A Study of Women's Portrayal in Contemporary Iranian Cinema Based On Social Structure

Mana Tabatabai Rad
Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology, Panjab University, Chandigarh, India
mana.rad93@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper aims to study women's portrayal in contemporary Iranian cinema based on social structure. This study focuses upon two films as case studies in terms of their text. The names of the Iranian films are: Sag Koshi by Bahram Beyzai, and Do Zan by Tahmineh Milani in the 2000s. With used narrative method for analyzing the selected films. In conclusion one found out that both films represent the present realities of the women in Iranian society. They critique gender hierarchies and patriarchal ideologies (structure) in narrative cinema. These films portray women both as victimized and as empowered.

Keywords: Women, Iranian Films, Sag Koshi, Killing Rabid Dogs, Do Zan, Two Women, Cinema, social structure.
1. **Introduction**

Recent decades of pioneering work by feminist scholars in women's studies have made us aware of gender and its centrality in shaping social life. The study of gender has performed the task of explaining differences between women and men and increasingly focused on the dynamics of masculinity and femininity. Sociologists of the 1970s adopted the term gender to be able to discuss femininity and masculinity as socially produced ways of acting (Holmes, 2007) and sociological perspective has led to an understanding of the sex-gender system as a cultural construct that is itself constituted by social structure. Gender roles are the roles that society assigns to men and women based on their gender. They affect how people perceive and expect themselves and others to behave in masculine and feminine manner. These roles are learned through socialization and are culturally determined and internalized by social norms and values.

Along with the examination of the concept of structure in sociological theory, it is necessary to explore the relationship between cinema, gender, culture and society. Among the social institutions, media are crucial in the construction and dissemination of gender ideologies and gender socialization. According to this view, it is important to focus on the role of cinema in the construction of gender and structural system within its specific cultural context(s) of production and reception. As Barsam (2003) points out, movies are a social phenomenon. Social history and culture have a profound effect on the movies, which in turn often influence society and culture. Because the movies reflect, make and influence history, they can be primary sources in the study of society.

Cinema reflects the central matters of sociology, and the interactive coordination of action among social agents. At this point, on the one hand we can think about cinema as a medium and agency of cultural production and cultural consumption in the area of sociology. And on the other hand, through feminist studies, it can be analyzed as sociological construction of marginalization of women by a patriarchal culture. Feminist film theory raises questions about women's subjectivity and the portrayal of women in films because of their different accounts of the self, agency, identity, and the cultural surroundings of the subject. Hence, to discuss emancipation and empowerment of women this theory emphasizes the relation of the social structure and women's agency and subjectivity. Feminist film theory describes how femininity is constructed in a patriarchal society shown by cinema and how women can bring about some changes within social structure.

The medium of cinema representing social and historical practice regarding gender approach is a crucial phenomenon in sociological studies. In concert with other cultural institution and practices, media are gendered as well and contribute to gendering our identities and influence how we think about people and events related to gender. Women’s position within media power structures and media representation of women are persistent concerns in every society. As Peter Goldman and Graham Murdock (Sakr, 2004) put it, media industries play a pivotal role in organizing the images and discourse through which people make sense of the world. Media cover
gender issues through interacting with cultural images of gender and with individual identities in three ways. First, media reflect cultural values and ideals about gender; second, media reproduce cultural views of gender in individuals; and third, media are gatekeepers engaged in filtering information and images (Wood, 1999). Dyer (1993) describes three main characteristics of contemporary media representation as being selective, culture-specific and being subject to interpretation.

Acting as the announcer of cultural values, media reinforce traditional stereotypes of women as dependent, decorative, passive and subservient and men as independent, powerful, active and superior. Research on gender and cinema has emphasized the question about women’s identity. In fact, the study of the images of women in cinema were a central concern of the ‘second wave’ feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, criticizing women's image in film and women's roles in the film industry (Jackson and Jacjie, 1998). Social definitions of women are examined in contemporary societies by institutions such as the family, the economy and the state, as well as, institutionalized patterns of sexuality and norms of appropriately feminine behavior and social status. Film itself is asserted as an ideological practice of women, masking or reinforcing those definitions (Kaplan, 2000). Feminist film theory raises questions about women's subjectivity and the representation of women in films because of their different accounts of the self, agency, identity, and the cultural surroundings of the subject. Through feminist studies, the sociological construction of marginalization of women by a patriarchal culture can be analyzed. The role of structure and agency in human thought and behavior is one of the central issues in sociology. Structure/agency debate which seeks to explain how social action is always already structured by the embedded effects of patterns of behavior linked to norms, identity investments, ideologies, moralities and so on. For analyzing the position and representation of women within power and gender relations in a patriarchal society, we need to consider how social structure determines women actions in society and what the role of agency in women’s lives is.

In recent years a great deal of discussion at the international level has addressed the issue of the place and status of women in present day Iranian society and the influence their social position has exerted in the spheres of art, literature, religion, politics, economics and history and thus, critical eyes are focused on Iranian women (Tapper, 2002). The growing importance of women's participation in all areas of social life, leads us to consider the film industry as one of these areas. The cinema in Iran among many of other institutions is an established art form and cultural practice and became a place for expression of women's voices. Following the rise of the Iranian New Wave Cinema and growing importance of women in modern society of Iran, Iranian cinema has been dominated by great women film directors and consequently films are starred by and focused on women.

