



Cinema Iranica
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Women's Cinema in Post-Revolutionary Iran

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Iranian women's cinema is a theater of activism, audacity, and determination and women have played numerous important roles in cinematic production since its coming to Iran at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the role of women in cinema has been divided between pre-revolution and post-revolution. In the decades since the revolution, however, women have continued to till the landscape of Iranian cinema despite the considerable and varied social stigmas restricting their movements and activities. Indeed, in the face of these restrictions, the increase in the number of women engaged in film and filmmaking in Iran has been staggering, with hundreds of movies in Iran having women behind the camera as well as in front of it, even with regulations and rules that restrict their presence and their visual portrayal on screen. From the beginning of the coming of cinema to Iran until today, over 120 films have been made by women, and the number is growing. Today, many celebrated women filmmakers make films in Iran alongside their male counterparts. These include Rakhshān Banī-I'timād, Tahmīnah Mīlānī, Pūrān Dirakhshāndah, Marzīyah Burūmand, Nargis Ābyār, Faryāl Bihzād, Samīra and Hanā Makhmalbāf, Manīzhah Hikmat, Marzīyah Mīshkīnī, Yasmīn Malik Nasr, Maryam Shāhrīyār, Jahāndukht Khādīm, Munā Zand Haghīghī, Maryam Bizhānī, Mihrnāz Muhammādī, Tīnā Pākrahvān, Āydā Panāhandah. Iranian women living outside of Iran have also continued to create internationally acclaimed films. Marjān Sātrāpī, Maryam Kishāvarz, Līlī Amīnpūr, Zar Amīr Ibrāhīmī, and Sierra Ulrich, amongst oth-

ers, have succeeded in making films which have been able to flout or otherwise differently resist the restrictions in Iran.

¹Janet Afary, "Guest Editor's Note," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 1 (2009): 3.

From the very outset of cinema in Iran, women have also exerted their agency on screen through acting where they have represented a whole array of personalities and characters, portraying a diverse and variegated range of women. In the 1970's, women gradually began to also establish themselves as directors and writers in Iranian cinema. In film, we have directors such as Kubrā Sa'īdī, and in documentary, we can name Furūgh Farukhzād, but the role of women in Iranian cinema changed dramatically since the Islamic revolution. Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Regime has pursued policies intended to project the image of the ideal Islamic woman in media. In reality, however, the presence of women in Iranian cinema diverges greatly from the presumed defined role of an ideal woman who is supposed to be najīb (chaste), coy, obedient, subservient, motherly, sacrificial, and all-giving for the welfare of her family and society.

However, the reality is more complicated than the regime's pre-defined, simplified designations, and with the presence of more women in Iranian cinema, the general stereotypes of women who are subservient to male authority no longer rings true. In this way, we can understand Iranian cinema as a paradoxical environment with a constantly changing dynamic in which women have been working and collaborating in films in Iran since the beginning of the revolution and long before. As Janet Afary has maintained, "if the legal arena has not given women much room for maneuver, the realm of cultural representation, particularly cinematic production by women, has provided a fertile ground for self-expression and resistance."¹ Thus, films on women and by women in the Islamic Republic represent a completely alternate and distinct image from the desired—or demanded—ideal picture of Iranian women. Women's cinema is diverse and variegated, sometimes subversive and politically provocative, and largely portrays the resil-

²Negar Mottahedeh, "Iranian Cinema in the Twentieth Century: A Sensory History," *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2009): 534.

ience of women in Iranian society and related diasporas.

In this article, I take stock of this diversity, inclusiveness, and women's activism for social justice by examining the state of Iranian women's cinema from after the revolution up to the recent Women, Life, Freedom movement which began in Iran in 2022. I do this by looking into how women have utilized cinematic expression to pose important social critiques in an otherwise repressive environment. I first track some of the gender-based rules and restrictions emplaced upon women since the Iranian revolution in 1979, and then turn to how women have responded to these limitations through film. I round off the article with a brief examination of how Iranian women both inside and outside of Iran are forging a shared space of international cooperation via global cinema.

State Policies and Women after the 1979 Revolution

State policies put in place after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979 dictated certain specific and restrictive roles and related images for women to be adhered to. From the very outset of the revolution, the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG) attempted to define the role of women in the new regime's ideological understanding of cinema specifically and to regulate cultural policies in the Islamic Republic more broadly. As Negar Mottahedeh argues, "Attached to traditional Islamic values and confined by the enforcement of modesty laws, women's bodies became subject to a system of regulations that aimed to fabricate the modesty of Iranian women into the hallmark of the new Shi'ite nation."² These regulatory fabrications have had a continued impact on women in Iranian society and quite specifically in both the depictions of women in films and films made by women in Iranian cinema.

Many of these policies have been arbitrarily imposed and it is no different in Iranian cinema. Indeed, the establishment of an Islamic dress code for women, restrictions on touching of the

opposite sex, the forbiddance of displays of affection on screen, and obedience to other Islamic regulations have not been uniformly enforced on the Iranian silver screen. As Hamid Naficy asserts about these filmmaking policies in Iran, “This situation has not remained static. Filmmakers, the film industry, film critics, governmental agencies, film financiers, and audiences have all been engaged in a multifaceted discourse and negotiation on the status of cinema as a cultural institution and an economical enterprise.” Alongside this dynamic negotiation of restrictions, he further describes how “Women and their representation on the screen were major sources of contention,” and the “woman question” continues to “dog cultural productions under the Islamic Republic” and “resurfaces with every social crisis.”³

