The Films of Rakhshan Banietemad

A Gateway into the Representation of Women in Iranian Cinema

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Abstract

This thesis explores film director Rakhshan Banietemad's films as a gateway into the representation of women in Iranian cinema. Looking at a distinctive Iranian filmmaker, I examine the visualisation of women, their stories, experiences and bodies since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 to present. In addition, my work focuses on the importance of cinema as an agent for social change, thinking about how films actively shape the dialogue for resistance in a place like Iran. Divided into four chapters, this dissertation relies on a diverse methodological approach, using films as case studies to think about gender politics on the Islamic screen. The first chapter 'zooms' in and relies on a focused character study to establish Banietemad's complex treatment and representation of women. In the second chapter, I look at the depiction of love as taboo, and the possibilities of the cinematic form in combatting censorship restrictions to bring ideas around sexual desire to the screen. The third chapter turns to motherhood and its portrayal in Banietemad's films, looking at how the role is challenged to complicate the stereotypical notions and binaries often associated with the mother figure. The final chapter of the thesis considers the idea of the collective. Here, I examine the role of storytelling as a mode of survival. In addition, throughout the thesis, I emphasise the significance of Banietemad's resistance and activism. Despite social, political and cinematic restrictions, she chooses to remain in Iran. And finally, I content that Banietemad's depiction of gender politics creates a space for wider criticism of Iran's social and state politics. Her films I argue offer a bold criticism of Iran's systems of power, but also through a complex and refreshing representation of women characters, these films dismantle the stereotypes associated with the non-Western/Muslim woman for an international audience.

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This thesis has been very close to my heart. It has taken me from my adopted home Canada to the University of East Anglia in England. Mostly, my research has afforded me the privilege to immerse myself in the artistic contributions of my birth country Iran. Such a journey requires academic and emotional labour, and for both, I have many people to thank.

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INTRODUCTION

> Cinema isn't my job; cinema is my life. Not that I am fascinated by cinema per se. Rather, cinema is a tool that visualizes and brings to the screen my concerns for my society and my country. Art for the sake of art has no meaning to me. Art is a vehicle for raising awareness and producing knowledge, especially in societies like Iran (Armatage & Khosroshahi 155).

These lines by Iranian film director Rakhshan Banietemad highlight the importance of cinema as a platform for social change in the country, encapsulating the filmmaker's vision and inspiration behind her work. For Banietemad "artistic and cultural works are like water slowly dripping into a boulder until, over time, cracks begin to appear" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 155). In a country governed by restrictions and red lines, artistic expressions are meaningful. Films specifically, play a key role in creating a distinctive space that confronts the nation's social, gender and political issues. Banietemad's cinema has from its inception been concerned and engaged with the social issues of contemporary Iranian society. Focusing on gender politics, the aim of this thesis is to explore her body of work as a gateway into the representation and visualisation of women on the Iranian screen.

Resistance, I argue is central to Banietemad's work, employed as a theme within the cinematic frame of her films, but also as a social and political stance that the director herself adopts. In other words, the way resistance plays out is multi-layered and complex, and reflective of both Iran's social/political context, but also its film industry and the position of women within it. Through her female characters Banietemad challenges the patriarchal structures of Iran, and yet, these women, despite their conditions, display defiance and agency. As this thesis will show, Banietemad's films complicate the role of women in various ways, often engaging with the taboo – all in defiance of the censors. Her approach

to cinema then, as a tool and vehicle for social critique and change, I argue is part of her resistance. Making films that stretch the boundaries of censorship imposed by the Islamic regime and choosing to remain in Iran to make films despite strict guidelines, are a display of her defiance as an artist, activist and filmmaker. Banietemad's extensive body of work, I argue, is fundamental in thinking about the role and representation of women on the post-Revolutionary Iranian screen.

Banietemad's Filmmaking Career (1979 to Present)

Often referred to as the 'First Lady' of Iranian cinema, the significance of Banietemad's body of work is celebrated both at home, as well as on the international stage. She is known for pushing "the censorship codes to the very edge" and considered "to be the foremost female director in Iran" (Whatley 31). The early years of Banietemad's career were devoted to documentary filmmaking, a practice that she continues with, and one that has influenced her cinematic style to this day. Her first dramatic films *Off Limits* (1986), *Foreign Currency* (1988) and *Yellow Canary* (1989) are different in tone to the films that later follow. With her film of 1992 *Nargess,* Banietemad won the Fajr International award for best director, marking her as the first female recipient. As Hamid Naficy points out, "this recognition by the film industry and the official film culture corroborates her status not as a woman filmmaker but as a top Iranian filmmaker" (Naficy "Veiled Voices" 568). In addition, Banietemad's cinematic style and concerns about gender politics and social issues take on a much more explicit tone with *Nargess.* Her feature films that follow, such as *Blue Veiled* (1995), *The May Lady* (1999), *Under the Skin of the City* (2001), *Gilaneh* (2004), *Mainline* (2006) and *Tales* (2014) are bold in addressing and critiquing Iran's gender, social and class politics. In thinking about the visualisation of women, this thesis will explore the ways in which Banietemad's camera confronts issues of gender, femininity, womanhood,

motherhood and resistance.

Any discussion of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema acknowledges the contributions of Banietemad. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to discuss the country's cinema without engaging with Banietemad's body of work. In his book, *Iranian Cinema a Political History,* Hamid Reza Sadr states: "despite the silencing of women in Iranian cinema during the 1980s, three female directors – Rakhshan Bani-Etemad, Puran Derakhshandeh and Tahmineh Milani – were the torchbearers of their gender" (258). He then continues to say, "among them, Bani-Etemad achieved the most consistent body of work, gaining international recognition and winning numerous awards" (258). Even in the limited research produced about the role of women in Iranian cinema, most scholars have acknowledged Banietemad's contribution: her film *Nargess* (1992), which tells the love story between two women and a man - dismantles many of the cultural codes of its time, paving the path for a cinema that began to pay attention to women as complex and central characters. Banietemad "has worked for nearly three decades to shape the history of Iranian cinema in regard to the representation of women, inviting critical conversations about gender politics and women's issues on the Iranian screen" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 142). Yet, no academic research has solely focused on her contribution to the country's cinema of resistance. This thesis, using Banietemad's films as cases studies, will be the first of its kind to explore solely the works of the director, both for their artistic/cinematic value but also for their cultural and political impact.

As this thesis will illustrate, Banietemad plays a significant role in shaping the nation's cinema, especially in regard to the representation of women. Later in this introductory chapter, I will examine the context in which her body of work is produced. Thinking about the evolution of her work, this project is interested in how she operates both within the boundaries of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema, but also how she is a changing

force within these spaces. In considering the depiction of women, this thesis will focus on Banietemad's feature films after 1992, where her works begin to explicitly engage with gender politics and women's issues. Through the exploration of her female characters and her engagement with issues around gender, I contend that Banietemad's films resist the patriarchal structures of her home country Iran, challenging its systems of power. But also, this resistance exists outside of the cinematic frame where, through her body of work and her constant negotiation with the cultural and political boundaries of Iranian society, she questions Iran's state politics.

Why Cinema? The Significance of the Filmic Form

In this thesis, the importance of cinema as an agent for change will also be considered. I will argue that films can actively shape the dialogue for resistance, playing a key role in the way issues around women and gender are foregrounded in public spaces. In her work, Najmeh Moradiyan Rizi looks at the bilateral exchange between cinema and society. It is worth quoting her here at length:

> Every major social and cultural transformation within Iranian society, especially in regard to women, has inspired Iranian cinema. This relationship, however, is mutual and in some cases it is Iranian cinema that energizes Iranian society through its movement for advancement and freedom. This reciprocal interaction has been considerable in the last decade as it is concomitant with cultural and sexual transformations in Iranian society. In recent years, there have been many changes in the life of Iranian youth, especially among women. This young generation is rewriting and redefining the notions of gender and sexuality in Iran (Moradiyan Rizi 1).

As Moradiyan Rizi argues, this reciprocal relationship suggests that cinema is influenced by

various social and political changes in Iran, but also it highlights the impact of cinema on society.

This is especially significant in the case of Iran. As Ziba Mir-Hosseini argues: "in the absence of a free press, cinema came to provide a kind of social critique" ("Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and State" 29). Films, through storytelling, create their own special space that can challenge the status quo and bring to the fore discussions that are ordinarily forbidden on public platforms. This is more pronounced regarding issues around gender and sexuality, because modesty codes, imposed by the government, create rigid binaries between the public and private. Norma Claire Moruzzi discusses these complexities, stating, "for women living in contemporary Iran, the political is personal" ("Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" 89-90). She goes on to discuss how this has led to discussions about women's lives being "peculiarly coded." For Moruzzi, "film is also one of the main vehicles through which the complexities of contemporary Iranian private life has been explored, particularly the complexities of women's lives" ("Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" 91).

Banietemad's films often deal with social issues, including taboo topics such as prostitution and drug addiction, problematising the role of motherhood, class inequalities and gender politics. Incorporated as part of her stories, her bold interaction with these topics and themes is crucial. For a society that masks and even prohibits public discourse around sexuality and social inequality, films bring to the fore these important issues, and function as a tool to raise awareness, and challenge power structures. The importance of cinema as a cultural and political medium also lies in its ability to travel. While Banietemad's work is highly critical of the patriarchal structures of her home country, her films do not legitimise the negative and stereotypical depictions of the Iranian/Muslim woman that often circulates in Western media and film. As Mir-Hosseini argues, the "favourable critical reception" of

Iranian films has "meant that it also reached outside audiences, putting it in a unique position as the alternative face of Iran to the world" ("Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and State" 29). These films then allow a form of self-representation that travels outside the borders of Iran, complicating existing cultural attitudes and promoting a more nuanced understanding of the country and its people.

Contemporary global politics make this crucial. Donald Trump's implementation of Executive Order 13769, or the "Muslim Travel Ban", as it is more commonly known, alongside sanctions on Iran, and widespread Islamophobia, all place even more responsibility on our visual media and highlight the role of artists to challenge tropes and stereotypes. As Veronica Thompson and Manijeh Mannani argue:

> In the face of predominantly simplistic and monolithic representations of Iran as a repressive, profoundly patriarchal, and politically intractable nation full of religious fanatics imbued with a hatred of the West and prone to terrorism, Iranian artists reveal a very different society, one whose cultural traditions are rooted in a lengthy and complex history that sometimes sit uneasily with the demands of modernity (3).

By shedding light on one of Iran's most prominent filmmakers, my aim is to invite an alternative way of thinking that goes beyond the monolithic depictions of Iran and one that challenges the discourse and culture around Muslim women.

With the rise of anti-Muslim and anti-immigrant sentiments, these issues extend beyond the boundaries of Iran. In his book *American Islamophobia,* Khaled A. Beydoun draws on the misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims, arguing that "the lines between news and entertainment media are often blurred, as representations of Muslims in television dramas and on the big screen match the religious and radical profiles of the Muslim terrorists" (103). Similarly, the depiction of Muslim women is problematic. Amy Farrell and Patrice McDermott state:

> The very representation of non-Western woman "in need" constructs and reinforces a narrative in which all that is Islamic/Muslim/non-Western is painted as "uncivilized" and "barbaric," the women are seen as "victims," and Westerners, as providing a "civilizing" effect" ("Claiming Afghan Woman" 51).

These writers draw on how Western media reinforces the negative images of Muslims. This highlights the need for a counter-narrative that challenges the vilification of the "Other." The women in Banietemad's films problematise the image of the oppressed non-Western woman "in need" of a white saviour. While within her narratives, the prominent women characters of Tooba (Global Adineh), Nobar (Fatemeh Motamed-Aria), Nargess (Atefeh Razavi) and Afagh (Farima Farjami) bear the burden of the conditions imposed on them by their societies and its patriarchal systems, these women are never victimised. Instead, they are always shown through their embodiment of strength and defiance. Banietemad's films challenge both the internal politics of Iran, but also the Western framework, offering an alternative narrative and depiction of the non-Western woman. As such, Banietemad's works also grapple with feminist theory and female emancipation.

Challenging Western Feminism

Feminism is a contested term historically, geographically and politically. I am interested here in the way the term, as well as the issues pertaining to women and their representations, is visualised on the Islamic screen, specifically in relation to Banietemad's films. Despite her explicit work on women's issues and gender politics, Banietemad intentionally distances herself from the label. My interview with the filmmaker reveals aspects of her hesitation when it comes to calling herself a feminist:

> The term *feminist* in our society has been subject to confusing interpretations. Apart from progressive groups and intellectuals, it has created an inverted image that

> results in a feeling of disconnect between ordinary people and feminists. My job is to make social films, and what is more important for me is to have trust from the general public and to be able to communicate with them" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 155).

As this thesis will demonstrate, Banietemad's body of work not only centralises women as complex characters with agency, but also, her films dismantle and problematise the patriarchal structures of Iran's social and state politics. As a result, many would read her films as "feminist". Her devotion to women's issues, combined with her rejection of feminism I argue invites critical dialogue about contemporary feminist discourse and movements, which positions her as relevant both nationally as well as internationally.

As a feminist media scholar, myself, an Iranian-Canadian woman, visibly marked by my headscarf, I contest aspects of the mainstream feminist discourse, and argue that many feminist movements have historically, and continue to relegate certain women to the margins. As black feminist scholar bell hooks argues:

> Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the centre, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live on the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences (*Feminist Theory* xvii).

Using hooks, my aim is to rethink the privileged position and consider the margins of Iranian society, which Banietemad's films are, I argue, highly invested in. The goal is to contribute to the efforts of creating a sense of "wholeness" to our feminist movements. In her works, hooks time and again returns to this idea of margins. In her book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* she says,

> I am located in the margins. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as a site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility. This site of resistance is continually formed in that segregated culture of opposition that is our critical response to domination (153).

The description hooks offers of the "margins" can be applied to Banietemad's cinema and the way in which her body of work addresses issues of gender in Iran. As this thesis will demonstrate, her films are invested in the social issues of the country and its marginalised stories. While she rejects the term feminist, Banietemad also says, "I am familiar with women's issues, and through my films and my social status I try to create a path for resolving some of these issues" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 155).

Banietemad's films grapple with gender and class politics in Iran, such that through her characters and narratives, the often-side-lined stories are made central. Not only do the characters in the films display resistance and agency, but also through the filmic form, a public medium, Banietemad brings to the fore issues of gender, class, addiction and sexuality. By doing so, she challenges the patriarchal forces of her country. My project is invested in Banietemad's constant display of resistance. This includes the way she works through the restrictions imposed on her by an Islamic regime that uses fierce censorship laws as its mode of control. But I am also interested in the way Banietemad challenges Western notions of liberation. The overall aim of this thesis is to contribute to the diversifying and de-Westernisation of film and gender studies by widening the film canon, especially in terms of discourses around feminism. Banietemad's body of work sheds light on the creative and political output of the country that stands to critique various forces of power. The implications of the visual culture and its impact both within the cultural boundaries of Iran, as well as the media representations of the Muslim/non-Western woman are central to my

work. In her book *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran,* Nima Naghibi argues:

> Representations of women in contemporary Iranian cinema offer us a glimpse into the challenges women face as they attempt to redefine gender roles from within the limitations imposed upon them by traditional cultural practices as well as by the restrictive laws of the Islamic Republic. These films, I believe, also contest the Western and Pahlavi feminist representations of the veiled woman as voiceless and subjugated (108).

In Iran, cinema functions as a special kind of tool. As Naghibi shows, filmmakers in Iran use the platform afforded by cinema to create their own newly defined space for social and political critique. Banietemad, through her bold confrontation with patriarchal issues, and her rejection of feminism, defies the conditions of her home country, but also rejects the narrative of the "veiled woman as voiceless and subjugated."

While Banietemad rejects feminism on the grounds that it has "confusing interpretations" in Iran, there is no denying that her films are deliberate in their commentary on gender equality and women's emancipation. To suggest otherwise is to misread the films. That said, the filmmaker's rejection of the term cannot be taken lightly, and in our pursuit of feminist scholarship it is crucial that we strive for a feminism that is intersectional and diverse.[1] As well, I have to acknowledge my own position too. While I self-identify as a feminist, I am highly critical of some of the ideas associated with Western feminism that have excluded marginalised voices in a fight for gender equality, and my aim with this thesis is not to denounce feminism but to rethink aspects of the movement through a reading of

[1] The term "intersectional feminism" was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in her ground-breaking article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics" (1989).

Banietemad's films. This project inevitably grapples with topics and ideas that are part of any feminist discourse. Here I am interested in the way in which femininity is negotiated in Banietemad's films, how issues of motherhood, sexuality, and liberation are raised in her cinematic works of post-1992. Also, I am interested in female authority and voice, and how Banietemad potentially challenges the stereotypical depictions of Iranian women both in and outside of the filmic frame. While the filmmaker distances herself from feminist discourse, it cannot be disputed that such questions advance the conversation about gender and its intersection with race and class.

In film studies and beyond, transnational feminism surely remains an area that needs work. Ella Shohat considers what she calls "Euro" feminism, arguing that in "cinema studies what has been called 'feminist film theory' since the 1970s has often suppressed the historical, economic, and cultural contradictions among women" (52). The aim of my project is to bring to this conversation a more diverse representation of some of Iran's historical, economic and cultural attitudes, thinking about how cinema offers a space for resistance against patriarchal and state forces. The exploration of Banietemad's works brings to film and gender studies a localised and contextualised idea of feminism that responds to the specific needs and limitations of Iranian women, from an active position, where their 'saving' is not in the hands of white or Western women. This allows for a deeper and more nuanced consideration of women's movements in Iran – one that honours the "contradictions" (52) to which Shohat refers. An exploration of films such as *Nargess, Blue Veiled* and *Under the Skin of the City* offers a specifically cultural account of Iran's stories that are impacted by significant social and political events such as the Revolution and the War. These films even within the Iranian context dare to enter the margins of the country's society, showing the intersections of gender and class politics.

At a time where Iran is so misunderstood, and its women victimised, the central ideas in Banietemad's stories of self-representation, agency, resistance and voice shed light on the movements happening in Iran, led by Iranian women. This is crucial to the Western perception of Iran and its people, especially women. On the political stage this matters because it reinforces the idea that Iran's fate and politics are in the hands of its people, rejecting ideas of Western occupation and intervention.[2]

The importance of understanding and accepting localised feminisms goes beyond Iran. Looking at the post-9/11 context, Naghibi argues that "we need also to consider carefully how feminist discourse participates in, indeed enables, colonial interventions through the perpetuation of such representations of the suffering Muslim sister in need of rescue or enlightenment" (*Rethinking Global Sisterhood* 143). Films from Iran can challenge and counter this homogenous, stereotypical and often Islamophobic representation of Muslim women. The aim of my doctoral research is to make visible, through Banietemad, the work of Iranian women filmmakers and to complicate what feminism looks like in a non-Western context. Ultimately, I view Banietemad's "feminism"[3] and resistance as a double-edged-sword. The director, throughout her work has consistently been committed to the social issues of her country, problematising through her films systems of power. Gender and class politics are at the heart of her films, and Banietemad boldly engages with societal and cultural taboos, daring to enter the margins of society to shed light on the prevalent issues of Iran. That said, her films and commentary have also always rejected the Western narrative

[2] There are many talks by the Trump administration about the possibilities for Iran. The American government has imposed strict sanctions on the country, which directly impacts the people. Also, the administration has pulled out of the nuclear deal. Under the current American regime, talks of dismantling the regime through Western intervention have climaxed. This is hugely unpopular with the people who live in Iran, who do want change, but oppose Western intervention.

[3] I say "feminism" to bring together both her rejection of the term, but also her commitment to fighting patriarchal structures.

of the Iranian/non-Western woman. As this thesis will demonstrate, her female characters, despite their harsh circumstances, are never victims – they are fighters. She is critical of both the internal and external politics that surround Iran and its women, using her films to tell stories that shed light on both forces of oppression.

Moving Beyond Auteurism: Positioning Banietemad's Body of Work

In discussions of the Islamic Revolution and Iran's post-Revolutionary cinema, Banietemad, whose career is heavily influenced by this significant cultural and political historical rupture, cannot be overlooked. Her films have garnered many awards, both in Iran and from international film festivals. This thesis offers a study of a number of Banietemad's films (and makes references to her body of work more generally). I have deliberately chosen her films of post-1992 (*Nargess, Blue Veiled, Under the Skin of the City, The May Lady, Gilaneh and Tales*) because they explicitly visualise issues around gender politics. That said, the research and study undertaken in this thesis can be applied to Banietemad's other films as well. Her documentary films have shaped her work both in style and thematic interest (an entirely separate and extensive research project on its own). My aim is to closely analyse a selected number of Banietemad's narrative films as case studies. As such, I am interested in how the cinematic platform, through storytelling, enables important issues such as women's sexuality, motherhood, prostitution, class, etc. to be confronted. With the aim to move beyond Banietemad's films, this study is invested and situated within the very complex and turbulent context of Iran's modern history. By looking at a selection of the director's films I want to illustrate the significance of her work in responding to and shaping this history.

Though this thesis offers a study of Banietemad as an author, it is not a conventional auteur study. As argued by Yvonne Tasker: "auteurism privileges the authored text over the complexities of the context" (213). In "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault also states that

"we try, with great effort, to imagine the general condition of each text, the condition of both the space in which it is dispersed and the time in which it unfolds" (208). While my thesis aims to focus on the films of Banietemad, my intention is not to isolate or detach her work from the complexities of the context that have produced her films and that very clearly define and influence her films. In fact, what makes Banietemad's films interesting is the way in which they provide a gateway into the cinematic movements and contexts of post-Revolutionary Iran, especially in relation to gender politics and the representation of women - on and off the screen.

The issue of visibility in discussions of women filmmakers is also relevant to my research. There is a distinction between discussing women in cinema (representation and role) and "women's cinema." The latter, as Alison Butler states: "is a complex critical, theoretical and institutional construction, brought into existence by audiences, film-makers, journalists: a hybrid concept, arising from a number of overlapping practices and discourses, and subject to a baffling variety of definitions" (2). Cinema in Iran and elsewhere continues to be a male-dominated field, and therefore it is important to recognise and celebrate women filmmakers. But, it is also equally important to refrain from reducing films and filmmakers to a category that is based solely on their gender. Furthermore, looking at Banietemad as a woman filmmaker only, and her films as "women's films," would diminish her contribution to Iranian cinema at large. What is even more at stake here, is the risk of suggesting that her commentary on social issues, a commentary that often problematises patriarchal systems, is only a women's issue or battle. Instead, I am much more interested in what Banietemad's work represents within the wider topics of Iranian cinema and female identity. Her films and the range of her oeuvre reflect the changes and movements that Iran and its cinema scene have experienced.

The filmmaker's rejection of the term *feminist* and her unease about being categorised and labelled as a "woman filmmaker" are important**.** The significance of her work is how it responds to and challenges these notions, and how her films operate within these gaps and paradoxes. The fact that Banietemad's films are situated "somewhere between entertainment and art-house cinema, fiction and documentary" (Whitaker 41) has meant that most scholars have found it difficult to define or position her work. Naficy for example describes her style as one that has an "internal tug of war between rebellion and resignation, progressivism and conservatism" ("Veiled Voice and Vision" 574). Whether this is a stylistic choice by Banietemad, or a social stance, it has sparked thoughtful discussions around her films. This reading is however based on binaries – one which my reading of Banietemad's works avoids. I am instead more interested in how Banietemad's films have inspired a serious conversation about what feminism *may* mean and the tensions it embodies. Her films such as *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* for example, propose two contrasting images of motherhood, yet both continue to interrogate and problematise the rigidity of what that role really encompasses – and yet in doing so, both offer and deal with two different storylines and historical moments, where womanhood changes drastically from one to the other.

Also important is Banietemad's distinct visual style and cinematic techniques, which have enabled her to engage further with the social context and conditions of the lives she explores in her films. Hamid Dabashi argues that a 'masculine' narrative dominates the Iranian culture, however, he also points out that there are "feminine exceptions" (*Close Up* 223). For him, Banietemad is such an exception; her "cinema is a visual theorization against that violent metaphysics" (*Close Up* 223). He claims that her films create this counter narrative, this exceptional voice through their documentary and realist film style, which for Dabashi becomes a new "feminist approach." He continues:

> Banietemad's reconstitution of feminine sexuality is not done via shallow feminism. Unlike generations of a supercilious middle-class feminism, she wages a war on patriarchal readings of the body so powerful that no other visual theorist comes close (*Close Up* 224).

This is important because, as Dabashi suggests, Banietemad's films offer a counter narrative not only to the patriarchal domination of Iranian culture and cinema, but also, the mainstream and Westernised reading of feminism all together.

Banietemad's films are important because they visualise and discuss social issues in a certain way. Dabashi and Naficy are correct in recognising that the filmmaker has acquired her own filmic language and style. I agree with Dabashi in that her films offer a counter narrative (most of her films are about characters that are side-lined and marginalised). That said, I think both Dabashi and Naficy's approach is too dependent on binaries (conservative/liberal or feminine/masculine), which are too reductive and neglect the complexities of Banietemad's films. I do not read her films as seeking out space in that way. Providing *Nargess* as an example, Mehrnaz Saeed-Vafa discusses how Banietemad's films are highly critical of society: "the main male character's evil habits of stealing and loving an older female accomplice are presented as a result of social ills and unemployment. The evil is in society, not the characters" (205). I do agree that Banietemad's films offer a complex reading of the Iranian society, along with its legal issues, which holds the system accountable. I also think that her films often escape and transcend beyond the binaries of good versus evil, or chaste versus unchaste. Banietemad's films tend to reject this black-and-white notion of goodness, and instead, through the complexities of her characters, she offers various shades of grey that bring to the screen the under-told stories from the margins of Iranian society. The result of such a technique is the presentation of characters that we

empathise with, and, through the exploration of the unfamiliar, Banietemad's films demystify the taboo and the unspoken.

What marks Banietemad's body of work as significant is the way in which her films occupy a sense of ambiguity and openness, oscillating between different modes of storytelling that cannot be pinned down and defined, and, by so doing, reduced. Through an exploration of her work, I suggest we can appreciate the way in which they continue to respond to Iran's dynamic society. It is her confrontation with the deepest societal struggles, as well as her bold visualisation of the taboo, and her representation of women in all of their diversity that has inspired this project. Despite the variety within her oeuvre, Banietemad's films have constantly remained interested in one thing: social issues. This matters because, while dealing with social issues and struggles, Banietemad's films continue to engage with gender politics. It is this confrontation with patriarchy that makes her work crucial not only to our discussions of women and Iranian cinema, but to cinema and women more broadly. And so, for me, Banietemad's films escape the notion of binaries and boundaries that many scholars have often relied on in describing her work. The existing binaries that are prevalent in her society do not limit or define her work. By rejecting them she offers a space where she discusses issues around gender that go beyond Western ideas of feminism, which then allow her to delve deeper into what she finds problematic about her own society. And despite her rejection of the term *feminist,* Banietemad never shies away from challenging her own society and its patriarchal norms.

Banietemad's films possess a deep awareness of the existing binaries, yet they actively refute them. The suggestion that Banietemad engages in a game of "tug of war" proposes that she actively looks for a space in between the binaries. However, I argue that her films are far more complex and nuanced than that. In an interview she discusses the

challenges and the ways in which she negotiates with the guidelines drawn by the Islamic Republic of Iran:

> I want to point out that there are discrepancies – gaps – between the official line of the Ershad[4] and the reality of film-making in Iran. It is within these gaps that we search for our freedom and try to gain it bit by bit (Rahbaran 134).

I argue that Banietemad blurs the lines conceptually in her films and through her storytelling in the same way that she blurs the lines with the officials. By rejecting binaries and categories such as feminism, she allows herself to say more, especially in the context of Iran where the term is highly contested. Instead of arbitrarily relying on categories and labels, the filmmaker interrogates cultural and political structures in her home country through her films. Her films create space for women's stories, and dare to speak back against the patriarchal powers, systems and institutions of Iran. Banietemad's films do not negotiate with binaries that are often limiting and reductive to begin with and instead her films rely on a mode of storytelling that blurs such lines, offering a new platform for creating dialogue and challenging systems of power. What emerges is a cinema that is deeply engaged with its own social context, and aware of its own limitations. By looking at the vastness and diversity that Banietemad's body of work offers, I want to show how her films provide in-depth interpretations of modern and contemporary cultural and social life in Iran, peeling away layers, complicating and challenging systems of power along the way.

Methodology: Reading Film as Text, Interviews and Historical Context

Many scholars have looked at Iran's post-Revolutionary films, and some have looked at the role of women. My project is unique in its approach to Iranian cinema and my

[4] The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Ershad) is responsible for controlling all media output to ensure all material abides by the values of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

intervention. For my methodology, I employ a triangulation of interviews paired with reading film-as-text and the application of theory, along with a deep contextual, cultural and linguistic understanding of Iran's complexities. I combine a textual analysis of reading 'film as text', as a means to look beyond the politicisation of Iran, with interviews and contextual research. My approach to film is significant because during times of political instability, especially in state-controlled countries, it is through the embedded and implicit messages of artistic expressions and the cinematic form, that a deeper reading of the country's social movements can be learned. I have already discussed the significance of the filmic form, and accordingly my methodology will focus on film as text. That is not to suggest that my research will be divorced from its political context. In a country where directing, producing, acting and even watching a film becomes inevitably associated with its social and national politics, the outcome is fluid, nuanced and certainly complicated. It is the merging of 'art' and artistic expression with forms of activism that places Iran's cinema under a different kind of light – one that stands in a liminal space between overtly political and absolutely mundane. My work considers these complications and nuances, and through an in-depth analysis of Banietemad's film, explores the visualisation of women on the screen.

As such, I want to analyse and examine where the often implicit remarks made by characters take us and how the filmic language itself responds to its surrounding, and, in turn, comments on and challenges the socio-political situation of the country. It is, I think the specificity of film that allows for these subjects, often unspoken and taboo ones, to be visualised and showcased in a place with such strict censorship codes. According to ASL19, the Islamic Republic,

> Has not introduced many regulations in regard to censorship in the past few years. The government has issued only a few acts that, to a minimum extent and in a general manner, outline the codes of censorship. As such, much of the censorship imposed

> is not grounded in specific legislation, and is rather based on arbitrary interpretations of laws and norms (229).

Iranian film scholar Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad also argues: "the state control of Iranian cinema has so far been understood as monolithic and impenetrable by some and as easily outwitted by others." He suggests that both positions "simplify the complex dynamics which have been at work" (54). In comparison to other media platforms in the country, cinema has a unique position, and "the absence of a clearly defined censorship code or a unitary censorship mechanism" opens up space for negotiation and dialogue, pushing against the so-called "red lines" (54). This further supports my approach to Banietemad's films. The text itself is meaningful, and what appears on the screen, as well as what is left out, comment on the realities of gender politics in Iran.

While it is impossible and undesirable to separate the art from its social and political context, I think a closer attention to the cinematic language can offer access to the complexities and cultural codes of Iran. By considering how through various techniques such as editing, lighting or cinematography Banietemad tells her story, films can provide thought-provoking and complex readings of Iranian society and attitudes towards women, sexuality and gender politics more generally. This also includes the treatment of the female body on screen over the years, especially with regards to veiling and framing. It is these urgent changes and shifts in Iranian society and politics that make the visual representation of women such a compelling topic. The female body and her presence on film have often been viewed as a site for "contamination" (Mottahadeh 1). While there is no question that women in Iran must constantly navigate a patriarchal system, there is also no doubt that a continuous and active form of resistance is taking place alongside these oppressions. It is precisely this social condition that makes it crucial for us to 'zoom in' on the country's cinematic movements and productions to witness how it responds to and challenges the

status quo. My readings of the films as texts, and my close analysis of the cinematic language will make this possible.

My project engages with a diverse approach to film and gender politics that treats Banietemad's films as cases studies. By doing so, my work asks larger questions about the representation of women. In addition, my research always considers the historical and contextual backdrop of Iranian society and cinema. My extensive published interview with the director,[5] and my research trip to Iran have also contributed to a deeper understanding of the texts at hand. My connection with the Iranian film industry has enabled me to understand the complexities of cinema in the country. Also, my contact with the cultural codes and my language fluency have aided my work and offered me access to the complex political, economic, historical and social context of the country. I am interested in the exchange between films and culture, and how cinema, and art more generally, provide a platform for resistance and activism**.** Gender politics and the systems of patriarchy that govern the country's public, social and political policies are central to my discussions of Iran and its cinema. My approach to film studies and gender politics in Iran have allowed

[5] In winter of 2016, Kay Armatage and myself conducted an extensive interview with Banietemad over email. The process took several months, where Armatage and I crafted and drafted the questions, which I then translated from English into Persian to send to Banietemad. Her answers were then translated by me from Persian into English. The material was reviewed again by Banietemad's personal translator for accuracy and published by *Feminist Media Histories* in a special issues journal. All quotes taken from the interview have been cited accordingly. On a separate occasion, in winter of 2017, I visited the director in her home office in Tehran where we discussed her work. That interview has been recorded but not published. When our conversation is quoted, I have indicated in the text.

The interview with Banietemad for *Feminist Media Histories* situates her work within the history of women's filmmaking and cinema in a global context. Significantly, it is after conducting and publishing this interview that my research project changed in focus. Initially, I intended for my PhD thesis to explore the works of various contemporary filmmakers and the representation of women. The significance of Banietemad's cinematic history and filmic output since the revolution, paired with the lack of scholarly work on the director encouraged me to write this thesis instead.

me to tune into the way in which cinema negotiates and mediates between the red lines, crossing over to the forbidden places of 'feminism' and women-centric films, commenting on gender politics and challenging patriarchal norms and expectations. Using films as case studies, the chapters in this thesis will offer close readings of Banietemad's cinematic practices and visualisations of her women characters. The significance of her work I think can be further foregrounded with a better understanding of the country's social and political post-Revolutionary shifts. The section to follow will offer an overview of Iran's contemporary and modern history, thinking about the evolution of the female character on the Islamic screen, and positioning Banietemad's work within these shifts.

The Social, Political & Cinematic Context of Post-Revolutionary Iran

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran has led to many political and social changes for the country. The attempt to de-Westernise the nation, and to bring back the lost Islamic identity has meant that the country's cinema, along with other forms of art (music, theatre, dance etc.) were all affected by the Revolution. This of course includes the position of women. In their article "Position of Women in Iran: An Analysis of Pre and Post Islamic Revolution 1979," Sadia Rafigue and Khalid Manzoor Butt draw on the economic, social and political participation of women in society and the state. They discuss how while at first the "1979 Revolution was the result of unity among religious forces, classes, gender and various political organizations" (Butt & Rafique 435), the outcome was something different. Soon after the Revolution's leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, was in power, women were forced into veils and out of public spaces. The consequences of such policies were also felt by the country's film industry.

This section will serve as a brief overview of the various cinematic shifts in the visual depictions and involvements of women on the post-Revolutionary Iranian screen. Here, I

want to demonstrate that while the Islamic Revolution brought with it rigid laws and constraints, filmmakers have shown through various means their resistance and persistence, adapting their work in ways that often challenge the system and negotiates with the redlines of censorship. An overview of Iran's post-Revolutionary social and political events, along with the representation of women and their stories, in a country that attempts to veil and hide them, will offer a contextual backbone to the following chapters, and illustrate the significance of Banietemad's body of work, situating her within the broader cinematic and political movements of contemporary Iran.

While there are many political and cultural events that impact the fate of Iran, it is no easy task to pin down these changes to a single movement, moment or director when we think about films and the shifting representations of women. In other words, mapping these changes is complex and dynamic, and the purpose of this section is to illustrate these complexities. There are a number of collective factors and historical moments such as the Islamic Revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, Mohammad Khatami's presidency, and the Green Movement that have inevitably led to changes in the nation's cinema, especially in regard to the involvement and participation of women both in front of, and behind the camera. Here, I will draw on these key moments, along with references to iconic and key films in thinking about the shifts that take place and the narrative around gender that is told and visualised through this significant platform.

Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema: Women on the 'Islamic' Screen

From the banning of the veil under the Pahlavi monarchy, to the rise of the Islamic regime in 1979, Iran has always been subject to a systemic patriarchy that has practiced its power and domination over women. The main mission behind the Islamic Revolution was

to redefine the nation's values and to redeem and take back the rejected and forgotten Islamic identity. In her book *Sexual Politics of Iran*, Janet Afary discusses the regime's fierce attempts at reinstating Sharia law and segregating public spaces. These laws, she argues "abrogated reforms benefiting women in marriage and divorce, lowered the age of marriage for girls to nine, pursued pronatalist policies, restricted women's employment, and mandated the *hijab* for all women" (Afary 11-12). The fate of the country's cinema was also questioned after the revolution with two possibilities left for consideration: "they could either forbid it (as the Taliban did in Afghanistan 15 years later) or Islamicize it" (Tapper 5). Aware of its immense power, as a political and social tool, the authorities chose the latter.

The newly defined Islamic/Iranian cinematic identity was enforced through strict censorship laws, which mandated that the "media would disseminate and observe Islamic norms and promote the interests of the country" (Egan 48). These constraining laws meant that "women have to appear veiled even in domestic settings; men and women cannot touch, not even husband and wife" (Gugler 10). Agnes Devictor also discusses the regulation of cinema in post-Revolutionary Iran. She states that:

> The 1996 booklet is the most detailed as to what is forbidden: it is not allowed for women to be filmed in close-up, to use makeup, or to wear tight-fitting or colourful clothes; men must not wear ties or short-sleeved shirts unless they are negative characters, no Western music is allowed, no intimate lighting; even the editing must correspond to the Islamic norm (Devictor 70).

Central to these rules that govern Iranian cinema are the role and visualisation of women, which is indicative of the social, cultural and political anxieties of the Islamic regime. In *Displaced Allegories,* Negar Mottahedeh argues that for Khomeini "women's bodies marked the site of contamination. They were the very fissures through which foreign impurities were introduced into the nation" (1). For the Islamic Republic, the female body functions as the

'battleground' upon which the nation's political interests also rest. Through veiling and privatising women, the Islamic regime practices its power and control over women and the nation.

In her book *Words not Swords,* Farzaneh Milani also discusses the impact of gender segregation after the Revolution:

> The cultural significance of an increasingly more rigid separation of men's and women's spaces was multiple and varied. It consigned power, control, visibility, voice, and especially mobility to one social category—men—at the expense of the other—women (Milani 3).

However, despite such efforts, throughout the years, "Iranian women have challenged patriarchal policies and structures" (Sreberny & Khiabany 88). Cinema, I argue is one of the ways in which women challenge and question patriarchal structures and systems of power. Milani argues that in cinema "feminine and masculine territories overlap as the narrative unfolds and the actors perform under the viewers' gaze. Cinema brings men and women together as protagonists, acting partners, and audiences in the theater" (*Words not Swords* 57). And while the inclusion of women in an art form as public as cinema has faced its own set of challenges, today, women play central roles both behind and in front of the camera.

From the "Chaste/Unchaste" to Complex Female Characters

In recent years, Iranian filmmakers such as Jafar Panahi, Asghar Farhadi, Reza Dormishian, along with women directors such as Banietemad, Tahmineh Milani and Pouran Derakhshande have made films that cast women as complex characters. Often these films negotiate with redlines, and even dismiss certain censorship laws. A Character such as Simin

(Laila Hatami) from Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011) for example, who is depicted through her complexity and agency, with her deep-red hair poking from her headscarf, challenges the patriarchal laws of Iran. Visually, Farhadi's camera grants Simin close-up shots, once forbidden by the censors. Dormishian, in *Lantouri* (2016), tells a visually and politically bold story, critiquing gender politics in Iran, drawing attention to acid attacks and violence against women. Recent Iranian films seem to have surpassed certain aspects of the censorship laws such as close-up shots of women and women in makeup for example. Over the years, the representation of women in films, and their role behind the camera have seen significant changes. My contention is that this is as a result of continuous resistance and creativity from Iranian filmmakers, and not as a result of a more lenient government. The same is true of women in public spaces, where "women's play with color or tightness, or the revelation of a shoulder, a belly button, an ankle, or a wisp of hair mark political resistance" (Lili Abu-Lughod 39). Since the revolution, through various means, women have fought to challenge their position in society. The same constant and continuous fight has impacted the country's cinema. The diverse images of women that flood the nation's cinema are as a result of various political, social and cinematic changes.

In its initial years after the Revolution through its newly defined Islamic cinema, women were heavily excluded from the screen, where any attention to their faces, bodies, stories and voices was banned. If women did appear in films, they "generally occupied background roles, partly due to filmmakers wanting to avoid complicated censorship rules" (Chaudhuri *Contemporary World Cinema* 74). However, since the beginning years of the Islamic Republic, the role of women has seen shifts. Maryam Ghorbankarimi identities four stages in "tracing changes in the representation of women in Iranian cinema" (2). These include:

> From the faceless, utterly good (vs. the bad) woman in pre-revolution films, to the even more one-dimensional – almost holy – woman in the cinema of the 1980s, to women who make mistakes and are subjected to hardship the same way that men are, and women who are striving for independence and freedom from the 1990s onward (2).

Shahla Lahiji's "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979," which is at the forefront of debates around women and their representations, also outlines the various shifts that have taken place in Iranian cinema in its treatment of women. Prior to the revolution, as Lahiji argues, female roles were also limited. She argues:

> 'Unchaste dolls' came to dominate the silver screen as the sole cinematic representation of Iranian women. The screen lacked real women – and real men. Iranian films overflowed with fantasy of the most vulgar type, with no sign of aesthetic appeal. It mattered to no-one that, in this display of coarse tactlessness, the vast majority of Iranian women, who were trying to emerge from their conventional social roles and rise to a higher level of social standing, were being victimized (Lahiji 219).

The 'unchaste' image that circulated within Iranian films, though worlds apart from what we would encounter after the Revolution, was still representative of a patriarchal system and a reductive approach and treatment to women and their characterisations, which lacked depth and complexity.

