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The Empathic Female Look: Resistance and Dialogue in the Patriarchal Spaces of Fīlmfārsī Melodrama

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Introduction

The patriarchal norms of Pahlavī-era Iranian cinema, particularly in the popular genre of Fīlmfārsī melodrama, have long been scrutinized for their objectification of women through the male gaze, their relegation of female characters to domestic roles, and their punitive narratives for women who transgress societal expectations.¹ While there has been extensive scholarly work on how these films catered to male spectatorship, less attention has been paid to how female audiences engaged with such narratives.

This scholarly neglect stems from the predominance of two reductive frameworks of female spectatorship, best summarized and proposed by Mary Ann Doane and Laura Mulvey.² According to these models, a female viewer either over-identifies with the on-screen woman—typical of masochistic dramas within the “woman’s film”—thereby losing herself in the image by treating the character as a narcissistic object of desire, or she temporarily adopts the position of the male voyeur. In this latter case, the female viewer directs a controlling gaze upon the woman on screen, maintaining emotional distance and emphasizing their difference, a process Mulvey refers to as becoming a temporary transvestite.³ In both scenarios, the female spectator is seen as losing her subjectivity. By negating the possibility of alternative modes of female spectatorship, these models

effectively dismiss the potential for female representation in a cinema shaped by patriarchal considerations or produced within a patriarchal reality, such as *Filmfārsī*.⁴

Linda Williams, however, challenges this binary framework by emphasizing the distinctiveness of female subject formation through a psychoanalytic lens. Drawing on classic psychoanalytic theory, Williams in her article “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: ‘Stella Dallas’ and the Maternal Melodrama,” notes that scopophilic pleasure—the act of taking women as objects of a controlling gaze—arises within a male subjectivity shaped by a fundamental break with the maternal bond. Boys, in their development, must separate from their primary identification with their mothers to adopt a male identity.⁵ This process, which hinges on the recognition of sexual difference and the symbolic role of the phallus as a marker of patriarchal privilege, involves the boy defining himself negatively, through differentiation from his mother, and aligning with his father to achieve autonomy and masculine identity. It is noteworthy that this cultural framework produces narratives that actively repress the figure of lack, thereby reinforcing difference and suppressing the fear of castration. Such repression ensures that women are consistently reduced to objects of the erotic male gaze, a dynamic that reflects the patriarchal structuring of film form.⁶

However, in contrast to boys, girls experience a continuity of the pre-Oedipal symbiotic bond with their mothers. As Williams explains, girls “take on their identity as a woman in a positive process of becoming like, rather than different from, their mother,” preserving the original maternal bond in ways that boys do not.⁷ Because male identity formation is predicated on repression and differentiation, male vision becomes constrained by an “Oedipal destiny,” unable to fully perceive women except through the lens of absence—defined by the lack of male genitalia rather than the presence of female identity. By contrast, female identity is inherently more fluid, capable of, and reinforced by shifting among multiple positions and simultaneous

¹For more detail on the patriarchal representation of women in Pahlavī-era cinema, see: Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2: The Industrializing Years, 1941–1978* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), chap. 5.

²Mary Ann Doane, “Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator,” *Screen* 23, no. 3–4 (September/October 1982): 74–87; and Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Autumn 1975): 6–18.

³Laura Mulvey, “4. Afterthoughts on ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ inspired by King Vidor’s *Duel in the Sun* (1946),” in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 29–38.

⁴Claire Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” in *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 26.

⁵Linda Williams, “‘Something Else Besides a Mother’: ‘Stella Dallas’ and the Maternal Melodrama,” *Cinema Journal* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1984): 8.

⁶Johnston, “Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema,” 31–40.

⁷Williams, “‘Something Else besides a Mother,’” 8.

⁸Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 188.

⁹Williams, ““Something Else besides a Mother,”” 19.

¹⁰Williams, ““Something Else besides a Mother,”” 7.

¹¹Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” 7, 18.

identification, without the rigid scopical distance or over-identification imposed by the phallogocentric masculine symbolic order.⁸

This fundamental difference allows female spectatorship beyond the aforementioned reductive binary, offering a more complex and fluid engagement with filmic representation. Williams argues that “rather than adopting either the distance and mastery of the masculine voyeur or the over-identification of Doane’s woman who loses herself in the image, the female spectator is in a constant state of juggling all positions at once.”⁹ This multiplicity of engagement allows women to navigate and reinterpret cinematic representations in ways that transcend both the limitations of the male gaze and the passive absorption of patriarchal narratives that has been assumed for female spectators.

Williams further suggests that this fluid identification opens the possibility for “a theoretical and practical recognition of the ways in which women actually do speak to one another within patriarchy.”¹⁰ Rather than advocating for the outright dismantling of cinematic codes that position women as objects of spectacle—a goal central to Mulvey or Doane’s vision of avant-garde filmmaking—Williams offers an alternative path. Mulvey’s approach, which seeks to “free the look of the camera into its materiality in space and time” and transform the audience’s gaze into a form of “dialectics, passionate detachment,” aiming to break with traditional narrative cinema.¹¹ However, Williams sees greater potential in working within these existing frameworks. She argues this to be:

... a more fruitful avenue of approach, not only as a means of identifying what pleasure there is for women spectators within the classical narrative cinema, but also as a means of developing new representationalist strategies that will more fully speak to women audiences. For such speech must begin in a language that, however circumscribed within patriarchal ideology, will be recognized and understood by women. In this way, new fem-



inist films can learn to build upon the pleasures of recognition that exist within filmic modes already familiar to women.¹²

Melodrama emerges as the ideal venue for exploring this form of female identification and dialogue. This cinematic mode, “associated with the dramas of domesticity, woman, love, and sexuality,” is often labeled “women’s cinema” due to its ability to elicit pathos and foster a strong emotional connection with female audiences.¹³ Traditionally, this identification with suffering characters has been dismissed as evidence of the female spectator’s inability to maintain critical distance, while male viewers are seen as more capable of adopting a detached, critical perspective.¹⁴ In Williams’ proposed framework, however, this identification appears as a crucial aspect of melodrama’s unique ability to facilitate female dialogue within patriarchal structures.

