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Marking Gender and Difference in the Myth of the Nation: A Post-Revolutionary Iranian Film

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## Marking Gender and Difference in the Myth of the Nation: A Post- revolutionary Iranian Film

*Nasrin Rahimieh*

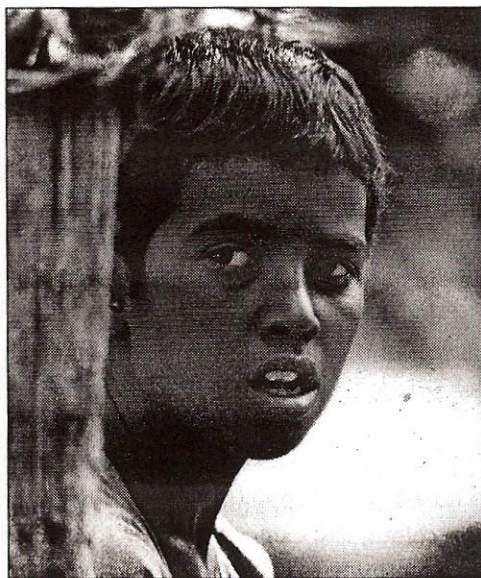
Bahram Beyza'i's 1985 film *Bashu, The Little Stranger* (first shown in 1988) has received attention both in and outside Iran for its candid depiction of post-revolutionary Iranian society and the Iran-Iraq war.<sup>1</sup> Although the film's title puts the boy Bashu at the centre of the story, the film itself gives equal prominence to a female character, Na'i, who becomes Bashu's primary interlocutor, in spite of the numerous differences that separate them. Bashu comes from the south of Iran and is a member of the Arab ethnic minority; his primary medium of communication is Arabic. Na'i, who lives in the northern province of Gilan, belongs to another ethnic group and speaks Gilaki, a local dialect of Persian. Neither Bashu nor Na'i is fluent in Persian, the national language of the country to which, however tenuously, they both belong. Through the difficulties Na'i and Bashu encounter in communicating with each other and overcoming their mutual anxieties about linguistic and ethnic differences, the film exposes the manner in which the construction of Iranian national identity has insisted upon the erasure and elision of gender, language and ethnicity. Taking the geographic polarities of north and south as its point of departure, the film introduces images of a country which is far from uniform and unilingual. The film's inclusion of ethnic minorities in its frame of vision helps to

problematize the myth of a linguistically, racially and culturally unified Iran. The interesting intersections of this critique of Persian ethnocentrism with the problematics of gender and power will be the focus of my reading of the film. Before proceeding to my analysis, however, I first provide a brief sketch of the plot for readers unfamiliar with the film.

The story revolves around Bashu, a young boy from the Persian Gulf region, who is orphaned when missiles hit his village and kill his father, mother and sister. He hops into a truck that happens to be passing through his village during the shelling. Unknown to him, the truck is travelling to the Caspian region in the north. When Bashu finally emerges from his hiding place in the back of the truck, this time frightened by dynamite explosions used in the construction of a tunnel, he flees into rice fields and is discovered by two children, who alert their mother, Na'i, to the stranger's presence. Na'i, who has never seen anyone from the south, is startled by Bashu's darker skin colour, and can only assume that he has been hiding in a coal-cellar. After attempting to chase him away, she takes pity on him and leaves him some food. She overcomes her fear, draws him closer and finally, against the advice of other villagers and relatives, who are equally suspicious of Bashu's 'blackness', she brings him into her farmhouse. It proves almost impossible for them to communicate, as his Arabic has little in common with her Gilaki. Little by little, Na'i teaches him a few words in Gilaki, and one day in the course of an encounter between Bashu and other village boys she finds out that he has learned Persian at school.

Persian, the standard language of Iran since legislation in 1935, is the only means through which educated Iranians of diverse ethnicities can communicate with each other. This legislation coincided with a rise in nationalism. In its most fervent moments, this same nationalist spirit vilified Arabic language and culture, which, beginning with the Islamic conquest of Persia in the seventh century, changed the linguistic, religious and cultural map of Iran. That the pre-Islamic Persian empire already comprised many different ethnicities and languages is a point lost to modern nationalists, whose single-minded zeal for Persian also ignores Iran's existing diversity. This obsession has never been completely divorced from certain strains of racial intolerance. An integral part of the arch-nationalist agenda has been to cleanse Persian of Arabic 'contamination' in order to return the language to its Indo-European roots.

