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Women's Post-Revolutionary Film and Literary Production

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ABSTRACT

Overcoming the Orientalist Legacy of Iranian Modernity: Women's Post-Revolutionary Film and Literary Production

The article traces the gendered construction of discourses of modernity and national formation in Iranian cultural history to situate the paradoxical discursive domain occupied by women in post-revolutionary Iranian culture. The argument highlights the emergence of a new space, particularly in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, which challenges the nation's self-Orientalization that has repeatedly relegated women to margins of the nation. This development is illustrated through the analysis of a novella by Shahrnush Parsipur, *Women Without Men* (1989), and a film by Tahmineh Milani, *Two Women* (1999).

Post-revolutionary Iran has become the site of numerous paradoxes particularly with regard to women and their status in the Iranian social, political, and cultural scene. To quote Farzaneh Milani:

Indeed, no one can accuse the Islamic Republic of Iran of intolerance for contradictions, especially when it comes to its relationship with women. Women can run for high elective offices, but must observe a restrictive dress code. They are encouraged to beautify themselves for their husbands inside the house, yet a dab of makeup in public can land them in jail. They can drive cars, but cannot ride bicycles. They can enter the world stage as diplomats, writers, directors, human right activists, sports champions, artists, and scientists, yet to leave their country of residence and to be issued a passport, they need the written permission of their male guardian. (5)[1]

Defying the expectations of the founders and proponents of the Islamic Republic, women have become far more visible today than they ever were before the 1979

revolution. In fact, as Zohreh Sullivan points out:

[T]he Islamic Revolution had no intention of producing its unintended effect: a potential that, though compromised, is realizing itself in a kind of women's movement specific to and produced by its historical moment – and in a newly politicized public reflected in the approximately 90 percent of people who went to the polls in May 1997, an election that, against conventional predictions, brought in the liberal Ayatollah Khatami. (236)[2]

One of the arenas in which women's increased presence has become palpable is the field of cultural production. The number of women writers has grown dramatically in the post-revolutionary period, as has the number and international reputation of female filmmakers. Yet, women's ever-growing visibility in the cultural arena is offset by political and legal restrictions aimed at delimiting women's place and space.

The seeds of this current paradox can be traced to the first phases of Iran's encounter with modernity and the subordination of the category of woman to the seemingly pressing task of fashioning an independent modern nation. As the historian Tavakoli-Taraghi has demonstrated, modern Iranian national identity was derived from the hegemonic "Eurocentric definition" that posited European Enlightenment as the cornerstone of Western progress and modernization and, consequently maintained that "non-European societies were 'modernized' as a result of Western impact and influence" (2). This conceptualization, Tavakoli-Targhi argues, has informed Iran's understanding of its own history: "By claiming that the Persian publication of Descartes in the 1860s is the beginning of a new age of rationality and modernity, the historians provide a narrative account that accommodates and reinforces the foundational myth of modern Orientalism" (8).

These Orientalist discourses that underwrite the history of modern Iran have extended the right to education to women as a precondition for their participation in the construction and development of a modern Iran. But the very terms under which women were configured in the concept of a modern Iran left unresolved contradictions that have haunted the recent chapters of the nation's history. At no other time have these contradictions been more evident than in the post-revolutionary era. Nor have the attempts at controlling, disciplining, and limiting women ever been as vociferously opposed as today. Even more importantly, this opposition has moved beyond the simple binaries of man/woman and subject/object and has created new creative spaces within which new forms of subjectivity are being carved out.

The emergence of these new articulations of gender identity in post-revolutionary Iran can be linked to the disillusionment with a revolutionary state that has reproduced the logic of self-Orientalization. While the Islamic Republic of Iran publicly denounces Western imperialism, it continues to replicate the very processes Edward Said describes in his seminal work, *Orientalism*: "[…] if all told there is an intellectual acquiescence in the images and doctrines of Orientalism, there is also a very

powerful reinforcement of this in economic, political, and social exchange: the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing" (325). It is both the realities of post-revolutionary Iran and critiques of Iranian discourses of modernity, particularly in the wake of the intellectual movements launched after the publication of Said's *Orientalism*, that have prepared the terrain for a critical engagement with the place of women in the fabric of modern and post-revolutionary Iran. The near historical coincidence of the publication of *Orientalism* and the Iranian revolution has created a compelling narrative of national reinvisioning, which I shall explore in this study. It is my contention that post-revolutionary Iranian women's literary and cinematic production, and its critique of Iranian gender relations, is inextricably intertwined with the intellectual movements enabled by and developed after *Orientalism*.

I will begin my analysis by first situating the discourses that have produced the paradoxical co-existence of confinement and mobility in modern Iranian cultural history. I will demonstrate how the gendered discourses of Iranian modernity have been embedded within an Orientalist logic that has made women into guardians of cultural and spiritual authenticity, thereby subordinating them to a realm of interiority that bars them from claiming their rightful place in the public arena. In the second part of this analysis I will turn to women's engagements with these prescribed roles in post-revolutionary Iran and trace the development of a new subjectivity in post-revolutionary women's cultural production. I shall illustrate this trajectory in two representative women's literary and cinematic works from the post-revolutionary era, Shahrnush Parsipur's novella, *Women Without Men*, and Tahmineh Milani's film, *Two Women*. My choice of these particular texts is intended to reflect two different moments in the post-revolutionary period.

