



Marjān and The House is Black: First Two Films by Iranian Women Directors

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June 4, 2025

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From the birth of the Iranian cinema in 1931 until the end of the Pahlavī era in 1979, women played many important roles as actresses, but as directors they only made four films: Marjān (1956), The House is Black (Khānah Siyāh Ast, 1962), The Sealed Soil (Khāk-i Muhr-Shudah, 1978) and Maryam and Mani (Maryam va Mānī, 1979). The movie Marjān, which was produced eight years after the ‘rebirth’ of Iranian cinema, was the first feature film directed by a woman in the history of Iranian cinema.¹ Shahlā Riyāhī (1927-2019), Marjān’s director, had previously acted in film and theatre. The House Is Black was directed by former-known poet Furūgh Farrukhzād (1934-67) in 1962. The House is Black was also the first Iranian documentary film directed by a woman. The Sealed Soil, produced in 1978, was the third movie directed by an Iranian woman. Marvā Nabīlī directed the movie in southwest of Iran in just six days with non-professional actors. Before the 1979 Revolution, she migrated to the United States, where her movie was screened in 1978. Thus, this film was never screened in Iran.² Maryam and Mani was the fourth film that was directed by a woman during the Pahlavī era. Kubrā Sa’īdī, artistically known as Shahrzād directed the film in 1979. but it was not screened in Iran until two years after the 1979 Revolution.

This article considers the film Marjān to be highly significant, as it was the first film directed by a woman in Iran. It also regards The House Is Black as important, not only because it was the second such film, but also because it was the first docu-

mentary directed by an Iranian woman. In this article, the two aforementioned films are examined comparatively through a historical approach.

Literature Review

So far, no research has been devoted to a comparative study of the films directed by Shahlā Riyāhī and Furūgh Farrukhzād. However, there are some papers that have compared Furūgh's poems or thoughts with those of others. For instance, Ruqayyah Bahādūrī has studied the concept of mortality and immortality in Furūgh's poems and one of Andrei Tarkovsky's movies.³ Additionally, in their joint-authored paper, Mahbud Fāzilī and Shahlā Jalālvandī have compared Furūgh's views of men and gender in her poems with Sādiq Hidāyat's view of women and gender in his works.⁴ In another joint article, Zaynab Mīrzāyī and Fātimah 'Itā'at also compare the ideas of Furūgh Farrukhzād and T.S. Eliot.⁵ All of these papers have only studied Furūgh's literary and poetic persona in comparison to others, despite her having directed a significant film (The House is Black), which should be studied comparatively with the notable film Marjān produced some years earlier.

In the case of Shahlā Riyāhī, there has been only one study about her, which was partly comparative. In "Motherhood and Coyness," Bihzād 'Ishqī analyzes and examines the figure of the Iranian mother in pre- and post-revolutionary cinema, focusing on the performances of Shahlā Riyāhī.⁶ In this article, in addition to Shahlā, 'Ishqī also mentions Sūsan Taslīmī, Nādirah, Īrān Daftarī, and some other actresses before and after the 1979 Revolution. Apart from this article, there are some books that generally deal with Riyāhī and her works. For instance, Gulnūsh Umīd and Jamāl Umīd mention her theatre, film, and television performances in their joint book.⁷ The same information is provided by Murtaẓā Sayyid Muhammadī in his book about Iranian directors.⁸

¹The year '1931' in which the first Iranian film was produced, is called the birth of the Iranian cinema. Nine Persian movies were produced from 1931 until 1937. But no Persian movies were produced from 1937 to 1948 (to know about the causes of this production discontinuance, See Musa Khamushi, "Causes of the Production discontinuance of Iranian Films During 1937-1948," Quarterly Review of Film and Video (August 2019): 1-13. The year '1948' in which Iranians started to produce movies again, is called the Rebirth of the Iranian Cinema.

²Hamīd Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 73.

³See Ruqayyah Bahādūrī, "Mutāla'ah-yi tatbīqī-i maḥmūm-i marg va jāvdānāgī dar shi'r va sīnimā (murid-i mutāla'ah: shi'r-i Furūgh va sīnimā-yi Tārkhfīskī)," *Fasl-nāmah-'i 'ilmī-pazhūhishī-i Naqd-i Adabī*, year 12, no. 47 (Fall 2019): 35-61.

