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Woman as Threat, Nation as Man: A Reading of the Perpetual State of Emergency through Post-Revolutionary Iranian Film

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Abstract

The present study examines legal gendered state violence in post-Revolutionary Iran as intrinsic to the perpetual state of emergency in the region. Drawing from the work of Marguerite Waller, I reflect on how a nation in a perpetual state of emergency is read as “male” and how the practice of enemy-condemnation integral to such a system designates women, and those who are considered “womanized” regardless of gender, as a threat. The theoretical/conceptual framework of the study is derived from both the work of Laura Mulvey and Negar Mottahedeh and the gaze theory and is used to explain gender role in the Iranian Islamic state and its corresponding gendered violence and skewing of accountability for violence by men against women. The author has also selected Asghar Farhadi’s film *The Salesman* as an intervention in this gendered state violence.

Keywords: Iranian film & media; Middle Eastern cinema; State Violence; State of Emergency; Sexual Violence

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Revolutionary Iranian Film

There is a sense of crisis, of imminent threat, intrinsic to any state of emergency. In a perpetual state of emergency—one that is not an exception to the rule, but rather integral to the ideology behind, and formation of the rule (i.e. the legal, economic, educational and political institutions of the nation)—this sense of crisis is ingrained in the founding of a nation and in its contemporary institutions. The ideology underlying the Islamic Revolution and the government founded through this upheaval relies on the concept of a perpetual state of emergency and a corresponding perpetual threat that aims to destroy the Islamic state. This threat—namely moral corruption that occurs in any circumstances of infiltration from the West—has remained unchanged since the establishment of the post-Revolutionary nation and is at times perpetuated

and subverted through the medium of film. In this article, I read post-Revolutionary Iranian cinema-as-discourse as a site at which critical interventions in state violence can be staged.

Specifically, this article conducts a close reading of Asghar Farhadi's 2016 film *The Salesman* (*Forushande*) as a means to discern state violence against women and to elucidate possibilities for subversion of this violence. Through analysis of a single work of contemporary Iranian media, this study examines the gendered aspects of the perpetual state of emergency in post-Revolutionary Iran, including how women pose a threat to the state and by what means they constitute a perpetual crisis.

Adopting an interdisciplinary approach, the article attempts to answer the following two main questions:

Q1: To what extent does cinema-as-discourse engage with and critique the perpetual state of emergency in Iran?

Q2: To what extent do gender and sexuality constitute an ever-present "crisis" in Iran, and in what ways does gender figure into Iran's perpetual state of emergency?

This article posits that the post-Revolutionary Iranian government's narrative regarding the potential corruption by women in fact identifies women as a constant potential threat to the security of the nation—and this rhetorical and institutional practice is reflected in contemporary Iranian cinema. Drawing from Marguerite Waller's work, I suggest that nationhood itself is read as hetero male to investigate means through which Iranian women are marginalized, targeted and considered perilous.

Method

This present study is informed by discourses, models and ideas central to Comparative Literature, Ethnic Studies, Iranian Studies, Legal Studies and Film Studies; I use an

interdisciplinary approach to investigate state violence, crisis-production and enemy-designation in a particular region.

I have elected to examine Iranian media and cinema—rather than published texts—as a venue for critical discourse addressing the issue of state violence. Due to meticulous and punishingly surveilling censorship by the Iranian state, there is little possibility for textual critiques of state violence to be published or disseminated by those who reside in the country. Cinema, however, through allegory and poetic aesthetics, does provide a venue for critical discourse in Iran—authored by those who live in the country.

This article considers narrative and cinematic devices employed in film *The Salesman* (*Forushande*), written, directed and produced by Asghar Farhadi. The film was popular both in and out of the Islamic Republic, ultimately being shown in over 30 countries. *The Salesman* premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in 2016, and was Iran's official submission to the American Academy Awards, winning Best Foreign Language Film in 2017. In 2012, Farhadi had won another academy award for a previous film, *A Separation*. These two movies were not banned in Iran, yet some other films of director Jafar Panahi have been banned. *The Salesman* became the highest-grossing movie in the country. The simultaneous popularity of Farhadi's films in the U.S. and in Iran is pertinent; his films resonate with a global audience, and are at times subversive, while concurrently appeasing the state infrastructure of media censorship and legal violence that is embedded in the contemporary Iranian government.