In the remote setting of Na'i's village, the artificiality of Persian – or its function as a 'paper language'<sup>2</sup> – is emphatically brought out. Na'i, who has received no schooling, is by and large barred from Persian; Bashu, who has



12. Bahram Beyza'i's *Bashu, The Little Stranger*.

access to Persian, has equally tenuous psychological ties to it. He speaks it haltingly, and his knowledge seems to be limited to words and phrases he has learned at school. In fact, he has to be coaxed into speaking Persian by the village boys, who betray their own linguistic alienation by prompting Bashu to 'speak like a book'. For these children, both Gilaki and Arab, seem to intuit the extent to which their identity as Persians is a construct.

In return for Na'i's kindness, Bashu lends her a hand in running the farm – which her husband's departure in search of work has made more arduous. Meanwhile, Na'i has informed her husband of Bashu's presence through letters dictated to one of the villagers. When Bashu finds out that Na'i's husband is opposed to his staying with them, he runs away. Na'i seeks him out, brings him back to her farmhouse and informs her husband that Bashu will remain with them. The film ends with Na'i's husband's return and the discovery that he has lost an arm, apparently at the front. The war with Iraq is not explicitly mentioned, but in response to Na'i's cries of anguish, her husband points out that there was no other work for him. The work at hand – the protection of the rice fields – constitutes the ending of the film and, like all other members of Na'i's family, Bashu is swept into action.

If Bashu succeeds in negotiating a place in his new community, it is primarily through Na'i's agency. And yet, this female agency is conditioned

throughout the film by the linguistic and cultural barriers that separate the two central characters. Na'i's attempts to draw Bashu into her family and the village community are thwarted by her lack of knowledge of Bashu's language and, on a different level, by her difficulty in communicating Bashu's humanity to the other villagers. Although she is not linguistically cut off from the other villagers, who also speak Gilaki, she is nevertheless frustrated by their ethnocentrism. Not only are they suspicious of the newcomer, whose very appearance relegates him to the status of alien, they are also ill at ease when Na'i usurps power by deciding to shelter and protect Bashu without proper consultation with the sources of authority, her husband or his relatives.

What Na'i and Bashu have in common is their status as peripheral to the existing linguistic, social, and cultural systems of signification, which isolate and vilify difference. In order to create a space in which to co-exist, Na'i and Bashu must rethink the very codes and norms that consign them, as woman and other, to the margins. Their condition is best described in terms adopted by Julia Kristeva in her theory of semiotics: *le sujet-en-procès*, the subject in process/on trial, or the subject-in-the-making,<sup>3</sup> 'the subject as a speaking, meaning-producing and meaning-deforming desiring being'.<sup>4</sup> Kristeva's play upon the double meaning of the French word *procès* can be aptly extended to the fate of Bashu and Na'i: the *trial* to which they are subjected is also the *process* through which they modify the signifying system within which they find themselves. In the course of their encounter, they are forced to confront their own ethnocentric blindspots and to re-examine their naturalized modes of interaction. If they do not radically change a symbolic system intolerant of difference, be it in gender, linguistic or ethnic identities, together they pose an ethical challenge to it.

It is significant that the film is set in Gilan and uses Gilaki as its primary means of verbal exchange. The choice of a dialect is indicative of the centrality of language and ethnicity to the film's critique of Iranian social structures. Gilaki may not be completely incomprehensible to Iranian spectators, but, by replacing Persian and its centralizing and unifying tendencies, it acts as an agent of displacement. Removing the audience to a remote village in Gilan and subjecting it to the local idiom makes possible experiments with other shifts in power and authority. This is not to suggest that *Bashu* revolutionizes the notion of a fixed linguistic identity, but rather that it raises questions about the assumption that Iranian identity is inextricably bound to the dominant language of the nation, Persian. By

problematizing this bond, the film text participates in the kind of unveiling Homi Bhabha describes in *Nation and Narration*: 'the image of cultural authority may be ambivalent because it is caught, uncertainly, in the act of "composing" its powerful image.'<sup>5</sup>