⁴See Mahbud Fāzilī & Shahlā Jalālvandī, "Bāztāb-i nigāh bih jins-i mukhālīf dar āsār-i Sādiq Hidāyat va Furūgh Farrukhzād," *Fasl-nāmah-'i Pazhūhishhā-yi Adabī*, year 10, no. 42 (January 2014): 81-112.

⁵See Zaynab Mīrzāyī & Fātimah Tā'at, "Barrasī-i afkār-i mushtarak-i Furūgh Farrukhzād va T. S. Eliot," The 10th International Conference on the Promotion of Persian Language and Literature [Tarvīj-i Zabān va Adab-i Fārsī], University of Muhaqqiq Ardabilī, Ardabil, August 26-28, 2015, 1035-43.

⁶See Bihzād 'Ishqī, "Nāzvāragī va Mādarānagī," *Majallah-i Film* (January 21, 2020): 17-18.

⁷Gulnūsh Umīd va Jamāl Umīd, *Sīnimāgarān-i zan* (Tehran: Nigāh, 2010), 148-149.

⁸See Sayyid Murtaẓā Sayyid Muḥammadī, *Farhang-i kārgardān-hā-yi sīnimā-yi Irān, 1309-1377* (Tehran: Simrū, 1999), 462-464.

⁹Hasan Sharīfī, *Nīm qarn khātīrāt-i sīnimā-yi Irān*, 1st ed. (Tehran: Pashūtan, 2003), 125.

My article aims to fill a gap in Iranian cinema research by comparing two seminal cinematic works by Furūgh Farrukhzād and Shahlā Riyāhī.

Marjān and The House Is Black

Perhaps Shahlā Riyāhī did not initially consider directing a film when she received the screenplay of *Marjān* from Manūchihr Kaymarām, a friend of both Shahlā and her husband, Ismā'īl Riyāhī. Kaymarām had given her the screenplay to review and provide feedback. Shahlā liked the screenplay and particularly the leading role of its girl.⁹

Director	Shahlā Riyāhī
Producer	Shahlā Riyāhī
Scriptwriter	Manūchihr Kaymarām
Actors	Muhammad 'Alī Ja'farī, Shahlā Riyāhī, Ahmad Qadakchiyān
Release Year	1956
Running Time	90 minutes

The plot of the film revolves around a Gypsy tribe that sets up camp on the outskirts of a village. *Marjān's* father (Ahmad Qadakchiyān) who is a member of the tribe, steals sheep under the pressure of poverty and hunger. Hamīd (Muhammad 'Alī Ja'farī), the young teacher of the school, arrests and imprisons



him in one of the school rooms. Marjān (Shahlā Riyāhī), while visiting her father who is imprisoned in the school, becomes acquainted with the teacher, and this leads to a mutual fondness between them. Hamīd releases the father and takes him into his own care. The following year Hamīd has to move to a city because of a formal ordinance. Marjān and her father return to their tribe too. Marjān who is fond of Hamīd, leaves her tribe to go to the city in order to find Hamīd; but she fails to do so. Marjān finds a job in a hospital as a nurse. Long after, Hamīd, now married, brings her wife to the same hospital for childbirth. Seeing them, Marjān decides to kill his wife; but she changes her mind and commits suicide by injecting the toxin.¹⁰ Shortly after the release of the movie Marjān, scenes of dances and singing of Mahvash (A famous dancer in Pahlavī time) were added to it and the end of the film also changed. In the new ending, she doesn't commit suicide and returns to her tribe!¹¹

¹⁰Ghulām Haydarī, *Films-hinākh-t-i Īrān, 1309-1340* (Tehran: Daftar-i Pazhūhish-hā-yi Farhangī, 1994), 129.

¹¹Ahmad Amīnī, *Sad film-i tārikh-i sinimā-yi Īrān* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangī-Hunarī-i Shaydā, 1993), 36.



Figure 1: The names Yāsamin and Mahvash are listed as the singers in the film Marjān.

¹²Muhsin Sayf, *Kārgardānān-i sīnimā-yi Īrān az Ugāniyāns tā imruz (az 1309 tā 1376)*, vol. 1, 1st ed. (Tehran: Kānūn-i Farhangī-Hunarī-i Īsārgārān, 1998), 523-525.