The reorientation of the public sphere in relation to the female body meant that women's visualisation as depicted in cinema would undergo changes after 1979. The Revolution, as expected, altered the fate of women on the screen. Moving from the 'unchaste' to the 'chaste,' the minimal role played by women often consisted of "neutral creatures engaged only in household chores" (Lahiji 222). Naficy states that "to use women,

a new grammar of film evolved, which included women actors being given static parts or filmed in such a way as to avoid showing their bodies" (Naficy, "Islamizing Film Culture in Iran" 46). This was still considered a refreshing change from the very first years after the Revolution where women hardly ever appeared on film. Other characters played by women included the 'bad' and 'faithless,' always represented by a less strict form of *hejab*. Cinematically speaking then, the *hejab* became a form of characterisation. In a cinema where women were hardly represented, their enforced Islamic garment became one with their filmic identity.

For Lahiji, Iranian films have always distorted the image of women. In "Depictions of Women in Iranian Cinema, 1970s to Present," Minoo Derayeh makes a similar argument, stating that two voices are commonly available to women in cinema – one of pre and post-Revolutionary Iran, which is either "silenced and erotic," or "silenced and desexualized" (151). Despite the radical shift in the policies and laws of filmmaking between pre and post-Revolutionary Iran, female characters remain silenced, with the difference that in one period the characters were heavily sexualised and the next desexualised. Both representations were passive, however, wherein women were prohibited to perform in roles that were more complex, active and representative of their roles in society.

In "Transcending the Limitations," Goli M. Rezai-Rashti discusses the significant changes in the role, participation and presence of women in cinema. The increased participation of women lends itself to various interpretations. Some scholars argue that the Islamic Revolution, for the first time ever, brought women's questions and concerns to the forefront of public conversation. Paradoxically, the enforcement of the *hejab* became a catalyst. By 'cleansing' and making the public domain morally acceptable in the eyes of traditional families, women's participation in public life was seen as legitimate and acceptable (Rezai-Rashti 193). There are different elements, such as movement within

public spaces, positions of authority within public life and the use of cinema as a public space that brings to the fore women's issues and stories. The complexities surrounding women's veiling, mobility and the screen will be further explored in the next chapter.

Today, many filmmakers feel obligated to tell a different story (Lahiji 216), which I think is highly suggestive of a cultural shift. The shift that many film scholars have taken notice of, takes place after the Iran-Iraq war where the role and representation of women expands out of the 'good' versus 'bad' binary. In this period, female directors also begin making films, as a form of objection to the ways they have been represented on the screen, which as a result pushed the films towards a more "realistic" and multidimensional depiction of women. Thus, as Lahiji concludes, today in Iran exists "a new approach that is far more progressive than attitudes before the revolution" (Lahiji 225). Ghorbankarimi also outlines two main factors that have "helped shift the screen persona of the Iranian female subject" (2). She argues that the "continuous evolution of the Iranian film industry" is the first factor, and second, "the increase of women's agency in society in general, and in the film industry in particular" (2). The role of prominent women film directors such as Banietemad then plays a crucial role in the way gender politics and women's issues are expressed on the screen.

Banietemad herself, who is recognised as one of Iran's most confrontational filmmakers, in the early years after the Revolution also made films that avoided the complex portrayal of women adopted in her later works.[6] Her first three feature films *Off Limits, Yellow Canary,* and *Foreign Currency* are different in tone and in subject from films she makes later in her career, highlighting and reflecting the film industry at the time. In these

[6] In winter of 2017, on my research trip to Tehran, Iran, Banietemad and I discussed the evolution of the representation of women in her body of work. She states that women's roles in films in the early years after the Revolution were limited, and slowly, through various factors, the portrayal of women began to see changes. Her early films were no exception, the director mentioned.

early films, complex female characters such as Afagh or Tooba are nowhere to be found. And yet, I suggest that despite the vast differences between her earlier works and those she makes later, Banietemad always shows an interest in social issues. The more restrictive social and political climate of filmmaking in the earlier years (1986-89) provides a context that allows for satire and comedy. While she hardly engages with issues around femininity and the complex representation of women, her earlier films still offer commentary on gender politics. Though differently and through different means, her films from the very beginning are concerned with and invested in the social issues of the country, and cleverly rely on a satirical tone to challenge aspects of the society. As a result, even when Banietemad is restricted in representing women, she is nonetheless wary of patriarchy through her representation of men and their fragile masculinity. Turning now to the films of post-1980, my aim is to explore further the depiction of gender politics in war films.

Gender and Iranian War Films

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) that lasted nearly a decade also plays a significant role in shaping Iran's history and consolidating the Islamic Republic. As Roxanne Varzi observes, "the war was also the largest mobilization of the Iranian population and was achieved primarily by producing and promoting a culture of martyrdom based on religious themes found in Shi'i Islam" (Varzi, "Iran's Pieta" 87). Inevitably then, the long years of war have shaped the nation's cinema as well. In her article, "Stories Beyond History: Translations Beyond Nations, Shouleh Vatanabadi discusses the influence of war on literature and films:

> Examples of films and literary works on the subject of the Iran-Iraq war are numerous in both countries. In the case of Iran, from the outset of the war, the media

> of literature and film were active loci for both the official and non-official expressions regarding this event and its impact on society. Many works fall into the general rubric of what is termed as the literature and films of *Defa'e Moghaddas* (the Sacred Defense, the official title given to this war). The war either has informed the central narratives of these works or provided the background and setting for the filmmakers and writers to address the subjects in relation to it (Vatanabadi 179).

Many of the films made and produced during the war years, promoted the regime's ideals, strengthening the Islamic Republic and serving mainly as propaganda (Ghanoonparvar 160).

The films made during these years "focused on war action, reaction, and violence" (Naficy, *A Social History* 24). As Naficy states, these films "resorted to cliché plots, sloganeering, moralizing narratives, and stereotypical and binaries characters. The Iraqi enemy was generally portrayed as incompetent, venal, and heretical, while their Iranian counterparts were represented as devout, idealistic, and heroic" (Naficy *A Social History* 24). In other words, these works cement and reinforce the war genre as an influential one for the Islamic regime. The role of women in these films, as has been the case generally within the war genre, is limited. As Naficy points, "if women were shown, they were grieving family members" (25). While the films made during this period hardly display any progressive images or complex representations of women (or social issues even), the war played a crucial role in shaping the country's cinema. Most importantly, the films "helped to remove the taboo that religious authorities had established and that devout Iranians observed regarding movie theatres and cinema in general" (Ghanoonparvar 160). An industry that was once seen as taboo and 'Western,' was now used as a way to promote Islamic and national ideals. In this way, the war films, however propagandistic, made an important contribution to the development of Iran's film industry.

In addition, despite the genre's gravitation towards films that promoted war and the Islamic regime, there were key films that also challenged such narratives. One of the most significant films from the period (and Iranian cinema generally) is Bahram Beizai's drama *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1986) - a multi-ethnic film starring Susan Taslimi as Na'i performing the film's leading character. In the film, a lone figure, Bashu (Adnan Afravian), who has lost his home and family in the war, finds himself in the Northern part of Iran in rice paddies. Here, Na'i, a local woman, who works the fields finds him and takes him in. Despite their cultural and language barriers, the two develop a bond. For the first time in Iranian cinema, a film relies on a woman character as the agent of its narrative; without her, there is no film. Bahsu's reliance on her, I suggest reinforces her centrality within the narrative. Also, through cinematic techniques, the film visualises Na'i in a way that further centralises her within the narrative, as well as on the screen. As Dabashi contends, "Nai is perhaps Beizai's most illustrious character" (*Masters and Masterpiece of Iranian Cinema* 275). He continues, "the most significant aspect of Nai's character is the fact that she works, that she is part of a labor class, which is the single most important source of her character, culture, autonomy, and authority" (Dabashi *Masters and Masterpiece of Iranian Cinema* 275).

The film's significant and perhaps most iconic visual moment is its introduction to Na'i. The camera offers a striking close-up of her, as she wraps her headscarf around her face, exposing only her bright green eyes, and a few strands of hair. Moruzzi adds that "the close-up first shot of the veiled Soosan Taslimi rising from the field breaks the post-Revolutionary gender taboo by re-centering the camera on the striking eyes of a handsome woman" ("Reflexive Cinema" 119). In addition, this moment reveals the intensity of Na'i's gaze, as she looks ahead, warrior-like, almost reminding us of an image of a super heroine – a woman about to fight (see figure 1). Through her intense and focused stare this shot of

Na'i reverses the idea of the 'male-gaze;' because while she is being looked at through the camera, by staring back, she actively confronts her viewer/camera. This close-up shot is meaningful for a number of reasons: this is the first image through which we are exposed to Na'i, and the image is successful in setting up her character and the important role she is about to represent, both in terms of narrative, but also in relation to gender politics. Additionally, this shot boldly challenges the censorship codes of Iran that prohibit any close-ups of women.

Figure 1: A close-up shot of Na'i from *Bashu! The Little Stranger.*

The film's commentary on war, as well as gender politics through the representation of its female character makes *Bashu* necessary in the context of Iran's cinematic landscape. As Godfrey Cheshire states, the film is a "poignant reminder of the impermanence brought on not only by war but by life's inevitable flux" (*Where Iranian Cinema Is* 42). Beyzai's drama represents a complex reading and portrayal of the Iran-Iraq war, grappling with issues of gender, ethnicity, race and the war itself. Produced during the war years, Beyzai's film focuses on the internal complications and aftermath of the war, without ever glorifying it. While the political context of the film informs our understanding of its plot, the relationships

and characterisations comment on the deeper repercussions of war. In this way, the film is not tied down to its particular historical moment, but rather comments more broadly on the theme of war and deals with issues of race, class and gender politics along the way, marking this film as one of the most influential and even controversial films of early post-Revolutionary Iran.

The war genre broadly (this is the case with Western cinemas as well), excludes any sophisticated or nuanced engagement with issues of gender, or images of women. *Bashu* challenges not only the genre, but also disrupts the phase of Iranian films that are flooded with the images of the "chaste" woman. In the decades since the war, filmmakers continue to use the event to make films, however, the tone of films produced after the war, "distance themselves from state propaganda" (Ghanoonparvar 160) and instead adopt a more "anti-war" tone. Contemporary films about the war such as *M for Mother* (2006) by Rasool Mollagholi Poor, Banietemad's *Gilaneh* (2006) or the recently made film *Villaeiha* (2017) by Monir Gheidi are examples that not only challenge war, but also cast women to bring to the fore some of the realities faced by them during the long years of the Iran-Iraq war. These films also show the continuous consequences of the war and its impact on the everyday lives of these women. The third chapter of this thesis will turn to Banietemad's *Gilaneh* as well as *The May Lady* to discuss the portrayal of motherhood, with consideration to the post-war context of Iran.

Cinema of Reform: Iran Under Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005)

A decade into the Revolution, and the representation of women on the screen begins to see changes. In his book, *Reform Cinema in Iran: Film and Political Change in the Islamic Republic,* Blake Atwood discusses the significant role Mohammad Khatami plays

in shaping Iran's reform cinema, long before he was elected as president. He points out that Khatami's relationship with, and influence over, the film industry "began during his two terms as the minister of culture and Islamic guidance" and "continued during his presidency" (Atwood 16). This was not accidental; indeed, Khatami had a vision for the country's cinema. Atwood continues, "if Khatami's first term as minister of culture and Islamic guidance consolidated the film industry's efforts into a revolutionary cinema, then his second term was the genesis of a reform cinema" (Atwood 17). In *Women, Islam, and Cinema,* Gonul Domez-Colin also points to Khatami's influence, suggesting that films made during his presidency "display a different picture, as if the filmmakers are testing the limits to see how far they can push the relatively relaxed censorship codes" (155).

Key films came out of what Atwood refers to as the "golden period for filmmaking in Iran because the ministry, at Khatami's urging, offered a looser interpretation of its duty to "supervise" film production" (Atwood 17). Banietemad's *Nargess* – a national and international success – grapples with issues of sexuality and the intersection of class and gender. Her subsequent feature film, *Blue Veiled* also brings to the Islamic screen a bold story of love. The two films are made prior to Khatami's presidency, but during his time as the minister of culture. The significance of *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* will be discussed in length in the second chapter of the thesis, where I consider Banietemad's confrontation with the role of women as lovers – a topic considered taboo.

Khatami's presidency in 1997 brought important changes to both social life in Iran as well as the nation's cinema. Many controversial films by Banietemad such as *The May Lady, Under the Skin of the City* and *Mainline* were made during Khatami's presidency. Other examples, which boldly engage with feminist, social and taboo topics, include *Two Women* (1999) by Milani, and Panahi's *The Circle* (2000). Under Khatami, a more open cinema was possible, enabling films that responded to the social conditions of the country,

and filmmakers did not hesitate to take advantage of this new progressive shift. As far as the representation of women is concerned, Panahi's *The Circle* is, I would argue, one of Iran's most radically feminist films, and begs further analysis. I discuss the films in order to provide a context for my focus on Banietemad's work. Films such as *The Circle* make clear that Banietemad was working in a larger context of cinematic change.

The Circle brings to the fore issues of gender politics in a patriarchal society. It does so by casting three female actors as the film's main protagonists, focusing on their stories. The camera follows these women, their journeys, familial relationships and their sisterhood as they escape prison to find themselves once again restricted and imprisoned by societal expectations. As the name suggests, the film portrays the circular and cyclical wheel these women are forced into. Panahi taps into the personal stories of various women as they cross paths and within these stories he introduces issues and themes that are new to the Iranian screen: abortion, addiction, prostitution and crime. The prison becomes a symbolic setting within the film: a place that the young women escape, yet a place that has shaped their identities and experience, preparing them for their lives on the streets of Tehran.

The prison also becomes a symbolic critique of larger issues, and Panahi's way of commenting on gender politics more broadly in relation to the Iranian society. On the one hand, to imagine three young women in jail brings forth its own set of assumptions, but even more importantly, Tehran, the society in which they live and must navigate, functions as its own prison for these women. In the film, we hardly learn about the backgrounds of these women. What connects them in their friendship and sisterhood is their shared experiences of prison life. By doing so, Panahi's film adopts a feminist position, not only because of its representation of women, but also for relying on three female characters and their camaraderie as they attempt to escape and set themselves free from the cycle implied by the title.

The film is an important artefact of its time - a social commentary on Iranian society and representative of a more open and relaxed cinema in Iran, approaching issues of gender through a more explicit and direct tone. As noted, the film's depiction of three women at its centre, which solely revolves around the female characters and their experiences, is crucial. Perhaps even more significant is the film's lack of any real male characters. The narrative structure then depends on the stories and agency of these women. Through its complex portrayal of gender politics and critique of the patriarchy, as well as the film's allowance of a narrative dictated and characterised by a truly marginalised set of female characters, the film marks itself as politically and socially significant.

As this example suggests, the reformist movement under Khatami witnesses a film industry that engages more explicitly with critical subject matter that questions social and political concerns. In this period, films begin to engage with pressing issues such as poverty, corruption, divorce, drug addiction, authority, and female agency (Egan 54). As the censorship laws ease, the "symbolic and esoteric" tone which post-Revolutionary Iranian films adopt is replaced in "favor of more straightforward, commercially oriented narratives" (Egan 54). However, while Iranian cinema was beginning to see significant changes, the election of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, brought with it the promise "to restore Islamic governments" (Egan 58). While, under his rule, stricter censorship laws were reinforced, Iranian cinema continued to grow, producing some of its best and most internationally acclaimed films.

The Ahmadinejad Period: Banning Feminism and Social Films

In *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Films and Society in the Islamic Republic*, Zeydabadi-Nejad discusses the shifts in the country's cinema under Ahmadinejad. He says,

"In 2005, the newly appointed culture minister, Hossein Saffar-Harandi, announced that from then on distribution and exhibition of films which promoted feminism and secularism were prohibited" (53). Zeydabadi-Nejad then continues to discuss what I think is truly telling of the way censorship laws operate in Iran. He says:

> My recent conversations with filmmakers demonstrates that the situation has not changed drastically under the Ahmadinejad regime. In filmmakers' dealings with the authorities, negotiation is still the order of the day. However, like the 1994-97 period, these negotiations can be more difficult than with the reformist authorities under Khatami (Zeydabadi-Nejad 53).

When I discussed censorship with Banietemad, she made a similar remark. That while there were changes under Khatami, and now under Rouhani, generally speaking censorship is about negotiation. In another interview, Banietemad states: "*I* push the boundaries" (Rahbaran 133), and that it is "within these gaps that we search for our freedom and try to gain it bit by bit" (Rahbaran 134). The "gap" Banietemad refers to is that of the official laws and the reality of filmmaking. And so, while the years under Ahmadinejad harmed Iran in various ways (economically, socially and politically), filmmakers still managed to work to an extent under such harsh realities, and not because they were encouraged to, but because they found ingenious ways to do so.

The politics of suffocation in Iran reached its climax after Ahmadinejad's first term, and the "relative social and political liberalization that characterized Khatami's presidency was essentially reversed" (Holliday 6). The aftermath of the highly disputed and rigged 2009 election brought to the streets the largest uprising since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Green Movement (the colour assigned to Ahmadinejad's opponent, Mir-Hossein Mousavi) challenged the state, questioning its legitimacy. People of all walks of life poured into the streets of Tehran, and other major Iranian cities asking: "where is my vote." Images of brave

Iranian women circulated all news outlets and social media platforms globally, leaving "no doubt in anyone's mind that Iran's body politic was invaded by feminine power (Tahmasebi-Birgani 78). A particular image, that of the brutal death of Neda Agha-Soltan, a 26-year-old woman shot in the chest during protests in Tehran, became iconic. In her work, Naghibi looks at how Neda has become a symbol, standing for all Iranian women, imagined beyond a mourned body ("Diasporic Disclosures" 60). With Ahmadinejad in power for a second term, Iran's fate was further threatened. The dire impact of international isolation and Western sanctions on the country has left its economy fragile, directly affecting the Iranian people. With Hasan Rouhani in power and the implementation of the historical Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, usually referred to as the Iran Nuclear Deal, involving the USA, the EU and other members of the United Nations Security Council, signed by president Barack Obama, a more hopeful future for Iran and its relationship with the West was imagined. With the election of Donald Trump and the withdrawal of the USA from the JCPOA in 2018, such hopes have wavered.

During such dire political times *how* does cinema reimagine a different narrative? The years under Ahmadinejad certainly impacted the country's cinema. One of Iran's most prominent filmmakers, Panahi, has been imprisoned for six years and banned from making films for 20 years as a result of his political involvement in the Green Movement (Rahbaran 163). And yet, this did not deter Panahi from making films: under house arrest the filmmaker produces *This is Not a Film* (2011), a "zero-budget film about a day in his life, shot entirely within his flat" (Bradshaw), smuggled out of Iran on a USB stick, hidden in a cake. His latest film *Taxi* (2015) won the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival but, banned from travelling, he was unable to accept the award (Rahbaran 163). Despite the restrictions imposed on him, Panahi has always found creative and interesting ways to continue with his filmmaking and participate in international film festivals.

In defiance of the stricter and harsher censorship laws under Ahmadinejad, the Iranian film industry has stood its ground, continuing to produce critically acclaimed films which have placed the country's cinema on the international stage. Farhadi, one of Iran's most respected and internationally recognised directors, has, in the face of harsh political and social realities, continued to make award-winning films. In 2012, Farhadi won the first Academy Award for an Iranian film for *A Separation* and then won again in 2017 for *The Salesman*, both in the category of Best Foreign Language Film. This is crucial, not only for the country's cinema, but also because, as I argue elsewhere, "at a time of political chaos and isolation, Farhadi has familiarised the world with his home country through its art and human stories" (Khosroshahi). His films, through characters such as Simin and Razieh (Sareh Bayat), also complicate the often homogenous and reductive depictions of the Iranian/Muslim woman on the international screen. Through his films, Giles Harvey argues that Farhadi "makes art of moral ambiguity" (Harvey). In a country that is obsessed with binaries, Farhadi challenges the black-and-white, offering instead shades of grey, questioning social politics in a way that raises questions, and yet, dodges the censors.

A Cinema of Resistance & Change

Iranian cinema continues to be recognised and celebrated locally and globally with the likes of Panahi, Farhadi, and Banietemad. However, this is as a result of continued persistence from these filmmakers. Banietemad's documentary *We are Half the Population* (2009) merges together state and gender politics. In the lead-up to the controversial election of 2009, the film captures various women's rights activist groups discussing pressing gender issues in contemporary Iran. The filmmaker then asks the four candidates (Ahmadinejad refusing to participate) to comment on the issues raised by these activist groups. Unable to

screen the film in Iran, Banietemad shares the footage online, free of charge, to be circulated and viewed by the public. During the four years, under Ahmadinejad's second term, Banietemad refuses to make films, explaining the gap in her career. In 2014, with Rouhani in power, the filmmaker compiled seven short films into her feature film *Tales*. In its final chapter, by looking at *Tales,* this thesis will discuss its reception, the meta-cinematic and the notion of collective womanhood in detail.

Returning now to the central theme of my research project – the cinematic representation of women – I contend that despite serious efforts to ban films with social and feminist topics, Iranian directors have continued in the pursuit of a cinema that challenges social and state politics. Films such as Banietemad's *Tales,* Farhadi's *The Salesman,* Dormishina's *Lantouri,* Derakhshandeh's *Under the Smokey Roof* (2017) and Milani's *Untaken Paths* (2017), are just a few examples that explicitly and boldly challenge gender politics and patriarchal structures. At times, it takes years for films such as *Tales* and *I am Not Angry* (Dormishian 2014) to receive permission for screening, and yet these directors continue with their persistence, bringing onto the Iranian screen films that engage with taboo topics. A documentary filmmaker-within-the-film from *Tales,* in the final scene, reminds us that "no film will ever stay in the closet." I argue that despite the efforts by authorities to control the nation's cinema, and to remove women and their issues once again from the screen, "the golden period"[7] (Atwood 17) has unleashed something that can never be taken back. Even when the country takes steps backwards politically, the cinema has reached a level of creativity and maturity that makes it nearly impossible to be retracted. As such, Iran's film industry continues to bring to the screen interesting and thought-provoking narratives that challenge social and state politics. Women continue to be central to these stories, drivers of the plot, and depicted in complex ways. The portrayal of women through

[7] The "Golden Period" refers to the period under Khatami argued by Atwood (17).

their "emancipated and liberated voices" (Derayeh 155) offers a new space, an arena where they display resistance and challenge patriarchal systems, where their stories, their roles, and their performances become acts of confrontation, resistance and action.

In this thesis, I will situate one of Iran's most prominent filmmakers within this dynamic and complicated context. I will argue that Banietemad's body of work serves as a significant collection that offers a gateway into the visualisation of women, and their stories on the post-Revolutionary Iranian screen, illustrating the evolving and changing of both the country's film industry, and the position women take within it. Also, through the intersection of gender and class, as well as her filmic style, Banietemad draws us to the complexities of contemporary Iranian society. Her position within Iran's post-Revolutionary cinema is interesting: she is at once part of this context, influenced by it, but has also, through her prominent films such as *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* significantly altered the representation of women on the screen. This confirms the importance of her work, illustrating that she is fully the product of Iran's cinematic and social context, but also a force that has enhanced and pushed for a nuanced, honest and bold cinema that confronts Iran's social issues, in defiance of authorities and censors. This thesis aims to examine and explore the ways in which she disrupts and dismantles the male-dominated film industry. Through her cinematic platform, Banietemad brings to the fore characters such as Tooba, Afagh, Nargess, Nobar, Gilaneh (Fatemeh Motamed-Aria), Forough (Minoo Faraschi) and Sara (Baran Kosari), visualising them on the screen, and drawing attention to their stories. Equally important is Banietemad's resistance and insistence to remain in her home country, despite its restrictions, using the filmic medium as a way to challenge aspects of her society.

Outline: Chapter Breakdown & Film Selection

The aim of this thesis is to shed light on the diverse representation of women on the Islamic screen, and the ongoing and tireless resistance and persistence of Banietemad's filmmaking in the process. Despite the stifling political and social climate under the Islamic government, my goal is to show, through detailed discussion of Banietemad's body of work, the important social and cinematic advances in Iran. The overview provided in this introduction of the shifting and evolving female identity on the Iranian screen, from the start of the Islamic regime in 1979 to the present, aids in contextualising the kinds of images and narratives Banietemad's cinema engages with. I am interested in how the female characters transition from non-existent to central characters, and how social and political moments in recent history have aided in this process. This exploration provides a necessary foundation for the dialogues and ideas the thesis will engage with, but also serves to situate Banietemad's work within a larger cinematic and social context.

The thesis will be divided thematically into four chapters, each focusing on specific films by Banietemad as case studies. The first chapter, through an analysis of the character Tooba, will examine her significance in Banietemad's body of work. First drawn by the director in 1985, the role of Tooba, arguably Banietemad's most iconic character, was always reserved for the actor Golab Adineh. Due to censorship, the film only received approval 16 years later. Adineh however, makes her first appearance as Tooba in *The May Lady* in 1998 and takes centre stage in *Under the Skin of the City* years later in 2001. In 2014, she appears again, in Banietemad's latest feature film *Tales.* The chapter will explore the significance of Tooba's characterisation: an illiterate, working-class mother who, despite reflecting the gender and class politics of her society, always embodies defiance. Over the

decades, Tooba has marked her filmic significance as one Banietemad's most influential characters. Most importantly, Tooba's centrality within the director's vast body of work draws us to the meta-cinematic. Her famous line, "who will watch these films anyway," comments on and questions the role of filmmaking in Iran. The significance of Tooba is undeniable within Banietemad's body of work.

Through an extensive analysis of the origins and development of her character and her position within these films, my aim is to consider Banietemad's treatment and representation of women in contemporary Iranian films. The chapter will mainly focus on *Under the Skin of the City* where Tooba plays the lead role. Made in 2001, the film is about Tooba and her family, with the city of Tehran and its context always serving as a backdrop. Her disabled husband is unable to work, which makes the textile worker Tooba the breadwinner of the family. Desperate to leave Iran and to seek better opportunities for the entire family, their oldest son Abbas (Mohammad Reza Foroutan) tries to sell the family house. The youngest son, Ali (Ebrahim Sheibani) is a student and a political activist who is always in trouble with the authorities. We are also introduced to the daughters: Hamideh (Homeira Riazi) who returns from her abusive husband to the safe haven of Tooba's home. Mahboubeh (Baran Kosari), the younger daughter, also lives with the family. Through Tooba and her family, *Under the Skin of the City* explores the conditions of social life in Iran. Tooba's home is both the space that brings together its members, but also, through its destruction, serves as a metaphor for life in Tehran, commenting on gender and class politics. Through a textual reading of *Under the Skin of the City* and references to *The May Lady* and *Tales,* where Tooba also appears, the first chapter of my thesis will explore the filmic significance of the Tooba figure as one of Banietemad's most iconic and influential characters. Her centrality within Banietemad's works draws us to different aspects of the

director's filmic practices, and through Tooba's spatial mobility, *Under the Skin of the City,* I argue explores various aspects of Iranian society and issues around gender politics.

The aim of the first chapter is to also establish Banietemad's filmmaking style and her treatment of the representation of women on the Iranian screen. From there, the thesis will take on a more thematic approach, wherein the second chapter will focus on *Nargess,* potentially the most influential of the director's works, and *Blue Veiled,* considering the representation of love as taboo in the Islamic Republic. *Nargess* tells the story of a love triangle between Afagh, Adel (Abolfazl Poorarab) and Nargess. Afagh and Adel, thieves who are partners-in-crime, are also lovers. We learn in the film, that Afagh, who is Adel's senior, takes the boy under her wings once he is shunned from his family. Falling immediately in love with Nargess, Adel hopes for a normal life. And yet, he cannot ask for her hand in marriage without the support of his family. In an attempt to hold on to her lover, Afagh agrees to perform the role of his mother, with the promise that he will never leave her. The film then grapples with ideas of sexuality, crime, class and polygamy. The complex triangular relationship between Afagh, Adel and Nargess only becomes more complicated as the plot develops. In similar ways, Banietemad's *Blue Veiled* also wrestles with the idea of unattainable love. Owner of the tomato factory, Rasul (Ezzatollah Entezami), a wealthy, widowed, middle-aged man falls in love with Nobar – a younger woman in a blue scarf who is working for him. The film explores the intimate love and bond between the two characters. However, differences in class and age create obstacles for the lovers. Rasul's daughters, who are bound in tradition, are unable to accept the relationship between their father and a poor factory worker.

These two films depart from Banietemad's first three films and bring to the screen the subject of love and desire intersected with class politics. About *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled,* I argue that Banietemad's depiction of love is crucial in the way in which she challenges the

image of women characters as passive subjects and recipients or objects of love. Instead, these films show the characters of Afagh, Nargess and Nobar through their agency. These women are sexualised, shown through their active role in their love stories, challenging the cinematic representations of women at the time. And so, through *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*, I argue that Banietemad depicts women as lovers, and in so doing, grapples with a cultural and cinematic taboo. Importantly, she is able to do so through the cinematic language in defiance of the censors. This chapter is interested in the role cinema as a platform plays in offering a set of tools that enable the visualisation of the taboo.

The third chapter will turn from the representation of women as lovers and begin thinking about the depiction of Banietemad's mother characters. Here I argue that Banietemad problematises the image of the mother. The chapter will focus on the director's films *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* - two films that while seemingly distinctive, are also in many ways connected through their shared theme and exploration of motherhood, as well as through their references to the Iran-Iraq war. *The May Lady* tells the story of Forough: a single-mother who is a filmmaker within the film. Living with her only son Mani (Mani Kasraian), the film brings to the fore the cultural complexities of Forough's life as a woman who must negotiate between her desire for love and her son's anxieties. In addition, within the film, Forough is assigned a documentary project in search of the 'perfect' mother. Through this, the film offers snippets and images of a diverse range of women and their experiences of motherhood. The film then brings together ideas of sexuality and work under the umbrella of motherhood, complicating the image and representation of the mother figure.

Gilaneh, which tells the story of the Iran-Iraq war, operates entirely differently. In its exploration and depiction of motherhood, the film is steeped in its war-time context. Gilaneh, herself a mother whose son returns home disabled and broken by war, must now sacrifice everything to take care of him. The film draws links between the mother's body

and the nation. In addition, *Gilaneh*, through a mother whose son is neither sacrificed nor a hero, contextualises the role of motherhood in a post-war country, drawing on its consequences. In this chapter, I will provide a brief overview of Banietemad's treatment of the theme and depiction of motherhood. The two films, *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* will serve as case studies in my exploration of the role and portrayal of mothers on the Iranian screen. In this chapter, I argue that the mothers we encounter in Banietemad's films transcend the stereotypical, reductive, and symbolic representations of motherhood. This matters especially, because in the years after the revolution, female performances were largely limited to depicting mother characters. For Banietemad to engage with this role, but in a way that challenges, diversifies and celebrates it, is crucial to a full exploration of her treatment of women on the screen.

The fourth and final chapter of the thesis will continue to think about the representation of women and gender politics in Iranian society by looking at Banietemad's most recent feature film *Tales.* The film is an accumulation of her previous works, making references to characters of Tooba, Nargess, Sara, and Nobar. It only seems fitting to end with *Tales* – a film that, in creating something new and dynamic, celebrates Banietemad's previous films and female characters. *Tales*, I argue, is a film highly aware of its own cinematic frame, using the filmic space as a way to connect the individual and distinct films of Banietemad's career together in an oeuvre defining, collective and unified notion of womanhood. The thesis thus begins with a single character study and ends with an examination of womanhood more broadly; in doing so, my hope is that this project brings to light the extensive range of female characters that appear on Banietemad's screen. In this final chapter I argue that the stories of the women in *Tales* intertwine as a way to create a notion of the collective – a narrative of female empowerment and survival that displays

resistance both within its cinematic frame, but also, through its reception and context, outside of the filmic frame.

In its entirety, the aim of my thesis is to explore the cinematic representation and visualisation of women on the screen, as well as the treatment of issues around gender and femininity. There has yet been no study that focuses entirely on Banietemad's films in the English language, and so this project is a first of its kind. Also significant to my work is the director's stance – I argue that her camera creates a special space that challenges both internal and external politics. Through a detailed analysis of Banietemad's films and their treatment of women characters, I want to show how, while the director is aware of the conditions of her home country, she never neglects the negative assumptions and stereotypical images of the Iranian/Muslim woman that circulate media outlets outside of Iran. And so, Banietemad's body of work is important for creating social change and impact in her home country, as she continuously challenges systems of power and makes films that resist the current socio-political conditions of contemporary Iran. Scholarship around filmmakers such as Banietemad has never been more crucial. First, her films shed light on the people-led and grassroots women's movements in Iran, dismantling any myths that Iranian women have no agency or autonomy. Secondly, my approach in this thesis will contribute to the de-Westernisation of the film studies canon, by expanding knowledge of Iranian cinema, challenging existing discourses and offering alternative narratives. Finally, I argue that at a time when our news outlets and political discourse is engulfed with hate and violence, diversifying our cinema and visual culture is crucial.

1. The Cinematic, Political and Cultural Significance of Tooba

Introduction

Drawn out by Banietemad in 1985, the role of Tooba, the filmmaker's most iconic character, was always reserved for Golab Adineh to perform in *Under the Skin of the City.* However, because of censorship, the film did not receive approval until 16 years later (Armatage & Khosroshahi 150). Tooba however, appears for the first time in *The May Lady* in 1999 and then later takes centre stage in *Under the Skin of the City* in 2001. In 2014, she appears again, in Banietemad's most recent feature film *Tales.* This chapter will explore Tooba's filmic significance and visualisation in Banietemad's body of work: an illiterate, working-class mother who, despite reflecting the gender and class politics of her society, always embodies defiance. Over the decades, Tooba, I argue, has marked her filmic significance as one of Banietemad's most influential characters. Most importantly, Tooba's centrality within the director's vast body of work draws us to various aspects of Banietemad's filmmaking practices, which include the recurring theme of the meta-cinematic, stylistic choices, and the representation of complex female characters. Tooba's famous line, repeated in several works that I will look at in this chapter, "who will watch these films anyway", comments on and questions the role of filmmaking in Iran, as well as the role of the camera for Banietemad, asking important questions about the representation of women in her films. In addition, by looking at one of Banietemad's most iconic characters, this chapter will discuss how she embodies spatial mobility, through which, *Under the Skin of the City* explores the concept of space and the layers of Tehran and its society. Using *Under the Skin of the City* as my main case study and drawing on the development of Tooba's characterisation and visualisation in other films by Banietemad

(*The May Lady* and *Tales*), my aim is to explore how the director utilises Tooba as a way to yoke together the private and public spaces to draw on the social issues of class and gender in Iran. Ultimately, the central aim of this chapter is to illustrate the cinematic, political and cultural significance of the Tooba character in the director's body of work, as well Iran's contemporary cinema.

Through a character analysis of Tooba, as well as a textual reading of *Under the Skin of the City*, this chapter will touch on Banietemad's filmmaking practices, the role of the camera, the representation of women characters, and the importance of veiling and framing of the female body. Throughout, I will be thinking about Banietemad's position as a filmmaker who actively chooses to remain in her home country, to make films despite its social and political restrictions. The central aim of this thesis is to consider how Banietemad uses her stories and the visual medium to engage with gender politics in Iran. By "zooming in" on Tooba, this chapter will begin with a character study, as a way to set up the rest of the thesis. The chapters to follow will consider the themes of love and motherhood, and the final chapter will turn to the director's latest feature film *Tales,* discussing the notion of the collective. What connects these themes and films is the complexity through which the women characters of Tooba, Afagh, Nargess, Nobar, Forough, Gilaneh and Sara are depicted. Banietemad's camera captures stories from the margins of society, remaining highly critical of the state and the social situation of her country, problematising gender and class politics at every turn. Yet, Banietemad's depiction of these women exceeds the harsh limitations imposed on them by their society. Her films also show these women through their defiance, agency and voice. I consider how the character development of Tooba, inspired by a documentary in 1992, precedes her first filmic appearance. She is written before appearing on the screen – both based on a 'real' film subject from Banietemad's documentaries, and at the same time a fictional construction. I argue that Tooba's

significance in shaping Banietemad's works around femininity and womanhood, as well as her dynamic and complex approach to class, are all aspects of her filmmaking practices that are heightened in *Under the Skin of the City*.

Tooba's Origins: Where Does She Come From?

The reception and development of the Tooba character, I argue, demonstrates her centrality to *Under the Skin of the City,* but also to Banietemad's body of work more broadly. While we encounter Tooba for the first time in *The May Lady,* she has been under development, a work in progress for a while in the screenplays of the director. Banietemad uses this method of storytelling again, where she borrows from her previous films and returns to past characters. Writing in "An Interview with Rakhshan Banietemad," Kay Armatage and myself argue that *Under the Skin of the City* represents a 'village' within the city metaphor where previous characters reappear again in later films. Through this the film depicts a sense of intimacy between its characters. Also, the way the characters often recur in later films supports this notion. As the audience, we return in later films to familiar faces and engage with stories in a way that connects us back to the conceptual 'village.' Tooba's representation I suggest further illustrates this point. Her recurrences make her relevant to the film, but also function as a point of reference. With this reading, we were interested in whether Banietemad anticipated this kind of storytelling where she would return time and again to the same characters in later films. This is her response:

> At the time that I was making *Under the Skin of the City,* I naturally didn't know that I would bring these characters back years later in *Tales.* But before that, in *The May Lady* that was made prior to *Under the Skin of the City,* characters from *Nargess* and *The Blue Veiled* were present. I wrote the first draft of *Under the Skin of the City* in 1985 and it was supposed to be my first feature film, but it didn't get approved until

> 16 years later. Of course in these 16 years, the drafts were revisited and rewritten based on current social changes, until finally in 1999 it got approved. In the *May Lady* there is a scene where Tooba goes to visit her son in jail. This is a character from a future film that has not appeared in a film before it! This was because years ago, I had made a firm decision that Golab would play this role (Armatage and Khosroshahi 149-150).

As stated by the director, *Under the Skin of the City* was written in 1985 and only received permission to be filmed and screened 16 years later. The reception of *Under the Skin of the City*, as is the case for many of her other films, is suggestive of Banietemad's embodiment of her political, social and cultural resistance, and how cinema becomes that platform and space for her protest and activism. As noted here, *Under the Skin of the City* was revisited, seeing changes throughout these years.

Banietemad also draws on the significant role of the Tooba character and Golab Adineh who would come to perform this role in all three films (*The May Lady, Under the Skin of the City* and *Tales*). Tooba then, is a product of her time – a character that has been revisited, rewritten, drafted and crafted with time. Her significance is tied to her relevance, but also the inception of the character which dates back to 1985, before Banietemad produces any feature films. The Tooba character, though she has seen changes, has been part of the director's repertoire since then. Her characterisation, I suggest informs and impacts the works of Banietemad for the years to come. Tooba's story is born out of a social context that makes her a symbol of resistance. She constantly, from film to film, reminds us about the cinematic frame and its role in our society, even questioning its importance. The character's first appearance in *The May Lady* is through the character Forough's camera lens: introduced as a working woman, she is angry in this first encounter. *The May Lady* offers a glimpse into the Tooba character, and sets up a motif in which Tooba appears

through a fictional camera lens. Unable to receive a permit for *Under the Skin of the City*, Banietemad puts away the screenplay, and goes on to make *The May Lady,* and yet, Tooba still makes her way in.

In *Tales,* Tooba makes an appearance again, wherein the film connects her familial story with the worker's union and their movement, and once again comments on the nature of filmmaking. This timeline shows how Tooba has been a part of Banietemad's filmmaking for over three decades. From film to film, frame-to-frame, the character has served as the nucleus of the family, but has also become crucial in the film's response to the gender and class politics of Iran. Also significant is Tooba's relationship with the camera and the filmic platform. The repetition of Tooba's question from film to film, asking, "who is going to watch these films anyway" visualises a world outside the cinematic frame and reimagines its relation to the audience, as well as the cinematic form. In response to Tooba's rhetorical question, I want to propose that viewership is important to the role of filmmaking, but also in questioning the power of the medium. While fully aware of its potential, through Tooba's scepticism, Banietemad also addresses the limitations of films in creating social change.

Tooba's role in *Under the Skin of the City* also touches on other crucial aspects of Banietemad's film career. The film encompasses various themes, ideas and styles that the filmmaker reproduces throughout her body of work. While Tooba is a fictional character, her construction is inspired by Banietemad's documentary *To Whom Do You Show These Films* (1992). In an interview, Banietemad discusses the origins of this significant line:

> The sentence which Touba says in the film, the first time I heard this exact sentence was 24 years ago. I was making a documentary and a character called Mehri asked me: "Who do you show these films to anyway?" This sentence had so much meaning that it stuck with me. I used it time and time again in many films that I made since

> then. I think the reason I use it is as a reminder to authorities to know what people are feeling and be aware of their sentiments (Talu).

Tooba repeatedly uses this line, which once belonged to Mehri. As noted here, the line draws attention to the power dynamics at play, questioning the role of cinema. But Tooba's famous line also highlights the significance of Banietemad's documentary filmmaking and its influence on her career. Prior to her narrative cinema, Banietemad was involved in documentary work, where she was "largely concerned with the lower and middle classes of Iranian society" (Ghorbankarimi 67). This interest is also evident in her fictional films, where the research conducted for the documentary projects is often "used as the foundation for the scripts of her films" (Ghorbankarimi 68). Varzi states that the "ethnographic value" of Banietemad's films impress her most. She describes this as work "that is based on participant observation, interviews, and a lot of research" ("A Grave State" 97). For Varzi this is especially important at a "time when documentary and most anthropological endeavors have become close to impossible in Iran" ("A Grave State" 97). These films through their ethnographic qualities and research offer a foundation for Banietemad's films. In addition to offering a foundation for the scripts, the 'realistic' mode in which Banietemad tells these stories, has also been influenced by her documentary filmmaking. The director's approach to fictional films also impacts her style, which often glides between realism and melodrama, and this is especially evident in *Under the Skin of the City.*

Banietemad's Cinematic Style: "Between Melodrama and Realism"

The impact of Banietemad's documentary works can be seen in her feature films as well. Turning to Banietemad's camera and filmmaking style in *Under the Skin of the City*, I argue that the film reveals a lot about the cinematic style of the director, and this is important because it comments on her documentary filmmaking and its influence on her style, but also

her approach to social issues, which are inspired by real life events and absolutely central to the subjects and content of her works. And yet, her feature films are dramatic, even melodramatic, evoking an emotional response but also offering a stylistic and artistic touch to storytelling. Banietemad is often referred to as the "first lady" of Iranian cinema, and Rini Cobbey suggests this is as a result of more than the "obvious reference to her prominence as a filmmaker" (85). She suggests, "the term can connote a social role that balances between politics and family" (Cobbey 85). This is a tension that the director's body of work generally reflects, and is addressed directly in *Under the Skin of the City* (Cobbey 85). Laura Mulvey makes a similar argument, saying that the film "brings together two cinematic stylistic traditions, social realism and melodrama" (8).