Through the genre’s portrayal of women’s tensions, desires, actions, and struggles, and despite its patriarchal intentions, melodrama reflects the lived emotional experiences of women. The genre often imposes sexual and social masks on its female characters, relegating them to prescribed roles and domestic spaces;¹⁵ at the same time, however, it reveals the contradictions and pressures inherent in these roles.¹⁶ These portrayals of presumed deception, deviation from societal norms, and eventual atonement resonate with female viewers, offering a form of recognition and solidarity.

As such, the messages embedded in melodrama do not necessarily align with the intentions of its (often male) creators or the interpretations of male spectators. The female spectator’s capacity for multiple and fluid identifications allows her to simultaneously connect with various characters and narratives, recognizing both her own subjectivity and the shared struggles of other women within patriarchy. This dynamic engagement transforms melodrama into a site of nuanced dialogue, where women’s voices and experiences can emerge and find reso-

¹²Williams, ““Something Else besides a Mother,”” 6-7.

¹³Laura Mulvey, “8. Melodrama Inside and Outside the Home,” in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), 63-64; and Linda Williams, “Melodrama Revised,” in *Refiguring American Film Genres: Theory and History*, ed. Nick Browne (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 42.

¹⁴Critics and thinkers discussing cinema, as early as Siegfried Kracauer, have criticized women for their supposed “naïveté” and childish sentimentality, accusing them of believing in the “lie” and deception presented on screen. For further discussion, see Patrice Petro, “Perceptions of Difference: Woman as Spectator and Spectacle,” in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 56–58.

¹⁵Laura Mulvey, “2. Social Hieroglyphics: Reflections on Two Films by Douglas Sirk,” in *Fetishism and Curiosity: Cinema and the Mind’s Eye* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), 29-30.

¹⁶Thomas Schatz, “The Family Melodrama,” in *Imitations of Life: A Reader on Film and Television Melodrama*, ed. Marcia Landy (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), 152.

¹⁷Husayn Husaynī, *Rāhnāmā-yi Film-i Sīnimā-yi Irān, Jild-i avval (1309-1361)* [A Companion to Iranian Cinema, Part One: 1930–1982] (Tehran: Ruzanah Kār, 2020), 376.

¹⁸This change could be attributed to the increase of female urban audience from the 1960s, which necessitated making films that would attract more female, or family audience. See: Parvīz Ijlālī, *Digar-gūnī-i Ijtīmā'ī va Film-hā-yi Sīnimā'ī dar Irān: Jāmi'ah-shināsi-i Film-hā-yi 'Āmmah-pasand-i Irānī (1357–1309)* [Social Changes and Iranian Cinema: Sociological Study of Iranian Popular Cinema (1930–1978)] (Tehran: Agah, 2016), 131-137; Naficy, *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 2, 161-165.

¹⁹Ann Kaplan, “The Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor’s *Stella Dallas*,” In *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Patricia Erens (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), Accessed online: <https://publish.iupress.indiana.edu/read/issues-in-feminist-film-criticism/section/625c6c58-5da9-41ac-9b6c-ca2c7263fe54>

²⁰These include films such as *Dancer of the City*, *Badnām* (Infamous, Shāpūr Gharīb, 1970), *Mīkhak-i Sifid* (The White Clove, Rizā Safā'ī, 1972), *Sāhirah* (The Witch, Kāmrān Qadakhchīyān, 1972), *Āqā-yi Jāhil* (Mr. Jāhil, Rizā Mīrluhī, 1973), *Husayn*

nance, even within a cinematic framework shaped by patriarchal norms.

The seminal work of Williams, and her proposed model of female spectatorship, prompted us to re-examine *Fīlmfārsī* melodramas with female protagonists.

Fīlmfārsī Melodramas of 1950s

While melodrama in Iranian cinema can be traced back to the 1950s, a notable shift occurred with *Raqqasah-yi Shahr* (Dancer of the City, Shāpūr Gharīb, 1970).¹⁷ This film marked the rise of melodramas featuring independent female leads who operate outside of the shadow of male counterparts and are not confined to traditional roles as mothers or wives.¹⁸ However, these characters often have to endure sacrificial or redemptive resolutions to atone for their perceived transgressions—a hallmark of “women’s films” defined by their intent to instruct middle-class female audiences on socially acceptable behavior.¹⁹

Popular films of this era showcase thematic patterns characteristic of typical melodramas and “women’s films.” These include intense, impassioned love stories, the dichotomy between masculine outer/public spaces and feminine interior/domestic spaces, and the contrasting archetypes of the Madonna (the virtuous, traditional wife/mother) and the whore (the transgressive, modern, disobedient woman). Female protagonists navigate this binary, challenge societal norms, and ultimately face self-sacrifice.²⁰ From a significant corpus of works, we have selected *Dancer of the City*, *Mr. Jāhil* (*Āqā-yi Jāhil*, 1973), *Only Mr. Mahdī Can* (*Faqat Āqā Mahdī Mī-tūnah*, 1977), and *Back and Dagger* (*Pusht u Khanjar*, 1977) for closer analysis; these films, which we provide brief plot synopses of below, stand out for the nuances in their resolutions and the emotional depth of their female protagonists’ sacrifices.



In *Dancer of the City*, Ghulām (Rizā Malik Mutī'ī), a woodworker discontent with her marriage to Ashraf Sādāt (Sīmīn 'Alī-zādah), becomes obsessed with Parī (Furūzān), a cabaret dancer. They flee after Ghulām injures Parī's boss, but Mahīn (Farangīs Furūhar), Parī's colleague, falsely claims Ghulām was executed. Devastated, Parī returns to cabaret work. When Taqī (Muhammad Taqī Kahnāmū'ī) informs Ghulām of Parī's relapse after his prison release, Ghulām stabs her in rage. Parī forgives him, leading to his freedom. Later, Parī visits Ghulām but leaves after seeing him with Ashraf and their children.

