



Cinema Iranica
A Research Compendium

Meteoric Rise and Demise of Rūhangīz Sāmīnīzhād, Iran's First Actress

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Introduction

The narrative surrounding the emergence of the first Muslim Iranian actress unfolds as an intriguing yet somber tale. Rūhangīz Sāmīnīzhād (1916-1997) holds the distinction of being the inaugural Iranian actress, having starred in the pioneering Iranian talkie, *The Lor Girl* (*Dukhtar-i Lur*, 1933). However, the new star's cinematic role coincided with a trajectory of social marginalization. Following her involvement in a subsequent film, *Shirin and Farhad* (*Shīrīn va Farhād*), produced in 1934 in collaboration with the same company and cast, Sāmīnīzhād's presence within the industry became increasingly scarce.¹ Departing from her native city of Kerman in southeastern Iran, she embarked on a divergent lifestyle, one disconnected from the artistic and even public sphere. Yet, the lost star resurfaced years later in a documentary directed by Muhammad Tahāmīnīzhād in 1970 to illuminate the challenges and barriers confronted by Iranian women within the realm of cinema while leaving many contributing factors in the shade.²



Figure 1: Still image from *The Lor Girl* (1933) showing Sāmīnizhād in the role of Gulnār.

Looking at a variety of sources, ranging from interviews, documentaries, podcasts, and manuscripts, this research seeks to provide a comprehensive account of various narratives and theories around Sāmīnizhād's ephemeral stardom and premature exit from the profession. Moreover, the study aims to elucidate the mechanisms that transmute Sāmīnizhād's cinematic image into an unconventional emblem reflective of the societal landscape at a historical juncture. The outcome of her artistic career, characterized by an abrupt halt, appears incongruous within the context of Rizā Shah Pahlavī's modernizing regime (1925-1941). During this era, Sāmīnizhād could ostensibly have expected considerable support, as Rizā Shah's reforms actively advocated for the integration of women into public spheres, including universities, and enforced penalties against institutions obstructing women's participation, even in venues like cinemas. However, beneath the surface lies a nexus of familial, historical, social, institutional, and cultural factors that underpin the divergence between Sāmīnizhād's portrayal of the archetypal Iranian woman in films and her subsequent relegation to the fringes as a castaway actress. Sāmīnizhād serves as an emblematic instance within the larger canvas of ongoing challenges faced by early actors and actresses within the Iranian cinema industry—individuals who might experience a brilliant but abbreviated stint within the industry.³

¹Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 28-29.

²For a detailed account of Sāmīnizhād's emergence in early Iranian cinema, see Muhammad Tahāmīnizhād's documentary *Sīmā-yi Irān: Az mashrūtiyat tā Sipantā* [Iranian Cinema: From Constitutionalism to Sepanta] [Iran: National Iranian Radio and Television, 1970].

³This argument was inspired by the article "Pāyān-i ghamangīz-i avvalīn hunarpīshah-i zan-i Irānī (film-i Dukhtar-i Lur)" [The sad ending of the first Iranian actress (*The Lor Girl*)], IranianUK, July 22, 2008, accessed March 2025, iranianuk.com/20080722122400021/

⁴For more information about the sociopolitical context of the early Iranian cinema projected in *The Lor Girl*, see Hameeduddin Mahmood, "Ardešīr M. Irāni: Father of Indian Talkie," in *Seventy Years of Indian Cinema (1913-1983)*, ed. T. M. Ramachandran and S. Rukmini (Bombay: Cinema India-International, 1985), 61–70.

⁵Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 21.