Relatedly in 1997 the Supreme Leader, ‘Alī Khāminah’ī (reigning as Supreme Leader since 1989), identified “women’s issues and families as a priority for the country.”⁴ While he admitted that the state acknowledged that women constitute half of the population, he conceded that women’s “impact on the fate of the country is greater.” For instance, Khāminah’ī expressed that, “At one point we consider a collective of humans together, half of them play a role commensurate with fifty percent, but the issue of women in the society is not as such, it is much higher.”⁵ Thus, the ideological view which the MCIG holds of women in Iran is of this figurative woman who represents “Islamic-Iranian culture”—note that MCIG includes both Islam and Iran as both a composite and an ideal value system on its website.⁶

Women are, however, mainly defined in their role as mothers to build “good human beings” according to “the teachings of the Quran.”⁷ This vital mission, it is argued in ideological terms, aims to ensure the strengthening of the foundations of families and education, producing the needed human resources committed to future generations. While the MCIG also indicates that women constitute half of the population of Iranian society, it puts increased weight on their responsibility for educating and raising the other half of society—and thus views women as so-

³Hamid Naficy, “Iranian Cinema Under the Islamic Republic,” *American Anthropologist* 97, no. 3 (1995): 4.

⁴This and all following translations in this article are my own.

⁵For this and preceding quotations, see, *Vizārat-i Farhang va Irshād-i Islāmī, Safhah-yi Nākhust-i Umūr-i Khānivādah va Zanān*, February, 18, 1998, accessed 04/09/2024, <https://shorabanovan.farhang.gov.ir/fa/ongoingplans>

⁶Iran, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), accessed 04/09/2024, <https://shora-banovan.farhang.gov.ir/fa/ongoingplans>

⁷Iran, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), accessed 04/09/2024, <https://shora-banovan.farhang.gov.ir/fa/ongoingplans>

⁸Iran, Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (MCIG), accessed 04/09/2024, <https://shora-banovan.farhang.gov.ir/fa/ongoingplans>

cial capital who are mainly responsible for raising new generations. MCIG states that in order to “reach sustainable growth” in the fields of culture, art, religion, media, and literature, the participation of women is of vital importance.⁸

In addition to these prescribed policies and regulations, there are also a series of unwritten rules that define cultural issues surrounding women, such as the various ways of wearing hijab, gender dynamics, gendered language, and displays of affection between the sexes. To give an example, the restriction of wearing the hijab (the Islamic head and body covering) is arbitrarily upheld, depending on different administrations and which people are in power, or in some cases, as related to film, the director’s decision. However, restrictions and regulations have not stopped women from exerting their subjectivities, and they continue to creatively circumnavigate many of the unwritten rules. It is within this dynamic and sometimes contradictory landscape of gender-based prescriptions—both written and assumed—in which women have not only negotiated these boundaries but creatively and audaciously worked around them.

Social Critique, Women’s Cinema, and Gender-Based Violence: Pūrān Dirakhshandah

In light of these many rules and restrictions, women’s cinema in Iran offers strong critiques concerning the reality of women’s lives, their social and cultural concerns, as well as their political and individual rights. Generally, women filmmakers in Iran are, to varying degrees, ideologically critical of their society, producing films which criticize traditional norms that hinder women’s rights. Such films seek to question gender dynamics and unabashedly offer perspectives that are doggedly different from what the state prescribes. Thus, women in Iranian cinema, whether as actors, directors, producers, or crew members, show a remarkable tenacity in the face of the regime’s prescriptions and stand at the forefront of social and political activism in promoting women’s rights in Iran.



One of the most urgent social issues that women filmmakers, actors, and others have drawn attention to is gender-based violence. For instance, in recent years many filmmakers have taken up the torch of the #MeToo movement—following the example of women in Hollywood—by exposing and calling out unwanted sexual advances, sexual harassment, and even assault in the cinema industry. For instance, signatories to the petition of the #MeToo movement in Iran in the spring of 2022 include many of the major women filmmakers in Iran’s cinema today, spearheaded by well-known names such as Tarānah ‘Alīdūstī, Lādan Tabātabā’ī, and Katāyūn Rīyāhī.⁹

⁹Jonbesh-e Me Too Az Taraneh Alidousti ta Riyahi va Pour Samimi. (The Me-Too Movement from Taraneh Alidousti to Riyahi and Pour Samimi). <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/1383000>

¹⁰“Huzūr-i Bidūn-i Hijāb-i Afsānah Bāyegān va Fātimah Mu’tamid-Āryā dar yek marāsīm [The presence of Afsānah Bāyegān and Fātimah Mu’tamid-Āryā without veil in a ceremony].” RFI, accessed 04/09/2024 <https://www.rfi.fr/fa20230501>

Of even greater contemporary and Iran-specific importance, after the Mahsā Amīnī-related uprisings in September 2022, many of cinema’s women celebrities, who had previously come together for the #MeToo petitions, were the first to take off their hijab at public events. For instance, Fātimah Mu’tamid-Āryā and Afsānah Bāyigān, both acclaimed actresses, appeared without head scarves in various official functions, and some of these protestors were summoned to court for their transgressions.¹⁰ In this way, women celebrities in contemporary Iranian cinema face a difficult choice between expressing themselves in the way they wish or succumbing to the rules they are forced to follow, whether it is in their dress code or their political views. However, these public petitions against gender-based discrimination and violence have created a network in which women feel a solidarity that gives them courage to stand up against verbal and cultural abuse. It also has permitted them to break the silence around gender-based abuses which have haunted them for centuries.