Āzhdān (Rizā Safā'ī, 1974), Ālūdāh (Contaminated, Ismā'il Pūrsa'īd, 1975), Faqat Āqā Mahdī Mī-tūnah (Only Mr. Mahdī Can, Rizā Safā'ī, 1977), Pusht u Khanjar (Back and Dagger, Īraj Qādirī, 1977), Parastū-hā-yi 'Āshiq (Swallows in Love, Farīdūn Riyāhī, 1977).



Figure 1: Ghulām and Parī in *Dancer of the City*

In *Mr Jāhil*, Zarī (Ārām), a gambling-addicted wife, neglects her husband Muhsin (Humāyūn) and their daughter. Muhsin falls for Nāzī (Hālah), a singer controlled by blackmailer Taqī Khurūs (Bahrām Vatan Parast). After Qudrat (Nimatallāh Gur-jī), Muhsin's friend, reveals Muhsin's family struggles, Nāzī pretends to love Taqī Khurūs to push Muhsin back to Zarī, who has since repented.



Figure 2: Muhsin and Nāzī in Mr Jāhil

In *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, Mahdī (Yad'allāh Shīrandāmī) rescues Parī (Shahlā Yūsufī) and Mahīn (Ra'nā Safavī) from harassment staged by Jalāl (Jalāl Mūsavī), who seeks revenge for Mahdī exposing his corruption. Mahdī (unhappy with his infertile wife Farishtah (Shahlā Qahramānī), and his friend Ni'mat ('Alī Mīrī) who is also unhappy with his marriage, develop feelings for Parī and Mahīn. After Farishtah's reveals her pregnancy, Parī fakes affection for Jalāl to protect Mahdī. Mahdī reunites with Farishtah, while Parī watches silently.



Figure 3: Parī and Mahdī in *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*

In *Back and Dagger*, Parī (Furūzān), a dancer, dates Hishmat (‘Alī Pārsā), but later, his married father Ghulām (Īraj Qādirī) becomes infatuated with her, and the couple fall in love. Parī’s boss addicts Ghulām to drugs, but she helps him recover. When the boss targets Hishmat, Ghulām and Parī intervene. Parī later leaves Ghulām, who reunites with his wife and his son.



Figure 4: Parī and Ghulām in *Back and Dagger*

In the upcoming sections, we will examine the roles of female protagonists who—as cabaret performers, gamblers and independent figures—are ostensibly framed as “fallen women.” We will argue that these characters defy and respond to the patriarchal realism inherent in the films’ narratives, particularly through acts of sacrifice and identification with other female characters—actions that in similar cases, have been interpreted by critics as the films’ chastisement of their transgressions.

These female leads assert their independent subjectivity through resistance and solidarity, often assuming active and decisive roles that may even challenge the dominance of the male gaze by presenting an empathic “female look.” Furthermore, we propose that the audience’s identification and empathy with these characters—whose struggles, identification with other women, and decisions mirror their own lived experiences—fostered an

²¹Somaiyeh Falahat, "Excavating Urban Imaginaries in Tehran," in *Being Urban*, ed. Simon Goldhill (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 242-245.

²²Kamran Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran: The Life and Legacy of a Popular Female Artist* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2011), 102-105; and Golberg Rekabtaei talks about the reception of these artists and their portrayal in cinema. See: *Rekabtaei Iranian Cosmopolitanism: A Cinematic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 193-194.

²³Naficy, *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 2, 298-301. It is noteworthy that this voyeurism and objectification extended beyond cabaret performers, encompassing any woman exhibiting independence, a prominent social presence (particularly without male guardianship), or wearing attire deemed "too revealing." Hamīd Rizā Sadr considers cabaret performers to be the ultimate symbol of such woman "transgressing" the moralities of patriarchy. See: Sadr, *Dar 'āmadī bar tārikh-i siyāsi-i sīnimā-i Īrān (1280-1380)* [An introduction to the political history of Iranian cinema from 1901- 2001] (Tehran: Nay, 2002), 146-152.

²⁴Naficy, *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 2, 209-212.

alternative and much overlooked feminine public sphere in Iranian cinema.

Women as Objectified Subjects

It is essential to first examine how these films depict their lead modern women. These women exist outside of domestic spaces, which are traditionally regarded as the respectable domains for a "good" woman—spaces where she can fulfill the roles of dutiful daughter, mother, or wife. In the urban context of modern Iran, women's presence in public spaces was expected to be limited, often contingent upon male guardianship. When unaccompanied, their presence had to be temporary and justified, typically for activities such as commuting to school, attending a socially acceptable job, or shopping.²¹ However, the female protagonists—Parī in *Dancer of the City*, Zarī and Nāzī in *Mr. Jāhil*, Parī in *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, and Parī in *Back and Dagger*—are defined by their public presence. These women live and work in the urban spaces where their interactions with the male leads, who eventually fall in love with them, occur. These spaces are depicted as inherently masculine, inhabited by violent men with an overtly sexualizing gaze. Consequently, the films portray these women as being out of place—removed from where society believes they should be.

Notably, in all cases, the female leads are cabaret dancers and singers—professions that were deeply stigmatized in Iranian society and cinema, and often equated with prostitution.²² The films, along with their male protagonists, freely objectify these women, treating them as sexual objects due to their perceived loss of respectability.²³ In fact, cabaret performers were a recurring presence in *Filmfārsī*, regardless of narrative necessity, as they provided opportunities for voyeuristic shots that appealed to male audiences and boosted box office sales.²⁴

The initial encounters of male characters with female leads in these representative melodramas involve a process of male in-



fatuation with cabaret performers, characterized by fetishized, subjective camera shots during the women’s performances.²⁵ Furthermore, whenever these women defy the male characters’ desires or beliefs during dramatic moments, the plots escalate to scenes of harsh verbal or physical abuse, including acts of extreme violence, such as stabbing with intent to kill. In *Mr. Jāhil*, for instance, when Nāzī fabricates a scene of self-sacrifice by pretending to engage in a romantic encounter with Taqī to push Muhsin away, Muhsin responds by attacking her and calling her a “whore.”²⁶ Similarly, in *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, Mahdī violently assaults Parī in a similar scenario, where she pretends to love Jalāl, Mahdī’s rival. In *Dancer of the City*, Ghulām goes even further, stabbing Parī merely because he thinks she has betrayed him by returning to cabaret. It is crucial to note that these male characters are depicted in the worlds of the films as good men—popular protagonists embodying a socially celebrated form of *ghayrat* (jealousy) toward their lovers.²⁷

²⁵Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It depicts Mahdī’s encounter with Parī while not performing. However, the film does fetishize Parī and Mahīn in capturing their beauty and seductiveness.