The Islamic Revolution: a perpetual state of emergency

In January 1979, two weeks after the Shah fled Iran, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from his exile in Paris, France to establish the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), an objective toward which he had long been writing, speaking and organizing. Shortly after the overthrow of

the monarchy, the new government closed all universities for two years, declared the veil mandatory for all women, and imprisoned, tortured and executed countless people—including thousands who had risked their lives to bring about the Revolution. This initial purge corresponded to the government's narrative of a perpetual threat against Islam and the new Islamic state; thus, the Islamic Republic "defined a significant portion of its identity through the concept of 'permanent revolution'" (Khorrami, 2015, p. 2). From its inception, the Islamic Republic of Iran adopted a permanent state of emergency with the declared purpose of protecting the ongoing Revolution from the threat of Western forces that sought to contaminate and undermine it. Azar Nafisi argues that, in this context, much like the rhetoric and surveillance deployed as part of the War on Terror in the U.S., people were surveilled through the binary of "for" and "against," such that in Iran, "all gestures, even the most private, were interpreted in political terms" (Nafisi, 2003, p. 25). The rhetoric, politics and mass-purging in Iran enacted directly after the Revolution has been legally, juridically and militaristically institutionalized.

Punishments for those accused by the state of not complying with Islamic laws are daunting—accusations such as *waging war against God*, *spreading propaganda*, *undermining national security* and *corruption on earth* confer penalties that include confiscating passports, house arrest, solitary confinement, indefinite incarceration without charges or trial, torture and even death. Through an exacting and generally applied rubric of morality and immorality constructed from a subjective interpretation of the Qur'an, the government monitors and censors the population in a publicly proclaimed perpetual state of emergency. It systematically enacts violence, often by inflicting punishments that are grossly disproportionate to the alleged crimes. In addition to official government forces that judge and dole out punishment, there are vigilante groups such as Basij and Ansar-e Hezbollah, gangs of individuals sanctioned by the state to surveil

and enforce with public violence the Islamic morality of its citizens. As agents of surveillance and state violence, these divine law enforcers monitor even the most private and mundane elements of day-to-day life for signs of deviance, sin, and corruption. To validate its use of censorship, surveillance, criminalization and physical violence, the post-Revolutionary government uses the rhetoric of an ongoing state of emergency—namely an unending assault on true Islam—and a corresponding binary of morality.

The Islamic Republic: woman as a site of corruption

Khomeini explicitly located the primary site of moral corruption in women's bodies. As such, he implemented a rigorous set of mandates, "based on principles of subservience, segregation, and veiling," that determined what was either permitted or prohibited regarding women's bodies through a subjective interpretation of the Qur'an (Naficy, 2012, p. 101). One of the most visible regulations was the nationwide mandatory implementation of Islamic hijab, or the veil, for all women in Iran. This includes covering the hair, as well as the arms, legs and feet in public spaces, or around any nonfamilial men whose presence renders a private space public.

To examine the gendered narratives underlying the perpetual state of emergency in contemporary Iran, let us consider a poster that is typical of a state-sponsored graphic design in the Islamic Republic, which belongs to a category of media commonly deployed by the government to justify its legally mandated and enforced use of hijab by women.



Figure 1

State-Sponsored Poster in Post-Revolution Iran That Supports Veil for Women

In Figure 1, an image found in a government building, and replicated on public billboards across Iran shows two side-by-side images. On the right, the horizontal silhouette of a properly veiled woman, her eyes averted from the viewer and whomever she may be facing; below her, a tightly wrapped candy, bound at both ends. All of this is green, a particularly significant color in Islam, said to be the color of the flag used by the prophet Muhammad. On the left portion of the poster, in the ever-wicked and seductive red, we see the silhouette of a woman presumably directly facing us, with her unveiled hair flying in the wind. Below her, there is a bar of unwrapped candy surrounded by five flies, four of which seek to consume the candy and the fifth is dead. Between the two images, a caption reads from right to left, *Masooniyat ya...?* This can be translated as *Immunity or ...?* It can also be translated as *Security or ...?* In either case, the use of proper *hijab*,

according to the poster, is bound to immunity, security, and safety from the appetite of “flies”—and, crucial to this analysis, the use of hijab is legally demanded by the state and deviance from this law is punished by the state. While this is a rich image, whose ellipsis allows for wide and diverse interpretations, I would like to consider here the one dead fly. The uncovered woman, the woman who is “unwrapped,” is the one at risk of not being secure or immune should something harmful happen to her. Blaming survivors of assault, in particular sexual assault, certainly is not unique to Iran. But the dead fly adds more to this practice by transmitting an additional message—namely, that not only is the woman a potential victim, but also, she is a potential threat. In this poster, all accountability falls on the shoulders of the woman: the responsibility for her safety is only her own—the flies cannot control their nature, they are weak in the face of the sweet nectar of an unwrapped candy, and the seduction of such a candy ultimately may even kill the fly that is unable to regulate its consumption when confronted with overwhelming temptation. Now, what if the nation, conceptually, politically, religiously, and institutionally, identified as the fly? What would the role of women be in the context of such a nation, and amidst rallying cries of nationalism?

