Screening Love: The Forbidden in Rakhshan Banietemad's Narges (1992)

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May 21, 2025

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Before the narrative even begins, Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād's Nar-
gis (Nargess) of 1992 directly engages the theme of love. As
the film opens accompanied by the melodic score, a close-up
of a conventional bride and groom figurine appears, dancing.
As the credits roll, photo scraps materialize on the black-and-
white screen. These images are of the couple whose story we
will soon witness. As the credits continue, the camera zooms
out, allowing us to see the dancing figurine in its entirety, pro-
tected and covered by a glass dome. The transparent shield mo-
mentarily protects this imaginary couple from the realities of
the outside world. Here, Banī-iʿtimād uses symbolic imagery
in the opening of the film to comment on love, but as the plot
unfolds, these same images return to the screen with entirely
different meanings.

This figurine, and its later reappearances, thus becomes one
of the ways in which Nargis conveys a love story that is not
only unconventional but also culturally taboo. For example, the
plastic bride and groom figurine, at first sight, stands for the
image of love and stability, represented by marriage. However,
very quickly this facade is broken down. In a later scene, we
watch the character ʿĀdil (played by Abulfazl Pūrarab) sifting
through his bag of stolen goods, then taking out this same fig-
urine. Thus, the identical object that represents marriage in the
opening credits also foreshadows the tragic love story that is
about to unfold, yoked with issues of gender, class, and crime.
As the credits come to an end, the music stops, the screen turns

dark, and we watch ʿĀdil panting, running as he escapes from the police. Before the love story even fully begins, it is already interrupted by the harsh realities of its external environment, metaphorically shattering the glass shield the bride and groom have been momentarily protected by. This pre-opening scene is significant; it relies on conventional depictions of love that also push the boundaries of what is permissible in Iran. However, while the imagery and symbolism allude to a typical romance, the narrative could not be further from a normative depiction of romantic tropes.

Figure 1: The statue of the bride and groom that ʿĀdil steals at the beginning of the film. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:03:49)

Instead, Banī-iʿtimād's Nargis tells a complex and heart-wrenching love story between three people. The film revolves around the triangular relationship between the petty-thief ʿĀdil, his older ex-lover and partner in crime Āfāq (played by Farimāh Farjāmī), and the innocent, younger woman Nargis (played by ʿĀtifah Razavī), who ʿĀdil falls in love with. Upon meeting Nargis, ʿĀdil decides to put aside his bad habits and to ask Nargis for her hand in marriage. In order to do so, however, he needs the support of his mother who, as it turns out, has shunned him. In fear of losing him forever, Āfāq decides to act the part of ʿĀdil's mother, playing the role of the maternal fig-

[1] I have previously written on Banī-iʿtimād's cinema through the lens of resistance. For instance, see: Zahra Khosroshahi, "The Artistic and Political Implications of the Meta-Cinematic in Rakhshan Banietemad's Films," in ReFocus: The Films of Rakhshan Banietemad, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 81-94.; Zahra Khosroshahi, "Tracing the Tooba Character in Rakhshan Banietemad's Cinema," in Cinema Iranica, ed. Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi (Toronto: University of Toronto, 2024), https://cinema.iranicaonline.org/article/through-time-and-space-tracing-the-tooba-character-in-rakhshan-banietemads-cinema/; and Zahra Khosroshahi, "Rethinking the Borders of Feminism: The Representation of Women in Rakhshan Banietemad's films," Feminist Media Studies, 20, no. 2 (2020): 294-296.

ure, eventually staged in front of Nargis and her family, to help secure the marriage. Āfāq's help comes with a lifetime promise, however: ʿĀdil can never leave her. Nargis, unaware of ʿĀdil's complicated past, agrees to marry him.

Nargis marks Banī-iʿtimād's first explicit engagement with the subject of love and female desire; a trend that continues to shape her later works. In this vein, Banī-iʿtimād brings to the screen unconventional love stories, but ones that still rely on the conventions of cinematic language. Films such as Nargis conform to the visualization and conventions of love through close-ups, score, lighting, and gaze to create intimacy, enabling Banī-iʿtimād to boldly envisage love on the screen and firmly push against the boundaries of what is permissible in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. In doing so, the complicated love stories we watch throughout Banī-iʿtimād's cinematic creations reflect their real-life cultural and political contexts. In relaying them, Banī-iʿtimād confronts the restrictions of censorship and dares to bring love onto our screens, but also shows us how these stories are always intertwined with issues of gender and class. To fully grasp the historical significance of Banī-iʿtimād's Nargis, I begin by first contextualizing the film. From there, I open up a discussion for us to think about love more generally across Iranian art and cinema, reflecting on the restrictions imposed by state censorship in order to respond to the question: how do we screen love in a nation that forbids it? Finally, we return to Nargis, closely analysing the ways in which Banī-iʿtimād engages with a forbidden love story, the film's influence on her later works, and how such works dare to hope and dare to love.[1]

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Figure 2: Āfāq is sitting in front of ʿĀdil in a restaurant when their conversation escalates into an argument. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:18:18)

Contextualizing Banī-iʿtimād's Nargis of 1992

When we speak of Nargis we speak of Iran's cinema in 1992, a time when any depiction of love was seen as highly controversial. About Nargis, Asal Bagheri posits that it is "the first film after the Revolution that is based on a social taboo."[2] The post-revolutionary ideals that defined the country's cinema were still fully intact and very much enforced at this time, producing a cinema that had to abide by Islamic laws and distance itself from any form of "Westernization." Many Iranian film scholars have also commented on the significance of Banī-iʿtimād's Nargis in cementing her reputation as a filmmaker in Iran. Winning the Best Director for Nargis in 1991 at the 10th Fajr International Film Festival, Banī-iʿtimād became the first woman to "garner the award for a feature film."[3] "This recognition," Hamid Naficy adds, "corroborated her status not as a woman filmmaker but as a top Iranian filmmaker."[4] In her discussion of the reception of Nargis, Shiva Rahbaran regards the film as representing "the vanguard of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema."[5] Similarly, Hamid Reza Sadr considers the film "daring," and "one of the first films after the revolution to focus on sexual relationships."[6]

[2] Asal Bagheri, "The Blue-veiled: A Semiological Analysis of a Social Love Story," in ReFocus; The Films of Rakhshan Banietemad, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh University Press: 2021), 142.