Discussing British Cinema, David Forrest suggests that "the broad term of social realism has come to represent numerous examples of films that reflect a range of social environments and issues, in a manner that rejects the artifice and escapism of more classically oriented narrative models" (Forrest 1). Though he mainly looks at British films, Forrest's definition of social realism applies to the films of Banietemad whose art cinema engages with social issues and structures. In *Poetics of Cinema,* David Bordwell argues that "art cinema defines itself as a realist cinema" (153). As he suggests, this cinema shows us "real locations" and "real problems" (Bordwell 153). Most importantly, these films use "'realistic' – that is, psychologically complex characters" (Bordwell 153). This means that the notion of realism as a cinematic mode and style of storytelling extends beyond the aesthetics of film (the hand-held camera and real places). For Lucia Nagib realism is the "challenging of binary opposition," and this means "understanding cinema as a system of representation" (Nagib 3). We witness this in many of Banietemad's films which are invested not only in the idea of representation, but more importantly, in challenging rigid and constructed binaries. Her realism brings to the screen everyday images and everyday

problems, often with Tehran as its backdrop, serving as a visual and visible reminder of Iran's social issues. But Banietemad's films, as is the case in *Under the Skin of the City,* are also filled with dramatic and melodramatic moments that add an emotional dimension to these "real" and everyday problems.

Melodrama is often thought as a genre of excess emotion. Ben Singer defines melodrama as a "set of subgenres that remain close to the heart and hearth and emphasize a register of heightened emotionalism and sentimentality" (Singer 37). He draws on various elements that make up a melodrama: "pathos" (44), "overwrought emotion" (45), "moral polarization" (45), "nonclassical narrative structure" (46), and "sensationalism" (48). For Linda Williams melodrama is the "foundation of the classical Hollywood movie" (Williams 42). Banietemad's films feature melodramatic moments, especially through performance and narrative. That said, where they differ greatly from the traditional melodrama we often witness in Hollywood, is the films' exploration of morality. In *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, Wimal Dissanayake argues that "melodrama has come to be recognized as containing subversive potential" (Dissanayake 1). Dissanayake's reading of melodrama and its potential offers a productive space for the melodrama that Banietemad's cinema engages with.

Banietemad's films then draw on both traditions, bringing together two seemingly opposing styles and modes of filmmaking. Mulvey discusses the social and political importance of combining social realism and melodrama. It is worth quoting her here at length:

> Banietemad uses both [realism and melodrama] to tell a story about crises rooted in class and gender inequality in contemporary Iran. This film encapsulates the way that realism and melodrama are, in different ways, stylistically important for dramas of social oppression and injustice. Realism records the state of things, without

> stylistic intrusion into a representation of the norms of everyday life and its fragile survival strategies. These are conditions that lack buffer zones or safety valves; misfortune or error can quickly mutate into disaster leaving their victims struggling to comprehend, unable to articulate clearly their suffering or the strain that leaves relationships fissured. It is here that melodrama serves its purpose and the cinema takes on an expressive function that responds to both the intensity of the crisis and its protagonists' desperation. There is, of course, an implicit chronology in this dual style: in the order of the narrative, the melodrama takes over from realism's depiction of a day-to-day state of things. Bani Etemad's perspective is deeply political and it is this that gives the combined use of realism and of melodrama a 'social' perspective (8).

The combined use of realist filmmaking and melodrama is not merely an artistic choice. For Banietemad, filmmaking is about addressing social issues and confronting gender and class politics. As Mulvey outlines, this "deeply political" perspective through two filmmaking styles also reflects social dynamics. The use of true-to-life locations as the film's setting (Tehran, shopping centres, alleys etc.), and handheld cameras that capture "real" social and political anxieties are paired with performances by professional and well-known actors. As Mulvey notes, both realism and melodrama are suited for societies that deal with oppression, and the way in which Banietemad combines the two styles frames "all this individual and family-level conflict in the larger social and political structure" (Cobbey 88). Rahul Hamid adds that *Under the Skin of the City* "animates an essential question of political filmmaking: how to balance fidelity to social reality with the often more compelling and convincing dictates of dramatic fiction" (50). I argue that through a combination of styles and modes, Banietemad foregrounds social issues and realities of contemporary Iran without sacrificing the dramatic or artistic dimensions of her film.

What remains crucial is that while Banietemad relies on filmic tropes and styles, she does so with full awareness and transparency about the power and the limitations of cinema. Through the meta-cinematic, to which Tooba is central, the film interrogates the importance of filmmaking and viewership.[8] We have seen this in her film *The May Lady* (made prior to *Under the Skin of the City*) and again in her latest feature *Tales*. In all three films, Tooba appears, asking, "Who will watch these films anyway." The role of the camera is central in all three films as well, and the explicit reminder of its purpose and function is brought to the fore through Tooba. So, while Banietemad's films are invested in the realist depiction of contemporary life in Iran, the self-reflexive camera functions as a vivid reminder of films as constructions. *Under the Skin of the City* draws us to the cinematic and meta-cinematic, as well as Iran's socio-economic and gender politics. In doing so, through this mixture of realism and melodrama, the film marks itself as a highly political artefact. Tooba's centrality within this frame is also significant. As Hamid argues, "although she is the force that holds the family together as the main wage earner, she cannot stop her husband and son from selling the house. For all her hard work in sustaining the family, she has no legal or social standing inside or outside of it" (51). Through Tooba and other female characters, Banietemad highlights "the compromised position of all women in Iran" (Hamid 51). And yet, visually, Tooba is at the centre of political debate; she is the figure who, through her famous and powerful line, questions and challenges filmmaking. By doing so*, Under the Skin of the City* pays tribute to Mehri – a real-life woman whose famous line has inspired Banietemad's later fictional films. Also, this crossover highlights the intersection of the director's documentary practices with her narrative cinema. In so doing, *Under the Skin of*

[8] Banietemad's use of the meta-cinematic aligns her work with other important filmmakers in the Iranian canon. Abbas Kiarostami, one of Iran's most celebrated directors, has left behind a body of work that is highly reflective of the cinematic practice. Jafar Panahi is another prominent example whose work offers a bold and political commentary on the state of cinema in Iran.

the City pays tribute to such practices, celebrating documentary filmmaking as a response to real life issues. And yet, all the while, through the performance of Adineh, a well-known and respected actress, reminds us of the construction of films too.

Tooba's Centrality in *Under the Skin of the City*

Invested in the working class of Tehran, *Under the Skin of the City* is a commentary on modern Iran. The Tooba character, through her centralisation within the narrative, offers a vantage point for the audience. Oscillating between various spaces, the roles of Tooba-as-breadwinner, and Tooba-as-mother mark her as central to the narrative and allow her mobility, which exposes us to the various layers of the city and Iranian society. Tooba's centrality to the narrative is significant. Her characterisation is key to her role in the workforce but also within the domestic space of the home. In fact, it is through her body, her characterisation and her story that the film connects these spaces. Therefore, the cinematic treatment of Tooba is crucial to our reading of the film and its relationship with space. It is through the Tooba character, that we are granted access to various spaces: prison, home, Tehran, the space of the film itself. This matters because not only does the film rely on her as a way to expose the layers of the city, but it also uses Tooba as a way to show her mobility, which challenges ideas associated with the non-Western woman, veiling and space, as well as cultural and patriarchal expectations of women. This I think is reflective of Banietemad's treatment of female characters more broadly in the way they dare to be disobedient, disruptive and confrontational in the face of authority.

Under the Skin of the City begins and ends with its main character Tooba making her position central to the narrative as well as the themes of the film. Her role is crucial in the way it cinematically frames the narrative but also how it travels within the layers of the city to comment on the social and political dynamics at play. A key theme in the film is the

exploration of space, and it is through Tooba's mobility that these spaces are explored and visualised. Every night, Tooba returns home from the textile factory in which she works. Both the workspace and everything it represents, along with the home she returns to, serve as significant symbols for the film's narrative and thematic structures. The film tells the story of Tooba and her family, but also explores life in Tehran, with its socio-political dynamics at the heart of it. In its opening scene, *Under the Skin of the City* comments on the conditions for the working class, transitioning then to a depiction of Tooba's workplace. Following her commute, we arrive at her home. The domestic space of the home reveals the family life awaiting Tooba: a pregnant daughter who has taken refuge from her abusive husband, and her politically-active teenage son who has just been bailed out of prison. We learn about the older son Abbas (Mohammad-Reza Foroutan), who longs for an escape from his dead-end situation, which directly comments on the socio-economic as well as the political conditions of Iran. Central to the plot is one of his projects, which goes wrong when his 'friend' takes off with the money, leaving him with nothing. Desperate to make up the loss, he agrees to deliver a package of heroin, but ends up losing it. We learn also that Tooba's husband is unable to work due to his disability, which means that Tooba is the sole breadwinner. There is a story inside the walls of Tooba's home, "under the skin of the city" so to say, that the film explores. While doing so, the film remains aware of the external conditions as well, showing the intersection between domestic and state politics.

Tooba's position as the central character offers insight into the cultural and familial dynamics at play here, and through her *Under the Skin of the City* critiques the gender and social politics of Iran. Banietemad however, through Tooba and the film shows just how interconnected the social and political are. While Tooba takes us into her home, the backdrop of the city is always present. Also, through her role as the mother, we are acquainted with her family members, who each have their own stories and struggles. By following Tooba's

movements across various spaces, this chapter will show how integral she is to the works of Banietemad. To an extent, the character is symbolic of many of the themes and concepts that the filmmaker seeks to address in her works. In *Under the Skin of the City*, Tooba takes centre stage; the camera framing her in such a way that marks her narrative and symbolic importance. Through a textual analysis of the film's opening scene, I will demonstrate how the cinematic treatment of Tooba politicises her body and marks her as socially and politically relevant.

Moving then from the filmic frame, this chapter will focus on the character's mobility, through which I argue the film explores the layers of the city. In turn, this functions as a metaphor for the layered and complex qualities of the city. The audience steps into Tooba's home, representative of its own social, class and gendered location, and yet still connected to the social politics of the country. Tooba's workplace, the textile factory, also tells its own story about the conditions of workers. But Tooba's role is significant in the way she connects these spaces, and complicates their representations. It is her relationship with these spaces that unveil the power dynamics at play. Her integral role to the narrative allows her a unique position where she is able to move between various spaces. Through this, Banietemad challenges the binaries of public and private spheres. Her female character, through her position and mobility, occupies all kinds of spaces and through her embodiment and story, she connects the private and political, showing how they are informed by one another.

Tooba's cinematic significance is worth unpacking. She stands as a figure that critiques both domestics and state politics, and her reappearance in Banietemad's *Tales* renders her as relevant and timely. At the heart of *Under the Skin of the City* is Tooba, and I am interested in where she takes us in the film. From the film's opening, with the double screens and the veiling of Tooba, the film links its main protagonist to the screen, and the

politics of class and the labour movement, where her cinematic importance to the film is established early on.

Framing Tooba: The Politicisation of the Woman's Body

Under the Skin of the City opens with a close-up shot of Tooba. The shot frames her face as officials interview her about the role of women labour workers in the election to come, which of course has political implications. The first image shown on the screen is of a small Sony television, and it is through this that we first encounter Tooba. The image is blurry at first and, as it becomes focused, the officials signal to Tooba to cover her hair (see figure 2 and 3). Tooba fixes her scarf, pulling it forward and covering the exposed hair. In addition to the double-screen, the scarf adds another visual frame to Tooba's face. The cinematic treatment of Tooba marks her as central to the film, but also, references the significance of the frame and her relationship with it. By telling Tooba to fix her *hejab*, the film reinforces the political restrictions of women in Iran, but also functions as a reminder to its audience about the public character of this moment. Not only is film a public form, but also, within the film itself, Tooba's interview will be on national television, which follows even stricter laws around veiling and censorship. While commenting on the social and political policies of the country, Banietemad uses the enforced veil to make her own statement. The veiling that has legitimatised Tooba's public appearance in this scene has also made her identical to the rest of the women she works with. As she tries to articulate her message, their voices are all muffled together – the message is one that they all share; yet without any fluency or eloquence they seem unable to articulate anything at all. The black veil simultaneously legitimises the public voice and conceals the identity of the speaker. Yet there is an additional effect in the identical appearance of the women; they appear united, with a uniform and a shared voice.

Figure 2: A blurry shot of Tooba in the opening of *Under the Skin of the City.*

Figure 3: Tooba in the opening shot of the *Under the Skin of the City* as she becomes more focused.

Visually, the film in this instance creates a unified movement-like-moment, which I argue offers a justification for the visualisation of these women as a single entity. Yet, Banietemad only briefly relies on this homogeneity, moving away from it almost entirely as the film progresses. While the film begins with this unified moment, it uses the opening to delve deeper into the personal life of Tooba and her family. Through this, the idea that the personal is political is reinforced, but it is also suggestive of how the political impacts the

personal in a place like Iran. Through this brief opening, Banietemad introduces the film's main character. While Tooba is potentially shown as part of the labour movement, she is still granted a sense of autonomy in this early scene. Visually and cinematically, she is central to the frame and in focus. While her black *chador* makes her appear the same as the others, soon, as the plot unfolds, we become very well acquainted with her. The women's voices continue through the film's opening credits. They talk about their struggles and the working conditions, which have left them sick and unhealthy. While connecting Tooba to the rest of the movement, Banietemad simultaneously singles her out, by having us watch her story. Through Tooba, the film takes its viewers on a journey across various spaces, each telling of its own socio-political context.

This opening scene comments on the complexities of the film and the important role Tooba plays in it. For example, the space depicted in this early shot is limited and confined. In other words, there is hardly any sense of space, producing a sense of tightness where Tooba is visually cornered. This visualisation is linked to the ideas the film attempts to depict, always serving as a reminder for how public the filmic form is – interrupting us as we are immersed into the fictional world. The screening of Tooba's face, the way it is framed, and the way the veiling works to create these visuals, mark her central to the film. But it also comments on the public nature of film in general. Furthermore, this moment is telling of the role of authority. Tooba's presence relays significant information about space, and the politics of Iran. Images of various locations that follow also continue to create snippets and images that unveil the layers of the city, Tehran. Through Tooba and her family, the camera travels to many places: administration spaces, the textile factory, restaurants, streets, prison and the home. The camera and the edit create this montage of spaces to depict an image of what Tehran may be like, and yet, all the while, central to these images is the characterisation and story of Tooba and her long-time relationship with the camera.

Tooba's role is also crucial to the narrative of the film. The film develops its plot and builds its relationships around the Tooba character. Through her embodiment, *Under the Skin of the City* reveals and unveils aspects of Iranian society, travelling across Tehran. This is significant because it dismantles many ideas around space and gender, as well as attitudes towards the female body and its mobility. Not only is Tooba central to the constructed narrative of the film, but also, her movement through various spaces is key to the film's exploration of gender and class politics. Tooba's role as a marginalised working mother offers the audience a crucially significant vantage point. In addition, it is an illiterate, working-class woman to whom Banietemad grants this position. These characteristics also work to resist the notion that Tooba is a stand-in for the filmmaker herself. The importance of this lies in the depiction of Tooba as a key figure in the director's body of work, but also her centrality to the narrative. Tooba is the driving force, the glue, and the vocal character that functions as a visible and filmic reminder for an audience year after year. She is, I argue a product, and reproduction, of Banietemad's resistance as a filmmaker. The way in which the story of Tooba is constructed is significant to her relevancy. Through her mobility and movement to and from various spaces, Banietemad relies on Tooba as a way to unpack the city. But also, it is important to note that in a cinema that works hard to marginalise women characters, the Tooba figure comes to represent resistance. What is more, Banietemad's illiterate female protagonist, against her will has to adopt a political discourse as a way to survive and make sense of her pain and struggles in Tehran. This demonstrates how entrenched the personal and political are, and Tooba shows us how they can never be divorced from one another.

In fact, Banietemad uses Tooba's body to make political statements, connecting the personal with the public. Returning to the opening scene: the officials ask Tooba to fix her headscarf. This telling moment comments on the arbitrariness of the situation. These women

are here to discuss their role in the workforce, as a way to bring forth change, yet all that matters, interrupting Tooba as she introduces herself, is the form of her *hejab*. Banietemad here alludes to the petty politics of her country that is far more concerned with women's dress than with the workers' rights. While doing so, Banietemad directly confronts the idea of obligatory veiling. And indeed, any discussion about gender and the representation of women in Iranian films must consider the role of veiling. The conventions of *hejab* and the censorship laws of Iranian cinema mean that we have to consider the role of veiling and the significance of private and public spaces. Here I want to consider the implications of veiling, and the visualisation of women's bodies and stories on the screen – after all, the film offers an invitation through Tooba for such a consideration. Through the enforcement of veiling, the Islamic government not only opposes female autonomy and freedom over one's body, but it also limits and denies mobility. This is something that plays out in films as well, as directors attempt to work with these laws and conventions to bring forth female characters with autonomy, and all the while they must consider the rules of censorship. There is perhaps no better moment than the film's opening to convey the entanglement of veiling with filmic framing, and its broader social implications. Also, the opening can elucidate the film's engagement with the concept of public and private spaces.

Veiling and Unveiling in *Under the Skin of the City*

Veiling conventions and modesty codes determine women's dress and the interaction between men and women. The representation of these practices in film is important to the cinematic practices of Iran. In the country, veiling governs not only the idea of viewership and gaze, but also informs the audience about spaces. *Under the Skin of the City* through Tooba makes this clear, but the film also uses other means to flirt with the notion of veiling and unveiling. I am interested in how, through Tooba, Banietemad addresses the issue of

forced veiling while at the same time utilising the garment to challenge social and gender politics in Iran. About the film, Naficy writes that "veiling and unveiling are overdetermined. The movies' title invites the peeling away of surfaces to understand hidden truths, mobilizing the classic Iranian distrust of the external" (*A Social History* 163-164). Banietemad's notion of veiling and unveiling then is spatially charged, both in terms of the urban landscape of Tehran, but also inevitably as shown earlier, comments directly on the conventions of the *hejab* and its relation to space in the film's opening scene. The concept of *hejab* and its investment in what can or cannot be shown naturally draws attention to the functionality and visualszation of women's bodies in Iranian films. We witness this in many of Banietemad's works, where women's bodies become vehicles for storytelling. Women's embodiment and mobility are linked to ideas of veiling and what is permissible in the Islamic Republic. This is something Banietemad responds to through the cinematic representation of women as central characters. From the very early days after the Islamic Revolution, the censors have been invested in the representation of women in Iranian films.

The laws that Iranian filmmakers must abide by, however, do offer their limitations, and this is especially the case with screening women and their bodies. Mottahadeh writes about how women's bodies are seen as sites of contamination after the Islamic Revolution (1). This has become a justification for veiling practices and consequent censorship laws in the country. Such practices also relate to space in the way the camera imagines and frames women's bodies and experiences. I am interested in the context in which Banietemad works within the system to create meaningful representations of women, and the ways in which she challenges and subverts such ideas. In essence, she utilises the cinematic space to tell her stories and to bring women into the foreground of public conversation, and in a country where forced veiling functions as a form of erasure and state control, she casts women who are individualised. This challenges the mission behind such laws, and brings women, their

bodies and experiences at the forefront of Iranian cinema. It also subverts the ideas often associated with veiling outside the country. Myra Mcdonald discusses veiling and the female body in the Western context. She posits:

> Western assumptions about the female body and sexuality conscript Muslim women into two potential forms of sexual silencing. Denied sexual agency in the "shroud-like" representations of their veiled state, their "natural," unveiled bodies are also circumscribed by codes of modesty that confirm their apparent exclusion from post-feminist forms of sexual liberation (13-14).

The image of the Muslim woman in Western media often operates within dichotomised ideas that are stereotypical, reduced to the veiled woman as either oppressed or highly-sexualised. The characters we encounter in Banietemad's films represent defiance, rejecting ideas of submissiveness or oppression that are often associated with veiling, especially in the West. But while they do that, the filmmaker also comments on and challenges forced veiling and the state's control over women's bodies.

The enforcement of the veil (*hejab*) is also important to our discussions of the representation of women in film. This is because space and the male gaze dictate the practice and understanding of *hejab* and modesty laws in Iran. This becomes important in our discussions of film as well, as the guidelines of veiling in film create unrealistic storylines that distort these rules. While women are not required to cover in front of their families and relatives, in film, actors who play these roles must cover nonetheless as they are abiding by the laws of the Islamic Republic by wearing the veil in the public space of the cinema screen. This then creates an unrealistic image of the realities of veiling and heterosexual relationships between men and women, but even between a mother and her son in film. In so many ways, the *hejab* becomes a restraint, interrupting the flow of realistic depictions we often see in Iranian films. Despite these restrictions however, Iranian filmmakers have found

creative ways to work with the conventions of veiling, and more importantly, have made space for women and their stories.

By using different forms of *hejab*, filmmakers keep to censorship laws, while still managing to create meaningful visuals through which these women characters (and actors) are able to enter different spaces. The *hejab* then adopts its own coding system, and depending on how it is worn or practiced in each scene, it can convey a different message. The *hejab*'s connectedness with space then has the ability to shift and change, dictated this time by the filmmaker and the audience. One way to look at how Banietemad achieves this is to look at how the *hejab* is used to comment on women's mobility and movement within various spaces. In the second chapter of the thesis I will examine the cinematic tropes used by the filmmaker to convey love and sexual desire, in defiance of the censors. A love scene in *Blue Veiled* (1995), showing Nobar's bare feet (will be discussed in further detail in the next chapter), is an example of how the camera's treatment of the filmic space creates a sexual and intimate bond between the characters without breaking censorship codes. There are also moments in Banietemad's films where the veil itself is used in different ways to provide various meanings.

The May Lady offers interesting examples surrounding the conventions of veiling. The visual representation of the relationship between Forough and her son is worth unpacking. According to Islamic law, a mother is never required to veil in front of her son (or blood relatives), and yet, as the film itself is public, and this is only a performance of a mother-son relationship, the two actors must abide by Islamic law. And yet, despite such restrictions, Banietemad depicts a loving bond between Forough and her son. One of the ways in which this is achieved is through the coding system surrounding the headscarf. Outside of her home, Forough wears a black scarf, covering all of her hair. Inside, she

loosely wears a lighter coloured headscarf, with some of her hair and neck exposed, signalling the more intimate and private space she has entered.

The woman's body is at the centre of discussions and representations of veiling. The cinematic frame I argue effectively problematises the rationale behind the state's control over women's bodies and dress. It does so by making women visually public; these women reject the very idea of forced veiling and female marginalisation. Their bodies become sites that comment on and challenge the patriarchal norms of Iranian society, and their stories travel nationally and internationally. Returning to Tooba in the opening scene of *Under the Skin of the City* we can see how she adjusts her headscarf to signal that she is not only in a public setting, but an official one, which requires an even stricter form of *hejab*. Her body is used here to convey a message about the politicisation of veiling and modesty codes in the Iranian context. Naficy states that the bodies of the women in *Under the Skin of the City* "are presented primarily for evidentiary purposes, to demonstrate the scars of men's brutality" (*A Social History* 164). In the same vein, writing about melodrama, Sandy Fitterman-Lewis looks at the female body as sites of suffering. She says, "it is the female character's suffering that provides the central articulating crisis of the films. The body of the woman becomes the stage across which the melodramatic spectacle is played out" (Flitterman-Lewis 5). These bodies not only become evidence of male brutality, but also go beyond that to display the brutality of the regime and society as well. However, I propose that Banietemad's films use the female body to do much more than passively displaying men's brutality. Women like Tooba also use their bodies as a proof of their existence, and ultimately their fight and defiance.

Women's bodies in Banietemad's films certainly draw our attention to the gender politics of Iran, through all its complexities. The centrality of the female body is present in many of Banietemad's films. For example, Sara's body in *The Mainline* is the manifestation

of her struggle, but also her constant fight with drug addiction, and ultimately her survival. Central to *Under the Skin of the City* is also the female body: Tooba's body is impacted by the working conditions that she endures. Suffering from asthma, she is constantly coughing. In *Under the Skin of the City,* male violence inflicted upon the female characters is "evidence of male brutality." Masoumeh (Mehraveh Shariginia) is violently abused by her brother, and her hair is forcibly cut, embodying male violence. Left without any choice, her defiance and doom are inseparable as she runs away from home. Through spectatorship and the filmic form, the bodies of Sara, Nobar and Tooba, along with their experiences, are made public. By telling stories with dominant and complex female characters that take up space on the cinematic screen, Banietemad challenges the conventions of veiling and gender politics, while adhering to the guidelines of the Islamic Republic.

Significantly, veiling also makes the audience hyper-aware of the filmic space as a public one. The characters, regardless of the relationships they perform, must abide by social and religious conventions that remind the viewer about their performance as actors. Also, films remind those watching that censorship is always at play, arguably interrupting the narrative flow and functioning as a reminder of the connectedness of film and its politics. Cast with women who perform a wide range of complex characters, Banietemad's films often grapple with gender politics. These women and their stories travel and through this, she as a director makes public not only women's challenges, voices and stories, but also their bodies. Film then enables the mobility of women and creates a public space for women's issues. As Milani posits:

> Cinema is a voyage, a magic carpet. It not only lifts the actors on-screen but also sweeps up the spectators and transports them to faraway places. It confounds the boundaries of time and space, blurring the borders between the private and the public (*Words not Swords* 57).

In addition, Banietemad's films often circulate nationally and internationally, allowing these characters and stories to travel across various spaces.

This is a crucial point, because in the Islamic Republic films function as a space in-between the public and private spheres, where women's issues can be addressed through their visualisation. On this issue, Moruzzi argues:

> For women living in contemporary Iran, the political is personal: the most intimate life choices of the past twenty years have been directly shaped by political as well as social and cultural factors – and in more subtle way than the immediate Western assumptions concerning veiling or Islamic patriarchy. Because women's personal experiences have so often been shaped by national events and because open discussion of many of those events is still not possible, the public discussion of women's lives is peculiarly coded ("Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" 90).

As discussed so far, this is inherent to Banietemad's camera work. Moruzzi continues: "Film is also one of the main vehicles through which the complexities of contemporary Iranian private life has been explored, particularly the complexities of women's lives" ("Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" 91). By bringing women's 'private' issues on the screen, Banietemad makes them public and re-locates both women and their stories in a new space. These new and censored spaces (despite the restrictions) also tell their own story. In an interview, when asked about the shifts that have taken place in Iranian cinema Banietemad states: "The Ershad never allows any freedom to anyone. We had to fight for our freedom. *I* push the boundaries; they wouldn't give me freedom as a gift – neither to me nor any other artist." She continues: "I want to point out that there are discrepancies – gaps – between the official line of the Ershad and the reality of film-making in Iran. It is within these gaps that we search for our freedom and try to gain it bit by bit" (Rahbaran 134).

This takes us back to the beginning of the film: a brief moment in which Tooba reaches for her headscarf, adjusting it so that her entire hair is covered, following the state orders. As I have argued, this scene serves as a significant moment in the film. The opening of the film invites its audience to think about veiling and its connection to the state as well as the screen. Framing Tooba, the scene marks her as visually central to the film, hinting at her significance to the narrative from the start. All the while, *Under the Skin of the City* relies on the meta-cinematic – the frame-within-the-frame – to highlight the importance of the filmmaking practice in Iran. Through its reference to national television, this short introductory scene imagines and visualises a public audience, making spectatorship crucial to the rest of the film as well. At the heart of all this is Tooba, who through her body becomes a vehicle for the story, taking us from one screen to the next, from the domestic to the public along the way, 'unveiling' the city of Tehran. Through Tooba's unique position, the film explores many of Iran's societal issues. I have argued that the opening scene of the film marks Tooba's cinematic relevance and importance through the conflation of framing and veiling, and the implications this has for Tooba's voice and visibility. Moving on now, I will explore how Tooba's movements through various locations and spaces are used as a means to comment on life in Tehran.

Tooba's Home: 'The Personal is Political'[9]

Tooba's identity and role strongly link to the home in *Under the Skin of the City*. The interconnectedness of Tooba and her home, I argue, serves as a significant point in the film as it comments on her family dynamic but also shows the relationship between the private and public. As the title of the film suggests, the narrative seeks to explore 'under the skin of the city.' This alludes to the significance of not only the city itself but also the idea of the domestic space. Central to the narrative of the film, and the family it depicts, is the home. The meaning of the home, thematically, spatially and cinematically, is worth unpacking. The film's introduction to the home is interesting: there is an establishing shot of the house, a space that will come to stand for the politics and ideas the film explores. In this scene, the camera pans across the courtyard, and its tiny doors. The house is worn out and appears to be traditional, which signifies its lower-class status (see figure 4). While the camera pans across, there is pop music playing and over the music we hear two young girls speaking. One is teaching the other chemistry. The camera, then panning over the house and courtyard, stops by the wall that connects the house to the building next-door, attached wall-to-wall. There we see the two young girls, using a ladder to climb up to the wall to talk over their homework. The camera pauses here, focused on the two young girls (see figure 5).

[9] "The personal is political" highlights the importance of public and political structures in the way they shape private and personal spaces and matters (appearing for the first time as the title of Carol Hanisch's article in *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation*) in 1970. The phrase (as she states herself) was given to the article by the editors. Audre Lorde in her article "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" also references this phrase and concept. In this chapter, I use the phrase to comment on the relationship between the private and public and Tooba's role as she negotiates between the two.

Figure 4: Tooba's home in *Under the Skin of the City*. This is the film's introduction of the house and its exterior.

Figure 5: Mahboubeh and Masoumeh discussing their chemistry homework in *Under the Skin of the City*.

This scene with the house as its location, tells its own story about gender and familial relationships. As Tooba enters the house, we learn that this is her home and it is her daughter Mahboubeh and their neighbour Masoumeh who are revising chemistry. The two are friends, classmates and neighbours. Tooba enters the house in a bad mood, and complains about the music being too loud, comparing it to the sound of the factory. She also asks the girls to climb down. Then turning to Masoumeh, she says, "aren't you scared of your brother." In this scene we learn about Masoumeh's abusive brother. While we do not yet know much about the details, this space of domesticity conveys enough about the strict and controlling nature of Masoumeh's brother. He is at work now, and without having to worry, Masoumeh climbs up to talk to her friend. Under the circumstance that he would be home, she would never do such a thing. The interior of the house reveals even more about the power dynamics of the household. The relationship between Tooba and her husband, and the fate of the house are all foreshadowed in this early scene.

Tooba functions as the glue of the family, binding all its members together. Her home I argue is telling of the complex social and political dynamics at play. The film explores the lives of Tooba and her family members, both through the many challenges they face, but also through moments of tenderness and joy. As Mulvey writes: "For Tuba, the house stands for her motherhood, her love for her children and their love for each other. The house next door, identical in layout, is tyranised by a brutal and conservative eldest son so that the high walls are more resonant of a prison than of maternal comfort" (8). A key scene that plays out in the home depicts Tooba cutting her husband's hair in the courtyard whilst they banter and laugh, which demonstrates their connection with one another, conveying a sense of intimacy. Their daughter Mahbouheh enters, pretending she has returned from a tutorial. Tooba however knows that she and Masoumeh had just been to a concert. While she hides this from her father, pretending she has been studying, the open space conveyed through the

courtyard and their interaction signals his leniency as he warns her to study. Moments later, Mahboubeh runs around in the courtyard with Tooba's homework in hand (she is learning how to read). Tooba chases her asking her to return the piece of paper. The scene conveys a sense of intimacy and closeness between the family members. The laughter however is interrupted by the cries of Masoumeh next door, as her brother violently hits her. As Mulvey points out, the contrast between the two houses is significant, and the symbolic value of the home for Tooba itself is important to the film's narrative and themes. Tooba's home while it represents love, is not void of dramatic tension and chaos either. This marks the house as central and crucial to the narrative in *Under the Skin of the City*. The visualisation of the home and the filmic treatment of the space are also important to its representation.

The depiction of Tooba's house is complex and multi-functional, reflective of the society in which the family lives in and the issues they must negotiate with. The domestic space of Tooba's home is representative of the patriarchal regime under which Tooba lives, and it is through the destruction of the home that this critique is heightened. The house serves as a symbol for commenting on patriarchy and oppression. As Mulvey suggests:

> The film constantly returns to and represents the physical and ideological oppression of women and their helplessness. The fact that Tuba has no legal rights over her own home is at the political heart of the story, while the crisis is precipitated as the neighbour's intolerance and brutality drives his young sister to run away from home (9).

Under the Skin of the City utilises the domestic space to comment on systemic and patriarchal issues in Iran. The home then, comes to represent and embody the metaphor of 'under the skin of the city.'

The politicisation of the personal and private reaches its climax with the destruction of Tooba's home. The scene represents a sense of uprooting and the dismantling (and the

literal destruction) of her home. The house represents the long years of Tooba's hard work, and its destruction (by two men: her husband and son) is symbolically significant. The scene visualises the painful struggles of the Iranian society, and the motivations of her son, Abbas, to sell the house. His intentions are tied to his desire to escape, to improve and better his current living situation. The Iran he lives in is no longer a place for growth for people like Abbas, and his desires to leave are tied to the conditions under which he lives. Here the house and its walls represent his dissatisfaction with a system that has hurt him. This house and the different plans Abbas and Tooba have with it, all become reflective of their ideas of survival. After years of hard work, this space represents for Tooba a sense of stability and security, but also an accumulation of her long years of hard work. For Abbas, it is merely walls that need to be broken down, metaphorically representing a sense of escape from the world in which he is so tied down to.

The imagery here connects the domestic space of a home with the social and political discontent of the Iranian society. The function of Tooba's home, symbolically and narratively, becomes a political statement. The house is all-encompassing and spatially significant to the film. The relationship between this house and the state is alluded to here as well. This is especially the case when Tooba reiterates that this house is all she has from this 'place.' This sentiment is fully fleshed out in Banietemad's *Tales* years later, where Tooba and her fellow workers travel on a tightly packed bus to protest against labour conditions. In another meta-cinematic scene, in Tooba fashion, the character faces the camera saying: "don't I deserve something? A piece of land after so many years of hard work?" For Tooba, everything has failed her, the state, her family and her company.

In addition to the symbolic value of the house as a place for Tooba, is the dramatic significance of the home in the film. Far more than a setting, the home is crucial to the plot as a motif and theme. It serves as a space where the various issues of economic instability,

gender and class politics, and male violence all intersect. This is reflected through the film's plot as the narrative and action of the film happen in the home but also in the way the filmic elements merge together to visually depict the importance of the home. In a key scene, Tooba finds out that the documents for her property are gone, and that her home will be taken away. In this scene, the small courtyard yet again becomes the centre of action, and the subplots merge together to heighten the drama. We know in this scene that Mahboubeh is in prison and needs bailing. She found herself in trouble with the authorities having aided Masoumeh in running away from home to escape the abusive actions of her brother. The house too is gone, and with it, the centre of the family. The visuals of the scene, the dark night, and the consistent coughing of Tooba intensify the mood of the scene. The two brothers confront one another, fighting. The paternal figure sits quietly in the corner of a room, unable to do anything. Here, the space that once represented solitude and a home for Tooba and her family has become a space for drama and tension. The sound of the intensified coughing continues simultaneously with the sound of the men fighting – in this scene the struggles and the social issues the film addresses merge under one condemned roof. The destruction of the home is also important. For example, when Tooba travels to find the man in charge, asking for the legal documents to be returned and the deed undone, the images of the bricks in the scene, piled in a corner of the construction site depict a sense of uprooting and destruction. What was once a home will no longer be. Regardless of what this home represents for Tooba, its fate had been foreshadowed throughout the film.

The home in *Under the Skin of the City* functions as a stage. It is where we meet the family and see their dynamic and interactions. Tooba invites the viewers into her home. Through the Tooba character, the film complicates the image of the domestic space. Tooba's home is not defined and visualised as a means to reinforce gendered readings of the home. Quite the contrary; the home is torn down (literally, by the end of the film) as a means to

question and challenge the socio-political conditions of Iranian life. Through the home, Banietemad unveils many aspects of Iranian society and shows how embedded the private and public spaces are. Tooba's role as a mother is significant to the narrative of the film, as well as her relationship with space. But Tooba is also the breadwinner, working in the textile factory to support her family. Her multi-faceted characterisation grants Tooba the spatial mobility to take us from the home to the metropolitan of Tehran.

Urban Spaces: Tehran and the Politics of Urbanisation

The concept of space, in its various forms is central to *Under the Skin of the City.* Atwood argues that "Bani-Etemad's films constitute a separate track in Iranian art-house cinema, one that interrogates urban spaces and experiences" (73). As set out in this chapter, the film complicates binaries of domestic and public spheres to show how interconnected private issues and state politics are. The film's title alone alludes to the idea of unveiling, and accompanied by its meta-cinematic opening, *Under the Skin of the City* illustrates the on-screen spatial politics around filmmaking and the woman's body. Also significant to the reading of the film is its setting; as Atwood argues, "Tehran serves as a complicated and unstable character in all [Banietemad's] films" (73). The heavily urbanised film of Banietemad, and its investment in the various layers of Iranian society, is, I argue, partly as a result of the political moment in which the film was made.[10] The depiction of urban life, and the way in which the film locates itself within the city and its political and social issues, can be read as an act of resistance and a deliberate use of cinematic space to bring forth and comment on the country's social and gender dynamics. Significantly, it is through Tooba's

[10] *Under the Skin of the City* is not the only film that uses the city and the urban life of Tehran to offer commentary on social and gender politics in the country. Banietemad's films such as *Mainline, Gilaneh,* and *Tales* are a few more examples.

gaze that the film begins to explore the urban. In this section I will be exploring the politics and representation of urban spaces in the context of Iran to think even further about Tooba's central role in *Under the Skin of the City*.

In their book *Cinema and the City*, Mark Shiel and Tony Fitzmaurice argue that "cinema is primarily a spatial system and that, notwithstanding the traditional textual emphasis of much Film Studies, it is more a spatial system than a textual system" (30-31). In "Reflection of Urban Spaces," Mohsen Habibi, Hamideh Farahmandian and Reza Basir Mojdehi conclude that "compared with other media such as maps, graphics, and fine arts, cinema can come much closer to everyday life, and as such it can inform us about the understanding of various urban spaces" (228). They go on to say, "critical analysis and review of cinema's approach to what occurs in a society, therefore, can yield a deeper understanding of different aspects of the society and everyday urban life" (228). They argue that this is especially important in the case of Iran, as the country's cinema engages with various social issues. The article also states that films "can become tools for examining how particular spaces are understood and interpreted" (229). In "Reflection of Urban Space" the authors consider the role of politics in the visualisation of these spaces. They state:

> The presidential election of 1998 and the entrance of Mohammad Khatami into the political realm of Iran with the slogan of "dialogue of civilizations" led to more flexible political and social spaces, and cinema found itself as a tool for the depiction of urban crises of Tehran. Thus, the physical, structural, psychological, and mental crises, and problems such as immigration, transportation, housing, crime, citizen rights, gender problems, and informal settlements became subjects for Iranian cinema (Habibi, Farahmandian and Mojdehi 230).

As discussed in the introduction of the thesis, Mohammad Khatami's presidency enabled a more open cinematic atmosphere, in which filmmakers began engaging with social issues.

Under the Skin of the City, and other films by Banietemad such as *Mainline, Our Times* (2002), and *Gilaneh*, use the urban landscape of Tehran as a way to address social, economic and political issues.

In addition, *Under the Skin of the City* through its reliance on the city offers a thought-provoking visual treatment of the metropolitan city of Tehran. Banietemad relies on real life locations to tell her story. These locations are not fabrications of the city of Tehran (though the narrative is fictional); instead they are real locations that one would come into contact with walking through the city, which for many offers a sense of familiarity. In his review of the film, A. O. Scott writes: "Ms. Bani-Etemad shoots the courtyard and alleyways of Tehran, as well as its fashionable shopping and office districts, with efficient realism, but the cries that wrack Tuba's family could be happening anywhere" (Scott). So while Banietemad relies on her realist style that uses Tehran as a filmic scene, the film through its narration and melodrama transcends the idea of place. As we often witness in Banietemad's films, *Under the Skin of the City* is a film born out of the social and cultural context of Iran. After all, it takes 16 years to get the screenplay approved. What is crucial is how the film relies on Tooba and her family members to lead us in and out of these familiar locations.

From its opening segment, the film already has characters oscillating between various spaces. Central to this is Tooba, who we follow from the initial interview in the film's first scene. At first the women in black *chador* visually represent a collective body. The shot following the film's credits is of the textile factory, as the camera crew approach Tooba. There are no words exchanged and only the loud noise of the machines can be heard. The next shot, singling Tooba out, is of her coughing on the bus, alluding to the consequences she bears from the conditions that she works under. We see Tehran through Tooba's window as she commutes home by bus, a shot that creates a frame-within-the-frame. In a scene that is politically charged we are encouraged to engage with the urban

landscape of Tehran; it gives the sense of a situation playing out across the city. The frame of the window through which we see Tehran disappears and what remains on the screen is the vast metropolitan landscape. The campaign speech of former president Khatami can be heard in the background: “and we shall broaden democracy, and progress toward a civil society. We will try to continually strengthen the dignity and stability of this nation.” The campaign that can be heard and the visualisation of the city as the backdrop are yoked together in this scene. In doing so, Banietemad offers a deliberately political reading of the urban space.