Parsipur's novella was published in Tehran in 1989, at a time when censorship rules were rigidly applied to all media. Ironically, the novella, despite its controversial title and content, initially escaped the attention of the censors. Parsipur's career as a writer predates the revolution, but her *Women Without Men* marked a turning point in so far as it signaled her direct challenge to the dominant ideals of Iranian female identity at a moment when the Islamic Republic strictly enforced rules concerning women's dress code and their social behavior and function. The furor created by the novella's publication eventually drew the attention of the authorities; the novella was subsequently banned and its author imprisoned. Following her release from prison, Parsipur left for the United States where she now resides and has continued her career as a writer.

Milani's film, released in Tehran in 1999, was well received by the public. She has developed a reputation as a filmmaker after the revolution, and her films typically focus on gender relations. She is an outspoken critic of women's treatment in Iran, which she lays bare in her films. Although Milani's works have not been censored, she served a prison term after the publication of an interview she gave about her

political activities around the time of the revolution. Like Parsipur, a decade before her, Milani was released from prison, but Milani has continued to work in Iran. The decade separating the writer and the filmmaker's works has witnessed drastic political and cultural changes. In addition to the increasing openness in the political climate in the wake of the election of the reformist President, Khatami, the Iranian cultural scene, particularly cinema, has left behind the isolationism of the first decade of the revolution and has begun to tackle questions of cultural identity from a broader perspective that have given the post-revolutionary films an international appeal. Moreover, the large-scale participation of women behind and in front of the camera has had a palpable influence on the range and type of issues represented in Iranian films. We can indeed observe differences in representations of gender identity in the work of filmmakers like Milani.

It is with the goal of foregrounding such differences that I have chosen *Women Without Men* and *Two Women* from two distinct moments in the post-revolutionary period. If Parsipur's novella is a critical representation of Iranian women caught within patriarchal social relations, Milani's film is a vision of women stepping outside the confines of those relations. This new productive space within which have emerged new visions of women's subjectivity has been generated through more than two decades of reflection on and analysis of the collusion between Orientalism, Iranian discourses of modernity, and women's liberation movements of the pre-revolutionary era. To ground my analysis of the novella and the film in Iranian cultural history, I shall now turn to an analysis of the intersections of Orientalism and modernism in twentieth-century Iran.

Discourses of Iranian Modernity

As I indicated earlier, the publication of Said's *Orientalism* coincided with the beginnings of political upheavals in Iran, which culminated in the 1979 Revolution. The forces that coalesced against the monarchy included highly divergent political, religious, and ideological points of view supported by Iranian men *and* women of all social classes. What united this broad and unlikely social and ideological spectrum was a common anti-imperialist vision, like Said's, based on challenging the Western subjugation of the nation. Iranian revolutionary discourse drew on the earlier decolonization movements heavily invested in opposing Western domination through the assertion of an independent, non-Western identity. For this self-definition, Iran, like other Muslim nations, relied on the very categories mobilized by what Said calls Orientalism. Moreover, as feminist and post-colonial critics inspired by Said's pioneering work, foremost among them Gayatri Spivak, Afsaneh Najmabadi, Meyda Yeğenoğlu, and Deniz Kandiyoti, have further demonstrated, the search for an indigenous and autonomous self replicated the Orientalist vision of Muslim women, denying them their subjectivity. As Said's work opened up new categories and modes of the history of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist struggles, it became possible to study

the Muslim world's own modern history in a new light. In the wake of *Orientalism*, the foundational rhetoric of the Iranian revolution has been subjected to more thorough analyses, particularly with regard to its gender blindness. It is in this intellectual climate that I place my examination of the developments in post-revolutionary Iranian women's works.

To highlight these particular intersections of Orientalist and revolutionary thought, I will briefly examine the work of the Iranian writer and social activist Jalal Al-e Ahmad who was an influential architect of the social and political critiques underpinning the revolution. His treatise *Plagued by the West*, published in 1962, was quickly banned by the government for its trenchant critique of Iran's economic, political, and cultural dependency on the West. He coined the term *Gharbzadeghi*, literally meaning being stricken by the West, to describe what he saw as a "disease" affecting his nation. In a passage reminiscent of Said's description of self-Orientalization, Al-e Ahmad writes:

[…] the west-stricken man can only recognize himself through the writings of western orientalists. He has singlehandedly turned himself into an object to be placed on the microscope of orientalism, and he relies only on what the orientalist sees there, rather than what he really is or feels or sees or experiences himself. This has to be the ugliest symptom of westitis. (73)

Al-e Ahmad extends the metaphor of the disease to a feminization of the nation: "The west-stricken man is a gigolo. He is effeminate. He is always primping; always making sure of his appearance. He has even been known to pluck his eyebrows!" (70). This provocative passage, characteristic as it is of Al-e Ahmad's exasperated tone and impassioned style, nevertheless lays bare the gendered nature of Iranian discourses of nationalism, independence, and authenticity.