[3] Hamid Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema: Vol. 4; The Globalizing Era, 1984-2010 (Duke University Press: 2012), 159.

[4] Naficy. A Social History of Iranian Cinema, 159.

[5] Shiva Rahbaran, Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Film-Makers Since the Islamic Revolution (I. B. Tauris, 2016), 1.

[6] Hamid Reza Sadr, Iranian Cinema: A Political History (I. B. Tauris, 2006), 259.

[7]Maryam Ghorbankarimi, A Colourful Presence: The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema. (Cambridge Scholars Publishing: 2015), 67.

[8]Ghorbankarimi, A Colourful Presence, 67-68.

[9]Bagheri, "The Blue-veiled: A Semiological Analysis of a Social Love Story," 144.

The significance of Nargis rests on a number of reasons, flagging it as a hallmark within women's post-revolutionary filmmaking. Nargis introduced Banī-iʿtimād as one of Iran's most prominent filmmakers, both nationally and internationally. Most importantly, however, is the way in which Nargis shifted Banī-iʿtimād's storytelling and filmmaking. As Maryam Ghorbankarimi argues, the film is the "turning point in [Banī-iʿtimād's] career."[7] Ghorbankarimi continues, arguing that "the unifying use of cinematic language and the thematic connections between all her films since Nargess define her as an auteur-director."[8] In contrast to Nargis, her earlier satirical narrative films Off Limits (Khārij az mahdūdah, 1987), Yellow Canary (Zard-i qanārī, 1988), and Foreign Currency (Pūl-i khārijī, 1989), however bold in addressing social issues, do not rely on women as key agents of their narratives. Banī-iʿtimād's reputation as a filmmaker shifted after 1992 when she began to address women's issues directly and center their stories within her films. Also, as Bagheri notes, Banī-iʿtimād's "evolution as a social realist director" begins with Nargis, but what is significant is the way in which these stories concerning women are combined with a "romantic style," using love as their anchor to explore intersections of contemporary Iranian society.[9]

Figure 3: Āfāq is undoing a knitted dress while listening to ʿĀdil's heartache. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (01:18:06)

In addition to centralizing women in her films, Banī-iʿtimād began to play with the depiction of sexual love and desire on the Iranian screen, themes regarded as forbidden and taboo in the country's cinema. Due to such taboos and censorship, love outside of marriage is often difficult to visualize or even speak about in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, especially in its earlier years. Equally, the portrayal of women as sexual beings with their own desires was and remains unfavourable. What stands out in Nargis is its delicate negotiation with censorship codes in a way that dares to depict romantic and sexual love between its characters. As Hamid Dabashi notes, Banī-iʿtimād's "semiotic sense of names, shapes, objects, and colors assumes a mythical proportion when it comes to the point of visually insinuating moments of intimacy between a man and a woman as permitted on an Islamic screen."[10] Cinematic language, along with the symbolic motifs Banī-iʿtimād employs in her films, become both the driver of her plot and the tools that enable her to resist censorship and tell her story.

Thus, by examining the depiction of the film's female characters, along with the treatment of love and desire, this article considers how Nargis visualizes and negotiates the taboo through cinematic elements and narrative. Ultimately, this article demonstrates how the film tells a love story that is unconventional, challenging many of our expectations and perceptions of what love is in an Islamic and Iranian post-revolutionary society. Importantly, Nargis does this by bringing to the fore central female characters that are dynamic and complex, pulling them from the margins of society to the heart of the narrative. It also achieves this through expert use of visual symbolism.

Indeed, the symbolism that has come to define second wave Iranian cinema has given the nation its own visual brand. Often, ambiguity and metaphor are also employed to both challenge and bypass state censorship. As Negar Mottahedeh argues, on the international stage, Iranian cinema is known for its artistic expression that often blurs the lines and boundaries of fiction

[10]Hamid Dabashi, "Body-less Faces: Mutilating Modernity and Abstracting Women in an 'Islamic Cinema,'" Visual Anthropology 10, nos. 2-4 (1998): 371.

[11]Negar Mottahedeh, Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema (Duke University Press, 2009), 15.

[12]Rahbaran, Iranian Cinema Uncensored,133-4 (the emphasis is original).

[13]Rahbaran, Iranian Cinema Uncensored, 134.

and non-fiction.[11] These symbolic and metaphoric references, along with the poetic nature of Iranian cinema, have become a trademark of the nation's cinema post-1979. This stylistic branding, I argue, is far more than an artistic choice. It is out of necessity—a language that Iranian filmmakers often resort to as a way to cope with censorship. But, as I will discuss later, it is even more than that.

