkan is stroking the dog, as he talks about their music. It shows his sensitive character, compared to the violence in the acts of the authorities, e.g. the violent sound of knocking on the car window repeatedly. However, this independence is under constant threat, such as when Negar's space in the car is invaded because the police take away their dog. The plain-clothed police officer approaches them from behind and asks them to stop. In the car, Negar resists the order to pull down the car window, and the police officer violently knocks on the car window with his knuckles. The police here display violence that interrupts the couple's serenity and safety; every time the police enter the narrative, they represent actual threats and violence. The police officer repeatedly asks Negar to pull down the car window. When she refuses, he asks Ashkan to assist him and make her do as he says;

Ashkan, as another male, is expected to co-operate and make the system work smoothly. Ultimately, when Negar pulls down the car window, the police officer puts his hand through the window. The hands enter into the shot of the two protagonists. It is another invasion of their privacy. The police officer's hand takes away their dog. Here the inadequacy of language as a means of communication between the opposing sides is noticeable. They are all speaking in Farsi, but language does not seem adequate for communicating meaning. When the police officer claims that dogs are dirty by nature and morally untouchable, Negar responds that it's been vaccinated and is clean. From a socio-political perspective, it is a manifestation of the harrowing gap between the superstitious ruling culture and the no-nonsense young body of the society. Also, there is an issue of miscommunication between the inside (young female protagonist) and outside of the shot (the male state representative, the villain). The camera, by keeping still and focused on the protagonists and refusing to let the police into the shot, takes sides, situating the viewer inside the car with the protagonists. The same filmic device is used when Ashkan is in the court looking through the half-open door. The camera fixes on Nader (a friend of Negar's and Ashkan's, who is facilitating their travel abroad), with glimpses of Ashkan's reactions to him, and excludes the judge (part of the system) from the *mise-en-scène*.

In this film, certain man-made urban structures such as prison, court and even the streets represent the authorities (when the dog is taken out of the

car onto the street or when Nader warns the couple on the back of his motorbike about the police and tries to hide/flee from them). The scene in the car - one long take in which the camera is kept running - firstly, contributes towards the realism and documentary feel of the scene and, secondly, limits the knowledge given to the audience and builds the suspense. As a consequence, it evokes our anxiety and concern about the protagonists and their wellbeing. Interestingly, it is Negar who leaves her space and goes after her dog to fight and get it back. She is not going to give up her pet dog without a fight. By leaving the car/shot, she risks losing her privileged position inside the car, with its relative safety. However, her position, seated in the car, was restraining her view and rendering her passive and confined inside. Now, the agents outside have caused the conflict to move to the public space.

Being banned from the public space and state media, most forms of music in Iran (e.g. rock, blues, jazz, pop and anything with a Western origin) have been pushed into the deepest corners of the houses in Iran, i.e. to the basements, as 'underground music', both literally and metaphorically. The home is the safe house, the refuge, for music, as it is for most other things. For the 'outside' (the authorities), it would be ideal if the music ended there on the inside and remained hidden, invisible and unheard. However, it does not stay confined. It breaks the boundaries and spills over, maybe not physically, but in recorded forms, as audios and videos. Thus, the basement becomes a place of creativity, of aesthetic release, for both women and

men, as they organise secret gigs and make plans for going abroad to reach wider audiences. However, the home and the basement are under constant invasion by the agents from outside. The musicians have to be on their guard all the time to avoid raids in order to protect themselves and their creations. In *No One Knows About Persian Cats*, there is a war between the inside and the outside. Outside is considered the threatening *other*, which is not allowed inside the shots/story. Outside is not trusted. Outside is not only not safe, but is the repressive sphere, where the villain - the state – is prowling.

For Ghobadi, women and underground musicians are on the same side - defending their undeclared unity and fighting for freedom from outside violence. The opening scene, where Ghobadi, the director, is singing a Kurdish song in the recording studio without a permit, establishes him as an underground musician and identifies him with this movement. Underground musicians have to constantly hide from the violence of the authorities and change the location of their rehearsals to avoid detection. Ghobadi uses sound and viewpoint in many different ways to implicate the authorities as the cause of disruption and breaks in communication - for example, in a phone scene, where the conversation between Negar and Ashkan in the privacy of their rooms is interrupted by the piercing police siren.

Profession: Documentarist (Herfeh: Mostanadsaz, Abtahi et al., 2014)

The essay film *Profession: Documentarist* is made up of seven episodes in which seven Iranian filmmakers – all women – are the central characters of their own films. Each story takes a different route to investigating the self; selves that are interwoven with the politics, one way or the other. All seven women share their private and professional lives with the spectator. The films tell their stories of struggles and negotiations with the state on many levels.

Shirin, the first episode by Shirin Barghnavard, deals with an imminent foreign invasion and possible war and her responsibility as a filmmaker in that case. *Sepideh*, by Sepideh Abtahi, shares her reflections through a home movie in which her late aunt, who was a leftist activist, and who died young, is shown without hijab. *Firouzeh*, by Firouzeh Khosrovani, expresses the fear of state censorship by telling the story of when she was interrogated about her short documentary *Rough Cut* (Khosrovani, 2002), which talks about the authorities' orders for the mutilation of female mannequins (by cutting off their breasts) because they were deemed un-Islamic. *Farahnaz*, by Farahnaz Sharifi, explores the relationship between her family and Iranian pop music, including in the years following a state ban on it under the Islamic Republic, driving music and dance into the private spaces of homes. *Sahar*, the piece by Sahar Salahshoor, is centred on a day when she is moving home, leaving behind a house with an unpleasant view,

associated with bad memories (more on *Sahar* below). *Nahid*, by Nahid Rezaei, focuses on the conditions of documentary filmmaking, such as those of the women filmmakers of this film (her collaborators), state arrests of documentary makers and the shutting down of the House of Cinema. *Mina*, by Mina Keshavarz, is about feeling lonely after her friends leave the country for good, mainly due to the harsh political conditions.

Every story offers its own context, highlighting different aspects of its protagonists' lives within the recent history of Iran and of the region, including the Iranian 1979 revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, the 2009 uprising in Iran and the revolutions in the Middle East in 2011. In their portrayals of themselves, the women situate themselves within their own historical, cultural and socio-political events, which shaped and established their personal identities.

Here I wish to dwell a little on *Sahar* by Sahar Salahshoor, largely because of its motifs of view, being seen and the veil, which relate more directly to my study and film. We find Sahar on the day she is moving home. She is moving because of the bad memories associated with the house. What we are shown is the home that she is leaving and her memoir-like monologue about her emotions and experiences while she was living there. Her tone is melancholic, but not nostalgic, as she is happy to leave behind a house with an unpleasant view, associated with bad memories. Throughout Sahar's documentary, her concern is the view of the prison (Tehran's main, Evin

Prison) from her window. She later reveals to us that as a child, she used to visit her parents in the prison, where - as the viewer can deduce from the context - they were kept as political prisoners. She stares through the window at the prison, connecting her with her parents in the past and, maybe also, with the other prisoners. At the same time, the prison appears to be what is stopping her from making a movie, as it weighs down on her, both because of its past associations and its present meaning. She also expresses her hatred for curtains and covers. She says the curtains have to be drawn because the prison authorities do not want people to look at the prison. She hates them perhaps because she identifies them with the compulsory veil and other oppressive restrictions on women. She aspires to move to a new home where she does not have to cover her view, or herself from view. She does not want to be forced to hide herself. But the constant presence of the security forces and guards makes her do that. She identifies herself as a prisoner like the ones behind the prison walls. The veil is like a prison.

Profession: Documentarist successfully chronicles the fears and hopes of seven women documentary makers as they struggle, often with the authorities, to change the circumstances in which they find themselves. Their story is the story of many other Iranian women trying to overcome the pressures and barriers of a misogynistic political establishment. Although the film is centred on seven individual stories, the ensemble form adopted in the film helps to highlight the solidarity and commonality of purpose of the

individuals in this network of women. The tone of the film, though often melancholic due to the nature of the stories, is positive in that the women are able to find some form of resolution, even if only through their films. Yet, the solutions in the end are only individual solutions, and often involve escape. Although the film, like other independent productions, is able to convey the ugliness and horrors of the life faced by women in Iran, narrated around the themes of war, repression, death and loss, it remains largely limited to this depiction, with the woman apparently having few options for any radical change. While evoking the viewer's sympathy, the resulting sense of helplessness in the face of a mighty adversary is inevitable.

In the Bazaar of Sexes (Mortezaei, 2009)

In the Bazaar of Sexes, a documentary by woman filmmaker Sudabeh Mortezaei, tells the story of several women (centring on two sisters) in Iran, focusing on the issue of *sighe*, i.e. Islamic temporary marriage. *Sighe* is a legal practice in Shia Islam, and thus under the Islamic Republic in Iran. It is a marriage contract that may last from 1 hour to 99 years in return for a sum of money or equivalent. It is a form of prostitution.

Although the film is mainly a testimony by women, who have been abused under Islamic laws, it also gives space to the legal-religious authorities and their functionaries to offer their rationalisations. It shows these women in different situations, such as in the bazaar while shopping, meeting their

friends, in the mullah's (the cleric's) office, as well as at home with their children. Nearly all of these women are survivors of forced marriages, and of abusive or drug-addicted husbands. They are all divorced or widowed. The film is a demonstration of how the religious state in Iran has made prostitution a profitable business, bringing it under its monopoly. Sex is a taboo subject under the Islamic Republic; however, the clerics have found a way around it for their own benefit.

Using the documentary genre and by following mostly women affected by *sighe*, *In the Bazaar of Sexes* places us in the middle of situations that form the story's setting. It shows the role of the clerics, as legal functionaries, in creating the predicaments that these women and their children are placed in. Also, through the female lawyer, it talks about the legal barriers that these women are facing. The film also shows the unity and community that exists among the women. In one scene, a cleric is in conversation with a young man, who manages a website that explores the issue of *sighe*. The young man states his opinion that women's rights are also a man's concern since 'What harms women, harms men too [...] what benefits women, benefits men too'. He challenges the system which discriminates against women and stresses the need to differentiate between the state's culture of masculinity and patriarchy and the progressive and more equal everyday relations and culture among the people. The young man's views are typical of how the young generation in Iran thought back in 2009, and still thinks today with even greater radicalism and sophistication. In this account of

Iran, Mortezaei portrays a broad map of personal, familial, legal and intellectual settings on the issue of sex and sexuality and how they are dealt with by the ruling religious establishment. Although the women are shown trapped in the Islamic legal web, they have not given up. Towards the end of the film, in the restaurant scene, a few young women are shown making fun of the mullah who is also having a meal there. The women appear confident and quite aware of their own power. The scene is emblematic of the confidence and fighting spirit of the women throughout the film. It evokes a sense that women are engaged in a fight to change their circumstances.

In summary, what connects the three independent films above, in contrast to Iran's official cinema, is the attempt by each film to portray the women in them as ordinary humans trying to live their lives in the face of an authoritarian misogynistic religious state. All three films are successful in conveying the dark, tragic and terrifying realities of the lives of women in Iran under a reactionary regime and its repressive forces. The fiction *No One Knows About Persian Cats* achieves this by interrogating the theme of space, exploring the inside/outside divide and the tension and clash between the two. Here, the 'inside' (whether the home or the car) is a place of relative safety, a refuge, protecting those inside from the villain, the repressive state, 'outside'. It is important to note that the film belongs to a period in the contemporary history of Iran, when protests against the Islamic regime had not yet taken the form of open revolts out on the streets (the 'outside'), as they did in the summer of 2009 (the film had its first official

screening at the Cannes Film Festival in May 2009), and which have continued intermittently since then. Since that time, that 'outside' has repeatedly been openly challenged and taken over by protesters. The quiet "resistance" on the inside has increasingly given way to vocal "protest" on the outside, on the territory of the enemy. *Profession: Documentarist*, likewise, eloquently, even at times poetically (e.g. *Sahar* and *Sepideh*), captures through the narratives of its seven protagonists the everyday fears and hopes of many women in Iran. Here too the theme of space is important, as some of the women try to resolve their predicaments by changing their locations, by moving away. *In the Bazaar of Sexes* chooses the topic of sale of sex through the institution and business of *sighe*, an Islamic form of legalised prostitution, to portray the tragic lives of a number of vulnerable women having to resort to *sighe* to earn a living.

All three films, through different topics (underground music, personal stories and sexual exploitation) are critical of the political and religious establishment in different ways. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, the narratives rarely succeed in leaving the framework of women as victims, who have few options for change. Nevertheless, what does unmistakably come out of all three films is the fighting character and spirit of the women portrayed, and the gulf that separates them, their thinking, culture and values from the ruling regressive, patriarchal religious state.

SECTION 2: My Documentary

Introduction

I would describe my documentary as an intervention aiming to create a progressive space that can, within its defined scope, as John Holloway (2010) puts it, “crack” the status quo, enable new ideas to flourish, and materialise a model for the empowered portrayal of women (specifically Iranian women) in cinema. The key concepts underpinning the specific perspective of my documentary arise from the critique of existing films of the last four decades offered in detail in Section 1.

I started the practice part of my research (filming the documentary) in February 2016, in my second year of part-time study. By that time, I had already devised a plan along the following lines: My documentary would be feature-length and made up of six segments, each segment portraying one woman activist. I would employ an ensemble approach (Lesage, 1990), where my protagonists would all have roughly the same amount of screen time, and combine this with a first-person narrative approach, with my participants directly telling their stories. I would also include the filmmaker (myself) in selected shots in what Nichols terms the ‘participatory mode’ (2017). The rationale for the ensemble approach is to give equal space to each of my participants, who represent specific social activism fields. The

rationale for the first-person narrative is to highlight the authenticity of the stories being told by my participants in keeping with the central aim of my research, which is to explore forms of representation which bring out the strengths in the women characters as subjects with agency rather than passive objects. The rationale for including myself in selected scenes is to highlight my connectedness with the lives and work of my participants, as someone who has travelled a similar path and experienced similar social and political events, and who is making a similar activist response via the medium of film. This selection of approaches is discussed in more detail below.

My practical project aims to provide a form of representation of Iranian women in cinema, which challenges those of the official Iranian cinema and, on a broader scale, those in mainstream Western and global productions. Specifically, my documentary aims to provide an alternative, empowered image of Iranian woman, which is a truer reflection of the reality of life and struggle of the present-day Iranian women as they confront and fight against the Islamic regime of Iran. Against portrayals based on a patriarchal, orientalist or cultural-relativist perception of the Iranian woman, I aim to provide an image of a woman, who is progressive, secular, open-minded, unbeaten, rebellious and engaged in a struggle, individually or collectively, to change her situation. The portrayal I have aimed to employ in my documentary is also critical of the victim image, which many progressive, independent productions, despite being sympathetic to the women's cause

and critical of the Islamic regime in Iran, provide (Chapter 4: Contrasting perspectives in the representation of Iranian women in Iran's independent cinema: victim or fighter?). The perspective I employ in my film is based on a particular activist, human agency-centred approach which I have outlined earlier in the thesis (Chapter 1: Introduction: The practical-activist approach of my work: primacy of the human agency).

Chapter 5: The theory that informs my work

In this chapter I discuss the theoretical perspectives and methodologies that inform my practice-based research, from documentary film theory to feminist film theory and feminist activist documentary making in the West.

One of the methods I have employed, because of having to be observer, researcher, participant/performer, practitioner/filmmaker, is the politicised first-person perspective, which was already an established method in feminist documentary films. At the start, I saw myself passionate about social issues (such as women's issues, children's issues and freedom of expression), but not specifically as an activist filmmaker. As other elements of the project, such as the participatory mode of the film and the underpinning autobiographical basis of the work, were included, they contributed towards the articulation of myself as a feminist filmmaker and to my understanding of a feminist activist approach. My PhD could be described as a form of participatory action research that provided me with the opportunity to explore, experiment and in the process reflect and explore my questions while working with women activists. In my project, using documentary as a form of filmmaking practice enabled me to apply and incorporate my ideas and the ongoing findings into a developing practice. The documentary was created because I, along with my women participants, participated with a collective view to have an impact to create change. They shared my initial aim to change the mindset and attitude of

people on how Iranian women are represented on screen. Following the tradition of PaR, the question remains if further down the line, this study could have an impact on the tradition of filmmaking broadly.

So because ‘a creative artefact’ would be the ‘*basis*’ and an integral part of my methodology and the vehicle for contribution to knowledge, I undertook ‘practice-**based**’ (Candy, 2006) research as the method of inquiry for my PhD; a methodology in which ‘learning by doing’ and developing individual creativity are the core elements of the course of study. PaR projects are well suited for researchers and practitioners, who would like to combine creative filmmaking with research and social issues (Chevalier and Buckles, 2019).

First of all, this film was made as part of my PhD, to be seen initially in academic environments, such as by examiners and at academic workshops and conferences. Following Jacques Ranciere’s concept of active audience (Ranciere 2009: 11), my film aims to inform, motivate and encourage my audience to change. As Lesage states, with the same sense of bringing about a change in the target audience, ‘feminist documentaries speak to workingwomen, encourage them in their public struggle, and broaden their horizons to make demands in other spheres as well’ (Lesage, 1978: 520). As mentioned already, my film (the screening of the stand-alone episode *Shahla* and the trailer as part of my presentations) raised very useful discussions around the themes I was already working on, but the audience also raised topics, which were encouraging for me and also contributed to

the film and impacted on the form the film/thesis ultimately took. Again, as Lesage has observed, feminist documentary films' appeal lies not only in having strong women speaking about their lives, but, even more so, in hearing and seeing how some women have deliberately altered the rules of the game of sexual politics (1978).

