

Three instances of women's interactions with metropolitan environments in the contemporary era of female depiction in Iranian cinema: *The Circle* (2000), *Boutique* (2004), and *I* (2016)

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Abstract

In the late 1990s, Iranian cinema experienced a notable transition concerning the representation and prominence of women and their issues in films. Nonetheless, it would be an oversimplification to categorise these films as analogous in their themes. This study examines three films—*The Circle* (2000), *Boutique* (2004), and *I* (2016)—as case studies, concentrating on the struggles, limitations, and responses of Iranian women within the patriarchal environments of Tehran. *The Circle* portrays Iranian women as passive victims ensnared in a framework of gender-based societal oppression, reflecting a defeatist perspective. *Boutique* narrates the tale of a young lady defying restraints and cultural judgements in her quest for independence, although she fails to acknowledge the validity of her acts. The narrative centres on a robust, autonomous female protagonist who effectively confronts patriarchal rules and practices. Consequently, she transforms into a paranoid pariah, regarded by society as a felon. The analysis highlights the interconnections of these three films and their distinctions, especially with the reactions of their principal female characters to limitations and the films' portrayal of their circumstances. It seeks to provide an enhanced understanding of the cinematic representations of the relationship between Iranian women and urban environments.

Keywords: Iranian women; Iranian cinema; urban spaces; *The Circle*; *Boutique*

Introduction

The relationship between acclaimed Iranian cinema and its portrayal of women has historically been rooted in patriarchy and characterized by the absence of female perspectives for much of its history. “Their structured absence during the Qajar era, their sexualized presence during the Pahlavis, and their desexualized and veiled presence under the Islamic Republic” has been a characteristic of Iranian cinema (Naficy, 2012, p. 93). However, in the last two and a half decades, significant representation and

involvement of women in Iranian cinema, both onscreen and behind the scenes, has emerged. Hamid Naficy outlines four distinct phases in the representation of women in post-Islamic Revolution Iranian cinema (2012, 111). The first phase, encompassing the early 1980s, introduced stringent regulations that prohibited the depiction of uncovered hair, “indecent dress” or “indecent contact,” and even love stories. During this period, women were almost entirely absent from films, which typically carried an early propagandistic tone. The second phase, aligning with the war years in the mid-1980s, saw women gradually reappear on screen, albeit often as subdued or domestic figures in household settings. The late 1980s ushered in the third phase, coinciding with the end of the war with Iraq and the presidency of the comparatively liberal Hashemi Rafsanjani. This era witnessed a more pronounced onscreen presence of women in leading roles, as well as an increase in female directors.

With Khatami’s election, a fourth phase in Iranian cinema commenced, characterized by, a comprehensive engagement with women’s issues. Women became central characters, with their plights and issues as leading narrative force, in addition to growing participation of women in filmic production. In contrast to the third phase’s films, which tactfully navigated oppressive regulations like the patriarchal norms of modesty, while also subtly and metaphorically resisting them, the films of this phase leveraged these constraints for more overt and bold sociopolitical critique (Naficy, 2012, p. 127-128). The films during this period, driven by diverse interests and perspectives, including political criticism and humanist or feminist viewpoints, focused intensely on issues pertaining to women. These included their treatment as secondary citizens, their subjective experiences in a patriarchal society, the impacts of oppressive regulations and values, and their resistance against such conditions. This significant shift marked a pivotal moment in the history of Iranian cinema, transforming the previously deprivation-laden relationship women had with the industry in terms of representation, production, and cinema attendance.

The subject of Iranian women in cinema, and the cinema produced by Iranian women, has been the focus of many scholarly works with last couple of decades.¹ This is the in

¹ See, for example: Ziba Mir-Hosseini, “Negotiating the Forbidden: On Women and Sexual Love in Iranian Cinema.” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007), doi: jhu.edu/article/224580; Goli M. Rezai-Rashti, “Transcending the Limitations: Women and the Post-revolutionary Iranian Cinema.” *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16, no. 2 (2007), doi:10.1080/10669920701378895; Minoo Derayeh, “Depiction of Women in Iranian Cinema, 1970s to Present.” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 33, no. 3 (2010); Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi, “Iranian

line with the central role of Iranian women's struggle for freedom and fundamental rights—a pivotal social issue in contemporary Iran that gained international attention with the feminist movements that have occurred in last couple of year in Iran—and because of cinema's potential to reflect modern issues, as well as its popularity and influence in Iran (Sadr, 2006, p. 23); As for this, such studies are relevant and still growing. This study aims to take a step within the current significance of feminist studies of Iranian cinema, by analysing how three significant films from the fourth phase, situate and portray Iranian women within modern urban landscape of Tehran, and how they treat the challenges they face in this landscape.

The first film is Jafar Panahi's acclaimed *The Circle* (*Dāyereh*, 2000), which presents a bleak and pessimistic view of the daily and broader struggles faced by Iranian women as second-class citizens and victims of oppression. The second, Hamid Nematollah's *Boutique* (*Butik*, 2004), depicts the challenges faced by urban youth, highlighting the resistance of a young woman named Eti (Golshifteh Farahani) against socio-economic difficulties. The third film, Soheil Beiraghi's *I* (*Man*, 2016), portrays a young woman named Azar (Leila Hatami) who successfully claims her independence and establishes her position within the patriarchal society, despite pervasive surveillance mechanisms. Each of these films offers a unique yet interrelated perspective on women's experiences in the modern, patriarchal urban setting of Tehran, shaped by the views and agendas of their male authors and the social contexts in which these films were produced. *The Circle* adopts a defeatist attitude, *Boutique*, while showcasing resistance, is laden with political considerations, and *I*, although empowering, implicates triumphs of its lead female character, come at harsh prices, such as being an outcast, and criminality.