These changes could attract more audience to movie theaters. Including a performance by a well-known singer like Mahvash, along with altering the film’s tragic ending, might have contributed to drawing larger audiences to theaters. The film *Marjān* had a deeply sentimental and tender mood, and despite its somewhat weak structure, it featured remarkable and valuable elements as the first directing effort by a female filmmaker.¹²

Six years after the movie *Marjān*, another movie titled *The House Is Black* was directed by another woman in a very different atmosphere. *The House Is Black* was not a feature film; but a 22-minute documentary one. The idea to make a movie for the lepers came from Ibrāhīm Gulistān. It all started when at the request of *Kayhān* newspaper, one of the *Gulistān Film Studio*’s members made a short news film about Lepers of Mashhad. This motivated Gulistān to think about making a good film about them. Via one of his friends, Gulistān made a connection to board of directors of ‘Association of Helpers to Lepers’ to consult about making such a movie. After his agreement with the board, Furūgh traveled to Tabriz for a few days in 1962 to investigate a leper colony in the region and its inhabitants, in order to make the necessary arrangements for her film.

Table 2: The House Is Black	
Director	Furūgh Farrukhzād
Producer	Ibrāhīm Gulistān
Writer	Furūgh Farrukhzād
Editor	Furūgh Farrukhzād
Release Year	1962
Running Time	22 minutes



A few months later, in the same year, Furūgh traveled again to Tabriz, accompanied by three people, to spend time among the lepers. She approached the outcast lepers there and was able to gain their trust. From then on, they easily stood in front of the camera and she was able to return to Tehran after two weeks of hard working.¹³ In addition to directing the film, she was the writer and the editor too.¹⁴



Figure 2: Furūgh Farrukhzād directing *The House Is Black*.

The film *The House Is Black* featured a text recited by Gulistān, with much of it delivered poetically by Furūgh Farrukhzād. Furūgh mostly used Book of Job, Psalms and Book of Jeremiah to write her film's text. All the three books are among the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament.¹⁵ She recited the film's text in a very, pleasant and passionate intonation.

Shahlā Riyāhī and Furūgh Farrukhzād

The movie *Marjān* (1956) was directed by Shahlā Riyāhī. Riyāhī was born in 1926 with the original name of Qudrat al-Zamān Vafādūst. She began acting in theater productions in 1944—her first role being in the play *Siyāsāt-i Hārūn al-Rashīd*—at a time when women in acting faced significant challenges. Continuing her artistic path, she gained fame as one of the most promi-

¹³Pūrān Farrukhzād, *Kārnamah-yi zanān-i kārā-yi Īrān (az dīrūz tā imrūz)*, 1st ed. (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 866.

¹⁴Jamāl Umīd, *Tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān, 1279–1357* (Tehran: Rawzanah, 1995), 866.

¹⁵Muhammad Tahāmī-Nīzhād, *Sīnimā-yi mustand-i Īrān: 'arsah-yi tafāvut-hā* (Tehran: Surūsh, 2002), 57.

¹⁶Muhsin Sayf, *Kārgardānān-i sīnimā-yi Irān az Ugāniyāns tā imruz (az 1309 tā 1376)*, vol. 1, 1st ed. (Tehran: Kānūn-i Farhangī-Hunarī-i Isārgārān, 1998), 523.

¹⁷Hasan Sharīfī, *Nīm qarn khātīrāt-i sīnimā-yi Irān*, 1st ed. (Tehran: Pashūtan, 2003), 124-125.

¹⁸Pūrān Farrukhzād, *Kārnāmāh-yi zanān-i kārā-yi Irān (az dirūz tā imrūz)*, 1st ed. (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatraḥ, 2002), 599.