Documentary form

Samuel Brody in his 1934 'The Revolutionary Film: Problem of Form' (2016: 247) considers the documentary form as the 'medium of revolutionary film production' under the capitalist system. Distinguishing different genres of documentary at the time – newsreel, "synthetic documentary" and the educational short – Brody calls documentary the filmic "weapon" for the working class. Discussing how to film a social problem, like slumdweller in *Housing Problems* (1935), Bill Nichols in his book *Introduction to Documentary* (2017: 159) states that documentary gave the opportunity to the subjects to 'speak for themselves'. He considers the latter – along with filming them in their own homes with synchronous audio – as a way to present the people as agents, rather than victims. Perhaps significantly it was a woman, Ruby Grierson, who reportedly first handed the microphone to ordinary people in a documentary and asked them to describe their own situation, rather than relying on a professional expert or narrator to do so – which had been, and often continues to be, a documentary tradition (Aitken, 2013: 403). For a short history of documentary cinema see Broderick Fox's

Documentary Media: History, Theory, Practice, the chapter titled A Brief History of Documentary, Movements and Modes (2017) .

My documentary aims towards a filmic representation of a group of activist women, their thoughts and actions, or, as Nichols puts it, to offer ‘aural and visual representations of some part of the historical world.’ (2017: 31) There is a long tradition of showing women as activists, who are protesting against oppression and discrimination. The *Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Film Collective, 1975) and *The Willmar 8* (Grant, 1981) are examples of many documentaries, which show campaigns by women workers in the 1970s over unequal pay based on sexual discrimination. These films have played an important role both in giving a voice to feminist campaigns and memorialising their hard work in the history of women’s rights, as well as experimenting with filmic forms and styles which push the boundaries. I discuss the documentary form further in relation to my own documentary in Chapter 7: Documentary Format.

Feminist film theory: A women’s counter cinema: disruption and oppositionality

Since the 1960s and 1970s, feminist art movements have been ‘cultural corollaries’ (Collins, 2006: 718) of women’s liberation movements in the West and these include work in feminist film theory and film practice.

Histories and analyses of feminism have tended to divide it into four waves (Rampton, 2008). Whether these are generational groups or political tendencies has been a matter of intense debate, with each new wave seeking to redefine feminism itself (Mackay, 2014). The first wave – situated as happening during the 19th and early 20th century – is understood as focused on the rights to vote for women, specifically the women's suffrage movement. The second wave, which I have employed as a method in my research, was at its height in the 1960s and 1970s, and was concerned with the overarching issues of women's liberation in the society including legal, political and social equality, aiming to achieve equal rights with men.

I was born in 1970, and even as a young girl, I enjoyed seeing the achievements of the feminist struggles in Iran in the 1970s, following their sisters' footsteps in the West. When the 1979 revolution happened I witnessed the protests by women against the newly-installed misogynistic regime (see (Moghissi, 1994; Shahidian, 2002b; Matin and Mohajer, 2010a)). When the revolution happened, despite some achievements in the pre-revolution period, Iranian women were still fighting for their equal rights (2nd wave ideas); rights, such as in family law, custody of children, inheritance and so on (Shahidian, 2002b). Following the attack on women's rights after the revolution, Iranian women protested against the introduction of compulsory hijab and reduction of rights, from needing permission from a male guardian to travel to limitations on the type of jobs for women and segregation in work and public places. Many women's rights activists in the

West (2nd wave feminists) strongly supported these protests and stood by their side. In solidarity with Iranian women's struggles, many protests were staged in large cities in the world such as in Rome, Milan, Madrid, Barcelona and Brussels in Europe and Montreal, Vancouver, New York and Washington in North America. *The Year Zero* – a 12-minute documentary – is the product of a European film crew, who recorded the extraordinary Women's Day rallies against forced hijab in Tehran on 8th March 1979 (Femmes du MLF, 1979). In the film, Kate Millett expresses her excitement for being there and is amazed by the standard of the protests and demands by women. She was there with Sophie Keir, who also filmed the protests, and whose photographs were published in Millett's *Going to Iran* (1982). Raya Dunayevskaya criticised the whole situation in Iran, especially the attacks on workers' and women's rights (Dunayevskaya, 1979). The film crew which went to Iran was following the huge solidarity and support lent to Iranian women's struggles by prominent international women's rights figures and organisations, such as Simone de Beauvoir. She was the head of a committee, who sent a group to Iran to support the movement (Matin and Mohajer, 2010b). Although the protests were ultimately crushed by the Islamic regime, they left a legacy, which by many feminist activists is considered as the first realisation of international women's solidarity in the world (Matin and Mohajer, 2010b).

However, during the 1980s, women's rights – along with many other basic civil rights – in Iran were systematically wiped out. Following the embracing

of postmodernism and post feminism in the 1980s and early 1990s as a broad framework for the rationalisation of identity politics by minority ethnic, racial, cultural and religious groups in the West, attempts were made in Iran within the religious establishment to put together a so-called “Islamic feminism” (a 3rd wave type of feminism). This was no more than a clumsy attempt by a number of female political figures from within the establishment to justify the total lack of rights and the existing state misogyny and violence against women. Its audience in fact were the liberal and academic circles in the West, rather than women in Iran for whom the horrors of the attacks on women and their lives and rights were too real to take such justifications seriously. Among this crowd were people like Faezeh Rafsanjani, the daughter of the then President, Akbar Rafsanjani, and Zahra Rahnavard, the wife of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, a former Prime Minister. Indeed, their hostility towards feminism (which they considered a Western construct) was so intense, that they would not call themselves Islamic feminists. In any case, to many at the time, the term ‘Islamic feminism’ seemed as an oxymoron (Shahidian, 1998: 51), as the impossible task of trying to reconcile the positive, liberating ideas of feminism (2nd wave) with the suffocating, repressive tenets of Islam, and so was duly dismissed by Iranian women’s rights activists (of Iran’s initial 1st and 2nd Wave). Since the 1990s, Faezeh Rafsanjani’s feminism has consisted in advocating the right of women to cycle, while remaining silent on all other aspects of the situation of women in Iran. Zahra Rahnavard has been known for her active role in ‘discrediting secular feminists and destroying the

existing women's press and organisations' (Mir-Hosseini, 2012). A quick comparison of the grassroots demands and struggles of Iranian women and this project by establishment 'Islamic feminists' in Iran will show why they were not taken seriously inside Iran. As an Iranian woman living in Iran, I found them alien to my everyday issues. Much as feminism (2nd wave) was an attractive concept for me, the 'Islamic feminists' weren't addressing my issues and remained irrelevant to me. For an extensive account and critique on cultural relativism and Islamic feminism see Hammed Shahidian's writings, for instance *Saving the Saviour* (1999) and *Women in Iran: Emerging Voices in the Women's Movement* (2002a).

This explains why my work remains attached to 2nd wave feminism due to the latter's relevance and suitability for my area of work and its activist, interventionist approach and theoretical framework.

3rd wave feminism (post feminism) grew out of the much bigger philosophy of postmodernism - or as an 'epistemological break' (Brooks, 1997 and Gill Scharff, 2013) associated with postmodernism - in the early 1990s. It was a new discourse to critique the second wave, aiming to disrupt a middle-class, white, heteronormative view. As a backlash to second wave, it turned its attention to race, ethnicity, religion, gender and nationality and emphasised them as decisive elements, while discussing feminism. As Ann Brooks suggests, it was a shift from 'debates around equality to a focus on debates around difference' (Brooks, 1997: 4). Although the 3rd wave

direction is believed to have taken feminism to an international level, when examining the women's issues, it took up a micro approach, focusing on local areas, regarding them as 'different' and 'respecting' their rituals and customs, i.e. their specific religion, culture and race. It trivialised women's rights, with gender becoming only another factor alongside other elements, rather than a central element. I do not discuss 3rd wave feminism at any great length in my thesis for mainly two identifiable emphases within it which relate specifically to the women's question in Iran, namely, 1) the absence of international sisterhood and comradeship in the 3rd wave, and 2) the dominance of identity politics, which in fact gave support to 'Islamic feminism'.

The 4th wave feminism, starting in the 2010s, is associated with the emergence of social media, feminist activism and feminist celebrities. While it has been considered a new wave, it is still very much linked with the previous waves, especially promoting intersectionality and feminist identity (Rivers, 2017: 5). 4th wave feminism could be seen as a reflection of a rise in women's social movement and demands for empowerment and equal rights, focusing on politicised female body. Its central preoccupations are women's right to agency, consent and autonomy over their own bodies. These preoccupations are manifest in media-orientated social collectives and activist groups (unlike the third wave which tended to favour individual efforts). The new generation of feminists uses the internet as the means of international organisation, communication and solidarity. This wave is

characterised by protests against sexual and gender brutality, for instance rape, as the most violent form of harassment. It focuses on autonomy for women's bodies and the right not to be harassed, but also the right to use their bodies politically and as a means of protest. 4th wave includes the basic fundamental demands of women's rights by the 1st and 2nd waves including equal access to the public arena, including work, politics and wage equality. 4th wave feminism is identified with radicalism, such as SlutWalk, a movement against rape culture and victim-blaming and slut-calling of rape victims, the MeToo movement, Everyday Sexism Project, Free the Nipple, Femen and Boobquake. The latter was a campaign by the 22-year-old student Jey McCreight, who called on women to come out (on 26 April 2010), wearing immodest clothes. It was prompted against a fatwa by Hojatolislam Kazem Seddighi - a religious authority in Iran - who had claimed women wearing immodest clothes causes earthquakes (Heussner, 2010; McCreight, 2010). The Femen movement has in particular expressed its solidarity with the struggles in Iran, especially with women's rights activists. For this reason, Femen found their way into my film and thesis since they have been in collaboration with the women participants in my film (*FEMEN Sweden - Posts*, 2018; Femen, 2020, 2022; Femen Facebook, 2021).

On women's representation in film theory

In *Women's Reflection: The Feminist Film Movement*, Jan Rosenberg (1983) gives a strong account of how feminists have criticised and challenged the objectification of women in the mainstream media, especially in cinema. She explains the routes through which feminists have tried to transform existing stereotypes, as well as developing new, alternative representations of women. Similarly, on documentaries, Lesage in 'The Political Aesthetics of the Feminist Documentary Film' (1990: 233) asserts that documentary 'serves as a critique of and antidote to past cinematic depictions of women's lives and women's space'. Many feminist movies (feminist in terms of political content) were influenced by student protests and women's liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s. As a result, there was a sharp increase in the number of feminist films in the 1970s directed by women, whose contents concerned 'women's issues and/or lives, or, in the case of avant-garde films, ... women's sensibility' (Rosenberg, 1983: 52). According to Laura Mulvey, a feminist cinema has to be an alternative to mainstream cinema and its patriarchal narrative, and it should be avant-garde in nature (Mulvey, 1975: 17). She suggests breaking those cinematic codes, which 'create a gaze, a world, and an object', as forming the challenge to the mainstream cinema. According to Mulvey, novel alternative forms cannot be imagined, so what can meanwhile be done is to 'break down' the visual pleasure of the male gaze, as well as the traditional narrative system, i.e. the narrative closure.

Similarly, Claire Johnston in her seminal essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema' (1973), emphasised how mainstream cinema is 'an expression of the dominant ideology and cannot be neutral'. Johnston proposed that women's cinema should disrupt 'the fabric of the male bourgeois cinema within the text of the film' and build an avant-garde, counter-cinema to challenge the male-dominated language of cinema. Since the 1970s, it has been argued that the cinematic form, as well as content, must be disrupted if a 'feminist (counter-) cinema was to emerge' (Thornham, 2019: 36).

Historically, feminist film theorists have recognised the influence of a range of radical film (and theatre) theories and practices on feminist film, which are considered avant-garde and oppositional to the dominant system of meaning-making. The most commonly cited examples of this method are Sergei Eisenstein's montage innovation and Bertolt Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation, de-familiarisation), which interrupts the identification of the viewer with the characters and the narrative, and Jean-Luc Godard's Marxist choice of cinematic forms and styles.

Elin Diamond in 'Brechtian Theory/Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism' (1988) proposes an intertextual reading of Brechtian theory and feminist theory, claiming 'a recovery of the radical potential of the Brechtian critique and a discovery for feminist theory'. Similarly, Iris Smith suggests that we adopt, and adapt, Brechtian ideas, especially the

idea of 'Gestus', in gender studies, noting that 'Brecht probably sensed ... that dilemmas facing women, as estranged and disenfranchised members of society, could articulate his own views. It remains for feminists to capitalize on their potential for gender studies' (Smith, 1991: 491). My documentary sits within a similar intertextual reading of Brechtian theory and feminist theory, in which I wanted the protests of a group of 'disenfranchised' women to be the voice of a people rejecting an intensely misogynistic and repressive establishment.

Feminist activist documentary filmmaking

Feminist documentary filmmaking covers a wide range of subjects, from consciousness-raising and educational documentaries exploring health and sexuality to aiming at politicising audiences about women and labour rights. As Lesage rightly states 'feminist documentary filmmaking is a cinematic genre congruent with a political movement, the contemporary women's movement' (Lesage, 1990: 222). Reflecting on four decades of feminist documentary filmmaking, Julia Lesage observes that history of feminist activist documentary effectively started with second wave feminism - when there was as yet not many feminist films to find to make up a list of all-women directors in feminist film festivals (2020). Similarly, Jan Rosenberg sees feminist documentary as a direct expression of the women's movement speaking 'in their own words about various problematic aspects of their lives' (Rosenberg, 1983: 56). These show how feminist film theorists

articulated the political rationale of the documentary form for the women's movement.

For Alexandra Juhasz (1994: 175) too, feminist documentary has involved a conscious element of politicisation. Trying to salvage a middle ground in feminist film theory from both the realist and anti-realist genres, she argues that the feminist realist documentary has rested on two integral elements, which often have been misread: 'the fact that there are *multiple* film styles and theoretical assumptions masked by the conventions of "realism", and more importantly, that realism and identification are used as viable theoretical strategies towards political ends with these films'. These elements, argues Juhasz, explain how politically-motivated realist documentaries have taken 'great pains to show that theirs is a politicised, opinionated vision of some reality' (1994: 175). These political films, furthermore, are 'rarely the mass forms of media', but, rather, 'organizing tools of grassroots or activist organizations'.

Johnston had already pointed to this active role of the filmmaker in the *construction* of the feminist activist documentary. In her important 1973 essay in *Notes on Women's Cinema*, she writes:

Clearly, if we accept that cinema involves the production of signs, the idea of non-intervention is pure mystification...Women's cinema cannot afford such idealism; the 'truth' of our oppression cannot be 'captured' on celluloid with the 'innocence' of the camera: it has to be constructed/manufactured. New meanings have to be created by

disrupting the fabric of the male bourgeoisie cinema within the text of the film. (Johnston, 1973: 28–29)

This would then require also a change in the ‘language of the cinema’ and its depiction of reality to avoid passive subjectivity and a ‘cinema of non-intervention’ (Johnston, 1973: 29).

As Julia Lesage elaborates, feminist documentary filmmaking is congruent with political activism. This trend of filmmaking has used a number of strategies to articulate its goals and creation of a political, counter cinema. I have used a combination of many of these strategies – if not all to the same extent – following the feminist formal and stylistic choices in feminist documentary film practice:

- Mise-en-scène - public sphere vs private (domestic) sphere
- Women’s personal lives - in order to ‘challenge all the previously accepted indices of “male superiority” and of women’s supposedly “natural” roles’ (Lesage, 1978: 509). Lesage argues feminist documentaries show ‘women in the private sphere getting together to define/redefine their experiences and to elaborate a strategy for making inroads on the public sphere.’
- Alternative visual cues for women – such as the characters’ body language, costume, makeup, age, body weight, sexual preference, race, class, language, accent, education and profession.

- Positive images and role models – following positive role models, feminist documentaries reinforce positive images of women.
- Autobiography and biography – Lesage points at this as an essential tool studying the women's 'subculture', their role in or exclusion from the public sphere, their fantasy life, their sense of "embeddedness" in a certain object world' (Lesage, 1978: 518) 'a critique of and antidote' to previous representations of women in cinema (Lesage, 1978, 519).
- Particular experimental filmmaking techniques, such as:
 - employment and innovative uses of experimental filmmaking, for instance the cinema verité form as in JoAnn Elam's *Rape* (1975) and Michelle Citron's *Parthenogenesis* (1975).
 - Experimenting with the narrative structure as in *Riddles of the Sphinx* (Mulvey and Wollen, 1977).
 - Talking heads, women's lives told by the protagonists directly to the camera, as in *Janie's Janie*, *Joyce at 34*, *Union Maids*.
 - Dominance of verbatim use of subject's words as a design for the soundtrack. Women's voice replacing the dominant, patriarchal media, which talks for women.
- Collaboration, participation and collective film productions – Feminist filmmaking groups such as COW in the UK and movies such as *We're Alive* (Women's Film Workshop, California Institution for Women, 1974).