On the Brink of a Meteoric Radiance

Rūhangīz Sāmīnizhād is recognized as the first Iranian actress of Islamic faith, gracing the screen in the inaugural Iranian talkie, *The Lor Girl*, released in 1933. Her entry into the film industry is attributed to her husband's affiliation with the Imperial Film Company, where he served as the taxicab driver for Ardīshīr Īrānī, the film's director and producer.⁴ Production of *The Lor Girl* began in April 1933, and the film was ready for public exhibition within seven months. Sāmīnizhād's selection for the leading role of Gulnār (a young woman from the Lur ethnic group who mainly reside in western and southwestern parts of Iran and speak their own unique dialect) is particularly noteworthy, especially considering her distinct Kīrmānī accent (a dialect practiced in Kerman province located in southeastern Iran). This choice reflects her unique status as the sole candidate willing to perform on camera. This film's success secured Sāmīnizhād another artistic opportunity, as she assumed a secondary role in *Shirin and Farhad*, a cinematic adaptation of the classical poem by Nizāmī Ganjavī, and one of the earliest to tailor the new art form to familiar themes in classical Persian poetry. This film was produced by the same film crew, Īrānī and Sīpantā.⁵



Figure 2: Still image from the first sequence of *The Lor Girl* with Gulnār (Sāmīnizhād) dancing in a teahouse.



Scholarly accounts, such as those of Peter Decherney and Blake Atwood, underscore the significance of *The Lor Girl* as a pioneering cinematic endeavor in the Middle East, casting a Muslim woman in a prominent role.⁶ Despite this early success, Sāmīnizhād's presence in the world of cinema waned swiftly. Her performances in *The Lor Girl* and *Shirin and Farhad* were characterized by traditional appearances, where she donned the rural attire and adhered to a headscarf. Paradoxically, these portrayals elicited social ostracism, leading to familial pressure, eventual rejection, and societal scorn upon her return from India (where *The Lor Girl* was shot) to her hometown Kerman. Although she was warmly welcomed in other modern cities, including Tehran, Isfahan, and Abadan, the trauma of being targeted by her own community remained with her.

⁶See Peter Decherney and Blake R. Atwood, eds. *Iranian Cinema in a Global Context: Policy, Politics, and Form* (London: Routledge, 2014), introduction.

Faced with these social challenges, Sāmīnizhād retreated from Kerman, subsequently leading a secluded life detached from art circles. It was only in Muhammad Tahāmīnizhād's 1970 documentary, which explored the history of early Iranian cinema, that she resurfaced and briefly recounted her story. In this concise interview, Sāmīnizhād's modest life and emotive presence in front of the camera highlight the intricate adversities that beset Iranian women's cinematic accomplishments.



Figure 3: Still image from Tahāmīnizhād's interview with Rūhangīz Sāmīnizhād in 1970.

In this documentary, Sāmīnizhād describes how she was harassed and threatened with death due to her appearance in *The Lor Girl* as a Muslim woman upon her return from India at the age of eighteen. She adds that even her family and siblings were scorned in the public sphere in Kerman because of her acting profession. Sāmīnizhād stresses that, in the decades following the release of her films, she faced constant pressure from a range of social forces, including the public press speculating about her life. She reveals that these pressures contributed to her eventual withdrawal from the film industry. Later in life, and even after her divorce from Habībballāh Damāvandī, she continued to use the name Siddīqah Damāvandī, possibly to distance herself from recognition tied to her cinematic career. The incongruence between Sāmīnizhād's roles as a traditional Iranian woman on screen and the social censure she encountered manifests the complexities of her predicament.

It is widely recognized that women's visibility in the public domain in Iran has been historically constrained by stringent norms and discriminatory practices. The new world of moving image, despite its transformative potential, was not exempt from such constraints. Nevertheless, there emerged pioneering figures like Sāmīnizhād who defied these conventions, albeit not without facing challenges. It is essential to acknowledge that the production of *The Lor Girl* coincided with the era of Rizā Shah Pahlavī's modernizing reforms, suggesting a possible governmental endorsement of Sāmīnizhād's venture.





Figure 4: Still from *The Lor Girl* showing Abd al-Husayn Sipantā as Ja'far (Left) and Sāmīnīzhād as Gulnār.

