Monsters, Slackers, Lovers: Exploring Cultural Identity in Iranian Diasporic Cinema 2007-2017

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Abstract

This study examines how Iranian cultural identity is explored through themes and aesthetics in the films of contemporary diasporic Iranian films (2007-2017). Taking cues from the first globally successful film made in the diaspora, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007), I use a postcolonial cultural studies as well as film studies approach to critically analyse specific films released in the English-speaking 'West' in this decade: Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2009), Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance* (2011), Tina Gharavi's *I am Nasrine* (2012), Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) and Babak Anvari's *Under the Shadow* (2016). This discussion includes my own original feature screenplay *Lady Land* which is also the creative component of the doctoral project. Influenced by the themes and visual signifiers explored in the films above and buttressed by academic scholarship on issues of exile and diaspora, the screenplay aims to illustrate how a marginalised Iranian immigrant "comes of age" navigating contentious notions of home, belonging and hybrid identities. The theoretical framework for much of this study draws on Hamid Naficy's explorations of exilic and diasporic cinema, which he termed 'accented cinema'. However, unlike the filmmakers in Naficy's research, my study focuses on the 1.5 and 2nd generation of Iranian filmmakers who spent their formative years, or were even born, in the diaspora.

Prevalent in these films is a sense of alienation and marginalisation, which, I argue, are represented in the films through themes, narratives and characters. The protagonists represent cultural figures such as the vampire, jinn,

‘slacker’ and ‘illicit’ lover. The use of the veil becomes an important visual motif that both liberates and oppresses, as does the use of gendered spaces, cultural blurring of horror and Western genres and the destabilization of ‘East and West’. I conclude that these films explore Iranian cultural identity within the diaspora as a way to reflect their own experiences as hyphenated identities.

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Monsters, Slackers, Lovers: Exploring Cultural Identity in Iranian Diasporic Cinema, 2007-2017

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Introduction

In 2002, I turned 21, and, as is the custom in New Zealand, I held a large celebration for this milestone. Included in those celebrations was my purchase of a one-way ticket to London, UK, which is another practice for privileged young New Zealanders, to move to the other side of the world on what is known as their 'overseas experience' or O.E. This is made easier by the visa system allowing New Zealanders to live and work in the UK for up to two years. For some it becomes a time to visit Europe, a type of Antipodean contemporary Grand Tour. For me, it was a time of reflection, particularly on the idea of home and homeland whenever a stranger asked me that complicated and rather ambiguous question: "Where are you from?". If I answered, "New Zealand" they would squint their eyes in confusion and follow with "Are you Māori?". If I replied that I am from "Iran", they would immediately congratulate me on my "excellent English". I had similar reactions in the US where the mention of Iran was nearly always understood while New Zealand conjured up odd geographical guesses like, "Is that near New Orleans?". These conversations tormented me as I never could find the 'right' answer. I was born in Iran but lived the majority of my childhood and adult life in New Zealand. Therefore, the question became: is my home the place where I was born but know little about? Or is my home the place to which my family immigrated and where I hold the most memories? The confusion surrounding these terms, homeland, home, and even hostland, migrant, and immigrant,

constantly haunted me and began surfacing in both my creative and academic works.

My Master's thesis short film, *Iran in Transit* (2012) was an auto-ethnographic documentary that followed my journey back to Iran from New Zealand for the first time in decades. The initial premise was to explore the idea of a homeland. I was born in Iran but moved to New Zealand at six years old, spending the next 30 or so years in Auckland. Based on popular rhetoric, Iran would be considered my homeland as it is my ancestral home and many of its cultural values are still with me, such as the language, customs and even some of the traditions. The film, however, showed the challenges that awaited me once I went to Iran. It was not the homecoming I expected. Instead, I felt as marginalised as I had felt growing up in New Zealand: my Farsi was poor, I did not look like others due to the way I dressed, and Iran felt rather alien. The film ends on a type of revelation. Over wide shots of a bustling Dubai airport, my voice-over concludes, "Perhaps I could go so far as to say that there's no place like home because it doesn't really exist. Or perhaps I have more than one homeland, or perhaps I have yet to find one" (00:20:00 - 00:30:00). My home was Iran and New Zealand. After all, I am a dual citizen and the film allowed me to accept this duality and, in a sense, celebrate it by noting that a homeland is not necessarily one place. It made me realise that I am both Iranian and a New Zealander.

This idea laid the foundations for this PhD study. I began to view films made by other Iranians in the diaspora and realised that they too grappled with similar questions around displacement and hyphenated identities.

0.1 Research Design and Methodology

This PhD study is significant in three main ways: it includes and extends the understandings of Iranian migrant cultural identity, using diaspora studies to focus on specific case studies of contemporary films made in the Iranian diaspora between 2007-2017 including Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2009), Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance* (2011), Tina Gharavi's *I am Nasrine* (2012), Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) and Babak Anvari's *Under the Shadow* (2016). I look at the theme of marginalisation, which is presented and represented in the films as a way to explore hyphenated characters (at times as extensions of the filmmakers themselves); and, secondly, I use the development of an original feature screenplay, *Lady Land,* and locate it within this same group of films thematically. The foundation of this study lies in the following key research question:

- In what ways do films made in the Iranian diaspora thematically show marginality and belonging within exile and diaspora? In what ways do they show a sense of 'Iranian-ness'? And how do these themes then inform my own creative practice as an Iranian-born practitioner living in the diaspora?

Further questions to explore include:

- What is the significance of all these films being produced and exhibited during the decade between 2007-2017?

- Taking on Hamid Naficy's work on exile and diaspora cinema, how do these films follow his model of 'accented cinema' and how do they subvert them?
- As films centring on women protagonists, in what ways are women represented and explored through the themes?
- Using a screenwriting methodology, how do I connect my own work, specifically my feature screenplay, to these same themes around marginality, "Iranian-ness" and living in a diaspora?

In her article "A 'Logical' Explanation of Screen Production as Method-Led Research", featured in *Screen Practice Research* (2018), Susan Kerrigan looks in detail at how a method-led research or creative practice study in screenwriting can begin. For Kerrigan, utmost importance is placed on the "philosophical position" (12) of the researcher regarding their ontological and epistemological stance, which underpins their methodology. Ontology is about being and *what is already out there,* such as existing literature and scholarship. The epistemology of a researcher is more individualistic and asks *what and how can we know about this knowledge?* (15). Using the definitions of social research theorist Alan Bryman, there are various terms and points of view to consider, depending on the researcher's philosophical standing. For example, a researcher in the natural sciences relies on facts and objective truths whereas one in the Social Sciences and Humanities would be more open to opinion and interpretation. Bryman terms the latter stance constructionism, which relies more on subjectivity than straight facts. As Kerrigan notes, "The point here is that my ontology, or my understanding of what is out there to know, is my belief in a socially constructed

reality that is specific to a particular culture and time" (20). My own position in this study, which is in the social sciences and humanities, is constructionist, whereby I am not relying on objective truths but rather more subjective interpretations and opinions, with the film texts providing support for the critical point of view. Therefore, my methodologies will reflect a qualitative rather than quantitative approach. However, I also incorporate creative practice, and therefore adopt a mixed method approach.

Creative practice research is expanding and has been in place in the creative arts for some time. Indeed, it is as new as Screen Studies itself. Jill Nelmes notes its rise in the 'West' in the 1950s with the French publication *Cahiers du Cinema,* which also spearheaded the popularity of the auteur and cine-eastes of the Nouvelle Vague (108). Screenwriting theorist Craig Batty notes the influence of the PhD in creative writing that incorporates a creative component, "Quite simply, a practice-based PhD should be about practice; the PhD in Creative Writing should be about creative writing, where students research and understand factors that are relevant to the act of writing" ("Unpacking critical theories to enhance creative practice" 14). A creative component allows self-reflection from the author themselves, which, above all else, allows a deeper understanding of the approaches and decisions made in the creative work.

In their Introductory chapter in *Screen Production Research* (2018), Craig Batty and Susan Kerrigan note the ambiguity and even confusion the PhD with creative practice can incite, notably with regard to the focus of the study.

> Methodologically, creative practice research demands that the creative work is either the result of research and therefore performs the research findings (practice-based research, research-led practice), or is used as a site for systematically gathering reflections on the process of doing/making, in order to contribute knowledge to the practice of doing/making (practice-led research, practice-as-research). (7)

Batty and Kerrigan state that the importance of the research lies in the research questions and whether the focus is on the process itself or on the “knowledge contained” in the finished product (6). For a practice-led or practice as research PhD, the research informs the writing or the focus is on the practice itself, that is, the process of writing and development. Taking on Batty and Kerrigan’s above definition, the core focus of this PhD study is not on the development of the practice but on the finished product, in this case a completed feature screenplay. As the University of Auckland’s doctorate statute from 2016 notes, “The presentation of a corpus of creative work allows for a particular theme to be investigated through one or more creative output alongside a written thesis”. It is not so much practice-led research as it is a PhD *with* a creative component. As such I have decided to use a textual analytical approach with a focus on theme, so the ‘practice’ is how the films I have chosen to analyse influence my own practice.

Batty’s own doctoral study, *When What You Want is Not What You Need': An Exploration of the Physical and Emotional Journeys, Undertaken by a Protagonist in a Mainstream Feature Film* (2009), used a screen studies

approach with a screenwriting methodology to explore the importance of the characters emotional journey and overall theme within screenplays, specifically his feature screenplay *Offside.* For Batty, this subjective analysis of his own work as a screenwriter was one of the core aspects of his study as it allowed a higher level of self-reflection and development: “The more I reflected on my experiences – of both teaching and my own screenwriting practice – the more I realised I needed to explore the emotional depths of screen fiction. This was something that would not only benefit my practice as a screenwriter, but also greatly benefit my teaching” (“A Screenwriter's Journey into Theme” 111). This exploration can also help to give all practitioners involved in the development of film, such as producers, directors and other production staff, a defined and unified overview of the project.

Similar to Batty, analysing and informing the theme and emotional journey of the characters across several films seemed a natural fit to my screenplay as I had already written a first draft before beginning my official research. I will be using a screenwriting methodology to look at how the screenplay can be a product of practice rather than focusing solely on the practice itself. My study differs slightly in that the focus of the investigation is the work and not the screenwriter’s role, although the process and development will be looked at in Chapter Five. Despite this, as Batty notes, my study will still be “a negotiation between creative and critical, practice and theory, doing and thinking” (*When what you want is not what you need* 3). The methodology of this study is a research-led practice whereby the creative work is the “result of research” (Batty and Kerrigan 6). As a way to contribute new knowledge to this growing scholarship around research-led practice, I include a reflective critical analysis of

the screenplay and explain why certain creative decisions were made within its themes, narrative and characters. Some of these decisions were influenced by outside influences such as professional organisations like the New Zealand Film Commission or people, such as script consultants, and this too will be looked at.

Batty, alongside others (Kerrigan, Nelmes, McDonald, Nannicelli), argues that similarly to prose, a screenplay can and should exist as its own completed text, that is, as “an artefact with its own agenda” ("Unpacking critical theories to enhance creative practice” 23), as “ontologically autonomous” (Nannicelli 135), and as being “worthy of study rather than being viewed as merely the precursor to the completed feature length film” (Nelmes 107). This study disagrees with this as the screenplay is also in professional development in industry in order to be produced into a film. The screenplay is still changing and more drafts are being written, even after this study has been completed, therefore it cannot be a finished artefact. My intention is to direct this screenplay in the future; therefore, using Batty’s reasoning that reflecting on the product will deepen my understanding of it, allows me to use this as a way to unify others in the development process to “tell the same story” (Batty, “A Screenwriter's Journey into Theme” 111). The films chosen in this study are also made by writer/directors with minimum outside influence (such as would be the case with big budget and/or studio films), so the way they navigate themes becomes the core focus of my research. Their screenplays were not the completed product and so the films will be the texts studied rather than their screenplays.

0.2 Methods and Definitions

As noted above, using a screenwriting methodology with a focus on quantitative and creative practice, my choices reflect a constructionist point of view. The methods used will be visual data collection and analysis. Using a film studies approach I will gather research through textual analysis of specific films made and released in the Iranian diaspora during a specific time. The research and analysis will focus on similar themes found in the works, which then informs and influences the themes, characters and narratives in my own creative practice, the feature screenplay *Lady Land.* This influence is then critically reflected upon as a way to understand the decisions made in the screenplay's development; although the process of screenwriting is also explored, it does not form the sole focus of this study.

This study combines film studies and screenwriting methodologies to create the two parts of the study: the thesis and the creative component (screenplay). The thesis informs and influences the creative product through themes. For the creative component there will be no exegesis (as is expected in some other creative PhDs); rather, I reflect on my findings as they relate directly to the screenplay and briefly look at its process and development, particularly as a way to locate it and myself in the greater realm of diaspora films made in Aotearoa/New Zealand. For the thesis, I use postcolonial theories of exile and diaspora from a film studies approach, researching and analysing the selected film texts, relevant academic writing, and also a mixture of other print and online

media such as newspapers and magazine interviews, reviews and online videos, which give insights into the production and reception of the films in question.

My literature review in the next chapter engages with scholarship focusing on exile and diaspora. Exile has its origins in banishment from the homeland. Exiles often yearn to return home, but this desire is not always fulfilled. To be in exile, then, can mean to exist in a liminal state where one is in-between the homeland and the place of exile. One of the most prominent scholars on exile and diaspora, particularly that of Iranians, is Hamid Naficy. His books, *The Making of Exile Cultures* (1993) and *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), focus on film- and television-makers in exile and in the diaspora. Naficy uses the work undertaken by the earliest study on Iranian exiles, Mehdi Bozorgmehr and Georges Sabagh's "High Status Immigrants: A Statistical Profile of Iranians in the United States" (1988), which focuses on Iranians who moved to North America (and some parts of Western Europe) between 1979-1988. Naficy's work on exilic and diasporic cinema explores a wide range of films and directors (not only Iranian) who had all emigrated to the 'West'. The majority of Naficy's work also focuses on Iranians in the US but it will still provide a framework for this study.

Exile often evolves into diaspora, which is less about isolation than community. Naficy argues that exiles hold a direct relationship with the homeland and desires to return, yet diaspora is "multi-sited" (*An Accented Cinema* 14). Like exiles, those in a diaspora have an identity back home and their decisions and identity will always be influenced by this affiliation. However, unlike exile, the relationship of a diaspora to the homeland is rendered more inclusive by including other diasporic communities: "As a result, plurality, multiplicity, and

hybridity are structured in dominance among the diasporans, whilst among the political exiles, binarism and duality rule" (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 14). Therefore, when thinking about exile and diaspora, I will mainly focus on diaspora and hyphenated identities. The numerous Iranians who fled into exile as a result of the 1979 Revolution, for example, stayed abroad and have now become part of the larger Iranian diaspora. I analyse the cultural output of the Iranian diaspora, namely the success of women's memoirs in the early 2000s, which was the predecessor to the 'mini-boom' of the films of the Iranian diaspora. Language is one of the major factors that link the films in this study, both to each other and to the Iranian diaspora. All of the films use the Farsi language as either the central language (*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, *Under the Shadow*, *Women without Men*, *Circumstance*), or bilingually, where it is used sporadically with the main language, English (*Appropriate Behavior*, *I am Nasrine* and *Lady Land*). Cinema enables these stories to be shared amongst a film-savvy diaspora, particularly as the filmmakers themselves are all well-versed in global film grammar. They all studied film studies, film production or visual arts at universities outside of Iran and their knowledge[1], experience and access to resources are evident in the content and form of their films. Unlike the earlier Iranian exile and diaspora films from the 1980s and 1990s that Naficy deems 'amateurish', these more recent films show experience, skill and, most importantly, high production values due to

[1] *A Girl's* Ana Lily Amirpour graduated from UCLA's Film and Television School while *Appropriate Behavior's* Desiree Akhavan studied directing at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, as did Maryam Keshavarz whose film *Circumstance* was made as part of her MFA. *Under the Shadow's* Babak Anvari completed a BA in Film and TV production at the University of Westminster. *I am Nasrine's* Tina Gharavi did not study at film school but worked in the film industry. As noted, Neshat began as a visual artist. My own credentials include a BA in Film, Media and TV Studies and an MA in Screen Production from the University of Auckland as well as a year-long graduate study in screenwriting and film production at the University of Southern California.

access to resources (including cheaper, newer technologies). These films have been chosen for this study based on four factors:

1. They were all made and released between 2007-2017, directly after the international success of diasporic Iranian women's memoirs. Books such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003) and Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004) became international best sellers and were critically acclaimed outside of the diaspora, and as such created a "boom" (Malek, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 367) in stories from the Iranian diaspora being published. 2007 saw the release of Satrapi's film adaptation of *Persepolis* (co-directed with Vincent Paronnaud), which was one of the first films produced in the Iranian diaspora to be critically acclaimed and achieve box office success internationally. The film won the Jury Prize at the 2007 Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Animated Feature (2008) and Best Film Not in the English Language at the British Academy Film Awards (2008). I argue that the success of these memoirs and of the film *Persepolis* allowed for a type of 'mini-boom' of films made in the diaspora, particularly ones centring on women characters.
2. All of the selected films focus on Iranian women protagonists. All of the filmmakers are Iranians (Iranian-born or with parents who are Iranian) and first-time feature filmmakers. With the exception of *Under the Shadow*, they are all made by women filmmakers.
3. They are all independently made (or written) in the Iranian diaspora, specifically in the UK, US and New Zealand.