- Women's issues and struggles as the core subjects, as consciousness raising aim in feminist films.
- Women's relationship, in particular as in mothers and daughters
- Female participants – women's bodies as political sites. Feminist filmmakers recognise that a woman's body is political, and these films provide the opportunity to reclaim that authority, as well as communicating it via the film as a political device. Also, women's bodies: the soundtrack of these documentaries is filled with women's voices – intellectual and self-conscious women talking about politics.
- Women activists as participants – women activists participate in feminist documentary films, and view their collaboration in creating a film, which is an 'explicitly public act'.
- Collective of women.
- Ordinary women as participants – Lesage argues that stories that ordinary women tell on screen are more than "slices of experience", but they 'serve a function aesthetically in reorganising women viewers' expectations derived from patriarchal narratives and in initiating a critique of those narratives' (Lesage, 1978: 519).

Cahal McLaughlin has worked extensively with survivors of political violence, especially as former prisoners, including recording their memories and experiences of political brutality in South Africa and Northern Ireland. He makes documentaries and writes about the memories and testimonies of the survivors. He examines the role and process of documentary filmmaking

as an event between the filmmaker and the participants and with this practice as a recording tool of oral history. As McLaughlin delineates, when filming participants with histories of political violence, there is a need for a high degree of trust in research projects (McLaughlin, 2018). As a protocol, working with survivors of political violence demands a high degree of sensitivity. As in my own work, McLaughlin worked on his own with light-weight equipment which made it easier for him and his participants (or collaborators as agreed by all) to move around. Unlike broadcast journalism, he adopted a loose style of questions to only ‘tease out’ and clarify their stories when needed. This would let them choose what to include and also would avoid confrontation, interrogation and challenging the participants (McLaughlin, 2010: 74–86).

While filming the prison sites of Armagh Gaol, Maze and Long Kesh in Northern Ireland, McLaughlin produced and archived online, on his website, his video interview recordings of various people, including prisoners, prison guards, visitors, journalists and many more, while revisiting the place. The website displays a collection of extracts and documentary films (short and feature-length), education resources, history and interactive maps of the prisons for the public (McLaughlin, 2020). The location has played an important role as a site for memory, trauma and recollecting the violence. It is similar to Jill Daniels’ and Oppenheimer’s practice-based works looking into the past events, memory and identity.

Those recordings have had various results and impacted more than just a documentary, being used in history lessons in schools, for example. In his book *Recording Memories from Political Violence: A Filmmaker's Journey* (McLaughlin, 2010: 81–107), he reflects on his film and gives a detailed account of the feedback and comments he received from the audience, wherever he screened his documentary. This goes to confirm Nelson's remarks on the impact of PaR methodology beyond the creative disciplines; so, not only enhancing the academy, but also having social benefits (Nelson, 2013b: 21–22), or, as in Chevalier and Buckles' definition of action research, contributing back to society.

Not Reconciled (Daniels, 2011) is an experimental documentary by Jill Daniels. It is the practice part of her PaR PhD. She explores the question of survivor memory in the context of a small town in Spain after Franco's mass killings of the opposition. In her film, she investigates the binaries of past and present and dead and living, leading her to the mass graves created by the fascists, which is currently being investigated by the authorities. It is a juxtaposition of interviews with residents of the town, who were children at the time of the civil war, conflated with conversations between the ghosts of two Republicans, who were killed by the fascists. The voices are edited over the town and its ruins, remaining from the time of the civil war. Daniels brings the voices of those who lost the war – opposing the idea that the victors write the dominant narratives (referring to a quote in the beginning of the film). In her statement on ScreenWorks, she states that her research is

an examination of representation of 'place, memory and identity', experimented in a documentary film.

A similar subject is *Act of Killing* (2012) by Joshua Oppenheimer on the subject of the mass killings of the communists in Indonesia in 1965-66 by the army and paramilitary forces. The film, which is an output of Oppenheimer's PhD, focuses on the executioners in present time and asks them to re-enact their killings on camera, narrating their emotions and memories in their own favourite film genre. As the story unfolds, the participants start assessing their past brutal acts onscreen and worrying about the consequences of their testimonies and confessions for the public. The film takes a further turn when it becomes too traumatic for an executioner, while playing his own victims, which takes him through an emotional rollercoaster on camera. The story happens in present-time Indonesia where the executioners are still in full power and the families do not yet dare seek redress for their executed family members.

Using documentary film as a research tool provided me with the possibility of creating and materialising my vision of Iranian women in cinema. It does not mean this is the only way, but the methodology I chose proved to be useful and fruitful for the purpose of this project.

The voice of women

Annette Kuhn in her book *Women's Pictures, Feminism and Cinema*, referring to *Union Maids* and *Women of Rhondda*, stresses the importance of working-class women telling their stories, which relates them to larger historical events, showing them as “subjects in history” (Kuhn, 1994: 147–148). *Union Maids* (Klein, Mogulescu and Reichert, 1976), for example, tells the story of three trade unionist women in 1920s and 1930s Chicago, who organised workers and strikes for better wages and work environments. *Women of Rhondda* (Esther Ronay, Mary Capps and Mary Kelly, Margaret Dickinson, Brigid Segrave, Humphry Trevelyan, 1973) is also an oral history of the hardship and struggles of the miners – including long periods of strikes - in Rhondda Valley in the 1920s. It shows a different point-of-view on a similar event in Wales in 1926. *Women of Rhondda* represents the wives and daughters of miners with supportive roles compared to the women in *Union Maids*, who are workers themselves. Both groups are strong women, who resisted the pressure of the depression on their lives.

In recent years, especially since the start of the global financial crisis in 2008, we have been witnessing a wealth of documentaries, which are critical of the growing inequality and the exploitation of the people in an economically divided system, portraying lives of individuals as a reflection of the lives of the masses. *The Divide* (Round, 2015) is a documentary which tells the story of seven workers in the US and the UK, who are struggling to make ends meet. This documentary by Katharine Round was inspired by the book *The Spirit Level* (Pickett and Wilkinson, 2010), which argues that

income inequality is the key cause of all social problems. In her interview with *The Guardian* (Gentleman, 2016), Round states that she ‘wanted to put a face to things that are everywhere and nowhere – breakdown of the society, fear of the crime, rising mental-health issues’.

Women’s voice in cinema in the West has been approached from a feminist perspective in its different aspects - from within the narrative to sound, dialogue and the female voice-over. It has been explored in a wide array of forms, as in female authorship and self-inscription, as well as in forms of resistance, opposition and subverting the dominant male subject (Doane, 1987; Silverman, 1988; Lawrence, 1991; Hollinger, 1992). The function it serves goes beyond a mere authentic sonic reproduction of what the filmed women say in the films. Lesage (1990) rebuts the charge of women's voices merely as dull talking heads and draws attention to their ‘function of rephrasing, criticising, or articulating for the first time the rules of the game as they have been and as they should be for women’. The stories told by women are not just ‘slices of experience’, but aesthetically reorganise “women viewers’ expectations derived from patriarchal narratives and in initiating a critique of those narratives” (Lesage, 1990: 233–234).

Nichols (2016), looking at the effect of voice and speech in films centred on interviews, notes that those function as much more than merely ‘talking heads’. Taking the example of *Shoah* (Lanzmann, 1985), he says,

... when the various interviewees ... speak to us about their past, a key aspect of understanding the force and severity of that past lies in its effect on their way of speaking and acting in the present. Memories, experience, habits, and trauma all get embedded in the body, and it is of them that the body in documentary speaks. (Nichols, 2016: 75)

The women interviewed in my film are not just local activists, as was the case mostly in the movies mentioned above, but operate over a larger geography, in and out of Iran and internationally. They are, for example, in constant contact with the women in Iran and even the Middle East and other parts of the world. In filming them, I have been travelling around in the UK as well as several countries in Europe. I show them in their homes, as well as at events in other countries in which they run panels of speakers and/or give talks. I also show them recording TV programmes for broadcast and giving speeches on social media to large audiences.

One-person crew

Since the 1960s (Fox, 2017), as the filmmaking technology has advanced, filmmakers have found it easier to produce films relying on smaller film crews. Nowadays, desktop documentaries are made using video capturing software and the computer camera, with footage sourced from the internet. In feminist filmmaking, the one-person crew has been used by influential women filmmakers such as Sally Potter, who has been credited as director, cameraperson, sound-operator and editor on *Thriller* (Potter, 1979). Feminist documentary filmmakers have also opted for this mode of production due to

the collective and grassroots nature of their works. Adriana Monti, in her introduction to the script of her film *Scuola Senza Fine* (*School Without End*, Monti, 1983), explains how she started filming in 1979 after a year working with a group of housewives. The film became a collective work by the participants after she managed to receive funding, including free equipment. In Iran, *Profession: Documentarist* was made by a collective of women filmmakers working on their own short sections. Raha Faridi, an experimental filmmaker (amongst her other roles), in her video campaign for crowd funding on Kickstarter.com states that during the making of her film *Chicheka Lullaby* (2019), which took eight years to complete, she worked as researcher, director/producer, camerawoman and editor (Talebi, 2020).

Similarly, I worked on my documentary as the researcher, director, cameraperson, soundperson and editor, which I discuss further in Section 2 under My Documentary.

First-person narrative

Feminist cinema from its inception in the 1960s was influenced by *cinéma vérité*, America's direct cinema and avant-garde modes of filmmaking as the stylistic basis for its radical filmmaking. However, since the critiques of the concepts of truth and objective reality, especially in documentaries in the 1970s, (Nichols, 1991, 2016; Shapiro, 1997; Kahana, 2016; Pramaggiore and Roe, 2018) feminist film practice has been subjected to much critique

and revision (Kaplan, 1988; Penley, 1988; Erens, 1990; Kuhn, 1994; Arthurs and Grimshaw, 1999; Hollinger, 2012). From the 1970s through to the 1990s, as Renov postulates, the cultural mood in the West increasingly favoured 'the politics of identity' over 'the politics of social movements' (2004: 178–79). The feminist movement was influential in this development, building on the contention that 'the personal is the political' (Hanisch, 2010). As a result, subjectivity, grounded in a range of personal issues, became a basis for political actions (Renov, 2004: 177). The idea of political movement as central to union reforms, or labour movements gave way, thus, to broader coalition politics based on ecological protests, anti-nuclear protests, and human/civil rights. Feminism was part of all of those changes.

However, as Catherine Caesar (2001: 43) brings to our attention, in an assessment of artist Martha Rosler's conceptual art, a differentiation between 'two strains' of conceptualism (Krauss, 1973) is necessary. The first type, writes Caesar, referring to Krauss, stems from the 'private expressive self', while the second (in which category Caesar places Rosler's interventionist, political art) 'rejects subjective expression and instead relies on the public to produce its meaning'. According to Krauss, 'the prioritization of the private mental concept in an artwork could diminish concern for social change' (ibid). Rosler perceives a similar 'narcissism' in feminist art with the rise of autobiographical first-person narratives as a dominant tendency (ibid). This distinction is important because it reminds us that the personal is *not* always political. My own work, while highlighting the

role of the personal, subjective element in the creation of the artwork, far from remaining a 'private space' inaccessible to the public, connects with the political, public space, and, indeed, *has to* do so in order to remain a product for intervention (See Section 2, Introduction).

In feminism, personal experience as the basis for political action was born out of women's rights collective debates and conversations seeking effective means of action for the liberation of women (Hanisch, 2010) in order to highlight the links between the private lives of women and the surrounding political structure. As a consequence, private issues such as women's bodies and family structure became key topics in feminist debates to discuss and challenge.

In my film I decided to portray both the political (activism) and personal lives of my participants. There was no contradiction there. In fact, what characterised them all was the craving for life, a better life for all; real human beings engaged in daily living, while campaigning and protesting.

Furthermore, on a larger scale, most things turn on the political in Iran and drive one into confrontation with the state since the state has such a massive hold on the lives of the citizens – down to the most private, minute details - due to codes of conduct in religious orthodoxy. The smallest steps for the smallest of changes require confrontation with the state – from workers' pay disputes to the kind of music one is allowed to listen to. This is doubly true in the case of women in Iran, who live under a controlling

patriarchal system. Portraying both aspects of my participants' lives was thus essential in order to provide a full account of the fight they are engaged in.

Chapter 6: My participants

Introduction

In 2014, when I started my PhD project, after a period of contemplation, I drew up a longlist and then a shorter list of potential participants. The list narrowed down still further, when some names were excluded for very practical reasons, e.g. geographical distance and the financial burden of having to make long trips for shooting. This was the case with Lila Ghobadi, for example, the activist filmmaker living in Canada, although she was very welcoming and supportive of the project. In a number of other cases, in spite of initial agreement, the candidate/s withdrew for personal reasons, due to their changed circumstances and commitments. I also had to exclude some potential candidates from the initial longlist as their profile did not fit the social-activism model I had by then developed for my participants (more on this below).

My pre-existing acquaintance with the six participants I eventually selected assisted me tremendously. In fact, I had known them to different degrees and worked with them on the production of their Television activist programmes on some previous occasions. Thus, my own presence behind the camera, filming their lives appeared to come from a position of familiarity with them and their work, and I managed to create a conversational style in the films, which were shot in a day or two for each

participant at their homes and at various public events. In Sweden and Germany, I stayed at Farideh's and Mina's homes, respectively, which resulted in collecting many more hours of footage. This led to longer editing time, but also richer material to choose from. In our initial conversations, I explained my purpose and plan, including the production process and the timespan from production to editing. I also mentioned that they would have the opportunity to see their respective final versions to comment on. At the first session of filming, I presented each interviewee with a letter of information and a consent form for them to sign prior to the interview. I also explained that their participation was voluntary, and they could terminate the interview at any time and/or refuse to answer specific questions. During the interviews, on a number of occasions they asked me not to include some of their responses, with which I complied accordingly.

The entire filming took place between May 2016 and October 2019. The October 2019 sessions happened when I went back for more shooting with some of my participants to fill in a number of gaps I had identified during the editing, in consultation with my supervisors.

All women

The fact that I opted for an all-women cast may be obvious, given the particular perspective and thrust of my documentary and project. However, some reflections on the context of my film and project are necessary. More

broadly, I wanted to present women in this documentary as the agents of change, as subjects who contribute to the creation of networks of sociality and solidarity for women and for social justice and human rights. However, this is particularly a central issue for a society like Iran, with its complex of contrasting and contradictory social realities. In the face of it, a society living for decades under an intensely misogynistic, authoritarian, religious force could hardly be expected to be a bedrock for radical feminist activism. However, this is the apparently paradoxical reality that presents itself with every opportunity that women find for protest and self-expression. A reactionary system built ideologically, politically and juridically on the denial of human status to women and which has legislated unashamed discrimination and violence against women into its system of government and law, imposing it on society for over four decades with an iron fist, rather than subduing the women, and the population at large, appears to have led to an extreme feminist radicalism and anti-religious backlash. We are reminded of this yearning for equal human status and uncompromising freedom at every year's International Women's Day protests in Iran (of course, conducted illegally) and the numerous outbursts of street protests, where women appear at the frontline of the protests and leading them. The composition of many anti-government street protests that take place are female-dominated or have a substantial section of women participants in them. A more recent example of a series of daring protests by women was the movement that became known as the Girls of Revolution Street (starting from 27th December 2017 and carrying on till around the middle of 2019),

where women individually climbed on utility boxes in Revolution Street in Tehran (*Khiaban-e Enghelab*), symbolically taking off their obligatory hijabs (Islamic headscarves) and waving them in the air at the end of a stick in protest against this symbol of Islamic misogyny and coercion. This action of the Girls of Revolution Street received much popular support and was replicated by women activists in other cities. Many of the women were arrested and sentenced to long jail terms and flogging. Some managed to escape and are now in political exile (*First 'Revolution Street Girl' Who Removed Hijab In Protest Sentenced To Jail*, 2019).

Thus, in a society living under a systematic state misogyny, enshrined in its laws and built into its ideology, women have become important agents for change in opposing the regime, not just for themselves but for the society as a whole. While it is not a simple question of substituting the Marxist notion of the proletariat with female agency as the agent of change for social transformation in a capitalist society, women's agency and mobilisation is nevertheless an important adjunct to (and an ally of) the working class and the rest of the disenfranchised population in a society under a system of blatant discrimination against women and a 'gender apartheid'. Marx says of the working class that it cannot liberate itself without at the same time liberating the entire enslaved humanity (Marx, 1992). The women under this aggressive misogynistic system cannot achieve change in their situation without at the same time upending the system as a whole.

Hijab is a case in point. The imposition of hijab and the fight against it started right after the assumption of power by the Islamists following the defeat of the 1979 revolution (Hekmat, 1995). Over the years, hijab became a symbol of the Islamic Republic, and questioning it came to be regarded as tantamount to questioning the entire ideology and philosophy of existence of the Islamic Republic. Iranian women showed their defiance from the day it was introduced. Only three weeks after returning to Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini decreed that women should wear the Islamic hijab in public (Ettelaat, 1979), in response to which women took to the streets of the large cities in Iran, in particular in their massive protests on International Women's Day on 8th March 1979. The protests in Tehran were recorded in a 12-minute documentary on 16mm film by the French feminist journalist group *Pratique, Politique et Psychanalyse* (comprising Michelle Muller, Sylvina Boissonnas, Claudine Mulard and Sylviane Rey), who were there to film the Iranian women after the revolution. The short is entitled *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes Iraniennes – Année Zéro* (Iranian Women's Liberation Movement in the Year Zero, 1979). At the time, the American feminist author Kate Millett was in Iran to speak at a conference by a Marxist women's group for International Women's Day (Millett, 1982). In an interview in the film, Millett states 'I never before saw women who organized themselves so fast and so numerous.' (min 7:30) As women comprised the majority of the protestors, men were seen protecting the stream of the protestors on the sides from the Islamist thugs, who were reported to be

bullying – calling them ‘prostitutes’, ‘European dolls’ - and even attacking the protestors with chains and knives. The demonstrators were calling for equal rights for women and the freedom to assemble. The slogans and the aspirations stated in the interviews by the women in the film crossed geographical borders, highlighting universal demands by women. Kate Millett notes with praise and approbation the highly progressive demands of Iranian women. The banners seen in the film include slogans such as ‘Women’s rights are human rights’, ‘Women’s rights are neither Eastern, nor Western, they are universal’, ‘We did not make a revolution to go backwards’. The film closes with ‘No revolution will endure without women’s liberation’. As later developments showed, with the consolidation of the Islamic Republic, women were the first to be attacked. The protests on International Women's Day 1979 were documented in a two-volume book by Nasser Mohajer and Mahnaz Matin in Farsi titled *The Post-revolutionary Women’s Uprising of March 1979* (Matin and Mohajer, 2010a).