The contradictory and ambivalent discourse of nationalism laid bare in *Bashu* also brings to light the problematic position occupied by women in the 'imagined community'<sup>6</sup> that makes up Iran. In Na'i's utterances and in her exchanges with other women in the village we discern how women are situated in their community, how they talk about themselves and how they are talked about. If I dwell on this particular aspect of the film – women's relationship with and place in language – it is to illustrate how the 'natural' link between the woman and the stranger equates women and alterity only ultimately to trouble the notion of alterity as the cornerstone of the construction of subjectivity. In other words, I see Na'i as not only instrumental in Bashu's integration into the village, but also a focal point for the film's questioning of patterns of socialization. By drawing upon the work of critics such as Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, whose theories of subjectivity have brought together elements of linguistics, psychoanalysis and gender studies, I hope to show how the film explores the intersections of gender, subjectivity, ethnicity and language in an attempt to carve out a space in which to posit new ways of seeing, hearing and perceiving the self and the other.<sup>7</sup> If the film's more radical ventures into new gender boundaries are ultimately thwarted, the new ambiguities that emerge allow us to see how even a critique of nationalism fails to correct the type of subordination of gender to nation that Radhakrishnan interrogates:

Why is it that nationalism achieves the ideological effect of an inclusive and putatively macropolitical discourse, whereas the women's question – unable to achieve its own autonomous macropolitical identity – remains ghettoized within its specific and regional space? In other words, by what natural or ideological imperative or historical exigency does the politics of nationalism become the binding and overarching umbrella that subsumes other and different political temporalities?<sup>8</sup>

As we shall see, Bashu's ambiguous ending risks replacing one totalizing discourse with another: viewers might be asked to rethink national identity, but they are also presented with a return to family structures. This alternative has resonances of binarisms of self and other which the film otherwise problematizes.

The initial encounters between Na'i and Bashu underline the extent to which self-identity is contingent on the recognition and existence of alterity.

Na'i's first glimpses of Bashu lead her to question his colour: '*Chi bamalasti, anqadr chark-e chaghandari?* [What have you rubbed on yourself to make yourself so dirty?]'.<sup>9</sup> Because she cannot conceive of otherness, she assumes that Bashu's complexion is unnatural. The absence of a common colour so unsettles Na'i that she instinctively chases him away. Throwing stones at him is symbolic of her attempt to keep the self intact and uncontaminated; so also is the forced bath she gives him in order to make him white. Na'i's field of perception has thus far been limited to self-reflexive referents, but Bashu's intrusion opens up new categories which demand revisions of the earlier modes of perception. For instance, when Bashu emerges from his bath unchanged, Na'i is forced to admit, '*Sefid nibeh, ki nibeh* [No, he won't become white]'. This is the first stage of a recognition on the part of Na'i that Bashu's complexion, like his language, must be accepted as indelible marks of his difference.

The transition that Bashu's arrival inaugurates can be described as constituting a shift from mimesis to alterity. In his *Mimesis and Alterity*, Michael Taussig observes:

Pulling you this way and that, mimesis plays this trick of dancing between the very same and the very different. An impossible but necessary, indeed an everyday affair, mimesis registers both sameness and difference, of being like, and of being Other. Creating stability from this instability is no small task, yet all identity formation is engaged in this habitually bracing activity in which the issue is not so much staying the same, but maintaining sameness through alterity.<sup>10</sup>

That alterity has disturbed the balance between sameness and difference, and the stability of the identities of those villagers who have come into contact with Bashu, is clearly delineated in a scene in which we see Na'i's daughter, Gulbesar, looking at herself in a mirror she is holding in her hands and then turning and looking at Bashu, who is sleeping a few steps from her. The child's need to reconfirm, by consulting her own image in the mirror, that the colour of her skin is different from Bashu's, points at once to her curiosity about the newcomer and her incomprehension and fear of his visible difference. It is this fear that prompts her to get up and run away when Bashu wakes up. Ironically, Bashu is as startled as Gulbesar; she is the symbolic mirror in which he looks but does not find the similarities and the points of reference he is seeking. They run away from each other because their field of vision has suddenly and inexplicably allowed the alien to slip in. They have been forced to confront the illusion of seeing themselves replicated in the images of others.