ment theatre actresses. Then, at the invitation of Mu'iz al-Dīn Fikrī (one of the founders of the Iranian cinema), Shahlā for the first time acted in a feature film titled *Golden Dreams* (*Khvābhā-yi Talā'ī*, 1951).¹⁶ Acting in the movies *At a Glance* (*Yak Nigāh*, 1952), *The Thief of Love* (*Duzd-i 'Ishq*, 1952), *Halfway through Life* (*Nīmāh-rāh-i Zindagī*, 1953), *The Sinner* (*Gunāhkār*, 1953), *The Girl on the Way* (*Dukhtar-i Sar-i Rāhī*, 1953), *The Shepherd Girl* (*Dukhtar-i Chūpān*, 1953), *The Familiar Face* (*Chihrah-yi Āshnā*, 1952), *For You* (*Barāyi Tū*, 1955) and *Mother's Kiss* (*Būshāh-yi Mādar*, 1956), Shahlā affirmed her place in Iranian cinema. Prior to directing the film *Marjān*, Shahlā had spent several years acting in Iranian cinema and had occasionally directed theatrical productions. Having acted in films herself, she was practically familiar with the nuances of performance. For instance, she had a basic understanding of how to work with cameras, coordinate camera movement with actors' movements, and utilize the effects of lighting and music. Thus, when Shahlā directed the film *Marjān*, she was acquainted with the know-how of directing, without having had any training in the field.¹⁷ Nevertheless, she was courageous enough to direct a feature film as a woman at a time when Iranian cinema had no precedent for female filmmakers in such roles.

On the other hand, *The House is Black* (1962) was directed by Furūgh Farrukhzād who has been well-known in Iran as a poet rather than an actress or a director. Furūgh al-Zamān Farrukhzād Arākī known as Furūgh Farrukhzād was one of the most beloved female poets of contemporary Iran, born in December 1934 to a father from Tafrish and a mother from Kashan.¹⁸





Figure 3: Portrait of Furūgh Farrukhzād.

Furūgh grew up in a strict family with a military father, but also in a cultured environment that valued education and reading.¹⁹ She became so famous that, by 2013, more than 20 different translations of her poems had been published in the United States alone.²⁰ After her early poetic life in which she composed a collection of poems such as *Captive* (1952), *Wall* (1956) and *Sin* (1975), she found the opportunity to get acquainted with Ibrāhīm Gulistān who was very talented in discovering different people's abilities. For example, he employed Akhavān Sālis as a sound mixer in his studio; Akhavān was a prominent poet of the time.²¹ Observing Furūgh's interest in cinema and its affairs, Gulistān directed her talent to a correct way. He sent her to England to educate in the field of film editing. Being trained there for some months, Furūgh came back to Iran to improve her knowledge in practice too. She traveled to Khūzistān in company of Gulistān and some other members of the Studio to cooperate with them as an assistant director and an editor in making some documentary movies until 1960. In 1961, she edited the documentary *A Fire* (*Yak Ātash*, 1961) directed by Gulistān. Later that year, she traveled to England to study the technical aspects of film production.²² Thus, Furūgh became a film editor at Gulistān Film Studio, although she also undertook various other responsibilities.²³

With two educational trips to England in the field of film pro-

¹⁹Nāsir Şaffāriyān, dir. *Kasī kih misl-i hīch kas nīst: dar-bārah-yi Furūgh Farrukhzād*, (Tehran, 2000, 63 minutes), 00:00:25-00:00:34.

²⁰Parvīz Nāzirīyān, *Guzārī bar zamān* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp, 2013), 57.

²¹Ārash Sanjābī, dir. *Āqā-yi Gulistān* (Tehran, 2017, 65 minutes), 00:00:51-00:00:52.

²²Abbās Bahārī, *Sad chihrah-yi sīnimā-yi Īrān* (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 80.

²³Ārash Sanjābī, dir. *Āqā-yi Gulistān* (Tehran, 2017, 65 minutes), 00:00:51-00:00:52.

²⁴Hasan Sharīfī, *Nīm qarn khātirāt-i sīnimā-yi Irān*, 1st ed. (Tehran: Pashūtān, 2003), 124-125.

²⁵Jamāl Umīd, *Tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Irān, 1279–1357* (Tehran: Rawzanah, 1995), 282.

²⁶Ahmad Amīnī, *Sad film-i tārikh-i sīnimā-yi Irān* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangī-Hunarī-i Shaydā, 1993), 36.

²⁷Ahmad Amīnī, *Sad film-i tārikh-i sīnimā-yi Irān* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangī-Hunarī-i Shaydā, 1993), 36.

²⁸Jamāl Umīd, *Tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Irān, 1279–1357* (Tehran: Rawzanah, 1995), 280.