Thus, as a counterpoint to the misogynistic portrayal of women in Iran’s official cinema, I decided to make a film with a predominantly female cast from Iran, who all have proven track records of opposing the Islamic regime in Iran. These women, from different backgrounds and with different experiences, provide an alternative perception of women’s lives and struggles in and outside Iran in recent history; a perception different from and indeed opposed to that which informs the portrayals of Iranian women in Iran's official cinema and much of the cinema in the West. My

documentary then, by providing a space and voice for women activists, along with the other elements discussed throughout the thesis, strives towards an alternative cinema, with an alternative portrayal of Iranian women on screen.

Six women

In my documentary, I could have exercised my freedom to focus on just one woman's life and delve deep into her political and personal life. However, this focus would have limited the domains of active protest among my participants which I wished to include: women's rights, secularism, free thought, political prisoners, workers' rights, the fight for the abolition of stoning and the death penalty, etc. The six women in my film, together, represent important areas of social protest in the current Iranian society. Another reason for going beyond a focus on just one person is to demonstrate the commonality of purpose of a collective of women even when they are engaged in their own specific domains of activism. This would show the connectedness of their struggles and experiences, highlighting the breadth of the social issues and grievances within the society. This universality of both repression and opposition to it is explained by the existence of a centralised political state that is the source of the repression and the social grievance. This is different from societies where the source of the grievance (e.g. discrimination against women) may be essentially a question of engrained and stubborn social attitudes, such as

male chauvinism, despite the protections in law. In Iran this is essentially a political and legal issue, emanating from the political system, supported by laws which explicitly uphold and perpetuate women's inequality, bearing down more or less equally on a huge segment of the population. This lends a commonality of purpose to the struggle that it engenders. The collective participation by a number of women allows for this commonality of purpose to come through. The number six, however, has no further significance than allowing for a convenient and practical number of segments, of approximately 15 mins each, for the episodes in my film.

All activists

Each of the women in my film (Shahla, Mersedeh, Mina, Maryam, Farideh and Shiva) represents mainly one field of social and political protest, although there are some overlaps. Thus, Mersedeh and Shiva have a shared concern for political prisoners in Iran. However, while for Mersedeh the effort to win redress for the families of thousands of political prisoners who were summarily executed (including members of her own family) in the 1980s (particularly in the summer of 1988) forms a special area of activity, for Shiva (who herself was a political prisoner at a very young age), current campaigns to gain the release of political prisoners and save them from execution constitutes a more specialised concern. For Mina and Maryam, confronting political Islam is a shared concern. However, while Maryam has a special focus on issues of secularism, apostasy, atheism and free thought,

for Mina a primary area of engagement has been the successful campaign to effectively ban stoning in Iran (while it has not officially been taken out of the Islamic regime's penal code) and continuing the campaign to abolish the death penalty. Shahla's campaigns are mainly focused on workers' rights. However, she shares the struggle for women's rights with Farideh, for whom the latter is a special area of activity (including saving women from abuse and protecting them in safe houses).

In my documentary, to use Julia Lesage's 1978 term for early feminist documentaries, I have 'show[n] the unshown' (Lesage, 1978, cited in Waldman and Walker, 1999: 287), by a portrayal of representative, but at the same time, ordinary women. Those documentaries aimed to raise awareness and create a feminist community, for example *The Nightcleaners* (Berwick Street Film Collective, 1975), *Behind the Strike* (Broomfield, 1974), *Women of Rhondda* (Esther Ronay, Mary Capps and Mary Kelly, Margaret Dickinson, Brigid Segrave, Humphry Trevelyan, 1973), *With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade* (Gray, 1979), *Harlan County, USA* (Kopple, 1976) and *Union Maids* (Klein, Mogulescu and Reichert, 1976). I am following a similar path with my documentary, both in the sense that my documentary in itself is a work of activism, and in portraying activist women. My own activism as a filmmaker and my symbolic participation in certain scenes provide an added element to my documentary as not merely a passive reflector and interpreter of reality, but also an active participant in bringing about change. In the West, women's

documentaries such as *School Without End* (Monti, 1983), and in the Iranian diaspora's independent filmmaking, women filmmakers such as Pantea Bahrami and Lila Ghobadi may be counted as activist documentary filmmakers, whose films are committed to consciousness-raising themes, especially on women's and human rights subjects. Bahrami sees her role in the Iranian diaspora as 'filling the gap' for what the independent filmmakers inside Iran are unable to achieve due to the obvious repression and restrictions:

I'm sure films with the same subjects [untold history of Iran] have been made but are hidden until the day they can be shown. Therefore, for us outside the [Iranian] borders, we can fill in this gap and cross the red lines. The regime's hush on the horrors of the 1980s is very mindful, organised and calculated, that is wiping out part of the current history. (DW, 2015)

So, for me, the choice of activist women in my film was an obvious one. Female subjectivity and social change have always been on the feminist agenda, and documentary genres and auto-ethnographic forms have proven to be an appropriate cinematic vehicle for women filmmakers.

During my research for participants I looked for women who already had a long history of struggle for women's rights and human rights. Sandra Ristovska and Monroe Price look at how 'visual forms of knowledge production' and 'image-making practices of various actors' can extend the scopes of human rights actions and empower the agents working in that field. The book focuses on 'how, why and when' visual information can

affect human rights practices and broaden our understanding of it (Price and Ristovska, 2018: 3). Similarly, I selected those women for my film since they are the representatives of an aspect of women's reality which is not talked about in mainstream commentary, whether academic or media, i.e. the empowered woman; the female agency that is behind much of the social struggle and social change in a country like Iran; a woman that is outspoken and defiant and who has not accepted defeat; who is not a victim but a fighter and agent of change, on a social scale.

While growing up, I was fascinated by women characters as strong leaders and fighters, such as Morgan (Geena Davis) as the pirate captain in *Cutthroat Island* (Harlin, 1995) and Ellen Ripley (Sigourney Weaver) in *Alien* (Scott, 1979). They were the fighter/warrior women of Hollywood cinema. However, they were only in sci-fi and fantasy genres, and the ones in the present settings would usually not end up well, as in *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991). Women's roles in the history of the cinema were predominantly, as Johnston puts it, conveyors of a sexist ideology itself (Johnston, 1973). I have always been searching for women in alternative empowering roles.

Chapter 7: Documentary form

As the practical component of my research, I decided to make a documentary exploring and applying new forms of feminist and emancipatory portrayals of women in cinema. My decisions in the making of this documentary have stemmed from my own view as a woman from Iran, who experienced a specific set of historical events, such as the 1979 revolution, the rise and establishment of the Islamic Republic, war and several uprisings, including the most recent in 2019. Just as Grierson defined documentary as ‘the creative treatment of actuality’ (Grierson and Hardy, 1971: 147), so my film may be seen as the stories of a number of Iranian women, within their historical and social world, seen, interpreted and narrated from my perspective.

Documentary was a conscious decision for this project because of its contrast to the fictional representation of women as the dominant genre in Iranian official cinema. As part of the debates on the fiction/non-fiction divide, Walton’s *Mimesis as Make-Believe* (1990) and Currie’s *The Nature of Fiction* (1990) identify fiction as principally imagining, whereas non-fiction engages with believing. However, more recent works, like Friend’s ‘Fiction as a Genre’ (2012) and Matravers’ *Fiction and Narrative* (2014), have questioned the neat division of fiction/non-fiction. Finally, others have pointed out the ‘fiction property’ of documentary, in how it “produces” reality, sounding a word of caution on unqualified use of concepts such as

‘authenticity’, ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ in the context of documentary filmmaking (Nichols, 1991, 2017; Barnouw, 1993; Winston, 2019). My choice of documentary over fiction, similarly, is grounded in the belief that while the subjective element, and the interpretive framework, is undeniable and indispensable in any documentary study, this particular genre, nevertheless, provides a more suitable medium for the study of social and political events and personalities (as is the subject of my documentary) in that it allows the filmmaker to ‘get close to what is going on’ (Maysles, 2008). Nichols discusses this suitability of the documentary genre for serious and ‘sober’ subjects in terms of ‘discourses of sobriety’ - discourses with which the documentary engages to represent and even, crucially, to persuade and intervene in. These are, Nichols says, the ‘ways we have of speaking directly about social and historical reality’, but also of acting and intervening. For Nichols, documentary itself is a discourse of sobriety (Nichols, 2017: 26).

My documentary was enriched by my close knowledge of the participants and their work, by my activism in the same fields, including women’s rights, and by my own professional experience as an Iranian woman documentary filmmaker. In addition, throughout the making of the film I kept a constant and open dialogue with my participants, including engaging with them in the preparation of certain scenes, and with myself appearing, in a number of places, in the film alongside them. The totality of these factors has, I believe, contributed towards a depiction that has come close to the lived everyday experiences and struggles of these women. I have employed cinematic

tools in order to translate - in Mina's terms – a real picture of the Iranian women (and their struggles for change in Iranian society).

The choice of documentary form for my film created a space for my participants to give their own direct testimonies about their lives and activities. Such space has rarely been provided in Iran's official cinema for women. And where they have been included, this has only gone to reinforce the dominant portrayal of women as disempowered, submissive subjects; at best as victims (I have already discussed this point at length in the first part of Section 1 dealing with Iran's official cinema and its representation of women). Furthermore, such unequal portrayals have traditionally happened in the genre of fiction, the most representative examples of which I reviewed in Section 1. However, there have also been examples of documentary films made in Iran by both Iranian and non-Iranian filmmakers, which have continued to reinforce the traditional, religious and conservative depiction of Iranian woman. A recent example is *Finding Farideh* (Ataee and Moussavi, 2018), a documentary film co-directed by Kourosh Ataee and Azadeh Mousavi in Iran. It was put forward by the Iranian government as its foreign film nomination for the Oscars 2020. Donyaye Tasvir Online (an Iran-based film magazine) reviewed it under the title of 'In search of identity'. The speaker for the Islamic Republic's International Section Selection Committee, who is also the international vice-president for the Supreme High Council of Farabi Cinema Foundation, in an interview with the Iranian news website Khabaronline, claimed a documentary was chosen to

represent Iran because of 'the growth of documentary cinema' in Iran. He adds that *Finding Farideh* revolves around the issue of 'identity crisis', which he claims is a global issue and as a result, the film may connect to a specific audience. The film, however, was not shortlisted.

Finding Farideh is the story of Farideh, a 40-year-old woman raised by her adoptive Dutch parents, who travels back to Iran looking for her biological family, who in 1977 left her - as a six-month old baby - in Imam Reza Shrine in Mashad (a city in North East of Iran). In one scene in the film, the main character is shown putting on different types of hijab, from a headscarf to a chador, to which she gets the comment: 'You definitely look like an Iranian'. When she is checking herself in the mirror wearing a headscarf, she looks confused, but when she's putting on the chador as she grins, she watches herself admiringly in the mirror. The symbolism of feeling like an 'Iranian woman' in an Islamic headscarf or full-length chador and its consequent normalising of the current religious system and its compulsory norms is certainly not lost to the viewer. The film was praised by its supporters for not giving a 'denigrating' and 'reactionary' image of the system in Iran (Javad Toosi, 2019), while others described it as a choice driven more by politics than artistic merit (2019). It is revealing, in the context of what I have been discussing here about the skewed, pro-establishment representations of Iranian women, how even a contemporary Iranian woman in search of identity is shown in this official cinema to find that identity in Islam and the Islamic ideal of woman.

Chapter 8: Narrative structure

In this chapter, I discuss the basis for the design, filming and editing for the scenes in my documentary. The overriding perspective informing all of these processes is that discussed in Section 1, the emancipatory and feminist perspective, which, in contrast to the dominant portrayals of the Iranian woman in Iran's official cinema and the cinema in the West, attempts to provide an empowered image; an image, which is a closer reflection of the lives and struggles of the woman in Iran today. In this section I discuss the ensemble structure chosen for the narrative and the interview format as the cinematic and methodological choices that I made towards applying this perspective to my film.

Six-part structure: ensemble vs heroes/heroines

A quick glance at the current trends in cinema in the West shows that there has been an increase, especially in Hollywood productions, of female ensemble films in recent years. The female ensemble film is a narrative of a group of female characters, each with a specific role in the film, where the plot or narrative elements are driven by their inter-relationships and actions. While this type of film has always existed within Hollywood, such as *The Women* (Cukor, 1939), *Nine to Five* (Higgins, 1980), *Mystic Pizza* (Petrie, 1988) and *Steel Magnolias* (Ross, 1989), the new millennium's filmmakers have welcomed the ensemble format, and their films have succeeded

massively at the box office, such as *Bridesmaids* (Feig, 2011), *Pitch Perfect* (Moore, 2012), *Ghostbusters* (Feig, 2016) and *Girls Trip* (Lee, 2017). There have been debates about whether this increase in female ensemble films signifies a fundamental change in Hollywood culture by having more female leads or if it simply represents a business tactic to reach more female viewers (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2020; Whitten, 2019). However, the ensemble form has long tended to be intrinsic to the documentaries dealing with women's issues. A network of narratives has most naturally been practised in women's documentary filmmaking, such as in *With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade* (Gray, 1979), *Women of Rhondda* (Esther Ronay, Mary Capps and Mary Kelly, Margaret Dickinson, Brigid Segrave, Humphry Trevelyan, 1973), *Union Maids* (Klein, Mogulescu and Reichert, 1976) and *Ukraine is Not a Brothel* (Green, 2013).

Having a number of participants helped me to approach my film as a collection of personal stories, which now forms the structure of my documentary. My film therefore adopts the approach of ensemble films which are made up of many key actors who are given roughly equal weight during the story and evoke a sense of collectivity, in contrast to the popular sole 'protagonism' in Hollywood cinema. While they share a commonality in what they do, the specific domain each covers is the focus of separate narratives on areas of activism and public/private beliefs, which I let freely develop in my interviews. Each of these domains/protagonists complements

the others, and they all link up as a patchwork to build the bigger narrative for the documentary (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1: From left: Myself, Shahla, Mina, Shiva, Maryam, Mersedeh and Farideh (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

Many of Iran's independent women filmmakers have, likewise, used an ensemble of characters to tell a story around a topic/theme. *Profession: Documentarist* (Abtahi et al., 2014), for example, is made up of seven separate short documentaries on various topics but are all told by women in first-person mode. Many times, including in *Profession: Documentarist*, the adoption of this mode seems to have been driven by a practical exigency, namely, the inability due to financial and political constraints for each filmmaker to make their own independent documentary. Nevertheless, this ensemble form has ultimately been made possible due to the prior existence of female networks of sociality and solidarity, each of which has been dealing with more or less the same pressures and barriers from a misogynistic political establishment. In my film, the strong connectedness

between the various fields of political and social activism in which each of my participants was engaged added to this commonality of purpose and solidarity among my participants, making the ensemble form and the model of 'a network of narratives' an even more appropriate form to adopt. As mentioned, this design has already been successfully employed by many feminist documentary practitioners, from the 1970s to the present day (e.g. *Union Maids*, 1976, *School Without End*, 1983, and *Ukraine is Not a Brothel*, 2013).

The interview format

I used interviews in my documentary as the main building block of the story. In choosing this principal format for the narrative, I was guided by the fundamental perspective of my project, namely providing a space and presence for Iranian women in my film where they could freely express themselves. My aim was to place my participants at the centre of the narrative so as to mirror the strong and central position that each already occupies in the current social and political activism milieu in and about Iran. The interview format, therefore, seemed an obvious choice, resulting in an essentially interview-driven narrative and documentary. Bordwell and Thompson (2012) note the effective use of interviews in early feminist filmmaking:

During the 1970s, engaged filmmakers also explored the interview technique. Now entire films were built around talking heads. In feminist filmmaking, this led to a genre of 'film portraits,' often in an

effort to create positive role models of women. (Thompson and Bordwell, 2010: 519)

Furthermore, I had established early on that the interview form would be semi-structured to allow a greater space for probing in reaction to answers and for more effective eliciting (Wengraf, 2001). My questions aimed to delve into both the professional (activism) and personal lives of my participants so as to provide an all-round picture of those activists. By choosing this format, I naturally asked many open-ended general questions in order to allow each woman more space to expand and explore the issues in the direction that they wanted. This led to filming many long interviews with the participants, allowing their voices to establish the tone of the film as intended for the project. However, in order to avoid simple reproductions of what the participants had already said publicly in other films and in broadcast and print media – since they are prolific in that respect – I sometimes decided to ask provocative questions or give an opinion challenging their statements or asked for more detail. This caused the interviews to become more conversational and lively and added to the overall emotional meaning of the interviews. In the film, the emotions are transmitted through the interviewees' tone of voice and body language; for example, by actively moving towards the camera and interacting with me - the filmmaker - and the camera. In keeping with their already-established powerful roles, I endorsed this method for an empowering filmic depiction of those women.