This study contends that Panahi presents a bleak portrayal in which women are overwhelmed by the political and social constraints imposed by the city. By making the patriarchal limitations inherent in Iranian society his sole focus, he neglects the resistance and strategies employed by women, rendering his female characters as neutral objects that merely act as witnesses to the filmmaker's commentary on patriarchal realities, rather than as active subjects. Conversely, Nematollah's *Boutique* highlights the resistance of its female lead, Eti, but pathologizes this resistance as a consequence of socio-economic problems. The film suggests that without these problems, a young woman like Eti would not engage in activities deemed “wrong” and “indecent.” In

Women, Iranian Cinema: Negotiating with Ideology and Tradition.” *Journal of Religion & Film* 19, no. 1 (2015): Article 35.

contrast, Beiraghi's *I* portrays an overtly empowered female lead, Azar, who overcomes various constraints and obstacles. The analysis indicates that *I* is influenced by the social context of the 2010s and beyond, where many young urban women have successfully resisted constraints and established themselves as active agents in urban centres, despite increased surveillance. The lead character symbolizes young urban women who have rejected traditional roles and devised strategies to counteract surveillance. Although Azar is triumphant in claiming her autonomy, her victory exacts a severe toll, manifesting in constant paranoia due to vigilance and her treatment as an outcast and criminal. The study posits that Azar's criminal status serves as a metaphor for her transgression of official and patriarchal norms and values. For Beiraghi, achieving autonomy is inextricably linked to the cost of criminality. The study concludes that the feminist stance of films addressing women's issues should not be taken for granted and the "feminism" of each film, its view towards issues, the authorial approaches and social complexities must be considered.

To provide context for this analysis, the next section will offer a brief overview of the ideological and societal pressures and constraints faced by Iranian women during both the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic, serving as the social backdrop for the study.

Modern Iranian woman and a century of resistance

The social, cultural, and economic status of women, including minute details of their appearance, have been crucial elements in the ideologies of both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamic Republic, with each one placing a primary emphasis on defining and addressing women's issues. Afsaneh Najmabadi believes that following the introduction of Western modernity into Iran, and the constitutionalists' intrigue with notions like modernization, progress, and nationalism, the concept of the "traditional woman" emerged as a conspicuous emblem of backwardness (1991, p. 51). For the emerging modern middle and upper classes, the traditional Iranian woman was perceived as "ensnared in poverty, ignorance, and superstition." and incompatible with their male counterparts (Amin, 2002, p. 23). Consequently, during Reza Pahlavi's reign, the rapid journey towards modernity and 'progress' included a process of educating and unveiling this "backward" subject, transforming her into a counterpart fitting for the modern Iranian male, and marking a new epoch in Iran's gender and sexual politics. Reza Shah, with his authoritarian and patriarchal zeal, frequently imposed Western cultural and social norms, amalgamating them with local practices to produce "hybrid forms where

the old and new coexisted in an uneasy alliance” (Afary, 2009, p. 142). The state’s objective was to cultivate a hybrid figure, mirroring her Euro/American counterparts in aspects like attire, education, hygiene, and consumer habits, while preserving her “authentic” Iranian values, particularly in domestic roles as a wife or mother. Traditional patriarchal values were maintained, albeit in a modernized, yet passive guise. Hence, the reforms were not genuinely for women’s liberation, as evidenced by the coercive nature of policies like unveiling, but were instead aimed at maintaining traditional gender roles within the context of a modernizing society, and never did the reformist and modern state, intend to grant women autonomy over their bodies and identities (Amin, 2002, p. 117).

This continued throughout Mohammad Reza Pahlavi’s reign, where the state, fixated on the “cosmetic” aspects of modernization, exerted considerable effort in shaping an image of modern Iran through means such as the modern Iranian woman. He and his state manipulated women’s issues to align with his vision of “Great Civilization.” while neglecting to dismantle the evolving patriarchal values, or preparing practical cultural and social grounds for the liberation of women from centuries of sexism (Najmabadi, 1991, p. 51; Talattof, 2011, p. 33).

To summarize using words of Parvin Paidar, “under both Pahlavi Shahs the state’s modernization policies aimed, on the one hand, to integrate women into the process of national development and, on the other hand, to preserve male domination and female subordination within the family” (Paidar, 1997, p. 257).

However, the exhibitiv reforms by the state, and the partial freedom granted for women in showcases of “modernization.” sufficed for both Islamist opposition and secular critics concerned about Iran’s “westernization” to denounce the modern Iranian woman as a symbol of the degradation of original Iranian-Islamic values like modesty under the Pahlavi regime (Talattof, 2011, p. 80). By the 1970s, the figure of modern Iranian woman was labelled as “superwesternised.” epitomizing *gharbẖadegi* (westoxication); a societal “disease” and “imperialist scheme” for moral decadence of Iranians, that the Islamic Republic would seek to “remedy” in the years to come (Najmabadi, 1991, p. 51). For those who instigated the Islamic revolution, women were considered the primary locus of such corruption. In this perspective, women, particularly as mothers and wives, are deemed responsible for the nation’s moral integrity and, consequently, its political destiny, and this, justified their segregation and veiling as social necessities.

This perspective underpinned the establishment of the Islamic Republic, which forged a new “Islamic” nexus between nation and gender, delineating a specific role for women (Paidar, 1997, p. 257). The Islamic Revolution crafted its governance approach, instituting a new social order anchored in Islamic family ethics and values, that took away previous opportunities that women could leverage for anti-patriarchal means. Professing to safeguard the nation’s “health and purity” as a “protecting” father oversees his family, the Islamic government implemented a rigorous “normalization” of its citizens, particularly women (Khosravi, 2007, p. 31).

However, this trend did not persist, as the post Iran-Iraq war, younger generation of urban women hailing from middle-class and upper-class families, known as “the third generation.” found avenues to resist the restrictions and patriarchal values, particularly under the reformist administration of Mohammad Khatami (Khosravi, 2007, p. 127-128). Many modern urban women from this generation and subsequent ones, and from various cultural and economic backgrounds, initiated a persistent resistance against nearly all values cherished by the state, including autonomy over one’s body, appearance, social activities, presence, and even sexual freedom (Sedghi, 2007, p. 246; Khosravi, 2007, p. 8). This resistance continues despite the state’s increasingly stringent surveillance, disciplinary, and policing strategies, and has spread among various sectors of the society, even some of the more traditional and religious families, or rural areas. Women of various social groups—employ novel tactics and engage in innovative and unprecedented creative methods to contest the state gender policies and preferences (Sedghi, 2007, p. 246).

Consequently, the public and social spaces of metropolises like Tehran have transformed into dynamic battlegrounds, where women assertively pursue their fundamental rights, including independence and freedom.