While Iranian cinema faces censorship laws that limit its content so that it abides by the guidelines of the Islamic Republic, the codes and lines are not always as clear as they may seem. Reflecting on the censorship laws in Iran, Banī-iʿtimād has remarked: "The Ershad [Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance] never allows any freedom to anyone. We had to fight for our freedom. I push the boundaries; they wouldn't give me freedom as a gift – neither to me nor to any other artist."[12] She continues, "I want to point out that there are discrepancies – gaps – between the official line of the Ershad and the reality of film-making in Iran. It is within these gaps that we search for our freedom and try to gain it bit by bit."[13] It is between these inconsistencies and gaps that filmmakers seek a path, to push against the boundaries of what is permissible.

Figure 4: Āfāq holds ʿĀdil's shirt tightly after he tells her he plans to get married and leave the house. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:26:19)

The image of the Iranian woman on screen—in and outside of the country—has changed immensely. As well, the ways in which love and intimacy show up on the screen, despite continued control and censorship, have evolved. Writing on intimacy in Iranian cinema, Michelle Langford states that it is "thanks to filmmakers like Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, who are willing to push the representation of intimacy to the very limits of censorship, [that] viewers can finally experience the much-anticipated and long-withheld embrace of a husband and wife."[14] Langford here refers to the embrace of Nubar (played by Fātimah Muʿtamid-Āryā) and Rizā (played by Farhād Aslānī) from Banī-iʿtimād's latest feature, Tales (Qissahā, 2014)—an important film in this discussion which I address later. By contextualizing Iranian cinema and reading it within its own time, we can better understand the cinematic shifts ignited by filmmakers such as Banī-iʿtimād. In a cinema with laws against a close-up of a woman, Nargis became a trailblazer. What is special about films like Nargis is the way in which they have the potential to shift the trajectory of films about women in Iran, bringing to our screens in 1992 depictions of women whose stories, voices, and images had, until that time, been marginalized and ignored.

Though social issues have been a consistent interest of Banī-iʿtimād throughout her entire career, the turn to more controversial issues around gender and sexuality and their intersection with class politics became much more prominent and bolder in her works since Nargis. We can observe this, for instance, in how the love story that Banī-iʿtimād tells in Nargis subverts ideas of femininity and masculinity through the intersections of age, power, crime, and class. The moments of romance peppered throughout the film certainly offer cultural critique, but while they engage with the harsh realities of Iranian society, they still manage, even if short-lived, to convey a love story in a cinema that works hard to forbid them. Regarding this conversation about love on the post-revolutionary screen, it is worthwhile to turn briefly to its depiction in Iranian art and cinema more broadly.

[13]Rahbaran, Iranian Cinema Uncensored, 134.

[14]Michelle Langford, "Tales and the Cinematic Divan of Rakhshan Banietemad," In Re-Focus the Films of Rakhshan Banietemad, ed. Maryam Ghorbankarimi (Edinburgh University Press: 2021), 72.

[15]Shahla Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," Iranian Studies, 42, no. 1, (2009): 114.

[16]Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," 114.

[17]Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," 114.

Figure 5: Āfāq recalls the joyful moments with ʿĀdil. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:38:04)

Depicting Love and Desire in Iranian Cinema

While Persian literature has traditionally dealt with themes of love and desire, under the current Iranian regime there are strict Islamic guidelines and laws to follow, both in everyday circumstances and, invariably, in film. For example, "unrelated men and women are forbidden to touch one another."[15] In addition, under Islamic law in Iran women must be veiled in all public spaces. Given this state of affairs, Shahla Haeri poses an important question: "how, then, can one make movies based on love and carnal desire without having the lovers even touch each other's hand?"[16] In the face of these restrictions, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has had to negotiate with censorship codes and find creative ways to represent love and desire. At the same time, as Haeri argues: "although the Islamic legal discourse has reasserted itself after the revolution of 1979 and appears to have become dominant, in fact the 'erotic' discourse that is ever so subtly embedded in Persian poetry and popular culture is alive and possibly thriving."[17] She further describes the historical tension between the "legal discourse that restricts gender relations" and the "erotic discourse that subverts the very same regulations," vividly demonstrating the long tenure

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of these competing and conflicting discourses and their ongoing influence.[18]

Reflecting on the role of women in Persian literary practice specifically, Farzaneh Milani asks: "what are the ways in which gender and space intersect in the Iranian literary arena?"[19] She continues by asking: "if seclusion is an attempt to erase women from the public scene, how, then, have authors of numerous Iranian romances reconciled narrative imperatives with cultural proprieties and constructed feminine voices and images in a sex-segregated society?"[20] Milani's questions are relevant beyond literature and equally applicable to the nation's post-revolutionary cinema, especially as women gain prominence both behind and in front of the camera.

In her work on literature, Milani further describes the models of virtue and femininity placed upon women; traditionally, a virtuous woman was one who "covered her body, guarded her honor, controlled her desires, measured her words."[21] Indeed, these "codes of ideal femininity, masculinity, and honor [that] demanded the exclusion of women from the public sphere" are reminiscent of the same ones witnessed in the early years of the Islamic Revolution when women were systematically pushed out of sight.[22] It is through the inclusion of characters such as Āfāq, who is nowhere close to the ideal image of a woman of honour and virtue, that cinema begins to not only shift the representation of femininity and womanhood, but also begins to question these ideals entirely. Relatedly, Milani speaks of a "deep-seated desire to maintain strong sexual boundaries" and "to restrict women's mobility" in literature in order to restore social order.[23] If this is true in literary practices, then I would argue that it is enforced even more vigorously in cinema because of its visual nature.