Regarding the issue, the present study aimed to analyze the gender phenomenon in relation to cinema in the context of Iranian films based on the theories related to social structure and agency and feminist perspectives on media and films. The selected films for the study are Do Zan (Two Women, 1999) by Tahmineh Milani and Sag Koshi (Killing of Rabid Dogs, 2001) by Bahram
Beyzai. Narrative method was implemented to examine the portrayal of women in relation to the private and public spheres of women's lives by reflecting on the depiction of patriarchal values in these two films focusing on the structural aspect including sub-themes of patriarchy, social class, caste, socialization, gender stereotyping and violence. Finally, women's empowerment as depicted through the change in their portrayals in two films is analyzed and approaches of female and male filmmakers to the portrayal of the problems of women in their respective societies are examined and compared.

2. Literature Review

Considering the subjects of gender, cinema and society is important. It is surprising to find that there is relatively less literature on the said topics and also notably whatever available material is primarily from USA and very little work has been done in Iran on the topic of gender in films. Some of these writings focus on research studies from different perspective of women's representation in cinema, in various countries. However, we would like to discuss the writings specifically in the context of the American film industry or Hollywood (since it has had great impact on world cinema) and Iranian cinema.

Cinema represented the ideological meaning that 'woman' had for men while the 'woman-as woman' was absent from the text of the film. The important theoretical shift here was from an understanding of cinema as reflecting reality, to a view of cinema as constructing a particular, ideological, view of reality. Thus, classical film narrative had presented the constructed images of 'woman' as natural, realistic and attractive. This was the illusionism of classical cinema. In reality, stereotypes of women in film had not to be compared with the reality of women's lives. Smith (1972) explored the limited range of women's images due to sex role stereotyping and according to the fantasies and fears of their male creators. She emphasized the power of cinematic representations to influence the social context and suggested that women had to be shown as active not passive and should have variety of strong roles. Women's images in film were chronicled by Haskell (1973). She pointed out that film reflected society through ideological and social construction of women. Sex and sexism in the movies were examined based on culture. Haskell pointed out that the treatment of women in the movies was more than a question of art or entertainment. According to her, if films had flattered and amused us, reflecting our most cherished beliefs, they had also distorted truth and reinforced delusions, perpetuating stereotypes and molding values.

Nelmes (1996) analyzed "The Piano" made by a female director Jane Campion in 1993, as a case study in portrayal of culture in masculinity and femininity and understanding of gender, sexuality and society. She explored that in this film female character became a fetish object of a man’s desire, who tried to control and contain her. She pointed out that in films one can saw representation of gender role and female sexuality through clothing and the lack of voice of female characters was a symbol of their withdrawal from patriarchal society. Thus, in her view
films like ‘The Piano’ were an exploration of female sexuality, and in some scenes, although in some scenes the director did try to portray woman as subject rather than object.

With a look at literature from Iran on the subject of gender and cinema, very few works are found. Sadr (2006) analyzed some key films made by well-known directors to describe their themes, tropes and characterizations, which reveal the political and ideological contexts that express Iranian society. Ejlali (2005) examined Iranian cinema since 1930 till 1978 (before revolution) and analyzes the structure and content of all Iranian films of that time. He studied the Iranian films in the changing times and stresses the stability of Iranian culture and society. He emphasized that films can reflect some social meaning and culture for audience in a particular time with specific functions. In this book he has considered cultural factors and social mobility. He tried to analyze the content of those films focusing on social, economic and cultural reality of Iranian society.

In "Iranian cinema under the Islamic republic", Nafici (1995) examined Iranian film industry in post-revolutionary period since 1978. He mentioned that Iranian cinema has been influenced by Islamic values. He argued that two kinds of cinema have been emerging in this era – the first one is the populist cinema which describes post-revolutionary values at the level of plot, theme, characterization, human relationships and portrayal of women and the second one is the quality cinema, which engages with those values and tends to critique the social conditions under the Islamic government. He believes that since the mid-1980s, women's representation has included more and more dominant characters on the screen and the number of active women behind the cameras as a filmmaker has increased.

Moruzzi (1999) also has studied Iranian women in films. She explored Iranian women's lives after revolution in terms of how they had been shaped by political and social/cultural factors. She discussed their lives and how their expectations about education, work and family have changed due to political revolution, economic decline and national cultural shifts. She focused on representation of Islamic women in Iranian cinema and investigated the relationship between the political and the personal in Iranian women's lives. She analyzed representation of women by two Iranian films. The subject of the two films was domestic abuse and women's resistance. Both films contained female characters that were controlled by possessive and abusive husbands.

As it is seen, most of the studies have concentrated on women's cinematic representation in terms of patriarchal ideology. The researchers have found that women are usually portrayed as passive, erotic objects, marginalized and stereotyped in different contexts of cinema although there are some instances of depiction of women as independent and autonomous individuals too. It is thus evident that mostly women in cinema have been analyzed through psychoanalytic and semiotic approaches. In the proposed study we have tried to analyze women's portrayal in Iranian cinema by applying both the feminist film criticism perspective and the sociological approach that focuses on the debate on the primacy of structure.
3. Research Method

With the purpose of data collection in the qualitative research we have chosen the narrative method for analyzing the selected films. Narrative theory is reshaping qualitative inquiry in virtually every human science discipline and practicing profession. Narrative methods are suited to analysis of oral, written and visual stories of experience and social representation processes such as feelings, images, and time. They offer the potential to address ambiguity, complexity, and dynamism of individual, group, and organizational phenomena.