Literature Review

The “nonfamilial male hetero gaze” in Mulvey, Mottahedeh and Farhadi

In “*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*,” Laura Mulvey notes that the content and structure of Western narrative film is determined by a codified gaze (Mulvey, 2009, p. 25). Using women to satisfy heterosexual men’s desires establishes the narrative film’s gaze as masculine and heterosexual. Mulvey employs psychoanalysis to read the privileging of the hetero male desiring gaze in cinema; in this paradigm, women are the objects of this desiring gaze rather than the one who desires or gazes. Drawing from 1970s gaze theory, in *Displaced Allegories* Negar Mottahedeh

identifies an ever-present nonfamilial male hetero gaze in Iranian cinema. In this paradigm, the state—and its political, legal, juridical and cultural institutions—assumes the presence of a nonfamilial heterosexual male gazer—both during the production of the film and in the theater audience.

The ubiquitous and ghostly presence of this gaze renders Iranian cinema an permanent public space, resulting in state-mandated legal censorship that demands the mandatory use of full *hijab* in all film scenes, including those who depict private spaces—such as in a character's own bedroom. This gaze—and its corresponding requirement for women to be properly veiled in all cinema—complicates the realistic cinematic portrayal of the period before July 1980, when the veil was not compulsory and therefore only worn by a segment of the population. This gaze additionally complicates cinematic depictions of geographies outside of Iran where the veil is not the law of the land.

A fundamental difference between Mulvey's and Mottahedeh's readings of the gaze lies in the social contexts out of which they emerge. In Mulvey's case, while the gaze is prominent in the content and context of Western narrative films, the U.S. state (namely its legal, juridical, and political institutions) are less willing than the Iranian state to formally acknowledge the prevalence of the patriarchy from which it has emerged. In Iran, however, this nonfamilial male gaze, whether assumed in cinematic production or in the streets of Iran, is reinforced by modesty-laden rhetoric that has, since the Revolution, been employed by the government toward an isolationist and religious nation-building that is set against the perpetual threat of moral and religious corruption from the West. Not only does the post-Revolutionary Iranian government not deny the overwhelming patriarchy of the broader society, it in fact publicly validates it as necessary to maintaining the Islamic purity required for the preservation of the Shi'ite Islamic nation. Women's

legal, cultural and political status as second-class citizens in post-Revolutionary Iran is “one of the distinguishing characteristics of the Islamic Republic” (Naficy, 2012, p. 52).

Many post-Revolutionary Iranian filmmakers attempt to resist the coerced publicness of the private space, as well as the imposition of *hijab* on commonly non-*hijabi* circumstances. For example, in *This is Not a Film*, Jafar Panahi states that he prefers to produce films that are set outside in public places, rather than inside private homes, in order for women in his films to avoid wearing the veil in spaces where women are not traditionally veiled. Panahi also describes a film in which he planned to shave the female protagonist’s head so she could elude the falseness of wearing *hijab* alone in the privacy of her own home. In another example, Australian-based filmmaker and poet Granaz Moussavi used wigs and shaved the head of the lead actress in a film she produced in Iran (Naficy, 2012, p. 70). Unfortunately, such strategies provide no certitude in subverting or eluding state censorship: the protagonist of Moussavi’s film, for example, was arrested and sentenced to four months in jail for improper *hijab*, including her shaved head (Naficy, 2012, p. 70).

In Farhadi’s film *The Salesman*, the protagonists stage Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman*. The director of the play, and the director of the film in which the play is embedded, are both faced with the challenge of portraying the character of Willy Loman’s mistress in the context of the ever-present Islamic male hetero gaze. For a scene that calls for the character, The Woman, to enter dressed only a black slip, the Iranian stage actress appears wearing a long red raincoat, headscarf and hat, to deliver her line: “But my clothes, I can’t go naked in the hall!” This elicits laughter from a fellow actor, which the actress playing The Woman perceives as disrespect for the moral inferiority of the temptation-wielding mistress whom she portrays.