4. And finally, with the exception of my screenplay, they were all released globally and garnered critical and commercial acclaim beyond the Iranian diaspora. They were all theatrically released, premiering at A-List film festivals[2] and garnering awards. For example, the films made by or centred on Iranian-American comedian Maz Jobrani, *Shirin in Love* (2014) and *Jimmy Vestwood: Amerikan Hero* (2016) were not released theatrically outside of the US and so have not been included.

These factors help locate this study within a specific decade and, as such, certain other films are only briefly explored. For example, Iranian-born Australian, Granaz Moussavi's *My Tehran for Sale* (2009) follows actress Marzieh, who can only pursue her passion in secret in Iran, and yearns to emigrate to Australia. The film will be referenced, but thematically it is not so much a representation of an exploration of hyphenated identities as it is about exile and life within Iran. In contrast, Desiree Akhavan's *Appropriate Behavior* (2014) focuses on a young Iranian-American Shirin, living in Brooklyn. Though the film stars the filmmaker and is influenced in some part by her own life as an Iranian-American, thematically it is more about Shirin coming to terms with a romantic break up rather than negotiating her identity as an Iranian-American. Other films have been left out completely. For example, films made about Iranians by non-Iranian directors in the US such as *Rosewater* (Stewart, 2014), *Argo* (Affleck, 2012) and *Septembers of Shiraz* (Blair, 2015) are omitted as my study explores the links between the filmmaker's own hyphenated or diasporic identity. Similarly, *The*

[2] The New Zealand Film Commission categorizes different levels of film festivals as 'A-List' such as historically established festivals like Cannes, Berlin, Sundance, Toronto, Venice, London and Melbourne (NZFC).

Stoning of Soraya M. (Nowrasteh, 2008) was also omitted as it had no link to exile or diaspora. Based on the 1990 book by French-Iranian journalist Freidoune Sahebjam, the true story focuses on a woman who was stoned for adultery in a remote Iranian village.

Persepolis (2007) was the first film to incorporate these themes, and, due to its global success, became the catalyst for other Iranian diasporic films to emerge. Since the 1979 Revolution and more recently 9/11 and the 'War on Terror', Iran and the Middle East in general have been of global interest in the news and internationally, particularly in the 'West'. Women's memoirs grew enormously directly after 2001. I argue that these memoirs and continuing interest in Iran allowed for a surge of films to be made in the diaspora in 2007-2017. This link to the 9/11 attacks and focus on the Middle East will be looked at in more detail in the next chapter.

In their article, "How Does One Do a Practice-Based PhD in Filmmaking?" Larra A. Anderson and Ann Tobin note the key difference between the Master of Arts in Filmmaking and the PhD by centring on a potential model of a practice-based PhD in filmmaking to engage future doctoral students. The MA student focuses on learning to create a work (such as learning how to write a screenplay) and reflects on its process in an exegesis (using methods such as a development journal), while the PhD candidate already has the knowledge of the how but takes this to a more critical and analytical level. The article also acknowledges the importance of the visual and aural in film studies and this is linked to my own decision to focus on the final films rather than their working screenplays in my textual analysis:

> It [the practice-based PhD in filmmaking] is about the art of *moving* image after all, and not one about other written texts - it makes sense that some of its primary references would involve movement. (957)

The importance of the moving image and the screenplay as a step amidst the process of making a film is important when thinking about the ongoing discussions within screenwriting discourse.

This self-referential study will be vital in adding more knowledge to the act of screenwriting in diasporic contexts, particularly given a transnational narrative perspective. Craig Batty emphasizes the importance of this in a paper supporting one of his own Japanese-British screenwriter students who undertook a similar study: "In other words, by embracing the process of creative practice research, the knowing screenwriter is self-aware moment-to-moment as he creates. That is to say, previously taken-for-granted notions or unthinkingly asserted concepts are polemicized in the screenwriting process" (Batty and McAuley para. 29). This transnational perspective is particularly important in adding new voices to an overtly Eurocentric field of scholarship.

In sum, the combination of screenplay and thesis in this practice-led research aims to contribute to the growing scholarship around both film studies and screenwriting discourse as well as more broadly to the ongoing work centring on creative outputs in the Iranian diaspora.

0.3 The Film Texts

The films and filmmakers chosen for this study represent the 1.5- and second-generation of Iranians living in the diaspora, that is, those who migrated as children or were born in the diaspora. One exception is Shirin Neshat, who is one of the most well-known filmmakers in my study and the only person who emigrated as a teenager at 17 in 1975, prior to the Iranian Revolution. Neshat began working as a visual artist working in the US and revisiting Iran in the 1990s (MacDonald and Neshat 628-629) until she went into self-imposed exile in 1996 (Palmer-Mehta 82). I include her as she was one of the first Iranian artists in the 'West' whose work was both critically and commercially successful outside of the diaspora. Neshat's work explores the notion of being in exile and of being in-between, but her first feature film, *Women without Men* (2009), combines many of the same themes of marginality prevalent in the more diasporic works of the other films in this study. *Women without Men* is based on an Iranian novel in 1989 of the same name by Shahrnush Parsipur, a magical realist story that centres on five very different women who represent different societal levels in 1950s Iran. We begin with Munis, who refuses to marry a suitor, much to the dismay of her brother, Amir Khan. In retaliation she kills herself, but her ghost is resurrected by her friend Faezeh, who follows Munis to the city centre where protests are growing against the CIA-backed coup against Prime Minister Mosaddeq. After a sexual assault, Faezeh and Munis make their way to an orchard in the countryside that was recently bought by the upper-class Fakhri, who has left her husband. Fakhri helps Faezeh as well as the quiet Zarin, a former sex worker

who fled her brothel after seeing a man without a face. Each woman finds their solace within this orchard and, for once decide their own fate. The film uses a feminist lens to explore how space is gendered. Public spaces are overrun by men who ignore the women, while private spaces, such as gardens, become sanctuaries for the women, that is, until they are intruded upon by men who bring violence by proxy. Neshat herself has claimed that the film was made for a 'Western' audience, namely, to educate them not only on an important historic event, the involvement of the US and British in Iranian politics, but also as a way to subvert negative stereotypes of Iran and its people (Palmer-Mehta 83). The objective to counteract negative media portrayals of Iran is a theme of all the films in this study.

In contrast to Neshat, writer/director Maryam Keshavarz was born in the US to Iranian parents but spent summers in Iran, which provided the basis for her film *Circumstance* (2011). The story revolves around two best friends in Tehran who harbour a secret romantic love for each other: the wealthy Atafeh and the working- class orphan Shirin. Together they live a hedonistic life as a way to rebel against their boredom and the oppressive regime that dictates their lives in contemporary Iran. Conflict comes in the form of Atafeh's brother Mehran, a former drug addict turned religious zealot who begins spying on this family and the 'illicit' relationship between his sister and Shirin. After a traumatic arrest, Mehran forces Shirin to marry him, which tears the relationship apart, ending with Atafeh leaving for Dubai alone rather than with her lover, as originally imagined. The film blatantly criticises the Iranian state and idealises an escape to another country for both women. The film garnered its own fair share of criticism for not representing the 'real' Iran, but like the other films set in Iran, *Circumstance* is still

a film from the point of view of the diaspora and therefore its recreation of Iran is a simulation.

Iranian-born British Tina Gharavi's *I am Nasrine* (2012) follows Iranian siblings Nasrine and Ali, who leave Iran after Nasrine is arrested and raped by police officers. The two are thrust into exile in northern England where both of them, in their own ways, experience sexual awakenings with people from the local community. While Nasrine befriends local outcast Nichole, Ali tries to come to terms with his homosexuality. Tragedy occurs when Ali is killed in a knife attack and Nasrine is left alone to contemplate her future in the UK. Her parents cannot immigrate to join her due to the restrictions after 9/11 so Nasrine decides to stay on alone. *I am Nasrine* revolves around marginal figures. Nasrine and Ali are refugees, who bond with other outsiders such as the nomadic Leigh, who becomes Nasrine's lover. However, unlike in *Circumstance*, the idealisations of the 'West' are not as utopian as the greatest tragedies for Nasrine and Ali occur there.

The British-born Iranian-American Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) follows an unnamed, loner female vampire who preys on 'bad' men in a fictional Iranian town of Bad City. The Girl is a loner who is deeply obsessed with popular culture and finds redemption by rescuing a local sex worker Atti. The Girl becomes a type of vigilante, killing the 'bad' men and falling in love with the good one, fellow recluse Arash, who has his own problems with his heroin-addicted father Hossein. Together, the Girl and Arash find a type of youthful solace in each other. Though the film is spoken completely in Farsi, it is set in Southern California, combining both the American and Iranian worlds together just as it mixes the Western and horror genre. In fact, the vampire as a

cultural figure is also a liminal one that blurs social and cultural norms and crosses borders. As such, it is through her that the film explores themes around marginality and duality.

Iranian-born British filmmaker Babak Anvari's *Under the Shadow* (2016) also uses the horror genre, but this time the story is located in Iran during the Iran/Iraq war of the 1980s. When her husband is drafted into the army during the war, Shideh is left confined within her Tehran apartment with her young daughter Dorsa. During nightly air raids, a missile rips through the top apartment, killing a neighbour. The missile also brings a jinn (Islamic curse) that begins to haunt Shideh and Dorsa. Terrified, Shideh must challenge the jinn and her own strength as a mother to ultimately save herself and her daughter. The film uses the metaphor of the jinn, another liminal cultural figure, to explore the psychological trauma of war but also the fears surrounding motherhood.

The creative component of this thesis is my original feature screenplay *Lady Land*. The screenplay focuses on two young Iranian women, Samira and Fari, who grew up in Auckland, New Zealand. As self-confessed 'slackers', the women have never accomplished much in their lives, living in a permanent state of extended adolescence. Samira relies on her fantasies of the mythological Persian warrior Banu Ghoshap, naively believing that if she finds herself a 'one true love', she too will change her life for a better one. On Samira's 21st birthday, Samira and Fari decide to escape Auckland and live at Fari's aunt's commune in Wellington. Fari believes that the commune will provide respite from capitalist conformism, but Samira harbours a secret desire to attend a New Year's Eve party with an Israeli backpacker, Erez, whom she believes could be her 'true love'. The road trip tests their friendship to the point where they must go their

separate ways in order to become fully-fledged adults. The film is a comedy about the ending of a co-dependent friendship and the beginning of independence for two women living in a dual world of hyphenated identities as Iranian-New Zealanders. The screenplay incorporates many of the themes found in the other texts, particularly the focus on marginal protagonists and cultural figures.

0.4 Chapter Overview

The Iranian diaspora is relatively new in comparison to other diasporas such as the African Caribbean and South Asian diasporas, which many theorists in the next chapter have focused on (Brah, Hall, Cohen). The Iranian diaspora also differs insofar as it is not a diaspora that was created through the direct effects of colonialism. Even though the Iranian diaspora covers the vast majority of the world geographically, from Australia to Germany to Saudi Arabia, my focus will be on the cultural output of the Iranian diaspora, specifically in the US, UK and New Zealand, as these films have had major successes beyond the Iranian diaspora and on the international stage, as evidenced by their nominations and wins for awards from mainstream institutions in the 'West'.

Chapter One and Chapter Two lay out the contextual and historical frameworks for the films in this study. Chapter One examines theories of exile, diaspora and hyphenated identities from a postcolonial perspective and reviews some of the more noted scholarship on these subjects from well-known theorists

such as Stuart Hall and Edward Said. There is a special focus on Naficy, whose work is consistently referred to throughout this study.

Chapter Two focuses on diaspora and hyphenated identities from an Iranian studies point of view. While Chapter One gives a brief introduction to the origins of Iranian cinema, Chapter Two focuses on the Iranian diaspora, which grew greatly after the 1979 Revolution and the war with Iraq that followed. The majority of Iranians fled to North America and Europe and established, as a result, a global community. Due to the ongoing focus of global news, Iran has continually been in the international media; events such as 9/11 and 'The War on Terror' have helped to strengthen an appetite for stories and information from the Iranian community. This gave rise to the 2000's women's memoir 'boom', which has provided the focus for much scholarship by theorists such as Amy Malek, Nima Naghibi and Farzaneh Milani. I argue that the success of these memoirs helped pave the way for the influx of Iranian diasporic films in the next decade. Those years saw the release of the films: *Persepolis* (2007), *Women without Men* (2009), *Circumstance* (2011), *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2012), *I am Nasrine* (2012), *Appropriate Behavior* (2014), and *Under the Shadow* (2017). My own screenplay, *Lady Land* was developed and written between 2015 and 2020.

Chapter Three and Chapter Four focus on the specific thematic details that link these films together. All of the films explore a sense of Iranian-ness, with their focus on Iranian characters (either by birth or culture) who are living a marginal existence. Chapter Three looks at the way each of the protagonists is marginalised. One of the major visual props that the majority of the films use to represent Iranian-ness is the veil. As all of the protagonists in the films are women, the veil becomes synonymous with being female and Iranian. The

chapter looks at the origins of the veil in Iranian history and culture and its relationship to Orientalism. I will explore how and why the veil is such a prominent tool in some of these films. *Under the Shadow* and *A Girl Walk Home Alone at Nig*ht (from here on referred to as *A Girl*) use a horror genre, which fits perfectly within Barbara Creed's concept of 'the monstrous feminine' where the woman in horror becomes both victim and villain. In *Under the Shadow*, Shideh, the protagonist, is haunted by jinn that also takes the form of a veiled woman. In *A Girl*, the story revolves around a veiled vampire. In both films, the 'monster' is a veiled woman. The veil has often been seen as an oppressive tool used against women, yet its origins and even its use in some of these films symbolises a type of liberation instead. This visual duality is a constant theme throughout my study. One of the strongest features of the films is their focus on marginalised women protagonists. The characters in *Lady Land* make their own self-imposed marginalisation within society whilst *Circumstance* has the protagonists revel in hedonism and rebellion against an authoritative state, and also against their own repressive family members.

Marginality is also symbolised through duality. Chapter Four explores duality in 'genre blends' whereby films such as *A Girl* play with utopian and dystopian spaces to signify living as a hyphenated identity, just as the main character does as a vampire living between life and death. *I am Nasrine* and *Circumstance* also use ideas of utopia and dystopia by reinforcing the binaries between 'East' and 'West'. *I am Nasrine* reveals the misconceptions of a utopian 'West' through tragedy while *Circumstance* critiques an oppressive 'East' that continually invades its citizen's lives and personal spaces. This duality in space is also acknowledged within private and public spaces, which are often gendered so

that women are restricted to only the private. *Women without Men* uses the analogy of the garden to replicate a woman's 'safe space', but one that is continually intruded upon by men. This space becomes a moveable one as the screenplay *Lady Land* takes place on the open road. This focus on transit and being in transit are commonplace with films in exile and diaspora due to their protagonists' restlessness and need to find a 'home'. However, this chapter also looks into the importance and difference of women-centred road films and those made in the Antipodes where roads often lead to dead ends.

Fusing the thesis with the creative component will be a discussion of the process of constructing the screenplay in Chapter Five. The origins of the screenplay, specifically from a thematic point of view will be looked at including my own personal intentions for the project. The chapter will also reflect on the challenges and process of developing the screenplay through the academy and industry as it incorporates some of the discussions brought forth from screenwriting discourse such as authorship and craft.

Finally, Chapter Six will look at the conclusions drawn from the earlier chapters and assess what has been learned from this 'mini-boom' of Iranian diasporic works centring on women as well as what the future could hold for further cultural output from Iranian artists living in the diaspora.

Chapter One: Theoretical Frameworks and Iranian History

The theoretical core of this study is based on postcolonial cultural studies, specifically theories on exile and diasporic cinema as they pertain to the Iranian diaspora. There is a substantial amount of scholarship on these theories and to attempt to incorporate it all would be beyond the scope of this study. For my purposes I have mainly stayed close to Hamid Naficy's writing on exile and diaspora and included works on hyphenated identities.

To begin with, I broaden my scope to incorporate important foundations that lead to diaspora and exile, namely scholarship surrounding nationalism and globalisation. Cultural theorists such as Benedict Anderson provide much thought on the formations of nation states particularly the idea of "imagined communities". Though Anderson's work centres on and is from a European point of view, it is possible to link ideas around imagined communities to those of a diaspora. An imagined community is one that believes a community exists but may not necessarily see or know everyone within that community. A diaspora functions in this way as not everyone in a diaspora knows everyone in that diaspora but know they exist, just as these films in this study show they do through the medium of film.

My intention with this chapter is to explore well-known works of postcolonial theories so as to be able to locate diaspora and exile within it. I

briefly look at the work of Stuart Hall on globalisation and Edward Said on exile which links to Naficy's work on exile and diaspora. For Naficy, exile is all about the relationship with the homeland above all else with a yearning to return. Exiles exist in liminal spaces, where they are in-between the homeland and 'hostland'. In contrast, a diaspora centres on the present and though there is a relationship with the homeland, there is also one with the 'hostland'. My use of quotation marks around words like 'hostland' is on purpose as I also detail the terminology I will be referring to and omitting in this study. For example, the binaries of 'East' and 'West' are explored, though, as noted, they are not without their problems as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam discuss in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994). I have also made a conscious effort to include a feminist lens whenever possible as the films in the study all focus on women protagonists and all, but one are made by women. Amy Malek and Farzaneh Milani are constantly referenced throughout this study as much of their work on Iranian cultural output has informed mine.

