

# Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema

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Women and sexual love are time-honored—but problematic—themes in Iranian cinema. Soon after the 1979 revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic in Iran, these themes were forced into the straitjacket of Islamist ideology and Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which allowed little room for representations of current social realities. The authorities imposed *hejab* (a dress code) and sexual segregation, and the public presence of women and the expression of sexual love became highly restricted. For almost a decade, Iranian filmgoers would look in vain for screen depictions of women and love. Gradually, however, both came out of the shadows; and by the late 1990s, they were once again leading—if highly controversial—themes in the Iranian cinema.

In this essay I explore these developments through a discussion of three films, which in different ways were landmarks in the passage out of the shadows and became the focus of heated debates for their transgression of the rules. They are Abdolhossein Sepanta's *The Lor Girl* (*Dokhtar-e Lor*; 1933), Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time to Love* (*Nowbat-e Asheqi*; 1991), and Behrouz Afkhami's *Hemlock* (*Showkaran*; 2000).

I argue that the problem of the cinematic representation of women and romantic love in Iran long predates the birth of the Islamic Republic. It is part of a larger problematic, which has two elements. The first is a deep-rooted ambivalence in Iranian culture and society toward love and women: on the one hand, both are “objects of desire,” and, on the other, both are feared as corrupting influences. The second element is an ongoing struggle between the forces of modernity and traditionalism, in which women and their bodies have become a battleground. While the first element, the ambivalence, is ancient and more poetic in form and expression, the second (women's bodies as battleground) is contemporary and more political. This contrast is evident in the two famous twentieth-century mandates on how women should appear in public. In 1936 Reza Shah, the first Pahlavi monarch, banned *hejab* and punished women who appeared in public wearing a chador or scarf. In 1983 the Islamic Republic did the opposite.

By imposing religious rules on cinema, the Islamic Republic accentuated and politicized both the cultural ambivalence toward sexual love and women and the conflict between tradition and modernity. This in time opened the way for renegotiating some old cultural and religious taboos.

Earlier versions of this essay were presented at two conferences: “Behind the Lens, beyond the Veil: Women in Iranian Cinema,” School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 2001; and “Religious Witness: The Intimate, the Everyday, the World,” New York University Center for Religion and Media, New York, May 2004.

Comparative Studies of  
South Asia, Africa and  
the Middle East  
Vol. 27, No. 3, 2007  
doi:10.1215/1089201x-2007-042  
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### Sexual Love and the Art of Ambiguity

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) whether 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.

But such ambiguity cannot be maintained in the performative and visual arts, where both the language and the form demand greater transparency and directness in the depiction of women and love. Among the traditional solutions to this problem were either the complete elimination of women or idealized and unrealistic representations. The first is seen in *ta'ziyah*, the religious passion plays, where women's roles have always been played by men, and the second in the “neuter” figures depicted in much painting before the later Qajar period—embodiments of how the “beloved” was described in classical poetry.<sup>1</sup> In these paintings, as Afsaneh Najmabadi argues, male and female attributes of beauty—such as arched eyebrows and slim waists—are blended in such a way that a figure emerges, which she calls “neuter.”<sup>2</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, with the advent of photography, representation became more naturalistic, and women's bodies were depicted more realistically in both painting and photography.<sup>3</sup> In the twentieth century, the drive to “modernization” under Reza Shah, and the corresponding take-off of cinema as public entertainment in Iran, reinforced this tendency. Not only had Iranian women's public roles and status changed, but love stories and female characters were integral to the film industry from

the start. Yet none of these developments lessened the ambivalence in Iranian culture toward these themes—love and women.

### Breaking the Taboo: *The Lor Girl*

The fate of the woman who played in the first Iranian talkie—*The Lor Girl* (*Dokhtar-e Lor*)—can tell something of the power of the taboo. Made in 1933, the film was the brainchild of Abdolhossein Sepanta, a key figure in the early days of Iranian cinema. The film is a version of the popular story of Jafar and Golnar. Jafar, a government officer, meets Golnar in a teahouse where she works in southern Iran. The daughter of a merchant, she was kidnapped when a child by a gang of bandits, led by Qoli Khan, who also fancies her. Jafar and Golnar fall in love, and together they discover the hiding place of Qoli Khan and his gang and bring them to justice. Their heroic action puts an end to the banditry and lawlessness in the region.