The conduct of the interviews was of course also important. Again, my main concern as a filmmaker was to ensure that the specific setup of the interviews, the questions, the locations and the timing would provide the greatest space for the free development of the conversation. To let these activists speak for themselves and to hear their words with a minimum of intervention by the interviewer/researcher was enough to generate a powerful narrative, which is a testimony to their characters. Thus, I opted for open questions and long shots, allowing the speakers to develop their thoughts with minimal hindrances. For locations, I chose their own homes and the venues where they were key participants (e.g. as speakers/organisers in conferences, events and demonstrations). I also adopted a flexible approach in planning the times of the shooting to fit their busy schedules, with minimal pressures due to the time constraints of the project from my side. In both the planning process, through which I also sought my participants' participation, and the conduct of the interviews in relaxed spaces familiar to them, I aimed to reinforce a sense of belonging and co-ownership. Connected with this, my own appearance in certain scenes placed me as another participant, alongside them, with an equal role: not just as the filmmaker or woman behind the camera. In keeping with the looser format of the interviews, I did not prepare any scripts, although I did have a general idea of the larger framework for the topic and what I was aiming for and hoping to achieve. I decided very early on not to include a voiceover, and let the interviewees instead drive the narrative with their stories.

These strategies and methodological choices were, of course, partly governed by the very nature of the documentary format versus fiction, with the former's less controlled nature (Bordwell, Thompson and Smith, 2012). However, this was also guided by the particular participant-centred perspective of my project as a whole, aiming towards an empowered and emancipatory portrayal of Iranian women in cinema. These strategies in the conduct of the interviews worked, I believe, as a vehicle both for creating some level of objectivity in the film's perspective and leaving space for the subjectivity of the women's narratives. This subjective narration through interviews in turn was aimed at creating an alternative history 'from below' as Nichols puts it (Nichols, 2017: 33) and letting women speak to us about their lives and work. The film's alternative history relies on the very fact of the voice of the women in these interviews but has also been aided by the way those interviews were set up and conducted.

During filming, I faced many obstacles, from carrying equipment to recording acceptable video and sound. As a result, in the editing room, I had to compensate for some technical shortcomings by going through all the rushes to find alternative scenes to use, or even once going back to film an additional interview. The issues ranged from lack of proper, external sound to poorly-lit scenes. My skills improved gradually after every session of filming. The choice of equipment was made after careful consideration of the quality of the final product, as well as the weight of the equipment

(lightweight equipment would ease my work). However, after this long and rich experience, I would also consider using a camera with a good quality of picture and a reasonable on-camera sound-recorder, which would help me straightforwardly produce high quality video and audio.

Chapter 9: Making the film

The filmmaker

The journey for the making of my documentary started from research in 2014 and lasted till early 2020, when the last words for the subtitles were typed on the screen using Avid Media Composer, followed by the export of a copy of the finished product for initial viewing. However, the origins for such a project of course go back to many years before the formal start of the project, to my own background as a woman growing up in the specific situation of Iran. I have described elsewhere in the thesis (Chapter 7) the particular circumstances and the barriers that made up the context of my upbringing, just as they did for many others in my generation in post-revolutionary Iran. That context clearly played a formative role in the particular academic, artistic and activist path that I eventually followed. This has not been dissimilar to the path which Marjane Satrapi relates, with dark humour, regarding herself in her autobiographical *Persepolis* (book and animation, 2003 and Satrapi and Paronnaud, 2007). Any film, in any case, is a product of a complex of factors - biographical, as well as social and political. Agnes Varda coined the term *cinécriture* ('cinema-writing') (Benezet, 2014) to describe film as a production emerging from a complex process of inspirations, writing, casting, shooting and editing. In this sense, the making of my documentary has not been an exception, but has, of course, its own story to tell.

My documentary film practice and the accompanying written text provide step-by-step practical evidence and critical reflection, which can be adapted and adopted in future creative productions in order to reproduce similar effects and representations.

The beginnings: getting the work started

Having arrived at a final shortlist of my six participants, I set about making arrangements with each one separately, and agreed preliminary dates for the shooting. As part of the technical preparation for the filming, I needed to have an induction in the specific audio-visual equipment that I was going to use, including the different cameras, sound recorders and the editing suite for later in postproduction. Carina, a second-year BA TV Production student, introduced by my supervisor Paul Kerr, helped me in syncing the sound and video. However, I soon realised that I would have to do most of the editing on my own as my film is in Farsi and I would have to decide on how to edit the content into a structure. The difficulty this presented was that I would have to make my documentary relying entirely on myself as a one-woman filmmaker. However, this could also work to some advantage by naturally enlisting the collaboration of my participants, which is what happened in practice. E.g. my stand-alone 17-minute-long piece with my first participant Shahla, which I edited for screening at Middlesex University's *Work: Play* Conference, held in April 2017, includes scenes

where my participant and her partner are helping in parts of the filming (helping with lights, etc.). Similar collaboration existed in the other episodes of my film.

How the work progressed and developed

After my first edit of one of the episodes of the film, I needed to make a decision on how the practice part of my project should best be synced with the writing aspect. Should one take precedence over the other? The decision I arrived at was that the development of the practical project needed to run more or less in parallel (with a short time lag) to the development of the theoretical component of the project. My rationale was that the two components (theory and practice) needed to engage and interact with each other continually: on the one hand, the results obtained, as the theoretical/textual analysis progressed, informed the approach to be applied in the practical project. On the other hand, the results obtained from the application of my particular perspective in the production of the practice fed back to the theoretical component and to its further refinement and possible recasting. This cyclical (or, more accurately, spiral, as it was developmental) engagement required the development of the two spheres more or less in parallel.

Several months into filming, given the scale of the practical project, the number of my participants and the difficult logistics of arranging appropriate times and locations for the filming of each of my participants, I was satisfied with the progress of the documentary. I stayed within the projected timeline and the amount of the material I had produced enhanced my choices in the selection of the shots and in the editing process. The good working relationship with my participants and their positivity, patience and welcoming approach also gave me the freedom to realise many of the goals that I had set out to achieve in the making of this documentary: exploration of alternative forms of female representation, which depart from and are diametrically opposed to the dominant forms in the official and mainstream cinema (in Iran and the West).

Each segment of the film was filmed on more than one occasion and location. The filming of *Shahla*, *Maryam*, *Shiva* and *Mersedeh* was done in the UK, *Mina* and *Farideh*, in Germany and Sweden, respectively. *Shahla* was the first episode that I edited. Given that each episode, while being part of a feature-length documentary, functioned as a stand-alone piece, I decided to screen *Shahla* at the *Work: Play* Conference at Middlesex University on 11 April 2017 and at the 'Feminist Art Activisms and Activisms' Conference Middlesex, 2 July 2018. Substantial parts of this short were later incorporated into the documentary as a whole. *Shahla* also served as the basis for my chapter in *Feminist Art Activisms and Activisms* (Parsafar, 2020) entitled 'Women, Agency, Documentary: First Cut of *Shahla*'.

The remaining work included some additional filming of Farideh in Sweden in her workplace (which was not possible on my first visit, due to Farideh's health problems at the time), after which the editing and postproduction of the entire work was completed. As the interviews were all conducted in Farsi, I translated and added subtitles in English to sections of the film for viewing and feedback by my supervisors. Dialogue with my supervisors about the film (as well as the project as a whole) was ongoing at different stages. By December 2019, I had done a complete first edit of the film, which I presented to my supervisors for viewing and feedback. Following that feedback, more re-editing and revision of the subtitles were carried out until early March. However, final work on the film, including dub and caption correcting, colour-grading and sound optimisation could not be completed as this coincided with the outbreak of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown.

Traveling to make my documentary ('women travelling')

I travelled to different cities in the UK and other countries in Europe to interview and film the participants in my film. This was relatively easy for me to do. I did it freely. I did not encounter any unexpected obstacles on the way. Nobody stopped me. I did not need to seek the permission of anyone... This may seem like stating the obvious. It *is* stating the obvious; however, only if one views the world from one's normal experience in a part of the world where the travelling of women (and many other basic rights of

women) have long been recognised as basic human rights - so much so that one does not even notice it or feel it. However, that is not the case for women living under Islamic states and Islamic law, such as in Iran, where the mobility of the woman (like many other aspects of the exercise of her will) is only allowed by the written permission of the husband (in the case of married women) or of a male family member (in the case of unmarried women, even if they are adults). This gross humiliation and degrading of women *officially* and *legally* by the state is part of the everyday experience of millions of women in Iran and other regions living under Islamic regimes. However, in practice, many women in Iran do fight to flout these rules, receiving socially the support of many men, who are equally appalled by these repulsive laws. At the same time, involuntary movement and displacement has been a part of the life of women in political exile, having fled persecution, or more broadly of women fleeing abuse and violence. This has been particularly the case for women in Iran, who have had to flee persecution following their activism and protest against the oppressive anti-women laws (e.g. women known as the Girls of Revolution Street who protested against compulsory hijab) (Amnesty International, 2019).

I went through the same experience, of course, when I was living in Iran. When I first applied for my own *separate* passport – i.e. not as part of my husband's passport, as his 'dependent', like a minor - my husband was called in by the Islamic Republic's Interior Ministry in order to give permission in person for the passport to be issued. And as if to dispel any

doubt that he was acting in his right mind, he was asked whether he was fully aware that he was giving permission to his young wife to have a passport of her own, which would mean she would be able to travel freely abroad.

In documentaries by women, geography and mobility have often been part of the composition and the narrative. Ursula Biemann in her documentaries *Performing the Border* (1999), *Writing Desire* (2000), *Remote Sensing* (2003) and *Contained Mobility* (2004) explores issues of women, mobility and labour within the globalised capitalist geopolitics and notions of borders (Geobodies, 2020). She uses orbital views captured by satellites in her videos depicting large scale movements of people on an international scale.

In my film, I have depicted many modes of travel, both in my own trips to gather footage and those used by my participants, from flying to driving and cycling. Although, Iranian women have been shown behind the wheel in many Iranian official films, they are still fighting to exercise their right to drive without harassment by the regime's Islamic/military patrols. In October 2014, women drivers in the city of Isfahan suffered a spate of acid attacks by unidentified male motorcyclists. The perpetrators were never caught but were widely believed to be the vigilante agents of the regime. The pretext for the brutal attacks was that the women did not have proper hijabs. However, all those attacked were women drivers and they were behind the wheel at

the time (Esfandiari, 2014), indicating a hostility not only towards defiance of the obligatory Islamic veil, but also to women driving.

Women have also been harassed by officials when riding a bicycle.

However, like many areas of activism and social protest, this has not stopped women from flouting the law, especially women activists, who have subsequently been arrested and forced to sign pledges not to ride a bicycle again (Bezhan, 2019). Similar restrictions have been applied to riding a motorbike, while many women rely on the motorbike as a cheaper means of commuting to work (Esfandiari, 2019; Kayhan Life, 2020).

In my film, women are pointedly shown driving, cycling or otherwise travelling freely so as to create a counter depiction to that found in Iran's official cinema.

One-woman crew

Self-shooting became a practical option for practical reasons, such as financial constraints, but also because I needed to do parts of the filming at the homes of my participants (which should preferably be done by someone they already knew, trusted and felt at ease with). Having no budget, I was operating as a one-woman crew, as the producer, director, camera operator, sound recordist and editor. This was of course expected of a PhD project, but has also been a dominant characteristic of many independent

documentaries (e.g. Albert Maysles and Nanfu Wang, self-shooter director of Oscar-shortlisted *Hooligan Sparrow*, 2016). To help the process, I employed light-weight cameras equipped with on-camera shotgun microphones which made it easier to follow my subjects around and also meant less work during postproduction. At the same time, working in these roles gave me a degree of freedom which I would not have had with a larger crew. This was especially important given the creative and experimental aspect of my work, of trying to explore and find forms which suited the subject matter and the particular perspective of my project. Working as a one-woman crew also increased my mobility, enabling me to gather a large amount of footage in locations of my choosing.

A key factor in the decision to work as a one-woman crew was the particular circumstances of my participants, living in political exile, under extra security, due to risk to them from the regime in Iran and other Islamist forces internationally who disapprove of their work and routinely threaten them with physical violence. As I approached each one, we discussed the issue of their privacy and decided I would be alone when interviewing them in their homes, and the location of their workplace would not be disclosed in my final product. The only exception was in the making of *Shiva*, where my daughter who is known to the participant was welcomed by her to join me to help with some parts of the shooting.

At the same time, my acquaintance with them allowed me a degree of “intrusion” into their homes and places of work which might have been much harder for any other member of a filming crew unknown to them. For example, one of my shoots of Mina in Germany coincided with her being filmed by a film crew, who were making a documentary about her. I captured this contrast between the filming of Mina by a film crew and myself in the episode of my film on Mina (Fig. 2). While the work of a film crew offered much greater resources in both filming and postproduction, the intimacy of the one-person shooting (the possibility of staying in the family home for several days in a row and engaging with many aspects of Mina's personal and political life) allowed me to make a more intimate record of her life.



Fig. 2: A documentary film crew making a film about Mina's life (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

My participants' anonymity directed me to choose a different method to fill in gaps that otherwise would be left in my story due to this constraint. To

protect the identity of their families, I had to conceal their whereabouts. As I was filming Mina, she handed me her family photos, including those of her daughters. I have met them and would have loved to show them in my film and their relationship with their mother. It would have been a visual illustration of how she has been/is dealing with motherhood. However, I decided that it would be enough to include a single picture of a sandy beach I found among their photos with the initials of her daughters etched in the sand. Although the photo is only a moment in the past, I am using it as a replacement to convey a sense of Mina's family.

Being on my own, on the other hand, enabled me to stop and start filming at any time, which gave me greater flexibility in deciding what to include and exclude during the shooting. In turn, self-shooting has determined certain aesthetics in my practice, such as in *Shahla* when she claps her hands before the camera, announcing the start of the film, just after the opening shot. This shot is an example of how practical constraints coincide with an aesthetic. I have included pieces of the behind-the-scenes footage in my documentary, which show how Shahla is helping me in setting up the scenes, such as when we are trying to pour more light into their kitchen during a shoot on a grey, winter afternoon. Also, in *Farideh*, I ask for the help of Farideh and her sister, Parivash, when deciding where to place the camera. By involving them in a discussion over the operational and formal aspects of the filmmaking, I made this experience a shared one; for

example, when I show Shahla and her partner their episode of the film and ask for their feedback.

Working as a one-person crew was nevertheless made possible, to a large extent, by the practical support I received from Middlesex University, which provided up-to-date equipment and use of an editing suite, as well as technical training, including new editing software and intellectual support.

Chapter 10: Cinematic techniques

Camera

I ruminated around the question of how an Iranian woman should be represented to reflect her everyday life in an emancipatory light. The viewpoint adopted by the camera was the key figure in my thoughts since there would not be a script nor a storyboard, as there is in fiction. Robert Kramer speaking in his video letters states: 'I used to spend a lot of time thinking about the letter, and where to start and how to do it. I would plan this whole thing out.' (Birkbeck, 2017). It is indeed the case that a lot of thought goes into documentaries, in their planning, throughout filming and during editing (see below for how I approached editing in my documentary). There are so many interpretations of and assumptions about the emotional and psychological impact of camera angles and camera shots with guidance on why, when and how to apply them for an appropriate effect. Following the rationale behind the use of closeup, i.e. as a device to take the viewer closer to the subject, I intended to use it in long takes of women, to get closer to them and focus on their individuality, in contradistinction to the misogynistic Islamic regulations of Iranian official cinema, as explored in Section 1 of the thesis.

In contrast to the official cinema in Iran, where the use of closeup for women subjects was strongly advised against (because, in the eyes of the

Islamic regime, they provoked the male viewers sexually) (Naficy, 2012), I used closeups frequently when filming the women participants in my documentary. I chose the closeup for its partiality and intense look (Rabiger, 2013: 50) and to get closer to the subjects emotionally (Barry, Corrigan and White, 2012). By maintaining a closeup, and shooting my interviews at eye level, frequently, I aimed to augment their presence and their stories. I placed the camera in close proximity to the participants during interviews, combined with a telephoto lens to focus on my interviewee and to blur out the background. This was followed by both handheld and static/on tripod shots. In public gatherings and in crowds, on the other hand, I used wide frames to show the participants in their elevated positions, such as when speaking from the stage, as in a panel of speakers, or on their own from a podium.

While outside, I operated the camera mostly handheld for its practicality, as it made it easier to move around and follow the subjects. In turn, this achieved a sense of mobility, immediacy and action for both the participants and the film. Handheld camerawork has created a lively atmosphere while outdoors, contributing to a sense of vibrant public presence as distinct from the static camera used during interviews and speeches to convey stability of political views and a concrete and unflinching character. In this contrast between indoors and outdoors, the use of a static camera allows the viewer a different way to understand and connect with the characters and their stories.