It is interesting to note that Al-e Ahmad dwells upon the Orientalist underpinnings of American imperialist ventures in Iran, but he remains blind to his own conflation of national independence and male virility, which, as Meyda Yeğenoğlu has demonstrated in *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism*, is itself a symptom of the Orientalization of the Orient as well as a heterosexist discourse. She argues that the attempts at modernization in the so-called Third-World countries replicated the imperialist and colonial binaries and "took over the discourse of the indigenous elite" (133). In Al-e Ahmad's treatise we observe the very reproduction and reinforcement of the division between the Oriental and the Western. The Iranian subject, read as male, has lost touch with his own authenticity and reality. Moreover, the further the West-stricken man moves from this "true" self, the more feminized he becomes. The solution Al-e Ahmad and other intellectuals of his generation suggested was to reclaim Iranian authenticity. For Al-e Ahmad, this authenticity is closely linked with Islam – a point driven home in the very last sentences of his book: "Therefore I will end by purifying my pen with this verse from the Koran: The hour of resurrection drew near and the moon was rent in twain" (111). This return to tradition, aimed at

recovering national and cultural authenticity, has clear ramifications for the very conceptualization of the gender divide.

Yeğenoğlu's feminist reading of Orientalism illustrates how in the opposition between the Orient and the West, the attempt to fight the material domination of the West has typically produced a search for an interior and spiritual domain where the nation can remain untouched by the West. This opposition, she further points out, "has been mapped onto the gender question" (124). In other words, women have come to stand in for the inner and the spiritual realm that at once guards and must be guarded against Western incursion. In the equation of woman with the guardian of the true self, Yeğenoğlu goes on to point out: "Her sexuality was erased by a successful portrayal of her as a mother, symbolizing the motherland, so that her new place in the outside world would not constitute a significant challenge for the care and protection of the nation's true self, its genuine and essential identity" (125). This erasure of sexual difference in the struggle between nationalism and imperialism is evident in Iranian history and has been pinpointed by Iranian historians grounded in feminist and post-Orientalist analysis.

In her comparison of Iranian modernist discourses and Islamic counter-discourses, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi points to a common "language of loss" with regard to the question of women (1993: 487). She writes:

Whereas Iranian modernism scripts a loss of chains of female enslavement, the Islamicist response scripts the same historical moment as loss of Islamic virtue. In the modernist imagination the premodern woman is envisaged as absent from the public, silent from the print. Modernity is to have transformed these absences into her unveiled public presence and her printed words. The Islamic counterdiscourse, on the other hand, sees the modern transformations symbolized by the loss of Islamic identity of the female (and of the community), though the absence of her Islamic marker, her veil. (487)

In the shift from pre-modernity to modernity Najmabadi uncovers a process that led to a de-sexualization of women's language and the erosion of a homosocial space, envisaged by her as an exclusively female space, in which women's knowledge could circulate outside the male-dominated public arena. The emphasis placed on new forms of scientific knowledge and sensibilities transformed this homosocial space into a heterosexual one, changing the very nature of women's language: "The newly produced woman, with a veiled language, a disciplined body, and scientific sensibilities, could claim a place in the public space that was not threatening to the social and cultural order" (489).

The transformation described by Najmabadi is illustrated in the memoirs of Taj al-Saltana, the daughter of Nasir al-din Shah, a Qajar king. In her self-portrait she identifies the roots of Iranian women's plight in their traditional, i.e. non-Western, upbringing. By contrast she describes herself as an enlightened woman who embraced the new

vision of a scientific education. She attributes her decision to adopt modern European dress to her modern education: "I began to dress in the European style […] After this change, the next was that I abandoned praying and acts of piety […] After forsaking prayers, I repudiated all religions and beliefs as invalid, arguing 'Thunder is thunder and lightning is lightning. The tree is exactly as it appears, and so is a human' " (309). While some historians have rushed to identify Taj-al-Saltana as an early Iranian feminist, it is difficult to overlook the contradictions that remain at the very core of her self-construction and, by extension, the notion of liberated, modern woman she advocates.

During her lifetime, Taj al-Saltana witnessed Iran's first revolutionary movement of the twentieth-century, the Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11, which she, despite her own royal affiliation, endorsed along with countless other Iranian women who saw themselves as beneficiaries of the reformist spirit and, even more importantly, as full-fledged citizens in the newly configured modern nation.[3] But this movement's progressive plan to integrate women in the public arena was not without its own gender contradictions.