Incorporated in this political reading of Tehran is also the depiction of the daily life of Iranians. Atwood argues that, “urbanism allows Bani-Etemad to investigate the representation of reality and to consider the ways in which multiple urban realities coalesce” (73-74). Through sound and the grey colour palette of the scene, the urban city of Tehran is portrayed as a chaotic, polluted and busy place. A particular shot that stands out is when a fight breaks out. The encounter is never explored further in the plot, and the positioning of the camera makes the characters anonymous. The function of the scene is not to serve the narrative but rather to further characterise the city. The voiceover continues throughout the scene, connecting the mundane city life with state politics. As the camera glosses over the city, it is important that the exploration of the urban space began with Tooba. Through her gaze, as she looks out of the window of the bus, we too see the city through her eyes and experiences. Also key in this scene is Banietemad’s documentary and realist approach to film that captures the essence of Tehran. The real location of the city, and the campaign that contextualises Tehran, add to this notion.

The voiceover is significant for what can be heard, but also what is blurred out. The voice begins by producing the following words: “and we shall broaden democracy and progress toward a civil society. We will try to continually strengthen the dignity and stability

of this nation. Our developments were the product of a great revolution, and our problems." In this instance, the voice fades, blurred out by the noise of the city – the sound of traffic is intensified here. Moments later, the voiceover continues: "the result was first and foremost a recovery of ourselves, and particularly of our youth." The pause and interruption to Khatami's voiceover is reflective of a political reality. This filmic moment comments on the larger politics of Iran and the restrictions the reformist leader Khatami faces. With limited power, the Supreme leader has authority over Khatami. This constant challenge in Iran's politics is ongoing and continuous and this voiceover, interrupted by the busy sounds of the city, and the follow-up story of Ali, Tooba's younger son, are far too familiar for an Iranian audience. So, this juxtaposition and trope used by Banietemad is not accidental. It is a savvy way to deal with the censorship codes of the country. And in other ways she takes advantage of these lines to draw on the political reality and the current and continuous social struggles of the youth in Iran.

As the following shot takes us into a shopping centre, Banietemad's *Under the Skin of the City* explores other aspects of the city too. There is a stark contrast drawn here between the empty and glossy shopping centre and the busy and polluted streets of Tehran. Functioning almost as an escape, the space is a visual contradiction to the Tehran we encounter earlier. But the calm and coolness of the mall is also interrupted by the events that follow: a young woman running to Abbas (Tooba's older son) to deliver urgent news to him. Even in these slow and calm business hours, the events of the city create a sense of urgency and tenseness about it. Abbas is told that his brother is in custody. The next shot is of the two, Abbas and Ali, on a motorcycle, riding in the city. The exchange between the brothers, and the way in which the scene is constructed comments directly on the socio-political nature of Iran – the city and the theme of urbanisation adding to its message. As suggested by Atwood, *Under the Skin of the City* "represents one of Bani-Etemad's most complex

portrayals of Tehran. In this film, the director explores the political possibility of the metropolis, and she envisions the capital city and its many paradoxes" (73).

The city, like the home, becomes its own stage, responsible for aspects of the film's narrative, and functioning as a political symbol. The brief exchange between Abbas and Ali as they ride away from the prison on a motorcycle, along with the cinematic qualities of the scene, illustrate how the city of Tehran is linked to state politics. Sitting on the motorcycle, we only see the two men, the camera closely framing them, as they yell loudly over the sound of the engine and the noise of the city. "Get in any political trouble again, and I'll show you," Abbas warns Ali. Countering his brother, Ali insists that in order to change the situation, there needs to be resistance. Abbas, who is older and less optimistic, tells him to keep his "head down" and focus on his education. The two speed off towards the grey, foggy and polluted Tehran horizon, an ominous foreshadowing for any political action. As Abbas states his final words and speeds off, his vehicle becomes smaller within the larger metropolitan setting, and the focus is now on the city, visually depicted through the concrete buildings. Hardly into the plot of the film, *Under the Skin of the City* has already engaged with politics.

Here, Banietemad utilises her documentary and realist filmmaking style as she explores Tehran and introduces her audience to the city. In this opening scene, Banietemad shows "the city's ability to represent the various human experiences that exist on its concrete surfaces extends beyond spatial and even temporal dimensions. Tehran functions as an affective surface that captures and mirrors the emotional responses and impulses of its inhabitants" (Atwood 82). The urban setting of Tehran obliquely conveys the film's political position. Through its title *Under the Skin of the City* is self-reflexive, and yet the film is more than just a simple depiction of an urbanised space. The gaze through which we witnessed the city (Through Tooba as she travels home) has now transitioned to a more

omniscient view, and yet, Tooba remains central within this plot, as it progresses and intensifies. After all, it is through her and her family that *Under the Skin of the City* engages with the complexities and layers of Tehran.

Conclusion

As illustrated in this chapter, the construction and characterisation of the Tooba figure are important to Banietemad's filmmaking career. She enters the screen officially in 1999 appearing in *The May Lady* and takes centre stage in *Under the Skin of the City* in 2001. In *Tales*, Tooba reappears once again. In all three films, using the meta-cinematic as a technique, Banietemad uses Tooba to draw attention to the significance of the filmic form, even questioning the medium. Tooba functions as a focal point for the narrative, but also as the nucleus holding together the family. In addition to her role as a mother, Tooba is the breadwinner for her family, working in the textile factory. This allows her a unique position in which she becomes the mouthpiece for the working class in Tehran, granting her a socially and politically important role. This chapter has been concerned with Tooba's embodiment and characterisation, as well as her sense of movement, and as such the impact of her mobility through various spaces. I have argued that through her movement, the film acquaints us with the layers of Tehran, and the nuances of the city, whilst always remaining aware of the cinematic frame that tells these stories. From her initial appearance in the film and the way in which her body is veiled, framed, and made public, to how she manoeuvres through the domestic and urban spaces, *Under the Skin of the City* illustrates how the private and political are always linked at the level of the individual.

Under the Skin of the City ends as it begins: with Tooba in focus, the camera facing her. In the film's final scene, she is shown participating in the elections. This time however, as she is being interviewed, Tooba is much more prepared. In this final scene, she is not

reciting and repeating what she has been told. When asked about her message Tooba, responds:

> Message? What message, sir. There was a time when we complained but you said we were fighting a war. It was the truth, so we accepted it. After the war you asked us for patience, because the country was in ruins. So once again, we put up with it all. Now there is someone who wants to save us, so I am here to vote.

But then Tooba is asked to repeat herself: "Sorry ma'am were having technical difficulties. Please start all over." And this time, Tooba's real message is delivered: Her message is loud and clear. "Just forget about it. I lost my house, my son ran away, and people are filming all the time. I wish someone would come and film what's happening here." Here Tooba points to her heart. The film ends with Tooba's iconic question: "Who the hell do you show these films to anyway?" As Scott concludes in his review:

> There is a great deal of palpable political sentiment in this film: a quiet disgust at the way Tuba and her co-workers are exploited; a simmering contempt at the deeply ingrained habits of male domination; and a weary pessimism about the fantasy of cosmopolitan affluence that Abbas finds so compelling. But Ms. Bani-Etemad is neither hopeless nor didactic, and somehow the calamities that befall Tuba and her children take on the purgative and redeeming force of tragedy. The distraught mother facing the camera at the end is a figure not of pity, but of defiance.

Tooba's cinematic development and visualisation throughout Banietemad's films guide the viewer across the layers of the city of Tehran, commenting on its class and gender politics at every corner. As this chapter has shown, Tooba's defiance and rebellion are significant to her characterisation. But, in ending as we started, it is important to remember that, even as she critiques the form, Tooba, uses cinema as her space to be heard and seen. In its final moments, the film once again relies on the meta-cinematic to centralise its main character.

Here she questions everything but also the role of filmmaking. Unlike the opening scene, Tooba is now certain about her message: there is no stuttering, her hair pokes out of her headscarf exposed, and through voting she is practising her legal right.

Tooba's portrayal and characterisation highlight significant aspects and qualities of Banietemad's filmmaking career and practices. The reception and the origin of Tooba, which date back to 1985 pay tribute to Mehri and Banietemad's documentary films. By following Tooba, through a filmic reading and a character study, my aim has been to demonstrate her significance to Banietemad's films and the construction of the woman character – with all her complexities. In addition, *Under the Skin of the City* allows for a thorough and complex discussion of the director's filmmaking style, which is inspired by the social realities and issues of Iran. The film operates within the realms of realism, melodrama and the meta-cinematic, to comment on some of the social and political issues of contemporary Iran. Resistance and resilience are at the heart of Banietemad's stories too – this we will see in upcoming chapters as well. Turning to the director's confrontation with the subject of the taboo, the next chapter will illustrate how Banietemad negotiates with censorship codes to depict her woman characters as lovers. Banietemad's treatment of the Tooba figure I think offers an interesting starting point for the potential and possibilities of women on the Iranian screen. What connects films such as *Under the Skin of the City* to the filmmaker's other works is the way in which they challenge the internal politics and patriarchal systems of Iran, and offer an alternative reading of women's representations for those watching from abroad.

2. The Representation of Love as 'Taboo' in *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*

Introduction

While the depiction of sexual desire is forbidden in Iranian cinema, Banietemad uses cinematic language to display romantic scenes that challenge the censorship codes of the country. The films *Nargess* (1992) and *Blue Veiled* (1995) marked a new phase in the filmmaker's works, and begin to depict an explicit visualisation and representation of women and their stories. To fully grasp the significant place *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* hold in Iranian cinema, this chapter will draw on the cultural contexts of both films. In its endeavour to think about the representation of the taboo on the screen, an overview of the depiction of love and desire in the Islamic Republic of Iran will be included. Using the two films as case studies, this chapter examines the depiction and role the films' female characters play, examining how womanhood is complicated on the post-Revolutionary Iranian screen. Banietemad, I will show, departs from the binaries of the "chaste" and "unchaste"[11] in her treatment of the woman character. Moving from the portrayal of women as active and complex characters, the chapter will consider how sexual desire plays out in *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled.* In thinking about the taboo in Iran, I will demonstrate how the filmmaker relies on various cinematic techniques and narrative tropes to negotiate with censorship codes, but also to subvert the conventional love story.

This chapter, along with the rest of the thesis is interested in the representation of women. The importance of this representation in post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema, with all its guidelines, pushbacks, creativity and complications is amplified in the films *Nargess*

[11] Ideas of "chaste" and "unchaste" drawn by Lahiji have been discussed in the introductory chapter of the thesis.

and *Blue Veiled.* The two films set the stage for an alternative post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema that brings to the screen iconic women characters such as Afagh, Nargess and Nobar. Banietemad's later films continue to bring forth complex women characters. *The May Lady'*s Forough, Tooba from *Under the Skin of th*e City, Sara from *Mainline*, are but a few of the many women characters we encounter in the director's films. This chapter will begin with the two films that paved the way for Banietemad's cinema – a cinema that, in addressing gender issues, has always remained aware of the implications of class and social politics as well.

For Banietemad, "cinema cannot claim to function as a mirror for an entire society. However, addressing cultural taboos can become a way to challenge social issues and norms" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 155). In many of her films, Banietemad explores "cultural taboos" as a way to question social norms and resist systems of power. The filmmaker enacts her resistance through her work and her deliberate choice to remain in her country to make such films, despite strict censorship laws and restrictions. In doing so, I argue that Banietemad, through her body of work, challenges the power structures and patriarchy in her home country. At the same time, she re-imagines an alternative image for the Muslim and non-Western woman on the global stage, one that challenges the often dehumanising, victimising and stereotypical depictions circling through various Western media outlets. Her films then function as a double-edged sword that dares to imagine and create a new space for Iranian women and their voice. Films such as *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* centralise their female characters, and, in doing so, stretch censorship codes in Iran and introduce on the screen women such as Afagh, Nargess and Nobar through their autonomy and defiance, without ever underplaying the societal and patriarchal pressures that seek to limit them. *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*, as I will show in this chapter, turn to love stories to delve deeper into these social pressures of Iranian society.

Contextualising *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*

Nargess and *Blue Veiled* engage with the complexities of contemporary Iranian society. The films offer commentary on gender and class politics in a way that paves the way for future Iranian films, introducing a fresh look at the role of women as characters that step outside of the prescribed and limited roles they had been given. What becomes crucial is the depiction of women as active and complex characters that dare to love and display desire. The two films, I argue, present a specific turning point in Banietemad's oeuvre. Whereas previously women were subjects of male desire and recipients of love, the two films counter this dynamic through the representation of active female desire. *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* are important because they interrupt the confinement of women into passive roles and, at a time where love was seen as taboo, these films rely on visual motifs that stretch and push censorship codes to depict love stories. The filmmaker's treatment of the subject of love continues in her later works and is evidenced in films such as *The May Lady* and *Tales*, where she once again depicts women as lovers, and once again complicates heterosexual relationships with societal norms and expectations in a way that sheds light onto the gender and class politics of Iranian society. While the love tales these films explore are unconventional, they rely on a conventional cinematic language. This means that the film conforms to the visualisation and conventions of love through close-ups, score, lighting and gaze to create intimacy. This enables Banietemad to boldly envisage love on the screen, leaving no grey areas, and always pushing the boundaries of what is permissible in Iranian cinema. Even when Banietemad relies on cinematic tropes that offer a conventional depiction of love, I contend that she does so as an act of resistance. About the film *Nargess,* Banietemad says:

> Prior to this film, the characterization and filming of women protagonists in Iranian cinema faced many difficulties. A plot involving a love triangle between a man and two women was unheard of. The representation of a character such as Afagh, who was excluded from society but nonetheless evoked deep sympathy and compassion from the audience, was a new topic that went against the grain, and offered a new cultural narrative (Armatage & Khosroshahi 144).

Through various filmic elements such as themes, characterisation of its women, narrative structure and cinematic language, the film resists and persists, and offers what the director calls "a new cultural narrative." This story not only paves the way for Banietemad, marking an important departure in her career, but also becomes significant to the Iranian film repertoire more widely.

It is important to contextualise the time period in which these films were made and screened. When we speak about *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*, we are describing Iran's cinema in 1992 and 1995, and a time where any depiction of love was seen as highly controversial. In addition, the post-Revolutionary ideals that defined the country's cinema were still fully intact and very much enforced. This had led to a cinema that not only abided by Islamic values, but also distanced itself from any form of "Westernisation." A love story that begins with the motif of a dancing figurine of a bride and groom, as is the case in *Nargess and Blue Veiled*, however "conventional" for Western audiences, played a significantly different role in Iran at the time. In this way, even when Banietemad uses conventional techniques to depict sexual love between her characters, within the Iranian context these images were breaking boundaries and functioning as a form of resistance for the director, who relied on visual motifs and symbolism to bring the theme of love and female agency to the Iranian screen. The two films engage in a very different and new way with the role and representation of women and desire, where they dare to show women as active seekers of

love. And even though in these films, Banietemad often relies on what I refer to as 'conventional' visual techniques, the love stories Banietemad tells in her two notable films are not conventional in other ways. Her characters are picked up from the fringes of Iranian society, informed by, and complicated with, issues of class and social status. Ultimately, I will argue that Banietemad's films rely on conventional (and yet forbidden) cinematic tropes, such as score, lightening, flashbacks and symbolism to depict love. The films however, use the medium and platform to tell love stories that are unconventional – and both are a form of resistance, one cinematically through its negotiation and confrontation with censorship codes, and the other culturally, by challenging women's representations as lovers.

Many Iranian film scholars have commented on the significance of Banietemad's *Nargess* in creating her reputation as a filmmaker in Iran. As Naficy notes, "Banietemad won the first prize in the 1991 Fajr festival for directing *Nargess,* the first woman to garner the award for a feature film" (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 159). "This recognition," he continues, "corroborated her status not as a woman filmmaker but as a top Iranian filmmaker" (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 159). In her interview collection titled *Iranian Cinema Uncensored: Contemporary Filmmakers since the Islamic Revolution,* Shiva Rahbaran also discusses the reception of *Nargess* with the filmmaker. She regards the work as one of the films that "became the vanguard of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema" (1). Later, in her conversation with Banietemad, Rahbaran describes *Nargess* as a "film that not only deals with woman's sexuality and lust but goes a step further and represents the male protagonist as the sex object of that woman. In other words, you [Banietemad] reverse the traditional relationship between man and woman in that film" (134). In his book *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, Sadr considers the film as "daring" (259), adding that "this was one of the first films after the revolution to focus on sexual relationships, and played with

another Iranian taboo: sex between an older woman and her younger lover" (*Iranian Cinema A Political History* 259).

There are many dimensions to the significance of *Nargess* in post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. As the aforementioned scholars have noted, this film dealt with issues and subjects that were unseen and unheard of at the time. In addition, *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* launched Banietemad as one of Iran's most prominent filmmakers, both nationally and internationally. Most importantly however, is the way in which *Nargess* shifts Banietemad's storytelling and filmmaking. In her book *A Colourful Presence: The Evolution of Women's Representation in Iranian Cinema*, Ghorbankarimi points to this: "the turning point in Bani-Etemad's career was the film *Nargess* (Nargess, 1991), which also earned her the first prize at the Fajr International Film Festival in Iran in 1992. The unifying use of cinematic language and the thematic connections between all her films since *Nargess* define her as an auteur-director" (67-68). In fact, there is a clear shift in the director's films after 1992. Prior to that, she worked in television and as a documentary filmmaker. What became evident in her films was the way in which she addresses women's issues, and their characterisations in her films. Her earlier satirical films, however bold in addressing social issues, do not rely on women as key agents of their narratives. Banietemad's first three feature films were: *Off Limits*, *Yellow Canary* and *Foreign Currency*. The films are satirical and different in style and theme from the rest of her works. That said, they do still engage with social issues, but do not explicitly address gender politics and the representation of women in the way her later films do.

Only a few years after making *Nargess,* Banietemad directed *Blue Veiled:* another feature that deals with love as taboo, and women as lovers. *Blue Veiled* tells the story of a young, poor factory worker, Nobar, visually recognised in the film by her blue scarf. The plot intensifies when we learn about the romance between Nobar and the older factor owner

Rasul. Their relationship is interrupted and interrogated when Rasul's daughters find out about the romance, on the basis of Nobar's age and class. Despite the differences in plot, *Blue Veiled* again yokes together issues of gender and class with the theme of love. In a similar way to *Nargess,* Banietemad's *Blue Veiled* also complicates the typical love story, challenging not only gender roles, but also class politics in contemporary Iran. In his discussion of the *Blue Veiled,* Naficy argues: "the modesty rules, which forced directors to continually devise new, ingenious, and sometimes distorted ways of implying heterosexual desires and relations, are everywhere at play in this movie" (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 159). Banietemad, through editing and lighting, along with her use of symbols, creates a language that both conveys the intensity of her characters' love for one another, and manages to evade censorship. It is the specificity of the cinematic platform and the visual culture, I argue, that is able to address taboo topics, especially with regards to gender politics and sexuality. Moruzzi contests: "for women living in contemporary Iran, the political is personal" ("Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" 89). She continues to argue that the "public discussion of women's lives is peculiarly coded" ("Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" 90). For Moruzzi, "film is also one of the main vehicles through which the complexities of contemporary Iranian private life has been explored, particularly the complexities of women's lives" ("Women in Iran: Notes on Film and from the Field" 91). In addition to offering a space to explore these complexities around gender, cinema makes the private public. In doing so, it functions as a tool that brings women's stories to the fore, through the public screen. In a country where the political is indeed personal, cinema seeks to publicise the private in order to make women's experiences visible. With this in mind, the way film operates, and the way Banietemad uses filmic language to convey meaning and to challenge ideals and systems of power, are central to this chapter and beyond. Throughout the chapter, I will be considering the ways in which Banietemad uses

various cinematic techniques and motifs to depict love on the screen and to unpack these coded and gendered ideas. I will show how *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* mark an important time in Iran's post-Revolutionary film history, and the context of the two films, which deal with issues that were and are considered taboo. My analysis will shed light on their significance, especially as the representation of women and gender are concerned.

In addition to centralising women in her films, Banietemad begins to play with the depiction of sexual love and desire on the Iranian screen, themes that are forbidden in the country's cinema. This means that love outside of marriage is often difficult to visualise and even speak about in post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema, especially in its earlier years. Many view this type of love as taboo, sinful and wrong. Equally, the portrayal of women as sexual beings with desire is not favourable. What stands out in *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* is the delicate attention in restoring an order, maintaining a balance that simultaneously depicts and communicates the love between the characters and at the same time adheres to the guidelines and censorship codes of Iran. In his article "Body-less Faces: Mutilating Modernity and Abstracting Women in an "Islamic cinema," Dabashi argues: "Bani-Etemad's semiotic sense of names, shapes, objects, and colors assumes a mythical proportion when it comes to the point of visually insinuating moments of intimacy between a man and a woman as permitted on an Islamic screen" (371). The cinematic language, along with the symbolic motifs Banietemad employs in her films become the driver of her plot, and the tools that enable her to resist censorship and tell her story.

By looking at the depiction of the films' female characters, along with the treatment of love and desire, the aim of this chapter will be to consider how *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* manage to visualise the taboo through their cinematic elements and narrative, using what Dabashi calls a "semiotic sense of names, shapes, objects, and colors" ("Body-less Faces" 371). Ultimately, this chapter will demonstrate how the two films tell love stories that are

unconventional, challenging many of our expectations and perceptions of what love is in an Islamic and Iranian post-Revolutionary society. Importantly, the films do this by bringing to the fore central female characters that are dynamic and complex, and who drive the plot forward. Additionally, the films intertwine issues of gender and class politics in a way that offers insight into the margins of Iranian society and use these love stories to shed light on larger social issues.

The symbolism that many Iranian films rely on has given the nation its cinematic brand. This technique is employed by many filmmakers in Iran to both challenge and bypass censorship. Devictor states: "after the Revolution, cinema became a highly regulated sector, in which the state strictly controlled the entire industry" (70). This means the films must always follow a procedure in which the screenplay, the casting and various elements of the films are monitored at every stage of the film's production. Devictor outlines some of these guidelines: "it is not allowed for women to be filmed in close-up, to use makeup, to wear tight-fitting or colourful clothes; men must not wear ties or short-sleeved shirts unless they are negative characters; no Western music is allowed, no intimate lightening; even the editing must correspond to the Islamic norm" (70). Many of the censorship laws came into existence as a way to make the country's cinema Islamic, and that meant non-Western and anti-Pahlavi. While these regulations meant the establishment of a stricter cinema, the anti-Western sentiments did lead Iran's film industry towards a stylistic shift. In her book *Displaced Allegories,* Mottahedeh explains: "Western journalists persistently review Iranian cinema with a sense of wonderment. What casts the industry as unique in the film festival market, however, is the uncanny way in which post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema's fictional narratives glide between the realms of real and of the fictional" (15). As suggested by Mottahedeh, on the international stage, Iranian cinema became known for its artistic expression that often blurs the lines and boundaries of fiction and non-fiction. The symbolic

and metaphorical references, along with the poetic nature of Iranian cinema, have become a trademark of the nation's cinema post-1979. This stylistic branding, I argue, is far more than an artistic choice. It is out of necessity – a language that Iranian filmmakers must use in order to make films and cope with censorship.

While Iranian cinema faces censorship laws that limit its content to one that abides by the guidelines of the Islamic Republic, the codes and lines are not always as clear as they may seem. It is between the inconsistencies and gaps that filmmakers find a way to push against the boundaries to tell their stories. By contextualising Iranian cinema, we can shed light on the cinematic shifts created by filmmakers such as Banietemad. In a cinema with laws against a close-up of a woman, *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* become trailblazers. The brief and economic scene where Afagh applies makeup on the screen before her lover enters the house is not only crucial to the narrative in what it depicts about their relationship, but also bold in the way makeup is used as an act of defiance against censorship laws. In this short scene, the anxieties of an aging woman are shown as she tries her best to hold on to her lover. But also, this scene offers a moment where the forbidden (applying makeup) is explicitly performed.

In the introduction to this thesis, I have outlined the shifts in female representation on the post-Revolutionary Iranian screen, and so, when we look at Banietemad's body of work from 1992 onwards, it is important to keep in mind the contextual backdrop of her filmic productions. What is special about films like *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* is the way in which they shift the trajectory of films about women in Iran. While there are few other significant films that rely on women as their central characters and plot drivers, what marks *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* as trailblazers is their direct engagement with women's sexualities, a topic that to this day is seen as taboo in Iranian cinema. The two films create a shift in the filmmaker's stylistic and thematic approach to films as well; from the satirical early films

of her career, to an interest in narratives driven by strong woman characters. And though social issues are a consistent interest of Banietemad throughout her entire career, the turn to more controversial issues around gender and sexuality as they intersect with class and society become more vivid and bold in her works after *Nargess.* The love stories that Banietemad tells in *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* subvert ideas of femininity and masculinity through their intersections with age and class. These momentary romances between the characters are used as a cultural critique, but while they engage with the harsh realities of Iranian society, they always manage, however momentary, to convey love stories in a cinema that works hard to forbid them.

In this conversation about love in cinema, it is worthwhile to turn briefly to its depiction in Iranian art more broadly. Iran has a strong literary tradition defined by the likes of the great Persian poets such as Ferdowsi, Rumi and Hafez – to name a few. These poetic practices have undoubtedly influenced the country's national cinema, but also its approach to the subjects and themes of love and desire. In order to contextualise my discussion of cinema the following section will explore the treatment and representation of love and desire in Iranian art and cinema more broadly. From there, I will turn to my case studies, *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* to discuss in further detail the portrayal of love on the post-Revolutionary Islamic screen.

The Depiction of Love and Desire in Iranian Art and Cinema

While Persian literature has traditionally dealt with the themes of love and desire, under the current Iranian regime there are strict Islamic guidelines and laws to follow. For example, "unrelated men and women are forbidden to touch one another" (Haeri 114). In addition, under Islamic law in Iran, women must be veiled in all public spaces. Shahla Haeri poses an important question: "how, then, can one make movies based on love and carnal

desire without having the lovers even touch each other's hand" (114)? Post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema has had to negotiate with censorship codes, and find ways to represent love and desire. As Haeri argues: "although the Islamic legal discourse has reasserted itself after the revolution of 1979 and appears to have become dominant, in fact the 'erotic' discourse that is ever so subtly embedded in Persian poetry and popular culture is alive and possibly thriving" (114). She describes the historical tension between the "legal discourse that restricts gender relations" and the "erotic discourse that subverts the very same regulations" (114-115).

Referencing Persian poetry, Anne Demy-Geroe states that the "concept of love as portrayed by Rumi and Hafez is less readily expressed cinematically" (149). She continues: "turning to the Iranian film industry, there are constraints on *how* to portray, dictated by the Iranian cinematography regulations (veiling, touch etc.), and *what* to portray in the tensions between Islamic and pre-Islamic (or Persian) culture" (149). Interestingly however, Iranian cinema often relies on its poetic history to depict love in a way that is compatible with the Islamic laws of the country. Demy-Geroe is correct to comment on the constraints of "*how* to portray" and "*what* to portray," both of which I will be looking at closely in this chapter as I consider the use of cinematic visual motifs and narrative structures in the films of Banietemad. It is through these cinematic techniques that film is able to find a space where it is able to portray love and desire.

Milani, in her article "Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature", asks: "what are the ways in which gender and space intersect in the Iranian literary arena"? raising the question of the role of women in Persian literary practices. She continues: "if seclusion is an attempt to erase women from the public scene, how, then, have authors of numerous Iranian romances reconciled narrative imperatives with cultural properties and constructed feminine voices and images in a sex-segregated society" (107)? Milani's

questions can also be applied to cinematic practices under the Islamic Republic, as women begin to enter the spaces both behind and in front of the camera – as storytellers and as characters. In the same article, Milani goes on to describe the expectations of femininity and womanhood:

> Traditionally, a virtuous woman was expected to maintain a closed-in existence that did not intrude or merge with the outside world. She was a person of few transactions. She covered her body, guarded her honor, controlled her desires, measured her words, and unfailingly remained in her "proper circle." Codes of ideal femininity, masculinity, and honor demanded the exclusion of women from the public sphere ("Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature" 107).

The description Miliani shares of what makes a virtuous woman once again applies to the representations we come across in the earlier years after the Islamic Revolution where women were pushed out of sight. This is something Banietemad engages with in her films as well. For example, with the inclusion of characters like Afagh, who fit nowhere close to that image of honour and virtue, cinema begins to shift not only the representation of femininity and womanhood, but also questions these ideals entirely. Even today, as Milani concludes "a deep-seated desire to maintain strong sexual boundaries, to restrict women's mobility, and to keep them in their "proper place" remains with us" ("Voyeurs, Nannies, Winds, and Gypsies in Persian Literature" 123). This is crucial, because if this is true in literary practices, then I would argue that it is enforced more vigorously in cinema because of its visual nature.

How then, do filmmakers engage with issues of love and desire? And more importantly, how do they visualise love and desire? What Mir-Hosseini refers to as the "art of ambiguity" in Persian poetry may be a good starting point. She states:

> Love has always been the main theme in Persian poetry, where it is seldom clear whether the writer is talking about divine or earthly love, or (given the absence of grammatical gender in Persian) where the "beloved" is male or female. Both the Persian language and the poetic form have allowed writers to maintain and even work with these ambiguities. The art of ambiguity (iham), perfected in the work of classical poets such as Hafez, has spoken to generations of Iranians, including the present one ("Negotiating the Forbidden" 694).

The art of ambiguity that Mir-Hosseini describes here is prevalent in other art forms, especially post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. In this cinema, as mentioned above, the main goal of censorship is to keep as far away from "Westernisation", and the immorality this supposedly represents, as possible.

Mottahedeh's argument about how Iranian films operate between the "realms of the real and of the fictional" (15) supports Mir-Hosseini's idea of "art of ambiguity." As Mottahedeh notes, after the Islamic Revolution, Iranian cinema became recognised for its newly defined filmic identity that blurs the lines between fiction and non-fiction. This meant that the symbolic tone, the realist style and language of ambiguity became the hallmarks of post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema. Many filmmakers relied on the language of ambiguity to bring to the screen contemporary issues of Iranian society. A memorable film from the earlier years after the Revolution, and during the Iran-Iraq war, is Beizai's *Bashu! The Little Stranger*: at a time where films about war were centred around propaganda, spreading the noble cause of war and emphasising masculinity, this film introduced an entirely new take on war. The opening sequence follows Bashu, a little boy escaping his war-torn home, and in these first ten minutes all we hear is the sound of explosions, and all we see is bombs. The film however, then shifts focus to the everyday life of Na'i as she becomes acquainted with this young boy from the borders of Iran and Iraq. Here, rather than glorifying war and

violence, Beizai explores gender and ethnicity in a society that is surrounded and contextualised by war. Through its realist shots and images, the film adopts the language of ambiguity, and in doing so, in a subtle, and yet powerful way, problematises war. The gliding of narratives between the real and the fictional world that Mottahedeh refers to, or the "art of ambiguity" described by Mir-Hosseini become modes of storytelling and tools that lend themselves to many filmmakers as they deal with the restrictions of censorship. It is between these spaces (real and fictional) and within this language of ambiguity that Banietemad finds a way into films about love and sexual desire.

In their article, "The Open Image: Poetic Realism and the New Iranian Cinema," Shohini Chaudhuri and Howard Finn also look at the style and aesthetics of Iranian films. The two focus on one of the main characteristics of the nation's cinema. They suggest that the often ambiguous tone that Iranian films embody has "intrigued both critics and audiences" (38). They explore a mode of visualisation that they refer to as "open images" – "one might read these images directly in terms of the political and cultural climate of the Islamic Republic which engendered them, as part of the broader ongoing critical debate on the relationship of these films to contemporary Iranian social reality" (38). Their intention is to explore "how a repressed political dimension returns within the ostensibly apolitical form of the open image" (38). Returning then to the subject of this chapter, what is important about the form and style used in Iranian films (that make them globally intriguing) is often their openness and ambiguity. Film directors such as Banietemad rely on this openness, this space to explore some of the most taboo and unspoken subjects. The way these filmmakers achieve this is through their reliance on images that are nuanced and complex. That said, I argue that Iranian cinema goes beyond the embodiment of ambiguity. I would suggest its end goal transcends the idea of obscurity. Rather, the cinema of Iran often relies on a poetic discourse, rooted deeply within its artistic culture and modes of expression, that seeks a

space, that to quote Rumi, "is placeless." As Khatereh Sheibani argues, "the fruition of Iranian art cinema in the 1960s coincided with the defining moments in Persian poetry in the modern era" ("Kiarostami and the Aesthetics of Modern Persian Poetry" 509). At the same time, metaphors, double-entendres, symbolism and ambiguity have always been a part of the Persian literary practices and language. So, in many ways, this open and ambiguous cinema is rooted in the artistic and literary traditions of the country. Inevitably, so much of this cinematic identity is also as a result of its present and contemporary history, defined and shaped by the Revolution of 1979. The tone and images that have become iconic and reflective of Iranian cinema certainly rely on historical poetic and linguistic traditions, yet, the circumstances that have caused them to resurface within the imagination of filmmakers today are a result of laws, guidelines and censorship codes that necessitate a cinema that is implicit, coded and ambiguous.

It is clear then that Persian poetic traditions have substantially influenced the country's cinema. This means not only in form and cinematic technique, but also in the many ways poetry has been used as a tool and vehicle that drives the plot forward. One of the most telling films that relies on poetic expression as a technique to advance its plot and love story is Banietemad's *The May Lady.* Stephen Weinberger in his article "Joe Breen, The Ayatollah Khomeini, and Film Censorship," draws on the difference between the Iranian and American film industries that are, without a doubt, starkly opposed to one another. What is interesting in this article however, is the distinction Weinberger draws between the types of Iranian films made by different filmmakers and the limitations they face due to censorship. According to Weinberger, in regard to narrative and storytelling, Iranian films fall "into two rather different categories" (211). Here, Weinberger refers to some of Iran's most celebrated films such as *The Cyclist* (Mohsen Makhmalbaf, 1987), *Children of Heaven* (Majid Majidi, 1998) and *The Color of Paradise* (Majid Majidi 1999): "there are many, including the most

well known and highly acclaimed that fit comfortably within the confines of censorship" (211). These he states, are "gentle heartwarming films" that are not concerned with political or cultural issues: "they focus on the lives of ordinary working class people struggling with issues that are of enormous importance to them, but of no great concern to society" (211). "The other type of film," he argues, "presents a harsher and edgier world in which poverty and tradition damage peoples' lives. Easily seen as a voice of protest, it stretches the censorship systems to its limits," and here he refers to "Banietemad as the most prominent director of such films" (211). And perhaps the best place to start will be the depiction of characters such as Afagh, Nargess and Nobar, who, through their complexities, poverty and circumstances offer a very loud and clear voice of protest.

Here I am interested in the way that these prominent female characters are represented in the films in which they appear. The depiction of these characters is important as they introduce a new and fresh image of femininity that begins to move away from the traditional and reductive representations of women characters. As discussed earlier, Lahiji's key text "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian cinema since 1979" draws on this treatment of women characters as either "chaste" or "unchaste." She argues:

> Today, Iranian films have risen to the level of international acceptance and adopted a different approach, with an attitude to women that is far more progressive than attitudes before the Revolution. The new approach allows Iranian women to challenge the representations of their place in society (225).

She names Banietemad's films *Nargess*, *Blue Veiled* and *The May Lady* as key examples that challenge this reductive binary. The characters of Afagh, Nargess and Nobar are drawn out as complex and multidimensional women who show resistance in their daily lives. The visualisation of such characters, especially in the earlier years after the Islamic Revolution matters, and my aim is to explore how these characters defy the stereotypes and binaries of

femininity and womanhood in Iranian films. Compared to both pre-Revolutionary Iranian cinema and the earlier years after the Revolution, the role of women has become far more central to films, and their representations are complicated and diversified more than ever. Films such as *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* have played an important role, inviting a more nuanced depiction of women in film, one that deals with gender politics, challenges patriarchal norms and system of power.

Exploring the Binary of "Chaste" and "Unchaste" in *Nargess*

The treatment of women and their characterisations in *Nargess* is thought-provoking, especially with consideration to Lahiji's work on the chaste/unchaste dichotomy. In her article, Lahiji outlines the shifts and journey Iranian cinema has taken in its visualisation of women and their stories. She argues that this positive shift that has brought to the screen a much more diverse image of femininity and womanhood is a result of the shifts and changes in public opinion. She states that images that "portray woman as a humble or haughty stereotype, or attribute to her an obsession – with a son or a lover" are alien and unrealistic images. She continues, "it now seems that public reaction to such images makes filmmakers aware of the risk that public opinion may call them to account as regards to the roles they allot to heroines and other female characters in their films" (215-216). Lahiji also draws on this binary of chaste/unchaste as a means to discuss the reductive approach to the visualisation of women both in pre and post-Revolutionary Iranian films. *Nargess* is a key text in discussions of female representation, since the film initially relies on the same binary of "chaste" and "unchaste" in its treatment of gender and women's representation. In other words, *Nargess* is fully aware of these binaries of good versus bad, and it uses the convention to explore the ways these ideas intersect and ultimately collapse the binary. In its opening sequence, *Nargess* introduces us to the three main characters: the love triangle of Afagh,

Adel and Nargess. The camera's treatment of Afagh is interesting: the first time she appears on the screen is brief and ambiguous. She and Adel are running in the dark alleys of Tehran, as the police chase them. Unable to catch up with Adel, Afagh hides behind some large garbage bins. Concealed by her black *chador* and the darkness of the city, both Afagh's appearance and her mission are made vague for the audience. This introductory scene is our first glimpse of Afagh, commenting also on the relationship between her and Adel. Concealed by the dark, we watch Afagh as she is left behind, hiding in a pile of trash, as the police run past her. This scene sets up the relationship between Afagh and Adel, foreshadowing what is about to unfold, but also, the imagery of Afagh as she hides behind the bin, in the dark, I suggest works in thematic as well as narrative terms in the film. The scene sets up Afagh as a character left behind and treated like rubbish.

Banietemad's use of a real-life location as the setting is also important as the dark alleys of Tehran become significant to the narrative. As the plot unfolds, the love story we witness, entangled with issues of gender and class, becomes one with the film's location, linking the narrative to Tehran. In this first scene, our introduction to Afagh is limited. In front of the camera, in the city of Tehran, she is veiled by both her dress and the darkness of the city. The darkness creates a vivid contrast and distinction between the scene and what is about to take place. Also, it functions as a concealment that creates a sense of ambiguity about the Afagh character, and her relationship with Adel.

The film's introduction of Nargess is quite different. As Adel runs, he reaches a hospital. He enters the bathroom to change his clothing so that he can disguise himself from the police, changing from a black shirt to an orange one. In the bathroom, we meet Nargess, a young woman and one of the film's main characters for the first time. She enters the scene with her sick father. Taking advantage of the situation, Adel pretending to help, takes over, to appear to be a part of the family in front of the police. This opening scene is crucial for a

number of reasons: it introduces us to the film's three main characters and prepares us for the dramatic complications that are about to unfold. It also begins to delve into the opposing representations of the two women: Afagh, as she escapes her crime, and Nargess, as she is helping her father. Mainly however, in this short scene, the camera follows Adel as he runs from the middle-aged Afagh who can no longer keep up (literally) with Adel, as he runs to Nargess. Also, the change of clothes from dark to bright here represents a different Adel: a different man within the vicinity of Nargess. The scene also transitions from the dark streets of Tehran to the bright indoor space of the hospital. Adel runs through the dark alleys but as he reaches the hospital there is light, exposing his face. Interestingly, while the audience sees him clearly under the bright lights of the hospital, it is as he conceals his identity. Helping Nargess and the old man, he tells him: "don't be scared dad." While to Nargess and her dad, he represents a genuine man who is trying to help, in reality this is his form of escape from his crime. Nargess then functions as a gateway, symbolising his freedom from his own life, the figure that introduces him to a life without crime. Not much is revealed about the characters at this point in the film, yet, through lighting (dark and light), and symbolic gestures (Adel's changing of clothes), and location, Banietemad sets up the scene in a way that visually depicts Afagh and Nargess in opposing ways.

Throughout the film, there are various moments and symbols that allude to the initial scene that introduces the two women. On the one hand, we have Afagh: an older woman who takes control over Adel's life and guides him to corruption. She is the master-thief, representing experience both in terms of crime and sexuality. On the other hand, the film introduces a young woman named Nargess: her name representing a type of flower, going hand in hand with the virginal and timid depiction we get in our introduction of her character. One of the most telling moments in establishing the polarisation of Afagh and Nargess is the *Khastegari* scene. The *Khastegari* is the first step of a traditional Iranian marriage, wherein

the groom and his mother visit the bride's family and come to an agreement about the details of their marriage. In this scene, Afagh performs the role of his mother, both as a means to hold on to Adel but also to display the highest form of loyalty. The sacrificial role she plays complicates her character further and this becomes even more apparent and visible when the two arrive at the home of Nargess and her family, to ask for her hand in marriage. The visual construction of the two women is further heightened in this significant scene. Nargess enters the small sitting room carrying tea on a tray, as is traditional for a soon-to-be bride. The camera captures her as she pauses by the door, quietly greeting her guests. The camera then cuts to Afagh, who looks up but does not respond. Nargess offers tea, first to Afagh and then to Adel. Here, for the first time, the three appear in the same cinematic frame, a visual depiction of their complex triangular relationship (see figure 6). Once again, Banietemad uses light and dark to mark the two women. Once Nargess is seated, the conversation begins. Her mother asks Afagh, "Ma'am, what does your son do?" The camera here shifts to Afagh, as she looks up, asking in distress, "my son?" In this moment, the film uses the information that is available to the audience to create pathos. While to Nargess and her family, Afagh is Adel's mother, those watching are fully aware of their romantic past. To further comment on the emotional disturbance experienced by Afagh, Banietemad uses her camera to fully isolate the character for a brief moment, and to juxtapose her facial expression with the celebration of the wedding. Once the agreement has been reached, the sound of drums and wedding music can be heard, yet the camera remains focused on Afagh: dressed in black as if in mourning (see figure 7). The camera glued on her displeased face, Afagh here is shown in isolation from the shot's action and score. The scene then cuts to the next shot, where we see the drums, and Nargess dressed in white, as a bride. Up to this moment, we have only been introduced to Nargess and Afagh in separate scenes. Their first encounter with one another is Afagh's performance of 'motherhood' to Adel, and with this, Banietemad

complicates their already complicated polygamous relationship. Also, in this scene, the two women are contrasted by Banietemad's camera. Yet, through their class position, the two are brought under the same roof.