To provide context, a brief exposition of Rizā Shah's era is warranted, as his legacy within Iran evokes a spectrum of sentiments and opinions. During the 1930s, Rizā Shah's rule ushered in transformative reforms that visibly altered societal norms and appearance. The compulsion to discard the veil was indicative of his determination to modernize Iran. Pertinently, cinema was a conduit through which these reforms were projected, as was true with *The Lor Girl*, which featured the Pahlavī regime's patriotic song at the end, celebrating the state's progressive agenda.

During the tenure of Rizā Shah, a seismic transformation swept through the societal fabric, profoundly altering the visual tableau of the populace. By juxtaposing visual representations from different eras, one can discern the escalating complexities of modernity in the Iranian society. This period marked a series of transformative developments intricately interwoven with women's social existence. Foremost among these was the enforcement of the compulsory unveiling decree in January 1936, precipitating a paradigm shift that thrust women and their existence into the heart of contention. Within this historical context, it is evident that Rizā Shah had for years begun to undertake

⁷Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 144.

⁸See Jamāl Umīd, 'Abd al-Husayn Sipantā: Zindigī va Sīnimā 1282-1348 [Abd al-Husayn Sipantā: Life and Cinema] (Tehran: Fāryāb, 1984); Jamāl Umīd, *Tārikh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān, 1279-1375* [The history of Iranian cinema, 1900-1997] (Intishārāt-i Rawzanah, 1995).

deliberate measures to integrate women into the public domain, stressing the government's resolve to eliminate gender-based exclusions. Subsequent progressions included the admission of women into universities, their entry into government offices, and the rigorous measures taken against those who persisted in appearing publicly veiled or even modestly draped in a headscarf. Notably "Public places, such as cinemas, cafés, and hotels, were threatened with heavy fines if they discriminated against women."⁷ Consequently, a proliferation of recreational establishments emerged, exacerbating the tension between the state and religious authorities. This tumultuous landscape bore down heavily on traditional segments of society that resisted the wave of modernization, thereby reshaping women's experiences and societal perceptions.

Considering the political, cultural, and societal milieu of the time, it becomes apparent that Sāmīnizhād's stardom could have been envisioned as both a political discourse on the evolving role of women and a reflection of the shifting modern image that the government sought to instill. Her stardom offers a multi-dimensional perspective on the women's shifting role in Iranian cinema and society, as it encompasses an actress whose artistic journey was bright yet transient, echoing the present-day experiences of Iranian women grappling with residual and emergent societal expectations.

Cinematic Reception of The Lor Girl: The Film's Triumph Amidst the Star's Demise

The cinematic reception of *The Lor Girl* stands as a notable chapter in its narrative trajectory. Jamāl Umīd contends that the film's resounding success finds its roots in the innovative technological features it showcased, including the integration of sound, Persian dialogues, and melodious songs.⁸ This amalgamation fostered an unprecedented sense of audience engagement, forging a tangible connection between viewers and the



unfolding dialogues and musical compositions. Evidently, this marked the first instance wherein spectators found themselves resonating with the on-screen interactions. Furthermore, the film's enduring reception marked a significant benchmark. It steadfastly held its position in the limelight, a feat exemplified by its thirty-seven-day screening run at Māyāk Cinema, followed by an impressive additional one-hundred-twenty-day screening period at Sipah Cinema. Such remarkable persistence was particularly noteworthy considering the customary practice of altering film programs twice a week.⁹

The richness of the film's reception is vividly encapsulated in Hamid Naficy's *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (vol. 1, 2011). This repository of accounts, interwoven with interviews and memoirs from individuals who witnessed *The Lor Girl* in the cinematic setting, opens a treasure trove of insights. Noteworthy among these testimonies are those of key figures, including director Parvīz Khatībī, owner of Gulshan Cinema, and Badī'ah Mīsāqiyah, the filmmaker's daughter. These accounts offer a glimpse into the diverse range of experiences of the film's spectators. Khatībī recalls a scene in which hundreds gathered outside the box office, exuding a sense of anticipation and eagerness:

Hundreds of people had gathered outside the box office. As was customary, they had not lined up for tickets but were competing for them in a swarm.... Perhaps partly due to chaos of the of the crowd, the film began about an hour late; however, when the Persian-speaking actors spoke on the screen for the first time in history, the delighted spectators broke into applause, something that was repeated periodically throughout the movie.¹⁰

⁹See 'Abbās Bahārū, "Dar fāsīlah-i du kūditā (az 1299 tā 1332)," [Between two coups: From 1921 to 1953] in *Tārīkh-i tahlīfī-i sad sāl sīnīmā-yi Irān* [The analytical history of one hundred years of Iranian cinema], ed. G. Haydarī and M. Tahāmīnizhād (Tehran: Daftar-i pazhuhihshā-yi farhangī, 2000).

¹⁰Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Volume 1: The Artisanal Era, 1897–1941 (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 237.

The film’s delayed start, owing to the chaotic throngs, only heightened the anticipation:

Suddenly a voice proclaimed loudly: “Ladies and gentlemen, do not worry, the film will be screened for a long time, I promise you.” A moviegoer who had recognized the owner of the voice, shouted, “Look, it is him, Mr. Sepanta himself, the lead actor.” Others shouted, “Long live Mr. Sepanta ...”¹¹

In reviewing the historical records, a notable source of insight emerges from the pages of the *Ittilā’āt* newspaper, offering glimpses into the reception of *The Lor Girl* within the discerning circles of critics. Notably, this provides a balanced perspective, combining both commendation and critique, encapsulating the multifaceted engagement that the film elicited. The film is praised for its portrayal of the “Eastern soul,” a quality that resonated with the evolving cultural ethos of the time. The newspaper’s appraisal extends to the cinematic tapestry, acknowledging the inclusion of “beautiful scenery” as a commendable aspect of the film’s artistic composition. Moreover, the film is credited with capturing the spirit of societal “progress” in Iran, a testament to its alignment with the national trajectory.

Nonetheless, the evaluative narrative maintains a dualistic nature, incorporating elements of disapproval. A pointed critique is aimed at the actors’ performances, marked by strain and perceived shortcomings in acting proficiency. This scrutiny hints at the evolving expectations of refined performances in an era witnessing the advent of new filmmaking paradigms. A notable aspect of contention is the discernible presence of heavy Indian accents when the performers spoke in Persian, an attribute that diluted the authenticity of the film’s linguistic dimension. Additionally, the criticism extends to certain musical arrangements and a scene depicting the lovers’ visit to the Imperial Film Company, an element deemed “inappropriate” within the contextual narrative of the film.



Turning the gaze toward the diverse strata of the audience, a comprehensive understanding necessitates the delineation of distinct categories of spectators who engaged with the cinematic offering. This stratification gains relevance in light of the peculiar circumstances that enshrouded Sāmīnizhād's path, wherein she emerges as a singular figure incapable of partaking in the bountiful rewards and triumphs that the film's success ushered forth. Within this framework, it becomes evident that the contours of reception were not uniform but rather nuanced by factors such as gender and generational perspectives.

¹²See Dabashi's analysis for more details about the connection between socio-political reforms and early Iranian cinema including *The Lor Girl*. Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future* (London: Verso, 2001), 21.



Figure 5: Still from *The Lor Girl* showing Sāmīnizhād as Gulnār trapped among Qulī Khan's bandits.