The Circle

Panahi’s 2000 film *The Circle* sparked significant controversy upon its release, gaining recognition for its overtly political content. Banned in Iran for its allusions to prostitution, the film has been acclaimed for its profound engagement with oppression of women in Iran. This includes an exploration of state surveillance, the trials and

restrictions inherent in a patriarchal society, control exerted over women's bodies, and the relegation of women to a subordinate status in Iranian society.²

The Circle unfolds over the span of a day and night in Tehran, focusing on a group of women navigating these societal challenges. It begins with the characters Maedeh (Maedeh Tahmasebi), Narges (Narges Mamizadeh), and Arezou (Maryam Parvin Almani), each having escaped from prison. They plan to leave for Narges' hometown. However, Maedeh is apprehended while attempting to pawn a gold chain in the initial scenes of the film. Arezou manages to secure the funds for a bus ticket, and gives it to Narges, herself going back to where she secured the money for unknown reasons. Narges heads towards the bus station but faces multiple impediments and ultimately remains in Tehran due to the presence of officers at the station. She seeks assistance from Pari (Fereshteh Sadr Orafaee), a pregnant friend who has escaped to pursue an abortion, following the execution of the child's father. Unable to find Pari's whereabouts from her enraged parents, the narrative transitions to Pari's plight of seeking a way to abort her child. After she fails at her attempts, the film transitions to a third episode, featuring a destitute mother (Fatemeh Naghavi) who, after abandoning her child, and in a desperate bid for financial relief, decides to ride with a stranger man in hope of getting some money or shelter from him. However, the man turns out to be a member of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). She narrowly escapes this interaction and the narrative, in its epilogue, shifts to a detained prostitute (Mojgan Faramarzi) who is taken to a detention centre. It is revealed there that all of the film's central female characters have been detained and are locked up there, awaiting prosecution the next day.

The film's prevailing pessimism regarding the state of women in Iran, communicates the fundamental challenges they encounter within the nation's patriarchal context. Instead of delving into the individual crimes or pursuits of its characters, *The Circle* focuses on the broader societal challenges these women endure simply due to their gender. Through this approach, Panahi makes the female characters of the film, a representation of the experiences of Iranian women in general, suggesting that from birth, they are treated as outcasts, confined within spaces that the literal prison of the

² See: Bert Cardullo, *In Search of Cinema: Writings on International Film Art* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 116-7; Hamid Dabashi, *Masters & Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema* (Mage Publishers, 2007), 396; Geraldine Pratt and Rose Marie San Juan, *Film and Urban Space: Critical Possibilities* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 89-93; Daniel S. Cutrara, *Wicked Cinema: Sex and Religion on Screen* (University of Texas Press, 2014), 39.

film, is a metaphor of, and subjected to constant surveillance and segregation, especially in the absence of a male guardian. The film begins with a childbirth, revealing that the newborn is a girl. The mother's family, upon hearing this, is saddened, while the father's family is enraged that the baby is not a boy. This initial scene, which is unrelated to the narrative of the rest of the film, serves as Panahi's statement that society undervalues females, depicting the girl as unwanted and marginalized from birth. This prologue transitions to Maedeh, Arezou, and Narges, who are gathered in the urban space of Tehran, the space the child would enter after its birth, representing the unwanted girls now grown into adulthood, and are now dealing with the harsh realities of being a woman in Iran. The film begins its grim illustration of the suffering of women, who have stepped outside their traditional domestic confines, and are navigating masculine domains of the public.

Panahi skilfully depicts the contempt, suppression, and harassment women endure in these spaces. The trio immediately become targets of male verbal abuse, as the threat of verbal and physical abuse by male strangers looms large for women who are without a male guardian. This pattern of disrespect and degradation continues throughout the film, culminating in the portrayal of the prostitute in the epilogue, who is demeaned by the patrol officer who has detained her. In response to this omnipresent male threat, women are condemned to remain vigilant and inconspicuous, moving through the city's margins to avoid attracting attention. This is exemplified by the destitute mother who takes worried steps in enemy territories of Tehran, in the shadows, steering clear of the spotlight.

In *The Circle*, urban spaces are masculine spaces, rife with double standards in societal norms—behaviours deemed acceptable for men, are often considered inappropriate for women. The mobility of women is also fraught and hindered, reinforcing the sense that they are navigating a landscape that does not accept them. They must constantly be cautious, adjusting their movements to avoid the assertive, unyielding paths of men. Panahi vividly captures this dynamic in a shot where Narges, having just been rebuffed by Pari's irate father, leaves the house. The cinematography divides the frame into two sections: the door of the house on the left, and a narrow passageway. As Narges moves down this passageway, a motorcycle suddenly appears, ridden by Pari's brother, furious about his sister's illegitimate pregnancy and intent on violent confrontation. Unconcerned with Narges' presence, the motorcyclist forces her to hastily retreat to a wider part of the alley to avoid collision (see Figure 1). This moment powerfully

symbolizes the dominance men hold over public spaces and the expectation that women must yield and adapt to their surroundings.

The Circle intricately portrays how mobility within patriarchal spaces is systematically structured to restrict and monitor women's movements. This is vividly illustrated through the character Narges, who encounters difficulties while attempting to purchase a bus ticket to her hometown. The ticket clerk insists on her having a male companion or presenting a student card as justification for traveling alone. Narges persistently pleads that she doesn't have her student card with her, and insists on getting the ticket, ultimately managing to convince the clerk and secure the ticket. This scenario underscores a broader societal norm: women unaccompanied by male guardians are permitted movement only within certain contexts deemed acceptable, such as being a student. This reflects longstanding issues with women's independent travel and accommodation in Iran, persisting through both the Pahlavi era and the Islamic Republic (Afary, 2009, p. 154). The character Pari, towards the film's end, similarly confronts these restrictive norms. She is unable to secure hotel accommodation due to the absence of a male companion and her inability to provide a valid justification for her stay. While some of these restrictions have been somewhat alleviated in legal form by 2024 due to women's resistance, it is still deemed unacceptable for a woman to travel or live alone without acceptable justification within more traditional families.



Figure 1. Narges has to retreat to open the motorcycle's way (Jafar Panahi Film Productions, 2000).

Narges yearns to get to her hometown of Raziliq, since she nostalgically remembers the place as a utopian space of gender equality and freedom. However, her disillusioned friend, Arezou is aware that such a place exists only in Narges' imagination. *The Circle*, in its bleakness, believes that acceptance for women in Iran is contingent upon conforming to the entrenched and enforced norms, and highlights a pervasive and inescapable patriarchal prison, within which women are doomed to live.