In the last few years, there has been a growing interest among sociologists in narratives, narrative analysis, stories, and storytelling. Narrative is an interpretive approach in the social sciences involving storytelling methodology. The story becomes an object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives. A narrative can be understood to organize a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole. In this way narrative conveys the meaning of events.

There are three approaches to the study of narrative; first, Structural analysis which focuses on story grammar that includes the setting and events in a story; second, ‘Sociology of stories’ approach which focuses on cultural, historical and political context in which particular stories are (or can be) told by whom and to whom; and third, ‘Functional approach’ which focuses on what roles characters perform in a story (Griffin, 2009). Clearly our method is the second one where we have also tried to study the four stories in certain cultural and social contexts.

This study focuses upon two films as case studies in terms of their text. The names of the Iranian films are: Sag Koshi (Killing Rabid Dogs) by Bahram Beyzai, and Do Zan (Two Women) by Tahmineh Milani produced in the 2000s. The choice of the films was based on the fact that these films are comparable to each other having some similar issues to study. They belong to art house cinema and they are nationally and internationally acclaimed. The films are women-centered and mostly have concentrated on women's issues in different situations, especially in the gender relations context.

4. Iranian Films under Study: Two Women and Killing Rabid Dogs

4.1. Two Women

Two Women is a very popular Iranian film by writer and director Tahmineh Milani, released in 1999. Feminist filmmaker Tahmineh Milani is one of Iran's few high-profile female filmmakers. Constantly at odds with the government, her often melodramatic films usually deal with women's rights and the Islamic revolution, featuring fearless female leads confronting an oppressive regime. Interestingly, despite her feminism, she is famous for stating that a filmmaker’s gender is insignificant when considering cinematic creations that reflect feminine perspectives and experiences. Two Women (1999), her fifth film depicting the story of a scholarly woman whose
spirit is crushed by the male characters that inhabit her life, took seven years to be approved. She was arrested in 2001 for her subsequent film, *The Hidden Half* (2001) about a judge who discovers that his wife was once a revolutionary, before an international uproar among filmmakers led to her release.

Milani is an avowed feminist who focuses on the conditions of urban women and their everyday struggles at home, in the context of patriarchy and in the realm of politics in a society where the culture and laws conspire against them. She is known for touching controversial and sensitive issues, including women's rights in her films. She usually adopts a highly melodramatic style and focuses more on gender issues and her female characters tend to be the subject of intense oppression and discrimination. She has received critical accolades and awards for her films, especially for *Two Women*.

### 4.1.1. Plot outline

*Two Women* starts at some fourteen years after Fereshteh and Royā became friends, while studying architecture at a university in Tehran. Fereshteh is stalked by an obsessive young man named Hassan. This prompts Fereshteh's father to force her to return to their home in Esfahan as through some inverted logic, her father believes that the actions of the stalker must have been provoked by some impropriety on the part of his daughter. These events take place at the time when the universities are being closed by the government of Iran as a result of the Iranian Cultural Revolution of 1980-1987. Fereshteh’s departure from Tehran becomes a life-changing event. The stalker follows Fereshteh to Esfahan and during a chase involving his motorcycle and her car, causes a fatal accident involving two children. Fereshteh is asked by the court to pay a hefty amount to the parents of the injured child as compensation, which her family’s financial conditions do not allow. A neighbor named Ahmad, who helps Fereshteh and her family with the legal case following this accident, asks for Fereshteh's hand in return and despite her initial fierce opposition to the proposal, he succeeds in gaining Fereshteh's consent by promising to be supportive of her plan to pursue her studies. In the last scenes of the film, after yet another fight with her husband, Fereshteh runs into Hassan, He chases her with a knife in hand, and corners her in an alley. At this point her husband Ahmad bursts in on the action, attacks Hassan, and is knifed by him while Fereshteh watches in horror.

### 4.2. *Killing Rabid Dogs*

Bahram Beyzai, born to a literary family in Tehran in 1953 is one of the most enigmatic figures of the contemporary Iranian cultural scene. He is a leading expert in Iranian dramatic arts and his outstanding command of the Persian language and narration ranks him high on the list of Iranian script writers. Beyzai is one of the major names in Iranian art cinema even though his reputation beyond the borders of Iran remains far behind those who are known as the pillars of the new wave of Iranian neo-realism. In international film festivals Beyzai’s multi faceted and complex work leaves many confused as how to fit his work into any genre.
The most controversial theme in Beyzai’s films which has frequently led to official banning of his films is the iconic representation of women. Women's issues are frequently addressed in the Iranian social cinema. Beyzai’s depiction of women on screen, however, dates back to the early 70’s and deviates from the typical contemporary realism that draws attention to the cultural, religious and social webs in which the average women of Iran are supposedly caught. The women of his films although challenged by unjust realities, transcend the boundaries that surround them by the virtue of their natural superiority. In his depictions, women are entangled in the ropes of the patriarchal society yet they are not victims to it. While Beyzai's films metaphorically address the potentials of feminine mobility in the early years of Islamic revolution, yet in his later films for portraying the issue of femininity he even resorts to the use of actual props. For instance, automobiles have become an indispensable vehicle for extending the presence of women in the public sphere. Nevertheless, Beyzai’s key interest is to show the empowerment of women, how they challenge the norm, how they reject the tradition and how they are empowered by their independence, power of will and their invincible love as mother, lovers, sisters and wives. These women however signify more that their traditional roles. Their pivotal function in the majority of Beyzai’s films is as political signifiers or symbols of the spirit of life and the soul of the nation. Their representations are based on the reality and the complexity of their life. It can be said that in his cinematic works these women portrayed as having an internal power to augment their status in the face of the most difficult of circumstances. In truth, we can see the aspects of both subjectivity and resistance in his film Killing Rabid Dogs. In fact, this film is considered as a critique of social situation with specific attention to the women's issues in Iranian society.