²⁹Ahmad Amīnī, *Sad film-i tārikh-i sīnimā-yi Irān* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangī-Hunarī-i Shaydā, 1993), 36.

³⁰“Marjān,” *Ittilā'āt*, year 31, no. 9127 (September 27, 1956), 13.

duction, practical experience as an assistant director on several documentary films, and substantial expertise in film editing, Furūgh was in a stronger position than Shahlā to direct a film. Although Shahlā had much more experience in acting when she started to direct Marjān, She had only some practical experience with directing, without having attended any formal educational classes, or even having had at least any experience as an assistant director in cinema.²⁴

Reflection in the Press

Following its screening in various cinemas, Marjān became the first film to provoke a stark confrontation between journalists and artists with opposing views. This event, however, did not work in the film's favor.²⁵ The first criticism about the movie was written by Parvīz Nāzirīyān, one of the famous critics of the time. Nāzirīyān sharply criticized the film, considering the omission of the director's name on its poster to be a major weakness.²⁶ Nāzirīyān, seemingly trying to provoke a press uproar, later claimed that, according to his inquiry, a highly positive article about Marjān, published in the magazine *Bamshād*, had been written by the film's director, Shahlā Riyāhī. This claim led to a war between Nāzirīyān and Shahlā Riyāhī.²⁷ Shahlā decided to respond to his claims, but the newspapers refused to publish her statement. As a result, she chose to publish her response in an advertising column.²⁸ The press disputes surrounding the film continued, and another critic of the time, Bābak Sāsān, also wrote a negative review of the movie.²⁹ However, some newspapers like *Ittilā'āt*, *Dunyā-yi Jadīd*, *Tihirān Musavvar*, *Bamshād*, *Pust-i Tihirān*, *Kayhān*, *Āshuftah* and *Khandanīhā* praised the movie on several occasions.³⁰ It is hard to believe that all these publications wrongly supported Shahlā and praised her film. If she had been influential enough to publish a positive piece about her film in *Bamshād*, as Nāzirīyān claimed, she would not have needed to use an advertising column to respond. Instead, she could have published her response in one of the aforementioned newspapers.





Figure 4: Film still of Shahlā Riyāhī in Marjān.

It seemed that these press clashes were more related to those who disliked Muhammad 'Alī Ja'farī (the film's first actor) than to the film itself. When Ja'farī, a popular theater actor, entered the film industry and took on his first acting role in Marjān (which, as expected for a first film performance, had some flaws), he unknowingly gave his rivals an opportunity to criticize him as much as they could. In this turbulent situation, Hūshang Kāvūsī, a cinema critic and head of the Iranian Cinema Writers Association, also criticized the movie, making the film's situation even more desperate.³¹ The screening of the movie began on September 6, 1956, at Diana Cinema and ended on October 2, 1956, at Khurshīd Cinema.³² That is to say, Marjān was screened for approximately 45 days (though not continuously) in theaters. Although the movie performed well at first, its sales gradually declined. Overall, Marjān wasn't very successful at the box office.³³ One of the factors behind the low sales can be attributed to the dispute between critics and artists in the press. In this way, the movie became a victim of the conflicts among some critics and artists, so that Shahlā, due to her frustration, negative experience with critics' reviews, and perhaps her fragile spirit, did not appear in any other films for four years and never directed another film in her life.

³¹Ahmad Amīnī, *Sad film-i tārikh-i sinimā-yi Irān* (Tehran: Mu'assasah-yi Farhangī-Hunari-i Shaydā, 1993), 36.

³²"Ākharīn taghyīrāt dar barnāmāh-yi sinimā-hā," *Ittilā'āt* (September 6, 1956): 13; "Ākharīn taghyīrāt dar barnāmāh-yi sinimā-hā," *Ittilā'āt* (October 2, 1956): 15.

³³Gīsū Faghfūrī, *Sarguzasht-i sinimā dar Irān* (Tehran: Nashr-i Ufuq, 2014), 40.

³⁴Muhammad Tahāmī-Nizhād, *Sīnimā-yi mustand-i Īrān: 'arsah-yi tafāvut-hā* (Tehran: Surūsh, 2002), 55.