How, then, do filmmakers engage with and visualize love and desire? What Ziba Mir-Hosseini refers to as the "art of ambiguity" in Persian poetry offers a good starting point for us to

[18]Haeri, "Sacred Canopy: Love and Sex under the Veil," 114-115.

[19]Farzaneh Milani, "Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature," Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies, 8, no. 14, (1999): 107.

[20]Milani, "Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature," 107.

[21]Milani, "Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature," 107.

[22]Milani, "Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature," 107.

[23]Milani, "Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature," 123.

[24]Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema," Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East, 27, no. 3, (2007): 694.

[25]Michelle Langford, Allegory in Iranian Cinema: The Aesthetics of Poetry and Resistance (Bloomsbury: 2016), 2.

consider. It is worth quoting her at length:

Love has always been the main theme in Persian poetry, where it is seldom clear whether the writer is talking about divine or earthly love, or (given the absence of grammatical gender in Persian) whether the "beloved" is male or female. Both the Persian language and the poetic form have allowed writers to maintain and even work with these ambiguities. The art of ambiguity (iham), perfected in the work of classical poets such as Hafez, has spoken to generations of Iranians, including the present one.[24]

The art of ambiguity that Mir-Hosseini describes here is prevalent in other art forms, but most especially in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. In this cinema, the goal of censorship is to ensure that films stay as far away as possible from "Westernization," to promote Islamic values, to maintain social and political order, and to limit representations of love and desire. In the face of these many restrictions, particularly concerning the erotic, desire, and touch between lovers, one of the most useful arts of ambiguity for Iranian film-makers is allegory.

The use of allegory, through metaphors, double-entendres, symbolism, and ambiguity, has always been a part of Persian literary practices and language. In many ways, the ambiguous cinema of post-revolutionary Iran is rooted in, or at least greatly influenced by, these literary traditions. As many scholars of Iranian cinema have acknowledged, much of the nation's cinematic visual aesthetic has also been significantly shaped by the Revolution of 1979. Thus, while iconic images and stories populating our screens are certainly influenced by poetic and linguistic traditions, censorship has necessitated a cinema that is implicit, coded, and ambiguous. Yet, as Langford reminds us, "it is important to recognize that for many Iranian film-makers, allegory is much more than a foil against haphazardly applied censorship rules, or an attempt to hide meaning under a veil of secrecy."[25] That is, allegory is not only a means of avoiding

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the censor, but also a rich mode of cinematic expression itself. Thus, Langford acknowledges how, on the one hand, because of "its capacity to say one thing while meaning another,"[26] allegory has "proven to be a powerful way of evading state censorship and expressing forbidden topics or issues."[27] While on the other hand, Langford's central argument, essential to our reading of Banī-iʻtimād, highlights the relationship between the image and the audience: "allegorical aesthetics cues or prompts viewers to look for hidden meaning or to experience a film poetically beyond the literal level of story."[28] That is, the images on the screen invite the audience to actively engage with the cinematic text. This is especially relevant when we consider Banī-iʻtimād's body of work: an oeuvre covering over four decades that is also reliant on the stories of recurring characters that tap into our cultural memory (e.g., the character Sara who appears in both Mainline [Khūn-bāzī, 2006] and Tales [2014]).

Figure 6: Nargis meets ʻĀdil outside the house. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʻtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:19:29)

How then, given this ambiguous environment, do we read Banī-iʻtimād's cinema? What interests me most about the filmmaker's works is their refusal to fit neatly into any category. Devoted to making social films, Banī-iʻtimād's expansive body of work explores a range of forms, oscillating between realist,

[26]Langford, Allegory in Iranian Cinema, 2.

[27]Langford, Allegory in Iranian Cinema, 2.

[28]Langford, Allegory in Iranian Cinema, 1.

[29]Stephen Weinberger, "Joe Breen, The Ayatollah Khomeni, and Film Censorship," Quarterly Review of Film and Video 26, no. 3, (2009): 211.

[30]Weinberger, "Joe Breen, The Ayatollah Khomeni, and Film Censorship," 211.

[31]Weinberger, "Joe Breen, The Ayatollah Khomeni, and Film Censorship," 211.

[32]Sadr, Iranian Cinema, 259-260.

documentary-style filmmaking to melodrama. Whether set in metropolitan Tehran or the rural landscapes of Gīlān, the director remains dedicated to those on the margins. In his discussion of Iranian cinema, Stephen Weinberger compares two types of films. The first he refers to as "gentle heartwarming films" that are not concerned with political or cultural issues, "sitting comfortably within the confines of censorship."[29] Many of these films include the most celebrated and acclaimed of Iran's cinema, fitting neatly into the allegorical and ambiguous brand the nation's cinema has established. Then, there is "the other type of film," those Weinberger refers to as a "voice of protest."[30] Unlike their heartwarming cousins, these films stretch "the censorship system to its limits," specifically naming "Banī-iʿtimād as the most prominent director of such films."[31] Like any other Iranian film-maker, Banī-iʿtimād utilizes cinematic codes and visuals to bypass censorship, but her commitment to social issues is never masked behind an apolitical cinema. Indeed, characters like Āfāq, Nargis, and Tūbā (played by Gulāb Ādīnah in Under the Skin of the City (Zīr-i pūst-i shahr, 2001), through the combination of their complexities, social status, and circumstances, offer very loud and clear voices of protest. With these elements of ambiguity, allegory, and vocal protest in mind, I now turn back to Nargis in order to examine closely the ways in which intimacy, love, and desire are foregrounded on the post-revolutionary screen as a daring provocation that confronts Iran's social issues.