Figure 6: The *Khastegari* scene, Nargess offering tea to Afagh and Adel in Banietemad's *Nargess.*

Figure 7: Afagh; here the drums and wedding music can be heard in Banietemad's *Nargess.*

On the cinematic level Banietemad may seem to indulge the notion of chaste and unchaste, but she does not rely on these clichéd binaries. Instead, she acknowledges this existing and reductive opposition as an attempt to distort them, shake them up and to bring to the screen characters that are much more complex than what their visualisations may suggest. There are many ways in which *Nargess* distorts, challenges and questions gender roles and the image of womanhood for the Iranian audience. The film achieves this in different ways at the level of plot, but also through a reliance on the visual mode and representation of the female characters. In fact, from the beginning, through its title (*Nargess*), Banietemad feminises the film. This is important because it informs the audience that this is a film focused on a woman character, creating a sense of anticipation around the Nargess character. The name becomes even more significant as we encounter Nargess. As mentioned, her name, which signifies a type of flower, symbolises the virgin-like and innocent characterisation that she is initially granted within the plot. In the film, she embodies innocence and chastity. In this way, the film sets up the character, but also centralises a woman as its main plot driver. As the story continues, our perceptions of Nargess also change. Her representation is complicated through her agency as she tries to take control over her life.

As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the existing literature alludes to this trend and the binaries that many Iranian films rely on in their depiction of femininity. There is something important to be said about the way the film here sets its women characters as oppositional and archetypes of 'good' and 'bad.' Yet, what stands out here is the way Banietemad relies on these two identities in a non-reductive manner and continues to complicate the two characters and their relationship with one another. While she introduces them through these binaries, she explores them well beyond their stereotypes in a way that

complicates and humanises them. It is through the triangular relationship that Banietemad brings together Afagh and Nargess.

After Adel's arrest later in the film, Nargess finds out the truth about his criminal life. As Adel returns home from prison, Afagh is waiting by the door of his and Nargess's home. Adel has warned Nargess to stay away from Afagh, which adds to the suspense of the scene. The scene cuts to Nargess, on the floor crying, asking Afagh why she never told her the truth about her son. Afagh, turning to Nargess, tells her: "this is just the beginning. When I was your age, I had a train track of stories behind me." The next scene is of the two women, in Nargess's small bedroom: Afagh on the mattress, and Nargess sitting next to her, as the two talk (see figure 8). Up until this moment, the film has drawn on vivid distinctions between the two women characters. In this key scene however, Banietemad's cinematic frame creates a space that uses class and gender politics to bring the characters together in the intimate setting of the bedroom. This intersection between the two women enables them to create a bond. Here, along with Nargess, we listen to Afagh talk about her past. Banietemad's *Nargess* relies on pathos as a strong tool to create the sense of emotion that the film conveys. She does this through the intimacy the two women share. It is both the plot and the camera that brings Nargess and Afagh under the same roof and within the same cinematic frame. The scene also has a sexual undercurrent. Afagh, who has performed the maternal role, enters the bedroom of the couple. This sharing of this intimate (and sexualised) space tightens the triangular relationship even more.

Figure 8: At Adel's home, the two women in the bedroom, talking in *Nargess.*

Banietemad complicates her depiction of gender by exploring a love story from the margins of Iranian society, layered with issues of class, crime and age. By doing so, the binaries and depictions of good/bad and chaste/unchaste become irrelevant. Instead, Banietemad brings forth daring characters that step outside of their prescribed roles. As Naficy points out: “casting a woman as an expert thief was something new, pushing casting boundaries” (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 158). Banietemad brings to the screen a character we have never seen before, that goes against casting conventions. In addition, in one of the film’s most economic scenes, we see Afagh as she applies lipstick when Adel visits her. As mentioned earlier in the chapter, the guidelines of censorship prohibit the use of make-up and close-ups. This is important because here in this moment, Afagh is performing the prohibited act, which is also aligned with her cinematic role. More importantly, she is doing so for the male gaze, as a means of reclaiming her sexuality for her man. But there is also sympathy for this “unchaste” and criminalised woman, captured

through the use of cinematic language and technique. In the scene, Adel, who has been "trained in love and criminality from the age of fifteen by Afagh" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 144), returns for a final criminal job. As he knocks, Afagh who has been waiting for this return takes a few minutes to refresh her makeup. "In this brief, economical scene, empathy for the woman protagonist is at its peak" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 144). About this important scene, Banietemad's posits:

> Many factors are involved in creating a scene in a film: script, performance, lighting, sound, set design, and so on. Directing is about bringing all of these together to help create that moment the filmmaker is after. In my opinion, one of the most important elements of this scene was its location. A hidden upstairs room that faces the alley, with a wide mat hung from the large window and light peeking through the window—this helped convey Afagh's lonely and sad life, and her corrupt relationship with the outside world (Armatage & Khosroshahi 144).

The depiction of Afagh in this light is not through plot only. It is through cinematic conventions, filmic practices and visual techniques that Banietemad is able to create sympathy for the most marginalised character of the film. And yet, while she creates sympathy, there always remains an element of agency on display. Banietemad, the woman behind the camera, pushes the censorship codes of her country by having her character perform forbidden acts (through the application of lipstick), and Afagh, though heart broken, reaches for her lipstick. This brief scene exhibits a moment of resistance for the filmmaker, and a moment of hope for the character.

Returning to my initial point: Banietemad relies on these empty binaries to expose their fragility as a means to show their collapse. I argue that she depends on them as a means of telling an important story about gender and class politics in Iran. As Saeed-Vafa concludes about *Nargess:*

> The main male character's evil habits of stealing and living with an older female accomplice are presented as a result of social ills and unemployment. The evil is in society, not in the characters. It seems that as martyrs, heroes or even victims, the characters cannot even afford to own their shadows. Their dark sides are blamed on their enemies and others, or in general on society. But the society that accommodates the unwanted culture of the other is portrayed through urban public spaces such as the bazaar, streets, traffic or administrative offices and residential buildings" (205).

The point drawn here by Saeed-Vafa is important, as it becomes the same argument made by Nargess herself as she confronts the officials after Adel is free and unable to find any work. Confronting the man in charge, she asks: "how do you expect criminals to stop when there's nothing in place to help them? Sure, there are honest ways of working, but not for people like my husband who have never lived a normal life." This scene once again distorts the images of the womanhood expected from the Nargess character by removing assumptions of passivity with her character. Here we see a bold confrontation between Nargess and the official as she questions and challenges authority. As for Afagh the master-thief: she becomes metonymical for loyalty in the film. Importantly, Banietemad relies on these ever-changing and shifting representations to comment on broader societal problems, and at the heart of these issues are gender and class politics. The film ultimately shows, how it is societal conditions that bring together women like Afagh and Nargess within the same narrative, under the same roof and part of the same marriage. It is in this way, that Banietemad challenges gender and class politics, showing the fragility of these binaries once again.

Defying Stereotypes: The Representation of Nobar in *Blue Veiled*

Banietemad's films problematise the representation of women as one-dimensional and passive characters. I argue that the significance of these efforts go beyond the borders of Iran. Not only do these visualisations challenge the patriarchal systems of the country, but also, as these films circulate international festivals, crossing the borders of Iran, they offer alternative narratives and images of the Iranian/Muslim woman as well. Central to the narrative of *Blue Veiled* is Nobar; a character who is shown through her defiance, characterised by the central role she plays in the film, her choice to love, and her depiction as the breadwinner of her family. While *Blue Veiled* relies on a love story to comment on class politics, illustrating the social restrictions for a character like Nobar, the film never victimises her. This is also evident in the camera's treatment of Nobar, who is made central within the film, both in terms of narrative, but also on a cinematic level.

One of the aims of this thesis, through its exploration of women characters such as Nobar, is to rethink the depiction of the Iranian/Muslim woman. Nationally, the treatment of women characters in Iranian cinema by Banietemad serves to challenge patriarchal systems of power in the country. On a transnational level, through the films' circulation in various international festivals, the works of Banietemad, I suggest, offer a counter-narrative to the victimised image and treatment of Muslim women in Western media. I am interested in the idea of self-representation and the contributions of Banietemad's body of work as they negotiate with the restrictions imposed on them by a patriarchal Islamic regime that uses fierce censorship laws as its mode of control. Equally, the characters in *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled,* I argue, challenge Western notions and stereotypes associated with the Muslim woman. As Naghibi states:

> Representations of women in contemporary Iranian cinema offer us a glimpse into the challenges women face as they attempt to redefine gender roles from within the limitations imposed upon them by traditional cultural practices as well as by the restrictive laws of the Islamic Republic. These films, I believe, also contest the Western and Pahlavi feminist representations of the veiled woman as voiceless and subjugated (*Rethinking Global Sisterhood* 108).

Filmmakers, such as Banietemad, use the cinematic platform to recreate their own newly defined space as a way to offer social and political commentary on the representation of women and gender politics more broadly. In addition, as Banietemad must constantly negotiate with red lines and navigate censorship codes in her home country; her choice to stay in Iran is in itself an act of resistance. In this section, I will be turning to the representation of Nobar in *Blue Veiled.* Through her cinematic treatment of the character, Banietemad brings to the screen a character that is central to the narrative, but also is represented through her defiance, rejecting stereotypes associated with young 'poor' girls.

In *Blue Veiled* Banietemad once again knits together a love story with external factors of age and class. In this film, she captures an unconventional and even forbidden love story between the young, working-class Nobar and Rasul, the widowed, wealthy middle-aged owner of a tomato plantation. Banietemad taps into the emotional connection between the lovers, depicting a love that withstands familial and cultural pressures. As Dabashi points out: "*The Blue-Veiled* transforms the classical melodramatic genre of rich-man-meets-poor-girl into a narrative so powerful that it radically redefines the genre" ("Body-Less Faces" 370). More importantly, as he suggests, the film offers a "radical transformation in the nature of a love affair permitted in Iranian post-revolutionary films" ("Body-Less Faces" 370). *Blue Veiled*, the story that "radically redefines the genre" is dependent on the representation of womanhood that is also radical for its time. It is through

the embodiment of Nobar, her unapologetic right to love, that the film conveys its story. Before the film delves into the romantic relationship that ensues between her and Rasul, it offers a notable introduction to Nobar. A group of women, including Nobar, are lined up at the tomato plantation for a position. When she is called, pushing her way through, claiming space, she clearly states her full name: "Nobar Kordani." The man working in the plantation continues with his questions: "your husband's job"? She tells him that she is single, and he calls the next person in line. Here, Nobar angrily asks: "why next? I said I don't have a husband. I didn't say I live alone. I am the breadwinner for three people, my mother and siblings. I live close by, and I know my job well too. What else?" As she continues, we see Rasul appear from the window, the camera cutting to him. In this early scene Nobar's character is established as she is shown in an explicit confrontation with a man in position of authority. Depicted as bold and active, we are acquainted with Nobar: the breadwinner of her family. At the same time, the camera's treatment of her is also worth noting. Through her blue scarf, voice and body positioning, she is visually central in this scene (see figure 9). The camera's treatment of Nobar extends to her narrative role as well, where she is not only central to the plot, but also represented as a woman with agency, in control of her family and her life.

Figure 9: Nobar, along with other female workers from *Blue Veiled.*

The rest of the film continues to confirm this introduction to the Nobar character. A significant moment is when Rasul, who at this point is her boss (the owner of the plantation), makes his way into her small town, where she lives with her drug-addicted mother and her two younger siblings. Similar to *Nargess*, the film uses a real-life location as the setting, drawing our attention to the realities of Iranian society. The camera takes us to a dilapidated village on the outskirts of Tehran. Through this lens, we become better acquainted with Nobar and the life she leads. Also, in this scene, the camera becomes one with Rasul's perspective, guiding him in her footsteps, and opening his eyes to the reality she lives through. As Rasul searches for Nobar, he learns about her mother who suffers from addiction. He comes into a small house where he witnesses Nobar taking care of her elderly sick grandmother. As Nobar holds the old woman in her arms, with the village inhabitants around her, Rasul walks in. The two lock eyes, and reaching for her blue scarf, Nobar fixes

the edges, and gently greets him. To further emphasise Rasul's emotional response, a score, heightening the sense of pathos associated with Nobar and her life, accompanies the scene. This scene also takes us back to Nobar's tenacity in the earlier scene of the film, justifying her insistence on getting the job. Also, this moment in the narrative successfully sets up Nobar and Rasul as opposites, which becomes a crucial point to the narrative of *Blue Veiled.* This encounter between the two shows where Nobar comes from and vividly depicts her life and struggles on the screen for both the audience and Rasul. This is all, of course, in stark contrast to Rasul's mansion, his tomato plantation and his upper-class family that often visits him. In this brief scene, without there being any need to recall Rasul's house or family yet, the class binary is crystal clear; Rasul's clothes, his car and his shock leave no doubt for the viewer or the rest of the village where he comes from. Banietemad's depiction of Nobar however, goes beyond the hardship she faces. As the plot unfolds, the Nobar character is further developed. The film shows her familial responsibility, her relationship with her mother and siblings, marking her as central to the film. Most importantly, we witness Nobar through her experience of love for Rasul, which becomes crucial to the film because of this initial setup, showing that the binary of rich-poor, as well as the restrictions age may have on their love, all become irrelevant.

I argue that the film's portrayal of Nobar as a woman in love is a crucial element of *Blue Veiled.* Both on a political and filmic level, Nobar's love for Rasul displays resistance. Politically, Banietemad's decision to visualise a romance that shows Nobar in love becomes her way of claiming and creating space on the screen for what is deemed as taboo by the Iranian authorities. Within the narrative too, Nobar's insistence on her emotions for her lover Rasul becomes her way of fighting for what she believes is rightfully hers, implicitly challenging a class-based society. In an exchange between her and Rasul, Nobar's certainty about her emotions for him is made clear. Rasul, sitting down, through tears tells Nobar:

“tell me you don’t want me. Tell me and make me it easy for me. Tell me I could be your father. My reputation, my honour. Until I am alive, I will take care of you as if you’re my daughter. That was my intention from the beginning too. I don’t want you to waste your youth on me, on a secretive life.” The camera’s role and the positioning of the characters in the scene are also important here. The two are in the dark, in a courtyard: Rasul is sitting down on the stairs and Nobar stands next to him (see figure 10). This positioning visually reverses the power dynamic that exists between them, depicting Rasul as vulnerable - a man in love. While at first the camera captures both characters in the frame, as Rasul begins his monologue, the camera draws closer to him, isolating him on the screen. It then cuts to Nobar, focused on her face: “what if it’s what I want, I have to say no”? Through the use of music, the scene adds to its dramatic tension. The darkness also comments on the secretive nature of the lover’s relationship.

Figure 10: Nobar and Rasul in *Blue Veiled.*

Blue Veiled uses issues of class, family, age and reputation, to complicate the love story of Rasul and Nobar. What remains unchallenged on the screen is Nobar's unapologetic love for Rasul. Banietemad's visualisation of a woman in love, who takes full ownership over her emotions, is significant. By loving a man who is far out of her class reach, Nobar crosses uncharted territories, a representation that challenges class politics through a love story, but also dares to depict a woman in love. While the theme of love across social boundaries is well established in literature, theatre and film, it is through the Nobar character that *Blue Veiled* offers something different. Throughout the film, the camera makes Nobar central to the film's imagery as well as the narrative: a young beautiful woman in a blue scarf who defies stereotypes and transcends the image of the poor passive woman. While the film engages with social issues of class politics and patriarchal ideals, it simultaneously dismantles and challenges the idea of women as submissive and oppressed. Following the characters of Nargess and Afagh, Banietemad continues here with her quest to develop a cinema that dares to visualise women as complex characters by telling stories that challenge the social dynamics of her society. In the next section, I will be looking at how the filmmaker uses the platform of cinema and its tools to convey and visualise these loves stories in a way that negotiates with the redlines and censorship codes of Iran.

Visualising the Taboo: Love in Banietemad's Cinema

This section will consider how *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* treat the subject of love, and how through the cinematic lens they negotiate with the taboo, bringing to the screen scenes that are unmistakably a portrayal of love and desire, all the while escaping censorship. Before the narrative even begins, Banietemad's *Nargess* engages with the theme of love. On the screen, accompanied by the melodic score, a close-up of a conventional bride and groom figurine appears, dancing. As the credits roll, photo scraps materialise on the black and white

screen. These images are of the central couple (Afagh and Adel) in the earlier years of their relationship. The credits continue, and the camera slightly zooms out, allowing us to see the dancing figurine protected by the dome shaped glass cover. The transparent shield momentarily protects the couple from the realities of the outside world. In this way Banietemad uses symbolic imagery in the opening of the film to comment on love, but as the plot unfolds, these same images return to the screen, and this time to mean something entirely different. This becomes one of the ways in which the film develops a love story that is not only unconventional, but also culturally taboo. The plastic bride and groom figurine for example, at first sight stands for the image of love and stability, representing marriage. However, in a later scene, as Adel goes through his bag we realize that the figurine is amongst the stolen goods. Banietemad here uses these figures to depict love, but also continues to yoke together the tragic love story with issues of class, gender and crime. As the credits come to an end, the music stops, the screen turns dark, and we hear the panting of Adel, running as he escapes from the police. Before the love story fully begins, it is interrupted by the harsh realities of its external environment, metaphorically shattering the glass shield the bride and groom have been momentarily protected by. This pre-opening scene is significant because through its reliance on conventional, and arguably "Western" depictions of love, it pushes the boundaries of what is permissible in Iran. However, while the imagery and symbolism allude to a typical romance, the narrative, as it begins to unfold, could not be further from that depiction.

Banietemad's *Nargess* tells a complex and heart-wrenching love story between three people. The film is about the triangular relationship between the petty-thief Adel, his older ex-lover and partner in crime Afagh and the innocent younger woman Nargess, with whom Adel falls in love. Upon meeting Nargess, Adel decides to put away his ill habits and to ask her hand in marriage. In order to do so, he needs the support of his mother (who has shunned

him). In fear of losing him forever, Afagh decides to act as his maternal figure in front of Nargess and her family. This comes with a lifetime promise: to never leave her. Nargess, who is unaware of Adel's complicated past, agrees to marry him. *Nargess* tells a story of a complex world where issues of class, age, womanhood and crime all intersect.

As shown earlier, *Nargess* sets the tone for the kind of work and films Banietemad would go on to make, and the subjects and themes she explores in the later years of her career. Sadr posits: *"*this was one of the first films after the revolution to focus on sexual relationships, and played with another Iranian taboo: sex between an older woman and her younger lover" (*Iranian Cinema: A Political History* 259-260). *Nargess* pushes boundaries in terms of cinematography and the construction of the visual image, as well as the narrative structure and plot of the film. The film complicates an already complex love story with issues of society and inequality, and in doing so comments on both gender and class politics. More importantly, as will be the focus of this section, the film introduces to Iranian cinema not only a love story, but one that deals with sexuality in a way never previously attempted on the Iranian screen, and so the story steps outside of the boundaries of its time. As mentioned above by Sadr, the film plays with the taboo of sex between an older woman and a younger male lover. Their relationship is further complicated when Nargess enters the dynamic. Here, Afagh, the sexualised and criminalised woman takes on a motherly role in an attempt to hold on to what she has with Adel. As already shown, the *Khastegari* scene displays Afagh's performance of motherhood, with its carefully constructed shots and use of colour in the characters' costumes.

Through this complicated love affair, the film I argue distorts the conventions of romance. For starters, it does so through the triangular relationship entered by the characters. Also, as shown, the film's opening sequence only momentarily indulges in the conventions of love through score and the bride and groom symbol that alludes to marriage and

monogamy. Visually the scene establishes images that convey romance. On the screen, as the credits roll, the figurine of a bride and groom dancing to the music becomes metonymical for love. These figurines that seem at first to be included as an "innocent touch" will make an appearance later in the film. In fact, as the love story ensues, the audience is confronted with a subplot that complicates the initial setup entirely. Also, the figurine we see in these opening moments of the film alludes to the *performance* of love and marriage. But as the plot unfolds, we are confronted with a love story that moves far away from the cliché depictions of romance and instead, Banietemad delves deep into the margins of Iranian society, complicated with issues of class, inequality, crime and gender politics. Immediately following the credits is the scene in which Afagh and Adel are running away in the dark from the police. The images of love are already interrupted by the reality of their lives on the streets. The stolen bag carries the same figurines we see in the credits. Here, through these visuals and symbols, Banietemad connects love with theft. The figurine however comments on something larger: it becomes the ultimate image that Adel aspires to. In a later scene, he puts the figurine next to his bed, as he longs for Nargess. In a later scene, Banietemad goes even further in subverting the meaning of the motifs on which she relies in the opening scene. When Adel goes to price the items he has stolen, he is told the figurine is "worthless." The images of conventional love and marriage are ultimately stripped of their value, and while the figurine lacks economic value, the symbolism of the bride and groom also foreshadow the questionable marriage within the film between Adel and Nargess.

The visual motifs are key in developing a love story set in the Islamic Republic. In a country where women and men are forbidden to touch in public, the overt images of romance serve a meaningful purpose. Banietemad's films use these visuals to connect the dots and to construct the image of love and desire in her films. A telling moment is Adel and Nargess's wedding night. To help him out and in accordance with her performance of the maternal

figure, Afagh lends her apartment to the newly married couple. As the two enter the building, the sound of wedding bells and drums can be heard. Afagh runs up the stairs to hide. From above, she watches as the couple walks into the flat. Here, guided by Afagh and following her gaze, the camera lands on the pair of shoes left outside by the bride and groom. The shoes, black and white, symbolic of the conventions of marriage, along with the closed door make everything clear (see figure 11). While the censorship codes will never allow us to see what happens behind the closed doors, the filmmaker leaves no doubt in our minds. I argue that Banietemad here uses metonymic devices in which the symbolism stands for something larger. Once again, Banietemad uses the conventional images and motifs of love to paint the image for her audience. But, what makes this scene especially important, is how she uses these conventions and moments to take us deeper into the story. What becomes clear in this scene is Afagh's extramarital love affair with Adel and her anguish as he consummates his love for another woman. Here, through the broken Afagh (we see her sitting on the stairs outside of her own home, tears coming down her face), a flashback takes us back in time showing how it all started. Banietemad's use of this cinematic technique relays the love story that once was. Also, despite the depiction of Afagh as an independent and proud woman, the audience, through this solitary moment and the recollection of her memories, visually depicted through a flashback, is exposed to her as a vulnerable lover. The film is punctuated with moments like this. As discussed earlier, the scene where Afagh quickly freshens up her face, applying makeup before Adel arrives is significant. The scene resonates because of its depiction of the Afagh character and her desire to be loved and attractive, exploring in a very brief scene themes of aging, sexuality and femininity. For a cinema that is encouraged to depict women as desexualised, Afagh's desire to be attractive and wanted is absolutely significant.

Figure 11: The pair of shoes that belong to the newlyweds in *Nargess*.

Banietemad continues to employ similar techniques in *Blue Veiled.* Using cinematic language and motifs, she boldly explores and expresses love and sexual desire. Perhaps the most unforgettable scene is when Nobar dances with her bare feet to her lover Rasul. This iconic scene, which stretches the censorship boundaries of Iranian cinema, depicts love and sex, without ever having the couple touch. Here, the bare feet of Nobar and her white dress comment on the lovers' first night together. Many film critics and scholars have commented on the significance of this scene. Weinberger writes:

> Perhaps the most audacious of the Iranian directors is Rakhshan Banietemad. In *The Blue Veiled* (1994) for example, there is a scene shot at night, where the heroine runs across a yard to embrace her lover. Rather than show their entire bodies or even just their faces, Banietemad focuses only on legs and feet rushing towards one another. When they meet, and presumably embrace, she abruptly cuts to a shot of the moon" (213).

Thinking back to the central question posed in the chapter: how does Banietemad convey such strong images of love and sex in a cinema that prohibits touching? Using this scene as an example and thinking back to the scene in *Nargess* for a moment, we can see how Banietemad relies on what can be shown (visual motifs, the bare feet, a closed door) and leaves what is prohibited to our imagination. When the door closes, or when she "cuts to a shot of the moon," the filmmaker has left enough visual clues for the audience that the rest becomes clear. About this scene, Naficy writes:

> The modesty rules, which forced directors to continually devise new, ingenious, and sometimes distorted ways of implying heterosexual desires and relations, are everywhere at play in the movie. To suggest that the lovers, who never touch each other, have consummated their relationship, Banietemad employs a remarkably economic and beautiful single close-up showing Nobar's bare feet sticking out of her fancy, embroidered white skirt (implying a wedding dress), walking gracefully, rhythmically, and playfully on a richly designed Persian carpet to the tone of extradiegtic dance music. This single shot suggests wedding-night lovemaking without breaking modesty rules (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 159).

In a similar way to *Nargess, Blue Veiled* is also filmed with conventional tropes that function as reminders, alerting the viewer about the love exchange between Nobar and her lover, Rasul. Even before the two become aware of their love for one another, Banietemad, through her use of score and close-up shots creates intimate moments, offering a chance for the audience to watch and witness as Nobar and Rasul fall in love. One way in which Banietemad achieves this is through score: for example, almost every time the two are in a shot together, it is followed by music. As the two lock eyes, the camera through close-up shots, brings them closer within the cinematic frame. The camera maintains its focus on Nobar, revealing her face as she smiles gently. The close-ups of Nobar throughout the film

are crucial for both the narrative as well as the themes the film engages with. Depicting her as a woman in love and offering close-up shots challenges censorship codes, but it also establishes the romantic bond between Nobar and Rasul. Banietemad relies on the same conventions and tropes in *Nargess*. When we are first made aware of the love between Nargess and Adel, the close-up shots of both characters convey their love and desire for one another. In this way, editing techniques, along with performance and close-up shots, create intimacy between the lovers, and while Banietemad uses the tools of cinema to convey these scenes (without having the couples touch and ultimately abiding by modesty rules), these scenes leave no ambiguity as far as the depiction of love and desire is concerned. It is through the tug-of-war game that Banietemad plays with censorship red lines that result in films that push boundaries, but still, though with difficulty and tension, are screened in Iran.

In both *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* Banietemad relies on cinematic techniques and narrative tropes to ease us into unconventional forms of love that are made complicated by age, class and social stratification. As outlined, Banietemad relies on the platform of cinema to depict love: *Nargess* uses a flashback as a way of introducing the audience to the past Adel and Afagh once shared. She uses visual motifs such as the pair of wedding shoes, the bride and groom figurine or symbols of closed doors, a white dress and bare feet to convey and visually construct intimate moments of love, and even sex. The films through their use of the visual and sometimes the implicit references drive the plot forward and push the narrative along. Through the cinematic language and the power of motifs, Banietemad offers love scenes that are tender, emotionally intense and defiant. She uses storytelling and filmmaking as way to comment on, and challenge the social issues of her country. The love stories explored in both *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* then, are ways in which the filmmaker questions censorship codes, and despite the restrictions for love and sex on the Iranian screen, make space for such stories. As the rules prohibit any contact between men and

women, many filmmakers rely on mediators as a way to bypass censorship: one of the best examples of this method is used by Banietemad in *Blue Veiled*, where Sanobar (Baran Kosari), Nobar's youngest sibling, is used as a mediator between the lovers. That said, Sanobar is still used as a means to bring the couple closer, into each other's space to create a much more intimate atmosphere in the scene. The same technique is used in the final scene of *Nargess*. As Naficy comments: "the director employs a mediating object to avoid male-female touching. In the final sequence, a deadly struggle occurs in the middle of a busy street between Adel and his older cowife over love, jealousy and money" (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 159). The two wrestle over a bag of money (that they have stolen), without ever coming into contact with one another. As Naficy points out, the object between the couple is used as a tool to prohibit any contact or touching between the couple: a "political balancing act" (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema* 159). Here I want to add to the significance of what this bag represents. Yes, it is used as a mediating tool to bypass censorship in the Islamic Republic, but like most symbolic gestures by the filmmaker, this too stands to comment on societal issues. The bag standing in between Afagh and Adel is stolen money – it is both what connects and distances the couple, and comments further on the reality of corruption and the nature of their relationship.

The love scenes that Banietemad depicts in her films of *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* (and in her later works), however compelling, are representative of the social conditions and external factors that define them. Banietemad maintains moments in the film that visualise the deep and tender moments between her lovers. The cinematic techniques she employs are so compelling that they function as a moment of escape from the external factors and realities of the societies these characters experience. These scenes, I argue, have the potential to serve as an invitation for the audience to join the characters as they slide away, falling deep into their brief moments of innocent love. Yet, as we witness in *Nargess,* these

moments are interrupted visually and narratively by the external factors that Banietemad is so invested in exposing. An example is when Adel and Nargess, only days after their marriage, begin to build their home together. The camera here brings to the fore the performance of their love. The couple clean, paint, and prepare their marital home. The scene is filled with music, dancing and laughing, as reminders of the beginning of a love story ready to unfold. The moment is soon interrupted, as the reality 'knocks' on the door (literally shown by Afagh appearing out of nowhere). She is there to remind Adel of his promise, a secret that she will only keep if he sticks around. Banietemad uses these conventional moments to show love, as a way to dismantle them. The visualisation of love itself, within the film and the context of post-Revolutionary Iran makes these films controversial, taboo even. However, Banietemad does not shy away from her depiction of love and despite the censorship codes of Iran, she draws images that relay to the audience tender moments of love and affection. The filmmaker takes it even further when she represents women as active lovers, fully subverting gender norms in Iran at the time. What becomes even more important is how then these films use conventions of love. The unconventional aspects of these love stories rely on the wider frame and the narrative structure that portray the marginalised love stories that are always complicated by external factors that seep through, which is fully at play in this love scene between Adel and Nargess, interrupted by Afagh. The film simultaneously fights to depict the taboo, but also uses the love story as a way to delve deeper into the realities and conditions of Iran's class and gender politics.

The theme of resistance runs deep in the films of Banietemad. We see in *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* lovers who fight against the external factors of their societies to hold on to one another. On the other hand, is the director's choice to visualise love on the Iranian screen, and to take it even a step further, Banietemad's characters are women who are lovers and sexual beings. As Dabashi writes, "the sheer fact of a woman telling a love story on a

wide and voluptuous screen in a land of veiled faces, concealed bodies, and denied sensualities, is perhaps the most significant part of Bani-Etemad's film ("Body-less Faces" 370-1). These tales of forbidden love are utilised in ways that comment directly on issues of gender and class inequality. Weinberger calls *Nargess* a "social criticism and the first post-revolutionary film that tells a love story" (211-212). In fact, what connects Banietemad's films to one another is their fierce devotion to exploring the most pressing issues of Iranian society. Films such as *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* engage with themes of love and romance as a way to unveil and dismantle ideas of gender and class in the margins of Tehran.

Nargess and *Blue Veiled* are only the beginning of Banietemad's cinematic exploration of love on the screen. As demonstrated above, through various filmic techniques (editing, symbolism, lighting, close-ups), the director finds ways to depict love without fully disregarding the "rulebook". These techniques continue to grow in innovation and creativity in her later films, and while *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* mark the inception of such bold filmmaking for the director, it is by no means the end. Banietemad continues with her exploration of love and female desire on the screen as a way to centralise women as complex and interesting characters in her later films. Following Banietemad's films *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*, *The May Lady* once again brings love onto the screen. With this film, Banietemad is invested in the middle-class family dynamic, engaging with issues of divorce and themes of motherhood (which will be explored in depth in the next chapter). Here, Banietemad uses poetry and voiceover as a way to depict love between its main character and her lover. As a means to avoid censorship complications, Banietemad uses poetic language, through voiceovers and letters throughout the film. By doing so, she replaces the male figure entirely, to the point that we never see him on screen, and only become acquainted with him through his recitation of poetry and protestations of his love for Forough. Yet again, despite the lack of physical contact, and his absence, Banietemad leaves no confusion about their affections

for one another. What remains on the screen is nonetheless a challenge to the traditional and cultural norms of Iran: a divorced single mother, questioning her identity through her role as a mother and a lover. Here again, the theme of love is used as a narrative trope, to simultaneously challenge gender politics in Iran, but also as a way to move beyond romance and to bring to the fore issues relevant to Iranian society. Banietemad continues to show the intersection of love and society in her works. In *Mainline*, starring her own daughter Baran Kosari as the film's main character Sara, she tells a story of drug addiction. Sara's lover awaits her in Canada, and the audience learns of their relationship through their Skype conversations. This means that the long-distance relationship between the two creates an on-screen physical distance so that they never appear together within the same shot. This is important because once again, Banietemad uses a mediating tool (the long-distance relationship and Skype) to depict their union without ever having to negotiate with the censors. The distanced relationship however also serves the narrative as it comments on Sara's condition as a drug addict, and the nature of their relationship. As this example suggests, the director's treatment and depiction of love and desire deepens and becomes even more explicit with time.

In her most recent feature film *Tales,* Banietemad brings forth one of the most tender love scenes of contemporary Iranian films, where the unspoken emotions between Hamed (Payman Moadi) and Sara (Baran Kosari) breaks into an intense conversation about life in Tehran. The two are in the car, along with a hospitalised woman who has attempted to end her life (working here as the mediator and third person). In a sudden moment, interrupting their bickering, Sara boldly asks Hamed: "do you like me"? The moving car, along with the dialogue that slowly leads to their implicit conversation about their interest in one another, finally reveals the anxieties of Sara and Hamed. We learn that Sara is a survivor of drug addiction and is HIV positive. About Hamed, we learn that he has been expelled from

university for his political activism. And yet, despite the grim future that awaits both characters, and in the midst of their complex lives, Banietemad crafts a scene that crosses over the boundaries that Sara and Hamed face. *Tales* was made in Iran during a period of sanctions and economic struggle, and so when Hamed conveys his story, he is doing so in front of an audience that is fully aware of such conditions. Banietemad's choice to include a love scene becomes even more powerful here, functioning as an act of resistance that offers a moment of hope. Despite her fierce critique of social issues in Iran, Banietemad always leaves room for love. By doing so, I argue the filmmaker challenges both the internal politics of her country Iran and the pressures that exist beyond the borders. She confronts the systems of power by bringing to the Islamic and Iranian screen the taboo subject of love, pushing boundaries along the way. She then uses these same tales as a way to humanise, through storytelling, the people of Iran on the international screen.

Conclusion

The central question of this chapter asked *how* love can be shown in the Islamic Republic and in a cinema defined and limited by strict censorship. I have also explored the question of where women and their representations fit. Though any visualisation of love, and especially sex, is forbidden, Banietemad's camera manages to offer scenes that depict romance on the screen. I have argued that in order to construct such images, she must at once keep true to the ambiguous and poetic language that has characterised Iranian cinema, but also find creative ways that challenge the boundaries to make space for such themes and ideas on the Iranian screen. As this chapter has shown, Banietemad, through her clever implementation of cinematic language in her films *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*, has paved the way, and introduced iconic love stories to Iran's filmic repertoire. The filmmaker uses these love stories to then tackle issues of gender inequality, class politics, and crime, bringing to

the centre of these tales women characters that reject the chaste/unchaste binaries that have for years served as a limitation. In addition, these films fight against the stereotypical representations of Muslim and Iranian women on the international screen. Chaudhuri makes a similar claim, saying that "Afagh and her rival Nargess (the chaste, law-abiding woman whom Adel marries) moreover refute the stereotype of the subjected Muslim woman, both being more determined and independent-spirited than either Adel himself or his male cronies" (*Contemporary World Cinema* 75). The same reading is true of Nobar in *Blue Veiled*, who is represented through her determination, pride and hard work. In this love story too, the weakness comes from the male character Rasul who is bullied by his daughters and constantly worried about his reputation.

Of Banietemad's cinema, Dabashi argues:

> What we see in Bani-Etemad's cinema is thus a transgressive suggestion that visually challenges the verbal constitution of power. To see that strategy in full operation, we should consider the narrative composition of *Blue Veiled.* Echoing the central theme of *Nargess, Blue Veiled* is a story of forbidden love between a rich and powerful widower and a poor but dignified young woman (*Close Up* 235).

What stands out in these loves stories, adding to their controversy, is the casting of women characters in roles that enable them to unapologetically claim their love and desire. The films of *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* then show a desire of the forbidden by the female characters of Afagh, Nargess and Nobar. Pulling these two films together, and arguably the rest of Banietemad's works is the way in which her narratives always shed light and centralise the marginalised, those on the fringes of Iranian society in a way that both pushes the boundaries but also is aware of the lines and sensitivities of the Iranian culture. In my consideration of the role and representation of women in these films, it is only fitting to think about the filmmaker's own position in the revelation of these stories. Despite the strict censorship

codes and the system in which she must constantly come into contact with, Banietemad chooses to stay in her home country and to make films. Her role behind the camera is an embodiment of her resistance.

In the following chapter of the thesis, I will be looking at the filmmaker's later works *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh*. Using the two as case studies, the chapter will explore the representation and construction of motherhood in Iranian cinema. The two films, in different ways, question and challenge the maternal role. In a similar way to *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled*, complex women characters that become an embodiment of resistance, carry the plot, and become forces of interrogation in the films. Once again, Banietemad uses these female characters as a way to ask larger questions about the Iranian society. Knitted together in the films are issues of motherhood, revolution, war and love.

3. Transcending Stereotypes: The Depiction of Motherhood in *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh*

Introduction

This chapter will explore the representation of motherhood in Banietemad's films to demonstrate how these works challenge and destabilise the role of the maternal, questioning what it means to be a mother in Iranian society. To provide a theoretical backbone, I will consider the larger framework of motherhood studies and the cinematic representations of mothers and the 'maternal' in a more global context. By doing so, I hope to situate my work within a larger conversation about womanhood, cinema and gender studies. My ultimate goal however is to demonstrate, through textual and contextual analysis, how the films of Banietemad offer an insightful gateway into a culturally specific conversation and visualisation of motherhood and womanhood in Iran that can then be applied to more general discussions. I will provide an overview of the mother characters in Banietemad's body of work, thinking about how they have evolved and changed over the years, and as a way to consider the diverse range we come across through her body of work.

The chapter's main focus will be a comparative analysis between *The May Lady* (1999) and *Gilaneh* (2004); two films distinctly different in terms of narrative structure, context and style. Yet, through their engagement with the theme of motherhood, the two films can be read alongside one another as a way to think about the visualisation of motherhood in ways that are both linked to Iran's post-Revolution and post-war context, but also as films that comment on the role of the mother outside the Iranian framework. In this way, this chapter's goal is to challenge the representations of women as mothers but also use these films to contribute to scholarship outside of Iran. Here, I argue that Banietemad's mothers transcend the stereotypical and symbolic representation of motherhood defined and

restricted by the binary of good versus bad that often appears in films. The mother that is often "relegated to silence, absence, and marginality" (*Women and Film,* 172) in film, instead rises within these narratives and is granted a sense of self and autonomy. By granting centrality to these characters, Banietemad challenges the reductive treatment of the fictional mother. Focusing on *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* as case studies, this chapter will be looking at the role of the filmic medium in the construction of these characters, and their significance in the Iranian context.

Beyond Hollywood: The Cinematic Representation of Motherhood

The social construction of womanhood and its relation to the visual representation of mothers in films is important to our discussions of gender politics. Also crucial is the relationship and distinction between the social realities of motherhood as a lived experience and the cinematic representations of the mother. My aim here is to explore the depiction and the discourse around motherhood in Iranian cinema by looking at Banietemad's films. That said, I would suggest that the contextualisation of these films offers insight into some of the cultural anxieties we have about the mother figure. In "Sex, Work, and Motherhood: The Impossible Triangle," Ann Kaplan looks at the complexities and struggles that many women face as they balance their personal and professional lives. Written in 1990, the article in addressing this triangular impossibility continues to ring true (409).

In her book *Feminism and Film,* Kaplan again points to the role of patriarchy in Hollywood. She states: "The Hollywood cinema is as responsible as anything for perpetuating the useless patriarchal myths. Relatively few Hollywood films make the Mother central, relegating her, rather, to the periphery of a narrative focused on a husband, son, or daughter" (*Feminism and Film* 467-8). As a result, the representation of mothers on the screen has witnessed a reductive approach that rests on traditional binaries of 'good'

versus 'bad': "The dominant paradigms are similar to those found in literature and mythology throughout Western culture" (*Feminism and Film* 467-8). Kaplan then goes on to offer an outline, arguing that women as mothers fall within specific cinematic representations. It is worth quoting in length the four categories she draws on:

> **The Good Mother**, who is all-nurturing and self-abnegating – the 'Angel in the House.' Totally invested in husband and children, she lives only through them, and is marginal to the narrative.
>
> **The Bad Mother or Witch** – the underside of the first myth. Sadistic, hurtful, and jealous, she refused the self-abnegating role, demanding her own life. Because of her 'evil' behaviour, this Mother often takes control of the narrative, but she is punished for her violation of the desired patriarchal ideal, the Good Mother.
>
> **The Heroic Mother**, who suffers and endures for the sake of husband and children. A development of the first Mother, she shares her saintly qualities, but is more central to the action. Yet, unlike the second Mother, she acts not to satisfy herself but for the good of the family.
>
> **The Silly, Weak or Vain Mother**. Found most often in comedies, she is ridiculed by husband and children alike, and generally scorned and disparaged (*Feminism and Film* 467-8).

Kaplan's framework draws on the mentioned Western practices from both literature and film that divide mother characters into reductive, one-dimensional stereotypes.