Indeed, a compelling dimension of differentiation emerges between the discourses that percolate within the male and female spheres surrounding the film. The multi-dimensional portrayal of the protagonist, Sāmīnizhād's Gulnār, appears to have stirred distinct reactions within these gendered realms. While the film resonated with the prevalent societal transformation and modernization efforts, it simultaneously provoked differential interpretive lenses through which the male and female audience members perceived its narrative.¹²

Furthermore, the film reception manifests a generational divide,

the contours of which are rendered through Naficy's conversation with Badī'ah Mīsāqiyah. The reminiscences of Mīsāqiyah offer a glimpse into the role the film assumed in the lives of children and young girls, serving as a contemporary plaything akin to a modern toy. The coquettish dialogues exchanged between Gulnār and her romantic interest Ja'far, along with the amorous interludes enacted on screen, acquire the semblance of interactive enactments within the familial setting. The intimate connection that the younger generations forged with the film delineates a dynamic shift in the relationship between the film's narrative and personal engagement, wherein the celluloid world transforms into a realm of participatory indulgence and imaginative interaction.

Although Sāmīnizhād was warmly received and loved in more progressive towns, specifically among the young generation, she suffered much from this experience on other levels. From her immediate circle, such as the people of Kerman and her family, to the media of the time, various factors played a destructive role in her experience. Journals like *Zan-i rūz*, with their gossip op-eds, and her sudden transition to becoming a star all tarnished her relationship with cinema.

Narratives Influencing the Destiny of Sāmīnizhād's

Stardom:

Despite the seemingly favorable political conditions of the time, it becomes evident that an array of factors, interlaced with the historical, social, institutional, and cultural milieu of the period, contributed to Sāmīnizhād's unexpected decline in stardom. Investigating the complex elements that might have shaped the pioneering star's trajectory can shed light on a broader conceptualization of stardom—one encompassing the ephemeral yet impactful careers of numerous following actresses in Iranian cinema. Moreover, Sāmīnizhād's stardom is the key to capturing the complexity of contemporary Iranian society by high-



lighting the trends wherein Iranian women challenging societal norms often face similar marginalization. Her fictional image in her films and in the society, emblematic of distinctive societal associations, offers a lens through which the intricate narratives woven by the society of her era can be deciphered.

Despite the film's significant success among both the urban audiences of Tehran and the rural populace across various regions of Iran, the prominence of Sāmīnizhād's accent posed distinct challenges for the filmmakers. Evidential accounts indicate that Sipantā, the director, faced practical difficulties stemming from Sāmīnizhād's pronounced accent.¹³ This circumstance could have likely contributed to her relegation to a secondary role in *Shirin and Farhad*, reflecting a strategic adjustment based on her linguistic limitations.

Furthermore, within the contours of her interview in Tahāmīnizhād's documentary, Sāmīnizhād subtly hints at the multifarious challenges she encountered as a woman navigating the film industry. In the documentary *Sīnimā-yi Īrān: Az mashrūtiyat tā Sipantā*, Sāmīnizhād reflects on her initial confusion regarding her decision to star in *The Lor Girl*. She recounts believing that her involvement was an unserious and even "child-like" affair. However, the young girl only realizes the seriousness of the job when a large group of Parsi actors from India arrive at the filming location. The men harass her in the fictional world of the film and this traumatic encounter of Gulnār prompted a profound realization about the gravity of her situation and the realities surrounding her role. She seems to have realized her naïve status surrounded by serious socio-cultural forces in a patriarchal and religious society in transition to modernity.¹⁴

Regrettably, she reveals instances of enduring mental scars from sexual harassment by her colleagues, a disheartening reality that casts a shadow over her professional journey. Additionally, her matrimonial life found itself entangled in the complica-

¹³See Mohammad Ali Issari, *Cinema in Iran, 1900-1979* (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1989), 105-107.

¹⁴See Muhammad Tahāmīnizhād, *Sīnimā-yi Īrān: Az mashrūtiyat tā Sipantā* [Iranian cinema: From constitutionalism to Sepanta] (Tehran: National Iranian Radio and Television, 1970).