Negotiating Forbidden Love on Banī-iʿtimād's Screen

Banī-iʿtimād's Nargis marks a pivotal moment in the filmmaker's career, setting the foundation for her exploration of the subject of love in her later films. As Sadr argues, Nargis plays "with another Iranian taboo: sex between an older woman and a younger man."[32] As it will be the focus of this section, the film introduces to Iranian cinema not only a love triangle narrative, but also depicts love and intimacy in a way that, for its time, was considered truly bold and daring. In Nargis, Banī-iʿtimād

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makes space for love on the post-revolutionary screen—no easy task!—and, more importantly, relies on forbidden love to explore contemporary Iranian society and the intersections of gender and class.

While the film undoubtedly plays with the taboo of sex between an older woman and a younger male lover, this love affair is further complicated through the Nargis character who enters their dynamic. In relaying this love story, Banī-iʿtimād is also invested in complicating the role of motherhood, a trend we continue to see in her later films. Āfāq, the older experienced lover (in both crime and sex), must now perform the maternal role, but only in order to retain her (sexual) hold on ʿĀdil. One of the most poignant moments in establishing this polygamous exchange is the film's Khāstigārī scene (i.e., the initial step in a traditional courtship process). Having agreed to perform the role of ʿĀdil's mother, Āfāq joins him to ask for Nargis' hand in marriage. While this ensures an eternal bond between them, it also displays Āfāq's loyalty to ʿĀdil.

Figure 7: Āfāq, in the role of ʿĀdil's mother, on his proposal day. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:31:43)

First, this scene establishes the polarization of its two women characters, Āfāq and Nargis, seeming to operate within the

[33] Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema," in The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity, ed. Richard Tapper (I.B. Tauris: 2002), 215-26.

[34] Nargis, 00:29:10-00:29:14 (the translation is mine).

[35] Nargis, 00:29:16-00:29:17 (the translation is mine).

paradigm of what Shahla Lahiji terms chaste-and-unchaste representations.[33] An added layer to this initial representation of Nargis is her name: Nargis refers to a flower, furthering her characterization as chaste and virginal. The visual construction of the two women further heightens the scene. Nargis, as is customary of the bride-to-be, enters the small and humble sitting room carrying tea on a tray. The camera captures her as she pauses by the door, quietly greeting her guests. The camera then cuts to Āfāq who looks up, not responding. Nargis offers tea, first to Āfāq and then to ʿĀdil. Here for the first time the three appear in the same cinematic frame, visually depicting their complex triangular relationship. Banī-iʿtimād further emphasizes their differences through light and dark colours to mark the two women's clothing.

Figure 8: Nargis serves tea on her proposal day. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj(00:30:40)

Once Nargis is seated, the conversation begins. Nargis' mother asks Āfāq, "Ma'am, what does your son do?"[34] The camera then shifts to Āfāq as she looks up, asking in a distraught tone, "My son?"[35] In this moment, the film uses the information that is available to the audience to create pathos for Āfāq. While to Nargis and her family, Āfāq is ʿĀdil's mother, those watching are fully aware of their romantic—and criminal—intertwine-

ment. To further comment on the emotional disturbance experienced by Āfāq, Banī-iʿtimād uses her camera to fully isolate the character for a brief moment and to then juxtapose her facial expression with the celebration of the wedding. Once the agreement has been reached, the sound of drums and wedding music can be heard, yet the camera remains focused on Āfāq, dressed in black as if in mourning. The scene then cuts to the next shot where we see the drums and Nargis dressed in white as a bride. Up to this moment, we have only been introduced to Nargis and Āfāq in separate scenes. Their first encounter with one another is Āfāq's performance of motherhood, and through this, Banī-iʿtimād complicates their already complex polygamous relationship. The two women are contrasted through Banī-iʿtimād's camera in this scene, yet, through their class status, they are brought under the same roof (and within the same marriage).

Figure 9: Āfāq, wearing a black dress, stands next to Nargis, who is dressed as the bride in white. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:33:50)

Āfāq's performance of motherhood is done out of necessity, strategically functioning to ensure continuity in her relationship with ʿĀdil. But it is also worth reading this particular example in Nargis within Banī-iʿtimād's broader representation of mothers. The director's corpus offers nuanced depictions of motherhood in films such as Blue Veiled (Rūsarī-i ābī, 1995), The

May Lady (Bānū-yi Urdībihisht, 1999), Under the Skin of the City (2001), Mainline (2006), and Tales. While motherhood is not the central theme of Nargis, the way in which Āfāq navigates the role foreshadows the director's later works. Āfāq's roleplaying here facilitates the marriage and brings Nargis into their dynamic, as yet unaware of their illicit backgrounds. It is only after ʿĀdil's first arrest since his marriage with Nargis that she finds out about his criminal past. Returning home from the prison, Nargis finds Āfāq waiting by the door. By this point, ʿĀdil has warned Nargis to stay away from Āfāq which adds to the suspense of this scene. Our view cuts to Nargis, on the floor pleading and crying, asking Āfāq why she never disclosed the truth about her "son" and his life of crime. In response, Āfāq, turning to face Nargis says: "This is just the beginning. When I was your age, I had a train track of stories behind me."[36]

Figure 10: Nargis cries and blames Āfāq for not revealing ʿĀdil's criminal past. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:58:05)

The next scene is of the two women in Nargis' small bedroom: Āfāq lying down on the mattress, and Nargis sitting next to her, the two engaged in conversation. Up until this moment, the film has drawn on vivid distinctions between the two characters. In this key scene, however, Banī-iʿtimād's cinematic frame creates a space that uses class and gender politics to bring together Nar-