²⁶Mr. Jāhil, dir. Rizā Mīrluhī (Tehran: Mihrigān Film, 1973), 01:45:51.

²⁷Talattof, *Modernity, Sexuality, and Ideology in Iran*, 114-116.



Figure 5: Muhsin chastises Nāzī in *Mr Jāhil*

²⁸Ijlālī, *Diġar-gūnī-i Ijtīmā'ī va Film-hā-yi Sīnimā'ī dar Irān*, 221-223.



Figure 6: Ghulām of *Dancer of the City*, stabs Parī believing she's cheated on him.

The films argue that these women require a responsible man to rescue them from the streets and the cabaret lifestyle, perpetuating a common trope in *Filmfārsī* cinema. In this narrative tradition, the so-called fallen woman, often portrayed as a cabaret performer or someone who has been victimized by men due to her naivety, is redeemed by a male savior.²⁸ While the case studies examined here share this trope—depicting fallen women being introduced to a semblance of normal life through the presence of what the films' present as virtuous men—the films' narratives allow for alternative interpretations when analyzed from the perspectives of the female characters. Two specific aspects emerge: the social activity of these women and the question of who truly saves whom.

Examining women's social activity reveals that in both *Dancer of the City* and *Back and Dagger*, the character Parī (played by Furūzān) is portrayed as a strong, independent woman. Parī, unconcerned with male objectification, skillfully leverages male infatuation to secure economic independence and power. Although the films aim to depict such women negatively and subject them to moral critique, Parī's character, embodied by the popular star Furūzān, exudes undeniable agency and power. Her defiance of societal judgment about her profession chal-



lenges the films' authorial intentions. As critics have long observed, Furūzān's performances imbue these characters with remarkable independence. For instance, Husayn Husaynī notes, "the effect of her presence in forming this new presentation of women [powerful and independent] couldn't slide away from the eyes of the contemporary critics."²⁹

²⁹Husaynī, *Rāhnamā-yi Film-i Sīmā-yi Īrān*, 376.



Figure 7 and 8: Furūzān's characters in *Dancer of the City* (left) and *Back and Dagger* (right), radiates undeniable power and agency.

The films also create a dichotomy between these cabaret performers and the mother/wife figures confined to domestic spaces in the male protagonists' lives (with the exception of Mr. Jāhil, where Zarī also breaks out of domestic confinement, becoming a fallen woman). However, this dichotomy unintentionally highlights the vibrancy and vitality of the female leads compared to the more subdued good or proper women. For example, in *Dancer of the City*, Ashraf Sādāt is depicted as utterly dedicated to her domestic duties, but her character appears mundane and lifeless, whereas Parī's character radiates electrifying energy. Similarly, in *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, Farishtah and Malāhat are portrayed as resigned to monotonous lives of household chores, while Parī and Mahīn lead dynamic, adventurous lives that captivate Mahdī and Ni'mat. Even if these traits are presented to enhance the characters' sexual appeal, they underscore the spirit and liveliness of the so-called deviant women in contrast to the stasis of domestic figures.

³⁰Katharina von Ankum, “Gendered Urban Spaces in Irmgard Keun’s *Das kunstseidene Mädchen*,” in *Women in the Metropolis: Gender and Modernity in Weimar Culture*, ed. Katharina von Ankum (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 165.



Figure 9 and 10: Iffat, the dedicated housewife of Ghulam in *Back and Dagger*, is contrasted with the free-spirited Pari.

In both *Mr. Jāhil* and *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, women are compelled to endure harsh and exploitative working conditions where they are subjected to objectification and violence by their male counterparts, primarily due to financial necessity. Nāzī, in *Mr. Jāhil*, is burdened by debt and constrained by her obligation to Taqī, forcing her to work for him until the debt is repaid. Similarly, in *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, Jalāl holds legal documents that establish Parī’s financial indebtedness to him, granting him leverage to imprison her unless she complies with his demands. As Katharina von Ankum observes, in pathologizing women’s participation in jobs deemed inappropriate and chastising them for such involvement, men frequently disregard “the actual social situation of the women in question.” The majority of such women, von Ankum notes, “were recruited from the ranks of women who worked as servant girls, waitresses, sales clerks, and seasonal workers,” many of whom had migrated from rural areas to urban centers in search of work. The proliferation of prostitution or similarly stigmatized jobs, therefore, emerged as a direct consequence of forced industrialization and urbanization.³⁰

Given this context, it is plausible that urban female audiences of these films, many of whom faced comparable economic constraints requiring them to work—at least until marriage—and the much harsher asymmetry (compared to Von Ankum’s *Wei-*

mar Germany) in accessing socially respectable and well-paying employment opportunities, would empathize with these female characters, who are similarly bound by financial obligations to men.

Before addressing the question of who ultimately saves whom, it is worth briefly examining the encounters from the perspective of the female protagonists, as opposed to the male perspective, which is often defined by sexual objectification. Notably, in all the films discussed, the female leads develop romantic feelings for the male protagonists. Romantic love, particularly on a widespread and mass-cultural scale, was a modern concept in Iran. Traditionally, relationships between men and women were governed by marriage, which itself was shaped by economic, religious, and tribal considerations, often excluding the consent of the individuals involved—particularly women. With the introduction of the concept of romantic love in the 19th century via encounters with West, primarily through its literature, these traditional marriage norms began to face significant challenges, and this tension was represented across various cultural media. Despite the societal changes that unfolded during the Pahlavī era, the institution of marriage remained largely defined by limited participation and consent on the part of women. Even if a man fell in love and identified a specific woman as a prospective partner, it was typically the woman's paternal guardian who made the decision regarding the marriage.³¹ Consequently, the portrayal of independent and active female leads, who exercise the freedom to choose whom they love, would likely resonate with urban female audiences. These audiences, sharing similar aspirations for autonomy and romantic agency, would find these characters relatable and inspiring in their ability to assert their right to love freely.