To ensure adherence to prescribed norms, women are subject to persistent surveillance and oversight. Indeed, *The Circle* portrays Tehran as embodying a panoptic society. Both Pahlavi era Iran, and Islamic Republic Iran have been analysed as panoptic societies.³ Afary observes, "Both the Pahlavi regime and the Islamist regime employed various techniques of modernity, particularly those that directly impacted the body. Foucault's technologies of power are instrumental in examining the modern disciplinary practices of the Pahlavi era... They also elucidate the power modalities under the Islamic Republic ... After the revolution, citizens were perpetually under the Islamist state's scrutiny, regulating public and, in some instances, private bodily behaviours. [The Islamic Republic] encompassed all elements of a modern panopticon" (2009, 267-268). Both states established a surveillance hierarchy, with state monitoring claiming omnipresence, and employed modern mechanisms and technologies for enforcement (Afary, 2009, 266). And within this surveillance hierarchy, women occupy the most subordinate role, facing more stringent forms of monitoring and disciplinary gaze.

In his depiction of Tehran as a panoptic society, Panahi illustrates the intense surveillance on women, effectively likening their experience to living in a panoptic prison. *The Circle* exemplifies an ongoing contest of gazes. Women must remain cautious and vigilant, constantly aware of the gazes of voyeurs, disciplining bystanders, and surveillance operatives. The ability to possess an independent gaze, and to revel in the plethora of attractions offered by the modern metropolis, remains an elusive urban pleasure for Iranian women. In one instance, the idealistic Narges, momentarily left alone by Arezou, lowers her guard, becoming captivated by the surrounding spectacle. She indulges in urban pursuits such as window-shopping, briefly embodying a flâneur, aimlessly enjoying the city's phantasmagoria. However, her daydream is abruptly interrupted, fortuitously, by Arezou, who jolts her back to reality and reproaches her

³ See, for example: Mahmud Moghadas, "The Disciplinary Mechanisms of Creating a Normal Object in the First Pahlavi Era Based on Foucaultian Idea of Governmentality." *Political and International Approaches* 10, no. 4 (2019): 146-170; Afary, *Sexual Politics in Modern Iran*, 267-8; Khosravi, *Young and Defiant in Tehran*, 31.

for not being alert to the possible agents who may be nearby. Women, reduced to sexual objects under the voyeuristic gaze, and objects of monitor and discipline under surveillance gaze, are denied the liberty of a leisurely gaze that men enjoy, necessitating constant alertness.

The women in *The Circle* must perpetually remain vigilant, as they face not only the ubiquitous harassment from men but also the risk of entrapment by ever-present official surveillance agents. The sudden appearance of agents is the key reason why Narges cannot leave the city; she encounters a random inspection by agents at the bus she intends to board. Although she initially evades them, she eventually becomes ensnared in an unseen trap, as evidenced by her presence in the detention centre during the film's epilogue. Another example of this sudden entrapment within the surveillance system is certain patrol teams, who unpredictably station themselves throughout the city, conducting arbitrary vehicle inspections. The destitute mother unwittingly enters the car of a patrol commander, leading to her transportation to an inspection post. While she manages to escape, the prostitute featured in the epilogue is less fortunate and is detained by the inspectors. The film portrays surveillance permeating even the most minute aspects of women's lives. For instance, Pari's attempt to enter a hospital for an abortion is thwarted unless she adheres to the dress code by wearing a Chador, the state's preferred clothing for women. Additionally, the nurse assisting Pari must conceal her friend from her doctor husband, fearing repercussions if discovered. The film highlights the extreme lengths taken to control women's autonomy over their bodies. Pari faces insurmountable obstacles in obtaining an abortion; every transaction or procedure requires her to register her details within the system, and she cannot seek familial support due to the illegitimacy of her pregnancy and the potential extreme reactions from male family members. *The Circle* suggests that safety within this panoptic society hinges on conformity to the stringent norms imposed by those in power, encompassing modesty, chastity, and adherence to traditional roles as daughter, mother, and wife, under the guardianship of a male.

The Circle portrays Tehran as a vast panoptic prison for women, utilizing architectural elements and framing to highlight this theme. Women are frequently depicted as confined within the city's structures, creating an impression of suffocation and entrapment (see Figure 2). However, Panahi's focus on the oppressive conditions faced by women in Iran has been criticized for its one-dimensional portrayal, which neglects their subjective experiences, resilience, and achievements. Naficy argues that "such a

one-dimensional focus on victimization is not only unrealistic and disempowering but also constitutes bad filmmaking” (2012, 145).

Panahi’s treatment of societal issues, such as the depiction of issue of women in *The Circle*, has led to accusations of *Siyāhnamā’ī*⁴ by the state, suggesting he exploits negative portrayals to win awards at international film festivals.⁵ While such accusations cannot solely be attributed to a filmmaker because of his approach, it is arguable that his depiction is unrealistic and constitutes “bad filmmaking.” Panahi fails to provide independent subjectivity to his characters, using them to make a social statement. This mirrors the system he critiques, which frequently uses images of women for propaganda purposes. His method generalizes the situation of his characters to all Iranian women, portraying Iran as a vast prison for women. Although patriarchy in Iran, from institutions like the family to the government, is undeniable, each woman experiences a different form and degree of patriarchy. Some indeed overcome patriarchal constraints in institutions like their families, and many challenge and resist patriarchal structures, and even neutralize surveillance mechanisms. Evidence of this resistance is seen in the fact that some of the restrictions depicted in the film, whether in the form of official law or social norms, have been contested or abolished altogether due to the active resilience of Iranian women. Moreover, generalizations such as parental discontent at the birth of a female child, is not a widespread issue in Iran. Thus, while Panahi’s work serves as a poignant critique of patriarchy at various levels of Iranian society and highlights the restrictions women face, it fails to deliver a realistic portrayal of women’s active resistance in urban spaces.

⁴ *Siyāhnamā’ī* literally means “portraying in black,” and is used in Iran to refer to the fraudulent or negligent misrepresentation of a social cause or situation as being much graver than it actually is.

⁵ Panahi has been consistently accused of *Siyāhnamā’ī* by state-sponsored media. For example, Student News Network titled their review of his film *Taxi* (2015), “Jafar Panahi’s *Taxi*, wins the race of *Siyāhnamā’ī* at Berlin.” Similarly, the Young Journalists Club headlined their coverage with, “Selling the dignity of a nation at lowest price: Panahi completes his collection of awards.”



Figure 2. Women are confined within spaces (Jafar Panahi Film Productions, 2000).

Boutique

Boutique, Hamid Nematollah's directorial debut released in 2003, narrates the plight of a cohort of distressed young men and women of the third generation. Central to the narrative are Jahan (Mohammad Reza Golzar) and Ehteram, or Eti (Golshifteh Farahani). Jahan, a sales manager at a women's clothing boutique and a shop display curator, finds himself captivated by the rebellious and independent Eti. Having left her suburban family, Eti lives alone in a dormitory, facing expulsion due to her inability to make mortgage payments. She aspires to emigrate, seeking freedom and the realization of her ambitions to become affluent and distinguished. Jahan, enthralled by her resolve and beauty, chooses to assist her, disregarding his own financial challenges and the negative perceptions of his peers towards a woman of Eti's nature.