This brief moment in the film is generative. On one hand, the woman immediately assumes that the man is mistreating her and disrespecting her craft as a result of the “loose” woman she represents. The premise of such an assumption speaks volumes for the perceived potency of the corruption of women deemed to be a threat; in other words, that the fictional character who is perceived by the state to be immodest, loose and recklessly wielding her power of temptation could “infect” the actress playing this character for a theatrical performance emphasizes how truly dangerous and contaminating the potential corruption of women is for the Islamic Republic. As Hamid Naficy writes, the strength of women’s potential corruption is so formidable that “looking at unveiled or immodest women turns autonomous, centered, and moral males into dependent, deceived, and corrupt subjects” (Naficy, 2012, p. 110). With this scene, in addition to conveying the subjugating power of women’s potential depravity, Farhadi draws the viewers’ attention to the comical burden of reconciling Iranian state censorship with representing non-Iranian art, for which artist and audience cannot always sufficiently sustain a suspension of disbelief.

Asghar Farhadi’s *The Salesman*: a close reading

The Salesman depicts a period in the lives of Rana and Emad, a young middle-class couple living in contemporary Tehran. At the start of the film, the couple flees their home because of nearby unexplained construction that causes their building to fall apart. They relocate to a colleague’s apartment, and one night while home alone, Rana hears the building buzzer and unknowingly unlocks the apartment door to an intruder, thinking it is her husband. While alone in the shower, she is violently attacked. We witness neither the attacker nor the assault. Instead, in the following scene, we see Emad arrive home to bloodstains on the stairwell and in the empty apartment. He later finds his wife in an emergency room where she is visibly traumatized and receiving medical care. Here, the neighbors recount that they discovered Rana’s body after hearing

screams, and only then disclose that the previous tenant was a prostitute who accepted clients in the apartment where the couple now lives. From this point, the film follows the couple's unraveling relationship and increasingly tenuous mental and emotional health after the attack, culminating in Emad discovering the identity of the attacker and confronting him. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that the assault Rana survived was rape. However, it should be noted that the ambiguity around this fact is generative. We *do not* see the attack because we *cannot* see the attack; if all non-familial touching is prohibited in cinema between men and women, and women in cinema must always be veiled and donning proper hijab, by what means can a director convey a man sexually assaulting a woman? While Farhadi conveys this plot point through more implicit and coded means, he refrains from articulating explicitly that Rana was raped. He could, like filmmaker Tahmineh Milani, utilize character dialogue as a site of direct communication with the audience, and allow one of the characters to state that Rana was sexually assaulted. However, Farhadi offers a more poetic, open, and ambiguous depiction of this element of the narrative. In this way, he not only strengthens the film as a site of poetic resistance, but also draws attention to that which perhaps cannot be explicitly said or depicted in the context of rigorous surveillance and censorship. Thus, Farhadi employs his own ellipsis, gesturing to the violence that proliferates throughout society, but which are excluded from the state's deified narrative of state-preservation. This study proposes that the ellipsis deployed in the poster promoting proper *hijab* (Figure 1) is more constrained given the explicitness of the associated imagery; however, Farhadi's use of ellipsis is more aporetic, more resistant to the idea and practice of categorization, coercion, and constraint. Additionally, given the censorship in the Islamic Republic, this implicit communication of sexual violence is also an act of creative survival in an annihilating political and social

environment. That is to say, directly acknowledging the rape in the film could ban the film's production, dissemination or screening possibilities in Iran.

Near the film's end, after trapping his wife's rapist in their abandoned former apartment, Emad demands to know why this seemingly elderly and fragile man has assaulted his wife. As seen in Figure 2, the man meekly casts down his eyes and confesses, "*Vas-vase shodam*," which translates to "I was tempted." In the context of post-Revolutionary Iran, such a claim constitutes an act of violence, in that this claim evokes a violent and gendered narrative that is securely endorsed—ideologically and legally—by the state. Given the gendered institutional, legal and rhetorical dynamics of power in Iran, this claim strategically wields the weapon of public shame to intimidate and obfuscate.



Figure 2

The Attacker of Rana Confesses That he was Tempted to Rape Her in "The Salesman"

In framing his crime with the expression "I was tempted," the attacker deploys the Iranian state's own rhetoric that designates woman as a site of corruption; in other words, the man locates the

catalyst for his violence against the body of a woman in the body of that same woman. In this way, the original violence lies in the woman's temptation that assaults the man, rather than the man who violently assaults the woman's body with his own.