Addressing the question of who truly saves whom, even though the films—and the broader cinematic ethos—position women as needing to be rescued by responsible men, these narratives also implicitly hold women accountable for leading married

³¹For a more detailed account of romantic love in Iran, and its asymmetries up to the end of the Pahlavī era, see: Ijlālī, *Diġar-gūnī-i Ijtimā'ī va Film-hā-yi Sīnimā'ī dar Irān*, 280-285.

³²Women's "inappropriate" public presence is framed as a source of temptation that diverts men from their familial dedication. For more information, see: Afasneh Najmabadi, "Hazards of Modernity and Morality: Women, State and Ideology in Contemporary Iran," in *Women, Islam and the State*, ed. D. Kandiyoti (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991), 69-70 and Naficy, *Social History of Iranian Cinema*, Vol. 2, 233-234.

men astray.³² It is crucial to recognize that it is the female leads who take the initiative to resolve the crises at hand—often a family on the verge of collapse—while the male leads, incapacitated by their forbidden desires, remain paralyzed and passive. The male protagonist, whose gaze actively sexualizes the female lead, is strikingly ineffective in resolving the turmoil in his own life. By contrast, the female lead, guided by an empathetic perspective that acknowledges the struggles of her lover's wife and family, assumes the responsibility of making difficult yet morally sound decisions. She acts decisively, while the male lead is blinded by lust and passion.

In *Dancer of the City*, Parī forgives Ghulām for wrongfully stabbing her, helping him secure his release from prison. It is she who ultimately decides to step aside, allowing Ghulām to return to his family and children. Similarly, in *Mr. Jāhil*, it is Nāzī who is capable of preventing the disintegration of a family. Qudrat, Muhsin's friend, pleads with her to step away for the sake of Muhsin's wife and child. Nāzī stages an elaborate ruse, pretending to love and engage with Muhsin's rival—whom she personally despises—to drive Muhsin back to his family. The same dynamic is evident in *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*. Parī, deeply in love with Mahdī, learns that his wife is pregnant. In response, she feigns affection for Mahdī's rival to repel Mahdī and ensure he remains committed to his wife and unborn child. In *Back and Dagger*, the male protagonist, Ghulām, is unable to restore his life on his own. Struggling with addiction, he becomes incapable of reconciling with his family. It is only through Parī's initiative—helping him overcome his addiction and ultimately sending him back to his family—that Ghulām is able to recover. Through her efforts, Ghulām reconciles with his son and regains stability. In all these narratives, it is the female leads who take the decisive actions to resolve the crises, ultimately saving the male protagonists.





Figure 11: Parī identifies with the plight of Fereshteh, Mahdi's wife, in *Only Mr. Mahdi Can Do It*, and decides to sacrifice her love so that Fereshteh can reunite with her family.



Figure 12: In a dialogue with Iffat, Parī of *Back and Dagger*, decides to help her and make Ghulām overcome his addiction.

A Feminine Empathic “Look”

As mentioned above, female leads resolving narrative tension through acts of self-sacrifice often emerge as a central theme in melodramatic women's films. Such portrayals have frequently been read as reinforcing patriarchal morality, with the female protagonist's self-sacrifice interpreted as a necessary atonement for her perceived transgressions against societal norms—partic-

³³Parvīz Ijlālī, analyzing *Film-fārsī melodramas with female leads*, makes such a conclusion of the lead's self-sacrifice. See: Ijlālī, *Diḡar-gūnī-i Ijtimā'ī va Film-hā-yi Sīmimā'ī dar Irān*, 184-186.

³⁴Kaplan, "The Missing Mother."

³⁵Williams, "Something Else besides a Mother," 2-27.

ularly her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles. These narratives suggest that a woman who dares to live authentically, in defiance of patriarchal expectations, must ultimately submit to these norms through an act of renunciation.³³ Before challenging this interpretation through our case studies, it is essential to consider the influential analysis of the American filmmaker King Vidor's *Stella Dallas* (1937) and its protagonist's ultimate act of self-sacrifice, as examined by Ann Kaplan³⁴ and Linda Williams.³⁵

Stella Dallas tells the story of Stella Martin, a working-class woman who marries the wealthy Stephen Dallas. Despite having a daughter, Laurel, their marriage falters due to Stella's inability to meet the standards of upper-class respectability, manifested through the idealized wife/mother figure of the film, Helen, and Stephen's disapproval of Stella's behavior. Following their separation, Stella devotes herself to ensuring a better future for Laurel. Convinced that her working-class identity and lifestyle might impede Laurel's social advancement, Stella resolves to distance herself from her daughter. This decision culminates in an iconic scene where Stella, standing outside in the rain, secretly observes Laurel's wedding—a moment of bittersweet satisfaction as she reassures herself that her sacrifice has secured her daughter's happiness.