Figure 1: Afsānah Bāyegān (Left) and Fātimah Mu'tamid-Āryā (Right) attended the memorial ceremony for Ātilā Pisyānī without compulsory hijab. accessed via <https://www.iranintl.com/202305023819>

While these events have captured the attention of the contemporary moment, standing up against gender-based abuse can be understood as a continuing trend that began long before #MeToo and the Women, Life, Freedom movements. Cinema in Iran has been at the forefront of demonstrating social malaise, critiquing such problems, and at the same time advocating for change. For instance, the seasoned female filmmaker Pūrān Dirakhshandah can be considered a pioneer in delivering explicit public criticism of otherwise taboo subjects with the intention of changing social stigma.

Pūrān Dirakhshandah (born in Kermanshah, March 1951) stands as one of the most senior female directors of Iranian cinema, having graduated from the School of Television before the Iranian Revolution and beginning her directing of documentaries in 1975 for National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT). One of her most remarkable filmic achievements was her production of seventeen episodes of *Shukarān* (1980) for national TV. However, after the broadcast of the third episode, the TV authorities halted its showing because it publicly displayed the addiction of women, children, and men in society. Courageous-



ly, the series uncovered the negative impacts of smuggling and the black market in Iran and at the same time proposed ideas on how to prevent such drug-related problems. But it was her audacity to make an open series about drug addictions that caused her conflict with authorities.

In addition to her numerous documentaries, Dirakhshandah has produced multiple feature films, including: *Zīr-i Saqf-i Dūdī* (Under the Smoky Roof, 2016), *Hiss! Dukhtarān Faryād Nimīzanand* (Hush! Girls Don't Cry, 2013), *Hirfah-yi-hā* (The Professionals, Video film, 2010), *Khāb-hā-yi dunbālah dār* (Sequential Dreams, 2009), *Bachah-hā-yi Ābādī* (The Village's Children, 2006), *Ru'yā-yi Khīs* (The Wet Dream, 2005), *Sham'ī dar bād* (A Candle in the Wind, 2003), *Ishq-i Bidūn-i Marz* (Love without Borders, 1998), *Zamān-i az dast raftah* (Lost Time, 1989), *'Ubūr az Ghubār* (Passing from the Dust, 1989), *Parandah-yi Kūchak-i Khushbakhṭī* (The Small Bird of Happiness, 1987), and *Rābitah* (Connection, 1986). In addition, Dirakhshandah has written and produced several of her own films, as well as being the recipient of many domestic and international awards for her films, and regularly teaches acting classes privately.

But it is her film *Hiss! Dukhtarān Faryād Nimīzanand* (Hush! Girls Don't Cry, 2013) in which Dirakhshandah best exposes issues related to sexual assault, rape, and the culture of silencing, revealing her defiance of social stigmas. Dirakhshandah's subject matter was primarily based on social research she conducted after she had received a diary notebook from the provincial city of Būkān, a conservative rural area. The film was, in fact, based on the true story of a sexually-abused, rural boy of Būkān who had retold the story of a sexual assault he had endured in some detail. Knowing of the prevalence of such stories among both men and women, Dirakhshandah featured her fictional film with a woman protagonist, rather than a boy, as the subject of her social realist movie. This striking film, and Dirakhshandah's body of work overall, is worth examining closely

as a forerunner of women's contributions to social and political criticism in Iran.



Figure 2: As a child, Shīrīn sees the shadow of Murād behind the window of her room and calls out to her mother, crying. *Hiss! Dukhtarān Faryād Nimīzanand* (Hush! Girls Don't Cry, 2013), Pūrān Dirakhshandah, accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqR40Oj7Rns&t=2599s> (00:43:19).

As a highly evocative beginning, in the opening of the film we see a woman in a white bridal dress holding a knife smeared in blood in front of the camera. Through the course of the film, we come to understand that the soon-to-be-bride, Shīrīn, had attacked and killed the custodian who was abusing a child in his room. Shīrīn, we also discover through the course of the film, is a survivor of abuse herself, and in an impulsive moment of revenge took justice into her own hands. The entire film revolves around re-telling the story of violence and how this cycle of abuse eventually leads to more violence: in this case, the execution of Shīrīn, who in the eyes of the law is responsible for murder. At first, her murder of the custodian is an unexplainable and completely unexpected occurrence. Gradually, the audience, through a series of flashbacks, comes to learn of the past history of abuse that Shīrīn had endured, and like the disgruntled groom, comes to understand the psyche of an abused woman who commits this crime.



The sympathetic lawyer, played by Mirilā Zāri‘ī, tries until the very last minute to keep Shīrīn from execution. She presents Shīrīn as a victim, and her execution as an injustice unaccounted for by the flawed laws of the country. Sadly, by the end of the film, the lawyer fails to stop this execution. In other words, the film makes clear the idea that existing laws do not adequately protect women from abuse, nor from persecution when, as victims of sexual abuse, they take justice into their own hands. Rather, the film seems to suggest, the laws protect the perpetrators and leaves such violent abusers at large in society to prey on their next victim.



Figure 3: Shīrīn is in court, narrating the scene of the murder. Hiss! Dukhtarān Faryād Nimīzanand (Hush! Girls Don't Cry, 2013), Pūrān Dirakshandah, accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqR40Oj7Rns&t=2599s> (01:11:25).

In response to the success of this movie on gender-based violence, Dirakshandah commented that “Films that are based on research will find depth,”¹¹ indicating her belief that films drawn from real experience—in this case a real victim of sexual abuse—will evoke real feeling and meaning for the audience. Dirakshandah received an award for “promoting honest social issues” at the Global Festival in India in addition to many other domestic and international film awards.¹² It is also worth noting that Dirakshandah has also started the shooting for a similar film, Hiss! Pīsar-hā Gīryah Nimīkunand (Hush! Boys Don't

¹¹“Hiss! Dukhtar-hā Faryād Nimīzanand,” Facebook, retrieved 04/09/2024, <https://www.facebook.com/hiss-movie/>; This is as part of a Facebook entry on Pūrān Dirakshandah's website.