In her "Crafting an Educated Housewife," for instance, Najmabadi locates a remarkable shift in the very notion of motherhood as revealed in the reformist educational treatises of the time which, as we have seen in Yeğenoğlu's analysis, have been central to the construction of an authenticity, nurtured by the nation's mothers, intended to counteract the effects of modernization. The pre-modern Persian texts on the concept of parenthood, Najmabadi writes, locate motherhood "in the first place in the womb. Although the mother is given a secondary nurturing role in much of the pre-modern literature on parenting, her primary contribution is to provide the vessel of the womb for conception and prebirth nurturing of the fetus" (92). This erasure of women's subjectivity in the pre-modern era gives way in the writings of the reformist Mirza Aqa Khan Kirmani, to a revaluation of the womb in terms that at once regulate and enable women's mobility. As she demonstrates through a reading of Kirmani's treatise,

*To envisage the womb not simply as a vessel but as a school (*maktab*) imputed all the disciplinary and regulatory functions of school to the womb. Not only did the bearer of the womb regulate the character of the fetus, but now the regulatory process turned back upon the womb/woman. National formation began with the womb. If differently constructed Iranians were to be produced, woman as potential mother needed to be regulated and reconstructed. But the new notion of schooling also heralded new rights: because of the womb's central importance, 'one needs to pay special attention to and care for women and their rights so that children will not become ill-tempered and bad-natured.'* (Najmabadi 1998a: 93)

This double inscription of woman as subject and object and the responsibility it places on the mothers of the nation is also evident in Taj al-Saltana's memoirs. Despite her criticism of her own mother, she ultimately forgives her because of her lack of access to education. Reflecting upon her own role as mother, she declares

that she should have paid more attention to the upbringing of her children rather than assigning their lives and education to wet nurses. Echoing the vision and words of the reformists of the Constitutional era, she declares: "Every mother's first responsibility is to the edification of her children. The very salvation of the world lies in character" (116).

As we have seen, the reformist discourses of the Constitutional Revolution enabled Iranian women's agency, while at the same time defining the terms under which women would be entitled to entry into the nation. The new status gained by Iranian women continued to be marked by gendered divisions that, as Afsaneh Najmabadi argues, made men responsible for assisting, controlling *and* protecting women:

*Concepts central to the imagination and construction of modern Iran were envisaged in terms related to concepts of femininity and masculinity. Nation (*millat*), for instance, was largely scripted as a brotherhood – at least until the first decade of the twentieth century, when women began to claim their space as sisters in the nation. The modern notion of* vatan *(homeland), on the other hand, was envisaged as female – as a beloved and as mother. Closely linked to the maleness of* millat *and the femaleness of* vatan *was the multiple load of the concept of* namus *(honor), which shifted in this period between the idea of purity of woman (*'ismat*) and integrity of the nation. Both were constituted as subjects of male responsibility and protection; sexual and national honor forever slipped back and forth in the literature of the time.* (1998b: 182-3)

This paradigm places women at the same juncture Yeğenoğlu locates in the Turkish modernization reforms and the Algerian War of Independence. Addressing the history of Turkey's experience of modernization, she writes: "The figure of self-sacrificing 'comrade-woman' was particularly desirable because she participated in the national struggle with her man […]. This patriotic citizen is devoid of all sexual traces; she is virtuous, chaste, and honorable woman" (134-35). This particular effacement of women's sexuality is replicated, in more recent Iranian history. It is this history that brings us back to Al-e Ahmad's critique and what Najmabadi sees as the double othering of Iranian women in the period immediately preceding the 1979 revolution:

By the time we reach the 1960s and 1970s she becomes the very embodiment of 'Westoxication,' often referred to in the anti-Shah oppositional political discourses, secular and Islamic, as the 'painted doll of the Pahlavi regime.' In this reinscription she embodies a double Other: the enemy within, fitna*, and the enemy without, the West, thereby making it possible for the previously distinct voices of secular radical modernism and the newly rearticulated Islamicism to sing in unison condemnation of the 'super-Westernized' woman. It is ironic that the character that started as the embodiment of traditional backwardness, as the enemy of national modernist progress, became transfigured into the target of Islamic discourse of anti-Westernism.* (Najmabadi 1993: 511-12)

In light of this ambivalence, it is not surprising that women's massive participation in the 1979 revolution notwithstanding, their rights were quickly curtailed once the movement had attained its goal of ousting the Shah: "… one month after the revolution in March of 1979, revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini announced that 'women should not be naked at work in these [Islamic] ministries. There is nothing wrong with women's employment. But they must be clothed according to religious standards' " (Naghibi 1999: 566).

If the Iranian nationalist and the anti-imperialist movements were caught up in discourses of self-Orientalization, so were the feminist movements of the pre-revolutionary times. In her "Lifting the Veil on Global Sisters: Contesting Imperialist Modes of Feminism for Contemporary Iran," Nima Naghibi reveals the class-based nature of the collusion between Second Wave Western feminism and the Women's Organization of Iran (WOI) and their shared assumption that unveiling would equate women's liberation (156). She too situates her argument in the critique of the Orientalist foundations of the discourses of Iranian national identity and the Women's liberation movements. Like Yeğenoğlu, Najmabadi, and Tavakoli-Targhi, Naghibi devotes her analysis to the mapping of Orientalist discourse onto the national attempts at self-definition that have repeatedly shunted women to the periphery.