In "The Case of the Missing Mother: Maternal Issues in Vidor's *Stella Dallas*," Kaplan critiques the film's reinforcement of patriarchal ideals. She argues that Stella's sacrifice exemplifies the idealized maternal figure within a patriarchal framework, reducing women to self-sacrificing mothers whose personal fulfillment is subordinated to their children's needs. Kaplan asserts that Stella's transformation—from resisting societal norms to conforming to them—

“teaches’ Stella her ‘correct’ position, bringing her from resistance to conformity with the dominant, desired myth,” and “in so doing, teach[ing] the female audience the dangers of step-



ping out of the given position.”³⁶

Williams, however, offers an alternative reading of Stella Dallas, focusing on the film’s complex portrayal of motherhood and female identity. She argues that the film presents a nuanced depiction of the challenges women face within a patriarchal society, emphasizing the protagonist’s internal conflicts and desires that extend beyond traditional maternal expectations. Williams also examines the film’s use of melodramatic elements to express Stella’s sacrifices and the layered emotions they evoke. She observes that the film conveys “mixed messages—of joy in pain, of pleasure in sacrifice—that typically resolve the melodramatic conflicts in ‘The Woman’s film.’”³⁷ This perspective emerges from what Williams describes as a complex and empathetic “female look,” capable of recognizing the struggles and needs of other women within a patriarchal framework. In Stella’s case, this empathy centers on her daughter, whose future Stella prioritizes by making the courageous choice to distance herself. This decision allows Laurel to achieve upward social mobility, a challenge Stella herself had encountered as a middle-class woman.³⁸ By actively choosing to step away, Stella’s sacrifice transcends the traditional expectations of motherhood. Williams reads it as an act of profound agency and empathy. Rather than reducing Stella’s choice to mere conformity, this interpretation highlights the film’s potential to reflect women’s resilience and their mutual understanding of each other’s plights, within the confines of patriarchal structures of society, and of cinema.

A similar framework applies to the acts of self-sacrifice performed by the female leads in the filmic case studies our article discusses. In each example, the female leads, empathizing with the struggles of the male protagonists’ wives and children, choose to forgo relationships with the men they deeply love—men who, as seen in *Mr. Jāhil* and *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, could also potentially serve as a means of upward social mobility. Their sacrifices could be understood as expressions of

³⁶Kaplan, “The Missing Mother.”

³⁷Williams, “Something Else besides a Mother,” 2.

³⁸Williams, “Something Else besides a Mother,” 19-21.

feminine solidarity and identification with the pathos of others restrained in patriarchal structures—namely, women and children. By relinquishing their own desires to prevent the destruction of other lives, these women redefine the narrative of self-sacrifice, shifting it from an act of mere conformity to one of profound empathy and moral consciousness.

Let us examine the dynamics of sacrifice and its nuanced representation in each film, beginning with *Dancer of the City*. Parī, under the guise of having injured herself with a knife, secures Ghulām's release from prison, initially with the hope of a reunion. In the climactic final scene, Parī approaches Ghulām while holding a bouquet of flowers. Spotting him from afar, she runs toward him but stops abruptly when she sees Ghulām embracing his children outside his carpentry workshop. She pauses, silently observing from behind the glass of an unoccupied kiosk, as if deliberately distancing herself from the familial scene unfolding before her. She understands that any interference on her part would lead Ghulām to leave his family for her sake.

Through a sequence of alternating shots, the camera oscillates between Parī and her point of view, which captures Ghulām, his children, and later his wife. The progression moves from a long shot of Parī to a medium shot, and finally a close-up. All her point-of-view shots of Ghulām and his family, however, remain in long shots, reinforcing her emotional and physical distance from the scene. In each close-up, Parī's tear-filled look remains fixed on Ghulām and his family as they draw closer together, emphasizing her emotional turmoil. Overcome, she abruptly averts her look, pulling her veil over her face. The camera then transitions to a wide shot of Ghulām and his family, emphasizing their closeness, before returning to a medium shot of Parī, who withdraws further behind the kiosk, continuing to observe in silence. Meanwhile, a friend of the united family holds a Qur'an above their heads in a symbolic gesture of blessing as they walk away (Figures 1 and 2).



Parī's tear-streaked face is reflected on the glass—a striking visual metaphor that highlights her subjective agency despite her separation from the scene she observes. Finally, the camera captures her point of view as Ghulām and his family drive away, before transitioning to a shot of Parī from behind, obscured by the kiosk, as she silently watches their car disappear into the distance.



Figures 13 and 14: Parī watches the family that has reunited as a result of her sacrifice.

Parī's selfless restraint, refraining from revealing herself to Ghulām, ensures that the family's reunion remains undisturbed. Her tearful eyes reveal the depth of her sacrifice as she relinquishes her personal desires for the happiness of Ghulām's family. The close-up shots of Parī underscore her noble and compassionate demeanor, thereby enhancing the emotional impact of her act.

This profoundly moving sequence is further enhanced by Isfandiyār Munfaridzādah's evocative score, which magnifies the grandeur of Parī's sacrifice, mirroring her profound pathos—a sentiment born of her magnanimity and compassion. The dreamlike quality of the scene, particularly through Parī's perspective, evokes the family life she once envisioned with Ghulām, now unfolding without her. Yet, through her empathy, Parī grants permission for this vision to materialize, even at the cost of her own happiness.

³⁹Mr. Jāhil, dir. Rizā Mīrluhī (Tehran: Mihriḡān Film, 1973), 01:39:25.

The dynamics of sacrifice, particularly as they relate to the female protagonists' moral agency, is similarly explored in Mr. Jāhil, offering poignant parallels to the themes in *Dancer of the City*. In Mr. Jāhil, Nāzī's ultimate act of self-sacrifice arises from her discovery of Muhsin's familial obligations through Qudrat, who shows her a photograph of Muhsin with his wife and child. Qudrat's words, "Look closely at them. Both are waiting... for the man of the house," compel Nāzī to prioritize their happiness over her love for Muhsin.³⁹ Although devastated, Nāzī resolves to sever ties with him by orchestrating a scene that will push him away and reunite him with his family.

In the climactic sequence, freshly released from prison, Muhsin rushes past his welcoming family to Nāzī's home, only to overhear her laughter with Taqī behind a curtain. The camera assumes Muhsin's perspective as he discovers the staged scene of infidelity. His fury ignites a violent confrontation, during which he berates Nāzī and throws her onto the bed. The scene culminates in a devastating exchange of accusations: Nāzī bitterly confronts Muhsin's expectations of loyalty despite his absence, while Muhsin retaliates with insults, casting her aside with both verbal and physical abuse. In a high-angle shot, Muhsin tosses money at her, declaring it payment for their time together. The scattered bills and Nāzī's tearful collapse on the bed visually encapsulate her humiliation, which she has deliberately endured to ensure Muhsin's departure.