This visual inscription of alterity is immediately translated and reinforced in the verbal domain, when Na'i attempts to engage Bashu in an exchange ranging from his physical appearance to his inability to speak:

*'Gab bazan bidinam chi zaban dari? Nukuneh zughal chah jan birun bamoyi? Siyah ki isi, lal ham ki isi, ismam ki nari. Har adamizadi ismi dareh. Uniki ism nareh ghul-e sahrayeh [Say something so I can know what language you have; surely you haven't come from a coal-cellar? You're black, you're dumb, you have no name. Every human being has a name. Anyone with no name is a wild monster].'*

This reveals a level of recognition of his otherness: although she wants him to speak, she has already conceived of a category of 'monstrosity' into which to place him. Bashu's silence, like the darkness of his skin, only confirms the list of negative attributes with which Na'i believes him to be endowed. All those things that he is not and does not have move him further and further away from the human race. Her conclusion that only monsters lack names brings into focus the centrality of the process of naming in human socialization: to have a name is to be integrated into a family and social structure. The ethnocentricity of Na'i's conceptualizations is foregrounded in her assumption that to be human one must speak *her* language and have *her* skin colour.

Through the veil of Na'i's initial certainty about the values with which she is familiar, we begin to catch glimpses of her own conditional power and her later attempts to break through the limitations which the linguistic and social order impose on her subjectivity. When she asks Bashu what he is called and is met once again with silence, she proceeds to initiate him into the process of naming and identification. Beginning with herself, she says: *'Mi pe'er mi nam-e bana Na'i [My father called me Na'i]'*. With this assertion she confirms the supremacy of the name-of-the-father in the symbolic: her own entry into the linguistic and the social order was mediated through the authority of the father. Interestingly, however, she now shifts the relations of power and gender in the naming of her children: *'Aydanah dukhadam Gulbesar, oydanah Oshin [I called this one Gulbesar, that one Oshin]'*. Referring to her children as 'this one' and 'that one' may seem rather impersonal, but it does underline the artificial and contractual nature of naming and socialization. The sense of distance in her utterance also makes it possible for her to usurp the position of authority she has just acknowledged as belonging to the father. It is she, not the absent father of the children, who has done the naming. This is a far from unambiguous claim to power: Na'i asserts

herself only after she has given due recognition to patriarchy. Moreover, she makes these statements to a 'stranger' who does not understand her language. In a sense, she is merely talking to herself. Her voice is an echo, analogous to the mirror her daughter holds in front of herself to dispel any self-doubt to which Bashu's intrusion may have given rise. But this inner dialogue gives us insight into the position Na'i would like to occupy in the linguistic and social order.

Soon after the attempt to discover Bashu's name and identity, Na'i is required to externalize these same perceptions. In response to her aunt's inquiry about what news she has had from her husband, she admits: *'Dast-e tanha bobostam, khaleh jan [I've been left alone, Auntie]'*. The Gilaki expression refers literally to the hand she has been denied. Her husband's absence is here linked to the work of running the farm: she needs a hand – his – in carrying out her duties. In the next portion of the exchange, she extends this dilemma to her children: *'A zakan pe'er khaiyedi [These children want a father]'*. In this part of her response, she is repeating a formula about the importance of a father to the children. It is a necessary part of her social interaction to reflect upon the absence of her husband and its implications for the family unit. By talking about his search for work, Na'i also clearly distinguishes between the work done by men and women. While the work she carries out in his absence is limited to the farm, her husband is in the larger sphere of the world beyond the farm. This is yet another concession to the patriarchy which rules women's lives even when its own representatives are not on the scene.