¹⁵See Richard Dyer and Paul McDonald, *Stars* (London: Bloomsbury Publication, 1998), part 1.

tions of her circumstances.¹⁵ Historical records document three divorces and unsuccessful marriages, emblematic of the personal tumult she underwent. One might speculatively suggest that certain personal vendettas, the dissolution of her marriage with Habīballāh Damāvandī (aka Rizā Damāvandī), her first husband, and her subsequent involvement with the renowned theater actor Nusratallāh Muhtasham may have contributed to the accusations of immodesty she faced.

This confluence of circumstances gives rise to a burgeoning affection between Ja'far and Gulnār, the fulcrum upon which the film's narrative oscillates. Their bond deepens against the backdrop of Qulī Khan's continued aggression, culminating in Ja'far's dire injury as he becomes embroiled in an ambush. Gulnār, attuned to her lover's plight, galvanizes into action, racing on horseback to locate and nurse Ja'far back to health. Her indomitable spirit unfaltering, Gulnār once again proves her mettle by rescuing Ja'far from a well into which he has been cast by the bandits, culminating in the film's suspenseful crescendo, as Qulī Khan meets his demise.

The narrative further unfolds as Ja'far and Gulnār depart, embarking on a life of exile punctuated by their ardor and love, singing melodious tunes to each other as they voyage toward Mumbai. The specter of transformation takes center stage as Rizā Shah ascends to power in Iran, heralding an era of modernity and security under the aegis of the Pahlavī regime. In a symbolic display, the narrative culminates with Gulnār seated at the piano, offering a fervent patriotic ode to the newly instated ruler. A visual emblem emerges as the film concludes with the image of the residing star, the leader, poised against the backdrop of the new Iranian flag, signaling a harmonious alignment between personal love and the evolving sociopolitical landscape.

The Lor Girl emerges as a cinematic production intricately woven with manifold threads of nationalism. Notably, the film



serves as a repository for an array of Rizā Shah’s transformative reforms, ushering in a cogent observation on the interplay between socio-political progress and artistic innovation. Central to the film’s narrative architecture is the thematic premise of Iranian tribal banditry, a shrewd selection that harmonizes seamlessly with Rizā Shah’s nationalistic policies. These policies, animated by the imperative to dismantle the vestiges of the Qājār era, encompassed the disarming and settlement of tribes, as well as the suppression of rampant highway robberies that had burgeoned unchecked.

The film deftly introduces this overarching political context through a judiciously crafted opening caption, a rhetorical device that ushers the audience into the world of *The Lor Girl*. The caption resonates with a sense of historical reflection, stating: “Before the auspicious era of the Pahlavī, when the south and west of the country were under the influence of various tribes, in the Khūzistān region, in a café.” With this textual prelude, the stage is artfully set for the subsequent narrative developments, contextualizing the prevailing socio-political milieu.¹⁶

Crucially, the cinematic discourse culminates with the film’s conclusion, a momentous tableau that reinforces the thematic interplay between cinematic representation and nationalistic fervor. As the narrative crescendos toward closure, the film’s denouement unfolds under the gaze of Rizā Shah’s portrait, thereby encapsulating a symbolic and visual manifestation of the confluence between cinematic expression and political symbolism. The grand finale, emboldened by the presence of Rizā Shah’s image, consummates this discourse, illuminating the transformative power of visual media to both mirror and amplify the tenets of contemporary governance.

Moreover, the film’s temporal scope is enriched by an evocative flashback scene, a narrative device through which the film weaves prophecy and allegory. The moment in which Qulī Khan orchestrates the tragic disruption of Gulnār’s familial tranquil-

¹⁶For more information about the sociopolitical context of the early Iranian cinema as projected in *The Lor Girl*, see Hameeduddin Mahmood, “Ardeshir M. Irani: Father of Indian Talkie,” in *Seventy Years of Indian Cinema (1913-1983)*, ed. by T. M. Ramachandran and S. Rukmini (Bombay: Cinema India-International, 1985), 61–70.

ity is enshrined by a soothsayer's portentous declaration. In his visionary pronouncement, the soothsayer foresees the emergence of a radiant star amidst the firmament, poised to illumine the darkness and suffuse the land with luminance. An animated sequence of celestial orbs and constellations ensues, provocatively insinuating the identity of this celestial luminary—none other than Rizā Shah.