This rhetorical shield is crucial to Iran's perpetual state of emergency. In the Islamic nation-building narrative, "heterosexual desire [is] borne in the female body" (Mottahedeh, 2008, p. 9). For example, at one point in *The Salesman*, we learn that the attacker visited the prostitute frequently enough to become familiar with her and purchase a tricycle for her young son. Importantly, this detail—an elderly, married father repeatedly soliciting sex from a prostitute—can survive post-Revolutionary Iranian censors because of the narrative power of a man claiming, "I was tempted." In other words, the culprit, the homewrecker, the threat, is the one who embodies and wields the temptation; the corruption, and thus the assault, through impiety, immodesty, and impurity, is situated in the woman. Naficy observes that in the Islamic state narrative and its corresponding laws, "men are considered to be weaklings when encountering women's powerful sexual allure, for their gaze on immodest women has an immediate deleterious impact on the men" (Naficy, 2012, p. 106). The fact that the attacker is so deeply humanized in the film through his humility, his family's love and concern for him, his emotional vulnerability, his physical weakness and his investment in his reputation; that the prostitute is never physically present in the film, never speaks for herself and has no name; and, that the Islamic state's censors did not force the director to alter scenes depicting the old man as one of the prostitute's clients, all reinforce the dominant male hetero narrative of woman as threat.

The attacker offers repeated emotional appeals that serve to humanize him to the family and to the viewer. In Figures 3 and 4, the old man's familial relationships are foregrounded, as he is represented as a father concerned for both his children's wellbeing and his long-term relationship

with his devoted wife. In Figure 5, we witness his wife's concern and love for her husband, who she believes has fallen ill as a result of strenuous physical labor in his characteristic desire to support his family. Figure 6, from the concluding portion of the film, conveys the attacker's frailty as he is carried, much like an injured victim or a sleeping child, on his son-in-law's back.



Figure 3

The Attacker portrayed as a Father Who Has Dedicated His Life for His Children

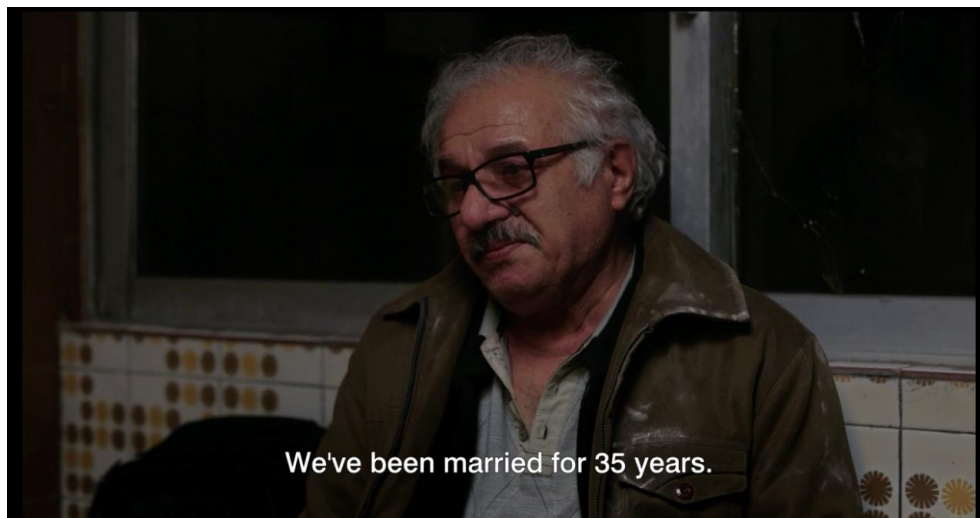


Figure 4

The Attacker Is Shown as a Husband Who Appreciates His Long-Term Marriage



Figure 5

The Attacker's Wife Appreciates her Husband's Dedication for Working and Supporting Family



Figure 6

The Attacker's Vulnerability Is Shown at the end of the Film When Carried by His Son-in-law

While I propose that Farhadi's film offers a disruption to and discernment of gendered state violence in Iran, the film's sustained humanization of, and apparent compassion for, the rapist should be noted as a perpetuation of this very violence. In the post-Revolutionary Iranian state-

enforced narrative and in most dynamics between men and women, men are not at fault—they are under siege by the overpoweringly corrupting nature of women. The prostitute was, after all, a prostitute—flaunting her seduction; causing public shame and discomfort for her neighbors; and tempting men who are devoted husbands, caring fathers, and honest providers who seek decent husbands for their children and who are invested in the reputation of their families. In the film, the attacker's admission to being tempted shifts attention from his agency as an attacker to his inherent vulnerability as man: one who is susceptible to the defiling power of temptation embodied by women.