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gis and Āfāq in the intimate setting of the bedroom. Here, along with Nargis, we listen to Āfāq relay her past. Banī-iʿtimād's Nargis relies on pathos as a strong tool to convey an emotional response, and despite largely framing Āfāq as a societal outcast, offers her meaningful screen time in this moment to complicate our feelings about her. Through their increasing homosocial bond, the scene builds an important intimacy between the two women, the narrative and the camera bringing Nargis and Āfāq under the same roof and within the same cinematic frame. However, there is a sexual undertone at play here, too. Āfāq, who has been playing the maternal role of ʿĀdil's "mother," has now entered the bedroom of the couple. Significantly, it is the homosocial nature of the scene shared between the two women that enables Banī-iʿtimād to film this. ʿĀdil's absence allows the director to escape any hassle from the authorities. Nonetheless, despite his physical absence, it is not lost for the viewers that the only point of connection between the two women is ʿĀdil: a man both women have had sex with. Their sharing of this intimate (and sexualized) space tightens the triangular quality and blurs the lines of their polygamous relationship—and further descends into the realm of the "forbidden."

Figure 11: Āfāq and Nargis are talking in Nargis's bedroom, and Āfāq tells her about her past. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (01:00:07)

[37]Naficy, A Social History of Iranian Cinema, 158.

[38]Kay Armatage and Zahra Khosroshahi, "An Interview with Rakhshan Banietemad," Feminist Media Histories 3, no. 1 (2017): 144.

As I have already mentioned, despite censorship and bans by authorities, expressions of sexual and romantic interest somehow continue to find themselves on the Iranian screen. Banī-iʿtimād's cinema takes this a step further, however, by foregrounding characters from the margins of Iranian society. In this way, her love stories also function as an essential gateway into gender and class politics by subverting binaries and depictions of good vs. bad and chaste vs. unchaste. Instead, Banī-iʿtimād's screen brings forth daring characters that step outside of their prescribed roles. As Naficy points out: "casting a woman as an expert thief was something new, pushing casting boundaries."[37] As previously discussed, Banī-iʿtimād not only goes against casting conventions but, more importantly, meaningfully includes marginalized characters such as Āfāq as central to her stories. In one of the film's most economical scenes, we watch Āfāq as she applies lipstick upon ʿĀdil's visit. The guidelines of censorship (especially at that time) prohibit the use of make-up and close-ups, adding to the scene's importance. Here, Āfāq performs what is prohibited, aligning her with her cinematic role. Her application of lipstick also functions as a reclamation of her sexuality (and her desire for ʿĀdil). But the scene also increases our sympathy for the older, criminal woman. Banī-iʿtimād speaks to the construction of this scene and its significance:

> Many factors are involved in creating a scene in a film: script, performance, lighting, sound, set design, and so on. Directing is about bringing all of these together to help create that moment the filmmaker is after. In my opinion, one of the most important elements of this scene was its location. A hidden upstairs room that faces the alley, with a wide mat hung from the large window and light peeking through the window—this helped convey Afagh's lonely and sad life, and her corrupt relationship with the outside world.[38]

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Figure 12: Āfāq looks at ʿĀdil through bamboo shades. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (01:14:17)

In fact, as Banī-iʿtimād herself describes, there is a lot happening in this sequence. The mise-en-scène makes visible not only Āfāq's loneliness but also her class status, the tight space of the room visually marking her as an outcast. These cinematic conventions create a sense of closeness and heightened sympathy towards Āfāq. But there is also an element of agency here. Rahbaran describes Nargis as a "film that not only deals with woman's sexuality and lust but goes a step further and represents the male protagonist as the sex object of that woman," reversing more traditional gender roles.[39] That is, this scene dares to acknowledge Āfāq's desire to be desired. While the filmmaker pushes censorship codes by having her character perform the forbidden (through the application of lipstick), Āfāq herself, though heartbroken, reaches for her lipstick, claiming her agency and sexuality.

With Nargis, Banī-iʿtimād obviously challenges traditional gender roles, but this complex love affair also distorts the conventions of love and romance. Importantly, the film does this in such a way that reminds us of the fragility of the polygamous marriage further complicated by class politics. As previously noted, the film's opening sequence and credits momentarily in-

dulge in the conventions of love, leading with images and a score that convey the visual and sonic codes of romance. On the screen, as the credits roll, the figurine of the bride and groom dancing to the music thus become metonymical for love. While the figurine seems at first to be an after-thought, it appears again later in the film. In fact, as the love story ensues, the audience is confronted with a subplot that complicates the initial setup entirely. Even though the figurine in the opening of the film clearly alludes to the performance of love and marriage, as the plot unfolds we are confronted with a love story that moves far away from the clichéd depictions of romance. Instead, Banī-iʿtimād delves deeply into the margins of Iranian society, complicated with issues of class, inequality, crime, and gender politics.

Figure 13: ʿĀdil went to Āfāq to discuss his plan to steal from the house. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (01:14:15)

Immediately following the credits, Āfāq and ʿĀdil appear on screen, running from the police in the dark. As quickly as they race to avoid capture, the curated images of love are quickly interrupted and discarded by the reality of the characters' lives on the streets. They run, in fact, with a stolen bag, one that carries in it the same figurine from the opening credits. This visual symbol of love is now connected with theft. But there is more to it—this figurine, protected by its glass shield, becomes the

ultimate image of love that ʿĀdil aspires to. In a later scene, ʿĀdil, not simply a thief but now also a man in love, places the figurine next to his bed, longing for Nargis, the young woman he had met earlier. Complicating its symbolic power a third time, Banī-iʿtimād returns us again to this figurine, going even further to subvert the meaning of the original motif she sets up in the film's opening. For when ʿĀdil goes to price the stolen items, he is told that the figurine is "worthless." The very image of love here is stripped of its value.