4.2.1. Plot outline

Killing Rabid Dogs (Sag Koshi) is a film, which tells us the story of a cruel fraud who destroys the lives of many people, including his wife and friends, so that finally the victims decide to kill him like a dog. The story traces the life of an Iranian woman writer, Golrokh Kamali, who had left her husband, Nasar Moaser, because of her suspicion regarding his relationship with the secretary of his company. She returns to Tehran at the end of war and sees her husband who has lost all his money and is going to prison. Golrokh feels responsible for his plight as she experiences guilt for her suspicion towards him. In her effort to help her husband she has to deal with each of the creditors and complainants, and while doing so, she has to face many difficulties and situations that she finds very daunting, but which she faces with great determination and resolve. At the end, she succeeds in setting her husband free. But instead of showing gratitude, he gives her a letter asking for a divorce. Golrokh now realizes that all of these events have been part of a plan hatched by her husband to become the sole legal owner of his firm. However, his plans are foiled by the return of his partner who not only tells Golrokh the truth but also kills Naser Moaser. In the end Golrokh finds herself cheated, manipulated and empty inside and decides to pour her feelings into her writing.

Killing Rabid Dogs is one of the women-centric films in the history of post revolutionary Iranian cinema, which criticizes the social realities in Iranian society. The film traces clearly the impact
of social structure on women's lives. Beyzai in this film portrays different aspects of women's lives in private and social spheres. It deals with injustice and violence against women by the male dominated system. It is about women's fight against the patriarchal culture. This film represents a realistic image of women as empowered and rebellious beings both in cinema and in a broader extent in society. Women’s portrayals in his films go beyond the stereotypes of ordinary women in Iranian culture and they are depicted as agents of social change fighting social inequality and discrimination in order to protect their feminine identity and their rights as women. The film shows that in spite of many difficulties, the protagonist independently challenges all social barriers and doesn't stop her efforts to achieve her will. Her story illustrates the situation of contemporary women in Iran who are facing various social, cultural and traditional challenges and problems.

5. Portrayal of Women in the two Films through Structure

After above description of the storylines of both films, next we look at the indicators of social structure the structural elements taken into consideration for this study are patriarchy, social class, gender stereotyping and violence.

5.1. Patriarchy

The question of patriarchy and its persistence in the Middle East has received a great deal of attention in the scholarly literature (Ahmed, 1992; Moghadam, 1993; Tohidi, 1996). Generally, religions have a patriarchal view of the relationship between the genders. Patriarchy has been a major institution in the area since ancient times and is deeply rooted in religious, legal and cultural practices. Studies of the women's movement and early feminists have also focused on this problem in the Middle East. Topics such as women's low status, women's chastity, honor killings, sexuality etc., are focused upon which have a considerable impact upon women’s lives and experiences in countries where patriarchal systems exist.

A look at the conditions in the Iranian society reveals that since the revolution in Iran patriarchy has been promoted and strengthened by reverting to ancient Islamic codes and with enforced patriarchal practices that control female appearance and mobility. As an Islamic society in Iran, gender (jens, jensiyat) is generally understood in the sense of gender identity, roles and relations, premised on the binary categories ‘man’ (mard) and ‘woman’ (zan). Gender distinction and gender stereotypes are crucial to an Islamic worldview and play an important role in the organization of everyday life in Iran today. The way Quran is interpreted usually upholds the view of man’s superiority and domination over woman. It is implied that it is men’s responsibility and duty to keep women under their protection and control. The Muslim woman has been portrayed as submissive, oppressed and the mass media and educational systems have played a major role in the construction of this representation (Darvishpour, 2003). In this sense women's status is reflected in the Islamic thought and Quran. Islam as a religion, and the Quran, the prophet's sayings, and Islamic Shari'i as the source of personal statutes laws have been
considered as important determining factors of the Iranian women's status. As a result, in the Islamic societies women occupy a secondary and inferior position to men. In this regard there are some Islamic rules, such as social rights, marriage and divorce laws, and other crucial areas which affect women's lives in society.

In Iran, one important social factor contributing to the increase in the rate of the women being stalked is “patriarchy”, which is most evident in small cities and villages. One significant consequence of patriarchy is that some men may believe they have the power to interfere in all of the women’s affairs, or even make decisions on their behalf. Yet, it is also interesting to note that the Iranian women have constantly indulged in practices that contain or limit the impact of patriarchal controls imposed upon them soon after the Islamic revolution. Patriarchy in Iran in fact, raised higher the bar of challenge for attaining equality for women’s right.