¹²Pūrān Dirakshandah received the Crystal Sīmurgh Audience Award for Best Film in 2013 for Hush! Girls Don't Cry in 2013, see: “Dawrah-yi sī-u-yikkum – javāyiz Ihdā shudāh dar jashnvārah-yi baynalmilālī-yi film-i Fajr [31st Fajr International Film Festival – Awards of Festival],” Soureh Cinema, retrieved May 8, 2020, <http://www.sourehcinema.com/Festival/AwardsOfFestival.aspx?FestId=139107050000>; “Global Film Festival honors Pūrān Dirakshandah with lifetime achievement award.” Tehran Times, December 2, 2020, retrieved May 8, 2021, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/455348/Global-Film-Festival-honors-Puran-Derakshandeh-with-lifetime>

¹³Maryam Ghorbankarimi, "Rakhshan Banietamad's Art of Social Realism: Bridging Realism and Fiction," In *ReFocus: The Films of Rakhshan Banietamad*, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 189.

¹⁴Ghorbankarimi, "An Overview of Banietamad's Career and Films," In *ReFocus: The Films of Rakhshan Banietamad*, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 7.

Cry), but it was delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic which hit Iran hard and compelled film crews to put their operations on hold.

From Social Documentary to Feature Films: Rakhshān Banī-I'timād

Like Pūrān Dirakhshandah, Rakhshān Banī-I'timād (born in Tehran, April 1954) entered the realm of feature filmmaking from a solid background in documentary through the National Iranian Radio and Television (NIRT) state broadcaster before the revolution. Later studying cinema at Tehran University's Faculty of Dramatic Arts, Banī-I'timād continued working in Television into the early years of the revolution. In many ways, Banī-I'timād can be considered a pioneer in women's cinema in Iran as she brings her documentary story-telling background to feature films with a social realist angle. She is notable for being one of the first female directors to receive the Fajr Film Festival award,¹³ has regularly received international accolades, and is considered one of the leading figures of Iranian cinema today.

Banī-I'timād's first internationally recognized film with a female protagonist, *Nargis* (1992), depicts a love triangle between an older and a younger woman who are both in love—and both married to—the same man: 'Ādel. 'Ādel is a dishonest husband and a petty thief with no sense of guilt, and Nargis' predicament begins with her dealings with this unstable and unreliable character. According to Maryam Ghorbankarimi, Nargis is not only a "turning point in [Banī-I'timād's] career; it also marks the beginning of a significant shift in the representation of female characters in Iranian cinema."¹⁴ The character of Nargis, with her initial naivete, withstands the injustices and challenges that come upon her, expertly juxtaposed against the character of Āfāq, the older, more mature woman in the triangle.

Most of Banī-I'timād's feature films continue to revolve around social realist subject matters. For instance, in *Rūsarī-i*

Ābī (*The Blue Veil*, 1995), the protagonist, a young rural villager named Nubar (played by Fātimah Mu'tamid-Āryā), becomes involved in an amorous relationship with the factory-owner Rasūl Rahmānī (played by 'Izzatallāh Intizāmī), an older, urban, middle-class father and grandfather. The evolving amorous relationship, unsanctioned by class nor age, breaks all social and cultural taboos. In spite of the existing love between the two, members of the middle-class family cannot accept the existence of such a love between their father, on the one hand, and an urban young villager who is also a wage worker of their factory, on the other. The exceptional acting of Fātimah Mu'tamid-Āryā as Nubar and 'Izzatallāh Intizāmī as Rasūl create a striking performance that not only criticizes the restrictive nature of prescribed gender relationships but works to disrupt such social stigmas.



Figure 4: Rasūl calls out to Sinawbar as 'Hey, Blue Scarf', and Nubar brings her to Rasūl. Rūsārī-Ābī (*The Blue Veil*, 1995), Rakhshān Banī-I'timād, accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m5MTGDoRN3I&t=1474s> (00:24:34).

While *The Blue Veil* tells the tale of a rural woman, in *Bānū-yi Urdībihisht* (*The May Lady*, 1998), Banī-I'timād offers the story of an urban, middle-aged single mother, Furūgh, who is also a photographer and a documentary filmmaker with a political activist background. In this film, Furūgh must deal with her teenage son, Mānī, a stigmatized love connection, and the

¹⁵Rakhshān Banī-I'timād has received numerous awards during her career. For a full list of these awards, see her IMDb site (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0051999/awards/>)

¹⁶Roxanne Varzi, "Tahmineh Milani," *Encyclopedia of the Modern Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Philip Mattar et al. (Macmillan Reference USA, 2004).

social malaise of urban life. As one means by which to find meaning in her complex situation, she concentrates her activism by filming and documenting the plight of children living in slums. At the same time, she is also seeking companionship and love throughout the film, but she is deprived of it as a result of traditional social stigmas, reflected through the outbursts of her teenage son. While unsuccessful, Furūgh seeks in this film to find balance between the needs of herself, her family's needs, and the needs of her lover (who remains unseen throughout the film). Similar themes and sub-themes exist in Banī-I'timād's other films where the burden of the family is placed upon the shoulders of the mother, depicting the weight of such social malaise affecting women in undue ways. This idea of a mother's burden is aptly displayed in *Zīr-i Pūst-i Shahr* (*Under the Skin of the City*, 2001), *Gīlānah* (2004), *Khūn-bāzī* (*Mainline*, 2006), and finalized in *Qissah-hā* (*Tales*, 2014).