While I was setting up the equipment, I shared the process of my work with my participants, aiming to create a sense of shared ownership and collaboration in the production of my documentary; or, in Michael Renov's term, a 'shared textual authority' (Renov, 2004; Kerr, 2015). Interestingly, this led to an increase in their sense of responsibility by letting me and the camera into more diverse aspects of their lives. For instance, in the kitchen, filming the lunch scene, I asked Farideh for her opinion on where to position the camera and set up the lighting. Later on, she invited me to see her collection of pictures and videos on her laptop, talking about her activism on women's and children's rights, including with the group Femen (FEMEN Sweden [@FEMENSWE], 2015). Another example in my film is in Shahla's home, where, while setting up the lighting in a kitchen, we had a conversation about how to add more light for the camera. Again, the aim here was to foster a greater sense of shared goals and solidarity.

Editing

The making of my documentary was a process of constant decision making from the start, but in particular during editing, beginning with sifting through around 70 hours of interviews with my participants. My method was to create a rough subject-based transcription instead of a word-by-word transcription of the interviews. This did work, I believe, for two reasons. Firstly, I was familiar with my material and could relatively easily find my way through the massive amount of footage I had collected (my whole project

occupies nearly 17TB of space including the project and the media). The second reason was I decided to avoid voiceover/commentary and to have longer pieces of interviews – in contrast to TV/industry-style practice of short snappy sentences - giving enough time and space to my participants to express their stories and ideas. By allocating longer speaking time on screen to them and their powerful life-stories, my aim was to create an empowering image of those women in contrast to media-style portraits and the less prominent and unequal presence of the woman in cinema. This has been exercised before by feminist filmmakers in documentaries such as *School Without End* (Monti, 1983). Lengthy interviews intercut with short extracts from actuality footage of their public presence were also designed to reveal the essence of each story, creating images of strong women leading busy lives.

During the editing, I focused on breaking/crossing the boundaries of private and public in cinematic language. I asked myself how to link the woman and her words – mostly at home – to her actions in the public arena. As a strategy, I created a simple timeline of intermittent home/personal and public/activism, with connecting subjects. For instance, when Maryam reads aloud the words of a fridge magnet ‘Well-behaved women don’t make history’ in her kitchen, it cuts to a picture of her nude protest in Paris in front of the Louvre. In such instances, I had Eisenstein’s editing in mind, where he reinforces an action with an image, like the lion statues in *Battleship Potemkin*, for their ‘emblematic significance’ (Bordwell, 1993: 42). I tried the

same in *Maryam* by cutting from the image of the fridge magnet to a still from her nude protest. As another example, in the cutting of *Shahla*, when she is talking about her aspirations, I cut into a scene of her daughter singing and playing the drums in her music band at a party, with Shahla dancing.

Filming my participants inside and outside became one of the themes and guided me in the editing and selection of key scenes from the interviews. For example, when my participants talk about their social and political activism in their homes, intending to break the stereotypical image of the Iranian woman as a good housewife, I showed Mina giving an interview to an opposition Iranian radio station, connecting the outside world to her, or filmed Maryam looking at social media on her phone, checking her Twitter account.

Solidarity was a concept which helped me in the selection of public space and its definition in my film. The campaigns led by my participants are not limited to Iran but extend to the Middle East and even to a global level. In a longer version of her episode, for example, Mina explains that she is going to Essen, Germany, to speak at a gathering of women from Iran and Afghanistan.

The long hours spent editing this film in the School of Media and Performing Arts at Middlesex University provided me with space for contemplating and

experimenting. Farsi is the main language of the film and I had to translate and subtitle the film. This process made me update myself with the Avid software and do the editing on my own. However, two BA Television Production students – Carina Moscattini and Federico Favretto - referred by my DoS, both came on board for short periods to help with editing. They were both really helpful as I got a perspective with my postproduction. Carina helped with syncing some of Shahla's video and sound, and Federico worked on a cut of the footage from *Farideh* in a TV-documentary style. In my initial cut with Federico, Farideh conveyed a sombre mood as her cancer and loss of her husbands dominated the narrative. In that version, Farideh's account of the execution of her first husband and the assassination of her second husband was interrupted by archive shots, underlaid with melodramatic music – *They Dance Alone* by Sting. It was telling the story of a life affected by war, tragedy and exile, with a focus on her marriages and relationship to men, rather than her autonomous activism. So, following re-edits, which I later did on my original footage, her fighting spirit throughout her life (something I wanted to emphasise) was more appropriately portrayed. That is the version I have included in the final assembled film. However, the responsibility for the final editing and changes and the form it took (which in my mind more accurately reflected the empowered image I wanted to give of my characters) of course rested with me.

The film was made through constant and regular adding, changing and editing - from a longer assembly of each woman to cutting down to around 15 minutes each. Editing involved contemplating the effects, experimenting with material, cutting different versions and long viewings and feedback from my supervisors. I also benefited from comments I received while showing extracts of my work such as *Shahla* and the trailer during conferences and presentations as it progressed.

The material I gathered in the editing suite was in four categories:

- Interviews
- Moving images/still archive
- Political/social activism/speeches/public meetings
- General actuality of each protagonist, both at home and in the public sphere

As mentioned, one of the techniques I used during filming was to ask my participants to clap before the camera in order to be used later in the postproduction for syncing the audio with video. This was to some extent out of practical necessity (helping me as the director and camera operator). However, I also wanted, in this way, to increase the involvement of my participants in the filming process. The decision to keep this in the film came later, during the editing of *Shahla* – which was my pilot at the time. I opted for this as a stylistic device, letting it work as a rupture in the narrative

and a reflexive link to the production side of the film. I did the same in the episodes for Mersedeh and Maryam. Cutting to the clap helped to convey a friendly and collaborative relation between the director and the participants from the start.

Editing is a crucial stage in making any documentary, as the narrative takes shape. Similarly, in the making of my documentary this was the most time-consuming part. However, it took longer for me due to my dyslexia, which I tried to overcome by using mind-maps, screengrabs of the scenes, and colour-coding with keywords for creating treatments and scripts (Fig. 3).

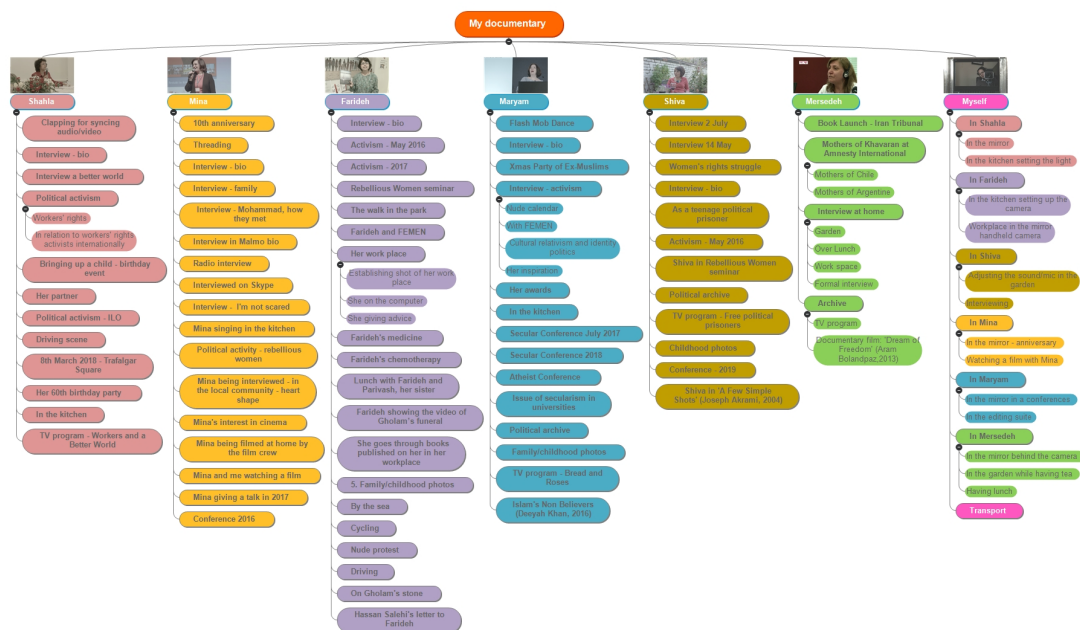


Fig. 3: A mind-map for my documentary using MindView software (image by author)

After syncing sound with the video for each participant, I spent days going through the rushes, taking notes. Since I had tens of hours of interviews and public speeches, I had a great deal of extra footage to choose from. This

process helped to make a preliminary narrative, which delivered the right mood I was looking for, such as in *Shahla*, but not initially in *Farideh*, *Maryam* or *Shiva*.

In my editing of *Maryam*, the initial assembly of Maryam's story did not deliver her strong, radical character. I resolved this by rearranging and replacing some of the archive public scenes with more of my own footage, as well as re-selection of the pieces of interviews. With Shiva, it was her relaxed body language and informal tone of voice during her initial introduction which did not produce a similar impact as my other participants. Therefore, along with the need for more public footage, I arranged to meet her again to shoot an alternative intro and film sequences of her public presence. This replaced the first cut and improved the overall rendering of her character.

During the long period of editing, I experimented with my material in order to achieve the appropriate emotion and mood for the participants. I showed the cuts to my supervisors, colleagues, friends and family members and used their comments to improve the story. My first screening was the first cut of *Shahla* at a research conference. It had a good reception and useful comments were received about the content, form and style. For instance, a colleague from Israel expressed how close and down to earth she felt about Shahla's character, like a family member. The first cut of *Shahla* started with a quick shot of her, while sitting on the steps of a building, which then

immediately moved to her intro at home. I was asked by a colleague at the conference why I did not start by a shot of her as a public figure at a public event. This led me to start *Shahla* in Trafalgar Square on 8th March, International Women's Day (Fig. 4), and I applied the same sequencing to Mersedeh's and Farideh's episodes.



Fig. 4: Shahla in Trafalgar Square, the opening scene (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

A particular ending for each participant was selected to suit each individual's specific character and the chain of events in their story. The different endings depict the diverse connections I formed with the participants. *Shahla* ends with a scene where Shahla and her partner, Kazem are watching her episode and commenting on it. *Maryam* finishes with conversing with me about whether I am in the film too; then I cut to a shot of myself in the editing suite with the screen showing a shot of the same scene repeating itself as if in a mirror. *Shiva's* ending, where she

raises her glass of wine with the words 'to hope and struggle', is a tribute to Iranian women and their long struggle for equality and freedom (Fig. 5).

Mina's piece ends with the audience clapping for her, as she's praised for years of hard work during the 10th anniversary of her organisation. Mersedeh asks jokingly if she needs to clap again, as in a clapperboard, and her part ends with her laughing. *Farideh* ends with her long, beautiful floating dance, which I chose as a metaphor for her fighting spirit and zest for life, despite everything. The film ends with my closing the laptop after watching my film, turning off the floor lamp and leaving the shot.



Fig. 5: Shiva raising a glass of wine to 'hope and struggle' (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

As can be seen, although my film concentrates on six women activists, it is a display of a network of numerous women activists, many of whom I came across while filming, including Atoosa Farahmand, an Iranian contemporary dancer who lived in Malmö, Sweden, in exile; Rana Ahmad, a Saudi ex-

Muslim living in Germany; and Parivash, Farideh's sister, also a human rights and women's rights activist. While editing, these women's stories pulled my narrative towards their own stories, which, as interesting as they were, exceeded the time limit for each episode. Therefore, there had to be a resolution, such as editing out the majority of Farideh's sister's lines in the scene where we eat lunch together and all of Atoosa's dance, the behind the scenes sequences and my interactions with her. The narratives, thus, remained focused on the key participants.

Sound and music

Building on what I discussed earlier, in Section 1, regarding female voice as a formal strategy, I decided to record the audio on a separate device, rather than using the on-camera microphone, in order to achieve the best possible sound quality for the film. This was in order to lend the film, its topic and the people in it, a professional air and gravitas that comes with a high-budget professional cinema. Again, this decision was informed by the empowering perspective underlying my project. At the same time, following Nichols's 'discourse of sobriety' (Nichols, 2017), using diegetic music, I aimed to create an air of 'transparency' and 'narrative clarity' by means of the sonic aspect of the film (Pramaggiore and Roe, 2018: 189–190). This helped create a better quality for the interviews, the ambient sound and the music in the film. Thus, not only the 'sonic' voice and vocal projections of the subjects (Pramaggiore and Roe, 2018), but also the diegetic music I had recorded on location was enhanced. This in turn added to a sense of

authenticity and immediacy in the documentary. This was particularly central to the film, in its relation to the banned voice of women in public, as singers and musicians, under the Islamic Republic.

Following *cinema vérité* and direct cinema as a model, some feminist documentary filmmakers have used only diegetic sound in their films. In *Harlan County USA* (Kopple, 1976), the music is a reflection of the life and struggles of the coal miners. In my first 10-minute documentary, *Nadia* (2004), I also experimented with that idea, having Nadia sing her favourite song at the end of the documentary, as both an aesthetic device critical of the ban on women singing under Islamic law and a musical reference to her activism.

On many occasions during my documentary, the music – mostly along with women's voices – has been used over montage sequences, where the source is heard off-screen. However, it has always been synchronised with the matching video of the singer, who is made visible and is identified. This can be seen in *Maryam*, *Shahla*, *Mersedeh* and *Mina*. However, in the other two segments, *Shiva* and *Farideh*, the participants' monologue is used, instead of the female singing as voiceover. This 'disembodiment' and 'dislodging' of the female voice from her image, as Silverman (1988) argues, frees women from the representational codes, which bind female characters to passivity and sexuality (1988: 166).

For the type of music, instead of selecting non-diegetic music as an added audio track during editing, I used music selected by the participants, and played on location. This was in order to minimise the added filter of the filmmaker's interpretation of the story, as Michel Brault suggests in the documentary *Capturing Reality: The Art of Documentary* (Ferrari, 2008). The music in the film is mainly protest songs themed around the activity field of each woman activist as a sonic representation. *Shahla* starts in Trafalgar Square on an International Women's Day event, with the music being played from huge loudspeakers, and ends with the attendees at a political conference chanting 'Solidarity' with the struggles of Iranian workers. Another example is in *Mersedeh*, where Shirin Mehrbod – a former political prisoner – sings a protest song during the event for Mothers of Khavaran at Amnesty International UK, Human Rights Action Centre in London. Also, Shelly Segal – an atheist herself – sings during Maryam's episode themed around women, freedom and equality, e.g. her song *Resistance*. I have included Shahin Najafi – an Iranian male singer - in *Mina*, since his music is widely known for being antireligious, with protest themes, which include women's struggles. In *Farideh*, music is a vehicle for portraying the political as well as the emotional side of Farideh's character. When talking about her partner's assassination, she shows us the video from his funeral in Stockholm in 1989. She sings along with the song on the video. This was a crucial moment in the film as it develops the story on many levels, but especially by illuminating Farideh's character further as a tireless fighter and a resilient socialist (the song is a socialist anthem), displaying still vivid

emotions from that experience. In the end she dances alone to a Western pop song, which reveals another side of her personality, a modern and happy woman. I practised the same theme in my trailer for the film by using the song *Bread and Roses* by Joan Baez. This was particularly effective as I had intended to relate the story of my film and the type of women in it to a Western audience; characters in touch, and in engagement, with the heritage of women's and workers' struggles in the industrial West. By the choice of music – content and voice – I intended to create a thematic opposition to the official representation of Iranian women as worshippers of parochial traditions, cultures and 'values', and, instead, reinforce the progressive, modern and emancipatory theme of the documentary and the women in it.

Personal objects

In addition to colour (discussed in the next section), I have made use of personal objects, such as family photos, letters, books and memorabilia, wherever I could, in order to depict the private lives of my participants, alongside their political lives. As well as enriching their stories, these personal items and photos act as tropes for their modern-day and progressive character, which challenge the traditional, stereotypical images of Iranian women prevalent in the official cinema in Iran and in many of the mainstream films in the West. Personal objects in my film can be classified in two categories: one, those introduced by the participants, and, the other,

those I selected myself, so as to add another layer of meaning to the narrative.

In every episode, the women introduce one or more objects, each of which has a key role in their stories. For instance, Mersedeh shows the ring her sister-in-law Monir gave her while in prison as a political prisoner in Iran, before she was executed (Fig. 6). She also shows the poppy flower as the symbol of the Khavaran mass grave in Iran. Maryam and Mina show their awards, and Mina and Farideh show their books. These are a range of objects, which are introduced to drive the story forward, as well as creating a more comprehensive picture of these women. In addition, the women in my film are all conversant with modern technology, using laptops and/or mobile phones when describing their political activities and showing their family pictures.



Fig. 6: Mersedeh showing the ring given to her by her sister-in-law before she was executed (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

I shot selected inserts and cutaways of different objects on location after filming the interviews. This was in line with my proposal for creating an emancipatory iconography and aesthetic. For example, in *Shahla*, when she is talking about her aspirations for a better future and she says it is not a utopia, I cut to a picture of John Lennon on the wall with the word 'Imagine' at the top (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7: Picture of John Lennon with the word 'Imagine' on the wall of Shahla's home (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

Another example is in *Mina*, when she is giving an interview online to an Iranian radio station. Mina has positioned her laptop on several copies of Karl Marx's *Capital* (Fig. 8). By including an insert of the books, I aimed to add a new layer of meaning to reinforce her statements, which are about prisons and political prisoners in the Islamic Republic. The aim was to

convey a sense of rebellion and radicalism and the fight for a better world in the lives of my participants, in the past and in the present.