It is interesting to note that Na'i's husband remains nameless both in this exchange and throughout the film. But his namelessness does not have the same implications as Bashu's does in the earlier parts of the film. While Bashu is denied any possible link to a community as long as he is nameless, Na'i's husband's position in the community is so well entrenched that his name does not need to be evoked. His identity and presence are continually marked through the specification of the type of familial relationships that determine the link between him and others. When the news of his return reaches Bashu, the village boy who gives him the news refers to him as *'mard-e Na'i [Na'i's man]'*. In Gilaki, as in many languages, *'mard'* means both 'man' and 'husband', and the boy is clearly using it in the second sense. But in another sense he is her man, the one who defines and determines her existence. A name for him would be almost superfluous.

That this statement is delivered by a child is a reminder of how the sexual and social hierarchies embedded in language are passed from one



generation to another. The child is conveying good tidings to Bashu; the return of Na'i's husband signifies a return to the established patterns of the past. And yet, the statement also implies that power must again shift back from Na'i to her husband. It is this shift that Bashu intuits as a threat to his own position: he picks up a stick, prepared to chase away the intruder who has come to upset the carefully negotiated balance.

In the end, Bashu does not need the stick to defend himself and his adopted family, precisely because he has acquired a language. Speaking to Na'i's husband in Persian – not Gilaki – he is able to communicate with him and reinstate himself in the family unit. The final segment of the film, beginning with the argument between Na'i and her husband and Bashu's arrival on this scene, switches between Gilaki and Persian. Interestingly, it is only Bashu and Na'i's husband who speak Persian to each other, arriving at an understanding that lays bare the structures of domination on which their future interactions are to be founded. When Na'i's husband identifies himself as '*pedar* [the father]', Bashu extends his hand to him and asks him to shake hands. Evoking a parallel to the earlier scene in which Na'i tells her aunt of the missing metaphorical hand of her husband, Bashu's gesture now confirms that Na'i's husband has physically lost his hand and can therefore not completely occupy his former position. This is already spelled out by Na'i, who, shortly before Bashu's arrival, points out: '*Pas hala keh ichi fada'i, ichi biafteh bi? Hala ki ti rast-e bal-e fada'i shayed u ti rast-e bal bibeh* [Now you've lost something, don't you want to gain something? Now you've lost your right hand, let him be your right hand]'. Bashu runs to Na'i's husband and embraces him, sealing his metaphorical transplantation onto the body of the family, represented by its highest source of authority – the husband. As they all run into the rice fields to chase away the birds, we are given a vision of a unified family, albeit an ethnically diverse one. But behind this apparent wholesomeness is the nagging reminder that Na'i has compromised her own authority. On one level, she succeeds in bringing Bashu into her family, but, on another level, she has had to do this with the help of a language which requires her to step into the background and leave the negotiation of power to men.

This is the kind of compromise to which Irigaray sees women being subjected within the inherent phallogentrism of language and social interaction:

The way [the between-men culture] is structured excludes what the other sex brings to its society. Whereas the female body engenders with respect for difference, the patriarchal social body constructs itself hierarchically, excluding

difference. Woman-as-other has to remain the natural substratum in this social construction, a substratum whose importance remains unclear in relational signification.<sup>11</sup>

Na'i, the woman-as-other, is the one who facilitates the bond between her husband and Bashu by once again reinforcing how central his 'hand' is to their lives together. The film's literalization of this metaphor translates Na'i's gender-bound position within language from verbal into visual. Even though it is she who arrives at the new organization of the family, she has to deliver her message in a discourse encoded with her own submission to male power. Na'i's apparent exclusion from decision-making and her subordination to her husband are forcefully underlined in one of her sister-in-law's earlier reprimands regarding Bashu's stay at the farm. She accuses Na'i of not having consulted someone in higher authority: '*Akbeh salah-u maslahati. Bozorgtar ti sar-e jor nisabu, aman ki isabim* [After all, you should have consulted. If there was no superior for you to consult, we were here]'. On a literal level, this utterance works as a graphic reminder to Na'i that a 'superior' authority stands over her head. Ideally this source of authority would have been her husband, but in his absence his relatives could have stepped in to relieve her of the responsibility of making decisions.