Nāzī's decision to degrade herself reflects her profound empathy for Muhsin's wife and child, whose familial bond she protects at the cost of her own dignity. This emotional climax, underscored by the swelling score, positions Nāzī as both victim and moral victor. Like Parī in *Dancer of the City*, Nāzī becomes a silent observer of the family's reunion in the film's final sequence, watching from a distance and above as she recalls her intimate moments with Muhsin. With tearful yet resolute triumph, she reflects on her sacrifice, embodying both grief and moral fortitude (Figures 3 and 4). The film alternates between Nāzī's point



of view, her flashbacks with Muhsin, and her sorrowful yet bittersweet look upon the reunited couple, reinforcing the depth of her sacrifice that made their reunion possible.



Figures 15 and 16: Nāzī looks down upon the reunited couple from above.

Similarly, in *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, Parī confronts her guilt upon discovering that Farishtah is pregnant and has suffered humiliation due to Mahdī's infidelity. Farishtah's harsh remarks evoke Parī's remorse, prompting her to promise Farishtah that she will step aside and restore Farishtah's family. Parī stages an elaborate scene of betrayal in order to alienate Mahdī. In the decisive moment, Mahdī arrives at Parī's house to find her in Jalāl's embrace. Overcome with rage, Mahdī confronts Parī, who coldly declares her love for Jalāl and her hatred for Mahdī. The tension escalates as Mahdī strikes Jalāl, only to be interrupted by news of his wife's hospitalization. Without hesitation, Mahdī rushes to the hospital, abandoning Parī.

As Mahdī departs, the camera lingers on a close-up of Parī, her tear-streaked face laying bare her emotional turmoil. She dismisses Jalāl, admitting that she merely used him to manipulate Mahdī into returning to his family. In the film's final moments, Mahdī, his wife and the newborn child are shown leaving the hospital. Concealed within a car, Parī silently watches their reunion, her expression imbued with bittersweet satisfaction (Figures 5 and 6). The film alternates between the joyful reunited

⁴⁰Kaplan, "The Missing Mother."

family and Parī, underscoring that this moment of happiness is ultimately the result of her sacrifice. The score heightens the emotional impact of this moment, emphasizing Parī's grief, resolve, and selfless love. Her carefully designed plan has ensured that Mahdī reunites with his family and embraces his responsibilities.



Figures 17 and 18: Parī's bittersweet look and her POV showing Farishtah, Mahdī and their newborn.

In *Back and Dagger*, Parī's self-sacrifice carries on the motif of female protagonists relinquishing their personal happiness for the preservation of another's familial bonds. After Parī's tireless efforts to help Ghulām overcome his addiction, even imprisoning him in a basement to force his recovery, Ghulām seeks her out with the intention of embracing her. Yet, Parī, recognizing the larger stakes, gently rejects him with the poignant words, "There are many waiting outside that door—your wife, your son. My time is over."⁴⁰ In this moment, she relinquishes her desires, demonstrating profound empathy and selflessness.

At the film's emotionally charged conclusion, filmed through a long shot, Ghulām, along with his son and a group of friends, moves toward his home and wife in the background. In the foreground, the trunk of a tree is visible. From the left side of the frame (off-screen), Parī enters the frame with her back to the camera and, standing behind the tree, watches Ghulām and his companions. As we see several shots of Ghulām approaching

his wife and his wife waiting for him, the camera cuts to a close-up of Parī, who, standing behind the tree, looks at them with tearful eyes. With a smile of contentment, she observes their reunion.

As the couple embraces, the camera pulls back, revealing Parī behind the tree, hiding her face with her veil while watching them. (Parī is positioned in the foreground on the left, while the tree divides the frame, with the couple in the background on the right). As the couple and their companions exit the frame, the camera moves forward, capturing a close-up of Parī. The image dissolves into another shot of Parī, still watching their departure with sorrowful eyes and a bitter smile (Figures 7 and 8). Slowly, she leans against the tree and sits down. The scene dissolves again into another shot of Parī as the camera zooms in on her face. At first, she buries her tearful eyes in her veil, then looks outward. The closing shot—a close-up of Parī looking off-screen, tears brimming in her eyes as “The End” overlays her image—solidifies her role as the architect of this reconciliation. Parī’s expression encapsulates her sacrifice, empathy, and forgiveness; it was her decision to push Ghulām away that enabled this familial reunion. Her active agency shapes the final *mise-en-scène*, positioning her as the silent yet central figure directing the conclusion.



Figures 19 and 20: Parī watches the family with a bittersweet smile on her face.

⁴¹Kaplan, "The Missing Mother."

⁴²Kaplan, "The Missing Mother."

⁴³Kaplan, "The Missing Mother."

Across these films—*Dancer of the City*, *Mr. Jāhil*, *Only Mr. Mahdī Can Do It*, and *Back and Dagger*—the notion of the female protagonist as a mere spectator, who, as Kaplan puts it, is “relinquishing the central place” is subverted.⁴¹ As opposed to Kaplan’s reading of *Stella Dallas*, where the female lead’s position is “limited to that of spectator,” and absence is the ultimate and moral role prescribed to her, the act of spectating here is one of active agency, directed from a position of moral authority and emotional identification.⁴² The female leads are not silenced or erased through their absence; rather, their absence is purposeful and decisive, functioning as a profound articulation of their subjectivity.

In each narrative, the female look marks the conclusion, shaping the portrayal of familial reconciliation. These reunions are not depicted through the objectifying masculine gaze but through the empathetic, subjective point of view of the female lead. This look, directed at others without being reciprocated, acts as an alternative to the dominating gaze of the patriarchal surveillance vantage point. Instead of reinforcing differentiation, it is a look of identification and empathy, one that affirms the centrality of the female protagonists even in their withdrawal. By crafting the conditions for these reconciliations and directing the visual and emotional closure of each film, the female leads maintain their agency, ultimately challenging the dynamics of passivity typically associated with such narratives.