Regarding gender relations patriarchy has been institutionalized in Iranian culture. Accordingly, in the selected film Two Women men are shown as stereotypically dominant and conservative. Some illustrate their patriarchal mindset by showing emotional dominance over women while others may do so by perpetrating physical violence against them. In the first category is the leading character Fereshteh's father who is a traditional man, afraid for his dignity and worried about his daughter’s chastity, who tries to control his daughter in order to avoid inappropriate behavior. As he says to her that "damn you for doing this to me, is this why you came to Tehran, to ruin and humiliate me.” Similarly, Fereshteh’s husband is also depicted as a person who has a dogmatic thinking and believes that his wife should obey him and follow his orders without question. He is possessive and has a paranoid personality. In one of the scenes he tells her "you don’t love me. I have done my part, bought you a house, clothes, I saved you. I scarified my family, my pride for you". In his view providing financial help to her family should make her satisfied and appreciative.

The way a woman’s voice is silenced in a patriarchal system is symbolically depicted poignantly in one scene where when Fereshteh is having labor pains the nurses ask her to scream loudly but her husband forbids her to do so and asks her to be silent as no one should hear her voice. This scene signifies her silence in the other dimensions of life, as well as in a patriarchal system, women are supposed to be silent and just follow the oppressive rules. Men in patriarchal societies usually try and break the spirit of the women whenever they try to achieve something. In this film too, it has been shown that Ahmed wants to suppress her freedom and give the feeling of inferiority to her just because she wants to be different and progressive.

It is obvious that he tries to limit her freedom and tries to control her, because he wants her just as a submissive wife who cannot do anything without her husband's permission. "You have got a lot of nerve talking this way. I should control you. You have had way too much freedom". The other dominant man in this film is the stalker Hassan who destroys Fereshteh's life by trying to force her to love him and marry him. He represents that face of patriarchy where one’s manhood
is displayed through aggression and violence. He tells her "You can’t get away from me. Nobody says no to me".

In *Killing Rabid Dogs* too, the focus is on sketching a picture of a patriarchal social set up. However, unlike *Two Women* in which most of the action takes place in the so called private sphere of the family, here the focus is more on the gender relations in the public sphere. In addition, men are shown as being not only dominant but also exploitative and manipulative. For instance, Golrokh's husband tries to use her to gain his freedom from the jail. He tells her "You are the only one I can trust. You are my last hope. But I can't bear it. It is a hard job". Nevertheless, in most parts of film the stress is on depicting the power relations between the genders, which is shown through the words, actions and general behavior of the men in the film towards the female protagonist. For example, when Golrokh telephones one of those men he tells her: "I won't talk to a woman. Tell your man to call. I won't deal with a stupid woman. Send your man. Find a man to speak for you". Similarly, when one of the men she deals with sees her beauty, he asks her to come to his place if she wants her work done. This shows how traditional men don’t value the dignity of women and view them merely as sex objects apart from considering them as inferior beings, the second sex.

5.2. Gender Stereotyping

Gender stereotypes in the traditional society see women as confined to the home, where they perform various domestic tasks associated with managing a household and rearing children whereas men are supposed to work in the public sphere, that is, in the fields, factories, bazaars, and offices. From this point of view, women adhering to the traditional roles are identified as “good women,” implying that those who comply with the social codes of chastity and virtue would have men’s respect and protection while those who fail to conform would be deprived of social respect and protection. The underlying idea here is that because women are the weaker sex, all female members of the family needs close supervision. Clearly, the effort is to control the sexuality of women. In this sense, *hejâb* (veil) is not just an external cover, but an internal one and whether the woman wears the veil on the outside or not, she is supposed to mask her innermost desires and yearnings. She is supposed to conceal her true nature from others. Women’s “chastity” and “virtue” have been essential elements of Iranian cultural identity and virginity has become a sign of chastity (Shahidian, 2009).

In this sense it should be noted that patriarchal and repressive family structure that is common to all the Muslim societies. The supreme position of the father economically and politically as defined by the Islamic social system is readily supported by Iranian law. The father has the sole responsibility for his wife and children's maintenance as he is obligated by law to do so. His sons also develop a strong identification with him that enables them to identify emotionally with every kind of authority. The daughters on the other hand are trained to identify with the submissive and resigned attitudes of the mother to all male members of the family (Azari, 1983).
Gender stereotyping is portrayed in both films. *Two Women* shows that whenever a woman doesn’t follow the traditional rules and is not a ‘proper’ model of womanhood, she has to face many problems. For example, Fereshteh is depicted as a dynamic woman who has great plans for her future. But her husband wants her to be under his control and follow the footsteps of his mother. He wants to change his educated wife’s personality into a passive and submissive woman. Several times he tells her that "You are not a good woman as a marriage partner, I should control you and change you. In *Killing Rabid Dogs* also similar gender stereotypes can be found. We see the protagonist Golrokh who is an educated and strong woman and who independently deals with different types of men during the course of the film. Consequently, they want to lower her self-esteem by using abusive language, emotional violence and even rape. In both selected films one can clearly see how the traditional view of gender stereotyping holds that woman should be passive, weak and submissive to be accepted by society while the men must be dominant and have authority over their women. And in both films, when the female leads break these stereotypes by the way of thinking, talking and acting, they have to suffer the consequences.