³⁵Muhammad Tangistānī, *Shahrvand-i jahān* (London: H & S Media, 2015), 145.

³⁶Hamid Naficy, *Film-i mustand*, vol. 2 (Tehran: Dānishgāh-i Āzād-i Īrān, 1979), 344.

³⁷Jamāl Umīd, *Tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Īrān, 1279–1357* (Tehran: Rawzanah, 1995), 846-847.

The situation was completely different for *The House Is Black*. The movie was screened at Sa'dī Cinema in Tehran, and like other films, it received both positive and negative opinions.³⁴ Of course, some had only negative views, seeing the movie as a sort of exploitation of the lepers, with the filmmaker benefiting more than anyone else.³⁵ But there was no backlash like with *Marjān*, and overall, the positive opinions about the movie outweighed the negative ones. Although Hamīd Naficy first pointed out the film's defects, he was also among those who praised it and generally supported it.³⁶ Kāvūsī, who had previously criticized *Marjān*, also commented on *The House Is Black*. In a relatively long article, he discussed both the positive and negative aspects of the film from his perspective, and ultimately ended by praising Furūgh's film.³⁷ It's possible that, after six years since *Marjān*'s release, critics changed the way they judged another film directed by a woman. Perhaps critics like Kāvūsī, who had seen the impact of their criticism on *Marjān*, took a different approach this time.

Financial Support

One of the factors that led to Shahlā's failure in her first directing experience, and her subsequent decision not to pursue it again, was the insufficient financial and economic support. According to her words, the movie *Marjān* was not produced with enough funds and was made with the financial help of one of her husband's friends. The movie was produced with a few actors and mostly in free spaces among the nomads who commuted near the city of Tehran, which consequently lowered the transportation costs for the film crew. The classroom scene was filmed in one of the Iran Film Studio's rooms. The scenes of the hospital and the gendarmerie were filmed at real locations. During the movie's screening, while the box office performance was not as good as she had expected, some scenes of song and dance were added to the film in an attempt to recover the main investment. However, the film's financial problem was not resolved with these scenes, and after its failure at the box office,



Shahlā sold Marjān to a film company to compensate for her financial loss.³⁸

On the other hand, Furūgh faced no financial problems with her movie *The House Is Black*, thanks to the Gulistān Film Studio and its financial backer, the Iranian Oil Consortium. Before entering the film industry, Ibrāhīm Gulistān was a photographer and a writer. He began his cooperation with the Iranian Oil Consortium in 1953, and with its financial support, he was able to establish the ‘Gulistān Film Studio,’ whose equipment remained in use until 1965.³⁹ In terms of film production equipment, Gulistān Film Studio was clearly head and shoulders above all other filmmaking studios in Iran. Most of the films produced by his studio were commissioned by the Iranian oil companies.⁴⁰ Thus, significant sums were injected into the studio. Furthermore, Gulistān knew how to secure funding for film production. Since making a movie like *The House Is Black* was expensive, Gulistān proposed that the ‘Association of Helpers to Lepers’ cover half the cost, with Gulistān Film Studio covering the other half, provided that the studio would have complete freedom in how to make the film with a humane message. The film cost 108,000 tomans, of which 50,000 tomans was paid by the ‘Association of Helpers to Lepers,’ and the rest was covered by Gulistān.⁴¹ Ibrāhīm Gulistān had settled the financial aspect of *The House Is Black* before Furūgh began making it.⁴² Gulistān Film Studio financially supported Furūgh’s film, while Āriyā Film, the studio that produced Marjān, was unable to do so for Shahlā’s film.⁴³

Honors and awards

In the year Marjān was produced, there were no film festivals in Iran to select the best films, and Iranian movies had not yet participated in foreign film festivals. Therefore, Marjān received no awards or honors. However, it is worth mentioning that the newspaper *Ittilā’āt* ranked films as excellent, very good, good, or medium based on the number of stars.⁴⁴

³⁸Hasan Sharīfī, *Nīm qarn khātīrāt-i sīnimā-yi Irān*, 1st ed. (Tehran: Pashūtān, 2003), 127-128.

³⁹Jamāl Umūd, *Tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Irān*, 1279–1357 (Tehran: Rawzanah, 1995), 842-843.