Female Identification and an Alternative Public Sphere

Kaplan argues that by the time *Stella* has made her ultimate sacrifice and become a mere spectator of her daughter’s success, her joy in her daughter “teaches” its female spectators the appropriate role of the mother, what is expected of her, and what is deemed beneficial for her (becoming a spectator and wife/mother like Helen), thereby framing the resolution of “women’s films” for their female audience.⁴³



Williams responds, consistent with the argument previously discussed, that “the woman’s sense of self is based upon a continuity of relationship that ultimately prepares her for the empathic, identifying role of the mother . . . the woman’s ability to identify with a variety of different subject positions makes her a very different kind of spectator.”⁴⁴ Accordingly, “the female spectator is identified with a variety of conflicting points of view.” She may see Stella as aspiring to be both a mother and a free woman—a Stella who aligns with her daughter’s needs yet erases herself to enable her daughter’s upward social mobility. Similarly, she might identify with Helen, who is bound by societal rules and becomes a model of self-restraint, while simultaneously empathizing with Helen’s recognition of Stella’s resistance and her desire to assist her. The female spectator would thus connect with women struggling and resisting within a patriarchal framework—one that never implicates Stephen, who is “characteristically oblivious to the suffering of others,” nor expects him to address others’ suffering.⁴⁵ In this way, the female spectator sees her own struggles reflected on screen, and in broader discourses designed for and about women. These create “spaces in which women, out of their socially constructed differences as women, can and do resist,”⁴⁶ as well as “spaces where women speak to one another in languages that grow out of their specific social roles—as mothers, housekeepers, caretakers of all sorts.”⁴⁷

This dynamic can be extended to female spectators of Iranian “women’s films,” including those examined in our case studies. Urban, middle-class, and educated women—negotiating the tensions between tradition and modernity, expected to be modern yet modest, economically active but not independent, devoted wives and mothers who simultaneously embody a Euro-American modern aesthetic—would likely identify with female protagonists who, despite acting in the best interests of other women, are chastised, assaulted, or even stabbed.⁴⁸ They would have witnessed wives who conformed to their husbands’ traditional expectations and were confined to the domestic

⁴⁴Williams, “Something Else besides a Mother,” 18.

⁴⁵Williams, “Something Else besides a Mother,” 18.

⁴⁶Christine Gledhill, “Developments in Feminist Film Criticism,” in *Revision: Essays in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. Mary Ann Doane, Patricia Mellencamp, and Linda Williams (Los Angeles: American Film Institute Monograph Series, 1983), 42.

⁴⁷Williams, “Something Else besides a Mother,” 7.

⁴⁸For details on expectations from urban middle-class Iranian women during the Pahlavī era, see: Najmabadi, “Hazards of modernity and morality,” 58-76; Camron Michael Amin, *The Making of the Modern Iranian Woman: Gender, State Policy, and Popular Culture, 1865–1946* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002).

⁴⁹Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), Chap. 3.

⁵⁰Rekabtalaei, *Iranian Cosmopolitanism*, 69-71.

sphere only to be abandoned for more modern or transgressive women. They would also have known women who were punished for adopting behaviors traditionally associated with men, such as socializing outside the home or gambling, as seen in the case of Zarī from *Mr. Jāhil*. Indeed, they could have experienced such outcomes themselves.

These spectators would observe female characters sacrificing aspirations of social mobility through marriage—or even romantic love—for the sake of other women, often in contexts where men remain unaccountable, leaving women with no choice but to take action for themselves. Just as the female leads in these films become silent-yet-active observers of the reunions unfolding before them, female viewers likewise become identifying and empathizing spectators of these on-screen narratives.

Consequently, this perspective offers an alternative framework for understanding the female spectator, particularly the Iranian female spectator. Rather than over-identifying and losing herself or masochistically adopting a transvestite stance, she participates in a collective sphere of women—both on screen and in the audience. This creates a female public sphere, allowing women to connect and communicate from within a patriarchal society. Such a sphere aligns with Miriam Hansen's concept of an alternative public sphere for marginalized groups, such as women and immigrants, where cinema fosters social community, engagement with modernity, and the negotiation of identities outside traditional societal constraints.⁴⁹ Despite being overlooked in Iranian studies, this social dimension of cinema, as scholars such as Golbarg Rekabtalaei highlight, was significant during the Pahlavī era.⁵⁰ Cinemas offered women a space to escape the confines of the domestic sphere, form communities, engage socially, and converse with one another.



Conclusion

The patriarchal realities of Fīlmfārsī melodramas reveal the tensions and struggles faced by women navigating a society that confined their identities to restrictive roles. These films, particularly those crafted for female audiences, inadvertently expose not only the hardships of women living under patriarchal constraints but also their resistance, aspirations for social agency, and empathy toward one another. Through nuanced portrayals of female protagonists challenged by patriarchal reality, these films present opportunities for identification and dialogue among female spectators.

This study examined four Fīlmfārsī melodramas, offering an alternative to Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane's frameworks of analyzing patriarchal cinema and female spectatorship. While prior approaches have focused on the dominating and objectifying male gaze, this research, influenced by Linda Williams' insights on melodrama, highlights how female characters and spectators disrupt that gaze through an empathic "female look." Female protagonists in these films reinforce their subjectivity, not through conformity or passivity, but through acts of identification and solidarity with other women. Their sacrifices, while situated within patriarchal narratives, are imbued with agency and empathy.

Furthermore, the female spectators of these melodramas form a connection to the struggles and decisions of the on-screen women, fostering a feminine public sphere that has been overlooked in analyses of both Pahlavī-era and post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. This public sphere serves as a space for shared reflection, dialogue, and resistance within the confines of patriarchal structures. As such, empathic bonds forged between female spectators and protagonists transcend the films' patriarchal intent, allowing women to recognize their collective struggles and aspirations.

These dynamics, though historically marginalized accounts, can be understood as precursors to the more acknowledged and established female public sphere in contemporary Iranian society. By examining these films through the lens of female identification and spectatorship, this research underscores the potential of cinema to create spaces where women can speak to and for one another, challenging the patriarchal frameworks that sought to silence them. Through the empathic “female look,” *Fīlmfārsī* melodramas offer a powerful lens into the resilience, solidarity, and subjectivity of women, both on screen and off.