The analytical reflections on the impact of *Orientalism* on Iranian national self-definition I have drawn upon in this first segment of my argument pinpoint the intellectual movements that have developed out of the tradition established by Said. The type of questionings undertaken by Iranian historians like Najmabadi and Tavakoli-Taraghi were unimaginable at the height of the revolution in Iran. As I have demonstrated, the debates underpinning the revolutionary movement betrayed their intellectual indebtedness to the binarism of the anti-imperialist movements of an earlier era. Their shortcomings were laid bare in the first few years after the success of the revolution, as was their inability to engage with the questions of gender. This legacy is evident in the history of Iranian women's post-revolutionary literary and cinematic works. In the ensuing section of this analysis, I will focus on two specific examples, Shahrnush Parsipur's *Women Without Men* and Tahmineh Milani's *Two Women*, to illustrate how the critiques of Iranian nationalism have opened up a productive space for representations of new forms of female subjectivity.

Search for a Female-Centered Space

Parsipur's novella consists of thirteen seemingly unrelated chapters focused on the lives of five women, Mahdokht, Faizeh, Farrokhlaqa, Zarrinkolah, and Munis, whose lives converge in a garden in Karaj, a resort just outside Tehran, where they are almost completely isolated from men. The five protagonists' lives span different periods of recent Iranian history. The novella makes obvious allusions to events that happened around 1953, the date representing a nationalist movement that was subdued through

a CIA-funded coup, as well as contemporary life. This subversion of linearity is paralleled in a narrative that bears resemblances to magical realism and defies a simple realist reading.

The five protagonists' trajectories are as different as the real and unreal events they encounter before they embark on their journey or on the path that ultimately leads them to the garden in Karaj. Mahdokht is an unmarried schoolteacher who is terrified and mystified by her sexuality, yet the idea of having children appeals to her. Channeling her desire for procreation into helping orphans, she devotes herself to knitting sweaters for them. After Mahdokht accidentally witnesses a sexual embrace between a servant and the gardener, her fear of sex is transformed into repulsion. She begins to long for alternative means of procreation and she settles upon the idea of becoming a tree:

Mahdokht decided to stay in the garden and plant herself at the beginning of winter. She had to ask the gardeners what was the best time for planting. She didn't know, but it wasn't important. She would stay and plant herself. Perhaps she would turn into a tree … If she became a tree, she would sprout new leaves. She would be covered with new leaves. She would give her new leaves to the wind, a garden full of Mahdokhts […] She would become thousands and thousands of branches. She would cover the entire world. (10-11)

Mahdokht does indeed become a tree in a garden, later bought by another character, Farrokhlaqa. Mahdokht's fears are embedded in her unawareness of her own sexuality which echoes the kind of erasure of women's sexuality I have outlined as one of the effects of the double process of modernization and preservation of authenticity in Iran. In fact, Mahdokht seems to stand in for the asexual self-sacrificing mother and guardian inscripted in Iranian discourses of modernity.

Farrokhlaqa's story, introduced in the fourth segment of the novella, revolves around the tedium of her marriage and a life that has become increasingly less appealing after her husband, Golchehreh's, retirement: "She had a thirty-two-year-old habit of not moving. She had gotten used to immobility. She knew only this, and she knew it instinctively, that when Golchehreh went out, mobility and happiness would come to her" (56). Her dream of mobility and her desire to own a garden in Karaj is realized when she indirectly causes her husband's death. In the garden she buys with her husband's estate she finds Mahdokht firmly planted. It is not the anomaly of a human tree that makes her accept Mahdokht as part of the garden, but rather the fact that Mahdokht's family is ashamed of her transformation. Farrokhlaqa's own liberation from the confines of male power makes her relate to Mahdokht's social predicament.

If Farrokhlaqa is empathetic to Mahdokht's status as an outcast, she also sees the human tree as a source of attraction that could lead to her own visibility among the social elite: "She could not only establish a literary salon, but could also become a government official or a representative. She had never heard of anyone who had a

human tree" (89-90). Although Farrokhlaqa never sets out to create a refuge for social pariahs, she provides refuge to three other women escaping their lot.

Zarrinkolah is a prostitute who one day discovers that she is no longer able to see her clients' heads. Terrified by this sudden impairment in her vision, she visits shrines, undergoes acts of purification, and renounces her profession. Seeking a new life of reflection, she sets out for Karaj and ends up with a gardener she meets along the way, in Farrokhlaqa's garden. Among other tasks, the pair is asked to look after Mahdokht the tree.