It is also worth noting that many of Banī-I'timād's films were produced by her husband, Jahāngīr Kawсарī. Their daughter, Bārān Kawсарī, is now a recognized actress and a vocal social activist in her own right. Banī-I'timād has received numerous accolades in major international film festivals, such as Locarno and Venice International Film Festivals in addition to domestic festivals.¹⁵

From Social Realism to Fiction: Tahmīnah Mīlānī

Alongside Rakhshān Banī-I'timād and Pūrān Dirakhshandah, Tahmīnah Mīlānī (born 1960 in Tabriz), is an award-winning film director and one of Iran's most prominent filmmakers. Mīlānī graduated with a degree in architecture from the University of Science and Technology in Tehran in 1986, but already had been working with major filmmakers since 1979 in various positions. Mīlānī's work mainly concentrates on women's and feminist issues in Iran,¹⁶ and she was briefly jailed by Iranian authorities, presumably for portraying a positive image of anti-revolutionaries in her melodramatic film *Nīmah-yi Pin-*



hān (The Hidden Half, 2001).¹⁷

In one of her first films about women, *Afsānah-yi Āh* (The Legend of Aah, 1991), Mīlānī offers a critique of the relationship between society and women's unfulfilled desires, unrequited love, and suppressed dreams. In this film, Mīlānī sets the foundation for her future female-centered oeuvre, following with *Du Zan* (Two Women, 1999), *Nīmāh-yi Pinhān* (The Hidden Half, 2001), *Vākunish-i Panjum* (The Fifth Reaction, 2003), *Zan-i Ziyādī* (The Unwanted Woman, 2005), *Ātash Bas I & II* (Cease-fire I & II, 2006 and 2007), and *Malī va rāh hā-yi naraftāsh* (Melli and Her Untrodden Ways, 2018). While in her earlier films women are portrayed with a certain kind of innocence, in her later films many of the female protagonists are displayed as strong-minded, independent women who claim agency in a predominantly patriarchal world. Mīlānī's work is also significant in terms of her broaching of socially and politically taboo subjects with regards to women, sometimes in a melodramatic manner. In *The Hidden Half* (2001), Mīlānī features female political activists who engage in student activism after the Iranian Revolution, recounting the story of women activists who succumb to persecution, arrests, and other repressive measures after the revolution. This film warrants some detailed attention.

The protagonist of *The Hidden Half*, *Firishtah* (Angel), is the wife of a judge, *Khusraw Samīmī*, who has been appointed by the new government (i.e., Muhammad Khātāmī's reformist administration that came into power in 1997). *Samīmī* is set to hear the last words of a female prisoner on death row in the city of Shiraz's prison and is planning a trip to the city to prepare a report. When *Firishtah* finds out from her husband about the political activist on death row, she hides a long letter, delineating her life-long secret about her own activist phase during the revolution. Via a series of tribulations, she hides the letter in her husband's suitcase. *Samimi* discovers the hidden letter in his suitcase when he arrives in his hotel room in Shiraz, and he becomes completely absorbed in reading it. The film provides a

¹⁷"Feminist Filmmaker is Arrested in Iran," New York Times. August 30, 2001, retrieved 04/09/2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/08/30/international/middleeast/feminist-filmmaker-is-arrested-in-iran.html>

visual narration of this past as narrated by the letter, filled with intermittent flashbacks to the present time.



Figure 5: Khusraw is reading a letter from Firishtah and flashes back to the past. Firishtah tells Khusraw about her situation at the university, and Khusraw assures her that he can get her back into university. *Nimāh-yi Pinhān* (The Hidden Half, 2001), Tahmīnah Milānī, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gxPphnn_pQ&t=6012s (01:30:41).

From reading the letter, Samimi learns of untold secrets, political activism, and an unrequited love between his wife and an older man called Jāvīd—translated as “the eternal one.” Overall, the letter contains profound revelations about his wife and the mother of his children whom he had thought he knew very well but in fact did not. By reading the secret memoirs of Firīshṭah, he learns of her hidden life, of her political activism that she had concealed from him all these years, and of a love to a social ideal—and her love of an older, activist man. At the same time, Samimi learns about Firīshṭah’s dilemma of hiding such an immense secret from him during the course of their marriage. At the end of the film, Samimi is seen interviewing the woman on death row, but her file—and even her voice—resembles that of his own wife, suggesting that this woman on death row could very easily have been Firīshṭah. Firīshṭah, however, succeeded in fleeing the authorities by hiding in the house of the mother of her future husband, whereas the woman on death row did not have the same luck. The nameless and faceless woman was in-



carcerated for over twenty years and is now awaiting execution, and her last hope of life is to be heard by the reformist government, which has promised leniency and reform.



Figure 6: The final scene of the movie where Khusraw is sitting across from the woman condemned to death, listening to her speak. *Nimāh-yi Pinhān* (The Hidden Half, 2001), Tahmīnāh Mīlānī, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gxPphnn_pQ&t=6012s (01:03:41).