To a large extent, these restrictive images and categories of the mother character drawn by Kaplan are also applicable to Iranian cinema. As this chapter will illustrate, Banietemad's films disrupt such ideals and treatments of the maternal figure. These images and categories leave no room for any complex exploration of mother characters, and instead reinforce binaries of good and bad, or are used as a way to mock the mother character. I

argue that the major issue with this type of characterisation is that it strengthens the false and unrealistic expectations of womanhood and motherhood. This then leaves no doubt about the importance of our visual culture and the principles it constantly breeds, as a way to maintain patriarchal values. Kaplan argues:

> To all intents and purposes, the mother qua *herself* is, in patriarchy, relegated to silence, absence, and marginality. What patriarchy has instead focused on is the status of woman as *castrated*, as lacking a status that confers on males the place of "in possession" which has been used to dominate women (*Women and Film* 172).

The visualisation of the mother character as silent and absent in our film and media is to further marginalise her in our society. The depiction of mothers that fit into these four groups also functions as an erasure of womanhood and female experience, because it suggests that once a woman becomes a mother, her identity and story are irrelevant. As we will witness in the case of *Gilaneh,* this paradigm is also interesting in the way the role of motherhood is understood within the context of war. This is especially true about the "heroic" mother who must sacrifice herself for the wellbeing of her family. Kaplan's categorisation will serve as an initial and important framework, and one that, I argue, Banietemad is at least implicitly aware of. By dismantling these ideals and categories, she rejects the relegation of the mother, and instead allows her to rise and occupy narrative space and a position of authority.

The cinematic representation of women has also often been invested in the reiteration of the role of motherhood and what that looks like on the screen. In her book, *And the Mirror Cracked: Feminist Cinema and Film Theory,* Anneke Smelik argues that "cinema is a cultural practice where myths about women and femininity, and men and masculinity, in short, myths about sexual difference are produced, reproduced, and represented. The stakes of feminist film theory are therefore high" (7). My goal is to tune into this form of "cultural practice" as a gateway into discussions around gender politics and social inequality in Iran.

While my research focuses mainly on the films of Banietemad, the overall aim here is to think beyond Iranian studies as way to create space within feminist studies and to invite diversity and an intersectional approach to film and gender more broadly. This section will show that as far as the representation of motherhood is concerned, there are parallels between the ideological productions of the mother on the screen that apply to world cinema too. At the heart of Banietemad's *The May Lady* for example is Kaplan's "impossible triangle," where Forough, the film's main character, has to constantly negotiate between her love life, her work and her role as a mother. The "impossible triangle" I would suggest receives its title from the need for relegating women to mothers only. This also touches on patriarchal ideas of femininity and motherhood, and one which has been adapted into film. As mentioned above, these myths and ideas are then "produced, reproduced, and represented" (Smelik 7).

Sylvia Harvey also looks at the representation of women as mothers. Her argument is similar to one made by Lahiji in her article "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979." For Harvey, "the two most common types of women in film noir are the exciting, childless whores, or the boring, potentially childbearing sweethearts" (38). In her discussion, Lahiji looks at the pre-Revolutionary representations of women (as "unchaste") versus the post-Islamic Revolution depictions of women (as "chaste"). Both Harvey and Lahiji highlight the restrictive imagery and binaries that are often used to depict women. Kathleen Rowe Karlyn also looks at this idea:

> In popular culture, especially in the more prestigious forms of film and primetime television, women have rarely existed as interesting characters once they are mothers, especially mothers of daughters. While occasionally sentimentalized and idealized, they are more often incompetent, monstrous, or just not there. Cinema's visual vocabulary of motherhood, established in the earliest years of film history,

> reflects enduring moral polarities that structure Western thinking around motherhood (12).

Karlyn's statement is worth unpacking, because it addresses a few issues. First, it reiterates the arguments drawn on by scholars such as Kaplan, Harvey and Lahiji, in that women's roles are often polarised between good and bad. There is more to what she says however; Karlyn also points to how women as characters lose intrigue once they become mothers. Through the role of motherhood, the film desexualises the maternal characters. This poses two issues itself: first that there is no room for sexuality in motherhood, and secondly, that if women are not sexualised, they become irrelevant. Finally, the last point Karlyn makes reminds us of why scholarship surrounding the representation of women and mothers is important; these cinematic representations reflect the cultural attitudes towards the role of the mother in society. And so, the intention behind the production of these images of motherhood has roots in our cultural understandings (and misunderstandings) of the role and representation of motherhood. As Asma Sayed argues, "since the advent of silent film, motherhood has been represented on the big screen across the globe" (1), and yet the exploration of this theme as a dimension of cinema is fairly new.

In her edited collection *Screening Motherhood in Contemporary World Cinema,* Sayed discusses how motherhood studies has only been considered an area of study in the last three decades. Even then, the focus has mainly been on Hollywood and American films. The goal of the book for Sayed is to "expand the scope of such studies, which will allow for a parallel examination of films from around the globe" (3-4). In her conclusion, Sayed argues that there are no known books or research on the representation of mothers in world cinema (18). This makes my research significant and timely as it contributes to further studies on the cinematic representation of mothers in world cinema. Similar to the previously discussed scholarship around representations of motherhood, Sayed also notes, "mainstream cinema

around the world, while appealing to the masses, has overwhelmingly portrayed mother figures in a stereotypical manner" (5). On a similar note, Karlyn argues:

> Like other liberation movements, feminism has long struggled with the consequences of trying to create political solidarity around an identity based on a universalized definition of "woman" rather than on the experiences of particular, historically situated women. These consequences weighed particularly heavily on women whose perspectives were marginalized by other women more privileged by race and class" (19-20).

But there is even more at stake: while most feminist scholars mentioned above are critical of the monolithic and reductive approach to motherhood in film, they all draw on Western (Hollywood) films, which poses even further limitation to the narrative and visualisation of mothers on the screen. Sayed's introduction, while acknowledging the contributions of feminist film scholars, points to these shortcomings: "these nationally centered investigations do not examine motherhood in multiple cinematic traditions, across language, religions, and world cultures" (3). To expand the scope, the films we analyse also have to present diversity and inclusivity. And so, my research on the representation of women in Iranian cinema, as well as this chapter specifically on motherhood, fits well within this mission: to use cinema as a way to break these boundaries and to introduce counter-narratives to these representations.

While this thesis complicates aspects of auteur studies, it cannot in its discussions of the representation of women, ignore the role of the director behind the camera.[12] Banietemad's role as an Iranian and woman filmmaker, who chooses to remain in the country, despite its strict censorship codes, and to make films, is I argue an important part

[12] The introduction of my thesis looks at auteur studies and the role of women as filmmakers in more detail.

of her resistance and her filmmaking. As Patricia White notes, there is importance to authorship, especially in discussions of feminist studies:

> Authorship has been of critical importance to feminist studies, in large part because women's access to the means of production has been historically restricted. The exclusion of women's perspectives has made its imprint on films, audiences, and the cultural imaginary, and feminists have explored the work that has been made by women as an act of historical retrieval, a theoretical project of decoding biography and experience within film form and address, a site of identification and libidinal investment, and a practical matter of equity (2-3).

She goes on to say:

> Women filmmakers from all over are navigating institutional politics and making films that have a chance to travel and be seen. Though inevitably shaped and constrained by economic and ideological forces both local and global, in its publicity and circulation this work projects a transnational feminist social vision (4-5).

My goal then in this chapter and this thesis is to examine how Banietemad visualises the women characters in her films, and how she approaches themes of sexuality, motherhood and the taboo within Iran's specific social context of censorship. I am interested in how the filmmaker approaches conversations with cultural sensitivities around gender issues in her films. Ultimately, the aim of this chapter will be to look at how Banietemad negotiates with the "mother" character in her films, and by doing so, shatters existing notions of motherhood and womanhood. My work engages with various feminist film scholars and their contributions to women's representations in film, which includes work on the depiction of the mother character. The aim of this thesis, however, is to think beyond Western theories and filmic practices, to re-think concepts such as feminism and to contextualise our conception and visualisation of female emancipation. This is the overall goal of my research:

to play a part in the de-colonisation and de-Westernisation of academic research. Looking at Banietemad's body of work beyond Iran, and within film and gender studies is an important part of this goal. Her films collectively, I argue, create a new and crucial space for the representation of women on the screen, but also her deliberate choice to remain in Iran, and to make films under censorship, becomes an act of resistance. Therefore, her films are an invitation for important conversations about the role of the filmmaker behind the camera. And of course, in discussions about the representation of motherhood, it is through her lens, her storytelling, that we are offered a critical perspective that confronts the homogenisation of womanhood, which depicts women and mothers in ways that are reductive and flat. I contend that by studying the films of Banietemad and her dedication in creating that space for women's stories and experiences, we can contextualsze gender politics in Iran, and complicate the stereotypical representations of the Muslim woman outside of Iran. Through my intersectional approach, my aim is to diversify the film canon and the scholarship around film and gender studies, and to challenge the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to feminism that we are often confronted with.

As displayed so far, the literature around motherhood studies remains limited and Western focused. This means that in our discussions of feminism and film we must not ignore mothers and their representations, but also it means that we must diversify our studies of motherhood and cinema to move beyond Hollywood and popular films. By looking at the representation of motherhood in Iranian cinema I am engaging with a timely and important discussion about feminism and the representation of the maternal. This study will allow us to tune into the visualisation of motherhood as a universal concept, but it will also offer an examination of the role and representation of mothers through a culturally specific lens that appreciates women's stories and experiences. The diversity that Banietemad's films engage with in their representations of motherhood and their voices, challenge the feminism that

has indeed, as argued by Karlyn, marginalised certain voices and bodies. More importantly even, Banietemad's films display an understanding and recognition of the categories identified by Kaplan (four types of mothers in film). However, her films though aware of these constructs, move away from these reductive images of motherhood, and contest and challenge these stereotypes.

On the theme of motherhood, Sheibani, in her article titled "The Aesthetics of (Dis) Empowered Motherhood in Iranian Cinema (1965-1978)", looks at the years leading to the Islamic Revolution of 1979, arguing that this period marks "the most dynamic years for Iranian national cinema" (374). Sheibani, looking at the representation of women and mothers, posits:

> Among the cinematic discourses that developed in the pre-revolutionary era, the rhetoric of motherhood has been a seminal one, albeit not an underlined one, negotiated by various generic trends in the film industry as well as the socio-cultural and political ambiances in this era" (374).

While Sheibani looks at the pre-Revolutionary representations of women and mothers in Iran, as she suggests, "generally speaking, the thematics and stylistics of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema were both a reaction to and continuation of the pre-revolutionary commercial and intellectual cinematic productions" (374). This marks her study of these depictions as crucial to our reading of motherhood in the post-Revolution and Islamic context. Also, as outlined by Sheibani, whilst the role of mother characters and the rhetoric around such representations is important, it remains unexamined and at best, understudied. Drawing on various studies and data in regard to pre-Revolutionary films, Sheibani concludes:

> In almost all of these films, maybe with few exceptions, the good mother is portrayed as a homemaker who prioritizes her maternal duties over social or leisure activities.

> Bad mothers are the ones who have a profession outside of their home, especially those mothers who are independent of male relatives for economic support (376).

The distinctions between good and bad mothers, drawn here by Sheibani, mirror the references made to the representation of women as mothers so far in this chapter. This shows that despite different cultural attitudes and contexts, there are repeated patterns and images that reinforce the stereotypes of motherhood in various film industries all over the world. Looking at how Banietemad challenges these notions through her body of work in an Islamic and post-Revolutionary context, I argue, becomes even more crucial. It is interesting how Banietemad in both *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* uses the role of the maternal to explore other dimensions: womanhood, sexuality and nationhood. By doing so, she once again plays with the boundaries of censorship through the character of Forough, while through its narrative also exploring cultural tensions. With the eponymous character Gilaneh, Banietemad embraces an entirely different notion of motherhood, one defined and interrupted by war and nationhood.

In both instances the filmmaker challenges the framework of what motherhood consists of, but also contextualises how motherhood is perceived. Forough, who is faced with her own set of challenges in a post-War patriarchal society, can dream to create (through film) and to love again. Gilaneh's experience of motherhood is very different: she has unwillingly sacrificed her son and lost her health and youth along the way. There is no space for her to dream or to love. Banietemad imagines in this war film an entirely different idea of motherhood that seemingly supports the depiction of the traditional mother, but Gilaneh, whose name is one with the land, is used as an embodiment (through her broken body and son) to question and challenge war. Through its exploration of the broken bodies, and the consequences of violence on a home and a nation, the film rejects the genre conventions of war films. As Sayed argues:

> Mother characters populating the backdrops of cinematic narratives are noteworthy both for what they reflect about culture and for the ways that they affect cultural attitudes and ideas about the roles, relationships, and potentialities of women and mothers. The screen often echoes unrealistic expectations that too often become the model to which women hold themselves and to which their societies likewise measure them. Films are both a product and replication of socio-cultural and political shifts (1).

Sayed's statement here further reinforces the significance of representation. The mother characters we encounter across Banietemad's body of work drive the narratives, revealing aspects of the socio-political and cultural attitudes towards women and the role of mothers in Iranian society. I will demonstrate how the films of Banietemad, show an understanding of what Sayed calls "unrealistic expectations," but engage with these ideas as a way to challenge and shift these images. The bilateral relationship between films and culture are significant to my study, as I am interested in how Banietemad explores and contextualises motherhood on the Iranian screen.

The Depiction of Motherhood in Banietemad's Films

Banietemad's body of work explores a wide range of mother characters. This is important because in its earlier years, the Islamic Revolution worked hard to eliminate women from cinema on the basis that women's bodies were viewed as "sites of contamination" (Mottahedeh *Displaced Allegories* 1). The newly defined guidelines that controlled the cinema, meant that the visualisation and image of women became so difficult that many filmmakers, to avoid the complications, stopped casting women altogether. When they did cast women, the female characters were to fit in reductive categories, operating on binaries of chaste and unchaste. These new roles and images in the earlier years, however

limiting, still paved the way to the introduction of women on the Iranian screen. The transition of women on the screen is outlined in detail in the introduction of the thesis, exploring how women were marginalised, confined to certain roles and spaces. On the one hand, many female roles consisted of passive, simple, and chaste daughters, mothers, and wives, and, on the other hand were roles that fit into the oppositional cliché of "whore" figures, usually identifiable by a less strict form of *hejab* (Lahiji 225). Within the context of Iranian cinema, the role of the mother is crucial, because it is within this framework that the inclusion of women becomes permissible. The question then is how Banietemad operates within these guidelines and how she challenges the cultural and political systems of power at play here.

In an article comparing women's filmmaking in Iran and Turkey, Asuman Suner looks at the films of Samira Makhmalbaf and Yesim Ustaoglu – neither of whom identify as feminist directors. Suner argues here that:

> The subversiveness of the filmmakers' gender politics arises, however, not from the presence of easily identifiable feminist voices in their films, but from the ambiguity of their female characters, who defy all pre-established expectations and clichés associated with the category of the "Middle Eastern woman" (54).

I argue that Banietemad's approach is similar to what Suner describes here: while her films boldly challenge the social circumstances of women in Iran, they also problematise the Western expectations of women and their situation in the country. Thus, Banietemad offers an entirely new space for her mother characters that reshapes and reimagines women as mothers in an entirely new light. Suner's argument about Makhmalbaf and Ustaoglu provides insight into the way I argue Banietemad's films need to be considered, because of the way they negotiate with gender politics in Iran. Suner describes the complexities surrounding the idea of feminism in this context, but also sheds light on the work these

women filmmakers create and the way they challenge patriarchal systems of power through film.

Going back to earlier discussions about Banietemad's filmmaking style, I have argued that the director avoids occupying a middle ground between the binary of 'progressive' and 'traditional' that scholars such as Dabashi and Naficy have posed. I think such a view oversimplifies the complexities of what Banietemad displays in her films. Instead, Banietemad chips away at pre-existing notions and ideas prevalent in Iranian culture, which is inevitably influenced and shaped by censorship, societal ideals, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq war. So, Banietemad's approach is not to reject motherhood altogether, but instead she explores and complicates it through the medium of film. Rather than challenging these binaries through an elimination of the "woman as mother" character, Banietemad boldly engages with this role. In fact, in many of her films, it is the male father figure who is absent, or marginalised as we saw with Tooba's invalid husband in the previous chapter. The narrative as well as the family structure is dependent on women characters, which marks them central to her films. In this way, Banietemad uses the role of the mother to explore femininity and womanhood more deeply. Despite the constraints that the role and personification of motherhood poses, the ways in which Banietemad engages with these characters offers an outcome which shows a rich and diverse outlook on motherhood. In doing so, she opens up a conversation about the cultural limitations of motherhood in Iran, and, more importantly, uses gender politics as a means to comment more broadly on Iran's social issues. The mother figure was meant to stay on the margins as a chaste and non-sexualised figure. The goal here is to explore how Banietemad reintroduces the mother character and how, by relying on narrative and visual representations, she complicates this role in ways that step outside of the boundaries and stereotypes often associated with motherhood. This is significant because Banietemad reverses and uses the

limitations imposed on the mother figure in Iranian cinema to offer a portrayal of a wide range of women in their capacity to be mothers. I argue that motherhood was crucial in paving the way for the inclusion of women on the Iranian screen, which means its depiction in Banietemad's body of work, requires close analysis.

Before moving on to the case studies (*The May Lady* and *Gilaneh*), which directly deal with the theme of motherhood, I will examine the mothers we encounter in Banietemad's films, to demonstrate the diverse exploration of this theme and characterisation in the filmmaker's body of work. As discussed in the introduction of the thesis, the depiction of women characters in the earlier years after the Islamic Revolution was minimal. Banietemad's first three films *Off Limits*, *Yellow Canary* and *Foreign Currency* were no exception. In these films too, women were pushed to the side-line, playing only marginal characters. Cast as mothers and wives, these women were hardly ever central to the narrative and the storyline never depended on their actions. In a conversation I had with the director,[13] Banietemad discusses the cinematic shift that takes place in the representation and depiction of women on the screen. In its earlier years, Iranian films, including hers, shy away from the depiction of women. However, as discussed at length in the first chapter, *Nargess* paved the way for women in cinema – both in front of and behind the camera. The characterisation of Afagh and Nargess is worth scholarly analysis, and though I have discussed their representations as women in the earlier chapter about love and the taboo, it is important to look at how Banietemad engages with ideas about the maternal and how she plants the seed for future films about the subject. *Nargess* marks Banietemad's first attempt at the explicit visualisation of women as characters that drive the plot forward, but also characters that have a sense of self, aspiration and sexuality. Here, Banietemad plays

[13] This is taken from a face-to-face recorded conversation I had with Banietemad in her home, Tehran-Iran during my research trip (February 2017).

with the binary of chaste and unchaste embodied by the two main women characters in the film. While the film is about a triangular love between the two women and a man, *Nargess*, I would argue is Banietemad's first attempt at challenging and flirting with a more complex depiction of motherhood. Through her performance of both lover and carer, the character Afagh in *Nargess* is perhaps the personification of this complexity. This idea reaches its climax when Afagh agrees to perform the role of motherhood in an attempt to keep her lover Adel. In this film, sexual desire and maternal instincts merge, eroding the binaries of chaste and unchaste, maternal and non-maternal women.

In *Blue Veiled,* once again Banietemad makes references to the cultural and social importance motherhood plays in Iran, depicting the mother in an entirely different way. Nobar's mother whom we encounter in the film suffers from addiction, and by the end of the film, she is in prison. In a visually economical scene, mother and daughter share a brief encounter where she reflects on her shortcomings: "I wasn't ever a good mother to you." This scene is significant for a number of reasons: visually, it has located the drug-addicted mother in prison. This fractures the perfect image of motherhood. The criminalised mother here is also shown reflecting on her failures as a maternal figure for her children. Distancing from the image of the 'pure' and perfect mother, Banietemad challenges the role of motherhood through Nobar's mother and presents on the screen an image that is hardly ever associated with ideas of motherhood. As we see with the rest of her films, Banietemad's diverse and complex depictions of motherhood are a way to challenge both stereotypes associated with the maternal role, but also, as a way to critique and raise awareness around intersections of motherhood with issues of class mobility, poverty, and patriarchy. As we saw in the previous chapter on the visualisation of love, these films rely on women and their bodies, as well as stories as a way to shed light on the patriarchal issues of contemporary Iranian society. But also, what is crucial is that in both instances, we hear their backstories.

Banietemad creates space for their experiences on the screen, where both Afagh and Nobar's mother (who is hardly a focus of the film), relay their past. Through this, Banietemad humanises them, but also sheds light on societal issues that have impacted their lives.

The mother character is prevalent in Banietemad's other films as well. Tooba, as discussed at length in the first chapter, is initially introduced to us in *The May Lady.* An illiterate woman from a working-class family; she works in a factory and is the provider for her family because of her husband's disability. Through her role as a mother of two daughters and two sons, the audience is confronted by the everyday struggles she faces in her society. Later, in *Under the Skin of the City,* we encounter Tooba as the main protagonist. This time the film goes deeper in relaying her story. Years later, we revisit Tooba and her family in *Tales,* which marks her as significant and almost iconic as a mother figure. Her recurrence in later films makes us invested in her story, and it keeps her relevant to the issues of the moment. As mentioned, Tooba becomes an iconic face in Iranian cinema, tapping into the cultural memory of those who have followed her story all along. Through her reappearance in films, Tooba's character growth and complexity also become significant to our reading of the representation of women and mothers. If most representations of womanhood, and especially motherhood, are dull and flat, with no complexity or nuance, then Banietemad challenges this idea through Tooba, where her character development continues to make her relevant on the screen for over three decades.

Banietemad's films continue to deal with a diverse range of women characters. *Mainline* focuses on the relationship between a middle-class drug-addicted daughter and her mother. In this film, once again we are confronted with a single mother as she desperately tries to help her daughter through recovery. We witness their journey outside the metropolitan of Tehran to the Northern part of Iran where Sara is meant to receive clinical help. On this journey, the deep maternal love wins over law as the mother reluctantly aids

her daughter in purchasing drugs. While the film focuses mainly on the two women, it also exposes a widespread reality of Iranian society: a broken family and a middle-class woman suffering from addiction. In *Mainline,* Banietemad challenges the assumptions and stigmas of addiction, as well as the limitations of motherhood. The mother characters we encounter in these films represent various socio-economic backgrounds, with different aspirations and ideals. Yet, they are all included in the films of Banietemad, each through their complex past, struggles and defiance. It is crucial that the mother in *Blue Veiled,* who is hardly central to the plot, is still granted her story. Banietemad not only challenges the monolithic and angelic image associated with motherhood, but also through her mode of storytelling, comments on the struggles of womanhood and motherhood in a patriarchal society.

The Representation of the Mother Figure in *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh*

By studying Banietemad's films we can begin to see how women are visualised and through these images we become exposed to stories that have often been silenced and marginalised. The discourse around the representation of women and gender politics cannot ignore the role of the mother. For the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* as case studies. In many ways these two films are entirely different in style, narrative and context. However, I argue there are elements that uniquely bring these two works together. The two films are important under the themes of womanhood and motherhood; and more importantly, the two films engage with these themes as a way to expose much more about gender politics and the socio-political realities of modern Iran. Banietemad's representations of motherhood challenge the 'sacred' role that women have often been pressured to uphold. These women often step completely outside of the prescribed image of motherhood. Even when motherhood is represented as sacrificial as seen in *Gilaneh,* it is as a way to bring to the fore issues around the nation. What is important

is how through the visualisation of these mothers, Banietemad pushes the boundaries of what is permissible and brings mothers and their stories from the margins to the centre of her films. Finally, within her body of work, Banietemad rejects the idealisation of motherhood, and dismantles the binaries and stereotypical categories of the maternal. This I argue reaches its peak in her film *The May Lady* – a film dedicated to the theme of motherhood, in search of the exemplary mother. Spoiler alert: she does not exist.

Situated within and set during the Iran-Iraq war, *Gilaneh*'s concern is different from that of *The May Lady.* The film tells a story about the repercussions of war, where Banietemad shows the sacrificial mother character primarily as a way to challenge the propagandist story of war. At first glance, *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* offer two very different moments in recent Iranian history. The films engage differently with the gender inequalities and the role of women as mothers. That said, I argue that the two films should be read alongside one another. Their oppositional approach to the role of motherhood comments on the contextual significance of the Islamic Revolution and the war for Iran and its women. Reading *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* together will offer an interesting insight into the timeline of Iranian contemporary history and society as represented through Banietemad's camera. In many ways, Banietemad's *The May Lady* leads us to *Gilaneh* and the story it has to tell us, and yet, based on history, the films can be read in reverse, where *Gilaneh'*s narrative predates the plot and issues surfaced in *The May Lady.* In both films, I argue that motherhood is used to subvert the patriarchal narrative and institutions of the society and by looking at these two films as case studies, we can gain better insight into the culturally constructed ideas of motherhood that are specific not only to Iran, but to its historical moment as well. And while the films are deeply rooted within their cultural contexts, they question the role of motherhood, society, nation and war well beyond the boundaries of Iran. In *The May Lady* motherhood is the focus of conversation, the focal

point of research, the subject within the film itself. With *Gilaneh,* we once again witness Banietemad's stern take on Iranian social issues. This time, the realist filmmaker retells the story of war; the realism lies in the present history of a nation in pain, for an audience that watches the events and struggles that have shaped and moulded their home country. Nearly two decades after the war, Banietemad's *Gilaneh* is still fully relevant. In this section, I want to explore the role of Gilaneh, the mother figure within this complex and universal story about war, thinking about the mother's body as she carries the burden of the nation.

Negotiating the "Impossible Triangle" in *The May Lady*

Many scholars and film critics have read Banietemad's *The May Lady* as autobiographical. About this, the filmmaker says: "naturally, the concerns of the filmmaker and the social conditions that she is faced with in the film-within-the-film are drawn from my own experiences. But the character's inner qualities, her calmness, and her personal life are far from and even contrary to my personal characteristics and life" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 146). *The May Lady* captures the struggles of a divorced single mother named Forough, as she attempts to balance her relationship with her son Mani, her desire to remarry and her new documentary project about the ideal mother. The meta-cinematic nature of the film and its reliance on poetry both offer interesting insight into the theme of motherhood as well as the internal and intimate thoughts of Forough. Through her search for the 'ideal mother' we learn more about her anxieties and desires, but also about the social situation of a country impacted by revolution and war. *The May Lady* offers a gateway into an important conversation about motherhood. The filmmaker within the film, as part of her research is after the "exemplary" mother. In this endless search, she takes the audience on a journey and into the hearts and struggles of many mothers in Iran. This is significant because it shows that experiences of motherhood vary and that there is no formulaic conception to being a

mother. Also, on this journey the films merge together motherhood with womanhood and then again reconnect it to the social and legal issues of the country. Motherhood then becomes a way in which the film explores many other aspects of Iran's society. Also, the film's meta-cinematic approach is used as a vehicle to further explore the role that motherhood plays in society. Using the film-within-the-film technique - Forough's project and camera - *The May Lady* offers through various lenses, cultural insight into conversations about gender politics more broadly. In addition, *The May Lady* looks at the role of films as significant cultural products. The film's awareness of its own form enables it to tell its story, relying on modes of representation and storytelling that bring to the fore socio-political and cultural issues of contemporary Iran.

Banietemad's construction of this story relies on many cinematic techniques. In this section, I will focus on the film's approach to the meta-cinematic and how it offers a two-layered narrative that lends itself to discussions about motherhood. This is important because it offers a more diverse and complex treatment of the mother characters we encounter within the film, but also reminds us of the director both within the film, but also outside of the plot. *The May Lady* is a film invested in the functionality of the camera and the role it plays as a tool that exposes and tells stories. For Banietemad herself, cinema has a purpose to offer an exploration of societal issues, a means to shed light on the marginalised stories of the Iranian society. For her, cinema is a tool to bring forth societal concerns and to raise awareness (Armatage & Khosroshahi 155). The Forough character's approach to filmmaking seems to mirror Banietemad's – and so the filmmaking within the film is a way of visualising and bringing to the screen the concerns she has for her society. At its height, the film through its use of the two cameras grants us a new position and way of seeing motherhood.

In addition to the film's meta-cinematic approach, *The May Lady* heavily relies on poetry and poetic language. As referenced in the previous chapter, Banietemad uses poetry

to convey the romantic bond between Forough and her lover. Also, through poetry, the Forough character becomes accessible to the audience. The opening shot for example sets the tone for the rest of the film, especially in relation to its use of poetry and its establishment of the main character. The first image we are shown in the film is of Forough's table. We see on it a set of pictures, flowers, candles and her poetry book. Within a few seconds, the film cuts to a shot of Forough's half-hidden face to the left of the frame, creating a sense of empty space and visual imbalance (see figure 12). This visual imbalance I suggest can be interpreted as a visualisation of Forough's internalisation of herself and her life. Here, her gaze is lowered as she reads and writes. The camera then cuts to her hands as she flips the pages of her notebook, writing down and reciting poetry. Once the camera cuts back to her face, the positioning has changed entirely. This time again, half of her face is exposed, but from the right side. This short introductory sequence ends with Forough reciting the poetic lines she writes down. The film's heavy reliance on poetry will be considered in my textual reading of *The May Lady.* Thinking back to the opening scene for a moment: the camera is focused on Forough's face as she softly recites poetry, almost in a whisper. In this brief scene we meet the film's main character and learn about her devotion to poetry. But the use of poetry in the film also has a pragmatic purpose to it. Often, the poetic language fills the void and gaps of the narrative, allowing fluidity. In other words, it is used as a cinematic and political trope to push the plot forward. Banietemad relies on poetry to convey and relay the unspoken: what cannot be said or shown is recited through poetry.

Figure 12: Forough, in the opening of *The May Lady*.

In the previous chapter I explored at length the visualisation of love as taboo and briefly looked at the role that poetry plays in *The May Lady,* allowing the audience to imagine a heterosexual love despite the restrictions and guidelines of the Islamic Republic. The absence of the male lover is also important in our discussions of feminist theory. Our knowledge of Forough's lover is through his voice. This sense of paradox that leaves him both outside of the frame and yet central within the narrative is crucial to how Banietemad negotiates with the censorship laws of Iran, but also reflective of Forough's hesitancy about her lover. The beautiful poetic language then is also used as a gateway into Forough's intimate thoughts and anxieties. It goes beyond expressing and commenting on the bond between her and her lover, but it is also what builds the relationship between the audience and Forough. The film's constant use of poetry and voiceovers offer access to the character. On a visual level, the opening scene sets up the Forough character as its focal point. Also central to the scene is her voice. In this opening, the film establishes Forough as central to the film from the beginning without ever alluding to her role as a mother. The complexity of her role as a single-mother and a lover has not yet been established in this early shot. Yet,

the film's focus on Forough and the visualisation of her represents the complexities of her characterisation, foreshadowing how the film deals with the theme of motherhood. Alongside the visual language that we must tune into, listening to the poetic declarations that are recited out by Forough to us (as if she were in private) is crucial. We cannot divorce the use of poetry as a motif from the visual; in fact, poetry is used where the visual cannot go any further, replacing the silences and the voids.

Through the filmic medium *The May Lady* captures the "impossible triangle" Kaplan references in her works. The opening of the film is dedicated to Forough's characterisation. That said, in an earlier scene, her life and the triangular complexities of motherhood, sex and work merge together, introducing to the audience her life as a woman and the tensions at play. This scene begins with Forough preparing dinner and setting the table for two. "How was class?" she asks. We soon find out that the young man approaching the table is her son. In the midst of their conversation as they discuss his studies, Forough reminds her son that there are people who have no opportunities. Mani asks: "where did you film today?" Earlier the film has shown Forough filming for her documentary project, where she interviewed children from impoverished areas on the outskirts of Tehran. Sitting with her son at the dinner table, her emotional response is carried over from the field to her domestic space. To lighten the mood, Mani begins to talk about the pranks they pulled in class. Forough, making a joke, says "I have to discipline you like you were a child." Mani's face changes, he sternly looks at his mother and says: "you had a few calls." The camera's movement and the conversation between the two slow down, capturing Mani's mood and expression. The camera cuts to Forough, sitting across the table, tensing up, as she very slowly raises her head. The answering machine beeps, the scene changes and Forough begins to listen to her messages. She has several messages, both personal and professional ones. The final message introduces her lover's voice for the first time. In his message he says, "Hi Forough," which

signifies a personal and intimate relationship. Here, Forough who has been walking around the flat, sits down by the phone, also signalling a different kind of message from the previous ones. The shot then changes to the exterior of their apartment building, with the dark night and sky as its backdrop, and the moon exposed. Returning his call, their phone conversation becomes muted by Forough's voiceover as she begins to recite poetry. This scene, in the domestic and private space of Forough's home captures the tensions and complexities of her life as a single mother, a filmmaker and a lover. In a later scene, Forough who is worried about her son's wet hair begins to affectionately dry Mani's hair using a towel. The glass of milk he is drinking from spills, and he overreacts. As she begins to wipe his shirt, he looks away, and the scene is followed by Forough's voiceover: "my young son, during these long and lonely years that we share, likes to play the role of my man." The voiceovers and poetry that are employed in the film are multi-functional. In this case, the voiceover allows us insight into her psyche and inner thoughts, but also gives access into the private world of Forough and her son.

Poetry is also used as a cinematic tool to bring together important elements of the film. A telling moment is when Forough is driving. Here, the two voices, hers and her lover's, merge together, echoing one another as the poetry is recited. In this moment, the poetic language is experienced and brought to life through filmic elements. As the two voices merge and overlap, so do the many personal concerns of Forough around the topic of motherhood and womanhood. In this scene, the film brings the personal and the professional; the lovers' voices; poetry and cinema all into one sequence. I argue that this scene shows how these lines blur and bleed into one another. What achieves this is the cinematography and editing: the moving car that offers a sense of fluidity that visually connects these ideas together. What is also achieved here is a moment of clarity as these lines collapse into one another. The merging voices here represent the lovers' bond, but it is also complicated by

their experience of reality that is vocalised in this scene about the challenges of their relationship.

The role of poetry is significant to our reading of *The May Lady.* From the opening of the film and its introduction to Forough, to the way the two lovers communicate, poetry plays a significant role in the way the film establishes the Forough character and the way in which it pushes the narrative along. In addition, the significance of the character's name cannot be overlooked. Banietemad's naming of her characters is not accidental. Named after one of the most prominent Iranian poets,[14] Forough's name and identity complement one another. She represents a poetic and artistic woman, a single mother, who defies many of the stereotypical notions that define motherhood. But I argue that Banietemad's reliance on poetry and explicit remarks about filmmaking are deliberate. The film and the poetry both become a mode and vehicle for Forough and the rest of the women – for the director herself even – to convey their story, and to complicate through these stories cultural attitudes towards motherhood. In *The May Lady,* Forough's role as a mother in her society, at least based on the wishes and demands held by her teenage son, prohibit her from pursuing her lover. Within the film, poetry becomes her form of resistance as a mother who is in love and sexualised. And outside of the film, it is through Banietemad's resistance that provides the filmic and visual space to tell their love story. In the film, poetry is what mediates and negotiates those red lines, serving a thematic significance, but also reaching into symbolism to remind the audience about the iconic Iranian poet named Forough Farrokhzad, known for her unconventional and even controversial approach to art and poetry.

In *The May Lady,* the two art forms of poetry and filmmaking enable one another, and depend on each other to tell this story. Going back to that initial shot of Forough in the

[14] Forough Farrokhzad is recognised as one of Iran's most influential contemporary poets. Writing from a female point of view, she is known to be controversial and daring.

film's opening scene: poetry is used from the beginning as a way of introduction to the main character. We learn from the first few seconds of the film about her reliance on poetry and literature. But what allows us (the audience) to see this is the film itself, through the visualisation of the recitation of poetry. *The May Lady* is a poetic film that incorporates these two art forms in an Islamic society – it names its main character after one of Iran's most unconventional poets. These details are important for a number of reasons: on one level, the film is about so much more than just motherhood, but on another level, the film complicates through its complex and dynamic storytelling the idea and cultural constructions of motherhood. It interrogates it from different angles (cinematic level, storytelling and of course thematic, but also through the embodiment of a character named Forough). The reliance on poetry never detracts from the theme of motherhood. It only grants us access into the Forough character, creating a bond between her and her lover, and also the medium through which the audience is able to witness that love. Our access to her is granted through the use of poetry, and she is complicated as a character through this language. The poetry and the performance of poetry through recitation and voiceovers are brought to the fore through film. The visualisation of motherhood, granted through cinema and filmic language, invite us into an entirely different world. In this Banietemad challenges not only the censorship codes, but through the voiceovers offers access to the Forough character. This goes against the images of motherhood we have looked at in conventional films, and instead complicates the mother character, granting her the space for thinking and creating.

In addition to the treatment of the Forough character, the film's investment in the subject of motherhood through the cinematic lens and medium is significant. As research has shown, the representation of women, and especially mothers have often been reductive and marginal. *The May Lady* grapples with the subject head-on, and its inclusion of images upon images of motherhood, in such an explicit manner is significant because it challenges

that stance. This is important both at the visual and narrative level. The film relies on stories of motherhood. What stands out is these characters' struggles in a society that has dealt with war, through which these experiences and stories of motherhood are further contextualised in the film. Only ten years after the war, this is important, because it speaks to a nation that is still attempting to recover from the impacts of war. But through Forough's lens (camera) Banietemad comments on the cultural polarities of Iran. A country that battles modernity, struggles to find meaningful space for women and their experiences, and is at the same time held back and defined by its past. While commenting on motherhood and what that looks like, *The May Lady* at the same time is invested in these cultural and societal tensions. The lens through which we witness the experiences of these mothers is also significant. It alludes to both filmmakers – the one within the cinematic frame, and the one outside. More importantly, the meta-cinematic in this film comments on the importance of filmmaking in the telling of these stories. We watch clip after clip, image after image of mothers from different corners of the country tell their story and experiences of motherhood.

The film's meta-cinematic theme thus not only drives the plot forward, but also becomes a way in which both Banietemad and Forough explore the limitations of womanhood and motherhood. The film relies on poetic language as a means of access into the psyche of the Forough character and the "film-within-the-film" as a means of offering access into the many mothers and their understanding of this contested role. Thus, the poetry and the film work together to delve deeper into the minds of women as characters but also, within the film, woman as people, through a documentary style approach. These dialogues, both Forough's through her poetry and the women who she enables through her camera, shed light on the complex layers of motherhood and societal limitations. The arbitrary question that the film project within the film pursues sheds light on the overly simplified discussions around motherhood. The conversation that *The May Lady* enables about

motherhood is by no means one-sided, nor does it offer a single answer to who the ideal mother is. As Forough herself struggles to find this truth, she encounters those within the society that challenge the status quo in the film. The film is able to, through the exchange between Forough with her film subjects, her colleagues, and her lover and of course her son, dig deeper into this complicated and nuanced conversation about motherhood. This exploration, Varzi argues marks the film as a radical one: "For the Islamic state (and again most totalitarian ones) women are only mothers, sisters, and wives, which is precisely why *The May Lady* is such a radical film: it allows Furugh to be a woman and still be an exemplary mother" ("Iran's Pieta" 95). While I agree with Varzi with respect to the radical approach the film takes, I would hesitate to refer to Forough as an exemplary mother. The film, I argue, is more radical, challenging these notions and rejecting such value systems. Forough, who questions herself throughout the filmmaking project, presents the footage to her team. In the moment where she has to announce the "winner," she says: "I can't be the judge." Here the filmmaker within the film, along with Banietemad herself, reject the notion of the ideal or perfect mother, and yet use the documentary process and the narrative of *The May Lady* to diversify and challenge the images associated with motherhood.

Forough's cinematic journey to this conclusion is also important. The film project grants her access into various spaces, which also comments on the misrepresentation of motherhood. This idea reaches its height when Forough applies for a permit to visit a prison for an interview. When asked, why prison, she replies: "mothers are everywhere." This scene also serves as a reminder from her earlier film *Blue Veiled,* where Nobar visits her mother in prison. Once again, Banietemad fractures the angelic figure associated with motherhood, but through her narrative, she offers her a voice and story. By doing so, she both complicates the stereotypical image of motherhood but also problematises society. The film-within-the-film format also enables explicit moments that challenge the misrepresentation of women

and mothers in society. A key moment is when one of Forough's interviewees says: "A woman is not only a mother; she is a human as well." In this moment, Forough's camera and Banietemad's cinematic lens have merged into one, displaying a sense of harmony between the two screens, and remaining focused on this woman, as she challenges the ideas attached to motherhood. Through the meta-cinematic, *The May Lady* comments on its own form, and uses its platform to challenge ideas of motherhood. Forough's project within the film functions both as a narrative device as well as a cinematic one that assists the plot and the themes.

A large portion of *The May Lady* is invested in interviews with various women about motherhood. Forough's film project not only exposes marginalised stories and experiences of motherhood, but also allows the character to meditate on her own experiences. The interviews begin in a way that comments on the cinematic, drawing our attention to the double cameras in the film. As Forough sets up her camera, there is a voice that recites a question: "who do you think is an exemplary mother?" Visually, the sequence has a marked 'realist' tone, and explicitly situates the audience within this space where performance is blurred. The subject of the film-within-the-film, the woman who is being interviewed even comments by saying: "I have a question. Are you now filming me?" In this moment, the screen shows us Forough's back as she films her subject, a performance for the audience to encounter. The woman even tells Forough that she will pretend the camera is not there. The scene then cuts to a close up shot of the woman, as she begins to speak: "I can say that all the women who view motherhood as being a part of humanity and society are exemplary mothers." She then goes on to say, "this isn't something every woman is capable of, so much of it has to do with what the society enables and the role it plays." Here, the two cameras merge and become one. The film's narrative and the documentary within the film are now one entity, and the subject becomes the focal point. The shift between the two is important.

Initially, we are fully aware of the camera's presence, yet as the woman begins to speak, the camera and the filmmaker both dissolve, and all that is shown is a close up of the woman. This is important because even though the film's reliance on the meta-cinematic is crucial to the film's narrative and plot, in this moment, the message the woman is about to convey becomes central. This message highlights the important role society plays in the lives of women.