In the cumulative narrative tapestry of *The Lor Girl*, the interplay of historical resonance, socio-political evolution, and cinematic representation converges, encapsulating a vivid image of Iran's course from "Yesterday's Iran" to "Today's Iran." The film, much like a prism, refracts the multifaceted dimensions of reform, identity, and nationalism, drawing on the past to illuminate the light of a transformed present and an emboldened future.

A discernible parallel emerges between the primary and secondary narrative threads in the film, juxtaposing the amorous bonds forged between individuals with the broader allegorical depiction of affection directed toward the nation and its sovereign, the Shah. This thematic interplay assumes an illuminating significance, particularly when seen through the lens of the hypothetical supposition that the film's visual language has effectively transmuted the stars' cinematic portrayal into emblematic symbols for the perceptive audience. Notably, the film's culminating moments unfurl as a compelling substantiation of this phenomenon: as the narrative reaches its zenith, Ja'far dons the quintessential attire prescribed by Pahlavī mandates, donning a suit and cap that encapsulate the essence of Rizā Shah's sartorial reforms. Counterbalancing this transformation, Gulnār—emblematic of femininity and cultural evolution—discards her veil, an emblem of traditional modesty, thereby visually encapsulating the triumph of modernity.

Though conspicuously absent from vocal renderings, Gulnār's dance performances at the inn are deftly choreographed to pro-



vide audiences with gratifying spectacles. Notably, the lyrical image constructed by the film's melodies eschews direct expression of personal sentiments. Instead, these compositions orchestrate a resonant harmony of communal sentiments, weaving together reflections on life, destiny, morality, and love—a lyrical syntax steeped in the tenets of classical Persian poetry.

Several factors converge to elucidate the intriguing blend of the film's overtly political agenda with its resonance among audiences. Primarily, the film's narrative trajectory engineers an adept synthesis between its socio-political objectives and its capacity to gratify the audience's appetite. This equilibrium stems from a careful orchestration of Gulnār's trajectory: despite her unveiled appearance at the film's conclusion, she retains the vestiges of her rural origins through her attire. Moreover, her character's portrayal as a victim rather than an object of titillation distinguishes her performance from a conventional source of pleasure in the film. This narrative disposition is encapsulated in scenes such as the Sheikh's advances—a sequence suffused with undertones of eroticism and peril, an observation underlined by the nuanced inclusion of the Mae West dialogue, enigmatically suffusing the themes of love and sacrifice.

However, situated beyond the confines of cinema, Rūhangīz Sāmīnizhād navigated the labyrinthine intricacies of her social identity as an Iranian woman, traversing a complex terrain mired in perceptions of chastity, morality, and fidelity. The intersection of her portrayal in the film as a Muslim girl enmeshed within a narrative that extols Rizā Shah's ideals, often at odds with the prevailing cultural, religious, and ethnic landscape, posed a multifaceted challenge. This intricate interplay of artistic representation and real-world identity imprinted upon her a veneer of unchastity and corruption, an imposition that could be attributed to her alignment with a work of art that, by its ideological nature, found itself aligned with Pahlavī's secular approach to nation building, something diametrically opposed to any religious exclusionism.

In sum, the nuanced marriage of cinematic allegory and societal undercurrents within *The Lor Girl* disclose a complex and detailed narrative that resonates with both aesthetic gratification and socio-political discourse, while simultaneously imprinting its protagonist, Rūhangīz Sāmīnizhād, with the echoes of complex sociocultural narratives.