There is no better instance of Na'i's dependence and conditional power than the letters to her husband that she dictates to a neighbour. She delivers her message in Gilaki and the neighbour translates and transforms her sentences into Persian and writes them down on paper. It is interesting to note how communication in writing is automatically equated with Persian. Na'i and her husband, who would normally address each other in Gilaki, have to rely on Persian in order to exchange letters. The imposition of Persian modifies the meaning of the letters: while describing Bashu for her husband, she says: '*Ita siah rekeh. Du vajab bishtar sar u shaneh nareh. Hato khial kuni zughal chah jan farar bukudeh* [He is a black boy. His head and shoulders measure up to two hands' length. You would think he has run away from a coal-cellar]'. When rendered into Persian this last sentence becomes: '*Guyi az zoghal chah birun amadeh* [You would think he has come out of coal-cellar]'. The difference between emerging from a coal-cellar and running away from one may at first seem minute – it does not essentially change the fact that Bashu's appearance and origins remain mysterious. The Persian version does, however, tone down the urgency detectable in Na'i's believing Bashu to have escaped from a coal-cellar. Her suggestion that Bashu has run away and had to use a coal-cellar as his shelter makes him into a helpless child in need of protection, while the

scribe's translation undermines this need. Na'i attempts to shift the focus away from his racial difference to his needs as a child, much in the same way as she later equates Bashu's 'hand' with her husband's. Whether the nuances are stressed or explained away, the point remains that Na'i is dependent upon someone else to communicate with her husband. Na'i herself is highly conscious of this dependence, as illustrated throughout the film.

The scene where the neighbor reads out the response to this letter is a case in point. Na'i's husband makes no mention of Bashu; Na'i notices Bashu's disappointment, grabs the letter from her neighbour's hand, and pretends to read from it:

*'Amma dar bare-ye an tazeh vared keh esmash Bashu ast. Qadamash mobarak bashad. Antur keh shoma binivishtid baraye khodash mardī ast. Khial-e man rahat ast ke shoma ra tanha nemigozarad. Anja kheyli kar hast. Agar man nistam, aqallan u hast. Khub ast jaye man bashad va shoma ra komak ahval bashad. Salam mara be Bashu beresandid [But regarding the newcomer whose name is Bashu. He is most welcome. According to what you wrote, he is quite a man. I am reassured that he does not leave you alone. There is much work there. If I am not there, at least he is. It is good that he has replaced me and can help you. Give Bashu my regards].'*

'Komak ahval' is the Gilaki equivalent of the Persian 'he helps you' but, like 'binivishtid', is unidiomatic in Persian. The Gilaki interferences remind us, over and above our knowledge that she cannot read, that Na'i is the true author of this passage. Her struggle with Persian is for Bashu's benefit even though he is well aware of Na'i's inability to read letters. However, Bashu rewards Na'i with a smile, indicating that he too has registered the depth of her message. By stepping outside Gilaki into Persian, the language of power, Na'i has pointed to her willingness to create the necessary authority to allow for Bashu's existence in the midst of her family.

That Na'i equates Persian with authority is more clearly emphasized when she finds Bashu in the shed, to which he has run away, having taken to heart Na'i's husband's disapproval of his stay. When she first sees him, she addresses him in Gilaki: *'Chereh ayah khufteyi? Magar tu jay nary khaneh kharab? Viriz bushu ti ja sar bukhus* [Why are you sleeping here? Don't you have a place, you wretch? Get up and go back to your bed']. But she ends her command with a Persian translation, *'Bar khiz boro sar-e jayat bekhhab* [Get up, go to sleep in your own bed], intended to deliver the final force of her message. Here again, she uses the language she knows Bashu identifies with authority and formality.