The majority of this study, however, draws upon Naficy's work in two key texts: *The Making of Exile Television* (1993) which looks at US based television in the Iranian diaspora in the 1980s and 1990s, and *An Accented Cinema* (2001). In *An Accented Cinema* Naficy focuses on films made by those in exile and diaspora and explores their similarities in style, theme and mode. For Naficy, these films are alternatives to the dominant cinema, in this case Hollywood, and so they are 'accented'. These films were independently made and distributed, receiving little reception. Naficy called this an 'interstitial mode'. The films in this study were all independently made but as I explore further in the study, they

received global attention and distribution, fusing the interstitial and dominant modes.

This type of blurring and blending is a common theme throughout which is symbolic of the very nature of the filmmakers and the films in being hybrids. Hybridity is a very broad term though I attempt to specify it in this study by referring to the hyphen. Hybridity means acknowledging and accepting the differences between the self and the diaspora, but for me, the hyphen adds a positive spin to it. A hyphen allows for an equal acceptance of both, such as the link to the diaspora and the 'homeland'. Referring to myself as an Iranian-New Zealander allows for an equal acceptance of both my Iranian heritage and the Iranian diaspora where I live, as well as the New Zealand aspect of my identity. The hyphenated identity is a way to celebrate this duality.

In order to situate these films in an Iranian diaspora, I also need to explore the history of this diaspora. As noted, the majority of Iranians fled during and just after the 1979 Revolution which ousted the Pahlavi monarchy and brought in the new Islamic Republic. Alongside detailing these key moments, I will also look at the changing face of Iranian cinema since its inception, which has not been without political influence as both the monarchy and Islamic regime saw its potential as a tool for their own ideologies.

1.1 Exile

Exile and diaspora cannot be explored without first considering their links to nation, nationhood and nationalism. According to one of the most well-known

historical scholars, Benedict Anderson, the very idea of nationhood is a contemporary one. His seminal work *Imagined Communities* (1983) defines nation as "an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign"(6). It is imagined because people within a community cannot know every person in that community, but they *imagine* that they exist. A nation exists literally due to borders, but since borders are forever changing one infers that other nations also exist. Both of these points are crucial when thinking about exile and diaspora. The Iranian diaspora, for example, relies on this assumption of an 'imagined community' as it is a community that resides in various nation states all across the world. Furthermore, not all of the diaspora comes directly from the nation state of Iran as many second- and third-generations in the diaspora are born and reside elsewhere but still link themselves to an Iranian identity (fully or partly).

Anderson traces the roots of modern-day nationhood to the 'birth' of 'Western' Enlightenment and the 'death' of religion at the end of the seventeenth century when European monarchies became empires, spreading themselves across the globe. Under an empire, borders were not so clear and "diverse populations" (19) suddenly became part of one community (the empire) mainly due to the marriages of the monarchs. Anderson notes the irony that there has not been an actual 'English' monarch as the British head of state since the eleventh century (19). At the same time, there was a shift in religion, namely in the language used in church and in the Bible. Anderson explains how the sacred texts were written and spoken in Latin, but soon regional vernaculars, such as English, took over. For example, the language of the court changed from Anglo-Saxon to Latin to Early English. Once British parliament was opened in 1362,

English became the official state language despite the fact that its territory at this time included England, Wales, parts of Ireland, Scotland and France (41). This becomes crucial once technological advances allowed for the printing press and mass publication. Print not only ensured the spread of the language but also allowed a common language to surpass existing boundaries. A wider community could understand each other through print and therefore *imagine* that others in the same community existed. This consistency gave rise to a national language; thus, according to Anderson, it was print and language that allowed the spread of the nation state:

> Speakers of the huge variety of the Frenches, Englishes, or Spanishes, who might find it difficult or even impossible to understand one another in conversation, became capable of comprehending one another via print and paper. In the process, they gradually became aware of the hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people in their particular language-field, and at that same time that *only those* hundreds of thousands, or millions, so belonged. (46)

We can strongly link this to the media today and its global reach. Film is the medium chosen in this study as it is a platform that is able to transgress beyond national borders and even languages. For instance, many of the works in this study incorporate the dual languages of Farsi and English as a way to sync the

official[3] language of Iran and the English-speaking countries where the films have been produced (the UK, US and New Zealand).

Cultural critic and theorist Stuart Hall discusses how globalization contributes to the evolution of the nation-state. In his much-cited essay, "Culture, Community, Nation" (1993), Hall notes that despite earlier beliefs, globalization has not destroyed the need for nationalism. There were hopes that the European Enlightenment and a more globalized, homogenous world would dissolve nationalism, but that was not to be. Nationalism still exists in other forms, such as the formation of smaller nations after the breakdown of larger states - for example, the former USSR and Yugoslavia or recent calls for independence for Scotland and Catalonia. To Hall, smaller nations can harbour problems, such as exclusivity based on religion and race, creating “pure formations” (355). This type of homogeneity, Hall notes, is actually a “myth” that has never been in place historically, particularly in Europe: “Ethnic absolutism … we must remember that versions of it are alive and well in the old ‘modern’ nation-states, especially in the wake of the multicultural diversity which the dislocations of globalization are pushing along” (356). But Europe was never completely ‘pure’ in the sense of having only one race or ethnicity and any allusions to such purity are mythological. Though Hall’s essay dates from 1993, his point is even more valid today when global borders and migration are highly topical such as the British vote to exit the European Union and walls being built and strengthened on the US/Mexico border. Far-right nationalist groups are re-emerging in the mainstream

[3] Farsi is the official language of Iran but as noted in Chapter Two, there are a vast number of other languages in use.

culture, claiming theories of “white genocide”,[4] and new nation-states are still emerging such as South Sudan from Sudan in 2011. This idea of race and “pure formations” can be linked to fears around immigration and even miscegenation as will be explored in Chapter Three.

The films in this study would form part of what is often cited as World Cinema. This is an outdated term which supports the idea that ‘Western’ and in particular Hollywood is the norm whilst all others are ‘World’. This idea is particularly problematic in this study as despite the films focusing on Iranian characters they were made and produced in the ‘West’. Though they were all independently made outside of the studio system, much of their form and style are influenced by Hollywood cinema. For instance, *Under the Shadow* was financed by Jordan, Qatar and the UK (Ide), while *Women without Men* was an Austrian, German and French production[5] made by a filmmaker who resides in the US. In fact, at the 2017 British Academy of Film and Television Arts, *Under the Shadow* was nominated for Outstanding *British* Film and not nominated for Best Film Not in the English language despite the entire film being in Farsi. Anvari also won Outstanding Debut by a British director. Tina Gharavi was also nominated for the same award in 2013. Similarly, in 2008 Satrapi’s *Persepolis* was accepted as a French film, co-winning the Jury Prize at Cannes and César award for Best Film and Best Adapted Screenplay. It was also nominated for a Golden Globe Best Foreign Language Film representing France. This indicates that despite their focus on Iranian stories with Iranian characters, these films

[4] This belief that “white” people are being “replaced” by “non-white” people is an ongoing conspiracy theory that was also propagated by the man responsible for the mosque attacks in Christchurch, New Zealand in March 2019 (Dearden 2019, Goggin 2019)

[5] *Women without Men* was produced by production companies Essential Film Produktion (Germany), Coop 99 (Austria) and Parisienne de Production (France) (Fainaru).

were still accepted as part of the national cinemas where they were financed and created. This is an example of how these films are not Iranian films, nor ‘World’ films but integral to British, French, and American cinema.

In *Reflections In Exile* (2001), Edward Said notes the important link between nationhood and exile. If exile is about leaving a nation for another but never fully assimilating to that new nation, one could become nationless. For Said, “Exile, unlike nationalism, is fundamentally a discontinuous state of being. Exiles are cut off from their roots, their land, their past” (177); however, if being in exile means cutting roots, it does not necessarily mean becoming *rootless*. Said posits that exile is a general term which refers to someone who cannot return home, but, more specifically:

1. Exile originates from banishment where it was a negative entity. Those banished would live a “miserable life” with the “the stigma of being an outsider” (*Reflections in Exile* 181).
2. Refugee is a political term originating in the twentieth century and mainly covering displaced large groups needing aid.
3. Expatriates are those who choose to live somewhere else for personal reasons. He gives the example of people like Ernest Hemingway in France. Expatriate is defined as a citizen residing elsewhere (or renouncing that citizenship for another), but I would argue that it is still a word that is loaded with racial and ethnic connotations. For example, the majority of expatriates seem to be white and originate from the ‘West’, whilst others are seen as immigrants.

4. Émigrés – an ambiguous term where choice is a possibility. These include colonial officials, missionaries, tech experts and even the white settlers in Africa and Australia who became émigrés and not exiles, after they began nation building (*Reflections In Exile* 181).

Said is not alone in categorizing exile in this way (as shown by Cohen and Brubaker below). In “Thinking through the concept of diaspora” (2006), Said looks at the extreme ends of exile: at one end there is an obsession with displacement and a need to maintain and even fetishize the isolation (440), whilst at the other end there is a need to deny exile and assimilate, which can lead to "a loss - of critical perspective, of intellectual reserve, of moral courage" (441). Said asks if there can be a more balanced middle-ground, or even an in-between where both are included. In-betweenness is also a significant term used within this study when discussing liminality.

Hamid Naficy determines two main movements of migration to the ‘West’ in the 20th Century. The first took place between the 1950s and1970s due to the decolonization of various countries. Empires like that of Britain were devastated after World War II and so needed excess (and cheap) labour to help rebuild their infrastructures and economies. Such was the case with the influx of South Asian and African-Caribbean migrants to the UK. The second wave of the 1980s-1990s, was "a result of the failure of nationalism, socialism, and communism" (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 10), such as the fall of the former Soviet Union, which caused migrations from the Eastern bloc to West Germany. There were also liberal changes made to immigration laws for other countries such as Australia, the US

and New Zealand. This is also the main era when the majority of Iranians began to leave their nation-state.

In *The Making of Exile Cultures* (1993), Naficy looks at exile discourse: "Traditionally exile is taken to mean banishment by governments for a particular crime, for a limited time or for life. Exile can be internal or external" (*Making of Exile Cultures* 6). His work focuses on physical external exiles, those individuals who have either voluntarily or involuntarily left Iran. Exiles are not just immigrants, nor are they always expatriates. They do not assimilate completely into the new country, nor do they return to the homeland. For example, the Iranian nation-state dictates that any Iranian-born person must hold an Iranian passport if they are ever to visit Iran. Therefore, many Iranians in the diaspora are dual passport holders. For Naficy, exile is all about the relationship with the homeland.

Exiles maintain a “vertical” (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 12) and primary relationship to the homeland through their desire to return. However, this desire is for an imagined homeland. For instance, Naficy notes how Iranian exile television made in Los Angeles in the 1990s often looked to the pre-Revolution days of a monarchy within its music videos and documentaries. Television logos were inspired by ancient Persian symbols and sometimes the royalist flag was shown, as opposed to the current Islamic Republic one (*Making of Exile Cultures* 135). This is a nostalgic and idealised version of the homeland that exists today. Contradictions are part of the complexities that make up exile and this is best exemplified in Naficy’s work on liminality.

Naficy looks at the origins of liminal spaces as explored by ethnographer Arnold van Gennep in his work on rites of passage, whereby the individuals awaiting ritual to progress to the next stage of life wait in a type of liminal place

(*Making of Exile Cultures* 8). Liminal space exists between two worlds, neither here nor there, and it is not always a literal physical border. One can be in exile within one's own nation as well as in a place between the home and new nation. This allows an individual to negotiate an identity between who they were back in the homeland, their values, their beliefs, and a new identity in the diaspora.

Though liminality is not always prominent in the films in this study, the idea of being marginalised is[6]. Each of the lead characters are outsiders in society. In *A Girl*, the Girl is a stranger in Bad City who operates alone at night. She is also one of the undead, who lingers in that liminal space between life and death. In *Under the Shadow,* Shideh feels like a failed career woman after not being admitted into medical school and so spends her days locked in her apartment with her young daughter. While *Women without Men* uses gender to signify a sense of alienation in 1950s Iran, *I am Nasrine* showcases the refugee as a marginal figure in modern-day England. In *Circumstance*, Atafeh feels alienated from society so spends her days as an unproductive slacker, much like Samira and Fari in *Lady Land* who spend their days in ennui, never leaving the suburbs.

Around the same time of the second wave of immigration to the 'West' (1980s-1990s), Naficy claims that films were being made in the Iranian diaspora, mainly in the US. The films were made independently with low budgets and resources, and so were often seen as cheap B-grade films. However, they were significant in that they provided a nostalgic memory of the homeland for newly-arrived Iranian immigrants who yearned to see images of 'home'. Soon filmmakers in exile began to produce their own works, which often reflected their

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[6] I have chosen to omit the use of Other and Othering as a way to distinguish migrant identities as again it is an outdated and problematic term.

own experiences of living in exile. Filmmakers such as the late Sohrab Shahid Saless (who worked predominantly in Germany), Amir Naderi and Ghasem Ebrahimian are highlighted by Naficy in his research.

The major framework Naficy provides is what he terms 'accented cinema'. In global cinema, the dominant has always been Hollywood or mainstream cinema. Exile and diaspora films are varied, dispersed, and independent (rather than studio films), so they are marginalised in more ways than one. They cannot be distinguished by just genre or narratives nor are a movement. Instead, such films are marginalised by the hegemonic in the way they are produced and distributed, hence they are "accented" (*An Accented Cinema* 10).

One aspect of 'accented cinema' is the filmmakers' mode of production, which relies on the filmmaker taking up multiple roles. Naficy termed this approach 'interstitial', a mode that operates "both within and astride the cracks of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies, and heterogeneity" (*An Accented Cinema* 46). For example, interstitial means that the filmmaker works horizontally across many roles, including finding financing or self-investing in their own works. Films that form Naficy's 'accented cinema' model often receive little reception and distribution though they may be critically acclaimed. In my study, however, I would like to take the interstitial mode further and fuse accented cinema with dominant cinema. The films in this study merge both commercial and independent forms of filmmaking and distribution. Similar to the films in Naficy's study, these films were critically acclaimed but with the exception of *I am Nasrine*, they were widely distributed (*I am Nasrine* was nominated for a British Academy of Film and TV award in 2013 but was self-distributed via the filmmaker's own production company Bridge+Tunnel Productions). *A Girl, Circumstance,*

Appropriate Behavior and *Under the Shadow* all premiered at the Sundance Film Festival and gained international distribution[7]. *Under the Shadow* won the British Academy of Film and TV award for Outstanding Debut by a British Writer, Director or Producer in 2017 (BAFTA). *Women without Men* premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2009 winning Best Director. Although the filmmakers' took on multiple roles and at times self-invested, they were financed and distributed by other parties. *A Girl* used the crowd funding website IndieGoGo to gather funds which led to Hollywood actor and producer Elijah Wood coming on board as Executive Producer. The film was then released under Vice Films and later distributed on streaming service Netflix. *Under the Shadow* was produced by Wigwam Films in London and included financing by the Doha Institute with a total budget of US$1 million (Ritman para. 11). The film sold its worldwide rights to Netflix shortly before premiering at the Sundance Film Festival. *Circumstance* was released internationally, including Europe, North America and Australia (Neon Productions "Circumstance"). The global outreach of these films and ability to transcend the 'accented' model Naficy set up is part of the reason they were chosen.

As noted, the films in this study have been accepted as part of the national cinema in the countries they were produced and yet they consistently refer to Iran in more ways than one. The films blend Iranian culture, and Iranian-ness with that of the diaspora and of the 'West'. I would like to briefly point out the terms I will be using throughout this study, particularly the use of 'East' and 'West'. The binaries of 'West' and 'East' are problematic as Ella Shohat and Robert Stam note in their

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[7] *Circumstance* premiered in 2011, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* in 2014, *Under the Shadow* in 2016. *Under the Shadow* was also the official UK selection for Best Foreign Language Film for the Academy Awards in 2017 (though was not a nominee).

book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* (1994): 'West' is a heavily loaded word that harks back to European imperialism where it "is a fictional construct embroidered with myths and fantasies" (Shohat & Stam 13). Geographically speaking, how can countries such as New Zealand and Australia be seen as 'Western' in comparison to Europe? 'West' as a symbol of progress and innovation is even more problematic, as Shohat and Stam claim. A type of "Eurocentric imaginary" (Shohat & Stam 14) declares that movements and inventions such as democracy, science and technology and even feminism were 'Western' whereas they were a mix of cultures that helped *form* Europe, therefore the idea of 'West/East' as binaries is not accurate (Shohat & Stam 14). There are other problematic terms found in my research that I have purposefully avoided to use in this study such as 'hostland' and 'Third World' which signify a power imbalance and are even assimilationist. However, as much of my work explores those binaries and even Orientalism, I have decided to use 'West' and 'East' in quotation marks as a way to reflect that they are still problematic.