Banī-iʿtimād also employs other images of love to convey emotional intimacy in Nargis. In a country governed by strict censorship laws with tight regulations that forbid women and men from touching, visual codes are key to successfully relaying a love story. Relatedly, a particularly significant moment in the film occurs during ʿĀdil and Nargis' wedding night. In her pursuit of retaining ʿĀdil's love and in accordance with her performance as his mother, Āfāq lends her apartment to the newlyweds. As ʿĀdil and Nargis enter the building, the sounds of wedding bells and drums fill the screen. Āfāq runs up the stairs to hide, watching from above as the couple walk into the flat together. Guided by Āfāq's gaze, the camera lands on the two pairs of shoes left outside by the bride and groom. The shoes, black and white and symbolic of the conventions of marriage, along with the closed door make everything clear. While the censorship codes will never allow us to see what happens behind closed doors, the filmmaker leaves no doubt in our minds. Not only does Banī-iʿtimād's camera lead us to imagine what happens behind the shut, matrimonial doors, but she also exploits this scene to delve deeper into the story. As Āfāq sits on the stairs in tears with a broken heart, the audience is transported via flashback to witness how the love story of Āfāq and ʿĀdil began.

[40]Weinberger, "Joe Breen, The Ayatollah Khomeni, and Film Censorship," 211-212.

Figure 14: Bride's and groom's shoes at the entrance of Āfāq's house. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:38:09)

Weinberger calls Nargis both a display of "social criticism and the first post-revolutionary film that tells a love story."[40] Given that Banī-iʿtimād's investment in social films has long been acknowledged by film critics and scholars, it is perhaps unsurprising but no less extraordinary how love is used as a powerful theme through which the director engages with and explores the nuances of her society and the barriers that exist for those on the margins. While Nargis decidedly paves this path, Banī-iʿtimād's later films such as Blue Veiled, The May Lady, and Tales are additional and excellent examples of films that dare to question censorship codes and that, despite those restrictions, make space for love and intimacy on the Iranian screen.

Throughout her career, Banī-iʿtimād has found various, creative means to negotiate the red lines of censorship. As the rules prohibit any contact between men and women, many filmmakers rely on various mediators (e.g., other actors, props, interior monologues, etc.) to bypass the threat of censorship. We see this in Banī-iʿtimād's Blue Veiled when Sanubar (played by Bārān Kawsarī), Nubar's youngest sibling, is deployed as one such mediator, sitting between the two lovers. In the scene, Sanubar is used as a means to bring the couple closer, functioning

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as a physical connector between them which creates a much more intimate atmosphere. The same technique is used rather brilliantly in the final scene of Nargis, this time exploiting a prop rather than a person. Standing in the busy and hostile streets of Tehran, Āfāq and ʿĀdil wrestle over a bag of stolen money. As Naficy states, Banī-iʿtimād "employs a mediating object to avoid male-female touching."[41] The luggage between the couple becomes a tool to prohibit any contact or touching between them, performing a delicate "political balancing act."[42] Although the bag is certainly deployed as an important mediating tool to bypass censorship, like most symbolic gestures employed by the filmmaker, this too stands as a comment on societal issues. The struggled over bag between Āfāq and ʿĀdil contains stolen money—literally and figuratively that which connects and distances the couple, commenting further on the reality of corruption and the nature of their relationship.

Figure 15: A fight between Nargis and ʿĀdil over a bag of money. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (01:29:50)

In her film, The May Lady, Banī-iʿtimād turns to poetry as a mediating tool to explore how Furūgh (played by Mīnū Farshchī), a divorced single mother, navigates love, work, and motherhood. Specifically, through expert use of poetry and voiceover, Banī-iʿtimād depicts the love between Furūgh and

[43]Dabashi, "Body-less Faces: Mutilating Modernity and Abstracting Women in an 'Islamic Cinema,'" 371.

her lover. In fact, we never meet the male lover and only become acquainted with him through his recitations of poetry and his protestations of love for Furūgh. Poetry functions in this film as the language of love, allowing the filmmaker to bypass censorship while also granting us access to Furūgh's innermost thoughts. An added layer to Banī-iʿtimād's negotiation with censorship is that Furūgh, too, must placate her son. Not only does censorship make it challenging for filmmakers to screen love in Iran, but at the metatextual level, The May Lady is also invested in questioning the very parameters of love itself. Can Furūgh, a filmmaker within the film, divorced and a mother, choose to love? The absence of the male lover, replaced by poetry, functions as a strategic move by Banī-iʿtimād. Not only is poetry a mediating object in the film, but it is also a force which centres Furūgh. Indeed, by the end of the film, Furūgh chooses love. Thus, The May Lady, similar to Nargis and Blue Veiled, utilizes love as a narrative trope, but one that moves beyond mere romance to unveil and dismantle ideas of gender and class in contemporary Iranian society.