In Na'i's final resort to Persian, instead of using her neighbour to write to her husband, she dictates her letter to Bashu, authorizing him as her son: *'In nameh ra pesar-e man minevisad keh nam-e u Bashust* [This letter is being written by my son, whose name is Bashu]. In this instance Persian both facilitates the already complicated communications between Na'i and Bashu and legitimizes Bashu's position within the core of Na'i's family. The status she has bestowed upon him provides the illusion of normality: he is now her adopted son. The bond between them is marked in Na'i's admission that *'Nani keh mikhporad az kari keh mikonad kamtar ast, va an nan ra man az loqmeh-e khodam mideham* [The bread he eats is much less than the work he does, and that bread I give from my own portion]. This image of Bashu and Na'i sharing her portion of the food suggests the corporeal merging of the body of the mother and the child that relativizes the absence of a biological maternal link as a crucial 'natural' missing element in the bond between Bashu and Na'i. It is precisely because Na'i resists granting supremacy to the symbolic order that she is able to replace the biological with the social and ethical. In other words, she defies and modifies the structures dictated to her by her society and culture. Her challenge to the existing social order is spelled out in the last sentence of the letter she asks Bashu to write to her husband: *'U mesle hame-ye bacheha farzand-e aftar va zamin ast* [Like all children, he is the child of sun and the earth]. By placing Bashu among all other children and linking them to a pre-symbolic natural order she obviates the need to establish Bashu's origin: as a child of the sun and the earth, he is not in need of a father to give him a name and an identity. This does not mean that Na'i fully subverts the norms and principles upon which her society is founded. On the contrary, she carefully negotiates a middle ground between total dependence upon – or total rejection of – the paternal and the patriarchal. Her utterances and actions appear to embody the kind of pragmatic recognition that Kristeva argues will enable women to bring about a revolution in language and culture:

Let us refuse both these extremes. Let us know that an ostensibly masculine, paternal identification, because it supports symbol and time, is necessary in order to have a voice in the chapter of politics and history. Let us achieve this identification in order to escape a smug polymorphism where it is so easy and comfortable for a woman to remain; and let us in this way gain entry to social practice.<sup>12</sup>

It goes without saying that this entry into social practice is far from easy. In fact, as Na'i's example illustrates, it is sometimes made possible at the expense of female subjectivity.

Na'i's negotiation of power is successful because she understands the prevailing hierarchies well enough to mimic the existing structures. As Irigaray has postulated, this mimicking does, nevertheless, have a subversive potential women which can deploy to their advantage:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself – inasmuch as she is on the side of the 'perceptible', of 'matter' – to 'ideas', in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible', by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language. It also means 'to unveil' the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply resorbed in this function.<sup>13</sup>

Na'i does this by challenging the binaries of male/female, white/black and culture/nature from within. For instance, she does not perceive the separation between nature and culture as rigid, nor does she simply place herself on the side of one or the other. All the time she is trying to find a language in which to communicate with Bashu and to integrate him into a community, she remains close to other non-verbal means of communication. She reproduces animal and bird sounds and is particularly adept at detecting the presence of animals in the rice fields. Here the subversive element of mimicking is laid bare; Na'i's imitation of the sounds is what chases the birds and animals away. In a similar mimicking of the gender-specific roles dictated to her by language and social convention, Na'i explores possibilities for change. It is such moments that the representation of Na'i's interactions with a 'little stranger' capture on the screen. The woman and the stranger need each other to unsettle the beliefs and customs of an established community. They must together become the outsider, the embodiment of the other side of the self, in order to put the self and the other into dialogue with each other. That such a dialogue must cut across ethnic and linguistic boundaries is underlined in the film's juxtaposition of Persian, Arabic and Gilaki. Only such cross-breedings can make possible revisions of the categories of race, ethnicity and national identity.

The precarious nature of these encounters is emphasized in Na'i's careful placing of herself between tradition and change, and in the restoration of the old, albeit extended and restructured, family unit at the end of the film. In the final analysis, the potential for subversion is subordinated to questions of survival. Na'i is not socially or economically free to extend her acts of subversion to all realms of village existence. She nevertheless

succeeds in overcoming her own fear of Bashu's difference and making the villagers reconsider their ethnocentrism and xenophobia.

What Na'i and Bashu communicate to Iranian audiences is a need to rethink the space assigned to the marginalized and minorities. The film points out that the comfortable and easily identifiable expressions and idioms that situate us within language also have the power to define and limit us. The Iranian viewer is subjected to the very linguistic alienation which Bashu and Na'i suffer. With the exception of the segments of dialogue in Persian, the film requires that Iranian viewers suspend their linguistic familiarity and, in effect, occupy a position not unlike the one in which Bashu finds himself after his arrival in Na'i's village. The film clearly insists on the type of linguistic defamiliarization that might translate into only a partial comprehension of the exchanges. But this incomprehension is at the very centre of the critique the film delivers to its Iranian viewers, who have to rethink the assumption that all their compatriots speak standard Persian.