For Shohat and Stam, the opposite of this Eurocentrism is multiculturalism: "In a transnational world typified by the global circulation of images and sounds, goods and peoples, media spectatorship impacts complexly on national identity and communal belonging" (Shohat & Stam 7). Media can be dubious; it can promote multiculturalism just as it can exploit or demonize it. Ironically, as Shohat and Stam point out, cultural studies have not been very multicultural. Their study, like my own, combines European thinkers with theorists from outside of Europe. Alongside Naficy, I also reference and draw upon the works of Babak Elahi, Haleh Ghorashi, Farzaneh Milani, Minoo Moallem, Hamid Darabi and Nima Naghibi.

1.2 Diaspora

Diaspora as a term is challenging, hard to define and provides no easy answers. The area of diaspora studies experienced a big "explosion of interest" (Brubaker 1) in the 1980s as Rogers Brubaker notes in his much-revered essay "The 'Diaspora' Diaspora". The way the term has been overused lacks distinctness and "has resulted in what one might call a 'diaspora' diaspora - a dispersion of the meanings of the term in semantic, conceptual and disciplinary space" (Brubaker 1). Some scholars (Brubaker, Naficy, and Cohen) believe diaspora has its origins in the expulsion of the Jews from Israel, and in many publications, their historical experience is referred to with a capital D to differentiate its particularity. The lower-case diaspora allows other groups of displaced peoples to use it, such as African Americans, African-Caribbeans and groups that identify as asylum seekers, refugees and migrants. Brubaker agrees that classical diaspora was always related to the homeland and adds both the Jewish and Palestinian diasporas to the list that Robin Cohen terms a "victim diaspora" (Brubaker, 2). Cohen, in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (2003), states how diasporas for many groups included a type of collective trauma but that now the meaning has developed to include people who "were neither active agents of colonization nor passive victims of persecution" (ix). He, like others (including Said, and Brubaker, who uses Cohen's examples in his own work), attempts to theorize the different meanings of the term by creating a classification of groups: Classical diaspora, which considers the origins of the word with the Jewish

experience and tries to go beyond this meaning; the aforementioned 'victim diasporas', which includes the African and Armenian diasporas; 'Labour and imperial diasporas' such as the Indian and British; and 'Trade diasporas' such as the Chinese and Lebanese. Brubaker also mentions the 'political diasporas' who are invested in the politics of the homeland such as Tamils, and 'labour diasporas' who seek work elsewhere but keep their links to the homeland (Brubaker 2). The major problem with diaspora theory is that it seems that every group and, indeed, everyone must belong to a diaspora: "If everyone is diaspora, then no one is distinctly so. The term loses its discriminating power - its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalisation of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora" (Brubaker 3). So, what gives diaspora its power is the difference or status of people in comparison to those not in a diaspora. Classical diaspora can also be problematic as it can lead to assimilation which is itself questionable. Assimilation means fully assimilating into the 'new culture' and so denying any identification with the homeland. This is in opposition to the idea of exile and diaspora and, even more so, hyphenated identities which fuse the homeland with the diaspora.

To further define diaspora, Brubaker breaks diaspora down to three points of definition: Firstly, he refers to the 'dispersion' of space - either metaphorically or literally beyond state borders. People are moved beyond these borders either voluntarily or by force. He notes that this is often the most used and accepted definition, though it is obviously very broad. Secondly, diaspora has links to the actual or 'imagined' homeland "as an authoritative source of value identity, and loyalty" (Brubaker 5). Again, this was an important point in classical diaspora studies whereas more recent studies do not make it mandatory. If we think about

the African-Caribbean diaspora in the UK, some who are third- and even fourth-generation British, we would find it hard to link it to a different 'homeland' than the one they are currently living in. Yet the British government recently did just that with what was dubbed the 'Windrush Scandal'. Amid new immigration rules, a specific group of African-Caribbean-born people who had been living and working in the UK for decades were at risk of losing their jobs and even deportation due to never having formally become citizens. Many of these people had come as children, with their parents, invited to work in the UK after the devastation of World War II[8] and had spent the majority of their lives in the UK.

The third and final point is "boundary maintenance", which looks at assimilation and so provides a type of boundary around identity. This is a point that feels closer to the idea of hybridity. For Brubaker, hybridity, like other terms such as "fluidity, creolisation and syncretism", runs counter to the idea of a "transnational community" (6) and it is about acknowledging the self as different to the 'host society' and not fully assimilating. I agree with Brubaker's definition of hybridity in that it means accepting the differences between the self and the diaspora, but I would like to veer away from its use as it has a very broad meaning. Instead, I will refer to hyphenated identities as those which incorporate dual cultures, often from the homeland and the diaspora. I have also chosen not to use words like 'host' or 'hostland' in relation to diaspora as it seems assimilationist. Where possible I will use the term diaspora or the country name instead.

[8] "The UK's Windrush generation: What's the scandal about?" *Al Jazeera*, 19 April 2018. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/04/uk-windrush-generation-scandal-180418074648878.html

Another postcolonial theorist whose work has focused on diaspora is Avtar Brah. In her influential book *Cartographies of Diaspora* (2005)*,* she believes that a diaspora is about a journey but one that has an end. Although it is important to know the reasons for the journey (such as what Cohen has categorized regarding types of people in the diaspora), Brah also states the importance of where the journey ends and where that diaspora settles: "How and in what ways is a group inserted within the social relations of class, gender, racism, sexuality, or other axes of differentiation in the country to which it migrates?" (182). It is about the power relationship to the new place but also to the diaspora at large and even to other diasporas. Here, Brah brings in the concept of *diaspora space*: "Diaspora space is the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them' are contested" (208-209). It is a place, like England, where diasporas from all over, such as South Asian, African-Caribbean, Jewish, Irish (and so on) have relationships to each other but also to "Englishness" (209). Therefore, it is not enough to only look at the power relations between the Iranian diaspora and the US, UK and New Zealand; one must also look at its relationship to other diasporas as well.

Brah also explores the notion of home and makes some distinct points in relation to homeland and diaspora. Similar to what Naficy notes, the diaspora can desire a return home, but it is often not a real possibility. Brah also contests the idea that diaspora *always* means a desire to return home. For Brah, home is a means to belong and she argues that there is a difference between "'feeling at home' and declaring a place as a home" (197). Home and homeland can be two different entities. Being in a diaspora does not necessarily make one homeless but perhaps makes home multi-sited. This sums up the conclusion I came to with

Iran in Transit. Home and homeland may be two different places and thus multi-sited.

Amy Malek, in her work on the Iranian diaspora (particularly on women's memoirs which will be detailed in the next chapter), discusses how this desire to return to the homeland has been changing, particularly with the second-generation. In “Displaced, Re-rooted, Transnational Considerations in Theory and Practice of Being an Iranian outside Iran” (2015), she emphasizes Naficy's own words when he claimed that the relationship went from the exilic vertical to the diasporic lateral (25). If exile means being in a direct relationship with the homeland with desires of returning, then diaspora makes that relationship more convoluted with the acceptance that the diaspora may be the new home. Malek claims that “by the early 1990s, there was an increasing awareness among Iranian exiles that their conditions of exile were perhaps not, in fact, temporary” (“Displaced, Re-rooted” 25). This loss of the temporary gives way to a more permanent place in the diaspora community and so this “communal experience” (“Displaced, Re-rooted” 26) becomes the key focus in diaspora studies.

1.3 Hybridity

Much of Naficy's work on liminality is developed from Homi Bhabha's work on cultural hybridity. Bhabha, in his pivotal yet heavily critiqued work *The Location of Culture* (originally published in 1994), focuses on the binaries and the interdependency of the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizer imposes an ‘imaginary’ identity such as race superiority onto the colonized. Bhabha uses

Robert J.C. Young's work on nineteenth-century racism where the term hybrid was used to classify persons of mixed race. Bhabha argues that hybridity takes on this imaginary identity and constructs a new one that challenges the colonizer. This is done in a place that he terms the *third space*:

> For me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the 'Third Space', which enables other positions to emerge. (qtd. in Rutherford 211)

The third space is an ambivalent liminal place of colliding cultures, where new identities are not only forged, but are in a continual state of development. Bhabha's 'third space' theory is closely aligned with the relationship of the colonizer and colonized so it differs here with the Iranian diaspora, which has no direct links to European colonialism (though European powers were involved continuously throughout Iran's history). Under colonialism, hybridity was seen as a negative term, and was used to describe miscegenation between different races, but it is also used to describe two different cultures or ethnicities. Hall makes a similar point about hybridity: "It produces new subjects who bear the traces of the specific discourses which not only formed them but enable them to *produce themselves anew and differently*" (362). Hybridity is not about cultural diversity, as Bhabha notes, but about cultural differences. Hybridity allows for an exploration of identity and duality whilst allowing new identities to emerge. Some theorists in this study note the importance of the 'third space' in studying these films: Malek, for instance, states how *Persepolis* (2007) blends the graphic novel

and memoir together to create a new third space where both those in the Iranian diaspora and those outside can explore hybridity. Emily Edwards in her work on Iranian cultural output looks at *Persepolis,* the TV show *Shahs of Sunset* and *A Girl.* Edwards believes that in *A Girl*, Iranian characters inhabiting a Southern Californian town is its own third space, a type of “twilight zone” (“Searching for a Room of One's Own” 19). However, if the ‘third space’ holds a liminal position then most of these films are either outside of it or find their way out of it. Hyphenated identities do not hover in a liminal space. They celebrate their hybridity, which is a running theme within these films.

Hybridity can be defined as a mixture of two cultures or ethnicities to create a new cultural form. As Hall notes, it allows for identities that “are under construction” (362). Europe has always been a hybrid itself and this allows for new words such as multiculturalism, creolization, and, to quote Salman Rushdie, “translated peoples” and “mongrelisations” (Rushdie quoted in Hall, 362). Hybridity is the antithesis of the idea of ‘pure formations’ as it allows for cultural differences and even multiculturalism, but is also open to change. These films create a new cultural form and the idea of a hyphenated identity becomes commonplace in diasporic cinema.

For Naficy, hybridity produces a complexity that is stuck in ambivalence. He uses the word syncretism: "Syncretism involves impregnating one culture with the contents of another in order to create a third, stable culture while hybridity involves an ambivalence about both of the original cultures, thereby leading to creation of a slip zone of indeterminacy and shifting positionalities." (*An Accented Cinema* 127). For Naficy, the ambivalence that hybridity produces makes it more reactionary and less likely for individuals to fight against the dominant. The hybrid

becomes complacent and loses agency (*An Accented Cinema* 189). He links this to issues surrounding hyphenated identities, such as Italian-American or Iranian-American. For Naficy this creates an imbalance in power whereby the hyphen makes an identity inferior to one that is not hyphenated. Generalised, as in Asian-American, hyphenated identities encompass a whole range of ethnicities, nationalities, religions and socio-economic status. The ‘hyphen’ can also be exploited, particularly in areas of marketing where it can hinder a film and restrict it to a ‘niche’ market. However, Naficy does note that it can link to ancestry and some groups can be liberated by it, citing filmmakers like Martin Scorsese who is known as Italian-American. I disagree with Naficy’s negative take on the hyphen. The hyphen does add links to ancestry, but it also allows an equal acceptance of the diaspora. For a hyphenated identity, particularly one born in the diaspora, the hyphen states that one is not fully assimilated. It becomes an acceptance of both; neither one is more equal nor unequal than the other. This becomes important when thinking about factors such as race. Hall, for instance, discusses how being ‘visibly different’ will always play a part: “If you are a black woman trying to secure rights of citizenship from the local DHS office or an Asian family with British residence running the gauntlet of the immigration authorities at Heathrow, ‘formal legal definitions’ matter profoundly. They cannot be made conditional on cultural assimilation” (360). As an immigrant, the physical differences, name, religion or even the cultural practices retained from the ‘homeland’ can be used to marginalise you. Using a hyphen then allows for a chance to reclaim this marginalisation and, unlike Naficy’s view, to regain agency – *I am this, but I am also this.* Finding this type of agency is what drives each protagonist in these films. This acceptance may also be shown by the filmmakers who in many cases

are referred to with the hyphen (though I am aware this may be at the discretion of the editors of the publications and websites). Amirpour introduced *A Girl* as the "first Iranian-Vampire Western" and, in *The Guardian,* she is "a British-born Iranian who grew up in the US" (Bradshaw para. 1). In the same publication, Babak Anvari is "an Iranian director" (Smith para. 3) and "Iranian-born, London-based film-maker" (Kermode para. 2) in two different reviews. In contrast Shirin Neshat, who was a teenager when she left Iran but who resides in the US, is continually defined as an "Iranian Muslim" (Palmer-Mehta 79), "Persian" (TEDtalk), or simply as an "artist" (Neshat, "Turning Artists into Heroes" 199). Neshat's films are often more aligned with Naficy's theories of exile cinema while those who left as children (Anvari, Gharavi, and myself) or were born in the diaspora (Akhavan, Amirpour and Keshavarz) explore the complexities of diaspora, particularly hyphenated identities.

In the films that follow, hyphenated identities are shown in a variety of ways, both thematically and stylistically. These films cannot be defined as 'Iranian films' or 'Iranian cinema' as they are not made within Iranian national cinema. They also do not fall under Naficy's term of 'accented cinema'. The films are independently made yet they use dominant stylistic modes of cinema such as genre and classical narratives and they are distributed in the mainstream. They are films made in the diaspora through the lens of those living in the diaspora.

1.4 Diaspora Films in Aotearoa/New Zealand

The founding relationships of Aotearoa New Zealand between Māori and Pākehā have often been the focus of New Zealand films in the past and only recently has émigré cinema become a new addition to this biculturalism. Films focusing on the Pacific Island, South Asian, Chinese and Korean communities have been made with first- and second-generation filmmakers both independently and with state funding. Films such as *Sione's Wedding* (Graham, 2006), *Apron Strings* (Urale, 2008), *Desert* (Kang, 2010), *The Orator* (Tamasese, 2011), *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (Liang, 2012), *Three Wise Cousins* (Vaiaoga-Ioasa, 2016), and *Vai* (Arahanga, Aumua, Freshwater, Fuemana, George, Likiliki, McCartney, N. Whippy and S. Whippy, 2019). In addition, only a handful of critical analyses have been applied to these films.

In her article "Technologies of Culture: Digital Feature Filmmaking in New Zealand" (2011), Virginia Pitts focuses on contemporary films made with very low budgets, usually by writer/directors like the early works of Florian Habicht such as *Woodenhead* (2003) and Gregory King's *Christmas* (2004) and *Song of Good* (2008). She notes that these differ from mainstream films, as mainstream films are those which receive funding from the state-owned New Zealand Film Commission or from one of their international co-funders. Similar to Naficy (*An Accented Cinema* 2001), Pitts notes how the mainstream film industry is Hollywood, so anything outside of that, including national cinemas from other countries such as New Zealand, can be regarded as 'alternative'. Throughout her article, Pitts mentions the differences between the alternative and mainstream

films. The majority of differences are notably due to financial or scheduling restraints (where cast and crew cannot be paid for time or the cost for excessive equipment). However, she does note that because of these restraints the filmmakers have to become more creative and thus there are changes both narratively and aesthetically in the films. Naficy makes a very similar observation in his research on diaspora films, as does Arezou Zalipour in her research on Asian diasporic cinema in New Zealand in the book *Migrant and Diasporic Film and Filmmaking in New Zealand* (2019). While most of Naficy and Pitts' films in their research were not made under the "traditional standards for theatrical release" (Pitts 12) they still found exhibition in niche markets: Naficy's films within the diaspora communities themselves and Pitts' films in film festivals and through self-distribution.

What is notable in Pitts's research is the lack of cross-cultural identity to be seen on screen, even in the alternative films that she addresses in her article. She notes that films remain primarily focused on the Pākehā face with an obvious absence of Māori or Pasifika. Zalipour also notes that New Zealand as a "modern settler state" was dominated by Pākehā stories or Māori stories told from a Pākehā perspective (*Migrant and Diasporic Film and Filmmaking in New Zealand* 13). Māori self-representation only came about in the 1970s with filmmakers such as Merata Mita and Barry Barclay, alongside the general growth in independent film. For example, the state-funded New Zealand Film Commission was founded in 1978. More recently there has been the emergence of Pasifika stories which, according to Zalipour were popularised in the 2000s with *Sione's Wedding (*2006) and filmmaker Toa Fraser. Asian stories are still relatively new, even in 2020, despite the strong growth of the Asian diaspora in Aotearoa. From 2011, when

Pitts completed her research, the official census recorded people identifying as Asian as 9.2%, which has since risen to 15.1% in the 2018 census ("New Zealand's population reflects growing diversity" para. 7). Pitts, however, does conclude that despite the numbers the mainstream New Zealand film industry is still too focused on Pākehā and often male-centric stories. Zalipour also notes the lack of initiatives or policies for films with specific "ethnic content" ("Interstitial and Collective Filmmaking in New Zealand" 100) on the part of the New Zealand Film Commission, which could do more to support migrant and diasporic filmmakers.

Since these articles were published, there have been incentives to push for more Asian stories on screen, such as with the Request for Scripted Feature-Length Pasifika or Asian project by the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) and New Zealand On Air (NZOA) and the formation of the Pan-Asian Screen Collective, which often works and advocates on behalf of pan-Asian practitioners with those organisations such as the NZFC and NZOA amidst others. I have noticed these changes over the last five years as I proceed into advanced development of my screenplay *Lady Land* but also begin work on other projects, such as the development of an anthology feature film on and by all women pan-Asian filmmakers, produced by the same team who created the first all-women Māori feature anthology *Waru* (2017), and the all-women Pasifika feature *Vai* (2019). Both of these features screened at A-List film festivals internationally[9] and were released broadly in Aotearoa and elsewhere.