*The Lor Girl* was shot in India and produced and directed by Ardeshir Irani, the owner of Imperial Film. At first, Sepanta had been unable to find a woman who was willing to play the central role; eventually he managed to persuade Sadiqeh Saminejad, the wife of Irani's driver, to take it on under the stage name “Rouhangiz.” To accommodate her strong Kermani accent, Sepanta had to modify the film script, which added to the attraction of the film to Iranian audiences. It was an instant success and Sepanta, who played the role of Jafar himself, became a kind of “star.” His appearance in movie houses attracted crowds keen to see and hear him in person. But the woman who reluctantly played Golnar became not a celebrity but rather a social outcast. Her life and personality were shattered by identification with the Golnar of the film. The very elements that made the film a popular success—Jafar and Golnar's love story

1. Peter Chelkowski, ed., *Ta'ziyah: Ritual and Drama in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1979).

2. Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Reading for Gender through Qajar Paintings,” in *Royal Persian Paintings: The Qajar Epoch, 1785–1925*, ed. Layla Diba (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999); see also Najmabadi, *Women with Moustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), chap. 2.

3. Najmabadi, *Women with Moustaches*, chap. 2.

and Golnar's singing and dancing—brought her the reproach of family and friends and abuse and harassment by strangers in the streets. She refused to play in any other film and became a recluse; she died alone and in poverty in 1997, at the age of 81.<sup>4</sup>

How can one explain the public's celebration of the film and the man who played Jafar and their rejection of the woman who played the role of Golnar—both equally heroic roles, one might have thought? But, of course, the answer is that Golnar breaks deeply engrained Irano-Muslim gender taboos, and she is far removed from an idealized and passive object of love. In a famous line in the film, she invites her lover to come to her room at midnight (*nimeh shab az daricheh bia*). In earlier Iranian films, not only were female characters silent, but they also were played by Armenians—that is, non-Muslims.

In the years between 1933, when Rouhangiz made her unfortunate debut as the first Muslim film actress, and the revolution, after which women could no longer appear on screen without *hejab*, both the film industry and women's status in Iran evolved and moved a long way. But the taboo, the stigma that shattered the life of the woman who played Golnar, did not lose its power. Few women working in an artistic field that was deemed "corrupting" could escape the stigma. The religious classes rejected cinema, or at best ignored it, like many other aspects of modernity, which they identified with the Pahlavi regime. To the clerical establishment, cinema was among the forms of art considered forbidden (*haram*), and for many pious families going to the movies was tantamount to committing a sin. Cinema was seen as one of the main causes of corruption in society. Not only could films, by depicting love, encourage illicit relations between the sexes, but they also transgressed Islamic rules by showing women without proper cover—*hejab*.

Such representations of women were most often seen in the popular genre of Iranian movies that came to be known as *filmfarsi*, whose

main ingredients were love stories and women dancing and singing. Although frowned on by the middle classes and many intellectuals and critics, *filmfarsi* movies not only kept the film industry alive in Iran, but they appealed to the public. They also kept to society's moral codes, and dealt with some primordial themes, such as the struggle between good and evil. It did so in rather simplistic and absolutist fashion. Protagonists were not real, multidimensional characters but ideal types or stereotypes. They were either goodies or baddies. Female goodies dressed modestly—at the time, this meant they wore a chador—and the baddies wore miniskirts. Goodies stayed at home and were protected by men, and the baddies worked—often they danced and sang in cabarets under the lustful gaze of men. It is this cinematic representation of women that Shahla Lahiji invokes when she speaks of the injustice that the cinema did to the cause of women in prerevolutionary Iran. As Lahiji puts it, women were represented, with few exceptions, as dolls, some chaste, some unchaste.<sup>5</sup> This was the case even in films by avant-garde filmmakers, such as in Massoud Kimiai's *Qeisar*.<sup>6</sup>

When the clerics came to power after the revolution, they faced a dilemma. On the one hand, aware of the power of the medium, they could neither reject nor ignore cinema as they had done before. On the other hand, religious law had nothing to say about cinema, apart from imposing its rules of *halal* and *haram* on cinematic images and themes. The way out was to purify and Islamize cinema, that is, to bring it under the domination of state ideology and religious legal rules.