The two other protagonists, Faizeh and Munis, are unmarried women whose lives and self-definitions are confined by traditional valorization of women's chastity, central to the identity prescribed for Iranian women even as they were being figured into the modern nation. In the second segment of the novella we see Munis and Faizeh engaged in a heated debate about the meaning of the word, *pardeh-e bekarat*, the hymen, which in Persian means literally "curtain of virginity." In line with the cultural expectation of modesty and purity, virginity is a necessary condition of marriage in women. In the exchange between Munis and Faizeh, the concept is reduced to its literal meaning and is defamiliarized. The discussion leads to Munis questioning her naïve submission to a word whose meaning she believes to have misunderstood:

Munis thought about how for thirty-eight years she had been looking out the window at the little garden, assuming that virginity was a curtain. When she was eight years old, they had told her that God would never forgive a girl who lost her virginity. Now it had been three days and two nights since she found out that virginity is a hole, not a curtain. Something inside of her had broken. (29)

The process initiated by this sudden realization is followed by a series of adventures and magical events that puts Munis and her friend, Faizeh, on the road to Karaj where they are raped before they too turn up in Farrakholaqa's garden. The rape suggests that once the expectation that women remain blind to their sexuality is defied, they are denied the protection men would otherwise naturally extend to them.

The five women's gathering in the garden, highly symbolic in its association with paradise in Persian culture, might spell their freedom from male domination and point the way to the possibility of creating a new female-only social space. But the only types of release from social and cultural conventions represented in *Women Without Men* happens in the form of magical events. For example, Mahdokht fulfills her dream of escaping her female body, she metamorphoses into a tree and casts her leaves and seeds across the world. Zarrinkolah marries the gardener and gives birth to a lily before giving up her own human form: "They [she and her husband] went and sat on the lily together. The lily wrapped them in its petals. They became smoke and rose into the sky" (131). This transmutation suggests that a new model of family, distinct from patriarchal norms, is unrealizable within the realm of the real. Over against the vanishing of Zarrinkolah and Mahdokht, are the fates of the three other

women who all return to Tehran. For Mahdokht and Zarrinkolah the garden serves as a literal space of transformation. It enables these two women to abandon their human form and thus escape the confinements of the social space. For the other three characters, on the other hand, the garden is a transitional space of rest. The narrative's open-endedness does not foreclose the possibility of other means of negotiating new identities, but the other three women's return to Tehran is not represented as a new beginning and a new path to self-definition.

Including his analysis of *Women Without Men* in a chapter entitled "Feminist Discourse in Postrevolutionary Women's Literature," Kamran Talattof writes: "The novel shows how the normative sexual morality surrounding female virginity shapes the feelings, aspirations, and internal conflicts of women. It disputes those norms that have justified violence against women and often have led to a sympathy for the violator" (147). This interpretation sheds light on Parsipur's radical critique of Iranian constructions of femininity and women's own co-option in the values that continue to repeat patterns of victimization. At the same time the space opened up by the defiant rejection of linear narrative and the unreal events of the novella ultimately vanishes, leaving the society of women without men a utopia. The title itself foreshadows the ending of the novella in so far as it alludes to the implausibility of a social unit consisting of women without men in the Iranian context. It could also be seen as addressing the very point Talattof raises in his statement, i.e. women become subjected to internal conflict as a result of the norms of sexuality. In other words, it situates the "feminist discourse" at the level of women and their self-perception. This vision of feminist critique would seem to leave untouched the roots of the erasure of women's sexual difference in the service of safeguarding a male-identified nation. The female protagonists of Parsipur's novella embark on a quest that is doomed to failure, for they seek to define a space from which men will be absent. This absence is itself a telling indicator of a missing crucial link to a genuine feminist and national liberation. As long as men are exempted from undertaking a parallel analysis of their own implication in the subordination of women, women will be denied their subjectivity.

Parsipur's novella captures well the ethos of the decade immediately following the revolution in which Iranian women who had participated in the revolutionary struggle against Western imperialism found themselves banished from the social and political arena. The realization that the very discourses of liberation in whose efficacy they believed had betrayed them led to levels and types of analyses that would ultimately produce new representations of women. Milani's *Two Women* is a fascinating example of these new representations of female subjectivity.

Articulating Female Subjectivity

The film depicts both women's victimization and the possibility of alternative lives within the very fabric of dominant social and cultural norms. The film's narrative,

almost entirely revealed through long flashbacks, revolves around the lives of two female university students, Fereshteh and Roya, who are from different social classes. Fereshteh, portrayed as the more intelligent and ambitious of the two, comes from a traditional family in Isfahan. She insists on attending university in Tehran despite her father's resistance and the family's limited economic means. To support herself through university, she tutors other students, and it is through the same means that she and Roya strike up a close friendship. Their relationship is, however, marred by a young man who claims to have fallen in love with Fereshteh and is obsessed with marrying her.