This film is emblematic of the "social-problem films" emerging post-Khatami's election (Naficy, 2012, p. 127). Benefiting from the newfound liberal atmosphere, these films scrutinized state policies by portraying the adversities imposed on Iranians, particularly the youth. These movies usually aimed to pathologize youthful defiance of societal norms. Hamid Reza Sadr elucidates that youth in these films, were portrayed as a menace or an "other," often relegated to the societal fringes, embodying contradictions that challenged established norms (Sadr, 2006, p. 243). This representation, teeming with new, inscrutable codes, fostered a fetishization of youth as violent entities, reflecting the fear of older and dominant regimes of power, of the shifting boundaries.

Films manifested both paranoia and fascination towards youthful transgression, and treated young individuals, especially women, as objects of speculation.

In these films, *Boutique* included, troubled youth are transformed into spectacles of political interest, illustrating how their maltreatment and economic struggles render them undecipherable and strange threats to society. Eti, the film's focal point of speculation, epitomizes a woman who defies societal norms. Her behaviour is portrait self-destructive, and leads to a tragic conclusion, where Eti falls to the worst of destinies that can befall of a woman in Iran, prostitution. The film, reflecting the reformist faction of the Islamic Republic, perceives Eti's assertion of independence, and relentless strive to claim her rights and spaces of her own, as pathologies caused by socio-economic conditions as a result of conservative faction's policies. In doing so, the film treats actions of a woman battling for her basic rights against patriarchal forces, including those of the reformists, as pathological.

From her initial appearance in *Boutique*, Eti exemplifies resistance in asserting her rights. The scene unfolds with Jahan, en route to work, observing Tehran's morning life. Among these observations is Eti, a woman who had previously visited his shop to buy jeans on credit. When Jahan approaches her to offer the jeans on instalments, Eti's suspicion surfaces, questioning if Jahan was following her. Her resistance and aggression hint at previous encounters where she had to assert her independence. When Jahan asks her what she's doing out this time of the morning, she answers defiantly 'well I have things to do'. and when he asks her whereabouts with the intention of accommodating her there, she answers "You don't have to go policing on me." These responses reflect her determination to defend her right to move freely in urban spaces, akin to men, without needing protection.

Jahan is captivated by her free spirit although it is Eti who initiates their first date. It is on this date that he learns about Eti's ambition to emigrate and build a prosperous life independently, and is further fascinated by her. Jahan's friend, however, cautions him against Eti, suggesting he find a more traditional and suitable girl. Jahan thinks his friend is cautioning him about Eti's poverty, but he makes his point clear by saying that he wishes a 'more modest girl, a girl with a family'. for his friend. He insinuates Eti's obscure past, hinting at the societal stigma attached to independent women in Iran. Kamran Talattof highlights that such women have usually been derogatorily labelled as prostitutes or their equivalents, *Zan-e harja'I* (a woman who roams anywhere), or *Zan-e kheyabani* (a woman of the streets) (2011, p. 82). Eti, conscious of these labels, is worried

that Jahan may think falsely of her too, and keeps confronting him about his perceptions of her in an aggressive manner, with questions like “What do you take me for?” or “what kind of a woman you think I am?” Eti’s interactions and behaviour, such as walking and talking with a strange man or asking him out, are laden with tension due to societal expectations of modesty for women. She addresses Jahan using formal pronouns, maintaining a facade to conceal her desires and assertiveness. It is the film’s contention that transgressing behaviour observed from Eti, is not because she is a “bad” and “immodest” woman as traditionalist would claim, rather, she is a troubled young woman.

In public, she adopts an active gaze, absorbing the city’s immense reservoir of energy and dynamism, but this active gaze, contradicts the expected demeanour of modesty, typically characterized by averted gazes of a *sar be zîr* (literary meaning head down) woman; so, she keeps her look down when Jahan looks at her. However, despite her habitual submission to societal norms, Eti vehemently defends her autonomy and rights whenever challenged.

Eti’s desire to leave Iran stems not only from the economic hardships and the amplified challenges women face in achieving financial independence, but also from the oppressive power dynamics inherent in Iranian spaces, including modern cities like Tehran. Similar to the women in *The Circle*, Eti finds herself marginalized within the urban landscape. Her family, deeply traditional and residing near a graveyard where her father works, imposes strict domestic confines on her. Eti’s repeated attempts to escape these confines underscore her struggle against both familial and societal constraints. The film illustrates Eti’s plight through the physical and emotional scars left by her father’s abuse, symbolized by the scar above her eyebrow, and evident when he brutally beats her while dragging her away from a dentist mid-procedure. The film’s focus on Eti’s desire to migrate serves as a social commentary on the impact of traditional mindsets within conservative families and economic constraints. It highlights how these factors push individuals like Eti to seek opportunities elsewhere, portraying migration as a response to oppressive social and economic conditions.

Despite the characters of *The Circle*, Eti doesn’t accept defeat and her spirit of resistance never wanes, as she seeks out spaces where she can express herself, and even goes on to create her own spaces within the city. Post-Khatami’s election, the proliferation of modern shopping centres, malls, cinemas, theatres, and coffee shops, offered women like Eti sanctuaries of relative freedom (Khosravi, 2007, p. 122; Khosravi, 2017, p. 126).

These spaces, less prone to male harassment, also provided women excuse to escape from domestic confinement (Friedberg, 1994, p. 37). Eti leverages these modern spaces, such as choosing a coffee shop for her date with Jahan, to express herself more freely. She's left her paternal house, and lives in downtown Tehran in the guise of a college student. She frequents shopping centres, and it is in the grandiose Milad-e Nur shopping mall where she encounters Jahan, a sales manager in a women's boutique, who is also the curator of shop displays, spaces that showcase modern commodities and dreams. When in a car, she sings and shouts along with loud music, turning it into a private space of expression. Eti's resistance extends beyond merely occupying these spaces. She actively reclaims public spaces as her own, and defends her rights within them. A particularly striking scene in the film is a montage-sequence that depicts Eti dancing in a subway station. Her dance is visible momentarily between the rushing subway cars, and dimly through their windows (see Figure 3). The movie, through this measure, captures Eti's defiance of social norms and her efforts to carve out spaces for self-expression, while escaping threat of censorship.