Sexual violence and the honor-shame system in Iran

The gendered notion of temptation is not the only site of physical and representational violence against women in Iran; the cultural, political, and legal operations of shame in the Islamic Republic harbor and perpetuate this dynamic as well. In *The Salesman*, Rana's shame-induced emotional and psychological withholding is conveyed through what she conceals from the other characters in the film, including her husband. From the audience's perspective, there is no one in whom she confides. For example, she first tells Emad that she never saw the attacker's face, only his hands and "then nothing;" but later, after an emotional and psychological breakdown during a live theater performance, Rana tells Emad that the catalyst for her breakdown was the look in an audience member's eyes that resembled the look in the eyes of her attacker. This disclosure gestures to a much larger withholding that embodies a correspondingly large potential shame. Her trauma following the attack is evident through her insomnia, fear of public humiliation, flashbacks, emotional and psychological anguish, marital discord, and the disruption of her work. And yet, Rana feels such prospective shame at the public disclosure of her rape that she repeatedly refuses

to go to the police, and ultimately her husband washes from the stairwell the attacker's blood, which could have served as crucial evidence for police to identify him.

Rana is not the only character who is beholden to the authority of shame; her husband Emad, the attacker, and the neighbors all cultivate a fear of humiliation, immodesty and dishonor. For example, at one point after the attack, a neighbor tells Emad that such people as the attacker should be driven around the city and publicly shamed in the streets—a mode of punishment currently utilized by the post-Revolutionary Iranian state for accused criminals.



Figure 7

Rana is Portrayed as a Victim Who Feels Shame Because She Was Rescued Naked by a Male Neighbor

The command of shame in Iran is present in other instances as well: as seen in Figure 7, Rana is ashamed by the possibility that a male neighbor discovered her naked body after the attack, and so her husband withholds this information from her; after being alerted that the attacker's car is blocking another car in the garage, Rana is so unwilling to publicly convey signs of her trauma to neighbors that she elects to physically enter the attacker's car and drive it herself, despite the

visible anguish this proximity causes her; Emad confesses he wants to grab the attacker's collar and humiliate him at work—not pummel him or drag him to the police station—but to enact the violence of public shame; and, near the film's end, the attacker nearly dies from the potential shame of being forced to confess his crime to his family.

The ultimate revenge for Emad—not for his wife because his insistence overrides his wife's wishes—is to humiliate the attacker in front of his family. This is the justice he envisions for himself. When the attacker's family arrives, Rana, who has survived the attack, threatens Emad that if he tells the man's family anything, then it is over between them. Thus, the possibility of shame is proposed to be the greater violence. Ultimately, in order to not sacrifice his marriage, Emad does not reveal the man's secret to his family, but he enacts another deep humiliation; he summons the man privately into the room, hands him a bag of cash approximately equal to the amount of money the man left in Rana's bedroom, and then slaps the man across the face. This sends the already weakened and ill man into a state that the film implies may lead to his death.

Masculine nationalism: woman as national security threat

Examining a 1993 *Newsweek* magazine cover featuring the face of Bill Clinton, Marguerite Waller writes that in the image, “Americanness itself is strongly coded as male” (Waller, 1993, p. 154). In her analysis of “the violation of women's bodies as a weapon of war,” Waller proposes that nationalism is male and thus women are perceived as posing a threat to national security (Waller, 1993, p. 160). This article considers whether the perpetual state of emergency, in its perpetuation of a sense of crisis and subsequent militarization, fosters a war-like environment, such that attacks on women's bodies, domestically and abroad, fall under the government's publicly declared practice of state preservation. As Waller observes, nationalism itself has a hetero male identity. And, pertinent to the implied crisis in a perpetual state of emergency, Angela Davis

notes that a “climate of fear” engenders “an extremely masculinist form of nationalism” (Davis, 2012, p. 72). In my use of the term nationalism, I refer to a masculinist and binary form of nationalism, what Katarzyna Marciniak calls a “phobic nationalism” that operates through “exclusionary practices of citizenship” and “righteous anger, which is often strategically evoked as a necessary emotion used in a battle to protect the nation” (Marciniak, 2015, pp. 122, 135). This study refers also to a nationalism which is utilized to summon founding mythologies in order to justify state violence both within and outside of national borders. Ultimately, the nationalism to be defined in this article is that which is used, often through enemy-designation, and diagnoses of state-determined corruption, to denounce and discredit resistance to, and criticism of, state violence, such that “the chances are that [a critic of state violence] will be judged before they are heard, and the argument will be lost in the welter of bruised national pride” (Roy, 2002).¹