As argued by Dabashi, "the sheer fact of a woman telling a love story on a wide and voluptuous screen in a land of veiled faces, concealed bodies, and denied sensualities, is perhaps the most significant part" of Banī-iʿtimād's cinema.[43] Indeed, the love scenes that Banī-iʿtimād depicts in her films, however compelling, are equally if not more so representative of the social conditions and external factors that define them. Again, Banī-iʿtimād often sustains moments in Nargis that beautifully visualize intimacy between her lovers, yet despite the parameters she must work within, the cinematic techniques she deploys are so compelling that, for a moment, we also forget about the external factors and the realities awaiting them. These scenes invite us to join the characters as they slide away, falling deep into their brief moments of tender love. Yet, as we witness in Nargis, these moments are quickly interrupted, visually and narratively, by the external elements that Banī-iʿtimād is so invested in exposing.

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Figure 16: Nargis, after hearing ʿĀdil's confession about his past and that Āfāq was his wife. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (01:04:23)

A significant example of this occurs, for instance, when ʿĀdil and Nargis begin to build their home only a few days after their marriage. As the couple clean, paint, and prepare their marital home, the scene is filled with music, dancing, and laughing, codifying and relaying their fresh love to the audience. However, the moment is soon interrupted as reality knocks on the door—achieved by Āfāq appearing literally out of nowhere. Āfāq has arrived, of course, to remind ʿĀdil of his promise and their agreement, telling him that she will keep his secret safe only if he visits her. Once again, Banī-iʿtimād exploits the conventions of love to swiftly expose its fragility and to further show how it is conditional. In this way, Banī-iʿtimād's cinema, while daring to affirm love on the screen, also utilizes romance to expose and relay the fragility of her characters' lives and to push ever further into and expose Iran's class politics. It is this daring—and hopeful—quality of Banī-iʿtimād's cinema, however, which is worth emphasizing.

Figure 17: Nargis painting the wall of their house with ʿĀdil. Nargis (1992), Rakhshān Banī-iʿtimād, accessed via https://www.aparat.com/v/x1625tj (00:41:40)

Conclusion: Daring to Hope and Daring to Love as Political Resistance

At the same time as her films deftly expose the vulnerable existence of her characters who live at the margins of Iranian society, Banī-iʿtimād's explorations of love sometimes function almost in reverse, acting instead as provocations for hope. While Nargis marks her initial forays into love, intimacy, and their complex reflections in a harsh world, it is in her more recent film, Tales, in which Banī-iʿtimād brings forth what I would argue to be one of the most tender—and perhaps powerful—love scenes in contemporary Iranian cinema.

In Tales, the unspoken emotions between Hāmid (played by Paymān Muʿādī) and Sara (played by Bārān Kawsarī) break out into an intense conversation that exposes the harsh realities of life in Tehran. More importantly, however, the scene functions as a moment of surrender for both Sara and Hāmid. The character Sara first appeared in Banī-iʿtimād's 2006 film Mainline in which she struggles with drug addiction. She returns years later in Tales having beat her drug habit and now working at a woman's shelter. Hāmid, among other part time jobs, offers taxi

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services for the shelter. In a key scene, the two are in Hāmid's car on their way back from the hospital, returning to the shelter with a young woman who has been hospitalized after a suicide attempt—the young woman operating as the mediator in the scene. Interrupting their bickering suddenly, Sara boldly asks Hāmid: "Do you like me ?"[44] Langford speaks to the poeticism of this moment in which, "on the surface, this scene appears to be quite conventionally driven by colloquial dialogue," while through its "alternation of sound and silence, pace, rhythm, repetition, framing, editing, and eye-line looks" Banī-iʿtimād opens the "sequence to a lyrical dimension that displaces narrative progression."[45]

The space of the car itself also further intensifies the confinement and intimacy of the scene. At the same time, the moving vehicle also eases the dialogue towards an explicit conversation about their interest in one another, revealing the anxieties of both Hāmid and Sara. And these revelations are no small matter. About Sara, we learn that, due to her past drug use, she is now HIV positive. About Hāmid, we learn that he has been kicked out of university for his political activism. The plight of both characters speaks to an audience that is, if not already sympathetic, then at least well-aware of the drug epidemic, and certainly one that has borne the consequences of political repression. Tales was, it should be noted, filmed under a pervasive cloud of economic deprivation, social instability, and political oppression in Iran. Thus, when Hāmid conveys his story, he does so in front of an audience who understands only too well the situation to which he speaks. Banī-iʿtimād's choice to include a love scene becomes even more powerful here, functioning as an act of resistance that dares to hope. Despite her fierce critique of social issues in Iran, the filmmaker makes room for love—a love that promises possibilities.

By surrendering their feelings toward one another, a moment of reckoning is created in the film, permitting Sara and Hāmid to accept themselves as deserving of love. Not only was Tales

[44]Tales, 01:19:24-01:19:25 (the translation is mine).

[45]Langford, "Tales and the Cinematic Divan of Rakhshan Banietemad," 76.

created under the harshest of conditions, it is, itself, a labour of love. This complex, intimate moment in a car in motion becomes a symbolic gesture then, not only of the realities of Iranian society—carrying tales of suicide, drug addiction, and political repression—but also a gesture which makes a space that can withstand these restrictions. A gesture which provides an opportunity for life that receives yet another chance to live—and new possibilities for love.

And the car keeps moving, carrying these stories of resilience into an unknown future. Here, Banī-iʿtimād's labour of love, captured through decades of filmmaking reaches new heights. Through films such as Tales and Nargis we watch how Banī-iʿtimād's films collectively represent an even greater reckoning: with censorship, with the harsh realities of life at the margins of Iranian society, and with the complex entanglements of gender, class, and politics displayed through the crucible of love. Banī-iʿtimād's works represent nothing less than a cinema that has for years withstood attempts to be erased and censored. A cinema that dares to love and be loved.