The viewers, along with Roya, discover that Fereshteh's rejection of his love has only fed his fury and made him more obsessed with "owning" Fereshteh. He stalks her, following her around on his motorcycle. He resents Roya's friendship with Fereshteh and once pulls a knife on her. Roya and Fereshteh escape the attacker, but not before hearing the stalker repeat his threats. The man's speech is peppered with expressions that identify him as a member of an underclass around which an entire pre-revolutionary cinematic genre, known as *film jaheli*, once thrived. Hamid Dabashi describes the prototypes of this genre, situating it within modern Iranian culture:

> Jahel *(literally, 'ignorant') referred to a type of lumpen who embodied the most sordid traits of patriarchy. A caricature of the medieval practice of* futuwwat *('chivalry'), the* jahel *represented the basest manifestations of male chauvinism in which masculine 'honor' was vested in the chastity of men's female relatives. The* jahels *themselves, however, frequented the bordellos and prided themselves in pederasty. The phenomenon of* film jaheli *plagued the Iranian cinema of the 1960s.* (26)

Ironically the traits Dabashi finds despicable in *film jaheli* are the same as those Najmabadi identifies at the very core of the Iranian discourses of modernity (Najmabadi 1998b: 182-83). The filmic expression of these foundational values are mere visualization and narrativization of the more elevated, yet equally patriarchal, goals of educating women so that they can enter the modern nation under the protective and watchful gaze of men.

It is perhaps not by chance that Milani chooses a *jahel* to haunt Fereshteh and her dream of becoming independent. The possessiveness and enraged reactions of Fereshteh's pursuer are, in fact, not different in nature and tone from Fereshteh's father's repeated angry accusations that his daughter is responsible for her own plight. Rather than responding to her victimization, he worries about the shame that her encounters with the attacker have caused the family. The stalker succeeds in cornering Fereshteh and a male cousin, whom he mistakes as a rival, and injures by spraying with acid. This sequence of events coincides with political agitations at the university that eventually lead to its closure. Fereshteh's father travels to Tehran to bring her back to Isfahan. His plan to remove Fereshteh from Tehran is meant to save *his* honor. Fereshteh is persuaded to return not by her father, but rather her friend,

Roya's reasoning that leaving Tehran while the university is not in session would also liberate her from the stalker. Obsessed with finding Fereshteh the stalker pursues her to Isfahan. In a sequence that shows Fereshteh driving quickly through narrow alleys to outrun her pursuer on motorcycle ends in an accident. The stalker kills a young child, landing him a thirteen-year prison term, while Fereshteh, who has caused a broken leg, receives a shorter term. She is bailed out by a man, several years her senior, whose magnanimity toward Fereshteh is not without expectation. After her release, he asks for Fereshteh's hand in marriage and, faced with her rejection, invokes his right to marry her because he has saved her reputation and that of her family. Under pressure from her father, Fereshteh consents to marriage with the condition that she be allowed to continue her education.

Marriage proves to be a form of complete confinement. Fereshteh's husband believes that she is in contact with male lovers he imagines she must have acquired in Tehran while she was living away from her family, and he forbids her any contact with the outside world. The husband's jealousy, possessiveness and rage increasingly resemble the characteristics of the stalker. Even after the couple has two children, the husband continues to be consumed with his distrust of Fereshteh and his zeal to protect her from other men's gazes. In one sequence, for instance, while the couple sits on a park bench, three young men pass by them. One of the men glances in their direction, provoking the husband's rage. Attacking the young man, the husband shouts: "Don't you have a sister and mother? Why do you look at another man's wife?" These claims make Fereshteh's husband into an embodiment of the modern Iranian values that entitle men to protect women's honor, itself an extension of their own honor and that of the society and the nation. Not surprisingly, Fereshteh's husband also forbids her to return to university when it reopens. When she reminds him of his earlier promise, he taunts her with: "Do you have it in writing?" underscoring women's almost complete dependency on their husbands under Islamic law.

The isolation and abuse take their toll on Fereshteh. In her repeated pleas to her parents to help her obtain a divorce and to her husband to treat her as his true partner, she stresses her loss of a sense of self. "Let me be myself," "I don't know who I am anymore," become the only types of utterances we hear from Fereshteh during her marriage. Her plight ends with the murder of her husband by the stalker, after he is released from prison. Fereshteh at last re-establishes contact with Roya. She calls her from the hospital in Tehran where her husband is being treated after he is attacked, and Roya comes to her rescue and takes her old friend and her children to her own home, which she shares with a far more understanding and liberal husband. The final sequences of the film take place in Roya and her husband's home, where the hospital notifies them of Fereshteh's husband's death. Fereshteh wonders aloud about her future. It is Roya's husband who replies, "Live," while Roya looks on tearfully. That this reminder that she will go on with her life is uttered by the husband

rather than Roya points to the possibility of a new social milieu in which men will not stand in for erasure and oppression of women.