The subsequent story of Iranian cinema parallels other postrevolutionary developments: a constant stretching of limits imposed by Islamic ideology and law.<sup>7</sup> Three key phases can be discerned. The first phase began with the creation of the Islamic state in 1979 and lasted for almost a decade, dominated by the Iran-Iraq war (1980–88). This phase saw the ascendance

4. Behzad Eshqi, "Zohur va hozur-e zanan-e bazigar dar sinema-ye Iran," in "Iranian Cinema Annual 1379," ed. Hadi Chapardar, supplement to *Film*, no. 265 (AH 1379/2001): 161–62; and Shahrokh Golestan, "Golnar mord," *Keyhan London*, 3–9 May 2001.

5. Shahla Lahiji, "Chaste Dolls and Unchaste Dolls: Women in Iranian Cinema since 1979," in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation, and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper (London: I. B. Tauris, 2002), 215–26.

6. *Ibid.*, 221.

7. Sussan Siavoshi, "Cultural Policies and the Islamic Republic: Cinema and Book Publication," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29 (1997): 509–30; and Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Iranian Cinema: Art, Society, and the State," *Middle East Report*, no. 219 (2001): 26–28.

and almost undisputed power of *fiqh*-based Islam and the suppression of reformist visions of Islam. During this phase, there was an almost total absence of love from the screen, and although women were present behind the camera, working even as directors, their roles on-screen were restricted to devoted wives, mothers, and sisters.<sup>8</sup> Children came to dominate the screen, and love and human emotions could be channeled through them.<sup>9</sup>

With the end of the war with Iraq in 1988, and Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, a new phase began, commonly referred to as "reconstruction." Marked by an increased tension between the different visions of Islam, during this phase cinema came to provide a kind of social critique. A number of Iranian films were now being shown in the outside world to increasing international acclaim, which put Iranian cinema in a unique position within the country and made an impact different from the press. The topics of women and love now resurfaced in many films; in particular, women film directors broke away from the male vision and started to produce films dealing clearly with female characters and sexual love. Notable among them is Rakhshan Bani-Etemad's *Nargess*—the story of a love triangle (one man and two women)—which won the main 1992 Fajr Festival award.<sup>10</sup>

#### Challenging the Taboo: *A Time to Love*

But it was Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *A Time to Love* (*Nowbat-e 'Asheqi*; 1991) that marked the beginning of a new approach to love and questioned the suffocating influence of religious regulations on cinema. *A Time to Love* was shocking, not only because it revealed a change of position by an Islamically committed filmmaker, but also because of the vehicle he chose for conveying his message: sexual love.

Shot in Turkey, the film deals with the forbidden subject of a love triangle—one woman and two men—and the relativity of human conditions and judgments. The story unfolds in three versions, with the male protagonists exchanging

the roles of lover and betrayed husband. Each version has the same structure and the same set of events and characters but ends differently. There are six characters: Güzel, her husband, and her lover; an old man who tells the husband that his wife has a lover; Güzel's mother, who tries to bring sense to her daughter; and finally a judge. The first version ends with the husband killing the lover and then being tried and sentenced to death by the judge. The second ends with the lover (played by the dark-haired man who was the husband in the first version) killing the husband (played by the fair-haired man who was the lover in the first version); the lover is tried, and condemned to death by the same judge. In the third version, the husband (once more played by the dark-haired man) tries to kill the lover. In the fight that ensues, the knife falls into the hand of the lover. He refuses to kill his rival, and says, "I won't kill you because we haven't come into this world to kill each other." He then hands the knife back to the husband, and says, "But I am prepared to die; kill me. I can't help it; I can't not be in love with her." The husband too chooses to behave differently. Instead of killing his wife's lover, he decides to honor her love and prepares their wedding. The judge who sentenced the husband and the lover in the previous episodes is now the guest. He says,

For a long time I wanted to live as a person; all my life I played my social role. Last week, when I heard the news of your wedding, I opened a marriage registry. Judging is good for a person who only thinks of the consequences of a crime, not of the reasons for doing it. In every trial, when I heard the guilty person's reasons, I thought to myself, if I were in his situation . . .

The judge leaves the audience to finish his sentence, which is the message of the film: it is time to suspend judgment. It was this suspension of judgment—which is in effect the removal of love from the domain of Islamic law—that made *A Time to Love* the subject of a bitter controversy in the 1991 Fajr Festival. In some ways, this

8. Hamid Naficy, "Veiled Vision/Powerful Presences: Women in Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema," in *In the Eye of Storm: Women in Post-revolutionary Iran*, ed. Mahnaz Afkhami and Erika Friedl (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1994).