In the book *Migrant and Diasporic Film and Filmmaking,* Zalipour explores these transnational filmmakers, specifically those who identify as Asian in New

[9] *Waru* premiered at the New Zealand International Film Festival in 2017 and was later screened at the Toronto International Film Festival and *Vai* premiered at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2019 and later at South By SouthWest (SXSW) in the US.

Zealand and who work in both the interstitial and collective modes of production, that is both independently and in the mainstream. Zalipour's key question is whether "there ever been such a thing as 'Asian New Zealand film'?'" (2). Her book aims to apply critical analysis to both the films and filmmakers in order to engage with and add more scholarship in this new area of study. Zalipour notes that New Zealand never adopted an official policy of multiculturalism, unlike other Commonwealth nations such as Canada and Australia, as in New Zealand "multiculturalism has complicated the prevailing discourse of biculturalism but has not supplanted it, nor is it likely to do so in the near future." (11). This is true with regards to the incentives noted above, including NZFC's He Ara Fund, which provides development funding for Māori or Pasific Island films and filmmakers. These are in addition to rather than replacing incentives for all practitioners and stories. Zalipour notes how the NZFC has evolved with social and cultural changes in NZ itself (99), as NZFC is committed to constructing "'a national identity' through filmmaking" (99). This commitment to telling 'New Zealand stories', however, is not applied to co-productions in which the NZFC partly funds certain projects, which are produced in New Zealand but do not necessarily have to have content related to New Zealand. Such was the case with Toa Fraser's *6 Days* (2016), a co-production with the UK that focused on a real story about the Special Air Services (SAS) rescuing hostages from the Iranian embassy in London in 1980.

Zalipour focuses on a handful of films made by pan-Asian filmmakers in New Zealand and relates them to Naficy's modes of production with diasporic cinema. Despite receiving NZFC financing, these films still took on interstitial and collective modes, as did Naficy's films, which were often self-funded. Liang's *My*

Wedding and Other Secrets and Stephen Kang's *Desert* (2010) were multi-lingual and also asked the filmmaker to take on multiple roles aside from directing. For example, Kang was writer, director, director of photography and editor on *Desert*. Some films relied on non-actors due to the lack of pan-Asian professional actors available in New Zealand at that time. The short films *Eating Sausage* (Mandviwalla, 2004) and *Coffee and Allah* (Urale, 2007) used people from the Korean and Ethiopian communities, who were non-actors, in lead roles. Other similarities to the films in Naficy's study include the themes of displacement and marginality and their limited exhibition despite *My Wedding and Other Secrets* being state-funded.

This study uses Naficy's modes of production as a base but mainly focuses on thematics. The films use an interstitial mode such filmmakers taking on multiple roles (all films were written and directed by the same artist) and being multilingual (*I am Nasrine* and *Lady Land*). However, that is where the similarities end. All films have producers, production companies and experienced actors and, as noted before, wider exhibition and distribution. Even my own screenplay, which is being produced by the company Miss Conception Films, received development funding through the NZFC and is now looking at both domestic and international exhibition rights.

Taking on Zalipour's work on Asian films in Aotearoa, I will briefly explore my own contribution to the industry with my screenplay. Although there has been an increase in migrant practitioners in Aotearoa in the last three years, namely due to organisations such as the Pan-Asian Screen Collective and specific funding objectives as outlined above by the NZOA and NZFC, in terms of Asian representation, the industry is still developing. Looking at the last five years, the

only feature films to have been released with NZFC support that were made by pan-Asian identifying filmmakers (writer and/or director) were *The Breaker Uppers* (2018), with co-director Madeleine Sami (of Fijian-Indian and Irish heritage), and *Atomic Falafel* (2015), a New Zealand, German and Israel co-production helmed by Israeli writer/director Droar Shaul. 2021 will see the release of Roseanne Liang's second feature *Shadow in the Cloud*. Despite the growth of the pan-Asian community in Aotearoa and the global success of films focusing on Asian stories and made by the Asian diaspora, such as *Crazy Rich Asians* (Chu, 2018), *The Farewell* (Wang, 2019) and the forthcoming Marvel/Disney film based on a Marvel graphic novel, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (Cretton, 2021), New Zealand diasporic films centring on pan-Asian stories and made by pan-Asian filmmakers still has a long way to go in terms of reaching distinctive if not equal representation.

1.5 The Iranian Revolution

The Iranian Revolution of 1979 was, like many revolutions, the result of widespread discontent amongst all classes of people and the involvement of foreign powers over many centuries. Iran, which is the original name given to the area of Fars where the Aryan peoples lived before moving onto what is now northern India, was always a strategic position for European powers, particularly the UK and Russia. Under the Qajar dynasty (1785-1925), these particular states were heavily involved with trade (namely oil) and territory. Britain was keen to keep other powers out of the Persian Gulf and guarded south and east Iran in an

effort to keep India, whilst Russia tried to take northern Iran (Keddie 34). It is not surprising that their influence and interference would create problems in the twentieth century when moderate Prime Minister Mosaddeq attempted to nationalise Iran's oil. Infamously remembered for the involvement of the CIA, there was a coup in 1953 in which Mosaddeq was overthrown and the Shah of Iran regained complete control. The Shah, Reza Pahlavi, was the first-born son of Reza Khan (who renamed himself Reza Shah), a general who declared himself King after overthrowing the Qajars in 1925. Reza Shah made huge efforts to modernise the country by imposing strict changes to all aspects of traditional life, including lessening the power of the clerics. Progressive changes to the economy, judicial system and military were made to 'Westernize' the country, but they were all done "from above" (Keddie 87), whereby Reza Shah began to monopolise decisions. The often oppressive measures on religion were continued under his son Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, who secularised co-education and made budget cuts, so many *ulama* (Islamic scholars) could not teach; he even professed support for women to stay unveiled (Keddie 223). Many in opposition were arrested or exiled, such as the Ayatollah Khomeini, who fled to Iraq and then France, from where he sent messages back to his followers in Iran.

The country under Reza Shah was also made to modernise (known as a White Revolution), but at a cost. Reza Shah's rule became autocratic and included the involvement of the notorious secret police Sāzemān-e Ettelā'āt va Amniyat-e Keshvar (Organization of National Security and Information), shortened to SAVAK modelled on Israel's Mossad (Institute for Intelligence and Special Operations). Any political opposition was quickly silenced by imprisonment,

banishment or death. He was consistently backed by outside powers, including the UK and US, so much so that he was seen as a “puppet Shah” (Cottam p. 4). Reza Shah, like his father and even former European monarchs such as the Tudors of England, believed God ordained his role. In one of his most infamous actions, Reza Shah attempted to glorify the past Persian Empire and his link to its powerful dynasties by holding celebrations at the ancient site of Persepolis in 1977. He wanted to show the ‘glory’ of 2500 years of monarchy (in reality, there were various gaps and breaks). Much to the dismay of the clergy, he even changed the *hijra* (Islamic) calendar to one dating from Cyrus the Great, one of the most revered ancient kings. The ostentatious amount of money spent on such celebrations while his own people were struggling further ostracised the Shah from not only the *ulama* but the common people. According to Nikki R. Keddie in her book *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (2003):

> The continuing growth of malaise and discontent among most sections of the Iranian population as despotism and repression increased in the 1970s, promised political and economic decentralization failed to materialise, and economic difficulties grew in 1976 and 1977, despite huge oil income, led to an outbreak of opposition beginning in 1977. (214)

The protests began with simple open letters, which turned to national strikes, protests and even militancy from guerrilla groups. What was striking was that opposition to the Shah came from nearly every type of group in the country. Many

joined in the resistance to the Shah, from the secular urban left, Marxists and guerrilla fighters, to religious leaders, rural workers and farmers.

The Shah retaliated with stricter and stronger repression. He censored the press and produced propaganda to impugn his opponents, including Ayatollah Khomeini, who was gaining attention due to his sermons on tape that were smuggled into the country. The Shah also reacted with violence. On September 8, 1978, over one million people marched in protest against the Shah’s oppression and the Shah retaliated by banning protests. Many of the protesters were not warned about the imposition of martial law and so marched again three days later, only to be shot and killed by the army. It became Iran's own “Black Friday” (Keddie 233-232). Scholars differ on the exact pivotal moment that sparked the revolution, but the Shah was forced to admit defeat. Keddie believes a variety of factors led to the Shah not being able to react with further force, including the Shah's refusal to believe in the reality of the situation: "It seems likely that the shah long believed much of his own propaganda and also his toadying aides who assured him he was vastly popular and that the demonstrators were a minority of agitators who had misled people; he therefore long retained hope of regaining popularity by concessions, and did not wish to alienate more people by massacres" (237). He also wanted to leave a legacy of being a great leader, which he could not do by enforcing violent reactions. On January 16, 1979, the Shah departed, leaving behind a new premier. Khomeini returned to a huge welcome on February 1, and ten days later a new coalition was made between the premier and Khomeini.

The departure of the Shah further deepened the distrust of foreign powers, particularly the US. Despite their own insistence on the importance of human

rights, the US never interfered with the Shah's oppression or denial of human rights in Iran. During the revolution the US refused to support him and was even involved with the opposition, yet when the Shah went into exile, he was allowed into the US for cancer treatment. This prompted a group of students to take the US embassy hostage for 444 days, demanding the US return the Shah to face trial in his homeland. The hostage crisis prompted the US to deny further entry to the Shah. He fled to Egypt where he died from complications from cancer in 1980. As Keddie notes, what makes the Iranian Revolution unique is the coalition of various groups and the role of the clergy: "As in many revolutions, the coalition did not long outlast victory. Iran's revolution also had distinctive features, especially the unique leading role of clerics. Some revolutions have had religious ideologies, but clerical rule after a revolution was new" (240). Khomeini, despite consistently denying the clergy would have any kind of rule in the new government, took power in 1983 (Keddie 241). The roles that the UK and US played before and after the revolution are important to consider when thinking about the relationships of Iran today with those nations. For example, some exilic works that will be looked at later were a reaction to the hostility felt by many Iranians living in the US around the hostage situation and then again after the attacks on the World Trade Towers in New York City in 2001.

The mass exodus of Iranians from Iran in the late 20th and early 21st century can be grouped into three waves: Pre-Revolution students, Revolution and war exiles, and post-2000 immigrants. Many Iranians left due to the Revolution and regime change that followed and many more left after war began with neighbouring Iraq. Saddam Hussein, noting the vulnerability of Iran after the Revolution, decided to invade in 1980, but Iran was soon on the offensive. The

war lasted for eight years, including the mandatory drafting of men as soldiers, alongside volunteers. The regime change was also a factor. Strict religious laws were forced on the population, with many punishments harking back to sixth-century Sharia laws such as public lashings and hangings. Due to the regime change and the war, sanctions were imposed and most countries in the 'West' shut their borders, with the result that many Iranians attempted illegal crossings into Europe or became asylum seekers elsewhere, such as in South East Asia, Australia and New Zealand. The majority of Iranians who left in the second wave moved to North America. There are a variety of factors for this migration. Firstly, prior to the Revolution, it was commonplace for the middle and elite classes to study overseas, often at a 'Western' institution. Some of these students never returned home, particularly once the Revolution was beginning, and many of these universities were in urban cities, such as on the east or west coast of the US. People moved to these places simply because they knew or had relatives there. Secondly, many of the Iranians leaving Iran in the second wave were skilled working professionals and so moving to a populated centre with the potential for equally skilled employment was ideal. For instance, articles such as, "Tehrangeles: How Iranians made part of LA their own", put the number of Iranians in Southern California at 300,000 to half a million in 2012 (Amirani para. 5). The third group or wave of Iranians left Iran in the early- to mid-2000s and namely consisted of those on a highly skilled migrant visa or family visa, as noted by Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing. These statistics, though informative, are not completely without faults, which I will consider in more detail in the next chapter where my focus on diaspora and exile will be specified within an Iranian studies discourse.

1.6 Iranian National Cinema

Iranian national cinema became globally famous in the late 1980s and 1990s in what became known as the Iranian New Wave, where ‘new’ filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami were ‘discovered’ in the ‘West’. The quotation marks are valid as Kiarostami, like the Iranian film industry itself, had been creating works for decades. In fact, Iranian film history is as old as cinema history. Cinema came to Iran directly after the Lumière brothers exhibited their very first short films in Paris,1895. Many historians believed it was a Qajar shah who brought the magic of cinema to Iran after a visit to France around 1900 (Jahed 53). Films in early Iranian cinema up to 1932 were documentaries and often centred on the royal family. The very first movie theatre was opened in Tehran in 1904 by a courtier before it was forced to close by zealot religious authorities. From its origins, cinema has been a tool with which to promote the ideologies of contrasting groups, the monarchy and the clerics, a point of tension which has continued to this day. For example, while the Qajars adored the new technology by continuously exhibiting films about their lives, the extremist clerics viewed this new invention as an “ungodly abomination” and in the early days declared a fatwa against it (Sadr 9).

The majority of the history I will be referencing is taken from Naficy’s series *A Social History of Iranian Cinema* (1984-2010) and Hamid Reza Sadr’s book *Iranian Cinema: A Political History* (2006), which specifically combines the politics of Iran since the 19th century and the history of cinema. Sadr notes that in the 1920s and 1930s, cinema was mainly used as a tool to aid the rise of

modernism under Reza Shah. For example, women's rights were strengthened under Reza Shah and in 1924 the Grand Cinema in Tehran allowed women audiences for the first time. For Reza Shah, cinema was important as a tool of propaganda, especially in a country where over 80% were illiterate (Sadr 15). In the 1920s, film rushes about his leadership and his parliament were shown before every feature film in cinemas alongside the national anthem. Sadr claims that "Reza Khan's brand of cinema also indulged in the plagiarism of foreign features in order to celebrate and legitimise the Pahlavi regime" (16). For instance, 1926 saw the release of the film *Cyrus the Great and the Conquest of Babylon*, celebrating one of ancient Persia's most revered kings and comparing him to Reza Shah. The film exhibited was actually D.W. Griffith's Hollywood blockbuster *Intolerance* (from 1916), which centres on four fictional stories set in ancient Babylon.

One of the first successful Iranian films was the first talkie, *The Lohr Girl,* in 1932 by Abdol Hossein Sepanta (also known as Sepanta) and Ardeshir Irani, which was the first time that audiences watched a film in Farsi despite it being filmed in India. Naficy believes Sepanta's prolific body of work made him one of the first Iranian auteurs (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1* 98). *The Lohr Girl* has been critiqued for its Orientalist imagery, particularly in the form of the oppressed 'Eastern' woman, Golnar, a local girl in Lorestan who is kept captive by the local bandits until she is rescued by a government agent, and it's "anti-Arabism" in the role of the antagonist Sheik (Naficy *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 1* 236). Yet the film was so successful that it spurred a number of films based on Persian history, including works based on *Shahnameh*, an epic poem denoting mythological stories and historical ancient Persian kings.

Films such as *Ferdowsi* (1934) based on the famous ancient Persian poet Abul-Qâsem Ferdowsi Tusi, who wrote *Shahnameh*, explored the poet's life and was commissioned by Reza Khan himself (Sadr 34). Orientalist imagery was rife in these historical films; even though they involved Iranian characters, costumes were directly borrowed from Orientalist images in Hollywood, such as Rudolph Valentino's famous look in 1921's *The Sheikh* (Sadr 36-37). This self-imposed Orientalism re-emerges in the women's memoirs from the early 2000s and in some of the films in this study. The appropriation of the Islamic veil, for instance, becomes an important visual prop in *A Girl* and part of the narrative in *Under the Shadow*.

During World War II, the nation was divided by the Allies and Germany. Reza Shah was a Nazi sympathiser in the sense that he deemed Iran to be a "a pure Aryan country" (Sadr 38). At this time Iranian cinema had to compete with an overload of foreign imports and war propaganda. It was not until the end of the war that commercial cinema really took flight with the establishment of film studios such as Studio Badi and Iran Film Studios. Genres such as adventure films were popular with the central characters blatantly symbolising that of the younger shah, Reza Pahlavi. In an attempt to once again mimic Hollywood, these swashbuckler films had "trashy plots, cardboard sets, awful performances and ludicrous outfits" (Sadr 57). Despite not focusing on 'everyday people', the films at least attempted to render empathy for the working classes. During this era, when Hollywood had its own infamous self-imposed censorship under the Production Code (1930-1960), Iranian cinema had state-imposed censorship that continues today. The censorship propagated the rule of the Shah and outlawed any negative imagery of the monarchy or anything denoting political turmoil or

unrest. However, negative imagery of Islam was also outlawed. Around this time, the dubbing of imported films was popularised, which no doubt allowed for wider audiences to understand foreign films that had previously only been accessible to those who were literate. A new bourgeoisie began to grow in the country, due to the copious amounts of foreign grants being poured into the country after the successful coup against Mosaddeq. Many films reflected this growth by focusing on 'rags-to-riches' stories in genres such as melodramas, and once again were designed to "emulate Western modes and attitudes" (Sadr 73). There were hardly any films being made about the poor or working classes or, if there were, they were censored so as to not encourage any resentment towards the Shah. Similar to his father, the Shah was obsessed with presenting a very narrow view of Iran, one that was modern, urban and educated. Sadr notes that the focus of films in this decade on morality themes, specifically around marriage and women's roles, would later influence the New Wave. Women characters in the 1950s were seen in the binary roles of traditional mothers and/or wives, and modern women who sometimes would fall into the archetype of the 'fallen woman' (Sadr 78). The 'fallen woman' is similar to a type of femme fatale and is someone who crosses societal and moral borders, often committing adultery or foregoing her duties as a mother, and, as a result, is punished. The trope is still used in contemporary Iranian cinema as a way to explore the role of women in the Islamic Republic. Asgar Farhadi's *About Elly* (2009) centres on a group of young friends holidaying near the Caspian Sea. A young woman, Elly, joins the trip and despite being already engaged, develops romantic feelings for one of the men. The secret proves too much when Elly goes missing and her fiancé confronts the group, learning the truth about Elly, who is later found drowned. The entire plot in

Farhadi's *A Separation* (2011) revolves around a married couple and the troubles that are bestowed on them once the wife files (unsuccessfully) for a divorce. In contrast, the films in this study use a feminist lens to explore their female protagonists. The women all have (or gain) agency and only *Circumstance* provides a fallen woman trope in the figure of Shirin, who is forced into marriage to Mehran after being arrested for 'immoral' acts (namely having a romantic relationship with a woman).