As I mentioned in my analysis of *Women Without Men*, the absence of men from the protagonists' quest for new forms of self-fulfilling existence becomes part of the unraveling of the five women's journey. In contrast, the final resolution of *Two Women* draws in a male interlocutor who embodies values diametrically opposed to those of Fereshteh's father and husband. In fact, he is represented as Roya's partner both at work and at home. For instance, when Roya receives the phone call from Fereshteh at the hospital, Roya is seen handing over professional and family responsibilities to her husband. The sharp contrast drawn between Roya's and Fereshteh's husbands creates an alternative to the patriarchal Iranian role models. The film also pinpoints similar counter-hegemonic models of female identity.

The flashbacks throughout the film demonstrate the establishment of the bond between Roya and Fereshteh and depict Fereshteh as a young independent woman who resists both the dictates of tradition, represented by her father, and the normative roles of a modernized educated woman. Before her marriage, Fereshteh is economically independent and is not lured by the repeated offers of male protection. She rejects the suitor/stalker who represents all those values that entitle men to protect, objectify and possess women, and when she does fall prey to a similar man, she fights to maintain her independent subjectivity. In this regard, it is important to note that the film consists of many scenes depicting Fereshteh reflecting on her dilemma. In most of these scenes a voice-over allows the viewer to hear Fereshteh's thought processes and her unrelenting search for means of escape from her imprisonment.

Returning to the final sequences of the film, Fereshteh's recovery from the abuses she has suffered is represented as being enabled in the supportive environment of Roya and her husband's apartment. This space has obvious figurative meaning within the context of new gender relations. It is a space in which both the man and the woman witness and participate in a new beginning for Fereshteh. In this setting, Fereshteh seems to regain glimpses of her old self. Recalling her youthful dreams of independence and defiance encapsulated in the designation she had given herself and Roya, Apache Girls, she struggles to find resources within herself to overcome her victimization: "I have to fight," "How much work I have ahead," "I shouldn't waste any time," and finally turning to her friend she asks: "Roya, do you have any self-help books for single mothers?" The invocation of a society of women fighters and Fereshteh's reflection on the need to create a new life for herself and her children highlight a will to survive and to re-enter society on her own terms. It is also interesting that in this moment of crisis, she turns to her long-lost female friend rather than a family, determined to replicate Fereshteh's oppression.

Fereshteh's final words do indeed signal her self-identification away from the dominant regime of patriarchy. Seeking role models among women who have raised children

alone, she posits an independent identity and new model of family. By her own admission, Fereshteh's return to society is going to be a struggle to recover and maintain her sense of self. It is in this context that her announcement that she has "much work to do" resonates within Iran's social reality and carves out a new discursive space of resistance to modern Iran's repeated subordination of women to the nation's many and varied attempts at self-definition. If Fereshteh has her work cut out for her, so does the whole of her society and nation. For Fereshteh to reclaim her subjectivity, the nation has to also accept its legacy of resisting the logic of Orientalist domination on the one hand, and mapping it onto the question of gender, on the other. Milani's film, like that of other Iranian women filmmakers, does not merely raise the specter of this legacy, but demands that it be analyzed and set aside as a necessary step towards creating a new history of national identity. What Negar Mottahedeh writes with regard to the national character of Iranian cinema, can be easily extended to *Two Women*'s critique of the nation as a whole:

[I]f Iranian postrevolutionary cinema is to be considered a national cinema that is representative of a pure national identity, culture, and language, then it is so by virtue of an identity that is marked in its enunciation not only by its unwanted middle class and its women who, after all, mediate our reformative gaze as they look upon the past, but equally so by 'the foreign' (Hollywood) and 'the others' (the Arab neighbors) against whom the Islamic Republic of Iran claims its difference in its national statements. (186)

The signs of internal rupture and fissure captured in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema are equally powerfully evident in the nation's current political scene and the large-scale resistance to increasing forms of internal repression. The history of the earlier revolutions and their inability to conceptualize women as autonomous subjects in the nation should serve today's political activists, intellectuals and cultural workers. Modern Iranian culture reveals that the nation's salvation lies in coming to terms with its most profound self-Orientalization that requires women to stand in for honor, purity, and authenticity. As long as the question of sexual difference is elided in the nation's self-configuration, it will continue to replicate the legacy of Orientalism. But the convergence of the feminist analysis of Orientalism that has emerged in the wake of Said's work and the history of the Iranian revolution has fed the imagination of a generation of Iranian writers, intellectuals, and filmmakers, who like its pre-revolutionary predecessor, looks to new approaches for a better understanding of the impact of their nation's problematic history of encounters with the West. The development I have charted from the publication of *Women Without Men* to the release of *Two Women* is part of what has become a new global intellectual movement launched after the publication of *Orientalism*.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to Farzaneh Milani for permission to quote from the manuscript of a piece that will be published in a volume she and Richard Herskowitz are jointly editing on Iranian Women and cinema. The page references are to Milani's manuscript.

2. Ayatollah Khatami has had much appeal among Iranian women who, particularly at the time of the 1997 election, saw him as a reformist interested in relaxing the country's male-centered marriage and family law and the strict imposition of the Islamic dress code.

3. Janet Afary's book, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism,* is an invaluable study of women's role and participation in this revolution.