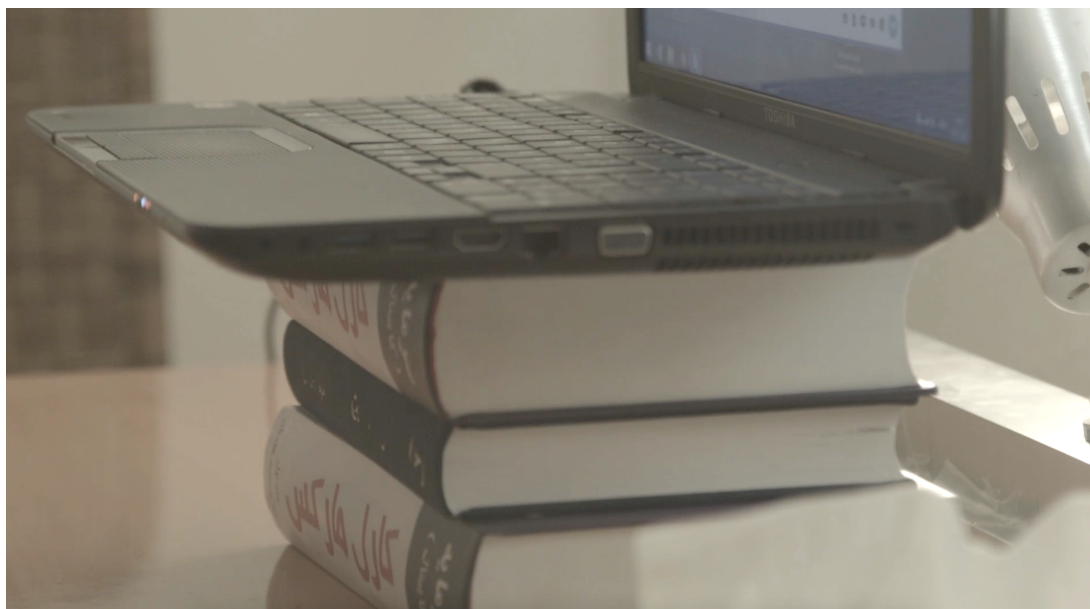


Fig. 8: Mina's laptop positioned on several copies of Karl Marx's *Capital* (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

Colour – red

After the Islamic regime came to power in February 1979, the woman in cinema, TV and print media was deliberately erased (Naficy, 2011: 111–112) and when she came back, her body was veiled, in stipulated black and dark colours, following the imposition of compulsory hijab in public. This form of appearance for women was extended to the screen. To challenge this regressive imposition on women, I decided to make use of the colour red in my documentary. The use of the colour red is in opposition to dark colours, especially black, as the symbolic colour of Islam, eternal mourning for the dead and the Islamic Republic as a whole. I had aimed to stress the effect

of the colour red throughout the film during the colour-grading. However, as mentioned earlier, the final work on the film, including some final dub and caption correcting, colour-grading and sound optimisation, could not be completed as this coincided with the outbreak of Covid-19 and the ensuing lockdown.

I aimed to use the colour red literally and metaphorically in order to express the feminine, passionate and rebellious nature of my participants. For example, I employed the colour red in the choice of the red lipstick and red clothing of the women filmed. Sometimes, it was already a choice by my participant, and at other times, my suggestion, and agreed by my participant. A number of scenes also show protest events against the Islamic Republic, where red banners are used by the demonstrators.

Women in Iran have used brighter colours and the colour red in opposing the Islamic Republic's imposition of dark coverings on women in Iran. Thus, women defy the obligatory Islamic covering laws for women by applying red nail polish and lipstick, wearing colourful headscarves and outfits, leaving parts of the hair out, or removing the hijab altogether (The latter now is a very common occurrence in many public spaces and gatherings, such as restaurants, cafes, cars and public events). For example, an anonymous user on the leftist *Women's Revolution* Telegram page calling herself 'Neda, a rebellious and "beyond Kitchen woman"', stated how putting on fiery red

lipstick and many other similar activities were a way of exercising her freedom (Women's Revolution, 2017).

Other acts of defiance and protest include, for example, celebrating Valentines' Day (with its red hearts and gifts) as a symbol of love, while some of the Girls of Revolution Street chose the colour red in their symbolic acts of throwing away the compulsory hijab (Radio Farda, 2019). Women activists such as Sepideh Gholian, Atena Daemi, Parvin Mohammadi and many others are known for dying their hair in bright colours and/or wearing bright clothes, particularly red; many more wear red lipstick (Frontline Defenders, 2020). This has also been taken up – consciously or not - by Iranian independent filmmakers. Marjaneh Satrapi's main character in *Persepolis*, for example, is shown in a red top when telling the story (Satrapi and Paronnaud, 2007).

The colour red in my film works as a metaphor. As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) point out, metaphors govern not only language but also our everyday life; our thoughts and actions. And colour as a metaphor plays an important role in our cultural formation, aesthetic system and in sustaining/altering social relations (Jones and MacGregor, 2002). Colour has also been employed widely in cinema as a powerful symbolic tool in creation of meaning, such as in Kieslowski's *Three Colours* trilogy (*Blue* 1993, *White* 1993, *Red* 1994) and in the use of red in *Schindler's List* (Spielberg, 1993) and *Don't Look Now* (Roeg, 1973). It has also been studied because of its

pervasive relation with representation and its function 'as a realist tool and a dramatic device' (Everett, 2007: 15). Red has been seen as critical and 'emphatic' since the introduction of colour to cinema, and is traditionally the colour of blood, danger, passion and courage. It is a colour which my participants can be identified with.

I have thus also used the colour red as a sign of defiance, uprising, bravery and the revolutionary character of the women in my film. Those women are all on the left side of politics and consider themselves communists and revolutionaries. They believe their flag is the red flag of socialism. In a scene in my documentary, Maryam states her flag is different from the Islamic regime's tricolour with its words 'Allah' and 'Allah is Great'. In a symbolic act – which has brought her threats by the Islamists – she cut out the word Allah in the Islamic regime's flag and tied the flag around her waist, baring her genitals as part of a nude protest. The title of her Satellite TV program is *Bread and Roses* (which in Farsi translates to 'Bread and Red Flower'). On a more direct and fundamental level, of course, it references the American women workers' Bread and Roses movement (Bread and Roses, 2020). Mersedeh's long campaign is symbolised with poppies, whose red colour I picked and highlighted in my documentary to reinforce her bloody past – including her time in prison and losing her family members and comrades to execution by the Islamic regime.

In Maryam's episode, I followed her in a protest which was a public body painting performance, where the participants, women and men, were re-creating the logo of the Council of Ex-Muslims (of which she is a founding member) using their painted bodies in a park in North London. The red body paint was also a protest against political Islam and, metaphorically, the colour of blood in memory of numerous people who fell victim to Islamic governments and movements while standing up to them (CEMB, 2017). Maryam's strikingly confident presence before the camera when giving an interview at that event is an example which presents a strong contrast to the image of the everyday lives of Iranian women as portrayed in the mainstream media, both Iranian and globally. The act performed at the event was anything but common and clichéd as an act of protest (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9: Maryam giving an interview while being painted red for a political performance (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

I asked Farideh if she could have something red in her outfit or makeup. When she sat before my camera, I was looking through the lens adjusting the frame and she was wearing all red – dress and shawl. The colour red in Farideh's case works as a metaphor for her whole life as a fighter, from being a political activist in Tehran and a partisan in Kurdistan, to being a political activist in exile today. Later in the film, I show how she has also been fighting with cancer for the last few years. She is an icon of resilience and fighter for freedom and equality, and by using the colour red I have tried to emphasise that.

Each of the other women brought red into the frame. Shahla, Shiva and Mina wore red clothes, and at other times wore something which had red in it and/or wore red lipstick. It also happened naturally/unconsciously in the stories – in the locations I followed them to, such as the red flowers at Mersedeh's public events, which are a symbol of the Khavaran Cemetery, the unmarked mass graves in Iran where executed opposition activists are buried. At other times, the colour red already existed in various aspects of the movement, such as the archive shot of a slogan written in red on the wall in Iran saying: 'Women's Revolution', the title of Maryam's TV programme, *Bread and Roses*, a shot of Sepideh Gholian's red scarf and the red flag covering the coffin of Farideh's assassinated husband, Gholam Keshavarz.

The use of mirrors

I use the mirror in my film for a number of purposes. I use it, first of all, in its purely reflective function to include the filmmaker in the film. Thus, in *Shahla*, *Mersedeh* and elsewhere, the mirror images of myself behind the camera help to identify the filmmaker and invite her onto the stage, alongside the other participants (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10: Myself behind the camera in the mirror (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

The decision to include myself in the frame (both physically, by appearing in some scenes, and by means of a mirror) was a deliberate one to position myself alongside the other protagonists, as someone who has lived through a similar experience and who with her film and camera is engaged in the same cause and struggle. By gazing into the camera along with my women protagonists I aimed to cross the lines of established narrative and

production processes and to break down divisions in my work, essentially that between the director and the participant. I also use the mirror in its simple reflective function to add an extra perspective for the viewer. For example, in one of the scenes, Mina is shown putting on makeup in front of a mirror (Fig. 11), and my shot includes her reflection in the mirror to let the viewer share her perspective.



Fig. 11: Mina putting on lipstick (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

I also use the mirror to help rupture the narrative so as to reinforce the transparency with which the subject matter and the voices of the participants are being treated. This provides for a direct, unpretentious and non-manipulative communication with the viewer, breaking down the film's boundary between the filmmaker and the audience. This is achieved, for example, when I let Shahla, the main character and the storyteller, nonchalantly cross the screen behind me (Fig. 12). Reinforcing this

transparency is crucial to building trust in the handling and presentation of political and social issues, such as the topic of my film, where conflicting social and class interests are at stake and in collision.



Fig. 12: Shahla passing by in the background reflected in the mirror (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

In *Mersedeh* and *Farideh*, however, I use the mirror for an opposite effect - not to interrupt but to reinforce the continuity of the narrative, to underscore the familiarity of the subject with the filmmaker, by letting me into her home and film, via the mirror, in a long sequence. In the beginning of the shot in *Mersedeh*, I am seen behind the camera in the mirror, with the edges of the mirror out of the frame, and therefore not seen, producing the impression that I was shot by another camera. I used the audio track to create a sense of continuity and conversation in the film, with my shot functioning as a counter-shot, where 'the other woman' is in conversation with her. In *Farideh*, while in her workplace, I included a shot of myself (reflected in the

mirror) holding the handheld camera, to show Farideh in conversation with me introducing her books and the organisation's educational leaflets (Fig. 13). This shot is, additionally, highlighting the handheld camera and the immediacy that is implied and normally comes with it. (This latter aspect is explored further in the section on the use of the camera).



Fig. 13: Farideh introducing her books and her organisation's leaflets (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

Chapter 11: Women's bodies, women's voice

Nude protest

Iran's official cinema uses women's covered-up bodies as a symbol of political Islam, as reinforcement of the Islamic narrative of the 'place' of women in societies living under Islamic laws. I, in contrast, bring to my film women who use their naked bodies as a form of protest. The woman's body has been used by women activist documentary makers as a conduit. Examples vary from Rosler's feminist critique of the role of 'citizen', employing her body in her experimental documentary *Vital Statistics* (1977), to the more recent *I am Femen* (Margot, 2014), looking at nude protests by Femen against corrupt and patriarchal political systems. Just as the activist women use an extreme form of protest to match (and underscore) an extreme situation and injustice, so my film in diametrical opposition to the forced covering up of women's bodies (both in society and on screen) depicts women activists freely engaged in nude protest.

In the film, while talking about women's bodies and nude protest, Maryam, one of my participants, mentions, for example, the collective action she took, along with a number of other women activists from around the world to produce a nude calendar (Namazie, 2012). The calendar was in support of Aliaa Magda Elmahdy, the Egyptian women's rights activist, who was persecuted for posting a nude photo of herself in protest 'against a society

of violence, racism, sexism, sexual harassment and hypocrisy' (ibid). One of the other participants in my film, Farideh, in one of her scenes (Fig. 14) shows pictures of her nude protest outside a courthouse in Sweden, where a *Femen* activist (Jenny A Wenhammar) is defending her legal right to nude protest. Another of the women in my film, Mina, invited dancer Atoosa Farahmand to perform at her event for the 10th anniversary of the Council of Ex-Muslims. Atoosa used a picture frame around her neck as a symbol for the choking restrictions that exist on women's bodies under Iran's Islamic Republic. Her dance is also performed mostly nude. In my film, Maryam is also shown being body-painted in allegorical red, defying and challenging the taboos and controls over women's bodies (see Chapter 10: Cinematic techniques, Colour - red, for a description of this event). I filmed both Maryam and Atoosa interacting with people and cameras confidently in different situations. Both women explained the different barriers they had to overcome to appear nude in public, especially for Atoosa, who started doing this while she was still in Iran and had to keep her identity a secret.



Fig. 14: Farideh during a nude protest with FEMEN (screenshot by author, from *Iranian Women Unveiled*)

Women's voice

I decided not to use my voiceover in favour of accentuating the voices of the women in my documentary and to allow their stories to be told in their own words. The question then is if this has in any way detracted from the filmmaker's voice, the 'rhetorical' voice of the documentary in Nichols' terms; in other words, my 'social point of view' (Nichols, 2017: 45). My answer is two-fold: First, the women in my documentary, whose activism and goals of social change I share, are highly articulate and express their views eloquently. This to a large extent fills the gap for what I would have included in my voiceover. Second, my particular authorial take in the film is evident in the construction of the narrative, the editing and through the entire process of treatment, casting, production and postproduction. The self-reflection and self-representation of the participants, on the other hand,

allows the participants to tell their story in their own voice. And by 'voice' here I mean not only Nichols's rhetorical and metaphorical voice, but also the sonic voices, the physical vocal projections 'as they produce speech, music and sound as an integral aspect of documentary representation' (Pramaggiore and Roe, 2018: 78).

Providing a big space for the women in my film to speak bears a particular significance under a state religious misogyny, where barriers are erected, legal and otherwise, to stop women from speaking. So, in my film, I wanted to reflect and amplify women's voices, which is a closer reflection of the actual social behaviour and interaction of women in a society like Iran, which has practically defied and broken down all of those barriers.

Confident, articulate women speaking in my film, deriding the political and religious establishment, and predicting its impending downfall in the face of a growing social protest, a 'women's revolution', is an important element of the perspective informing my work.

In the interviews with my participants, I included questions to elicit responses which specifically talked about their performance at public events. During filming, as we were sitting in different gardens and living rooms, I asked about my participants' public presence, whether as a partisan in the city of Sanandaj (in Iranian Kurdistan), a speaker at a protest rally in Tehran, or a speaker and event organiser at the secularism conference in London. In the filmmaking, I was looking for stylistic and

substantive means to construct an image of Iranian women that is modern, rebellious and taboo-breaking, precisely to counter the existing stereotypes promoted in Iranian official cinema.

The Islamic Republic tried to push women into domestic spaces. This perception of women was extended to the screen. However, in independent feminist documentaries, such as *In the Bazaar of Sexes* (Mortezai, 2009), women in private spaces, such as their homes and in hairdressers, are shown without hijab. This crossing of the red lines of censorship has been demonstrated in many other independent films, such as *No One Knows About Persian Cats* (Ghobadi, 2009), which I analysed in Section 1, Chapter 4. There I discussed how women have bitterly fought back against the misogynistic drive of the regime and broken the barriers to create a space that is liberating and equal for both men and women.

In my documentary, the music, songs and interviews are diegetic and mainly recorded indoors, either in the privacy of the participants' homes or at their workplaces or public events. However, in order to challenge the identification of the female body and voice with diegetic *interiority* (Silverman, 1988: 71) and domestic space in particular, I approached it on three levels: First, during the interviews, by prompting public topics discussed indoors, crossing the boundaries of public and private. Second, by letting the narratives run with the subject speaking at a public event, and even globalising it. This is particularly apparent in *Mersedeh*, when Mothers

of Chile and Argentina send their messages of solidarity to an event held at Amnesty International Centre, London, where Mersedeh is speaking. Third, by taking the woman's voice to extra-diegetic situations, both in time and space, by editing their voice over montage sequences in the film. These points are discussed further under the relevant topics.

Dance scenes

Public depiction of women dancing is illegal under Iran's Islamic Republic. Women defying the rule are harassed and persecuted. A famous example that attracted international attention was the production and posting of a music video in 2014 by a group of young girls and boys to the tune of William Pharrell's hit song Happy. All members of the group were swiftly arrested and later handed jail terms of up to one year as well as 91 lashes each. They were also forced to appear on state TV to confess that they had been 'tricked' into making the video (BBC, 2014). A more recent example was the arrest in May 2020 of a teenage girl for posting videos of herself dancing (HRANA, 2020). Also, Iranian musician Mehdi Rajabian was summoned to court for publishing women's songs and dances as part of a Middle Eastern Album, in which he collaborated with many other artists from the Middle East (Rajabian, 2020). Women and dance has been a forbidden topic under the Islamic regime, which women's media, including documentaries, would not legally be able to feature. *Forbidden Sun Dance*, a documentary by Lila Ghobadi (2008), shows the life of an Iranian woman

dancer/choreographer/teacher, who left Iran after the Islamic regime came to power due to the ideological hostility of the Islamic Republic to dance. In response, just like many other cultural and artistic expressions, dance too has become a form of protest, a visual aesthetic of defiance and saying 'no' to the system. Similarly, dance also features in my documentary, as an element of protest.