The theme of judging women, being judgmental towards them, and being a good judge of circumstances runs through this quasi-political movie. How will the husband/judge determine the fate of this political activist on death row? Can the judge remain impartial to the plight of this death row convict? Can the judge forgive the woman and release her from captivity? Can the resemblance between the story told by the detainee and that of his own wife have a positive impact on his decision making? While the ending of the film remains open-ended, and does not reveal how the judge will eventually decide, Mīlānī brilliantly merges the two stories of both women through intermittent flashbacks and connects Iran's past with its present through the voice and narrative of its female protagonist. The film elegantly shows how the idealism of the early revolutionary years is silenced and now hidden from public view, just as Firīshṭah's story was hidden and silenced. But Javid's appearance towards the end of the story—twenty years later but still looking exactly the same as before—telling Firīshṭah that she may have rushed to

¹⁸Michelle Langford, "Practical Melodrama: From Recognition to Action in Tahmineh Milānī's Firīshah Trilogy." *Screen* (London) 51, no. 4 (2010): 341–364.

judgement, alerts her to the necessity to present all sides before her husband decides the fate of a woman on death row. With deft filmic devices (e.g., overlaying Firīshah's image over the woman on death row), flashbacks, and the unexpected return of Jāvīd, Mīlānī's film utilizes melodrama to compelling effect.

Indeed, the melodramatic style of the movie, as Michelle Langford argues, is a "practical strategy to examine the impact of public events on the private lives of Iranian women." Langford argues persuasively that "where films are subject to severe censorship, melodrama serves as an important vehicle for expressing figuratively that which cannot be said within the allowable codes of state-controlled discourse."¹⁸ In a melodramatic style, Mīlānī's *The Hidden Half* thus effectively reveals the untold and invisible lives of women who have exerted passion and selflessness in their political beliefs and causes.

While in *The Hidden Half* the feisty activist moves away from politics with age and maturity, in Mīlānī's later films *The Fifth Reaction* (2003) and *Ātash Bas I & II* (*Ceasefire I and II*, 2006 and 2007), her female protagonists claim agency over their lives, rebelling against patriarchal norms and social expectations, and show powerful women on screen.¹⁹ In *Malī va rāh hā-yi naraftah ash* (*Malī* is short for *Malīhah*; the English title is *Melli and the Untrodden Roads*, 2018), however, Mīlānī treats the subject matter of domestic abuse in a more in-depth manner, and like *Dirakhshandah's Hiss! Dukhtarān Faryād Nimīzanand*, she seeks to push the boundaries of social stigma with regard to abuse. In *Melli*, Mīlānī portrays a woman whose simplicity and vulnerability bring her into the orbit of an abusive husband and depicts how difficult it is for her to break out of the abusive relationship without major verbal and physical altercations. With *Melli*, Mīlānī joins the crowd of activists crying for women's rights in Iran, especially for a woman's right to stand up to any form of abuse, whether it be domestic or political.



Women's Experimental Movies: Samīrā and Hanā Makhmalbāf

Many women filmmakers have also engaged in various cinematographic experimentations. At the age of seventeen, Samīrā Makhmalbāf began making internationally recognized movies, becoming the youngest director in the world participating in the official section of the 1998 Cannes Film Festival. Samīrā Makhmalbāf became known for her documentary debut, *Sīb* (Apple, 1997), written alongside her acclaimed filmmaker father, Muhsin Makhmalbāf. *Sīb* recreated the true story of two girls locked up in their small apartment by their father in the middle of Tehran. The two girls and their mother had next to no contact with the outside world, making them socially awkward and developmentally delayed. The mother and the girls, who had been confined to their dark rooms, had been denied the amenities of life by a patriarchal ideology. The experimental nature of depicting and recreating their true story brought the younger Makhmalbāf international attention and multiple awards.



Figure 7: A still from *Sīb* (Apple, 1997). Samīrā Makhmalbāf, accessed via https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tlqMtP77BE (00:13:38).

Her second movie, *Takhtah Sīyāh* (Blackboard, 2000), depicted the role of education in the deprived areas of Kurdistan. She

²⁰For a complete list of awards see Makhmalbāf Film House's website and her IMDb page: <https://makhmalbaf.com/?q=samira>; <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0538533/>

²¹See the IMDb page for Panj-i 'Asr: <https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0538533/>

²²See: <http://makhmalbaf.com/?q=samira>

directed a series of nomadic teachers carrying their blackboards on their shoulders and traveling from one village to another in the midst of bombs and an ongoing war, just to bring literacy to children. Blackboard was also selected by the Cannes Film Festival to compete in the official section in 2000, where Samīrā Makhmalbāf received the Special Jury Award. The film also received the “Federico Fellini Honor Award” from UNESCO, and the “Francois Truffaut Award” from Italy. This film had a large viewership in France.²⁰

Makhmalbāf also collaborated in one of the eleven episodes of September 11 (2002), alongside directors such as Youssef Chahine, Sean Penn, Shohei Imamura, and Ken Loach. Makhmalbāf's third feature film, Panj-i 'Asr (At Five in the Afternoon, 2003) was set in Afghanistan and features an Afghan woman who wants to be President. This film also won the Jury's Special Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2003, as well as the Golden Peacock's Best Film Award.²¹ In 2004, The Guardian named Makhmalbāf among its selection of the forty best filmmakers under forty.²² The entire Makhmalbāf family immigrated to France and then England in 2008, and Samira Makhmalbāf has been a jury member at various international festivals such as Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Locarno, Moscow, and Montreal.



Figure 8: A still from Panj-i 'Asr (At Five in the Afternoon, 2003). Samīrā Makhmalbāf, accessed via [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWWLmN_BkrE\(00:30:27\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XWWLmN_BkrE(00:30:27)).