The editing process that takes place within the film is also important as it exposes us to the myriad of stories. As Forough compiles these images and scenes, we too become exposed to the filming process but also the stories of the many mothers and their struggles. Through its thematic structure and such visual elements, *The May Lady* surveys a diverse range of women exploring what motherhood looks like. By doing so, the film shows how social issues of contemporary Iran are wrapped around issues of gender politics. At the heart of the film however remains the "impossible triangle" Forough has to negotiate with. In an intimate conversation with a close friend, she says: "when you're a middle-aged single mother, you can't really talk about love." Her friend protests: "to love is the right of every woman." The film's ending however offers a very different resolution. In the final scene, Forough and Mani are sitting in silence around the coffee table. The phone rings, filling the scene with tension. Forough looks at Mani, who stares straight ahead, making no eye contact with his mother. The screen turns black, and we hear Forough dial the number. Her lover answers: "yes?" The shot changes to a focused close up of Forough's face, this time in its entirety (see figure 13). As she tilts her head up, to stare into the lens, a voiceover follows: "Hi, I am Forough." The call signifies Forough's resistance, her choice in continuing their relationship, and choosing to love. In this final moment, she once again reminds us of who she is, reciting her name for the audience: Forough.

Figure 13: Forough, in the closing scene of *The May Lady*.

Throughout the film, we watch Forough struggle and negotiate with the "impossible triangle" as she attempts to balance a professional life with her role as a mother, while pursuing her romantic interest. The film always remains fully aware of its medium, using the film-within-the-film as a way to further explore the cultural tensions and discourses surrounding motherhood in Iran. Through its use of voiceovers and poetry *The May Lady* always keeps Forough at its focal point, rejecting the marginalisation of the mother character. Not only is her story central to the film, but also her inner-thoughts and anxieties are a crucial part of the film's narrative. Through the Forough character, Banietemad uses her platform to visualise and publicise the struggles of motherhood, where Forough's voice and camera are utilised as a way to shed light on other experiences of motherhood as well. *The May Lady* while invested in Forough's personal narrative, also extends and lends itself to other stories, offering a more diverse and nuanced representation of motherhood in Iran. In the post-war nation, there are always the untold and under-told stories of the mothers who sacrificed their sons. *The May Lady* makes space for such narratives, but it is a few years later where with her film *Gilaneh* Banietemad fully gives the stage to one of these mothers.

The Maternal Embodiment of Sacrifice in *Gilaneh*

Gilaneh opens with the sound of explosion, missiles, bombing and gunshots over a black screen. We hear the sound of screaming and crying as the explosion intensifies. Without being able to see what is happening, the film through the generic conventions of sound, makes it clear: there is war happening here. The shot then cuts to a close-up of Maygol (Baran Kosari) as she shakes and cries in her sleep. Her mother Gilaneh tries to wake her up. "I smell burning," Maygol says. "You're just dreaming," her mother comforts her. Here, the film uses Maygol's nightmare to frame its narrative against the backdrop of war and uses this short scene to visualise the reality of its characters' lives, but also functions to remind its audience of a reality once lived. Shown in this scene is our introduction to Gilaneh; the mother who must comfort her child. This opening scene follows aspects of war films and genre conventions as a way to signal to its audience the type of film they are watching, but also as a way to contextualise the film. At the same time, through its narrative structure, landscape and characterisation, the film rejects other conventions associated with war films, subverting many of the expectations we may have, which challenges the representation of war as propaganda. Through the broken bodies of its characters, the film rejects glorification. There is never a battle scene in the film, and instead *Gilaneh* is invested in the psychological and social impacts left behind by war. This short opening scene merges together motherhood and war. Maygol herself, we learn is pregnant, which not only further centralises the maternal in this film, but also alludes to the cyclical repercussions of war. As Maygol carries her own unborn child, her mother Gilaneh must protect her children from the violence of war. Contextualised by war, *Gilaneh* is invested in the role and sacrifice of the mother figure. Maygol's pregnancy is also significant, standing for a metaphor that reminds us of the generational consequences of violence. The opening scene, through score

and sound marks *Gilaneh* as a war film. Yet, through its symbolic and visual reminder of motherhood, the film, from the start, also heavily questions and challenges the consequence of war and violence.

Banietemad's *Gilaneh* consists of two parts: it begins with the Gilaneh character and her pregnant daughter Maygol as they travel across the country to find her husband. The first part of the film is set during the Iran-Iraq war of 1988. The second part of the film is set 15 years later, during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. *Gilaneh* captures both the lingering and tangible consequences of the war at home, but also functions as a warning for the rest of the world. This is what Banietemad had to say about the film: "after the war, and the destruction and damage that it caused, the loss and suffering of war veterans and their families, and what the victims of war faced during those dark times, *Gilaneh* was my praise for peace" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 150). Central to the film is the role of the mother figure Gilaneh,[15] whose name becomes one with the landscape of Iran and the nation. The second half of the film captures the aftermath of the war, Gilaneh's broken body, as she carries her disabled veteran son, representing her role as a mother but also the bitterness of war more generally. In this film again, Banietemad shows through narrative construction, as well as thematic and filmic elements how the role of motherhood is defined and shaped by the cultural and historical context of Iran. In this section, I will be looking at the representation of motherhood, arguing that in *Gilaneh* the consequences of war are embodied by the maternal figure.

In her article "Iran's Pieta: Motherhood, Sacrifice and film in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War," Varzi argues that "in *The May Lady* lie the seeds of *Gilaneh* – a continuation of the meditation on the constant negotiation between being a mother and a woman in a strong religious state" (88). She suggests that *Gilaneh* can be read as a continuation of *The*

[15] Gilan is a region in Northern Iran.

May Lady where Forough selects the exemplary mother from her footage and makes a film based on her life and struggles (Varzi, "Iran's Pieta" 88). I think the film is indeed a continuation in that it addresses the theme and role of motherhood in Iran. I agree that the body of work produced by Banietemad does have an element of progression in its storytelling format. This is especially shown as we encounter the same characters from film to film. However, I think Banietemad's films resist the notion of the exemplary mother and instead use these ideas to further complicate such roles. Gilaneh's motherhood is the only version of motherhood made available to her in the war-torn world she lives in. She has no other options and other ways to explore her motherhood. The film does not use the Gilaneh character as a way to idealise her role or reinforce the stereotypes of motherhood; instead, through its unity with the land, the mother and the nation are used as a way to complicate the relationship between the two as a way to comment on the consequences of war, but also gender politics.

Banietemad through Gilaneh explores a culturally and politically marginalised character. And while the film depicts Gilaneh as the ultimate sacrificial mother, it does so as a way to shed light on important social issues of post-war Iran and as way to expose stories that have been left untold. The film's portrayal of a fully sacrificial mother is used as a means of critiquing the political and social representations of war in Iran – of marginalised groups such as that of Gilaneh and her disabled son. In her categorisations of mothers, Varzi refers to Gilaneh as "the silent other." It is worth quoting her at length here:

> The mother whose son is neither martyred nor returns a hero, but is broken, paralyzed and in need of constant care – unsung and denied help from the state that has turned its back on him when he failed to return as a martyr or hero. Gilaneh represents for Bani-Etemad and Iranian women of her milieu the unthinkable horrors of the war and the sacrifices by so many women, especially mothers. These sacrifices are not

> acknowledged by the secular middle class, and never celebrated visually in the public sphere or paid for the state in subsidies. But Bani-Etemad makes them visible by showing us what the state leaves out of its many murals, plays, movies and renditions of the war's legacy, which depict the heroics of those who died martyrs (and women who mourn them). The film shows us the ongoing role women have had to play as caregivers post-war, a role that has bound them as living martyrs to the legacy and tragedy of the war. It is about a different kind of heroism that is not counted, not celebrated and that rarely appears in the films of other secular filmmakers (mainly men), who deal with the legacy of war in their work ("Iran's Pieta" 89).

Here, Varzi describes how Gilaneh and her son have become marginalised not only by the state, but also the visual culture. Gilaneh's son Islmael (Bahram Radan) who returns home neither a martyr nor a hero becomes the burden and pain of his mother, and yet remains invisible. Through the Gilaneh character, Banietemad also draws on the impact of war on women. The film visualises on the screen the untold story about war and the experience of motherhood that has often been silenced. Not only does Banietemad challenge the narrative of war, but also through *Gilaneh* she vividly critiques the film genre that continues to repeat and reproduce the message of war. Significantly, it is the Gilaneh character and her embodiment of the nation and motherhood that is at the heart of her criticism. In Kaplan's categorisation of the representation of mothers on the screen, she discusses "the heroic mother" as someone "who suffers and endures for the sake of husband and children. A development of the first Mother, she shares her saintly qualities, but is more central to the action. Yet, unlike the second Mother, she acts not to satisfy herself but for the good of the family" (*Feminism and Film* 468). Gilaneh however, is never a hero. Through a more realistic exploration of the tangible consequences of war, the film challenges the idea of sacrifice and motherhood. Here, by "realistic" I mean the way in which the film offers the

darker realities and pains of the long years of war, rather than a glorification of battle and nationhood. By doing so, the filmmaker disassociates sacrifice with heroism. About war and the heroic mother, Linda Ahall posits:

> Motherhood or maternalism is commonly used in nationalist discourses in which women's heroism is written through their roles as mothers. There is the 'Patriotic Mother,' the ever-ready womb for war, who performs her duty by 'producing' children [soldiers] of the nation: the more she produces, the more significant is her heroism (107-8).

Gilaneh only has one son, and hers, as Varzi notes, returns neither a hero nor a martyr. Also, the sacrifice she pays for is never coded as voluntary or willing. Gilaneh never agrees to this, and this is important because it suggests that it is imposed by the state, which I argue questions the idealisation of the mother and her sacrifice.

Banietemad simultaneously visualises and problematises Gilaneh's sacrifice. The aim of this representation matters. Gilaneh is represented as the epitome of the sacrificial mother, visualised through her broken body (see figure 14), as she struggles to care for her disabled son. Yet, she is not represented as a way to portray the ideal and exemplary image of motherhood. Her broken body, along with her son's is used to tell us an untold story about the consequences of war. About Gilaneh, Varzi argues: she is "an uneducated villager from the Caspian, bound to the state by a sacrifice she made, albeit unwillingly, that went awry. Since the war, her womanhood has been eclipsed by motherhood – especially evident in a love interest in the first scene of the film that never appears. Her role as a woman, as a sexual being comes and goes in one quick scene" ("Iran's Pieta" 95). Gilaneh's initial love interest, along with her ambition and dream to start her own business are all shattered in the aftermath of war. This is also true and embodied through her son Ismael, whose representation in the first half resembles that of a "prince-charming," a soldier ready to serve. Gilaneh does not

choose to be this type of mother; it is the circumstances of war and violence that inflict on her this life. Gilaneh's connectedness with war is also symbolised through her name, which refers to the land itself; a province that lies along the Caspian Sea in Iran, known for its fertile and green landscape. The film's title *Gilaneh* marries the mother's broken body with that of the nation. In this reading, Gilaneh herself becomes an embodiment of a space impacted by war. What this shows and comments on is the role of womanhood as it becomes moulded by war rather than motherhood. Gilaneh is a mother in the earlier scenes as well, yet she is given the space to dream and to fall in love. It is the aftermath of the war, the return of her disabled son, and the lost promises that reshape her role as a woman and as a mother. Through the visualisation of pain and struggle, which is embodied by both Gilaneh and her son, Banietemad critiques war. The film through the disabled Ismael reflects on the state's neglect, and in doing so, reimagines the war genre. The consequences of war remain to be felt, and Gilaneh, who becomes one with the nation, and her son together reflect the impacts through their crushed dreams and pain.

Figure 14: Gilaneh carrying her disabled veteran son.

The film however is interested in more than a reminder for its viewers of the recent historical war that took place. *Gilaneh* reimagines the threat of war by connecting history to present politics and to war more generally. This is shown in the film's second part as Ismael sits on his bed watching the live news coverage of the Iraq invasion. Here the film's context bridges the historical moment of the Iran-Iraq war to the present moment. With this Banietemad shows the cyclical nature of violence and war. Ismael's still and static body (he cannot move) is the visual reminder of what war brings. Vatanabadi writes about time and space in the film: "the director of *Gilaneh* weaves the narrative in such a way that the audience remains conscious of the dialectics of times and spaces" (180). She then goes on: "this particular emphasis on the fluidity of times and spaces in the film also enables Bani-Etemad to tell the story of war and its victims beyond the bounds of fixed nations" (181). In an interview, Banietemad also talks about the significance of time and space in the film:

> I always thought that if I showed Ismael in an urban setting, I would not be able to portray him as a universal victim of war; he would be more depicted as a victim of the specific war between Iran and Iraq. But when I set him in that beautiful scenery, that village, in nature, I thought he could be more of a universal figure. He could be a young American who goes to war and is a victim; he could be an Iraqi solider, a Palestinian, an Israeli soldier, for that matter. Gilaneh, for the same reason, could be the universal mother figure; she could be an American, Palestinian or Iraqi mother (Laurier & Walsh).

Through these film choices Banietemad reconnects to an audience beyond the boundaries of Iran. The film reflects its context, retelling a story about an eight-year-long war that impacts two nations, leaving homes and bodies dismantled. In its first half the film travels outside of the green landscape of Gilan. The audience along with the pregnant Maygol and her mother

Gilaneh move between cities in Iran. Along the way on their long bus journey they witness images of war. The film produces a sense of fear and uncertainty as we wonder if Maygol will ever find her husband. In this first part the film travels back – in time and space, to what will be recent memory for the Iranian audience. In its second part, years after the war, back again in the green land of Gilan, the film shows Ismael and his mother living their lives. They live with the pain, the memory and the consequences of the many long years of war. In this landscape, the film becomes less culturally specific. The explosions of the war they lived through have now been replaced by other sounds elsewhere and Ismael, in his broken and paralysed body, sits and watches. Through landscape and space, Banietemad reconstructs a national story about war, making it internationally relevant, and in the process, Gilaneh's portrayal as a mother also offers a potential to cross the boundaries and borders of the Iranian state.

There is much that can be said about the important role Gilaneh plays in the film. In a male-dominated cinema and genre, her role becomes an important protest against both the representation of women, but also of war more generally. From the beginning, through her characterisation, I argue the film challenges the generic conventions of war films, countering the genre in ways that challenge the construction and reality of war. In doing so, the film's reliance on the Gilaneh figure, becomes an interesting commentary not only on motherhood and the limitations of sacrifice, but also, the female body and the way it carries the plot and the nation, as the two merge into one (the name serving as the metaphor). Talking about melodrama, Flitterman-Lewis is interested in the role of the woman and its relation to the narrative. While she writes from a Western perspective, the way in which she views the female body in relation to suffering can provide a productive lens for thinking about *Gilaneh.* As Flitterman-Lewis argues: "it is the female character's suffering that provides the central articulating crisis of the films. The body of the woman becomes the stage across

which melodramatic spectacle is played out" (Flitterman-Lewis 5). In war films, the generic conventions produce an entirely different image, where the male soldiers embody heroism, either through their sacrifice (martyrdom) or through their return home. Ismael's broken body that deems him as neither, becomes the burden of the mother, and it is her body, standing for the nation, that carries both on its back. This image challenges the conventions of war films and instead yokes together the themes of motherhood and war. The land too is impacted by destruction, and so *Gilaneh* not only rejects the glorification of war, but also in its latter half, warns us against future violence, functioning as a stark reminder. Of mothers, Andrea Malin says: "Together, their stories serve as an indelible, collective memory for a nation trying to forget" (188). While this quote is taken out of an article about Argentinian mothers of the disappeared, as they search for their lost children, I certainly think it rings true in the discussion on motherhood in this chapter. In a similar way, the story of *Gilaneh* serves as a "collective memory for a nation trying to forget."

Conclusion

As demonstrated in this chapter, Banietemad's body of work complicates the role of women as mothers on the screen. Through her visualisation and storytelling, Banietemad brings to the screen a diverse representation of motherhood. Also discussed in this chapter, is the limited scholarship available on the representation of motherhood on the screen, especially in regard to world cinema and even more so with consideration to Iranian films. The aim of this work, and this chapter specifically, has been to contribute to an intersectional and multi-disciplinary approach to the visualisation of women and their stories. The political and cultural contexts of Iran produce its own narratives and images of womanhood and motherhood that I argue need to be included in the scholarship on gender, women and film. As always, the aim of my work is to see how works by Iranian filmmakers challenge the

patriarchal regime of the country, resisting and rejecting systems of power imposed by the state, to create work that offers a more complex representation of women and their role in society. Also, part of my work is to 'decolonise' and 'de-Westernise' film scholarship and gender studies. Banietemad's cinema and its engagement with gender issues is one way to challenge and diversify the discussions we have about gender and film. The filmmaker, I argue, constantly negotiates with the restrictions of her home country and the stereotypical misrepresentations of the Muslim woman abroad. Her body of work in challenging both systems of power creates its own distinctive space that not only fights for female empowerment, but also by paying close attention to its cultural specificities, productively contextualises the women's movement in Iran.

Studying the representation of the maternal is crucial to any endeavour that seeks to move away from the homogenisation and reduction of the woman and mother character. As Sayed notes, an exploration of motherhood studies, contributes to "feminist film studies, and world cinema studies by expanding its vocabulary and repertoire to include the study of representations of mothers and motherhood in world cinema" (1). The studies she explores in her edited collection, "allow for cross-cultural comparisons between national cinemas that make blatant the limited range of representations of the maternal, which are often quite similar from country to country, despite women's dramatically different lived realities and cultural contexts" (1). She goes on to suggest that, "applying a motherhood studies lens to the study of film helps uncover many political, historical, and cultural transferences in society" (3). This is true of the representation of motherhood in Iranian cinema as well. Through the exploration of both *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh*, and their engagement with the theme of motherhood, we gain access to the social anxieties around female sexuality as well as the repercussions of war in Iran. The characterisation of these mothers on the screen becomes a way for the film to explore social issues and gender politics further.

Through storytelling, Banietemad's body of work challenges not only the representation and treatment of the mother character in Iranian cinema, but also, her films problematise the depiction of motherhood on the global stage. Using these complex stories and representations, Banietemad, I argue, through a gender lens finds a way to comment on social politics, showing how interconnected these issues are. In doing so, she questions the systems of power in her country, pushing its censorship boundaries and constantly negotiating with authorities. She not only challenges the authorities and cultural attitudes of Iranian society, but also, by giving her female characters their agency and their story, displays in her female characters autonomy and defiance, which offer an alternative image of the Muslim woman that challenges the existing stereotypes. In Banietemad's films, these women characters who happen to also be mothers, drive the plot forward and become significant to the narrative, and so through their existence as complex and central characters they challenge the existing representations of mothers on the screen, and reject the prescribed roles and categories that serve as limitations. Most importantly, both *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh* challenge the visual representations of motherhood. In both cases, the narrative relies on these characters that are typically marginalised, silenced and made invisible. In these films, they take centre stage, their experiences visualised and publicised through film. This I argue is important especially in the context of Iran. As Malin suggests, "equating womanhood with motherhood is a common strategy for totalitarian regimes" (108). With this in mind, the portrayal of women and mothers as complex characters, rather than a flat and simplified symbolism of motherhood acts as a stern political statement. By complicating the role of mothers, and by distinguishing between womanhood and motherhood through a complex and diverse visual representation of characters and stories, Banietemad through her body of work challenges the religious state, unpacking the reductive

binary of woman versus mother, questioning the depiction and role of the maternal in cinema entirely.

4. Stories of Survival: Resistance and Womanhood in Banietemad's *Tales*

Introduction

Made in 2014, Banietemad's *Tales* is an unusual film in the sense that it contains seven short stories, all of which pick up characters and narratives from earlier feature-length films by the director. In the first chapter of the thesis, through a detailed character analysis and close reading, I have explored the significance of Tooba and the director's treatment and visualisation of the woman character throughout the past decades. This thesis began with a discussion about Banietemad's filmmaking practice, leading to an analysis of love as taboo, and the depiction of women as lovers in *Nargess* and *Blue Veiled* in the second chapter. From there, by looking at *The May Lady* and *Gilaneh,* I have explored how Banietemad challenges cultural and cinematic approaches to motherhood. *Tales,* I suggest, is an accumulation of the filmmaker's previous films, constantly drawing on references and past stories. As such, it is fitting, in this final chapter, to consider the significance of *Tales* both through its production, screening context and reception, but also its commentary on gender politics in Iran.

I will begin by examining the circumstances surrounding the film's production and how its unusual form and narrative structure came about in defiance of the censors. In this chapter I focus much more on critical reception and production context. In my interview with the filmmaker, the complexity of *Tales* and its political context became a recurring theme. In addition, in discussions of resistance, censorship and filmmaking in Iran, *Tales* is an archetype that embodies many of the political complexities of the cinematic practices in the country. And yet, while this chapter relies more heavily on critical reception, it still follows the 'film-as-text' method, using *Tales* as its main case study. As Banietemad's latest

works – one that connects her previous films as well – *Tales* and its relevant context and political backdrop inform and influence the film.

The thread of stories that are visualised in *Tales* engage with the social and political context of Iran under the presidency of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), and Western sanctions. In addition, the film explores cultural taboos such as prostitution, themes around drug addiction and gender politics. The 'unique' form that *Tales* takes on then is a product of its time and place, and so the reception of the film is a critical part of its story.[16] Following the film's reception and context, I will argue that the stories of prominent women in *Tales* intertwine to create a collective narrative of female empowerment and survival, once again in defiance of the censors. Storytelling then functions as a site of transmission of collective values, and the idea of the collective is central to *Tales* but also to the themes of resistance and activism that are so prominent in Banietemad's other works too. Throughout, I am interested in the way the film embodies its own circumstances, commenting not only on Iran's state politics, but also, as a way to speak back against Western sanctions. Through deft meta-cinematic touches, Banietemad comments on the importance of filmmaking as an act of political resistance, but also, as suggested by its title, *Tales* is invested in the power of storytelling as a mode of survival.

The first image that appears in *Tales* is through the camera lens of an unnamed documentary filmmaker (Habib Rezaei) within the film (see figure 15). He is recording the

[16] The structure of *Tales* allows for an exploration of the city. Arguably, the place itself becomes a character within the film – through which, Banietemad explores not only themes of storytelling and resistance, but also social issues. Recent works such as *Pari, Je t'aime* (2006), *New York, I Love You* (2008), and *London Unplugged* (2018) are other contemporary examples of portmanteau films that also feature the city and combine various stories. What marks *Tales* as different to these films is that the production and political context of the film necessitates this format. As well, these films combine short films that are made by different directors, whereas *Tales* is directed entirely and solely by Banietemad. There is also a sense of continuity that *Tales* embodies. The characters from her previous films reappear here in *Tales.*

city of Tehran from the window of a taxi, at night: “this is how I see,” he tells the cab driver, Abbas (Mohammad-Reza Foroutan). The camera replaces his vision, but also functions as the vantage point through which the audience begins to witness life in Tehran. The meta-cinematic theme in the opening of *Tales* runs like a thread through the rest of the stories. The film self-reflexively uses its own medium in order to engage with its social context and the status of filmmaking in Iran. Through this, *Tales* shows how the everyday struggles of people under immense social and political pressures can be made visible through the camera.

Figure 15: The opening image from Banietemad's *Tales*.

The film’s reliance on the meta-cinematic is a tool employed by Banietemad as a direct commentary on the status of filmmaking in Iran. When asked about the position of the unnamed documentary filmmaker in *Tales,* she responded:

> The position of the documentary filmmaker in *Tales* represents the position of filmmaking in general, where his camera is not able to record the “real” – that is, in the sense that the perspective of the filmmaker and the way he views the world is

> through a camera lens only as a means to record and hold on to that moment in time. This is a professional condition for filmmakers regardless of gender. The problem as a female filmmaker in this situation isn't different from that of a male filmmaker. And I didn't want to cast a woman for this role, since that might make it seem as if I was relaying a personal story (Armatage & Khosroshahi 152-3).

As noted above, the camera replaces the vision of the filmmaker, and at the same time functions as the enabler and vehicle for driving the plot forward. But more importantly, from this opening scene, the film invites the audience to ride along with these characters, and to join in on their experiences of life in Tehran. Banietemad chooses a male performer to avoid any suggestion that the character of the filmmaker be read as a stand-in for the director herself. As this quote demonstrates, it is the conditions of filmmaking she is interested in. Also, for Banietemad, this choice is crucial because her attempt is to depersonalise, as a way to comment on larger societal issues around the production and screening of Iranian films. By doing so, she complicates and explores the nuances of the country's cinematic and political conditions. The complexity of the role of the camera then relies on its multiple functions: as a conveyor of truth, a tool for resistance, and a way to see and vocalise social issues. In addition, the film uses the story of the filmmaker to explore the conditions of filmmaking in Iran, but also touches on the power of films to be seen and thus to speak and tell *this* story. Through a close textual analysis of the film I show that the film's cinematic awareness becomes its mode of storytelling – a point of self-reflection for the city and its people.

In the first section of this chapter I will show how *Tales* plays with filmic boundaries; it moves and glides between notions of realism, documentary and fiction, always aware of its own form, as well as its social and political context. As such, the cinematic platform functions as a tool for resistance. My aim then is to explore the ways in which the film flirts

with cinematic and filmic techniques to challenge the social context of present-day Iran. In the second section, the chapter reflects upon how *Tales* uses its own form, through connected stories, to reproduce a sentiment of womanhood that ultimately challenges patriarchal systems.

The Social and Political Context of *Tales*

Premiered in 2014, Banietemad's *Tales* seamlessly connects together seven different shorter stories through various editing methods. Literally made up of "tales," the film is informed by its past, but also a product of its present time and place. The intersection of the various subplots draws upon characters from Banietemad's previous films. Characters that we have already met reappear once again on the Iranian screen. And yet, the film stands on its own as an independent piece, where audiences with no previous background, who have never met or been exposed to these characters or stories, can still tune in. As mentioned already, *Tales* is made and produced in an Iran under strict sanctions, economic chaos and social restrictions, none of which can ever be ignored while watching. The internal and external political context that the film engages with I suggest offers a 'realistic' portrayal of life in a country dealing with issues of prostitution, drug abuse, class politics, violence, womanhood and of course, international isolation. For example, economic discontent as a result of isolation due to Western sanctions is a running theme in the film. Also, Tooba's desperate plea to bail her son out of prison touches on the painful reality many Iranian parents are faced with. When asked whether *Tales* was subject to censorship, Banietemad replies:

> Naturally, films that engage with social issues are much more sensitive to censorship. Despite these restrictions, I have always managed to find a solution to whatever extent possible. I have refused to allow censorship to hurt or damage my films –

> often at the price of months and months of dialogue and resistance. With many challenges, endless debates, and arguments, I can happily say that *Tales* was shown without any censoring (Armatage & Khosroshahi 153).

Banietemad's resistance in the face of authorities, paired with the film's unique structure offer an insight into the complexities of Iran's film culture and industry, marking *Tales* absolutely necessary to any discussions of cinema and women in contemporary Iran. By taking us back in time, the film offers a truly dynamic and diverse representation of gender politics.

Not only does the film play with the concept of genre, but it also flirts with the notion of time: while it offers a 'finished' product that connects and reconnects past narratives, characters and films, it also functions to tell a grander and perhaps national story with Iran's social and political backdrop leaking through – in its return to the past, the film momentarily holds us back, and again and again drills into our memory the characters' faces and pains that have become second nature to us. But even so and despite its return to the past, the film paves the path for the future. *Tales'* display of its characters and their stories on the screen is alive – in that it is dynamic and mobile. I use the term "alive" intentionally, because even though the film invites us to reach into our cinematic memory to recall characters like Tooba, Nobar, Nargess or Sara – their stories have changed and evolved. This is crucial because it comments on the representation of these characters, showing that they have changed. But also, the film grants time and space marking these characters as significant. Through its return to their stories, as well as through certain tropes (the driving car for example), *Tales* symbolises this sense of mobility. This disrupts the assumption that a return to past stories is regressive, because these characters never stay static. The theme of mobility in the film I think offers a hopeful image and depiction, and despite the harsh realities and political context in which the film is made, Banietemad retains a sense of hope for a brighter future.

And so, the way *Tales* oscillates between time and space creates a nuanced and mobile reading of gender politics in Iran. It is a film that through awareness of its own filmic language, critiques and challenges patriarchal systems, which makes it crucial to my discussions of representation and gender politics both within the parameters of this chapter, but also my overall project.

It is the interconnectedness of these "tales" that make the film's narrative structure especially unique. As one story ends, the next begins, offering a sense of continuity. And while the narrative structure of *Tales* is certainly reflective of Banietemad's artistic style, it is also as a result of its political context. The fate of the film industry underwent a drastic change in 2005 when Ahmadinejad won the presidency. Zeydabadi-Nejad states that in 2005, "the newly appointed culture minister, Hossein Saffar-Harandi, announced that from then on distribution and exhibition of films which promoted feminism and secularism were prohibited" (53). During this period, many films were banned. Importantly then, the seven short stories in *Tales* come together as a result and consequence of the political restrictions in filmmaking at the time. These stories were meant to function as independent films because it is much easier to avoid censorship when making short films. After the current President Hasan Rouhani won the election in 2013, Banietemad decided to produce a feature length film out of these shorter stories, connecting them together. In his review of *Tales,* Jay Weissberg writes:

> The film was ostensibly conceived as a series of shorts, making it possible to get a license under the Ahmadinejad regime, but with the current government she's been able to string together these stories of crushed hopes, addiction, abuse, and love.

As a result, the narrative form and structure of *Tales* oscillates between various timelines. With this, the film takes us back to early post-Revolutionary films by Banietemad. Her iconic and memorable films such as *Nargess, Blue Veiled, Under the Skin of the City,*

Gilaneh and *Mainline* come to life in 2014 in her feature film *Tales.* The film lives through these various periods, and by returning to its past stories and characters, it also responds to its present. Through this, *Tales* flirts with the notion of time, producing a sense of nostalgia. Mostly, by inviting us to travel back in time, to rediscover and re-watch these lives and these characters, the film implicitly challenges the social conditions, legal institutions and cultural attitudes of Iran's past and present.

The film is a product of its time and place, which inevitably influences the way the film comes into existence. Banietemad's unique filmic style and cinematic techniques enable her to engage further with the social context and conditions of the lives she explores through *Tales*. As Dabashi argues in his book, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present and Future*, a 'masculine' narrative dominates the Iranian culture, however, he also points out that there are "feminine exceptions" (223). For him, Banietemad is one exception; her "cinema is a visual theorization against that violent metaphysics" (223). He claims that her films create this counter narrative, this exceptional voice through their documentary and realist film style, which for Dabashi becomes a new "feminist approach" altogether. He continues:

> Banietemad's reconstitution of feminine sexuality is not done via shallow feminism. Unlike generations of a supercilious middle-class feminism, she wages a war on patriarchal readings of the body so powerful that no other visual theorist comes close to (224).

To add to Dabashi's point, Banietemad's films offer a counter narrative not only to the patriarchal domination of Iranian culture and cinema, but also, the mainstream and westernised readings of feminism altogether. Her films, as she often claims, are social films, engaged and inspired by the society. Saeed-Vafa argues that Banietemad in her films places blame on society rather than the "evil habits" of her characters (205). While I agree that

Banietemad's films do offer a complex reading of Iranian society, along with its legal issues, which holds the system accountable – I would also argue that Banietemad's films productively complicate this binary of evil versus good. As explored in earlier chapters, we see this with characters such as Afagh from *Nargess* or Forough from *The May Lady.* These films thus reject this black-and-white notion of goodness, and instead through her characters, Banietemad offers various shades of grey. The result of such a technique is characters that we sympathise with, but more importantly she often normalises and demystifies the taboo.

In *Tales,* Banietemad visually reveals the interconnected and painful stories of Tehran. When at the end of his shift, Abbas picks up a woman and her sick child, he is disgusted to find out that she is a prostitute. Masoumeh (Mehraveh Sharifinia) assures him that "the kid won't be a problem. He's fast asleep." At this moment, Abbas tries to kick her out, when Masoumeh says: "fine. Then just take me to the next street with a pharmacy. My child has a fever." The scene intensifies as Abbas begins to recognise this young woman. "Where are you from?" he asks her, as he begins to remember that she is that same girl, their neighbour, who had run away from the physical abuses of her brother. Returning to *Tales* from *Under the Skin of the City,* the audience too watches her fate. The film deals with the taboo: prostitution in the streets of Tehran captured in this economical scene. And all the while, the name echoes: Masoumeh, which directly translates into the "innocent one." While Banietemad paints a vivid image of some of Tehran's contemporary societal issues, she never fails to humanise her characters. Masoumeh's story is an example of a female prostitute, and by simultaneously depicting her as also a mother, tightly holding on to her child (see figure 16), her characterisation is further complicated. Also, in this short scene, through a brief dialogue, the audience learns of her past, as the camera focuses on her face as she cries. What this achieves is a moment of sympathy for the 'fallen' character, elevating

her even from this stigma. Importantly also, the camera's treatment of the character, by visually centralising her, contradicts her marginalisation in society.

Figure 16: Masoumeh, holding her son closely to her chest as she cries in *Tales*.

The series of vignettes in *Tales* come together as a result and consequence of the political restrictions in filmmaking at the time. Produced in an Iran under strict sanctions, economic chaos and social restrictions, the external political context of the film also informs the stories on the screen. The film explores life in a country dealing with issues of prostitution, drug abuse, class politics, male violence, gender politics, and international isolation. The director herself does not shy away from the impact of Western sanctions on ordinary Iranians. Banietemad sums up the dire situation in Iran as such: "our children who are sick with diseases such as cancer and multiple sclerosis are paying the direct consequences of the embargo because they cannot get medicines they need" (Child). "It's the Iranian people," she continues, "who are bearing the brunt of these international decisions, which are crippling our economy and making many lives miserable" (Child). It is these struggles, these realities that Banietemad captures through these "tales" that come

together to tell this grander narrative – one that reflects and responds to the current situation of the country, but also problematises the sanctions that were placed on Iran. The situation that Banietemad refers to shows up time and again in the film. The tough economic situation of the country and the struggle of the people becomes a common theme that connects the characters to one another.

The most telling of these is the bus scene that connects Tooba, Reza (Farhad Aslani) and their fellow workers in a confined space. What is significant here is the presence of the hand-held camera, documenting the workers' outrage. The factory has shut down, and the owner has run off with the money. In this overly crowded bus, the workers have united to fight for their rights. The audience has access to these characters and their complaints through this hand-held camera that functions as the eye of the viewer. This small bus also creates a divide between the workers and the authorities. Here, Banietemad once again plays with genre boundaries: the minimalist approach to filmmaking that is evident here adds to its realist style. Also, within the film, the filmmaker documents a 'real' event. The story-within-the-story, while merely fictional, has an important function outside of the narrative. By touching upon a tangible issue that speaks directly about the economic situation of the country, the film comments on the impact of sanctions and the internal and stifling politics of Iran. While this fictional feature film relies on a realist style to confront everyday struggles, its reliance on the visible camera is also extremely meaningful. The audience's access to this scene is through the camera (see figure 17) that creates a double frame, displaying all the details (the battery charge, the time of recording etc.), reminding us that recoding is in process. With this, Banietemad turns a once realist film into one that is highly self-aware and meta-cinematic. In his introduction to *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, Richard Tapper discusses how "many Iranian directors play with this poetically, by filming the making of the film, and by using documentary

conventions and cinematic styles, minimal scripting, real people and real locations" (15). This approach to filmmaking reaches its climax in this classic film-within-the-film bus scene, blurring the lines between fiction, realism and documentary, and in the process drawing our attention to its filmic medium.

Figure 17: The bus scene through the hand-held camera of the filmmaker showing the workers in *Tales*.

Through its engagement with the mundane and everyday struggles, *Tales* offers a realist approach to cinema, realist both at the level of content and at the level of cinematic style. The audience joins Abbas's journey through the streets of Tehran. In its first ten minutes, the film deals with issues of filmmaking in Iran, the economic chaos that that the country is experiencing and prostitution – all filmed in a moving car. According to Mottahedeh, realism is not "only about representational strategies embedded in specific notions of indexicality, iconicity, and the narrative's overall relation to a certain truth. Realism rests on narrative continuity" (162). *Tales* embodies and relies on narrative continuity as it connects various stories and characters to one another.

An important question to consider is *how* the film achieves this through its visual means? It is my contention that the presence and visibility of the camera, and thus the act of filmmaking have a lot to do with the film's portrayal and exposure of the country's social issues. While many films may engage with the idea of the meta-cinematic, what marks *Tales* as different is the clash between filming and the authorities. The confiscation of the documentary filmmaker's camera explicitly comments on the conditions of cinema, but also freedom of speech in the country. Throughout her career, Banietemad has been sensitive to the social issues of the country. According to Zeydabadi-Nejad, 'social films' explore post-Revolutionary social and political issues of the country through its cinema. "These issues range from social justice to the place of the clergy in the post-revolution society" (55). Social films are crucially important to Iranian cinema because of the country's shifting politics. In addition to their explicit engagement with social issues, Banietemad's works stand out largely because of the way in which they merge together the world of fiction and documentary (Sadr, *Against the Wind* 471). Sadr says of Banietemad that: "she was one of the few documentary filmmakers who gradually moved into feature filmmaking. As a result, her films are often sympathetic portraits of actual people, and are frequently praised for their forceful and engaging approach to Iran's contemporary problems" (*Against the Wind* 470). He continues by stating that the "importance of her films, lies largely on the fact that they weave a path between fiction and documentary, between the imagined and the actual" (*Against the Wind* 470). This is certainly true of *Tales,* where she blurs the line between fiction and documentary, film and reality. Banietemad achieves this through a realist and minimalist approach to filmmaking, with unexpected cuts, hand-held cameras and a deep understanding of contemporary issues in the country. What this achieves is a film that is not only reflective of its time, but also dynamically responsive to its current issues.

The critical reception of *Tales* is also important to its deep and nuanced engagement with its social context. The way in which the film is made and received in its country of birth, along with its political climate, make this an important contemporary work coming out of present-day Iran. Also, the film grapples with certain issues that are highly critical of the country's economic, social and political situation. In terms of its critical reception, the film has received polarised responses. In his review of *Tales*, Mohammad Rezvanipour argues that the film offers a dark and flawed depiction of Iran and its society. For him, the making of such films that then circulate in international festivals, and even win, is a kind of "cultural suicide" (Rezvanipour)[17]. Masoud Sabeti makes a similar case, arguing that "Banietemad like always, and this time even more pronounced than her previous films, has critiqued society and addressed the pains and struggles of people at the risk of sacrificing the artistic value of her film" (Sabeti).[18]

In our interview with the director, Armatage and I asked Banietemad about the challenges she faced in making, producing and screening *Tales.* It is worth looking at her response at length:

> *Tales* wasn't screened until four years after completion. It didn't receive the right to be screened under the presidency of Ahmadinejad (2005-13). Even with permission to be screened, which came under Hassan Rouhani's presidency (2013-present), the immense pressure of opposing groups resulted in a two-year ban. Billboard ads for the film were forced to come down. The main cinemas that belonged to government institutions in Tehran and other cities boycotted the film and prevented its screening. They even blocked me from attending Q&A sessions and other events. At the end, without any publicity, and without any television or radio advertisement, and very

[17] Translation my own. Please consult bibliography for original text in Persian.
[18] Translation my own. Please consult bibliography for original text in Persian.

> few exhibiting slots, the film was screened. Despite all this, and without any advertisement, it took in ten billion rials (Armatage &Khosroshahi 153).

As shown, in Iran, the film has been accused of portraying a dark and exaggerated image of the country. Furthermore, it has been suggested by the ministry of culture that it reproduces exactly what the "West" wants, and has been considered by hardliners as an intentionally depressing film. About the film's conditions of exhibition, Banietemad describes that despite having no rights to advertisement or any publicity in Iran, and being limited to only a few screenings, the film was extremely successful. *Tales* has been received well by the general public and has been recognised internationally, and been awarded for the best screenplay by the Venice Film Festival Awards. Reviews of the film outside of Iran have generally recognised the film's brave engagement with its social context. However, there are at times, I think mis-readings of the implications of the rhetoric in Iranian films generally, and *Tales* specifically. For example, at the end of his review, Weissberg writes:

> Of course the documaker returns at the end, saying things like "no film ever stays in a drawer" — lines that pointedly refer back to Bani-Etemad as well as all filmmakers who push the boundaries of freedom of expression in censorious societies. The sentiment is important, yet did it really need to be so baldly stated, as if viewers weren't already aware of the character's purpose? More interesting is the conception of male-female relations, from the older couples in which women are long-suffering victims of impotent male rage to the younger generation, whose women display marked intellectual superiority and demand to be considered as equals.

I think Weissberg rightly recognises the generational difference (in regard to gender relations) that the film successfully illuminates. However, while he recognises the "sentiment" behind the meta-cinematic gestures of the film, he is critical of how "baldly" it is stated. Films in Iran undergo strict revisions to ensure they meet the guidelines of the

Islamic Republic set out by the Ministry of Culture. It is impossible to ignore the role of the camera as an agent of social change in such films. Through *Tales,* Banietemad cleverly responds to the censorship politics of her country. In several moments, the film makes explicit and bold references to the issues of journalism and filmmaking in the country. The meta-cinematic elements of *Tales* become the very thread that connects these several stories together. The issue of censorship then becomes an integral part of the narrative and thematic structure of the film, commenting on larger issues of censorship and freedom of expression that is often limited in a place like Iran. It is to this very unique and timely social and political situation that *Tales* responds – one, which I do not think the reviewer has fully digested. Also, Weissberg assumes that these moments are included only for the audience. I argue in contrast that filmmaking in Iran is often so politically charged, that any stance against the censorship laws becomes a point of resistance.