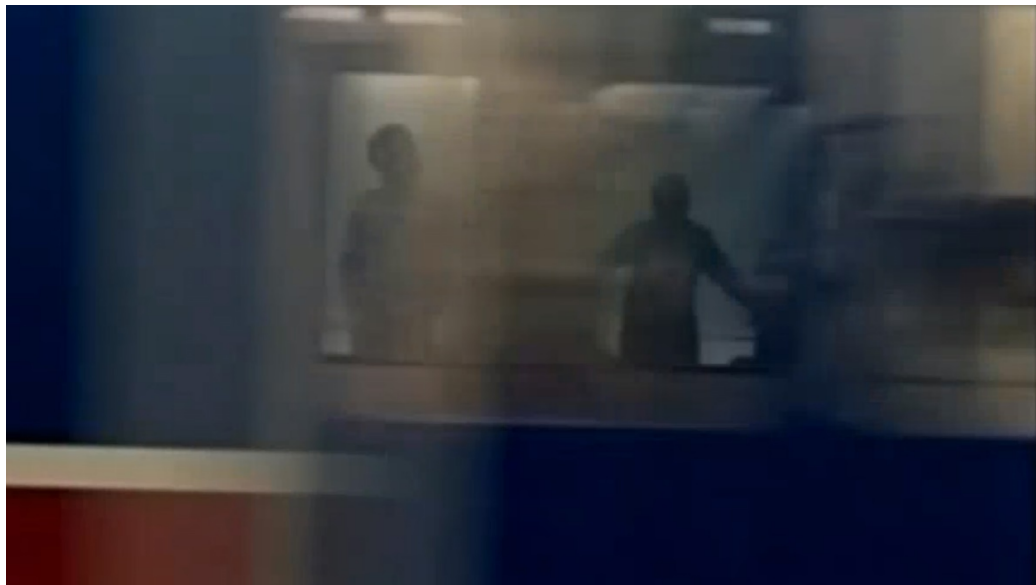


Figure 3. Eti dances within the public space of subway station. Source: Frame captured from the film (Frame enlarged) (Hedayat Film, 2004).

However, the film does not treat these acts of defiance and independence as natural or “right.” While it advocates for a certain degree of freedom for women, much like the reformist faction, it imposes limits on this freedom, with immodesty being the boundary. According to the film’s portrayal, the naïve Eti, due to her repressions and lack of awareness, transgresses the line of modesty and norms that are ostensibly in

place to protect her. Reformists have held the belief that wrong governance strategies have led young people “stray” from their religion and traditions, and Ata’ollah Mohajerani, an influential reformist and the Minister of Guidance and Islamic Culture, under Khatami’s first term, has stated: “We believe that if [the young generation] understand our beliefs, they will accept them” (qtd. in Sadr, 2006, p. 242). Echoing these viewpoints, the narrative implies that a more stable socio-economic environment could prevent young individuals like Eti, the drug-dealing couple, and the addicted young musician, from deviating from societal norms.

The film’s stance towards transgressive acts of Eti, are illustrated during Eti and Jahan’s visit to the home of Jahan’s employer, Shapoori (Reza Rooygari). Shapoori, depicted as a cunning and affluent individual, manipulates others through his wealth. Despite Jahan’s reservations, Eti naively perceives Shapoori’s manipulative behaviour as kindness. She unwittingly falls prey to his deceptions, evident in the instance she allows him to administer an unknown drug for her toothache, a moment that symbolizes a violation of her bodily autonomy. This autonomy, which she has staunchly defended throughout the film, is compromised when she naively lets her guard down in the face of the wealthy, cunning man. The film also highlights how self-destructive these acts of transgression are. In a metaphorical scene she ascends a descending escalator, exhausting herself without making progress, and inadvertently making a spectacle of herself. The narrative’s culmination starkly reveals this self-destructiveness, as Eti succumbs to Shapoori’s demands for sexual favors in exchange for funds to leave the country.

The film even treats Eti’s struggle for independence as naivety. It suggests that to realize her dreams and protect herself from men with wrongful intentions, like Shapoori, she needs a male guardian such as Jahan. According to the film, she requires Jahan’s help in every aspect: from finding accommodation to treating her tooth, enjoying a car ride, socializing with people, and ultimately emigrating. However, in her arrogant defiance and (according to the film,) unjustified quest for independence, she stands up to Jahan and claims she doesn’t need his help.

The film, despite providing poignant instances of a young woman’s resistance, and her plight in obtaining self-expression and independency, overlooks that the fact that this resistance and plight, is not merely a consequence of the mismanagement or erroneous implementation of traditional beliefs, but rather stems from the patriarchal essence of these beliefs, which are usually upheld by both conservatives and reformists. This

narrative, aligning with its political agenda, fixates on the threats posed by the circumstances of the youth, neglecting to address their actual subjective experiences. Consequently, the film fails to address the genuine and profound underlying reasons for the challenges faced by the youth.

In its concluding sequences, the film adopts a tragic and sombre tone. Eti, ensnared by the affluent antagonist, suffers the loss of her chastity. Jahan, consumed by a jealous fury and driven by deeply ingrained cultural norms of honour, commits a grave act against a Shapoori that has slept with Eti in exchange for money. The final shot metaphorically symbolizes both of their “descents” by portraying an aerial view of a descending elevator. Although Eti has achieved her goal of escaping the country, the film’s tragic ending belittles this accomplishment, suggesting that she has descended morally by losing her chastity.

I

Soheil Beiraghi’s first feature film, *I*, released in 2016, represents a distinct portrayal of a women within social spaces and power relations. The narrative unfolds around Azar (Leila Hatami), during the concluding stages of her criminal proceedings. This film distinguishes itself by its portrayal of a formidable, autonomous female protagonist who orchestrates numerous operations and commands a prominent role within the urban landscape. Azar, is the first among a series of women who make up Beiraghi’s oeuvre, that are not only prominently active and defiant against constraints, but also successful at obtaining independence (Saemi, 2020). The film garnered significant critical acclaim and commercial success domestically, achieved international screenings, and secured streaming rights on Amazon.