5.3. **Social Class**

Iranian society has a strong sense of class structure. Classes in Iran have been divided into upper class, middle class, working class and lower class (Katouzian, 2007). The post revolutionary upper classes consist of some of the same elements as the old elite, such as large landowners, industrialists, financiers, and large-scale merchants. They remained part of the upper class by virtue of having stayed in Iran and having retained a considerable part of their wealth. A new element of the upper class is those with great political influence, many of them being the religious elite holding key government administrative positions. The middle class includes social groups like entrepreneurs, bazaar merchants, professionals, and managers of private and nationalized concerns, the upper level civil service, teachers, medium-scale landowners, military officers etc. The working class is divided into various groups of workers: those in the oil industry, manufacturing, construction, and transportation; and mechanics and artisans in bazaar workshops. The workers within any one occupation, rather than sharing a common identity, are divided according to perceived skills. For example skilled construction workers, such as carpenters, electricians, and plumbers, earned significantly higher wages than the more numerous unskilled workers whom they tend to look down upon. Finally, there is the lower class distinguished by its high illiteracy rate, performance of manual labor, and generally marginal existence. The lower class can be further divided into two groups: those with regular employment and those without. Those who have regular work include domestic servants, bath attendants, porters, street cleaners, peddlers, street vendors, gardeners, office cleaners, laundry workers, and bakery workers.

Considering the sub-themes, the class structure in the Iranian context, it can be mentioned that in the two films under study social classes have an important relevance for the story and the events described. For instance, in *Two Women* the protagonist Fereshteh belongs to a working class and...
a traditional family and hence her life experiences reflect the elements of that particular social class. Her family is not wealthy and she has to work in order to pay for her education in Tehran. Later, it is because of lack of money that she has to agree to marry a wealthy man who offers to pay off her penalty amount fixed by the courts. The marriage causes her a lot of grief but she is unable to escape because of her financially weak position. On the other hand, her friend Roya belongs to a wealthy and modern family. She is able to continue her studies and fulfill her desire of becoming an architect. She marries a man of her own choice and becomes a successful woman who has a good standing in society. Thus, it appears that the economic and cultural nature of the family affect the current and future position of women in society as is depicted in Two Women.

In the second film Killing Rabid Dogs, class distinctions are shown in a different way. Here the story focuses on issues such as corporate corruption, business and bankruptcy etc., which are phenomena that occur in the upper classes. We are also provided with a portrayal of different types of men's behaviors towards women and towards other men. The director tries to show wealth as a source of power for men through which they dominate others. Thus, although shown differently, both films do base their stories in the context of certain social class arrangements.

5.4. Violence

Historically, in many cultures there is a pattern which has been functioning through the overall subordination of women and dominance of men. Here, sex determines the roles and behaviors of individuals. Accordingly, values, customs and laws are based on sex differences, with men being the powerful and the dominant, and women being the weak and the subordinate. This pattern is found in the Middle Eastern societies as well, particularly in rural and tribal areas. Most Middle-Eastern societies have followed the sex-biased pattern of the family relations. This pattern embodies men’s responsibility to protect, control and whenever appropriate, to punish the female members.

Women in Iranian society are victims of domestic violence, physical and mental abuse outside the household, honor killings and dowry murders. One of the common abuses in Iran is mental abuse in the form of domestic violence. This abuse includes harassing behavior towards the woman to disparage her, preventing her from meeting her relatives, prevent her from studying or working outside the home and imprisoning her in the house. Studies have shown that low level of education in women, insecurity of jobs, psychiatric disorders of men, and coercive marriage for women were associated with an increased risk of domestic violence. One major reason for greater incidence of violence against women is that psychological abuse in not considered as violence and women are not protected by law. In fact an old belief in Iranian traditional culture is that “women should sacrifice themselves and tolerate all types of maltreatment meted out to them”.

Violence against women is a very important issue and an international phenomenon. It is a result of gender discrimination and oppression specifically in patriarchal cultures and it is this discrimination that prevents men and women from having equality in all aspects of life. Violence against women is a very important issue and an international phenomenon. It is a result of gender discrimination and oppression specifically in patriarchal cultures and it is this discrimination that
prevents men and women from having equality in all aspects of life. In Iran, too there exists a patriarchal family structure where the man is the head of the family. The families are male dominated and the women are supposed to do what the men want of them. In relation to violence in the selected films, both films clearly portray exploitation of women and violence against women in a patriarchal system. In Two Women, the men in Fereshteh's life carry out various kinds of emotional and mental forms of violence against her. Her father forces her to discontinue her studies and get married to a man not of her choice. Her stalker Hassan is responsible for ruining her life. Her husband is a negative and suspicious person and forbids her to study and achieve her goals. He continually controls her, imprisons her at home and doesn't allow her to even read a book. He abuses her verbally, emotionally and mentally. It is worth noting that when she goes to court to apply for a divorce, she cannot prove her sufferings from mental violence. Therefore, Fereshteh suffers a lot from men's violence in different stages of her life – as a daughter of a dominating father, as a wife of an unfeeling husband and as a woman in society.

In the case of Killing Rabid Dogs also we observe many forms of violence against women. Golrokh is manipulated by her husband and despite her efforts to help him, he ultimately divorces her. In the process of helping her husband, she has to meet different men who perpetrate different types of violence against her. She gets assaulted many times and in many ways. Many of them suggest that she sleep with them, others humiliate her and she even gets raped. Thus, some impose physical injuries on her while others abuse her verbally and emotionally.