⁴⁰Abbās Bahārī, *Furūgh Farrukhzād va sīnimā* (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2017), 71-72.

⁴¹Bīhrūz Jalālī Pīndarī, ed., *Furūgh Farrukhzād: Jādū-yi jāvdānagī: shāmil-i nāmāh-hā, musāhibah-hā, maqālāt, dāstān-vārah-hā va khātīrāt-i Furūgh* (Tehran: Murvārīd, 2015), 234.

⁴²Bīhrūz Jalālī Pīndarī, ed., *Furūgh Farrukhzād: Jādū-yi jāvdānagī: shāmil-i nāmāh-hā, musāhibah-hā, maqālāt, dāstān-vārah-hā va khātīrāt-i Furūgh* (Tehran: Murvārīd, 2015), 234.

⁴³Ghulām Haydarī, *Fīlms-hīnākht-i Irān, 1309–1340* (Tehran: Daftar-i Pazhūhish-hā-yi Farhangī, 1994), 129.

⁴⁴“*Arzish-i har yak az film-hā*,” *Ittilā’āt*, year 31, no. 9123 (September 22, 1956): 9.

⁴⁵“Tirās-i Sīnimā Diyānā – Sīnimā Khurshīd-i Naw,” *Ittilā’āt*, year 31, no. 9116 (September 13, 1956): 9.

⁴⁶“Marjān,” *Ittilā’āt*, year 31, no. 9127 (September 27, 1956): 13.

Table 3: Rank of the Movies	
Number of Stars	Its meaning
1	Medium
2	Good
3	Very Good
4	Excellent

The movie *Marjān* was given a rating of two stars, indicating that it was considered a ‘good’ film according to the newspaper’s ranking system. According to *Ittilā’āt*, *Marjān* had an ordinary screenplay that was somewhat better than those of some other Iranian films, but it did not demonstrate any significant superiority. The film’s strengths lay mainly in its cinematography and, to some extent, in the lead performances by *Shahlā Riyāhī* and *Muhammad ‘Alī Ja‘farī*.⁴⁵ Of course, in the early days of the movie’s screening, many newspapers responded differently. *Ittilā’āt* (the same newspaper mentioned above), along with other journals such as *Dunyā-yi Jadīd*, *Tih-rān Musavvar*, *Bamshād*, *Pust-i Tih-rān*, *Kayhān*, *Āshuftah*, and *Khāndanīhā*, welcomed the film and highlighted its positive features.⁴⁶

Around sixty years after the production of *Marjān*, *Shahlā Riyāhī* was honored at a ceremony. She was invited, and some scenes from *Marjān* were shown to the audience during the public screening of the film *Night Shift* (*Shīft-i Shab*, 2015), directed by *Nikī Karīmī*, in 2015. *Karīmī* praised *Shahlā Riyāhī* as Iran’s first female director and described her decision to direct a film in 1956 as a taboo-breaking act at the time.⁴⁷ However, *Shahlā*—who was 88 years old at the time of the ceremony and suffering from Alzheimer’s disease—was not fully aware of the



event (perhaps a little too late to be honored as the first female director). Nevertheless, although the film *Marjān* received no official awards, it deserves to be remembered with honor as the starting point for women directing films in Iran.

On the other hand, *The House Is Black* was accepted into the 16th Cannes Film Festival in 1963. However, one day before the festival began, Ibrāhīm Gulistān sent a telegram to the festival's secretariat, withdrawing the film from competition. He never explained his reasons for the withdrawal.⁴⁸ Subsequently, *The House Is Black* participated in a German documentary film festival and won the festival's grand prize. This festival was dedicated exclusively to documentaries that had not participated in other festivals.⁴⁹ In addition to this award, news of another award for the movie at the International Short Film Festival Oberhausen was published in newspapers in 1963.⁵⁰ The film won the grand prize among sixty-five of the best documentary films from around the world at the festival.⁵¹ The movie *The House Is Black* gained such widespread fame outside Iran that, after Furūgh's death, the organizers of the 14th Oberhausen Short Film Festival (held from March 31 to April 6, 1968) named the grand prize for documentary films the "Forough Farrukhzad Memorial. Prize." The festival's slogan was taken from the opening lines of the movie;⁵² recited in Gulistān's voice: "There is no shortage of ugliness in the world. If man closed his eyes to it, there would be even more. But man is a problem solver."⁵³ Since then, *The House Is Black* has been frequently screened at various foreign film festivals, such as the Chicago International Film Festival in 1997, and has been broadcast on television in many different countries as well.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Shahlā Riyāhī made her film only eight years after the 'rebirth' of Iranian cinema—a time when the industry was still grappling with major limitations. Her achievement, given these circumstances, is especially noteworthy. However, critics' negative

⁴⁷See Mustafā Imāmī's eight-minute report on the public screening ceremony of the film *Night Shift*.