In the 1960s, Iranian cinema began to focus more on the working class, the rural family as well as urbanites. A huge population growth at this time, from 19 million in 1956 to 34 million in 1976 (Sadr 91), also heralded a growth in unemployment and, as such, the country shifted from an agrarian to a semi-industrial nation. Local film production rose dramatically. Pedram Partovi notes how roughly 1,000 domestic studio productions were released in Iran from the late 1940s until the late 1970s, which rapidly rose to 60 films per year in the 1960s and 1970s ("Popular Iranian Cinema before the Revolution", 00:10:02*).* These films were hugely successful commercially and are classified as 'Film Farsi' (taken from the original notion of foreign films that were dubbed in Farsi). Film Farsi was unapologetically commercial, relying on genre and star power to sell their films. Despite being seen as B-grade films " full of improbable plots, escapist fantasies, and inexplicable coincidences" (Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 2* 150), they did not avoid state censorship. Leading up to the Revolution, the cinema became a site of resistance. In 1969, five cinemas were set on fire by revolutionaries (Sadr 130), and a further 31 in Tehran alone. During the Revolution, over 125 cinemas in total were burned down (Sadr 169), including the Rex theatre in Abadan which was infamously set ablaze by Islamist

Revolutionaries in 1975, killing over 400 people (Khoshbakht para. 10). Directly after the Revolution, anyone who was involved in Film Farsi, including the actors, were arrested and many emigrated to the 'West'.

After the Revolution and the war that followed, filmmakers and the new government questioned the raison d'étre of Iranian cinema and how to proceed with the industry. Sadr notes that the time between 1978-82 "is considered the vaguest age of Iranian cinema history" (169) while Naficy notes the transition between 1978-1984 from the Pahlavi "cinema of idolatry" cinema, to the Islamic Republic era or "the Islamicate" was "slow but tumultuous, fiery, and destructive, and it offered an indelible contemporary example of the classic violence waged in all religions between idolaters and iconoclasts" (*A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 3* 1). The clergy was still cautious about this mass medium, which they believed at its core was a 'Western' and imperialist invention. Khomeini famously said that "the Revolution was not opposed to cinema *per se* only obscenity" (Sadr 169) and "decadence" (Esfandiary 71). Instead of outright banning cinema, the government decided that it would be used as a solely political tool for the purpose of sending social messages to its audience and demanding action (Sadr 173). This, in effect, laid the foundations of Iranian cinema in the 1980s and 90s. Many of the early 1980s films focused on the ordinary working-class man who rises to heroic action. Sadr classifies the themes in films of the period as ranging from the patriarchal paternal figure (modelled on the figure of Khomeini), with spiritual and religious undertones celebrating the Islamic faith, to 'anti-Western' attitudes and anti-Americanism (184).

The Ministry for Culture and Islamic Guidance governs all films made in Iran. As a result, many films were banned during the 1980s and 90s as

censorship rules were strengthened with regard to strict Islamic codes, such as the mandatory veiling of women characters and denying any subjects that conflicted with the current regime such as stories about left wing or communist groups. These restrictions made it more difficult to portray women characters on screen. Whilst some films abandoned women altogether, others had to adhere to the ideologies of the "chaste and maternal, never sexualised" (Sadr 188) heroine, often one from the working class who was never glamorised. During the war with Iraq, films that tended to focus on the war depicted extremely negative Iraqi characters and the glory of martyrdom as part of the propaganda for the war effort. Chiefly, cinema's role was to consistently send out the same message, "We are not fighting with Iraq, we are fighting with the enemies of the Revolution" (Sadr 195). Alongside the war propaganda were films that focused on 'anti-Western' and anti-American sentiments, which was partly a reaction to the way Iranians were portrayed in the 'West', particularly in Hollywood, after the hostage situation.[10] For example, the extremely negative portrayal of Iranians in the film *Not Without My Daughter* (Gilbert, 1991) shows multiple examples of Iranians as fanatical and violent, which Iranians viewed as "Beauty (American) and the Beast (Iranian)" (Sadr 213).

The Revolution and consequent war did provide ample material for a new type of cinema to emerge, which became known as the Iranian New Wave. The original 'new wave' in Iran was actually between 1969-79, initiated with Dariush Mehrjui's *The Cow* (1969) and Shahid-Saless's *Still Life* (1974), but was little known outside of Iran and film industry circles. By contrast, this new New Wave

[10] As noted earlier, the Shah, when he was ousted in the Revolution in 1979, fled to the US, prompting a group of students to take the US embassy hostage for 444 days, demanding the US return the Shah to face trial in his homeland.

was recognised as such in the 'West', where, despite having worked for decades prior, filmmakers like Abbas Kiarostami were suddenly 'discovered.'

Iranian New Wave consisted of social realism films that mixed fiction and documentary modes of filmmaking, often using children to explore the contradictions within society. Children were exempt from the usual restrictions on sexuality and gender, but they could also offer a different subjective viewpoint, often that of the filmmaker. They "denounced the horrors of war and/or dealt with themes central to reconstruction such as poverty, unemployment, the shortage of housing and social strife" (Sadr 224). The Iranian New Wave is similar in many ways to other arthouse and European cinemas, such as Italian Neo-Realism, which also emerged after a catastrophic war. Much like Italian neo-realism, which came into being after WWII, the Iranian New Wave aimed to bring a sense of realism to Iranian audiences by showing them 'everyday people.' Iranian New Wave stories depended on simplicity (Sadr 225) and self-reflexivity (Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema, Volume 4* 176), featuring non-actors and often children. They had low budgets so there was no need for lavish mise-en-scène or special effects. They were also character-based, where characters often went on a search for something which they were either rewarded with or denied (Gow 19). Similar to French New Wave, the endings of these films could be highly ambiguous. In "Post-Revolutionary art cinema in Iran" (2012), Adam Bingham notes how part of their success could also be tied to the fact that the filmmakers borrowed heavily from European art cinema directors such as Federico Fellini, Wim Wenders and Alain Resnais whose type of films were no longer being made in Europe despite a yearning for them by audiences (173). Around the same time a new reformist, President Mohammad Khatami, came into power in 1997. He

was known for opening up previously closed doors to the ‘West’, and cinema was one of the platforms he intended to use to strengthen relationships with foreign powers. Khatami was also the Minister for Guidance and Islamic Culture from 1982-92 at the beginning of the New Wave (Sadr 238).

Iranian New Wave counteracted ‘post-Revolutionary’ Iranian cinema but more importantly it was an antithesis to dominant Hollywood cinema. In fact, part of the New Wave’s popularity in the ‘West’ was due to the way Iran and Iranians were vilified in ‘Western’ media, particularly in Hollywood films, to the extent that audiences, particularly those demographics who attended film festivals, yearned to know more about the ‘real’ Iran. From the hostage crisis to the state’s constant opposition to the ‘West’ and the US (which Khomeini infamously called “The Great Satan”), the global media focus on Iran partly paved the way for the success of independent Iranian cinema just as it did with the boom of women’s memoirs in the Iranian diaspora in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The Iranian New Wave was a term created in the ‘West’, after the initial success of films like Kiarostami’s *Homework* (1989), *Close-up* (1990), *Life, and Nothing more…* (1992), and *A Taste of Cherry* (1997), which won the Palme D’Or at the Cannes Film Festival, as did Majid Majidi with *Baduk* (1992) and Jafar Panahi with *The White Balloon* (1995). Other filmmakers who have been revered as part of the New Wave are Mohsen Makhmalbaf, his daughter Samira Makhmalbaf, Bahman Gobadi, Tahmineh Milani and Asghar Farhadi.

In *From Iran to Hollywood and Some Places in-between* (2011), Christopher Gow agrees that the admiration for the Iranian New Wave was not solely due to it being an antithesis to Hollywood, but because it provided a different view of Iranians *from* the point of view of Iranians themselves, as

opposed to the Hollywood version of them, in which they were often reviled. This empathy, however, can still be problematic; Gow quotes Bill Nichol's idea of 'humanist cinema', vindicated by international film festivals, which classifies numerous films under one term such as Iranian New Wave so that very different films would seem homogenous (42). Iranian New Wave did not represent all of the films made within Iran in this period.

Ironically, because of the success of Iranian films abroad, there have been critiques that some Iranian films were not seemingly independent and that they were made "primarily to appeal to international film festivals" (Jahed and Ganjavie 8), including using misleading and stereotypical imagery. Such criticism is not dissimilar to the much earlier charge that cinema under Reza Shah relied on Orientalist imagery. The neoconservative government under Mahmud Ahmadinejad, after his election victory in 2005, attempted to bring back restrictions to cinema, including bans on any films promoting secularism, feminism, and violence (Esfandiari para. 1), yet the government still acknowledged the importance of Iranian cinema, as witnessed when Iran's official submission, Asghar Farhadi's *A Separation,* won the Best Foreign Language Film at the 2011 Academy Awards. By contrast, many of the films acclaimed overseas were also successful in Iran (Gow 44), so much so that there has been an increase in film production from 15 films in 1982 to 87 in 2001 (Gow 16). There was also a government incentive that taxed foreign films at a much higher rate of 20-25% than local films, at 5-20% (Esfandiary 70). More recently, the term Iranian New Wave has faded away as some of the filmmakers have moved to the diaspora or even other national cinemas. The late Abbas Kiarostami's *Certified Copy* (2010), for instance, was filmed in Italy, becoming the first film by

Kiarostami ever to be produced outside of Iran, while *Like Someone in Love* (2012) was filmed in Japan. Farhadi continued his success in the 'West' with *Everybody Knows* (2018)*,* a Spanish-English production.

The films in this study are similar to the Iranian New Wave in their receptions. All of the films garnered critical and some commercial success globally, particularly in the 'West'. Part of this success is due to what Gow had noted regarding the New Wave, in that audiences in the 'West' desired to see more 'authentic' stories about Iranians created by Iranians themselves, though there are marked differences as these films tend to revolve around Iranians in the diaspora than back in Iran.

These films are neither Iranian New Wave nor Iranian national cinema. Similar to what Naficy termed accented cinema, these films do not belong in one homogenous group; rather they were released at a certain time by Iranians in the diaspora and as such convey similar themes and messages as well as differences. The films were all released within a decade, 2007-2017, and owe much of their success in the 'West' to the earlier successes of Iranian women's memoirs.

Chapter Two: The Influence of Iranian Women's Memoirs in the Diaspora

The postcolonial theorists explored in the first chapter have been critiqued for being ethnocentric and for omitting other important aspects of film, such as gender, sexuality and class. The films in this study all focus on women characters and the majority of them are made by women filmmakers, so it seems vital to expand the previous chapter to include theories of transnational feminism. It is important to strengthen the link between postcolonial studies, particularly Middle Eastern studies, and a feminist framework. In 2001, Minoo Moallem described her frustrations with the lack of scholarship around Middle Eastern women in postcolonial studies: "I am appalled by the absence in Middle Eastern studies of any substantial literature on gender and globalization, of work that goes beyond the tropes of Muslim women as victims" ("Middle Eastern Studies, Feminism, and Globalization" 1266). Moallem's article was written prior to 9/11 and the 'War on Terror', which has no doubt contributed to a great deal of subsequent academic and literary scholarship on the region. Middle Eastern women were (and still are) seen as being oppressed and victimized by the Islamic patriarchy and in some cases needing to 'be saved' which is a form of Orientalist feminism. Part of this refrain, Moallem notes, is due to 'white feminism' (i.e. white, middle-class 'Western' feminism) that is still the dominant form of feminism in the 'West' today.

Much of the recent cultural output produced by and released from the Iranian diaspora centres on women's stories and in this chapter, I look at one of

its most successful forms, which has been critically revered both inside and outside of the diaspora: the women's memoir. Theorists such as Amy Malek claim that the timing of these memoirs coincide with external world events that centre on the state of Iran, beginning with the hostage crisis in 1979. In 1987 Betty Mahmoudy released her memoir *Not Without My Daughter* and its success soon gave rise to a film adaptation which was released just after the Gulf War in 1991. I explore how subsequent memoirs were released during historical moments when Iran was in the global news and how these films have also been produced at specific times when Iran was once again on the international stage.

The chapter also looks at some of the tropes, particularly Orientalist imagery, that are used throughout these memoirs as a way to engage a 'Western' demographic. Similar to what Moallem notes above, themes surrounding oppression and captivity become commonplace as does the idea of 'white saviours'. Despite the success of these memoirs, they also attracted criticism, particularly from scholars that saw the memoirs as pandering to a 'Western gaze' and therefore reiterating unnecessary stereotypes. The films in this study include aspects of Orientalism but they also attempt to subvert this ideology. This is an example of the burden of representation for the filmmakers in this study, much like the memoir writers.

2.1 The Global Iranian Diaspora

No one knows the exact number of people living in the Iranian diaspora. Estimates vary from one to four million, says Amy Malek in her 2006 article,

"Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" (357). Malek lists a variety of reasons for the lack of statistics. One cause could be that the majority of research and scholarship surrounding the diaspora is often limited to the areas where large numbers of Iranians reside, such as the US and France ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 357-358). Another could be due to the way Iranians identify themselves. A nation as large and as old as Iran has a very diverse population, based in differing ethnicity, religion and language, so there can be a reluctance for people to identify as purely *Iranian*. Sekander Amanolahi provides a detailed table of ethnicity, spoken language and religion in his article "A Note on Ethnicity and Ethnic Groups in Iran" (2005). He classifies a number of groups that includes Persian, Baluches, Lurs, Gilakis, Mazandaranis, Kurds, Talishis, Gabrs, Laris, Laks, Semnanis, Gurans, Koulis, Tats, Azaris, Brahuis, Qashqais, Turkmens, Other Turkic-speaking, Arabs, Armenians, Kalimis (Jews), Asuris (Assyrians), Mandaeans, and Hazaras (39-40). These groups speak numerous languages such as Farsi, Kurdish, Arabic, and have religious affiliations that include, but are not limited to, Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism, which originated in Ancient Persia.

The word 'ethnicity' is complex and is dependent on academic discipline. In anthropology 'ethnicity' is seen as a cultural construct that is not reliant purely on physical or "biological aspects" (Amanolahi 38). For example, the New Zealand census has historically lumped Iranians under the highly varied MELAA section, which encompasses the entirety of the regions of the Middle East and Latin America and the continent of Africa (Stats NZ) and only recently has broken this category down into more specific ethnic groups. In the UK, the Office for National Statistics uses the term "ethnicity" (this particular census only takes into

account England and Wales). Their categories are limited to White, Asian, Black/African/Caribbean/Black British, and Other Ethnic Group (which has a sub-category of Arab, and Any Other Ethnic Group). The website does note, however, that for Iranians, the most common response was "Asian/Asian British (38%), Any Other ethnic group (34%) and Other White (13%)" (Office for National Statistics), due to the fact that the term 'Asian' mainly consists of peoples from South Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh). Iranians in this UK census identified themselves with over three different groups which supports Malek's claims that we cannot confirm numbers of Iranians in the diaspora based solely on census statistics. Census numbers in any country are also never exact as not everyone in the population participates, particularly those who are not legal residents such as refugees or those claiming asylum.

The information we do have is not without its problems but still provides a basic overview of Iranians outside of Iran: those identifying as Iranian-born, of Iranian ancestry and/or ethnically/racially Iranian. As claimed by Naficy, Malek, Moallem, Fathi *et al*. the highest numbers of Iranians reside in the US. In "From Iranian Studies to Studies of Iranians in the United States" (1998), Mehdi Bozorgmehr agrees that "by about 1990, 637,500 Iranians were enumerated in official national censuses of the following ten countries on four continents: U.S., Canada, West Germany, Sweden, Great Britain, France, Norway, Australia, Israel, and Japan. With an Iranian population defined as persons either born in Iran or of Iranian ancestry, the U.S. contained nearly half (45%) of the Iranians living in the above-mentioned Western and Asian countries", which was 285,000 in 1990 (5). Bozorgmehr, like Naficy, believes there were two 'waves' of Iranian immigration to the US: the first consisted of mainly students and visitors, which

he terms ‘immigrants’, and the second were ‘exiles’ (7), due to the Revolution. Despite the US Immigration Act of 1965, which encouraged immigration from countries other than those in Europe[11], Iranians were not part of those groups and preferred to come as temporary students or visitors. This all changed in 1977 just prior to the Revolution when Iranian immigrant numbers to the US declined but Iranian refugees and asylum seekers to the US rose, particularly with minorities such as Jewish Iranians and Baha’is.[12] In the latest American Community Survey from 2016, the Iranian population in the US was estimated to be 476, 171 (+/-18,250). These numbers include persons who identify ‘Iranian’ as their first or second ancestry, although there are separate groups of Assyrians or Armenians. For a country that totalled an estimated population of 323,405,935 in the same year (US Census), Iranians only make up 0.15%.