Throughout my thesis, I have explored not only Banietemad's body of work and the way it challenges the visualisation of women on the screen, but also her investment in storytelling as a way to display resistance and to push back against such censorship codes. The filmmaker's deliberate choice to stay in Iran, and to make films within such guidelines is a testament to her dedication and perseverance as a director and an activist. For Banietemad, the practice of filmmaking transcends the notion of producing art. For her, "art is a vehicle for raising awareness and producing knowledge" (Armatage & Khosroshahi 155). Banietemad's explicit reference to the practice of filmmaking is not accidental, and she makes these references with full awareness of their reception in her home country. She opts against subtlety in *Tales* and does so to make a political point. While the viewers may well be aware of the director's purpose, and the conditions of filmmaking in Iran, Banietemad's deliberate and blunt acknowledgement of such realities is a political stance itself.

In this way cinema provides the space necessary to visually engage with these social and political issues, and to question systems of power. In their introduction to *Resistance in Contemporary Middle Eastern Cultures,* Karima Laachir and Saeed Talajooy discuss the role of artistic expressions and cultural products as forms of resistance. They describe the concept of "cultural resistance" to mean ways in which art and literature such as novels, films, plays and music "are used to resist the dominant social, economic, political and cultural discourse and structures either consciously and unconsciously" (5). Contemporary and recent events in the region of Middle East are central to their ideas of cultural resistance. The two argue that "cultural practices and products in the Middle East have been transforming the nature of public life in the Middle Eastern societies for decades and preparing the grounds for such widespread shows of desire for change, justice, equality and democracy" (2). In agreement, I also suggest here that the current climate in Iran, after its Green Movement in 2009, which has been followed by a reformist government in power, demonstrates the desire for change in the country. *Tales* validates this sense of awareness and contextual recognition through the stories it shares on the screen. This is particularly important in discussions of women's movements in the country. In an article for *The Guardian*, Banietemad says that women are even more vulnerable under the conditions caused by sanctions. Nevertheless, the filmmaker emphasises that women fight to maintain their agency, that "despite their social and political position, they are resisting" (cited in Child). While pain and suffering spill out of the stories depicted in *Tales,* what makes the film a crucially important and timely reflection on the state of the society and its gender politics is how in the midst of chaos, these women characters display defiance, resistance and hope.

The screen functions as an important space, drawing attention to these stories. Moreover, through its success, the film's "tales" are further validated through their

circulation across the globe. The strength that these characters embody in the face of the internal and external politics of Iran travels, becoming accessible for a wider and more diverse audience. The medium itself - the camera, the lens and the screen – all become a part of this resistance. In addition, Banietemad's reliance on a realist style, showcased through the use of the handheld camera within the parameters of a fictional film sheds light on the meta-cinematic, which becomes its way of fighting back and showing resistance. Tooba's famous line echoes in the background: "who will watch these films anyway?" While her line is part of the narrative and story line, it is a legitimate question that is very much 'real' – who indeed will see this film? As demonstrated above, Banietemad's *Tales* floats between these styles, time periods and characters – never becoming static. But there is a further significance to Tooba's question that is repeated throughout the director's body of work. Through this, Banietemad always draws us back to the filmic form – commenting on its role but also simultaneously questioning its impact.

The film uses its own body – its own form – to convey these issues and to bring forth this complex representation of the social conditions of present-day Iran. And in doing so, Banietemad uses the camera as a central motif (and even a character in its own right) to comment and problematise through filmmaking, larger social issues. In this way, both within the storyline as a thematic technique, and outside of it as the practice of filmmaking, the camera becomes a powerful tool. Within the film, the camera functions to connect the separate "tales." The film's narrative structure relies on the intersection of seven different stories. In these narratives, Banietemad's most memorable characters once again return to the screen, reminding the audience of the historical and cultural significance of her previous films. These past stories and figures merge together, giving birth to a new story. Most importantly however, Banietemad's characters embody a sense of nostalgia, showing that women like Nargess, Tooba, Nobar or Sara have become iconic, yet, by revisiting these

characters, they are re-written, re-invigorated and re-described in dialogue with Iran's present (Armatage & Khosroshahi 142). What makes these stories significant is how, despite their existence in the past, they continue to live, even if they are reshaped and redefined. This is important because it is reflective of the country's mobile and constantly changing social politics and women's movements. The fluidity that the structure of *Tales* relays, I think responds to Iran's current social and political climate.

Collective Womanhood and the Power of Storytelling

Through its engagement with the cinematic form, the film contends with issues of its time; economic instability, drug use, prostitution, and political isolation. At the heart of these issues is gender politics, made visible and central in the film. *Tales* does not shy away from visually depicting and announcing the political, social and cultural issues that women face in Iran. Issues of womanhood rise out of every story, which shows how unavoidable gender politics are in Iranian society. In fact, *Tales* is an accumulation of Banietemad's previous films, where characters such as Nargess, Tooba, Nobar and Sara return to the screen to tell their stories. As discussed in chapter one, Tooba appears in various films by the director. This method of storytelling (returning to past characters and films) is something Banietemad entertains from early on in her career. This I think creates a sense of intimacy between her characters, but also offers a sense of familiarity for the audience. In *Tales* not only do these past characters reappear, but they also join to be part of the same story. By connecting their individual stories, Banietemad creates a sense of collectivity and camaraderie between her female characters. Through its portrayal of collective femininity, I argue that the film uses storytelling as a means to connect these women, and their shared experiences. *Tales'* depiction of its characters and their stories on the screen invite us to reach into our cinematic memory to recall figures like Tooba, Nobar, Nargess, and Sara from her previous films. Yet,

their stories have changed and evolved, and so *Tales* oscillates between times and spaces, offering a nuanced and mobile reading of gender politics in Iran. It is the interconnectedness of these "tales" that make its narrative structure especially unique. As one story ends, the next begins, offering a sense of continuity.

Storytelling is about the collective, used often as a way to preserve, recall and even to resist. The idea of narration and storytelling as a tool for survival and activism is not unique to Iran or Banietemad, and I think by considering other traditions we can enhance our understanding of the multi-purposed nature of stories. About storytelling and survival Foucault writes:

> The motivation, as well as the theme and the pretext of Arabian narratives – such as *The Thousand and One Nights* – was also the eluding of death: one spoken, telling stories into the early morning, in order to forestall death, to postpone the day of reckoning that would silence the narrator, Scheherazade's narrative is an effort, renewed each night, to keep death outside the circle of life (206).

Although Banietemad's *Tales* functions differently, the collection of stories and the collective image of womanhood that the film depicts, I suggest can be seen as a symbolic reading of the themes of storytelling and survival that *The Thousand and One Nights* explores. On a similar note, in her chapter on Iranian New Wave films, Anna Dempsey comments on the role of women in shaping and shifting the national and cinematic narrative. She argues that despite the restrictions and constraints (especially in regard to issues around gender and sexuality) filmmakers face, they continue to display resistance. In other words, "the narrative – the story – is to be continued" (Dempsey 131).

Focusing on Banietemad's four female characters, I will illustrate how through the depiction of a collective image of womanhood, the director challenges patriarchal systems. In *Tales,* Banietemad shows the recurring problems and marginalisation that women face,

articulated through her narrative style. Whilst the film offers various readings, its stance on gender politics and women's issues should not be overlooked. *Tales,* in many ways can be viewed as an accumulation of Banietemad's previous films. The female characters that return in this film do so for a reason, and while their experiences are different and their struggles unique, the four women, through their stories, are motivated and driven to fight for their autonomy, families and love. And by portraying this notion of femininity and relying on storytelling as a means to connect these women, and their shared experiences of pain, Banietemad creates a collective body of womanhood. What makes this significant is how this sense of the collective becomes highly critical of the patriarchal without ever excluding men. The film's strength is in its complex portrayal of patriarchy, showing how men too fall victims to the same system. The centrality of the film's female characters, comment on larger issues of women's struggles, class politics and representation. Through their storytelling, Nargess, Nobar, Tooba and Sara become vessels and metonyms for some of the struggles faced by Iranian women.

One of Banietemad's most iconic characters, Tooba, returns to *Tales* from *Under the Skin of the City.* A key scene in the film is when she asks for her son to be freed. As the recent political protests of the 2009 Green Movement inform the film, always in the background, Tooba's story is one that is recent and fresh for many Iranians who have loved ones unjustly held in prison. The film taps into various struggles in this short scene and encounter between Tooba and the administration. When the administrator asks Tooba: "What can I do for you?" she begins her story: "I've come all the way from the other side of the city and I have to travel all the way back together with people worse off, hoping to get what we are entitled to." She explicitly references her rights, as she and fellow co-workers attempt to get nine months of salary from their former boss, who has shut down the factory, leaving no trace behind. But this is not the only problem Tooba faces. She

continues, “they’ve taken my son and I have to pay bail. I have no savings, no property, not any rich relatives. What am I supposed to do?” When the administrator asks about her son’s crime, Tooba responds by saying: “what crime? He’s done nothing wrong. He was speaking his mind.”

In the scene where Tooba asks for her son to be freed, her story is one that is recent and fresh for many Iranians. Representing a working-class woman, Tooba’s struggles, along with her fight are recorded here on camera. When all else fails, she reverts to pleading for her son, asking the lady to please help the boy. This scene is powerful for various reasons. It speaks to an audience for whom this situation is real and fully tangible. This is an Iran under political and economic sanctions. What the film successfully shows is the extent to which this internal struggle of Iran’s economic and social chaos impacts the women of the country. The nation’s struggles are felt through their stories, and their perspectives. A mother pleading for her innocent son to be free from jail is not an exceptional story. What Banietemad reveals in this film, are the everyday and mundane stories of the country. This becomes crucial, because while cinema can never fully replicate its society, it certainly in this case, represents a section of it.

Before Tooba pleads for her son, she fights. When she reiterates the innocence of her son, emphasising that his crime was speaking out, she puts her finger on yet another social sensitivity. In the moment where she finally asks whether “a poor woman like me who has no shit in her own country is supposed to watch her child rot in jail,” she addresses not the receptionist, but a wider audience. As she speaks however, as a result of her chronic cough, she must take a break. Tooba is silenced here by her lack of health (caused by her working conditions) and of course, the social circumstances of her country. The camera zooms in on her body, covered in a black *chador*, as we watch her cough and shake. She covers her face with her *chador*, as she sinks lower and lower into her seat. And while her black attire covers

her entire figure, her hands remain uncovered and exposed. In this helpless moment, I argue the only visible part of her body - her hand - symbolises hope and resistance, which is depicted visually through the black and white contrast (see figure 18).

Figure 18: Tooba in *Tales*, coughing as her body sinks deeper into her seat.

As discussed at length in the first chapter, through Tooba, Banietemad explores a number of Iran's legal issues around the working class, the youth and ideas around freedom of speech. But there is even more to Tooba than that. She represents a sacrificial mother who fights not only for her and her children's rights, but also becomes the leader for the group of workers who similar to her are fed up. On a bus filled mainly with workingmen, it is Tooba who the group of men have elected as their spokesperson. Appearing on camera, as the chosen figure to verbalise, represent and communicate the situation, Tooba delivers a speech that brings together the entrenched social and state politics of Iran. At first, she is reluctant, but once the rest of the group insists, she begins. Looking at the camera, she starts her speech:

> Honourable official and authorities. Ladies and gentlemen. Whoever you are, wherever you are. Whatever you believe in, please come and see for yourselves our miserable life. Things were hard enough when we were employed.

When Tooba says: "The high prices are breaking us," one of the men asks her to refrain from being political, fearing they may get in trouble. But she refuses to stop and starts talking about her son: "it's a year since they arrested my boy. I have no house or land in this country." At this point again, the men ask Tooba to be less explicit, as this may get them in trouble. She continues to talk about the unemployment rate in Iran, and the dire situation for youth. From there, she says she is still grateful that her son never became a heroin addict commenting on Iran's drug epidemic.

At the end, Tooba asks where these films will be shown, and who will even see them. And once they do, what then? The role of the camera becomes especially important in this moment. The workers on their way to fight for their rights speak on camera as a way to share their stories. While this is 'fictional,' the inflation, the number of factories closing down, the youth in jails and the increase in drug addiction in Iran is the country's reality. Outside its cinematic frame, Tooba not only represents the people of her country under such times, but also becomes their voice. In the film, she is chosen by the men to speak in front of the camera because she articulates the situation best. Thinking back to the first chapter of the thesis, we can see how *Tales* shows Tooba's character development. She is now confident in front of the camera, able to clearly articulate her personal and political position. This moment is also visually significant. Adineh performs Tooba's role for nearly two decades. This means that Tooba's character development is visually highlighted through the physical changes in Adineh as well. And within the cinematic frame, on the screen, Tooba's role as a mother is extended in this scene to her public role as a fighter, a worker and leader. Her significance in *Tales* is within her unique character and story. She is represented as a mother, religious

and illiterate, yet a well-spoken woman, who has worked all her life. Her fight for her son's freedom, and her right to the money that she has earned, however is not her fight alone. Through this figure, Banietemad offers a metonym for a common fight that many viewers in the country experience in this politically and economically unstable period in Iran. The scene on the bus is sensitive to its time and place. As the workers, along with Tooba, attempt to get off the bus, so that they can speak about their issues, the authority keeps accusing them of provoking. Tooba refuses to give up, and the camera remains focused on her as she forcefully tries to open the bus door, to get out. In this heated moment, as everything is captured through the lens of the camera, one of the authorities sees the filming, and begins to scream "camera." He starts to cover his face, feeling threatened. At this moment, the camera stops recording, and the scene changes to a small, worn-down kitchen (see figure 19).

Figure 19: The worn-down kitchen of Reza and Nobar's house in *Tales*.

In addition to Tooba's persistent fight, this scene has shown the fear and insecurities of authorities when filmed on camera. The camera shutting down in the middle of the 'story,'

suggests the confiscation of it, a question to which the film later returns. In its final scene, on the phone, the cameraman states that he has his camera back, and that he will continue making films, because "no film will ever stay hidden." No film, no story will stay in the closet, and I suggest that we view *Tales* as that exactly – stories that are finally dusted off and compiled into a film. Its power lies in its awareness of the filmic medium, and the many restrictions it faces and fights against.

Once the camera stops 'recording,' the film nonetheless continues. This suggests that stories continue, in turn hinting at the limited control of the authorities and officials or better yet, the power of storytelling. The next scene picks up from where the camera left off, bringing the chaotic previous scene into a quiet, small and worn-down kitchen. What we see in this scene is the political as it becomes personal. We watch Reza return to his home, smoking his cigarette, making eggs and humming along. But what causes this quiet scene to escalate into one that is chaotic, and even painful to watch, is a letter that is delivered to his wife Nobar. This letter brings to the fore issues of the past, and this scene becomes especially important in discussions of gender, as the topic of female sexuality, power and literacy become linked with one another. But the issue of economic deprivation continues to inform this gender battle. In this scene, while reintroducing us to Nobar from *Blue Veiled,* Banietemad once again reminds us of the struggle of the working-class woman.

Momentarily, Nobar is depicted as a woman defined by her past, and with this letter resurfaces her history with her previous lover Rasul.[19] The film interrogates her role as a lover, a wife, and a mother. But from the previous scene, we also learn from Reza that she is the breadwinner. The cinematic expertise of Banietemad stands out in this scene: returning home from work is a shot of Nobar in the narrow alley to their home, holding bread, literally

[19] While the ending in *Blue Veiled* was left ambiguous, years later in *Tales* we learn that the lovers' union ends. Nobar is now remarried to Reza from the small village they both lived in, when a letter from Rasul (her previous lover) arrives at their home.

visualising her role as a breadwinner (see figure 20). Later as the couple participates in a tug of war, Reza negotiates and practices his power and masculinity through his voice and physical strength. But what is shown ultimately in this scene, is a man filled with insecurities, surfacing here in their marital relationship. And Nobar, in this moment exemplifies strength, courage and even autonomy. The quiet scene that once turned into a chaotic and violent encounter settles back into a peaceful and even tender moment. The encounter between husband and wife becomes entangled with their past, their children and their financial situation. Nobar's strength is shown in her struggle to remain compassionate and patient while maintaining family order.

Figure 20: Nobar in *Tales*, as she arrives home with a loaf of bread in hand.

Through the interaction between the couple, this shot interrogates masculinity and male violence, illustrating through Reza's insecurities the fragility of his manhood. Here is a man who struggles financially (as shown in the earlier scene on the packed bus), and in this moment, he is reminded of his wife's past lover. Visually, Banietemad creates an

interesting image that also comments on gender politics and the couple's power dynamics. In the scene, Reza has to literally bring Nobar down, lower to his level, before he forces her to read the letter because of his inability to read himself. His access to the information in the letter depends on Nobar and her ability to read. Reading the letter halfway, she leaves the room, wipes off her tears. She puts on her smile, along with her 'mother' role as she engages in a conversation about her daughter's school project. The scene becomes less tense, quiet and calm. As their little boy reads to his father, we learn about the letter; that the old man, her previous lover, near death, wants to pass on one of his properties to Nobar and her family. At this moment the camera zooms in on Reza's face and visually exposes his shame. As he washes his face, he cries. In the background Nobar is pleased, as this will be extremely helpful for their financial situation. The camera is still on Reza as he continues to regretfully cry. His head is tilted down, the camera directly facing him. Nobar's body slowly and gradually appears in the frame as she rests her arm and head on Reza's shoulder.

In the next scene, we see Nobar at her work, passing on the story to Sara as the two come into contact. In this scene, Sara and Nobar have an encounter, and in this very brief exchange, the two share something intimate. From there, the film continues onto yet another intense exchange between Sara and Hamed. Returning from Banietemad's *Mainline,* Sara is a recovering addict and HIV positive woman in Tehran. In that film, Banietemad tells a story of a middle-class family, broken by divorce. Sara, who lives with her mother, suffers from addiction. The film explores the prevalent issue of drug abuse and addiction in Tehran, and through this story comments on social, gender and class dynamics. The film's narrative mainly consists of Sara and her mother on their journey outside of Tehran, where Sara will seek professional help. Performed by Kosari, the director's own daughter, the role of Sara is piercing, commenting on issues around drug addiction in Iran. About Kosari's preparation for the role, Banietemad says:

> The actor for this role had to undertake a very tough task in terms of research: six months before filming, she spent much time in close contact with youth who were struggling with addiction, and was present in tension-filled rehab centers (Armatage & Khosroshahi150-151).

When we meet Sara again in *Tales* she has recovered and is working at the women's centre, helping women who suffer from abuse, addiction and violence. And yet, she carries with her the 'consequences' of her past life, surfacing in the film as she encounters Hamed - the part-time taxi driver for the centre, and an expelled Engineer student for his political activities. The film's final scene shows how the two are haunted by their past actions. And yet, ultimately it is the ordinary and human dilemma of love that the two face. What makes this scene important to our understanding of gender struggles in Iran is once again in the way that it incorporates other important social and timely issues. But whilst their tense conversation is centred around drug addiction, political instability and the economic chaos of the country, which renders both Sara and Hamed angry, defensive and anxious – what makes this scene touching and human is that their exchange is inevitably one that is about emotions, love and compassion. The scene is at once a social commentary about Iran and its current state, but also about a mundane and everyday exchange of love, that is universally awkward and difficult.

Their dialogue soon shifts from that of shame and anger, to one with intimacy and vulnerability. Returning momentarily to the visual motif of the car, in this scene too, the vehicle conveys a sense of mobility that can be read as progressive and hopeful. Through its mode of storytelling, *Tales* depicts a powerful and diverse image of womanhood. As they pass on their stories, the embodiment of these women becomes the driving force that keeps the film alive. Sara's fight is about leaving behind her past, and despite her circumstances, allowing herself to fall in love, but more importantly to be loved. This final scene shows a

struggle that is real, mundane and yet difficult. The ordinariness of the struggle does not make it any less important or crucial. Their tense conversation takes place in a moving car – at once limited and mobile. As Hamed drives, their conversation intensifies, but also in its final moment, reaches a resolution where the moving car in this scene becomes representative of their journey together.

A key element in *Tales* lies in the film's return to these previous stories. In many ways, the film is informed and even shaped by its own cinematic and narrative history. The short films collectively deal with various social issues and taboo topics that are then compiled in *Tales,* which I suggest functions as a point of intersection. The film then touches upon various aspects of cultural memory, taking the audience back to stories that have previously been told, shown and screened. Female characters are central in *Tales*, and they are used to comment on larger issues of women's struggle, class politics and representation. Characters such as Nargess, Nobar, Tooba and Sara become vessels and metonyms for some of the struggles faced by Iranian women. Each story gives voice to these women and allows them through their own dialogue and perspective to tell their stories. No other character speaks for Nargess, Nobar, Tooba or Sara – each scene is powerful, heated and even chaotic – and whilst there is no proper resolution or 'happy ending' in all four cases, the audience witnesses not only their struggle, but also their fight.

It is significant that *Tales* continues stories that we have already heard and watched. This sense of continuity evokes an emotional response from the audience, where they are invested in the fate and future of these women. There is no doubt that *Tales* evokes a deep emotional response from its audience. The film hardly deals with light issues, and through its score, cinematography and casting, these scenes are effective in striking us as poignant, heart-breaking and deeply emotional. But why do we care about these four women? And how do they stand out? Perhaps the reason we feel so invested in them is precisely because

they do not stand out. In fact, they represent the ordinary – dealing with the everyday and the mundane. Banietemad resurfaces not only a collective memory but also a collective sensation of pain and struggle without ever losing its human touch and appeal. And the film's reliance on the everyday and mundane makes it even more powerful. The female characters from *Tales* become crucial to the film's structure and plot. These women become important to the film because their struggles are part of a shared and collective national experience of an isolated Iran under economic sanctions and social inequality. *Tales* then relies on its female protagonists to reveal its story, and these women become the film's mode of telling. In this way, their bodies, experiences and 'tales' become publicised and visualised, and this itself becomes a form of resistance both on and off screen.

Storytelling is enabled by the camera, and so filming in *Tales* is a form of telling, exposure and resistance. In this way, the film becomes a *unique space* for these women to speak and a platform for them to be heard. I think that the film's explicit reliance and awareness of its own cinematic frame is a way of tapping into the cultural and political sensitivities of Iran. The camera and the mode of storytelling in this film becomes a way of revealing the 'unspoken' and the taboo. In addition, the complex and constantly shifting status of censorship in the country, and its inevitable connection to the country's political climate, "shows that in the absence of a clearly defined censorship code or a unitary censorship mechanism, the 'red lines' are blurred and open to negotiation" (Zeydabadi-Nejad 53). As Zeydabadi-Nejad argues, "this sets cinema apart from the press and the heavily controlled national broadcasting" (53). It is this negotiation and back-and-forth dialogue between filmmakers and the authorities that makes it especially important as an art form. While its restrictions and boundaries are undisputed, as noted, it is nonetheless a medium that allows a space for manoeuvring. Also, through cinema, stories are visualised, publicised and consumed by often a large and diverse audience.

This becomes especially important because it enables conversation about womanhood that is often ignored. The film makes us think about the relationship between fiction and reality. Whilst the film is 'fictional' its realist style cannot be ignored. As discussed already, Banietemad's filmmaking relies on real-life locations, which personify the urban landscape of Tehran. In addition, the subjects the film explores, through its bold depiction of the country's cultural and political issues further connect these stories to their context. The intimate stories that are screened in *Tales* may be fictional, but are nonetheless very clearly reflective of cultural anxieties and politics of gender. Through its filmic form, private issues are visualised and verbalised. *Tales* shows us that the 'personal is political' – what cannot be discussed through public platforms is visualised here through fiction. Themes of prostitution and drug addiction that the film engages with are such examples. More than anything the film is a space where these women can speak, which makes them the agent of their own lives. The audience learns about Nargess, Nobar, Tooba and Sara through their own accounts, from their own stories and conversations. They are constantly shown as they confront the audience, the authorities and other characters in the film, displaying agency. As discussed already, the filmmaker's own resistance in the face of authorities, I suggest adds yet another layer to the notion of voice and agency.

Challenging the internal and external politics of Iran, *Tales* manages to engage with it all: through the personal narratives it deals with physical abuse, drug addiction, sexuality, the working class and motherhood. What is uniquely similar to the stories is the agency and strength the female characters display as they grip onto their life and dignity. What stands out is the film's honest depiction of vulnerability. In this way then, the film invites us to consider the role and purpose of storytelling. The film relies on various cinematic tropes to tell these stories. The role of women and their embodiment is arguably part of these techniques. What this storytelling structure achieves is a strong sense of womanhood, but

what stands out is the way in which it deals with this idea. The stories of these women are different and independent from one another, yet they merge into a bigger picture. These women pass on the 'baton', continuing the previous storyteller's struggle and essentially keeping the story alive – the camera keeps rolling. In its final scene, the film yet again offers a similar suggestion that these stories will continue to be told. The stories in *Tales* do not overshadow one another. Quite the contrary; they enhance one another offering both a sense of unity but still maintaining its sense of independence. Banietemad generously offers these women the space and time to share their struggles, to remind the audience of their stories and to show us where they are now.

The characters of Nargess, Tooba, Nobar and Sara fight to have their stories told, and despite their tragic struggles, are shown to persevere to change their circumstances. A powerful scene is of Nargess, whom the audience may recognise from Banietemad's earlier film *Nargess*.[20] We learn in *Tales* that her marriage with Adel (who was a thief) has ended. Faced with violence, her second marriage is with an unstable and abusive man, the repercussions of which visibly mark her face. And yet, while she is a victim of male violence, she is never victimised. In the final scene in which we see Nargess, she chooses independence over abuse as she is shown in a powerful shot walking away from her husband who sobs and begs for her to come back (see figure 21). She is shown in a moment of hesitation, and yet she walks away. This scene, I suggest, through the characters, as well as its visuals, comments on and complicates gender politics in Iran. First, it shows Nargess through her agency – in a position where she makes the decision to walk away. By doing so, *Tales* rejects the stereotypical images of the "oppressed" Muslim/non-Western woman. But Banietemad further complicates the scene through her visuals to comment on something

[20] Looking at *Nargess,* I discussed the representation of love and the taboo in the second chapter of the thesis.

larger. As shown in the image, the glass doors visually resemble a prison, keeping Nargess's husband out. The camera also plays with the idea of framing, creating a sense of suffocation. This I think comments on gender politics at large: the sobbing man, who makes promises to never repeat his mistakes, while being shut out – unable to enter his wife's new world, evokes a strong sense of pathos. The scene through its complex imagery, performance and Nargess's agency to walk away, depicts the nuances and complications of a patriarchal society – as one that is damaging to both men and women.

Figure 21: In *Tales* showing Nargess, in a moment of hesitation as her abusive husband begs for her forgiveness.

Banietemad's *Tales* is invested in the stories of women, and their resistance in the face of political and patriarchal systems. Each in their own way, respond to their circumstances embodying strength and defiance. Tooba for example is shown constantly fighting and resisting. She represents an older illiterate woman who despite strict social, political and economic limitations refuses to stay silenced. As shown in this chapter, one of the most powerful shots is of her when she confronts the camera, and boldly and bravely fights for her cause. Leaving behind her abusive husband, Nargess too, deliberately chooses a different life. Nobar's story is revealed through a single letter, read out to the audience by

her, which represents her agency. For a moment in this scene, she is defined by her past, yet what stands out is her compassion as she reunites the family, restoring order. In many ways, Sara too is limited by her history, but through their exchange, Sara and Hamed represent a hopeful reading of Iran's dynamic social and gender politics, imagining a different future.

Conclusion

As *Tales* returns to these older narratives, to characters like Nargess, Nobar, Tooba and Sara, it once again marks their stories as relevant. In its darkest moments, through their struggles, the characters of *Tales* remain "human" – they are neither turned into heroines nor victimised. What connects them is their common struggles and pain, but also their defiance and the sense of hope the film returns to again and again, and does so, through the ubiquitous internal camera. The film's final story of Sara and Hamed is about a union that comes to existence as they resolve their past. The two drive on, paving the way for their future. Directly after, the filmmaker walks solo. He has his camera back, which had been confiscated by the authorities. Speaking on the phone, he says: "of course I'll keep shooting. Listen, no film will ever stay in the closet. Someday, somehow, whether we're here or not, these films will be shown." And as these words are uttered, we are reminded yet again, that we have just witnessed a story that has come into existence and 'out of the closet' after years and years of censorship.

The film's obsession with its own form is not accidental. Storytelling is enabled by the camera, and so filming in *Tales* is a form of telling, exposure and resistance. Women's voices and agency are central themes in the works of Banietemad. As outlined in the introduction of this thesis, Banietemad complicates ideas of Western feminism, even going as far as rejecting the term. That said, as explored throughout my project, her films not only centralise women, complicating their visual representations, but also challenge patriarchy

along the way. In addition, as illustrated in this chapter, *Tales* through its form and content celebrates collective womanhood and camaraderie. All these qualities I argue, invite a feminist reading of her text. That said Banietemad's rejection of the term speaks volumes, challenging Western notions of feminism, and demanding that the stories of Tooba, Nobar, Nargess and Sara are contextualised. This makes *Tales* significant as it offers a critical reading of Iran's gender politics, challenging its patriarchal culture, but also, problematising the Western misunderstandings of the Muslim woman as oppressed, silenced and passive. Also, the film's explicit reliance and awareness of its own cinematic frame is a way of tapping into the cultural and political sensitivities of Iran. The camera and the mode of storytelling in this film become a way of revealing the 'unspoken' and the taboo. In addition, the complex and constantly shifting status of censorship in the country, and its inevitable connection to the country's political climate, show how the cinematic platform allows for manoeuvring. *Tales,* as well as many of Banietemad's films, stretches the censorship laws of Iran and negotiates with the red lines. It is the filmmaker's negotiation and back-and-forth dialogue with authorities that makes cinema especially important as an art form. While there are no arguments about its restrictions and boundaries, as noted, cinema is nonetheless a medium that allows a space for manoeuvre. Also, through films, stories are visualised, publicised and consumed by often a large and diverse audience.

Despite the boundaries imposed on cinematic practices in Iran, Banietemad's *Tales* engages with it all. The personal narratives offer a space for the film to deal with physical abuse, drug addiction, sexuality, the working class and motherhood. What is uniquely similar to the stories is the agency and strength the female characters embody as they grip onto their life and dignity. What stands out is the film's honest depiction of vulnerability. The narrative continuity and the way in which the film picks up from where the previous story ends, reminds us of the legendary Persian storyteller "Shahrzad", of *One Thousand*

and One Nights, who tells stories to stay alive. Under authoritarian regimes, I argue that storytelling functions as a mode of survival. With such a title, and awareness of its filmic form, *Tales* invites us to consider the role and purpose of storytelling. The film relies on various forms and tropes to deliver its tales. The central role of women and their embodiment is arguably part of these techniques.

The film's cyclical return to the filmmaker in its final moments is crucial. We watch a long shot of him walking on a bridge over the metropolitan city of Tehran in darkness. The scene is accompanied by the noise of traffic, sound and life. The camera here 'zooms out' once again from the personal stories that it has exposed, taking us back to its visual portrayal of the collective, communal and ultimately the city of Tehran. With this, the film reminds us that we have been watching the stories of a city and its people all along. While the film focuses on the raw, personal and intimate struggles of its female characters, its return to the macro - the bigger 'picture' - connects these personalised stories back to the city, showing that the struggles of these women are not theirs alone. Through this, Banietemad reminds us once again about the entrenched gender politics of Iran, and its impact on society as a whole. So much of *Tales* is about filmmaking in Iran, and a tribute to Banietemad's past characters, and even the camera itself.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has been very close to my heart. It has been both a personal and an academic journey, and the inspiration behind this research I think demonstrates how the two overlap and intersect. Mostly, the motivation behind this project shows the urgency for scholarly attention to the voices of Iranian women who have participated in shaping the country's cinema and culture through their artistic contributions and continuous display of resistance. The current political climate, the misunderstandings of "Other" places and people, and the misrepresentations of the non-Western woman are relevant and timely issues that have been at the heart of my project. By looking at Banietemad's body of work, the aim of this thesis has been to explore the representation of women on the Iranian screen, as a way to think about larger issues around gender politics, as well as social and political systems of power. As I have demonstrated, this journey is in no shape or form simplistic or monolithic. To get to this stage, Iranian cinema has seen many shifts and changes since the Islamic Revolution.

A common misunderstanding about Iranian cinema is that women play no role in shaping the nation's film industry. In fact, casual as well as academic conversations about my work throughout the last few years, where I have been asked on numerous occasions whether "there are even women in Iran's cinema" captures exactly why this work is important. This shows that in addition to the social restrictions and stifling political atmosphere many Iranians have to deal with, there are also the negative stereotypes that add yet another layer of restriction. As Naficy puts, "a unique and unexpected achievement of this cinema has been the significant and signifying role of women both behind and in front of the camera" ("Veiled Voice and Vision" 560). The misconceptions that surround Iranian cinema bleed into other aspects of the country too. This includes perceptions of its people and their way of life, and so it has been both a personal and an academic goal of mine,

through my research, to shed light on the cinematic output of Iran, its women directors, and to highlight the forces of resistance that are hardly ever included in our narrative of Iran. Banietemad's vast body of work, as I have demonstrated, is a testament to the display of defiance by artists in Iran.

The "first lady" of Iranian cinema, Banietemad, through her films as I have shown, problematises patriarchal structures and dismantles the notion of the one-dimensional female character. Her women reject the binary of "chaste" and "unchaste" (Lahiji) and defy the stereotypes of "passive" and "silent." Starting with an in-depth character study and concluding with the notion of womanhood and the collective, this thesis has in some ways gone full circle. Banietemad's body of work, I argue, exhibits an embodiment of continuity that marks her female characters as extremely relevant and timely. As discussed in the introduction, the representation of women in Iranian cinema was hardly ever complex before the Revolution, or even during the early years under the Islamic regime. As a collective body of work, Banietemad's films convey a sense of continuum. The recurrence of the characters and stories from film to film, I think is hugely important to the director's works. The characters of Tooba, Nargess, Nobar and Sara for example, through their return in *Tales* are made relevant again on the Iranian stage. In addition, through their return, Banietemad further engages with the idea of character development, which I think rejects the very notion of "simple" or flat female characters. These women and their stories matter, and by re-entering the cinematic space, their issues, identities and narratives are made relevant and public yet again.

As this thesis has shown, Banietemad's body of work is extensive. For the parameters of this project, I have focused on *Nargess*, *Blue Veiled*, *The May Lady, Under the Skin of the City, Gilaneh* and *Tales*: fictional and narrative works that explicitly address women's issues. This has enabled a thorough analysis of the post-Revolutionary

representation of women in Iranian cinema with a consideration to the country's political and social shifts. Banietemad, in her career, which dates back to the beginning of the Revolution, has produced an extensive amount of work. Her three earlier films *Off Limits, Yellow Canary*, and *Foreign Currency* as already mentioned are different in tone, and while they are critical of social issues, they do not fit within the structure of this thesis. As well, Banietemad's career, which begins with documentary filmmaking has inevitably shaped and influenced her work and style. Yet, the vast body of documentaries by the director are beyond the scope of this project. However, my research offers a framework and methodological approach that can be used for further research on Banietemad's films, as well as other filmmakers. The diverse range of methods that I have employed in this thesis – reading film as text, interviews, a research trip to Tehran, and contextual and theoretical studies – is part of my intervention, which invites and encourages a nuanced and complex approach to research. This project – the first of its kind – has looked exclusively at Banietemad's films as a gateway into important discussions and visualisations of women and their stories. And while my work focuses on the films of Banietemad, the overall aim here is to offer an invitation to think beyond the director, and even Iranian studies. This way, the greater goal is to create space to diversify film and gender studies.

Through the evolution of the female figure on the Islamic screen, this thesis highlights social and political life in Iran. Tooba for example, through her position as a working mother, is granted the mobility to take the audience through the layers of the city, shedding light on the domestic, public and political aspects of contemporary Iranian society. Through the iconic Tooba figure, Banietemad shatters any assumptions about the Iranian woman as passive, one-dimensional or submissive. Significantly, Tooba's marginality (as a working class, illiterate woman) is challenged through the works of Banietemad. Her recurrence in the director's body of work, as well as her centrality within these narratives I

argue is an important act of resistance. By bringing to the fore, a figure often side-lined by her gender and class status, Banietemad challenges her society. Feminist scholar hooks is invested in the margins of society as a space for resistance. She views "marginality as much more than a site of deprivation" (*Yearning* 149). Such spaces for hooks are also "the site of radical possibility, a space of resistance" (*Yearning* 149). Banietemad's keen dedication to social issues also takes her to the margins of her society.

A figure such as Afagh from *Nargess* is an important example of the marginalised and even forgotten. Afagh, a master-thief with a dark and heart-breaking past whose life has been shaped by abuse and poverty is made central in *Nargess.* What is more important is how her characterisation and story evoke a deep emotional response from the audience. Banietemad brings to the screen in 1992, a character that is unapologetic about her crime and love for a younger man. And yet, she is also depicted through her loyalty for Adel and her vulnerabilities about losing him. Importantly, Afagh, the outcast of society, is depicted through her complexities in *Nargess*. She is humanised on the screen, and though in society she is pushed to the side, she is at the heart of the film. This contradiction I argue displays a multi-layered resistance, and to use the words of hooks, offers a "site for radical possibility." Afagh's fight for her lover as a means to hold on to him is one. In addition, the depiction of a woman in love, and a criminal to add to that, displays the filmmaker's persistence and resistance for a cinema that challenges social issues in her home country, stretching its censorship codes to its limit.

While Banietemad's women are often drawn from the outskirts of Iranian society, by telling their stories, the filmmaker challenges the idea of marginalisation and instead brings to the fore their narrative, marking them central to Iran's filmic repertoire. And so, figures like Tooba, Afagh, Nargess, Nobar, Forough, Gilaneh and Sara are part of the national story, and through international awards and festivals, they are even known on the

global stage for a broader audience. In addition to brining attention to their stories, Banietemad, as this thesis has shown, truly engages with the idea of resistance and defiance. Her choice to remain in Iran, and to make films, despite its restrictions, I argue, is her active protest. Also, from the margins, her female characters, despite their restrictions, also fight. Through her films and characters, Banietemad challenges the patriarchal and power structures of Iran. Her representations and depictions of the woman character on the Islamic screen I argue disrupt and dismantle any associations she may have with invisibility or passivity. Thus, straying away from any simplistic portrayals that fall into the binaries of "chaste" and "unchaste." To look at Banietemad's films is to have a glimpse into the complexities and texture of Iran's socio-political context. As I have argued throughout this thesis, resistance is at the heart of Banietemad's filmic career – her role behind the camera, as well as the stories she tells are a reminder that a counter narrative, a voice of opposition and a real force exist in Iran.

Part of this project has also been an attempt to challenge Western feminism – not as a way to dismiss the contributions of Western women, but as a way to think beyond artificial and shallow ideas of intersectionality. Shedding light on Banietemad's body of work, and the way in which they challenge ideas of patriarchy in their home country I think is one way to really think about diversifying women's voices in our academic work. There are several important factors at play. First, the Muslim/non-Western woman is often spoken for. Here, the woman behind the camera, Banietemad – is the "speaker" and storyteller. Her stories rise out of the complexities and nuances of the society that is tangible to her. This means that she possesses an awareness about the cultural and political issues of her society that non-Iranian filmmakers simply do not. Also, to make these films, she is in a position of vulnerability where there are consequences to her expression and her speech. This means that the way in which Banietemad and filmmakers similar to her challenge their own

societies, need to be central to our understanding of Iran. The films discussed in this thesis, I argue do not fall into the "Western" trap – they do not conform to Western ideals and instead reimagine a culturally specific idea of feminism and freedom for Iran. That said, Banietemad's films, though locally inspired, open up and diversify ideas of feminism that shed light on the needs and struggles of other women on the universal stage as well.

Looking Ahead: Beyond Iran

As February 2019 marks the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the country faces a severe state of social, political and economic instability. Pressure from external and Western forces, imposed through harsh sanctions and the Travel Ban have also aided in further isolating Iran, making matters worse. Anxieties about the future of the Islamic Republic, and the country's national identity, have resurfaced. Crushed between the suffocating internal politics of the state and the Western forces outside of the borders, it is the Iranian people who pay the brunt of these policies. More than ever before, Iran's fate, and its relationship with the rest of the world are crucial. On one hand, the social and political situation at home continues to intensify, with severe economic consequences. On the other hand, on the global stage, images of Iran circulate in the media. As Milani argues,

> The problem with stereotypes is not that they are totally false. There is usually an element of truth to them. The problem is that they are arrested representations. They are fixed. Frozen. Dehumanized. They are immobilized, caged images of a reality that is perpetually moving and shifting (*Words not Swords* 25).

The cinematic platform I think combats some of these images, offering an alternative narrative that in the process humanises the "Other." Bert Cardullo suggests that "Iran's cinema offers an alternative that is fascinating, even astonishing, for its artistic sophistication and passionate humanism" (21). Speaking about the importance of our cinema, hooks looks

at how films "make culture" (*Reel to Real* 12). This further suggests that our mode of representation and storytelling has immense power in combating stereotypes of the "Other."

Today's political context, I think makes scholarship on Iran important and timely – not only for Iran, but also for the global community. The filmic output, and the visual culture, as I have demonstrated in this project, can offer a gateway into the complexities of Iran's context, and draw on the important work being done as a way to resist systems of power. This resistance is important because it rises from its own context, by people who are directly impacted by these structures. In his book *From Iran to Hollywood,* Christopher Gow comments on the nation's post-Revolutionary directors. For him, "Post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers have resisted attempts by Western critics and audiences to pigeonhole their cinema as a 'new wave' quasi-European art cinema as well as fought attempts by their own government to control this cinema ideologically" (54). This sentiment, I think is highly visible in Banietemad's works, where she challenges the political and social structures of her country, but also, remains highly critical of the pressures imposed on ordinary Iranians from the West. In addition, at a time of political isolation, films play a crucial role. As I have argued elsewhere, cinema "can offer a much more complex depiction of "other" places and people – one that challenges the power dynamics at play and introduces the idea of self-representation, agency, and voice" (Khosroshahi). Through my work, my aim is to participate in diversifying and de-Westernising film and gender studies. Our goal towards an inclusive and intersectional feminism has to begin with a study and analysis of a diverse range of films and directors. My project, through a detailed analysis of Banietemad's body of work, contributes to such an aspiration.

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