Writing about Hillary Rodham Clinton, Waller notes that “the problem of woman” is “already coded as corrupt” (Waller, 1993, p. 157). Importantly, in her analysis of a photograph of Bill and Hillary Clinton, she observes that while women may pose a sense of “unpredictability,” “wrongness,” “danger,” and “illegitimate domination,” there exists an assurance that the threat of woman “can be overcome, mastered, contained;” all it will take for this threat to be diffused is for someone to be “man enough to take charge” to restore stability (Waller, 1993, p. 153). In Iran, after the Islamic Revolution, Khomeini specifically indicted cinema, and the role of women in particular, as an instrument of Western corruption, asserting that the primary “site of contamination” is a woman’s body, and this contamination is a doorway that leads to other poisons such as imperialism and capitalism (Mottahedeh, 2008, p. 2). Thus, Khomeini sought to “overcome” and “contain” this threat by “taking charge” of Iranian media. According to Mottahedeh, “by Khomeini’s logic...the impurities introduced into the media by the intervention

of foreign forces stained national vision and hearing under the Pahlavi regime and linked the body of the nation to the world outside” (Mottahedeh, 2008, p. 1). By acknowledging the physical senses of “the body of the nation” in this way, Mottahedeh offers a reading of the nation not only as male and heterosexual, but also as possessing a human body. Coupled with Waller’s assertion, if one reads the Iranian nation as endowed with bodily senses, then Iran’s moral *and physical* security are susceptible to the ongoing threat of women as a site of corruption. Additionally, if the nonfamilial hetero male gaze is ubiquitous and state-enforced, the nation itself becomes a spectator; thus, through its spectating—namely through its vision and hearing—the nation is assumed to have a body. In this way, women, and specifically women’s bodies, perpetually present a national security risk for the bodied nation. In the same way that individual women can tempt individual men, women can tempt, and thus put at risk, nation-as-man.

Discussion

How does *The Salesman* subvert and reinforce a masculine state narrative?

In *The Salesman*, Rana expresses a concern for her attacker’s physical and emotional health that contrasts with Emad’s harsh treatment of him. How does Rana’s sympathy subvert and how does it reinforce the Iranian gendered state narrative? How does her concern for her attacker fortify the state-declared domestic, subservient, and sacrificial role of women in earlier post-Revolutionary Iranian films? What sacrifices does Rana make and what does this generate in the film?

Despite being terrified to enter the bathroom without the presence of her husband after the attack, or to dare inhabit the vicinity of the shower where she was assaulted, Rana offers unflinchingly to help her friend’s young son when he needs to use the restroom in their home. To tenderly support the young boy in a mundane task despite her intense personal trauma, Rana

suppresses, withholds, and transcends with a magnanimity that simultaneously hearkens the decades-old film trope of the good Muslim woman and challenges the notion of woman as threat to the state. After the Revolution, modesty of women in cinema and society served as a symbol of the re-Islamicized and therefore purified Iran. This state-directed modesty was demanded through such measures as “sacred defense cinema” that promoted “the trope of the patiently suffering woman” (Rastegar, 2015, p. 124). Later, the concept of sacred defense extended to include projects that promoted the ideological aims of the Iran-Iraq war, without necessarily explicitly including direct references to the war or its aftermath (Rastegar, 2015, p. 124). In the narrative of Iranian war cinema, in particular in its depiction of women, sacrifice was a means of transcendence. And like her willingness to make sacrifices for the young boy, Rana’s concern for her attacker can be read as satisfying the role of the sacrificial woman. For instance, upon hearing the old man plead and cry, Rana tells her husband to allow her attacker to leave in order to not force him to suffer the humiliation of confessing to his wife and daughter. Later, seeking to preserve both marriages—her own and her attacker’s—despite the barbarities and rejections enacted by both husbands, Rana says, “Emad, you’re taking revenge. Let him go.”