In complete contrast the New Zealand census statistics for Iranians are not only lower in numbers but little detailed before the 1980s. According to New Zealand Internal Affairs there were 17 citizenships awarded to Iranians (who had Iranian citizenship) between 1949 and 1979, prior to the 1979 Revolution. Only in 1993 did that number reach triple digits with the highest number of citizenships, 239, awarded in 2007 (Citizenship Statistics). Overall 4,380 citizenships have been awarded between 1949 and 2017. Of course, many people do not take up

[11] The majority of immigrants to the US prior to 1960 were from Europe. This new act “eliminated the use of national-origin quotas, under which the overwhelming majority of immigrant visas were set aside for people coming from northern and Western Europe” (Gjelton para.1) and is partly responsible for the shift in population demographics to what we see in the US today where nine out of ten people come from places outside of Europe (Gjelton para.2).

[12] Followers of the Bahai religion have been one of the most persecuted groups in Iran since its beginnings in the 19th Century. The religion is seen as heretical and is not recognized by the post-revolutionary constitution. This is partly due to the Bahai belief that the last prophet was Baha’u’llah and not Mohammed as Shia Islam dictates (Naji para. 16).

citizenship so the numbers for those identifying as Iranian would still be higher. The New Zealand yearbook for the years after 1979 only record broad entries on ethnicities and countries of birth so Iranians may have counted themselves under the categories of “Other Countries” (1977-1986), or “Middle East and North Africa”, “Other Asia” and “Not specified” (1991, 1996). Only from 2001 does the census have more accurate and specific information regarding countries of birth and ethnic groups. In the last published New Zealand census from 2018, those identifying as ethnically Iranian/Persian comprised 4, 425 up from 3,195 in 2013. 78.9% of those were born in Iran. Though the spike in arrivals seems recent, the “Birthplace and sex by years since arrival in New Zealand” denotes that the majority of Iranians came between 1987 (near the end of the Iran-Iraq war) and 1996.[13] In Australia, a culturally and geographically similar country, Iranian-born residents numbered 34,453, which was a 52.8% increase since its 2006 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing). Similar to the New Zealand data, the first ‘big wave’ of immigrants arrived between 1981 and 1990 and the second between 2007 and 2011, with Iranians outnumbering other foreign-born arrivals. The overview also states that the reasons for this spike in numbers in the later 2000s was due to further persecution of minorities in Iran and the increase in Iranians coming under family and highly-skilled migrant visas (Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing).

Malek insists that despite the lack of detailed statistics on population, the Iranian diaspora has made considerable growth as a “community” with

[13] The table comprises of “usually resident population” and how many years back they arrived in New Zealand from 2013. The total number of Iranians who arrived 20-24 years ago (prior to the Revolution) was 33 while a total of 837 arrived 5-14 years prior (from 1987-1996) (NZ Census 2001).

"community awareness" ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 353), such that they have "become much less politicised and much more interested in culture" ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 358). This new awareness can partly be attributed to the growth and popularization of Iranian diasporic cultural and academic output. Academically, scholarship around the Iranian diaspora is relatively new but growing rapidly. According to Malek, this acceleration is what differentiates the Iranian diaspora from other diasporas such as the South Asian or African diasporas ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 353). This development has been supported by new schools and departments in 'Western' institutions that not only focus on the Middle East but may include Iranian Studies. It is important to distinguish the relevance of using the term Iranian studies rather than Persian studies. Persian is the most common ethnicity in Iran, as signified by Farsi/Persian being the official language; however, as noted earlier, there are various ethnicities that are not Persian yet are still 'Iranian'. Iranian studies, therefore, encompasses not only the various ethnicities in Iran but also Afghanistan and the "Persianate cultural sphere" (Yale). In the US, various universities provide Iranian Studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate level, including (but not limited to) UCLA, Stanford, Harvard, Yale and Columbia. In the UK, institutions such as the University of London, University of Edinburgh and University of St Andrews also provide similar initiatives. Although the majority of the classes are based on learning the Farsi language, there are also classes encompassing Iranian history,

culture and politics.[14] For example, the University of Stanford has its own class on Iranian diasporic cinema led by famed Iranian filmmaker Bahram Beyzaie, whose film work is acknowledged as being part of the Iranian New Wave, including his most famous film *Bashu, The Little Stranger* (1986).

The largest group of the global diaspora reside in the US and a significant number live in Southern California. Naficy's earlier work centred on the cultural output of Iranians in Los Angeles, particularly cinema and television in the 1990s. When Naficy published *The Making of Exile Cultures* (1993), he noted how Iranians did not reside in one enclave like other diasporas in Los Angeles who had whole neighbourhoods named after them, such as Koreatown, Chinatown and Little Armenia. The majority of Iranians resided in and around Beverly Hills and Orange County. Ironically, since Naficy's publication the area around Beverly Hills and UCLA has now become known as "Tehrangeles" and in 2012 Google maps 'officially' recognised it as a neighbourhood (Amirani para. 1). Tehrangeles is a portmanteau of the Iranian capital city Tehran and Los Angeles. In this area Iranian stores and restaurants line the main road, Westwood Boulevard. With its focus on trade and jewellery stores, downtown Los Angeles has also expanded this Iranian diaspora ("More than just a stereotype", 00:01:16 - 00:01:25).

It is not a coincidence that Los Angeles, as the entertainment capital of the US, created numerous opportunities for Iranian diaspora cultural output. Naficy notes that Los Angeles provides a platform on which to not only create and produce texts but to distribute them too, due to the high numbers of Iranians

[14] The British Institute of Persian studies is a charity that provides grants and programmes for scholars and those interested in Persian Studies (again it should be highlighted that they choose to only focus on the term 'Persian').

residing in the city. In *The Making of Exile Cultures*, Naficy focused on television made by the diaspora *for* the diaspora. His study explored the biases found in diaspora television: the dominant language was Persian with Jewish and Armenian Iranians outnumbering others in terms of representation on screen. In addition, those still loyal to the Shah and his descendants, known as Royalists, outnumbered others, including Leftists. In the early 1990s the main broadcasts consisted of imported music videos from the homeland, but diaspora television soon developed its own content which was then broadcast (illegally) back to the homeland. Television differs from other forms of artistic expression in Iranian exile, such as cinema, which was seen as more elite, and the former was comprised mainly of celebratory pop songs, dance and comic skits (*The Making of Exile Cultures* 13). However, television and pop culture registered the diversity in the Iranian community, including geography, religion and ethnicity, albeit bound together through language and shared culture: “These symbolic markers of ethnicity (language and popular culture) have been put in the service of creating in exile an imaginary ‘national’ Iranian identity for all the Iranians, regardless of their religio-ethno-linguistic affiliations” (Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures* 29). The diversity of the Iranian community is not as apparent today in other diasporic works of cinema and literature. The majority are in the Farsi/Persian language and/or the language of the country where they are produced such as English or French, and the evident religion of characters on screen, when it makes an appearance, is usually Shi’a Islam.

2.2 Iranian Women's Memoirs

In her article "Gender and Culture of Empire: Toward a Feminist Ethnography of the Cinema" (1991), Ella Shohat details the role of the Orient as a sexualised, exploited and feminised symbol of the 'Western' id. The veiled woman as a marginal figure, "mirroring the mystery of the Orient itself, requires a process of Western unveiling for comprehension" (57). Just as the land becomes available for 'penetration' and possession, so does she. Part of this possession is her imagined need to be saved. Shohat notes that the rescues of both 'Western' and 'non-Western' women in 'Western' literature and cinema (particularly Hollywood) plays into ideologies of the superiority of Christianity over Islam. One famous example is the desert romance novel *The Sheik* (1919) by British author E.M Hull, whereby an English woman, Diana, takes a voyage across an Arabian desert only to be kidnapped by an Arab sheik who rapes Diana continually and holds her as his captive for months. Despite his assault they both 'fall in love'. An Orientalist fantasy, the novel (and film of the same name released in 1921) was also problematic in its use of rape and the revelation that the sheik was actually half-English, and therefore easier to accept as a love interest.

The subjection of women in popular culture is of course not new, but Shohat importantly notes that in this Orientalist fantasy 'Western' women also feed into its patriarchal colonial discourse: "The intersection of colonial and gender discourses involves a shifting, contradictory subject positioning, whereby [the] Western woman can simultaneously constitute "center" and "periphery", identity and alterity" ("Gender and Culture of Empire" 63). Even though the

‘Western’ woman is also oppressed and inferior to ‘Western’ men, she is still dominant to the ‘Eastern’ woman and so the usual sexual male gaze is substituted for a colonial gaze. Similar to *The Sheik,* Shohat adds examples of ‘white-woman’s-burden’ films such as *The King and I* (Lang, 1956)*, Out of Africa* (Pollack, 1985) and *Gorillas in the Mist* (Apted, 1989). I would include more recent examples which place the centre of the Orient in war-torn Afghanistan or Iraq and herald similar intentions. For example, *Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot* (Ficarra and Requa, 2016) is based on a memoir by American journalist Kim Baker who travels to Afghanistan and is able to ‘penetrate’ the private lives of veiled Afghani women purely because she too is a woman. Though the film is a black comedy, Baker is a white saviour figure since it is through her, and only her, that these oppressed women can have their voices heard.

Shohat’s research notes how the Orient is also sexualised. The ‘Oriental woman’ is a sexualised being, more so than her ‘Western mistress’ who is more ‘morally’ inclined. Often the ‘Western’ woman is forced into sexual contact with the ‘Oriental male’ whereas the ‘Oriental woman’ only ever consents to the ‘Western’ male because she is hyper-sexual and “in perpetual heat” (“Gender and Culture of Empire” 64-65). Much of this ideology can be attributed to the Hollywood Production Code (1930 - 1960s) which heavily censored sexuality and sexual acts on screen, thereby displacing the sexual onto an ‘exotic non-Western’ figure. Shohat provides, as an example, the misrepresentation of harems, which were not overtly sexual places as perpetuated onscreen but a place for wealthy women who often lived with relatives and even owned and/or rented their own property (“Gender and Culture of Empire” 70). The colonial gaze has been perpetuated over time in an almost sadistic way by Middle-Eastern women

themselves with the popularity in the early 2000s of Iranian women's memoirs, which often focused on themes of subjection and captivity.

Persia has been a constant source of interest for 'Western' literature, including in the Ancient world with the notable works of Greek writers, such as Xenophon's *The Persian Expedition* (c.370BCE) and Aeschylus's *The Persians* (472 BCE). According to Edward Said, Aeschylus's play is one of the earliest textual examples of European superiority over the 'East': "Europe is powerful and articulate; Asia is defeated and distant" (*Orientalism* 57). Hossein Nazari and Hossein Peernajmodin in their respective dissertations note the heavily Orientalised imagery of Persia in Renaissance literature, particularly Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* (1587) which focused on power, religion and ideology (Peernajmodin 56), and John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and *Paradise Regained* (1671), whereby allusions to the "pagan" Persia are "depicted in its Satanic luxury" (Peernajmodin 58). Nazari notes that this exoticism continued into the Romantic era of 18th- and early 19th-century literature where English poets such as Lord Byron and Robert Southey replicated images of an indulgent 'East' (5). Byron even published various poems between 1813 and 1816, known as the Eastern tales, such as *The Giaour: A fragment of a Turkish tale* (1813) and *The Bride of Abydos* (1813). Alongside these 'Western' writers, popularisations of Medieval Persian poets such as Omar Khayyam, Rumi and Hafez are still prominent in the 'West' today.

Two key texts that solidified the idea of an Orientalised Persia were *One Thousand and One Nights* by Scheherazade and the works of British diplomat James Morier. Nazari explains how Scheherazade's stories of Persian, Arabic and Indian folk tales added "to the exoticization and eroticization of Persia in the

Western Imaginary" (5). Furthermore, the most iconic stories of Aladdin and his magical lamp, Sinbad and the Sailor and Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves were not in the original Arabic version but were added by European writers and translators. In his books *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan* (1824) and its sequel *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan in England* (1841), Morier exploits his encounters with Persia and Persians by ridiculing them as "rascals", "superstitious", "vain, self-interested, duplicitous and cunning people" (Peernajmodin 151), although he sprinkles praise to prove his 'objectivity' as an observer. Morier also wrote many travelogues about Persia. Travelogues have been a constant source of Orientalism by Europeans, including the works of French traveller Jean Chardin in the late 17th-Century, Marco Polo, and Montesquieu's *The Persian Letters* (1721), an early example whereby two Persian noblemen travel around France during the European Enlightenment. The majority of such travelogues of Persians in the Occident were written by Europeans, although there are exceptions, such as the lesser-known Mirza Saleh Shirazi, who wrote about Britain and British history in the early 19th Century. However, exilic memoirs written by Iranians for a mainly 'Western' audience are new, with the majority being written and released from the early 2000s and gaining huge critical and commercial success in the 'Western' market. The 'mini-boom' of Iranian women filmmakers in 2007-2017, which is the subject of this study, is descended from this writing.

In "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" (2006), Malek lists a number of reasons for this literary "phenomenon" (359). Timing is always significant, as shown by one of the first women written memoirs, *Not Without My Daughter* by Betty Mahmoudy, which was released in 1987. The memoir became

a film (released in 1991) that harshly criticized Iranians as backwards fanatics from which the protagonist Betty, an American woman married to an Iranian man, had to escape 1980s Iran with her young daughter. At the time, anti-Iranian sentiments were popular in the US due to the hostage crisis,1979-1981. Similarly, Malek notes that the more recent surge of memoirs came directly after 9/11 when the Middle East was once again the focus of global media. One of the first of these memoirs of an Iranian living in exile was Tara Bahrampour's *To See and See Again: A Life in Iran and America* (1999). As well as non-Iranians showing interest in this area, Iranians in a growing diaspora were also consuming these products. Along with memoirs, both the travelogue and the autobiography have proved popular, particularly in the 'West' where analysing the self has become 'big business' – as shown by the prominence of 'self-help literature' and therapy discourse. I would add to this the widespread commercialisation of genealogy where the search for an ancestral past has now become accessible to a large number of private individuals, particularly in countries such as the US.[15] This revived interest in exploring one's roots and past are also key themes within these memoirs.

In "Iranian Women's Life Narratives" (2013) Farzaneh Milani believes memoirs are like a type of public confession which were not commonplace in Iranian society. She notes that those who did deposit the self into public works were seen as "literary misfits", such as famed female Iranian poet Forough Farrokhzad (131). Milani argues that in Iranian culture there is no sense of confession "either in its Catholic sense or in that practice's secular modern

[15] In 2017, industry estimates showed that the consumer genealogy industry was worth upwards of $12 million (Regalado para. 1).

version, psychotherapy" ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 130), which she relates to the prominence of the veil in the culture. The veil is the visible embodiment of a "barrier" that splits the private from the public: "Communication is veiled. Words are veiled. Public expressions of intimate relationships are veiled" ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 130). Milani states that confessions constitute a type of unveiling. She supports this argument with the idea that there were no full-length biographies of Iranian women before the middle of the twentieth century and that autobiographies were even rarer. One exception was Farrokhzad (1934-1967) who often wrote about herself and as a result was deemed controversial for her "exhibitionism" and "self-absorption" ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 131). Ironically, a novel based on her life, *Song of a Captive Bird: A Novel* (2018), has been written by Iranian-American author Jasmin Darznik. Milani notes that in the US there are "invisible veils" on certain topics, but self-narration is not one of them ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 132-133). Women's voices have always been marginalised in Iran *and* in the 'West', so whether or not cultural elements such as the veil magnify this restriction, the rise of women's memoirs, and now films, show that this marginality is being challenged.

It is not a coincidence that the majority of memoir writers are women. Some of the most famous (critically and commercially) in the 'West' include the aforementioned Mahmoudy (*Not Without My Daughter* 1987), Marjane Satrapi (*Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* 2003 and *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* 2004), Azar Nafisi (*Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books* 2004), and Azadeh Moaveni (*Lipstick Jihad: A Memoir of Growing up Iranian in America*

and American in Iran 2005).[16] These books achieved significant success in the 'West'. For instance, *Reading Lolita in Tehran,* which spent 117 weeks on the *New York Times*'s Bestseller list, was translated into 32 languages and is currently being developed into a film by Israeli filmmaker Eran Rikilis (Uterfilm). Much scholarship on the Iranian diasporic memoir revolves around these titles. Malek notes how the memoir works by giving a voice to women in a genre not dominated by male authors. She references the fact that many of the writers are already successful in other areas of writing: Azar Nafisi is an academic; Marjane Satrapi is an illustrator and filmmaker; and Azadeh Moaveni a journalist (Malek, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 364). There have been male writers such as Abbas Milani's *Tale of Two Cities: A Persian Memoir* (2006) and Maziar Bahari's *Rosewater: A Family's Story of Love, Captivity, and Survival* (2014), yet the memoir genre remains dominated by women.