9. Best-known instances include Amir Naderi's *The Runner* (1984), Bahram Beyzai's *Bashu: The Little Stranger* (1985), and Abbas Kiarostami's *Where Is the Friend's House?* (1987).

10. See Naficy, "Veiled Vision"; and Sheila Whitaker, "Rakhshan Bani-Etemad," in *Life and Art: The New Iranian Cinema*, ed. Rose Issa and Sheila Whitaker (London: National Film Theatre, 1999).

controversy resembled that which followed the publication of Abdolkarim Soroush's articles on the relativity of the human understanding of religion in the late 1980s. Disillusioned by the policies of the Islamic Republic, Islamic intellectuals and artists had begun to voice objections to the imposition of a legalistic and dogmatic vision of Islam.

One can say that what *The Lor Girl* had done in the Iran of the 1930s, *A Time to Love* did for the Iran of the 1990s. Both broke the rules. The first brought women from the inner quarters (the *andarun*) onto the screen; the second used cinema as a medium for validating sexual love. Though *A Time to Love* was shown only at the 1991 Fajr Festival, and not in public cinemas in Iran, it continued to be passionately debated in the press for some time. The debate was indicative of a deepening rift in society between two conceptions of Islam, two styles of governance. On the one hand there were those who insisted on the ideological construction of Islam and its imposition through juristic rules, and on the other there were those who were arguing for a more pluralistic definition of Islam and trying to reconcile it with modernity and democracy.

The election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997, and the emergence of the reform movement, began a new phase. The Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance was freed from the control of those (now referred to as Conservatives) who still advocated a juristic definition of social reality and came under the control of the Reformists, who sought more tolerant cultural policies. This phase brought a breakthrough, with women and love publicly rehabilitated in Iranian films. One strong feature of this phase was the emergence of younger voices demanding personal freedom and questioning older notions of gender relations. These voices are heard in films that deal openly and critically with gender roles and have love as their main theme.

#### **Debating the Taboo: *Hemlock***

Behrouz Afkhami's *Showkaran* (*Hemlock*; 2000) shows the extent to which the critique of juristic Islam has moved into the open and how far the ideological frontier has stretched. The film was produced by Howzeh Honari, an organization linked to the religious seminaries and created in the early years of the revolution to Islamize

art and cinema. Like Makhmalbaf, Afkhami started as an Islamically committed filmmaker and then became identified with the reform movement. In February 2000 he was elected to the Sixth Majlis, which was dominated by Reformists. Afkhami is also an admirer of American cinema, and *Showkaran* is his version of *Fatal Attraction*.

In the opening scene of *Showkaran*, one meets Mahmoud, a happily married man who combines religiosity with modernity. He is director of a factory in the provincial city of Zanjan, confiscated after the revolution and brought under the control of the powerful Foundation for the Oppressed (Bonyad-e Mostaz'afan). It is 1995, at the height of the Rafsanjani government's drive to privatization, and the foundation wants to sell off the factory. Mahmoud and his boss are resisting this plan. The boss's car is hit by a truck under suspicious circumstances, and he ends up in a hospital in Tehran. Mahmoud takes over running the factory. In the course of his visits to his boss in the hospital, he becomes attracted to the head nurse, Sima, a widow, and they start courting each other. Mahmoud, who is religious-minded, suggests to her that they contract a temporary marriage (*sigheh*), which Sima accepts, although she makes fun of him and his double standards.

Like all married men, Mahmoud keeps his new marriage a secret. Like all of them, he soon finds that he has to make a choice. For him this comes when his boss tells him that his relationship with Sima will cost him his support. Mahmoud decides to end it; he leaves a message on Sima's answering machine, together with seven gold coins considered to be her *mahr*—marriage gift. But Sima is now pregnant. She will not accept this rejection, and she threatens to ruin his marriage. She goes to his house, but she cannot bring herself to say anything to his wife. Mahmoud goes to Sima's father and tells the old man about the affair. Now rejected by her father, Sima plans revenge and goes to Mahmoud's house with a container of gasoline. Mahmoud has taken his wife out to celebrate his promotion and repair his marriage. Sima waits for his return. But when she goes to Mahmoud's bedroom to start the fire, she realizes that she cannot do it. She cannot destroy another person's life. She leaves, crying and driving reck-

lessly. Mahmoud drives home with his wife, laughing. The road is blocked; there has been an accident. He gets out and sees Sima's body being carried away. He is now off the hook.