To challenge the stereotypical image of the Iranian woman requires freeing her from the frame constructed for her. Contemporary Iranian dancer Atoosa attempted this in a performance at an event organised by Mina Ahadi, one of my participants, in Cologne last year. The dance shows the struggles of a woman to free herself from a picture frame that has trapped her and is restricting her movements. Her struggle in the frame reminded me of the woman (Mina) in my camera frame and her struggle to break the restricting misogynistic rules around her. Atoosa told me how she had to cover her face in Iran in order to hide her identity. I have included shots of Atoosa's performance in my film as an example of, on the one hand, woman's body as a site of protest, and, on the other hand, dance as a language for expressing women's struggle.

Dance as protest features in other episodes of my film, including Maryam's flash mob dance, where she states her love for dance by saying that she would have preferred to be a dancer. Shahla dances at her partner, Kazem's, birthday to the music of her daughter playing the drums in a blues

band. She also sings along at her birthday to Sex Bomb by Tom Jones and Mousse T. I have also included Farideh's last dance, which I comment on elsewhere (See Chapter 10: Cinematic techniques, Editing). As well as serving as an act of protest against the proscription of women's dance, the inclusion of these dance scenes also aimed to enrich the narrative and the characters by adding a feminine and human element to these characters.

Chapter 12: Conclusion

My research aimed to explore the possibility of providing an alternative representation of Iranian women in cinema by making a documentary around the lives and work of six influential Iranian activist women. My documentary film is a practical, critical response to the existing skewed and patriarchal representations of Iranian women, primarily in Iran's official cinema, but also in the cinema in the West.

Practice-based research, as a methodological choice, gave me the possibility of combining feminist and emancipatory approaches with specific formal and stylistic choices and devices in the making of the documentary. It allowed me to produce both a film focused on the subject – an empowering image of women – and in creating the space for describing the research process and the findings, explaining the underpinning theories and reflecting on the work through a written text.

As far as I am aware, my PhD project, exploring the representation of women in Iran's cinema, is the first to employ a practice-based research method, specifically by making a documentary about a group of Iranian women activists. So far, within the academy, Iranian cinema has been studied mostly by conventional literature-based research, containing film analysis and interviews with mainly prominent filmmakers – in works, for example, by Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film*

and Society in the Islamic Republic (2009) and Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (2001), to name but a few. On the other hand, there have been work via practice-based research on Iranian cinema, exploring other research topics, and not with a focus on activist women. Among these are documentaries by Jamsheed Akrami, for example *A Cinema of Discontent* (Jamsheed Akrami, 2013) and *Friendly Persuasion* (Akrami, 2001), where Akrami interviews prominent - mostly male - Iranian filmmakers (and actresses). However, the main focus of those films is the harsh conditions in making a film in Iran, in particular, issues such as censorship, but not the representation of women.

Through a critique of key films and literature around the representation of women in cinema, the research identified discrete ideological perspectives, which underpin, and help explain, these representations and how they limit women's agency. The conservative/religious perspective was shown to be a direct product of the ascendance of the Islamic Republic to power, following the defeat of the essentially secular 1979 revolution. The forced Islamisation and suppression of the civil society that followed soon obliterated free cultural and artistic life and expression. The cinema that developed in post-revolutionary Iran, therefore, bears all the hallmarks of this political and social development. Women were the first targets of this social and cultural onslaught by the Islamic Republic, as their freedom and equal status in society fundamentally clashed with the ideology and laws of the Islamic regime. Women were initially erased from cinema, and when they came

back, they were veiled, disfigured and dehumanised. I wrote a critical review of key films to explore how in response to the rise of a controlled, state-sponsored official cinema, an independent cinema has been emerging (whether as underground cinema inside Iran or an independent cinema in the Iranian diaspora), which is providing more progressive representations of women in cinema. My own documentary sits within this critical movement in art and cinema in Iran and aims to give a clearer voice to it.

The autobiographical/auto-ethnographical element of my project, which is grounded in my theoretical framework of (activist) emancipatory feminism, as well as in action research, was an intrinsic part of my research. Indeed, this element was the trigger for commencing it. Biggs and Karlsson suggest that for many artists *personal* matters are the motivation when embarking on a research project: for instance, ‘to empower themselves, to be able to work more independently, to state their personal agenda, or to investigate why they cannot do that in ordinary production circumstances’. In general, this is different from the performing arts workplaces, where the artist is ‘subordinated to the conventions and production demands’ (Biggs and Karlsson, 2011: 323–324). In my research, this is demonstrated as self-reflexivity in both the written text and in the practice, and in the explicit objective perspective in the research by acknowledging myself throughout the process of the research. Drawing on ‘personal is political’, I explored my role as the researcher/filmmaker by reflecting on and paying attention to how growing up in Iran as a woman and my social and political background

and activism affected my choice of methods as a feminist as someone opposed to the patriarchal propaganda cinema of the theocratic Islamic Republic – i.e. a political documentary-based research with a feminist and emancipatory theoretical framework. This was, in particular, in contrast to the dominant trait in Iranian official cinema in which the creator, especially the woman filmmaker, remains mostly behind the camera, which may be interpreted as another layer of the veil.

Doing a *practice-based* research project also reveals and gives voice to the tacit knowledge embodied in the form of the practice (Biggs and Karlsson, 2011; Nelson, 2013b; Barrett and Bolt, 2014; McNiff, 2016; Price and Ristovska, 2018; Coghlan, 2019). As Coghlan and Brannick reflect in the context of action research (2014: 27), when a researcher inquires into the process, explains for the audience his/her stream of thoughts and experiments with their hypothesis, the researcher is generating knowledge. Coghlan also points at the close relevance of the field of action research and practical knowledge which in the process brings together all other forms of knowing (2019: 54–56). Nelson, similarly, points at the specificity of PaR embracing all modes of knowledge: know-what; know-how and know-that (2013a: 38). Furthermore, he argues for making ‘tacit knowledge more explicit’ through a dynamic process, by distancing the researcher from a subjective view and closeness to the subject in order to be as objective as possible (2013b: 20). Following that line of action through notes, readings and reflections, the making of my documentary drew out and articulated my

voice as the feminist filmmaker. Nelson uses the term 'clew' - an old term for 'clue' - suggesting a 'thread' guiding through the line of the research and the researcher's process of *doing-thinking* (Nelson, 2013b: 10–11), which is relevant as a term to link my film and this thesis. He considers the exegesis as much more than only an archival record of the work and/or its process of creation but more of a 'dialogical' connection between different components creating 'resonance' between the two pieces. Thus, while the film is a cinematic product and has been made with a view to being watched ultimately by the public on its own (similar to works such as *Act of Killing*), the written thesis was not designed to be read as a document separate from the film, and thus needs to be accompanied by the film in order to make sense. My project is grounded in an already established field of film practice as academic research, as a mode of contributing to knowledge (See for example, contributions on ScreenWorks online for fiction and nonfiction outputs; Batty & Kerrigan's *Screen Production Research: Creative Practice as a Mode of Enquiry* (Batty and Kerrigan, 2017); Kerrigan and Callaghan's *The filmmakers' research perspectives: an overview of Australian and UK filmmaking research* (2016); *Documentary film as a research tool* (Cole, 2016), MeCCSA's contributions, such as Crofts' 'High Definitions': *Articulating Media Practice as Research*; and Cahal McLaughlin's work: *Armagh Stories: Voices From the Gaol* (McLaughlin, 2017)).

I made my documentary as a practical contribution to the development of a progressive cinema in Iran. The choice of women activists, who together cover important areas of political and social activism in Iran, was a deliberate attempt to leverage an empowered representation of women in cinema, as a polar opposite to the dominant and regressive portrayals of Iranian cinema. The powerful, eloquent testimonies of the six remarkable women in my film reflect the 'other' reality of Iranian society, that has remained hidden from the viewers of Iran's official cinema and most of the productions in the West featuring Iranian women. In that 'other' reality, which, as we have seen, is the more salient actuality of Iranian society, women are not weak and fragile, are not devout and obedient sisters, daughters and mothers, are not silent victims, are not voluntary bearers of the veil, are not the 'honour' of anyone, and have not acquiesced to forced segregation and a 'gender apartheid'. In my film I tried to use cinematic forms and devices that suit my subject matter, and which allow this actually existing, empowered image of Iranian women to emerge.

My documentary explored representation of women in cinema around a number of key themes, such as women's bodies, women's voice, dance and music. Women's free expression in all these areas comes into conflict with the patriarchal and misogynistic laws and institutions in place. For this reason, in contrast to the official cinema, I provided ample space for my participants for self-expression in all of these areas. Any such self-expression in itself subverts the dominant, anti-feminist perspectives and

representations. I positioned my film, therefore, on the polar opposite end of the spectrum, with my participants as strong, empowered agencies, to reinforce this subversion and the aim of the critique.

The critique of representations of Iranian women in cinema presented in the thesis, together with my documentary film, which is based on that critique, could serve as a foundation and reference point for further research on the issue of representation of women in cinema in Iran and in other countries and regions living under Islamic laws. As generic methods, the critical perspectives and the particular practical-activist approach employed in this research also have the potential to be applied to studies of women's rights (and wider social justice) issues in films and artistic productions in the West and globally.

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Like Someone in Love (2012) Directed by A. Kiarostami. [Feature film]. Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée, Euro Space, MK2 Productions.

Marginal Road (2011) Directed by Y. Ameri. [Feature film]. Canada.

Mirror (Ayneh). (1998) Directed by J. Panahi. [Feature film]. Iran: Rooz Film.

More Beautiful Than Life (Zibatar az zendegi) (2011) Directed by E. Shah-Hosseini. [Feature film]. Iran.

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My Tehran for Sale (2009) Directed by G. Moussavi. [Feature film]. Iran/Australia: Cyan Films.

Mystic Pizza (1988) Directed by D. Petrie. [Feature film]. USA: Night Life Inc., The Samuel Goldwyn Company, Virgin Vision.

Nadia (2004) Directed by P. Parsafar. [Short documentary]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-tBdCCiSf4> (Accessed: 22 February 2018).

Nightcleaners (1975) Directed by Berwick Street Film Collective (Marc Karlin, Mary Kelly, James Scott and Humphry Trevelyan). [Feature film]. The Other Cinema.

Nine to Five (1980) Directed by C. Higgins. [Feature film]. USA: IPC Films, Twentieth Century Fox.

No One Knows About Persian Cats (Kasi az Gorbehaye Irani Khabar Nadareh) (2009) Directed by B. Ghobadi. [Feature film]. Iran.

Not Reconciled. (2011) Directed by J. Daniels. [Feature film]. UK.

Our Times (Ruz-egar-e ma). (2001) Directed by R. Banietamad. [Feature film]. Iran: Cinema 79.

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Pitch Perfect (2012) Directed by J. Moore. [Feature film]. USA: Brownstone Productions (II), Gold Circle Films.

Profession: Documentarist (Herfeh: Mostanadsaz) (2014) Directed by S. Abtahi, S. Barghnavard, F. Khosrovani, F. Sharifi, M. Keshavarz, S. Salahshoor and N. Rezaei. [Feature film]. Iran.

Prostitution: Behind the Veil (Prostitution bag sløret) (2004) Directed by N. Persson Sarvestani. [Feature film]. Cosmo Film.

Protest. (2018) Directed by J. Akrami. [Feature film]. Canada. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3IHVj8i92zs> (Accessed: 16 June 2020).

Rape (1975). J. Elam. [Short Documentary]. USA: chicagofilmarchives.

Red (Ghermez). (1999) F. Jeyrani. [Feature film]. Iran: Resaneh Filmsazan.

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Room (2015) Directed by L. Abrahamson. [Feature film]. Element Pictures, Film 4, FilmNation Entertainment.

Rough Cut (2002) Directed by F. Khosravani. [Short documentary]. Available at: <https://vimeo.com/79795589> (Accessed: 2 November 2019).

Runaway (2001) Directed by K. Longinotto, Z. Mir-Hosseini. [Feature film]. UK

Scandal (Rosvaie) (2013) Directed by M. Dehnamaki. [Feature film]. Iran.

Schindler's List (1993) Directed by S. Spielberg. [Feature film]. USA: Universal Pictures, Amblin Entertainment.

School Without End (Scuola senza fine) (1983) Directed by A. Monti. [Feature film]. Italy.

Shirin (2008) Directed by A. Kiarostami. [Feature film]. Iran. UK: BFI.

Sib. (1998) Directed by S. Makhmalbaf. [Feature film]. Iran: Hubert Bals Fund, MK2 Productions, Makhmalbaf Productions.

Sonita (2016). Directed by R. Ghaemmamghami. [Feature film]. Iran: RTAG/TRAUM Filmproduktion, Intermezzo Films S.A., ARTE.

Steel Magnolias (1989) Directed by H. Ross. [Feature film]. TriStar Pictures, Rastar Films.

Ten (Dah) (2002) Directed by A. Kiarostami. [Feature film]. Iran: Zeitgeist Films.

The Act of Killing (2012) Directed by J. Oppenheimer, Anonymous, Christine Cynn. [Feature film]. Final Cut for Real, Piraya Film A/S, Novaya Zemlya.

The Blue Veiled (Rusari Abi). (1995) Directed by R. Banietamad. [Feature film]. Iran: Farabi Cinema Foundation, Kadr Film Production Company.

The Day I Became a Woman (Roozi ke zan shodam). (2001) Directed by M. Meshkini. [Feature film]. Iran: Makhmalbaf Film House, Makhmalbaf Productions.

The Divide (2015) Directed by K. Round. [Feature film]. UK/USA: Dartmouth Films, Literally Films.

The Hidden Half (Nimeh-ye penhan). (2001) Directed by T. Milani. [Feature film]. Iran: Arta Film, Iranian Film Society.

The Legend of a Sigh (Afsane-ye-ah) (1991) Directed by T. Milani. [Feature film]. Iran.

The May Lady (Banooye Ordibehesht) (1997) Directed by R. Banietemad. [Feature film]. Iran: Iranian Independents, Tose'eh Film.

The Mission (Ferestadeh). (1983) Directed by P. Sayyad. [Feature film]. USA: Aria, N.Y. Film Group.

The Outcasts (Ekhrajiha) (2007) Directed by M. Dehnamaki. [Feature film]. Iran.

The Purple Time. (2013) Directed by J. Akrami. [Short Documentary]. Canada

The Secret Fatwa. (2018) Directed by D. Abadi. [Feature film].

The Stoning of Soraya M. (2009) Directed by C. Nowrasteh. [Feature film]. Mpower Pictures Distribution.

The Tree That Remembers (2002) Directed by M. Raouf. [Feature film]. Canada

The Unwanted Woman (Zane ziadi) (2005) Directed by T. Milani. [Feature film]. Iran.

The Willmar 8 (1981) Directed by L. Grant. [Feature film]. USA.

The Women (1939) Directed by G. Cukor. [Feature film]. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM).

Thelma and Louise (1991) Directed by R. Scott. [Feature film]. USA: Metro Goldwyn Mayer.

Those Who Said No. (2014) Directed by N. Sarvestani. [Feature film]. Sweden.

Thriller (1979) Directed by S. Potter. [Feature film]. UK: Arts Council of Great Britain, Sally Potter.

Tooran Khanoom (2018) Directed by M. Mirtahmasb and R. Banietemad. [Feature film]. Iran.

Two Women (Do zan). (1999) Directed by T. Milani. [Feature film]. Iran: Arman Film, Arta Film.

Ukraine Is Not a Brothel (2013) Directed by K. Green. [Feature film]. Australia: Noise & Light.

Under the Skin of the City (Zir-e poost-e shahr) (2001) Directed by R. Banietemad. [Feature film]. Iran: Farabi Cinema Foundation.

Union Maids (1976) Directed by J. Klein, M. Mogulescu and J. Reichert. [Feature film]. USA: New Day Films.

Utopia (2002) Directed by M. Mansouri, and L. Ghobadi. [Short documentary]. Available at: <http://www.moslemmansouri.com/films.html> (Accessed: 9 October 2020).

Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained (1977) Directed by M. Rosler.

We're Alive (1974) Directed by Women's Film Workshop, UCLA, Video Workshop, California Institution for Women [Documentary]. USA.

We Are Half of Iran's Population (2009) Directed by R. Banietemad. [Feature film]. Iran.

What's Up? (Digeh che khabar?) (1992) Directed by T. Milani. [Feature film]. Iran: Farabi Cinema Foundation.

Where Do I Belong? (2007) Directed by M. Sheikholeslami. [Feature film]. Iran.

Where Is the Friend's House? (Khane-ye doost kodjast?) (1990) Directed by A. Kiarostami. [Feature film]. Iran: Kanun parvaresh fekri, Kanun parvaresh fekri, Farabi Cinema Foundation.

With Babies and Banners: Story of the Women's Emergency Brigade. (1979) Directed by L. Gray. [Feature film]. USA: New Day Films.

Women of the Rhondda (1973) Directed by E. Ronay, M. Capps, M. Kelly, M. Dickinson, B. Segrave and H. Trevelyan. [Short documentary]. UK.

Women Without Shadows. (2003) Directed by M. Mohamadi.

Women's Right is Human Right. (2011). Directed by P. Bahrami. [Documentary].

Writing Desire (2000) Directed by U. Biemann. [Short documentary].

Writing on the City (2015) Directed by Keywan Karimi. [Feature film]. Iran.

Zananeh (The Ladies) (2003) Directed by M. Afzali. [Feature film]. Iran.