Samīrā's sister, Hanā Makhmalbāf, also started making films at an early age. Her film, *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame* (2007), relates the obstacles women face to become educated under the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. As well, in the documentary *Green Days* (2009), Hanā Makhmalbāf explored the incidents following the disputed elections of 2009 in Iran which led to the Green Movement, a series of protests that saw several years of political demonstrations across the country. The film also received the "Bravery Award" at the Venice Film Festival in 2009.²³

²³See <https://makhmalbaf.com/> and their IMDb page for a complete list of awards.

²⁴For a list of all awards see the Makhmalbāf Film House's website.

Also part of the Makhmalbāf "Film House," Marzīyah Mishkīnī, the wife of Muhsin Makhmalbāf and an aunt of Samīrā and Hanā, gained international fame for her first film, *Rūzī ki Zan Shudam* (*The Day I Became a Woman*, 2000), and won awards at the Venice International Film Festival in 2000. Her second film, *Stray Dogs* (2004), also competed in the best film category at the Venice Film Festival.²⁴ Marzīyah Mishkīnī also wrote the script for Hanā Makhmalbāf's *Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame*, which won several awards.

Shabakah-yi Khānigī (The Home Network)

But it would be remiss to ignore contributions by Iranian women beyond the purview of mainstream filmmaking. Women have also started to find a niche in the newly established Shabakah-yi Khānigī (*The Home Network*), which is a private, independent filmmaking enterprise. As the supervision of content production in Shabakah-yi Khānigī did not start directly under the tutelage of the Ministry of Culture or state-run TV—for which they pose as competition—directors found less restrictions in their filmmaking. Since 2021, there have been many attempts made to curtail the freedoms of Shabakah-yi Khānigī, in particular in their depiction of women and their freedom of expression. Iranian Radio and Television, *Sidā va Sīmā*, has made several attempts to bring Shabakah-yi Khānigī under its own supervision, and this back and forth is continuing between independent artists and the state.

Shabakah-yi Khānigī's success began with the series, *Shahrzād* (2015-2018), a fictional account of a woman's life set in pre-revolutionary Iran in which tradition and modernity are pitted against each other. In terms of the subject matter and cinematography, *Shahrzād*, written by Hasan Fathī and Naghmah Samīnī, offered distinct and remarkable episodes that gained a wide and favorable reception. In addition, many famous filmmakers such as Mihran Mudīrī, Manūchihr Hādī, Hasan Fathī, and others began making movies with *Shabakah-yi Khānigī*, finding value not only in its distribution potential, but also in its relaxed restrictions compared to state-run TV.

One of the most successful filmmakers in *Shabakah-yi Khānigī* is Tīnā Pākrahvān, whose series *Khātūn*, presented with the English title, *Once Upon a Time in Iran* (2021), has now mesmerized millions of viewers. Set in the aftermath of the Iranian occupation by the Allied forces in 1941, *Once Upon a Time in Iran* tells the story of a female protagonist, *Khātūn*, who deals with issues of love, marriage, divorce, treason, and espionage set in the background of the Second World War in Iran and its tumultuous political setting. In a star-studded cast, Pākrahvān, who has previously worked in different roles with major Iranian filmmakers, comes to *Shabakah-yi Khānigī* from commercially successful feature films, such as *Los Angeles, Tehran* (2017).

Pākrahvān's work is significant in that she has created a series that places women at the center of major historical events in Iran. Pākrahvān juxtaposes the past with the present and invites the viewer to see this history through the eyes of an activist woman who is torn apart by the different ideologies of her time, dividing divergent ideologies in the midst of an unwanted war. Like *Shahrzād*, *Khātūn* may represent a historical era, but it can also be read as a critique of present times. Notably, both series would not have been able to be made were it not for the ability of the *Shabakah-yi Khānigī* to bring in private investors and wider distribution venues, permitting subject matter that would otherwise be deemed controversial. Thus, *Shabakah-yi Khānigī*



is now a major alternative to the ideologized filmmaking that state-run TV and film pursues. Yet it would be remiss to forget that the trailblazing work of the first generation of women filmmakers in Iran paved the way for many future filmmakers via this network, such as Nargis Ābyār, Āydā Panāhandah, Munā Zand Haqqīqī, and Yāsamīn Mālik Nasr, amongst others.

Women's Diaspora

No treatment of Iranian women's cinema would be complete without at least a mention of the films created outside of Iran's stringent gender-based restrictions. Indeed, many of the topics discussed in films of the Iranian diaspora would never have been given permission to be filmed and screened in Iran. Major players in this genre, including Maryam Kishāvarz, Grānāz Mūsavī, Sipīdah Fārsī, Līlī Amīnpūr, Shīrīn Nishāt, and later the women of the Makhmalbāf family, amongst others, have created films that reveal a very different Iran from the one depicted by the cinema produced inside the country.

Maryam Kishāvarz's debut movie set against the backdrop of a conservative society, *Circumstance* (2011), for instance, deals with explicit homosexual female love, a topic that would never have been sanctioned for depiction inside Iran, let alone its filming. The winner of the Sundance Audience Award, Kishāvarz's film tells a story of complex family dynamics, the devastating effects of traditional gender norms, and the challenges of the silenced LGBTQ members as they navigate their desires, dreams, and the societal pressures that separate them from each other. Another of her films, *The Persian Version* (2023), an Iranian-American comedy-drama which takes up the subject of mother-daughter relationships, won two awards at the Sundance Film Festival in 2023. Overall, her work has received accolades for tackling sensitive topics and giving a platform to marginalized voices.



Figure 9: A still from *Sharāyit* (*Circumstance*, 2011). Maryam Kishāvarz, accessed via <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0YnLvPbNw0c> (00:00:18).