In *Showkaran*, Afkhami openly and honestly exposes a number of social "problems," such as drug addiction, street prostitution, temporary marriage, the corruption of high-ranking state managers, and how religious regulations serve to cover and justify human greed and social injustice. The characters are multidimensional and complex. As the film unfolds, and one gets to know Mahmoud and Sima, one learns not to be deceived by appearances. Sima, though seemingly a liberated "modern" woman who smokes and does not observe religious rules like Mahmoud, has a stronger moral fiber. She looks after her old father, even pays for his opium addiction, and wants to be a mother. The only thing she wants from Mahmoud is an identification card for her child—which means registration of their marriage so that the child will not be stigmatized. For him, the end justifies the means, and he has a religious justification for all his actions. For example, when he wants to have a sexual relationship with Sima, he tells her that "he has certain beliefs." But when he finds Sima wants to be a mother, he tells her to have an abortion, and when she says she will not murder her own child, he replies, "It's not murder before four months; there's just a fine, which I'll pay."

*Showkaran* was the subject of immediate controversy. While the reformist press supported the film and saw it as a critique of the policies of the reconstruction phase, the conservative papers saw it as an affront and mockery of religious rules. The nurses were upset, too; they saw the film as an insult to their status in society, arguing that Sima gave a bad image of "decent" and hard-working nurses, by portraying them as women of easy virtue, smoking, and being willing to contract a temporary marriage. They held a public demonstration, demanding that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance revoke the film's license and withdraw it from cinemas. Saifollah Dad, deputy minister of culture in charge of cinema, spoke to the demonstrators, and Afkhami, too, spoke with the nurses' representatives. Though it was never stated, both sides agreed

on one issue: the relationship between Sima and Mahmoud, even though it was correct in juristic terms, was morally wrong. Afkhami and the reformist press put the blame on Mahmoud and condemned his manipulation of religion. The nurses and the conservative press blamed Sima and condemned her "indecent" behavior and loose morality. Both sides, in their different ways, ended by questioning the wisdom of many old solutions for modern problems, notably temporary marriage, which some people now advocate as an "Islamic solution" to the problem caused by the restrictions that the Islamic state has imposed on relations between sexes.

I end with a passage from Afkhami's open letter to those who objected to his film. The letter appeared on 15 April 2000 in *Mosharekat*, the reformist paper, soon before it was closed down. He writes,

*Showkaran* is not a film about the nurses, but about a woman who is on the surface free and granted the rights that a civilized society recognizes for women. But in reality she is deprived even of the rights that traditional women enjoyed one hundred years ago. . . . I remember my grandmother, a kind and majestic woman who smoked cigarettes. But today, some of our educated and "intellectual" nurses protest that the heroine of the film smokes, and claim that any woman in a film who smokes is immoral. We must truly ask ourselves, "why are we so accustomed to these absurd judgments, this savage imposition of our tastes on others? What is this prison that we have made for others and ourselves?" Even when someone is found to open its doors, we are not prepared to come out.

The most oppressed, the most endearing character in *Showkaran* is Sima (the nurse). She is a second-class citizen, who, without any backing or support, cares for her old father. She endures the emotional loneliness of a widow. She has accepted that she is a second-class citizen, and sees the injustice to which she is subjected as inevitable. She agrees to become a "second-class" wife, and secretly marries a man who enjoys "first-class citizen" status. But this just brings more humiliation for her. I feel sorry for the nurses, and those who have seen the film and in their own conscience cannot empathize with Sima's plight.<sup>11</sup>

11. Behrouz Afkhami, letter, *Mosharekat*, 25 Farvardin AH 1379/2000.

Afkhami's letter and the controversy surrounding his film clearly show that the debate about taboos concerning women and their behavior has moved on to new ground. By imposing *fiqh* rules on cinema, what the Islamic Republic did was to accentuate, bring out into the open, and politicize the Iranian cultural ambivalence toward sexual love and women. In so doing, it has perhaps unintentionally paved the way for a more transparent and realistic treatment of love and women on the screen. It has made the cinema a medium in which artists, politicians, clerics, and the general public can renegotiate their ideas about Islam and modernity through the time-honored themes of women and love.

Perhaps it is significant to note that the success of *Showkaran* brought its main actress, Hedi-yeh Tehrani, already a star, even more celebrity; such a contrast to the fate of Sadiqeh Saminejad, the woman who reluctantly became the first female actress in the first Iranian talkie. §



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