In conclusion one can see that both films represent the present realities of the women in Iranian society. They critique gender hierarchies and patriarchal ideologies (structure) in narrative cinema. These films portray women both as victimized and as empowered. To some extent the protagonists may not succeed in beating the system. But it is important that they fight it by breaking their silence and stepping forward to change the conditions. The effort, therefore, is to show women in empowering roles thus showcasing the twin phenomena of oppression and overcoming of oppression through films.

6. Sociological analysis

In view of the above, let us explore how women’s oppression, revolt and ultimately, deliverance have been shown through different storylines of the two films. In Two Women, Fereshteh, the protagonist is portrayed as a victim of the traditional society characterized by the suppression and passivity of women. She is depicted as being oppressed by the three men in her life, her father, her stalker and her husband, all of who contribute to her miserable existence. She gradually loses her identity and become a victim of domination, violence and dogmatic social beliefs. However, at the end of the film when she is left alone, she does show a little spark by chalking out a plan for her future life which includes resuming her studies and taking up employment to look after her children.

Killing Rabid Dogs traces the story of Golrokh who despite being cheated on by her husband, tries to save him from prison due to her emotional bond with him. In this process, she is shown as
being exploited by men of different kinds, physically and emotionally. The depiction of her struggle with the traditional dominating men is actually symbolic of her fight with the patriarchal structure, which gives her only pain and anguish. This film also ends on a positive note despite her being deceived by her husband once again.

In two films, women who have led unhappy lives search for liberation from societies ruled by men. They suffer from the injustices heaped on them by the patriarchal system but choose not to be viewed as victims. Instead, they all strive to change their dependent and subordinated positions. They go through a lot of hardship in their lives but decide to rebel against the society by making efforts to impose their own will and demands on their relations with men, both in the private and public spheres. They are presented as changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing women towards self assured assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands.

After discussion about the storyline, concentrating on the major sub-themes will lead us to comprehend the main concepts of the two films. Let us now discuss the commonalities and differences in the films in terms of the sub-themes which are related to social structure.

6.1. Patriarchy

One of the important themes tackled by two films is patriarchy. Patriarchal society may be defined as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women. Obviously patriarchal values influence women's lives. Gender inequality is rooted in the system of patriarchy. The two films under study show that there are some strict social norms which have been laid down by men in as per the patriarchal ideology. This kind of set-up expects the women to obey the social traditions and norms. In this system a woman is oppressed and controlled by her father, later by her husband and finally by society. This fact highlights inequality in gender relations as exhibiting a domination-submission pattern. System of patriarchy demands a subjugated woman to submit quietly to the trauma of her oppression. These films demonstrate that gender injustice is based on the existing culture in the form of patriarchy. They try to reveal that how women are unprotected from the domination and abuse prevalent in this system.

Fereshteh and Golrokh, are all presented as women living in the clutches of traditional and oppressive set-ups. They are not presented with any options by their societies. If they don’t accept men's rules they are punished. Patriarchy in Two Women has been shown through the males controlling the direction that the lives of woman take. It focuses on the issue of gender inequality by showing that all men have the right to make decision for a woman which she has to accept unconditionally. The film focuses on gender stereotyping of woman as passive and obedient. In Killing Rabid Dogs, patriarchy is depicted through the exploitation and manipulation of women. Most of the men in this film have a traditional mind-set and lose no opportunity of insulting the heroine Golrokh and rubbing in the fact that women are inferior beings.
6.2. Gender Stereotyping

The studied films have provided us with certain gender stereotypes. The concept of womanhood in patriarchal system has been divided to two categories as "good woman" and "bad woman". The former include women who are submissive, sacrificing, conforming to the social norms, even if they violate their rights. The latter image includes women who are non-conformist and who dare to question the patriarchal values.

These films provide us with characterization of good women as those who are chaste, submissive, weak, traditional, uneducated, faithful wives, sacrificing mothers, dependent on patriarchal authority and accepting social norms, and bad women as those who are strong, educated, talented, independent, rebellious and fighting for their rights. In Two Women, we find depiction of a dutiful and passive woman as daughter and wife. In Killing Rabid Dogs, the focus is on chastity and faithfulness.

Men in all selected films are depicted as typical traditional males. They are mostly aggressive, dominant, suppressive and abusive, not allowing women to have their own voice. They treat women as the second and weaker sex whose only task is to bow to their men’s will and fulfill their needs. Men are shown as being financially powerful and thus believing they can dominate and exploit women. They don’t believe in equal rights of man and woman and feel threatened by progressive and educated woman. Thus it is noteworthy that male directors have tried to an extent to deconstruct the conception of womanhood and break the traditional stereotyping of women in their films while female directors from both countries concentrate on providing us with the traditional stereotypes of women in their films.

It is also notable that in the films helmed by women directors, the female characters other than the main protagonists are also represented as being part of the patriarchal structure. Fereshteh’s mother and mother-in-law are shown to be as oppressive as the men in the films. This is a clear indicator of the fact that the women directors believe that in a patriarchal set-up both men and women are socialized into accepting the dominant social norms and in that sense are equally subject to the dominant ideology.