In *I*, Azar’s character is markedly independent, triumphing over the restrictive patriarchal forces that ordinarily confine women to domestic roles. The film opens with Azar undergoing interrogation by an intelligence service agent, where the focus is not her activities per se, but their incompatibility with perceived feminine roles. The agent advises her to pursue careers that are more “suited” for women, like teaching the oboe, her covert occupation. The film presents a surveillance mechanism that monitors not just her criminal activities but intrusively her life as a woman, and claims to be omnipresent. The opening credits showcase Azar navigating the city’s dynamics with a composed, vigilant demeanour, unafraid and aware of potential surveillance. Contrary to the female characters in *The Circle* and even *Boutique’s* Eti, she is neither overwhelmed

or ashamed, not ever for a moment; her poised, upright stature, particularly during the low angle shot in the title sequence, underscores her dominance in urban space (see Figure 4). Azar's mastery over the cityscape is a recurrent theme; her extensive knowledge of every quarter suggests an abolishment of the traditional hierarchical and patriarchal spatial dynamics, even its reversal as she holds the dominant position over men in instances that women usually held submissive one. Her unimpeded mobility and strategic presence in the city indicate a paradigm shift, where the urban landscape, traditionally a masculine domain, now accommodates, or rather, is forced by her to accommodate her unrestricted participation and movement.

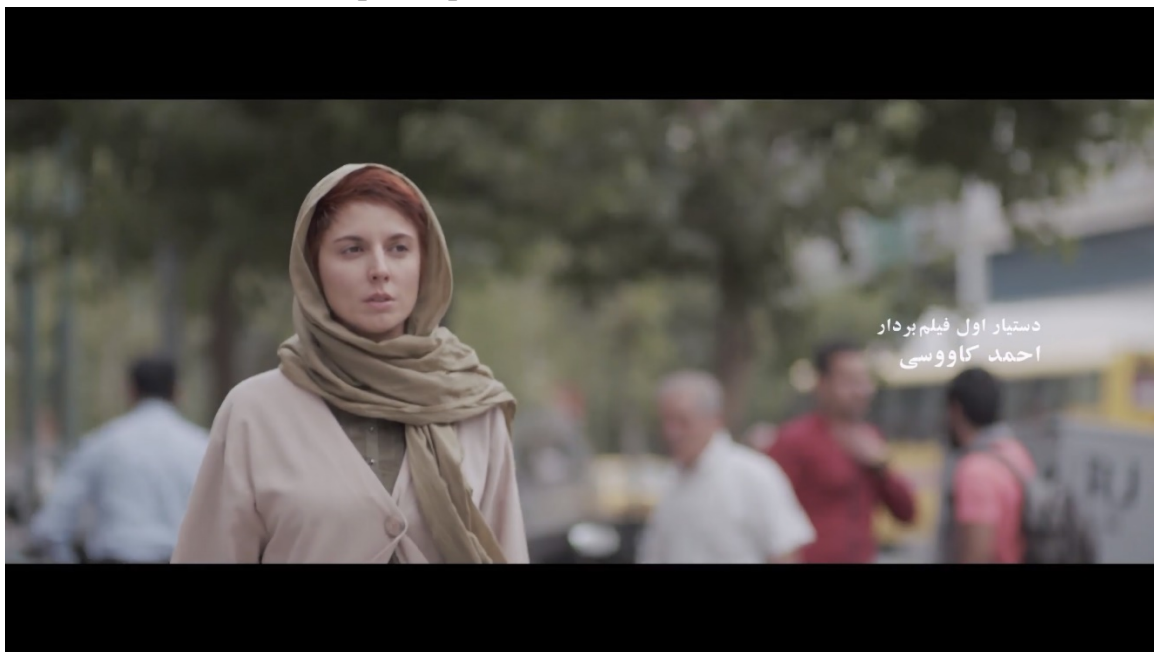


Figure 4. Azar walks defiantly and observant among urban crowd (Nasim-e Saba, 2016).

The omnipresent surveillance, fails to alter Azar's course. She neutralizes the hierarchy of gazes in the patriarchal panoptic structure, which is symbolized by her residence on the upper floors of a high-rise, overlooking the city. The flickering city lights below, reminiscent of watchful eyes, signify the pervasive surveillance (see Figure 5). Yet, Azar transcends this panopticon-like society; she is not a prisoner like the women of *The Circle*, but a figure who has redefined the hierarchy of observation, asserting a dominant gaze from her elevated vantage point. Her awareness of the possibility of being under surveillance, spurs her to adopt more clandestine tactics. She exhibits a profound acumen for circumventing the all-encompassing surveillance that pervades her existence. Her ingenious tactics are depicted in instances like using veils in religious

settings such as cemeteries for disguise. She strategically employs language aligned with official law in initial interactions with clients to circumvent entrapment, should the client be an undercover official.



Figure. 5. Numerous “eyes” are watching Azar, but she has the dominant vantage point (Nasim-e Saba, 2016).

Azar’s command over the urban landscape, her conspicuous presence, and endeavours within it, and her fortitude in the face of relentless surveillance, reflect the broader scenario of women in Iran over the past decade. Surveillance systems, both in their number and intensity, have escalated over the years, becoming increasingly sophisticated. The advent of modern surveillance technologies has intensified, accompanied by a more robust and active role of policing agents in diverse aspects of social life.

Despite these stringent measures, diverse groups of urban women have reinforced their visible and autonomous participation in urban spaces, challenging and defying the prevailing norms. An increasing number of unveiled women navigate through cityscapes, despite facing harassment, representing a significant ideological crisis for the state (Fars, 2023). In the face of surveillance, these women have developed evasion tactics, such as temporarily conforming to dress codes when near cameras or agents, or while engaging with officials who may get you in trouble in case of defiance, only to resume their defiant demeanour once out of sight.

Azar has effectively challenged and transformed traditional patriarchal hierarchies, securing a dominant role in various spheres of power. She commands a male workforce, attracting individuals like Amir (Alireza Ostadi), a skilled contractor, who aspire to collaborate with her. However, she maintains her autonomy, employing Amir but rejecting partnership. In the context of *I* and its socio-cultural backdrop, the emergence of women in leadership roles is no longer anomalous. Azar's influence extends to shaping cultural norms, as seen in her direction of Aria's (Amir Jadidi) musical style. Similarly, Iranian women are shaping cultural patterns and playing pivotal roles in the creation, distribution, and interpretation of cultural products (Kawar, 2022). Furthermore, Azar's involvement in Tehran's urban development and construction sectors is simultaneous to the broader engagement of Iranian women in the nation's evolution and architectural landscape.⁶

Another facet of women's societal triumph in Iran that finds its way to *I*, is their successful engagement with social media in challenging patriarchal norms, despite state efforts to regulate and monitor the internet. Azar leverages social media, utilizing anonymity and efficient communication for business purposes while evading state surveillance. When not physically present in the city's public spaces, she orchestrates her operations via technology, asserting her domain free from government intrusion. Iranian women have similarly utilized social media to access restricted information, foster solidarity, and challenge patriarchal norms through activities and shared content that challenge regulations and constraints on women's autonomy over their bodies, behaviours, and expressions (Alimardani, 2022). Despite government attempts to control social media through censorship and monitoring, and state initiatives to monopolize social media, social media remains a crucial battleground for Iranian's, especially women, who use these platforms to express themselves freely and resist societal constraints, and their victories in virtual spaces have paralleled and facilitated triumphs in physical spaces (Shokrani, 2022).