⁴⁸Jamāl Umīd, *Tārīkh-i sīnimā-yi Irān, 1279–1357* (Tehran: Rawzanah, 1995), 866.

⁴⁹Bīhrūz Jalālī Pindarī, ed., *Furūgh Farrukhzād: Jādū-yi jāvdānagī: shāmil-i nāmāh-hā, musāhibah-hā, maqālāt, dāstān-vārah-hā va khātīrāt-i Furūgh* (Tehran: Murvārīd, 2015), 232-233.

⁵⁰Pūrān Farrukhzād, *Kārnamah-yi zanān-i kārā-yi Irān (az dīrūz tā imrūz)*, 1st ed. (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2002), 602.

⁵¹Bīhrūz Jalālī Pindarī, ed., *Furūgh Farrukhzād: Jādū-yi jāvdānagī: shāmil-i nāmāh-hā, musāhibah-hā, maqālāt, dāstān-vārah-hā va khātīrāt-i Furūgh* (Tehran: Murvārīd, 2015), 233.

⁵²Abbās Bahārīlū, *Furūgh Farrukhzād va sīnimā* (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2017), 58.

⁵³Furūgh Farrukhzād, dir. *The House is Black* (Tehran: Gulistān Film Studio, 1962, 22 minutes), 00:00:01.

⁵⁴Abbās Bahārīlū, *Furūgh Farrukhzād va sīnimā* (Tehran: Nashr-i Qatrah, 2017), 58.

⁵⁵Bihruz Jalali Pindari, ed., *Furugh Farrukhzad: Jadu-yi javdānagi: shāmil-i nāmāh-hā, musāhibah-hā, maqālāt, dāstān-vārah-hā va khātirāt-i Furugh* (Tehran: Murvārid, 2015), 241.

reactions—and perhaps Shahlā’s fragile morale—led to an unfortunate outcome for Iranian cinema: the end of her career as a director. The world of Iranian cinema can be grateful that Shahlā Riyāhī eventually returned to acting, after having completely withdrawn from the industry for four years. On the other hand, Furugh Farrukhzād was a young and gifted woman whose presence was a true gift to Iranian cinema—thanks in large part to the pivotal role played by the Gulistān Film Studio. By participating in filmmaking and film editing courses in England, Furugh Farrukhzād laid a strong foundation for her career in cinema. Although *The House Is Black* was a documentary rather than a feature film, it marked an impressive beginning. In addition to being a pioneering documentary in the context of women’s filmmaking, the film—through its international recognition—also served as an inspiring model for women aspiring to direct, even in the realm of feature films, during the Pahlavī era. As Furugh Farrukhzād clearly stated in a 1964 interview, she was eager to direct additional films as well.⁵⁵ However, a sudden and tragic event, which led to her untimely death on February 13, 1967, at the age of 32, brought an abrupt end to her cinematic career. Despite the significant contributions of these two women to Iranian cinema through their making of *Marjān* and *The House Is Black*, it seemed that Iranian women were generally not inclined to pursue filmmaking.

The financial aspect of film production was certainly an important factor. Furugh Farrukhzād’s notable work was created when financial arrangements had already been made. At that time in Iranian cinema, it was uncommon to find all the necessary elements—such as financial support, motivation, interest, and knowledge of film directing—in a woman wishing to direct a film. Many male directors of the era also lacked these resources. It was only in the final years of the Pahlavī era that two other women, Marvā Nabīlī and Kubrā Sa’īdī (Shahrzād), directed the films *The Sealed Soil* and *Maryam and Mani*, respectively. While this paper does not address the works of Nabīlī and Shahrzād, they deserve a separate study to explore their films and careers.