6.3. Violence

Violence against women as a crucial but controversial sub-theme is depicted in the two films under study. In Two Women, the protagonist is victim of an abusive marriage. She has a dominant husband who dominates over her, emotionally abuses her and doesn’t let her have her own choice to live. The notion of violence is shown to exist more in emotional and verbal form. In Killing Rabid Dog, the main character is also abused emotionally by her husband and physically and verbally by different men whom she comes across in the course of the film. Thus abuse and violence (physical and emotional) is depicted in the two films. But interestingly enough both Iranian films show violence as being perpetrated by men.
7. Conclusion

The general purpose of this study was to investigate the interrelation of gender, women and cinema in the context of Iranian films. Our attempt was to study films in the context of theories related to social structure and feminist perspectives on media and films. Through the first, the attempt was to determine to what extent films under study presented a narrative that not only reflected the traditional structural elements, but also went on to reproduce it and to what extent did they try to counter the structure through the portrayal of women. Through the discussion of the feminist film criticism, too, similar questions were raised – whether films depict women as objects or do they provide an alternative to traditional images. These issues were to be examined in terms of structural sub-themes: patriarchy, gender stereotyping, caste/social class system and violence. Moreover, women's issues portrayed through the gazes of women and men directors were examined. For this study we selected two Iranian films namely Two Women and Killing Rabid Dogs. By examining the representation of women in Iranian cinema with the help of film criticism theory and literature on structure we have tried to unearth the importance of emerging women's cinema.

Feminist film theory considers production of more and more women centric films a necessary step in enhancing women’s importance not only in films but in society at large. When we look at the films studied by us, this does not however, seem to be true. The first question which comes to our mind is that are the selected films really women's centric films? Undoubtedly both films are supposed to fall in the category of women’s films. Looking at these films critically, we realize that just because their stories are about women and the main characters are women we should not call them women's films. In no way do they provide an encouraging picture of or for women. The protagonists are shown as suffering and defeated beings throughout the films, the only silver lining being that they don’t lose hope. As Smith (Thornham, 1999) has argued that in films women, even as central characters, are shown as confused or helpless, in danger or passive or as purely sexual beings. Consistent with this study, we can say that woman characters of the selected films are not being depicted as being empowered but only as being oppressed. In both films women come across by and large as weaklings who for most of the time in the film tolerate men’s dominance and even physical violence and it is only in the last few minutes of the films where they show some signs of rebellion. For instance, let us take the case of Fereshteh, the protagonist in Two Women. In the last scene of the film she is portrayed as a woman who has lost everything as she says "I am a bird without any wings". Thus, the women directors Tahmineh Milani who is known as feminist filmmaker just represent women’s problems, pains and the dark face of women's lives not showing any real solution. In conclusion there are some important issues that need to be pointed out:

In the first place, it is important to state that in the media – the cinema and TV mainly – women are portrayed mostly as powerless, even voiceless. Projecting such stereotypes reinforces the influence of patriarchal values, which is dangerous when directed towards a vast illiterate audience. These perverse trends have been creating a wide dispersal of anti-women values. Most
women thus live in a state of threat and reprisal, coercion and fear (Kasturi and Mazumdar, 1994). Women must not be portrayed in stereotyped images that emphasize the passive, dismissive qualities of women and encourage them to play subordinate role in the family and society.

Secondly, from the analysis presented in the study, it becomes obvious that the social and political conditions in a society tend to determine treatment of the subject of the film. As we have seen, culture of the society affects how women are portrayed in films. One reason for that could be the political milieu in Iran where films that touch controversial subjects and deal with the subject in an irreverent or non-conformist manner are banned and their makers imprisoned – a fate that did befall one of the directors of the selected films. Hence, even while tackling women’s subjects, the directors have to be careful in choosing what to show and what to simply imply. Therefore, in both the Iranian films the women have been depicted as being more tolerant and choose to adapt to their circumstances rather than show any strong rebellion, except in the concluding part of the narrative.

Thirdly, when we began this study, we assumed that the gender of the director would play a key role in influencing how the films would be handled. Accordingly, we expected women directors to focus more on women's agency rather than structural elements. But we could not find this aspect in their films. In fact, it was interesting to note that there was no substantial difference between the male and female directors in the way they depicted structure. In all films we could see the typical male and female stereotypes and the portrayal of the patriarchal structure dominating not only the life of the women characters but also the narrative of the film. This makes it clear that in film circles all over the world it is the male gaze that rules the cinematic narratives. De Beauvoir (1988) had described how representation of the world in cinema, like the world itself, is the work of men which they describe from their own point of view, which then is confused with the absolute truth not only by the men but also the women. Much later what can be further added to this is that this male gaze is not limited to the male directors but is very much a part of the women directors’ work as well. The explanation is simple. Women directors, despite their desire to produce works that deal with women’s issues, are themselves unable to transcend the cultural value structure that pervades the society in which they have been raised and in which they live.

In conclusion, we would like to re-iterate that the application of the structure and agency debate in this study was done with the aim of extending film analysis, especially the study of women’s portrayal, from the usual psychoanalytical and semiotic approaches to a more sociological examination. Also, through the film we tried to touch upon the issue of subjugation of women prevalent in male dominated societies. In the long run, the only effective answer to violence against women is the breakdown of patriarchy, the empowerment of women, and the democratization of society. Further, since so much of discrimination becomes internalized as cultural values, cultural action and educational interventions are imperative to break down existing gender stereotypes fostered by patriarchy, both in films and in real life.
References


