

A QUESTION OF (NON)EXISTENCE: A GENDER ANALYSIS OF POST-REVOLUTIONARY IRAN THROUGH THREE FILMS

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INTRODUCTION

The 1979 Islamic Cultural Revolution transformed the existent Iranian socio-cultural and political milieu from a secular one into a fanatically religious state. The clergy were empowered with administrative powers which had been stripped off from them during the previous Shah's regime. Consequently, the social, political, cultural and economic spheres underwent a dramatic transformation. This also gave birth to a cinema of unique expression which is recognized as one of the world's most vital national cinemas (Mottahedeh 2008).

Even though a pivotal role was played by women in the Revolution, they were forthwith relegated to subordinate positions in the wake of the Revolution, resulting in a situation of "gender apartheid"[†]. Women were marginalized in the political sphere as a result of the Islamization of gender relations and gender policies (Sedghi 1996). Measures were well in place for the implementation of the *Shari'ah* (Islamic law) and the *Fatva* (religious verdicts) to eliminate any possible impact of the Western culture that was perceived as "the Great Satan" (Nafisi 2004). A religiously-defined identity was thrust upon women. Thus the creation of an idealized and exemplary womanhood in the picture of "chaste dolls" has been central to the ideological agenda of the Revolution (Mottahedeh 2008). Misogynist legal reforms such as the imposition of the female dress code were crafted in order to curtail women's socialization and mobility in the areas of employment and education. The final outcome intended was domestication of the woman that created a nightmarish state of citizenship for women (Nafisi 2004). Conversely, men were not subjected to discriminatory practices as harsh as the ones affecting women's lives. They were also compelled to adhere to an institutionalized identity: an idealized masculinity. However, this identity bestowed prerogatives upon them, encouraging their freedom of mobility and exertion of violence against women.

Against this backdrop, resistance by women from different strata of society has been a recurrent phenomenon since the establishment of the new Regime. They set out to deconstruct the oppressive mainstream theology by popularizing their own versions of women's role in society. In this movement of resistance, a decisive role is played by cinema with "a visual theorization against [the State's] violent metaphysics" (Dabashi 2001). Gender and related issues became a prominent thematic area for many filmmakers, both male and female. They started utilizing cinematic work to respond to the phenomenon of Islamization and its drastically negative consequences notwithstanding the aggressive bureaucratic measures taken by the totalitarian regime such as state-sponsored censorship, intimidation and coercion. Endorsing defiance of the hegemonic rule, they give a voice to the silenced and oppressed woman.

The above idea is illustrated by the three post-Revolutionary films in the study: *The Day I Became a Woman* by Marziyeh Meshkini (2000), *The Apple* by Samira Makhmalbaf (1998), and *The Circle* by Jafar Panahi (2000) which document different facets of the dilemma of Iranian

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[†] <http://www.uri.edu/artsci/wms/hughes/khatami.htm>

woman's state of citizenship. With the destabilization of the stereotypical portrayal of women, and non-voyeuristic depiction of womanhood, the films elucidate how the post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema has become a feminist arena.

METHODOLOGY

The methodology utilized in this study is archival research. Video archives, printed material, and online resources were used. The primary texts were analysed using feminist and feminist film theories presented by theorists such as Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, and James Scott.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As the three films in the study reveal, women are confined to an oppressed state of citizenship in the post-Revolutionary Iranian context. Their lives are invariably constrained by a spectrum of written and unwritten laws stipulated by the patriarchal hegemonic rule. Women confront this situation with defiance and resistance. The motif of resistance is valorized by filmmakers, irrespective of gender, who are keen to give a voice to the silenced womanhood.

When looking at the third world context where gender segregation seems to have become an integral facet of the state of citizenship, this study offers food for thought. It suggests legislative measures are urgently needed from above to realize a decent state of citizenship. Simultaneously, the repressed segments must initiate action for their emancipation. Furthermore, the powerful artistic space of cinema can be utilized as an influential tool for awareness and empowerment of the repressed.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

Women are invariably victimized under a hegemonic rule that is designed by patriarchy. Resistance is an inevitable phenomenon in such a context. The feminist role played by cinema is highly remarkable in empowering women in the case of Iran.

This study concludes that the root causes of gender problem must be immediately addressed in order to uplift the state of citizenship of the Iranian woman. This can be considered a case study that is applicable to societies and communities under similar authoritarian rule. Likewise, it is important to study the social role of cinema that can be applied to contexts marked by gender segregation.

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