However, these triumphs come at a price. One is that the constant necessity to be vigilant and the anticipation of perpetual surveillance breeds a sense of paranoia, and a distrust towards everyone. Many young women in Iran, who, in their pursuit of autonomy and resistance against restrictive norms, are perpetually wary of unseen

⁶ For statistics on women's engagement in Iran's urban construction, see: Andrew Hanna, "Part 1: Phases of the Women's Movement." *The Iran Primer*, 11 Aug. 2020, [[Link](#)], accessed 15 Jan. 2024; The Iran Primer, "Protest Context: Statistics on Iran's Women." 7 Oct. 2022, [[Link](#)], accessed 15 Jan. 2024.

surveillance and potential informants. This environment, laden with suspicion and unease, and the psychological impact of living under constant surveillance and the resilience required to navigate such a landscape, is mirrored in *I. Beiraghi* employs cinematic techniques to convey this pervasive sense of paranoia, especially evident in scenes where Azar engages in perilous activities. One such instance is when Azar, under the guise of a patient, consults with a psychiatrist as part of an elaborate ruse. The objective is to obtain an exemption from mandatory military service for a client, leveraging the provision that exempts individuals with certain mental illnesses. In this intricate plot, Azar collaborates with the psychiatrist to fabricate a case of mental illness for her client. This scene is charged with a sense of wariness and caution, highlighting the lengths to which Azar must go to ensure the secrecy of their operation. Upon receiving instructions and payment, the doctor and Azar proceed to an adjacent room for further examination of the client via balcony. This transition is marked by a camera perspective that initially resembles that of a surveillance agent, fostering a sense of being watched. As the scene progresses and the doctor opens the door, the camera moves forward to a subjective view, revealing that this perspective was, in fact, a subjective representation of Azar's own paranoia.

The other cost is that the necessity to transgress laws and values in order to obtain autonomy means becoming an outlaw and outcast from the official order. To earn her autonomy, Azar must evade institutions such as marriage and domesticity. Her distance from such concepts is evident in her retort, "Do I look like a woman who marries?" in response to Aria's notions of future marriages, and in her sparsely furnished apartment devoid of any item that might tether her to domesticity. These and other aspects of her transgressions render her an outcast and an anomaly in the eyes of patriarchal society. Aria frequently proposes suggestions of a "normal" life, all of which a wary Azar, who understands the price of her hard-earned autonomy, rejects. It is eventually revealed that Azar's suspicions towards Aria were justified, as Aria, the man attempting to lure her into marriage, is in fact an undercover police agent. Azar becomes a target of the official normalizing force in society, both because she is a criminal and because she transgresses societal norms. Indeed, Azar's criminal status can be read as a metaphor for her violation of official and cultural norms and values. This dynamic is evident in Iranian society, where women who transgress official dress codes are treated as criminals and can face penalties such as fines and detention.

Although Azar triumphs in claiming her autonomy, Beiraghi's portrayal of her situation within the patriarchal society is imbued with bitterness. This bitterness culminates in the final scene, where the normalizing forces, embodied by the agent Aria, succeed in entrapping and detaining her. With this tragic twist, Azar's victory is short-lived.

Conclusion

Since the late 1990s, Iranian women fighting the age-old patriarchal hegemony have successfully amplified their voices to both Iranian and global feminist audiences, positioning their struggles and concerns as central social issues. In tandem, Iranian cinema, which previously marginalized or censored women, has undergone a significant transformation regarding women's presence and the prominence of their issues in filmic narratives. However, the approach to women's issues and their plight varies based on authorial agendas and views, and social and cultural contexts, as the cases of this study, all addressing the issue of women in urban spaces show.

Panahi's *The Circle* presents a sombre depiction of the tribulations Iranian women face in urban spaces of a patriarchal society. Although the film effectively captures the genuine challenges confronting Iranian women, including stringent surveillance, societal limitations, and control over women's bodies, it fails to grant its female characters an active voice. Instead, they are utilized as objects for the filmmaker to make his pessimistic statement about women being prisoners in Iran, an unrealistic argument that overgeneralizes their situation.

Nematollah's *Boutique* examines the struggles of Iranian youth, particularly through Eti, a rebellious young woman who aspires for independence and prosperity. However, the film fails to recognize this aspiration, portraying Eti's actions as pathological and dangerous both for herself and society, attributing these transgressions to adverse socio-economic hardships. Were this situation resolved, the film suggests, young women like Eti wouldn't step onto a path leading to her perceived impropriety and immodesty. This perspective, reminiscent of the reformist faction of the Islamic Republic, fails to understand the plight of youth like Eti, whose actions are justified acts of transgression against patriarchal structures cherished by both conservatives and the reformists who criticize them.

Finally, Beiraghi's *I* offers a groundbreaking depiction of women's autonomy and power dynamics in urban settings, centring on Azar, a character who challenges traditional norms. Azar neutralizes patriarchal hierarchies, asserting dominance in urban

landscapes and resisting the pervasive surveillance intended to monitor and confine her. However, Azar's triumphant position is not without cost. To preserve her autonomy and avert surveillance, she must remain in constant vigilance and suspicion, rendering her character paranoid. She is outcast and treated as an anomaly in the patriarchal society, and her career as a criminal, parallels and coincides with her transgression of norms. The film implies that she is pursued by the law not only for her illicit activities but also for her non-adherence to societal expectations of women. In the end, Azar's fate and her treatment by society resemble the fate of the women in *The Circle* and their treatment; however, the response and stance of women in each film differ due to authorial differences as well as social and cultural changes. Indeed, the believability of a character like Azar in *I* is a result of the evolution of Iranian women's struggle against patriarchal subjugation. Such a character might have seemed implausible in the 2000s, but the triumphant resistance of Azar in urban landscapes is now a more common scene in Iran's urban centres.

The article posits that all three films succeed in showcasing the constraints, expectations, and limitations imposed on women, and all portray urban spaces as inherently masculine. However, the response and situation of women in these spaces, as well as the author's stance regarding these situations and responses, vary with each film.

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