Likewise, the work of Sipīdah Fārsī, an Iranian director living in France, unravels the underground scene of addiction and corruption amid social and political tensions in her illegally-filmed movie, *Tehran: Bidūn-i Mujavviz* (*Tehran: Without Permission*, 2009). Fārsī filmed the shots on a phone camera on the streets of Tehran without obtaining the regular filming permits required for filmmakers. The film is predominantly about the city of Tehran and what is happening on the streets: its bazaars, rituals, and even an imminent political election.

Likewise, in *My Tehran for Sale* (Australia, 2008), directed by the Iranian-Australian poet and filmmaker Grānāz Mūsavī, the film examines the double life of middle-class families, their underground music, art, identity crises, brain drain, and how HIV is treated socially. Women's issues such as their access, or lack thereof, to abortion, to women's health clinics, and other women's concerns are presented critically in the film.

One of the most successful and well-known Iranian women in the international setting, however, is the graphic novelist and filmmaker Marjān Sātrāpī, who converted her poignant autobiographical tale from a graphic novel into animation. In order to



do so, Satrapi provides a simple story narrated from the point of view of a child in the film *Persepolis* (2007). The animated version of the film blends personal narrative with socio-political commentary, while exploring the complexities of belonging, cultural displacement, and identity. Satrapi also directed the film version of her graphic novel, *Chicken with Plums* (2011), which also presents a satirical perspective on historical realities. Several years later in *The Voices* (2014), Sātrāpī moved away from Iranian topics and engaged issues related to mental illness, combining humor and horror to probe the depths of the protagonist's psyche. Finally, in *Radioactive* (2019), Satrapi directed a film on the life of the female scientist, Marie Curie.

A New York-based artist, Shīrīn Nishāt, is another notable women's diasporic filmmaker who has made several art movies, including *Women Without Men* (2009), based on Shahrnūsh Pārsī'pūr's novella set in Tehran.²⁵ This film depicts the life of six single women seeking refuge in a very politically laden time during the overthrow of Musaddiq in 1953. Nishāt has also made several other installation movies. Her film, co-directed with Shujā Āzarī and entitled *Looking for Oum Kulthum* (2017), takes her to Egypt to uncover the life of the celebrated Egyptian singer.

In Conclusion: International Recognition and Reception of Iranian Women's Cinema

Today, many women filmmakers stand at the forefront of the women's rights movement, whether they live in Iran or abroad. Of particular, ironic, and recent note, three female actresses from Iran were present on the red carpet of the Cannes Film Festival in May 2022: Tarānah 'Alīdūsī starring in *Barādarān-i Laylā* (*Brothers of Leyla*, 2021), with a film from Iran; Zahrā ("Zar") Amīr Ibrāhīmī, starring in *'Ankabūt-i Muqaddas* (*Holy Spider*, 2021), with an Iranian film from Sweden; and Gulshīftah Farahānī, starring in a film from France. All three have had tenuous relationships with Iranian cinema, and all came to-

²⁶Roger Cohen. "An Iranian exile channels her trauma into film," *The New York Times*. October 22, 2022, retrieved 04/09/2024, <https://www.ny-times.com/2022/10/22/movies/zar-amir-ebrahimi-holy-spider.html>

²⁷Emma Graham Harrison. "Zar Amir Ebrahimi on fleeing Iran and her Cannes comeback: 'If you lose everything, it's easier to rise up,'" *The Guardian*. January 20, 2023, retrieved 04/09/2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/jan/20/zar-amir-ebrahimi-holy-spider-interview>

gether during the Cannes Film Festival in the spring of 2022. All three belong to the same generation and all three have been social activists in their own right. *Tarānah 'Alīdūstī* remains in Iran, while the other two are now making controversial movies as political activists.

Amīr Ibrāhīmī is of particular interest as she had to leave Iran due to the revelation of a sex tape showing her and her boyfriend in their most private moments in 2008. In her acceptance speech of the Best Actress Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2022, Amīr Ibrāhīmī alluded to the long ordeal she endured to get to where she now stood. She began her speech with words in Persian, and while she did not say much, she was understood by the Iranian audience as referring to her forced exile and the unjust cancellation that she endured almost a decade earlier.²⁶ On fleeing Iran and her Cannes comeback, Amīr Ibrāhīmī has said, "If you lose everything, it's easier to rise up."²⁷ In 2023, she also co-directed a film with an Israeli director in Georgia that has become very controversial. As examples such as this rare but poignant moment on the international red carpet show, the line between Iranian diasporic and domestic cinema is thin today and often overlapping. Diasporic cinema, however, ensures the allowance for wider female expression, given that women need not abide by rules and regulations imposed by the Iranian state. Many of the films produced by female directors in the diaspora delve into issues that would never gain approval inside the country which makes them even more important as stories which must be told.

In conclusion, women's cinema in Iran has grown tremendously despite the exceptional restrictions that women have faced for decades, whether on or off screen. Despite all that is set against them, women filmmakers have managed to create thought-provoking and powerful movies that have garnered international recognition and acclaim. And despite their confrontation with numerous challenges, women's cinema in Iran continues to flourish. Through the variegated tapestry of women's stories



both real and fictional, the body of Iranian women's cinema provides an important platform for women's voices and perspectives, demonstrating women's resilience, creativity, and a commitment to addressing pressing social issues. With the activism shown since September 2022 in relation to the Women, Life, Freedom movement, the contributions of women filmmakers remain crucial in shaping the future of Iranian cinema, and even Iran's history. Women filmmakers in Iran continue to deal with topics that their male counterparts may not be able to access, and thus often find themselves at the forefront of protest movements, culturally and politically.