Turning the focus toward a discourse imbued with religious and anti-Arab sentiment allows for a nuanced analysis of the film's thematic underpinnings. The film offers a discourse that holds religious undertones, signifying its relevance within the Pahlavī doctrine of syncretic Westernization, specifically anti-Arab cultural supremacy. Such thematic current finds expression through the depiction of an unsympathetic Arab Sheikh who perpetrates an attempted assault on Gulnār. The vilification of Arab characters resonates with Rizā Shah's strategic orientation of secular nationalism, intertwining with the historical backdrop of pre-Islamic and Zoroastrian Parsi traditions. This conjures reflections upon the historical confluence of the seventh-century conquest of Iran by Muslim Arabs and the subsequent religious tensions that catalyzed the migration of many Zoroastrians to India. The ideological alignment with an anti-Arab culture and pro-Parsi stance can be contextualized within the framework of the Imperial Film Company's political economy.





Figure 6: Still from *The Lor Girl* showing Sāmīnīzhād as Gulnār dangled from a cliff, suspended by a rope held by Ja'far.

¹⁷See Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls, Unchaste Dolls," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 217.

Within the cultural discourse interwoven within the film's narrative, a profound critique of Iran's patriarchal familial structure becomes discernible. Shahla Lahiji asserts that the film's storyline stands as an exceptional portrayal of a young woman navigating an independent existence amidst a socially tumultuous—often even violent—environment. The central figure, a dancer within a rural public tea house, emerges as an object of desire for an oppressive local authority, yet remains resolute in fending off his advances and safeguarding her autonomy of thought and action.¹⁷

Although the producer's apprehensions regarding public reaction appeared warranted, the film ultimately reached an audience that had undergone a substantial societal transformation. Consequently, traditional frameworks governing women's lives and bodies underwent shifts alongside these broader changes. Lahiji's insightful analysis explores further the intriguing paradox of *The Lor Girl*, its narrative discord with prevailing cultural values and norms notwithstanding. Lahiji posits that the heroine's less-than-perfect hijab held less significance for contemporary filmgoers. Instead, the story emphasized feminine potency and self-sufficiency, subverting conventional per-

¹⁸See Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls, Unchaste Dolls," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002), 218.

ceptions that relegated women to the confines of domesticity and social seclusion.¹⁸ Yet, noteworthy is the absence of reports documenting significant public outrage in response to the film's portrayal.

Conclusion

Sāmīnizhād's journey bears resonance with the contemporary discourse concerning Iranian women's representation and agency in the arts. Her struggles and triumphs become a precursor to the persistent challenges faced by modern Iranian actresses dealing with societal stigmas in their craft. Sāmīnizhād's life story stands not only as an embodiment of transformation and resilience, but also as a living testament to the complex relationship of cinema, politics, culture, and tradition.

In the instance of the inaugural star, contextualizing the government's imposition of restrictions on the authority of the religious establishment and the traditional social structure is imperative. Despite the innate resistance towards cinematic exhibitions of this nature, the residual social forces could not express overt hostility to the political system, and all their rage was directed towards the young actress. This quintessentially Iranian landscape underscores political frictions centering around the female body. Throughout history, the female form has often been a symbolic battlefield, serving as a locus of contention amidst social, political, cultural, and familial conflicts, and Sāmīnizhād, as a pioneering actress, was no exception.

Sāmīnizhād's fate was ultimately sealed at the age of eighty, a demise that had long been assumed by the cinematic milieu. This lends poignant authenticity to the tragically resonant associations linked to her name. Her legacy as the first Muslim Iranian actress encapsulates a narrative of significance, both as a harbinger of transformation and as an embodiment of societal upheaval. The epochal *The Lor Girl* not only captures the pioneering ethos of early Iranian cinema but also crystallizes the



broader sociopolitical transformation that marked its era. This research, a confluence of academic inquiry and literary exploration, tried to capture the essence of Sāmīnizhād's ascent and decline, immortalizing her as a pivotal luminary within the annals of Iranian cultural history.