In the subtitled version of the film, the experience of partial comprehension happens on a different level. Viewers drawing primarily on the subtitles nevertheless register the irrational fear and anxieties that prompt the villagers to shun the black-skinned outsider. In this sense, the visual grammar of the film is as integral as the verbal to the challenge it levels at the myth of a unified and homogeneous Iranian identity.

The Iran posited in *Bashu, The Little Stranger* is anything but uniform. It is a country incapable of facing its fear of the other within. The enemy against which war is waged is indistinguishable from the Arab-speaking minority living on the border with Iraq. Moreover, the destruction caused by the war is inscribed as much on the self as on the other. Both Bashu and Na'i's husband are subjected to loss. Na'i's husband loses an arm, while Bashu loses all the members of his family. The national conformity demanded of these Iranians dismembers them. Against this idea of the nation, the film posits the hybrid linguistic and social order Na'i and Bashu create together. But their new system of communication works particularly well in the absence of Na'i's husband, the figure of authority. His return dictates that Na'i must vacate the position she has carved out for herself and hand over the negotiation of power to her husband and Bashu, the newly integrated male member of the family. This is a particularly ironic ending, for the film succeeds in its critique of Persian nationalism through the agency of a woman whose final resubmission to patriarchal family replicates the patterns of subordination the film lays bare in the discourse of nationalism.

## Notes on Chapter 13

1. See Hamid Naficy's commentary in 'A decade of Iranian cinema: 1980–1990', the programme of the film festival sponsored by the UCLA Film and Television Archive and FCE.
2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, Dana Polan (trans.) (*Theory and History of Literature* 30) (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp. 16–27.
3. For a comprehensive overview of this concept, see Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Margaret Waller (trans.) (New York, Columbia University Press, 1984), pp. 19–164.
4. Elizabeth Grosz, 'Julia Kristeva', in Elizabeth Wright *et al.* (eds), *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: A Critical Dictionary* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1992), p. 194.
5. 'Introduction', in Homi K. Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (London, Routledge, 1990), p. 3.
6. For this formulation, I draw upon Benedict Anderson's study of nationalism: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, Verso, 1983) – though, like Partha Chatterjee in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (London, Zed Books, 1986), I find limitations in the application of Anderson's concepts to third world nationalisms. Most pertinent to my study is that, unlike Anderson's claim that '[t]he dreams of racism actually have their origin in ideologies of class, rather than in those of nation' (p. 136), I find a direct relationship between Persian nationalism and ethnocentrism and racism.
7. I am conscious of the fact that my use of these theoretical concepts might be interpreted as a form of 'Westomania' (*Gharbzadagi*), a term publicized in the 1960s by the Iranian writer and social activist Jalal Al-e Ahmad to refer to a whole range of social, cultural and political subjugation of Iranians by the West. Yet, like Leila Ahmed, I maintain that the prohibition of such cross-referencing in the name of preserving specificity and authenticity is isolationism at its worst: 'After all and in sober truth, what thriving civilization or cultural heritage today, Western or non-Western, is not critically indebted to the inventions and traditions of thought of other peoples in other lands?' (*Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1992, p. 237). This same spirit of intercultural engagement, espoused by the film, drew me to *Bashu, The Little Stranger* and prompted me to return to Gilaki, the language from which I was separated by the standard Persian my education imposed on me.
8. R. Radhakrishnan, 'Nationalism, Gender, and the Narrative of Identity', in Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer and Patricia Yaeger (eds), *Nationalisms and Sexualities* (New York, Routledge, 1992), p. 78.
9. To avoid erasing the linguistic differences marked in the film, I have chosen to provide a transliteration of all Gilaki and Persian utterances, followed by my own translation into English.

10. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 129.
11. Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*, Alison Martin (trans.) (New York, Routledge, 1993), p. 45.
12. Julia Kristeva, 'About Chinese Women', in Toril Moi (ed.) *The Kristeva Reader* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1986), p. 156.
13. Luce Irigaray, 'The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of the Feminine', in Margaret Whitford (ed.), *The Irigaray Reader* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1991), p. 124.