While this article offers that one can read Rana’s compassion for her attacker as sacrifice-as-transcendence, and therefore as a state-approved cinematic depiction of woman, it also proposes that the role of men in the film can subvert the ideologies underlying sacred defense cinema. Despite his wife’s protests, Emad’s response to Rana’s concern for her attacker is a curt “Don’t interfere.” He continues to deal with the perpetrator on his own terms, rather than the terms of the survivor (his wife). By allowing the men to take over the narrative—such that their egos, desires, violence and wounds dominate—Farhadi’s film can also be read as a disruption of the logic that underlies the claim “I was tempted.” One can read men as the threat to the state-sponsored narrative

of the nation; the men are the ones who create and perpetuate crises—the old man attacks Rana, and Rana’s husband selfishly pursues revenge for his own sense of masculine loss. By re-imagining and re-staging the state-sponsored trope of the sacrificial and modest woman promoted in Iranian war cinema in the 1980s, films like Farhadi’s can disrupt the logic with which women are labeled by the state as a perpetual site of corruption and thus as a threat to the nation.

Farhadi’s film style is interpretively generative in its moral and narrative ambiguities; these ambiguities also provide creative and professional possibilities for Farhadi as a filmmaker in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The avoidance of direct declarations, whether in terms of moral condemnation or plot details, allows for an evasion of accountability to state regulating forces. For example, after the attack, Emad discovers keys, a cell phone, cash, and a pair of men’s socks in the apartment. The socks in particular serve as a creative transmission from the filmmaker, an implicit means of storytelling that serves to elude the unforgiving and fixed rubric of government censorship, while also preserving a poetic ambiguity in the narrative. The socks convey not only undressing, but also an eerie intimacy, a sense of over-familiarity with the space on behalf of the intruder.

In addition to the disclosures and subversions enacted through moral and narrative ambiguity, there is subversion in the film’s depiction of contemporary Iranian lawlessness. Post-Revolutionary Iran’s absence of institutional accountability and reliable legal recourse for individual complaint is evidenced throughout the film: in the building that collapses and leaves the tenants homeless because of unexplained construction next door; the landlord who cannot force the ex-tenant to remove her belongings and the ex-tenant who cannot complain that all her possessions have been placed outside; the fact that nobody, including the neighbors, calls the police or files a report after a horrifically violent attack in their apartment building; that Emad

discovers a set of keys in his apartment after the attack, and rather than calling the police, tries to enter random cars until he finds the corresponding vehicle and drives it into his building's garage; and that Emad solicits one of his teenage students to ask his father, a retired traffic officer, to illegally trace the license plate of the attacker's car. Each instance discloses Iranian society's mistrust of Iranian law, thus undercutting the authority of that law, and in particular challenging the law's relationship to justice.

Conclusion

The contemporary Iranian government privileges the hetero male gaze in public spaces, including in cinema and elsewhere, situating the responsibility for moral corruption, and for its purging, in the body and mind of women. For the Iranian government, the enforcement and surveillance of an adherence to the hetero male gaze is crucial to the formation and perpetuation of a perpetual state of emergency—an ongoing legal and institutional form of state violence informed by gendered narratives depict women as the source of crises. Post-Revolutionary Iran is not simply patriarchal; rather, its patriarchy is embedded in its founding as a nation—including its legal and juridical institutions. Thus, in Iran, women pose a threat to the security of the nation-as-man. The legal and institutional ramifications of such a violent, gendered ideology allows for the state to monitor even the most private and mundane elements of day-to-day life for signs of deviance, sin and corruption, and to enact legally mandated punishments that reinforce this gendered narrative of the perpetual state of emergency.

Contemporary media in the Islamic Republic can serve as an intervention in this gendered state violence. Films such as Asghar Farhadi's *The Salesman* constitute a cinema-as-critical discourse that at times reinforces and at times resists the violent, gendered narrative of the state. More importantly, Iranian media and film can speak to larger issues such as the state of perpetual

emergency in Iran, and the presence or absence of laws pertaining to gender in a state of emergency—such as laws that mark a woman’s body as a site of corruption. In this way, cinema-as-discourse can be a means of identifying and challenging modes of violence intrinsic to any perpetual state of emergency, in Iran or abroad.

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¹ Other elaborations of nationalism as exclusion can be read in Angela Davis' *The Meaning of Freedom and Other Difficult Dialogues*, 73, and Arundhati Roy's *Capitalism: A Ghost Story*, 32.