The majority of the memoirs were written by the first and 1.5-generation of Iranians who witnessed the Revolution and/or the Iran/Iraq war and subsequent change of regime. Their memoirs centre on a childhood in Iran interrupted (often traumatically) by the move to an 'unknown West'. This trauma continues into life in exile, although some memoirs also explore a type of in-betweenness in the diaspora.

Some of the earlier films such as *Persepolis* (Satrapi 2004) follow this

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[16] Other titles include Nesta Ramazani (*Dance of the Rose and the Nightingale* 2002); Firoozeh Dumas (*Funny in Farsi: A Memoir of Growing Up Iranian in America* 2003 and *Laughing without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen* 2009); Farideh Goldin (*Wedding Song: Memoirs of an Iranian Jewish Woman* 2003 and *Leaving Iran: Between Migration and Exile* 2016); Azar Nafisi (*Things I've Been Silent About: Memories of a Prodigal Daughter* 2010, *The Republic of Imagination: A Life in Books* 2015); Roya Hakakian (*Journey from the Land of No* 2004); Afschineh Latifi (*Even After All This Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* 2005); Azadeh Moaveni (*Honeymoon in Tehran* 2009); Nahid Rachlin (*Jumping over Fire* 2005, *Persian Girls: A Memoir* 2006); Davar Ardalan (*My Name is Iran* 2007); Marjane Satrapi (*Chicken with Plums* 2009); Porochista Khakpour (*Sons and Other Flammable Objects* 2007, *Sick* 2018, *The Brown Album* 2020); Jasmin Darznik (*The Good Daughter: A Memoir of My Mother's Life* 2011); Golriz Ghahraman (*Know Your Place* 2020); Ghazaleh Golbakhsh (*The Girl From Revolution Road* 2020).

template. Based on a graphic novel of the same name, the story of this film focuses on Marji, based on the author's own life experiences, growing up during and after the Revolution in Iran. As a teenager she is sent to Austria by herself where she feels lonely and hopeless in a place devoid of any type of Iranian community. She returns to Iran to live a turbulent and rebellious life under the new regime. It is not until she makes a final move to France as an adult that Marji accepts a life of exile. The impact of being uprooted in childhood has links to the idea of being rootless for life as many of the memoirs discuss the challenges of living in a state of liminality. This sense of homelessness is accentuated even more when the exiled returns to the homeland but is still not 'home.'

Lipstick Jihad (2005) finds second-generation Iranian-American Azadeh Moaveni moving to Tehran as a journalist during the early 2000s to learn more about her Iranian identity amidst interviewing and writing about the political unrest of the time. Similarly, in my own *Iran in Transit* (2012), as a 1.5-generation Iranian-New Zealander, I returned to my birthplace of Tehran to explore a sense of duality and yet felt equally displaced. My conclusion, however, was an acceptance that it was not so much liminality that I experienced but a duality of having a home in two places, Iran and New Zealand.

Alongside exile, another prominent theme that arises in some memoirs is what Milani in "Iranian Women's Life Narratives" has termed "the hostage narrative" (207). She notes that even though the use of captivity has been a popular narrative for writers over centuries, there is a stark difference between "prison literature" (212) and hostage narratives, namely the lack of agency and focus on oppression in the latter. Hostage narratives rely on the clichéd oppressed Muslim woman: "She is seen as the victim of an immobilizing faith,

locked up inside her mandatory veil—a mobile prison shrunk to the size of her body. She is understood to have no real voice or visibility, nowhere to escape to, no protection, no shelter, no freedom of movement" ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 138). Milani notes how the victim is 'liberated' symbolically through a literal unveiling which may signify freedom in a 'non-veiled West' but has various other complex 'meanings' in the Muslim world ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 138). The veil as a signifier of oppression and liberator is also a key theme in the films in this study. However, like Malek, Milani also agrees that these memoir narratives help give women an authentic voice and a platform. Autobiographies and self-ethnographies are thought to have more reliable narrators and so are seen as more authentic. These women are not completely passive either as the need to escape comes from the women themselves and not an outside force where they are 'saved' by other parties. For Milani there are four main factors to the hostage narratives' popularity: "familiarity, the allure generally of life narratives, a relative lack of translated works from Iran and other parts of the Middle East, and American audiences' genuine desire to learn more about the region" ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 140). Two of the above points are relevant here. The familiarity and popularity of the captivity narrative, particularly of kidnapped women, helps to explain the increasing interest in the genres of "autobiographies, memoirs and travelogues" ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives"140). Secondly, a desire to know more about a 'taboo' country, as noted above, is an important factor in the success of these genres. Milani focuses on the memoirs *Not Without My Daughter* and *Reading Lolita in Tehran* to show different types of hostage narratives. The first is an obvious captivity story based on a foreign woman who is taken hostage by her husband and his family during

the turbulence of 1980s Iran, while the second is a less blatant self-imposed captivity story where an Iranian teacher and her students discuss 'Western' literature in her home in 1990s Iran, all the while feeling trapped within their own homeland due to the militant regime. In the films in this study, themes associated with imprisonment are common: Shideh in *Under the Shadow* is practically held hostage by a jinn in her apartment; *Circumstance* creates the oppressive world of Atafeh's family, which reflects the wider society in which she lives; even in the *Lady Land*, Samira and Fari feel as if they live in a self-imposed suburban prison and are desperate to leave. Like the memoirs, the women in the films escape of their own accord.

The memoirs above paved the way for subsequent films that were made by women filmmakers in the diaspora. It is not surprising that some of the earlier films were adaptations of books, such as Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2006), Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2011 – the book was published by Shahrnush Parsipur in 1978) and Dalia Sofer's *The Septembers of Shiraz* (2007), released as a film with the same name in 2015. Similar to the memoirs, these films were made and released during a time when the global media was focussed on events in the Middle East, including the 'War on Terror' and the 2009 post-election protests in Iran known as the Green Movement. Secondly, the popularity of cinema made by minorities and those in other diasporas helped establish an audience for diaspora films. One such group would be the South Asian diaspora, with women filmmakers such as Gurinder Chadha and Mira Nair who broke barriers early on in their careers by creating films that centred on the Indian diaspora. Many of Chadha's works, such as *Bhaji on the Beach* (1995) and *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) focus on the challenges faced by second-generation

South Asian women in the United Kingdom. Themes such as generational conflict and identity politics are commonplace as they appear in other films such as Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991) and *The Namesake* (2006).

Under the Shadow is similar to *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in that the story takes place in Iran during the Iran/Iraq war as the capital Tehran is bombed on a daily basis by Iraqi bombs and missiles. The protagonist Shideh is practically imprisoned within her own home, not only because of the dangers of the missiles, but also due to the new theocracy which prohibits freedoms for women and minorities. Shideh was a leftist activist during the Revolution and as such is no longer permitted to attend medical school. Frustrated and bored, Shideh spends her days working out to American aerobics on illegal VHS's[17] while having only her young daughter, Dorsa, to keep her company once her husband is drafted to war. Shideh's imprisonment is self-imposed. Her husband advises Shideh to escape with Dorsa to his parent's home in the north but Shideh refuses as she believes she would be a "burden". Shideh's apartment is covered in heavy-set dark curtains in order to keep prying eyes out of the house. Yet these curtains serve a dual purpose by also trapping Shideh and Dorsa inside as they become victimised by a vengeful jinn (Islamic curse). In order to keep glass from shattering if hit by missiles, all of the apartment's windows are marked by duct tape. In one scene, a close-up shows a piece of tape coming undone. An eyeline match cuts to Shideh who notices it from her bed. Another cut finds Shideh moving to the window to fix it when a sudden unknown arm bursts through the glass from the left of the frame and tries to grab her throat. A hard cut finds

[17] Under the Islamic Republic, media and broadcast is heavily censored and restricted. Foreign media particularly from the 'West' was (and still is) prohibited.

Shideh in bed sleeping, supposedly dreaming this nightmare (see Fig. 1, 2, and 3). As much as the apartment serves as a type of prison, it is also about keeping things out and keeping things secret. Only later when the building is empty, with Shideh and Dorsa left behind, does Shideh make the decision to leave, believing that she can face whatever horrors lay outside as opposed to the ones inside.

Fig. 1. Shideh looking to the window, *Under the Shadow* (00:48:00).

Fig. 2. Eyeline match to the window, *Under the Shadow* (00:48:03).

Fig. 3. The jinn grabs Shideh, *Under the Shadow* (00:48:27).

There are only a few scenes that take place outside of the apartment, as the film veers from a private space to a public one. The opening scene finds Shideh at University being rejected by a sullen official; the dead body of her neighbour's father is taken on a stretcher to an ambulance just outside the apartment; and when Shideh takes Dorsa to one of the last remaining doctors in her area, she is told that it may be her fault that Dorsa is ill. When the film does venture into the public space, it is full of disappointments for Shideh. Similar to the typical hostage narratives that Milani discusses, Shideh's marginality is shown through her oppression and she has no real agency for the first half of the film. Shideh finds her strength through the love of her daughter and manages to finally escape the apartment and possibly the jinn (a small talisman is left behind indicating that perhaps they have not escaped the jinn that attaches itself to such things). Though the film has elements of exilic hostage narrative, it also incorporates 'Western' horror tropes that centre on the traumas and challenges of motherhood whereby the protagonist is first chastised and then revered for being a mother. While Milani argues that hostage narrative memoirs "concentrate on one side of the ongoing battle in Iran, and offer a static image of victimhood and immobility, of subordination and entrapment" ("Iranian Women's Life Narratives" 140), these new films are subversive signifying the acceptance that Iranian women are not always victims. *Under the Shadow* shows the inner turmoil of a young mother who must free herself from her own self-imposed entrapment, in *addition* to the horrors of war and an oppressive regime.

A Girl also brings in a type of self-imposed oppression by the unnamed protagonist known only as The Girl. The Girl is a vampire who we assume is a visitor to the town Bad City. She is a stranger who works alone and, though she

strays from any type of connection with humans, she devours their culture (and their bodies). In her basement apartment, the mise en scène includes a shrine to pop culture. Posters of pop stars and fairy lights cover the walls as The Girl dances alone to a contemporary melody. Yet she desires to leave Bad City. This is evident when she meets Arash, who is keen to escape the town and his drug-addicted father, Hossein. This self-imposed victimhood contrasts with the fact that the Girl is also the villain. She feeds on the 'bad men' around her, including Said "The Pimp" and Hossein. The Girl can leave but refuses to, for reasons that are not clear. In one reading it is Arash who saves her, as it is his idea to escape the town, but it is also the Girl who generates possibilities, by murdering Arash's abusive father and Said for his money. In one way, both Arash and the Girl are oppressed and held hostage in Bad City and so must band together to escape, which they do together in the final sequence. The two sit in Arash's car on a dark desert highway. A long take holds on a mid-shot of the characters staring out into the distance. If there was a moment to turn back this would be it, but Arash starts the car as a 1980s electronic beat blasts out from the tape deck and they drive off, literally leaving dirt in their tracks. Both Shideh and the Girl show their marginality through their imprisonment, but they also negotiate their way out of marginality by escaping this imprisonment themselves - without 'Western' saviours.

2.3 The 'Western' Gaze

Edward Said notes in his work on Orientalism that the 'Western' gaze

promulgates tropes and stereotypes that readers (and viewers) expect from the ‘East’, such as veiled women and oppressive regimes. This, too, can be problematic in memoirs. As Nima Naghibi writes:

> These books - their publication, their marketing, and their popularity - speak to their complicity with a system of knowledge production that markets and packages the exoticized and simultaneously reviled East for the consumption of the West. And by marketing the East in this way, as a place both inviting and threatening, these texts lend their implicit support to colonial intervention’. (“Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia in Diasporic Iranian Women’s Autobiographies” 82)

Naghibi terms these memoirs as “soft weapons” (“Revolution, Trauma, and Nostalgia” 82), referencing the term ‘soft power’ from political discourse. Famously coined by political scientist Joseph Nye in 1990, ‘soft power’ involves coercion through “culture, ideology and institutions” (Nye 167). This is not a forced ‘hard power’ but a reliance on ideologies such as pop culture to ‘win’ over other countries. Film and media are obvious resources in this case, as shown previously by Hollywood studio films such as the aforementioned *Not Without My Daughter* and the more recent *Argo* (Affleck, 2012) which offered a more negative view of Iran and its people. The film revisits racist stereotypes of Iranians by including scenes of angry mobs yelling in a language that is not subtitled, against the evident heroism of the US government, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Hollywood. To counteract this view, the films in the

Iranian diaspora instead show a more complex image of Iranians. They are heroes *and* victims; their stories are not one-dimensional, and, as such, they are not seen as the unknown.

In agreement with Naghibi, Malek also warns about the challenges of overcoming this marginalisation. She believes that relying solely on the memoir genre pigeon-holes these women artists:

> This only perpetuates several frustrations in Iranian exile culture within the larger Western culture: memoir and film have become the only two creative vehicles through which mainstream Western consumers can view Iran and Iranians outside of the one-dimensional view provided by commercial news outlets. These two outlets have become further embedded in the Othering of the Iranian experience by giving a voice to Iranian artists and writers, while keeping them within these limited genres, thus further Othering them, though this time using their own supposed non-fictive voices. ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 364)

This commonplace frustration is an example of the burden of representation: the idea that minority artists must only represent their marginality, and their ethnic identity, and thus their identity as a representation of *everyone* within that ethnic group. The privilege of white characters (and artists) is that they can represent anyone and everyone in humanity. Richard Dyer, in his famous chapter, "The

Matter of Whiteness", states, "The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that - they can only speak for their race. But non-raced people can, for they do not represent the interests of a race" (10). Malek notes how Azadeh Moaveni intended to write a journalistic piece about youth in Tehran for her first book but was encouraged to turn it into the memoir *Lipstick Jihad* so that it would sell more ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 364). My own screenplay heralded a similar critique when it was noted by one anonymous reader that Fari should be a non-Iranian, 'white' New Zealander as having two 'non-white' leads in a feature film would not find an audience in New Zealand or consequently in the 'West'.

It is not surprising that the criticism aimed at Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* was partly due to its critical acclaim and huge popularity. Much of this criticism revolves around the authority of representation. In one of the first articles on Iranian women's memoirs, "Off the Grid: Reading Iranian Memoirs in Our Time of Total War" (2004), Negar Mottahedeh is highly critical of the memoirs that are written by the generation who knew Iran prior to the Revolution. She believes authors such as Nafisi are complacent in promoting war by foreign powers in Iran, and states that *Reading Lolita* "performs like a wound--up metal monkey on wheels as the warmup act for more theater of unprovoked war and another occupation" (para. 34). Iranian-born, American-based scholar Fatemeh Keshavarz called it "new orientalism" (Whitlock 12). Both critique the memoir as pandering to American tastes. Just as Milani claimed, the memoir mobilises Orientalist fantasies of women in an oppressed regime who need saving by 'Western' powers – in Nafisi's case, 'Western' literature. In reality, Nafisi's book group focused on a broader scope of literature including Iranian writers, but the

memoir solely focuses on ‘Western’ authors such as Vladimir Nabokov, Jane Austen, Henry James and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Part of the issue some scholars have with these memoirs is also class-based. As Gillian Whitlock points out in “From Tehran to Tehrangeles: The Generic Fix of Iranian Exilic Memoirs” (2008), the memoirs are written by *and for,* privileged, middle-class, educated liberal women. They are “a gendered and generational intelligentsia within the diaspora” (15) as much of the narratives revolve around middle-class spaces such as Palo Alto, Southern California in Moaveni’s *Lipstick Jihad* or the affluent North Tehran of Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita.* The authors themselves are the products of a liberally educated elite who are professionally trained writers and journalists. This also seems relevant to the filmmakers in this study. Each filmmaker has been educated at university in film studies or film production, with the exception of Tina Gharavi and Shirin Neshat, who gained experience in the visual arts before moving into film. Such class-based experience can also be seen in the narratives and themes of their films. *Appropriate Behavior* and *Lady Land* explore the ennui of middle-class Iranians in the diaspora while *Circumstance* focuses on an affluent household in Iran; *Under the Shadow* follows a highly educated, middle-class family in Tehran; and *I am Nasrine* throws its two protagonists from their comfortable middle-class existence in Iran to working-class asylum seekers in the UK.

The films’ audience demographics are also representative of an educated middle-class as each film premiered at an A-List film festival as well as being released internationally, unlike the exile films addressed by Naficy, which were barely exhibited outside of the US. For instance, *Circumstance* was released in the US, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, the UK and

Australia (Neon Productions). *Under the Shadow* and *A Girl* were also internationally released before being picked up by streaming platform Netflix and garnering a larger mainstream audience. This is exactly what Whitlock notes when she claims that the memoir boom was aimed at “North American middlebrow readerships” (9). The memoirs are written in English and emerge from a diaspora made up of mainly middle-class educated professionals. “They are ‘just Other’ enough to represent her subject authoritatively, and at the same time familiar enough not to alienate her audience” (Whitlock 14). The films, though not studio-made, are still mainstream cinema in that they are not purely experimental and intended for a theatrical audience. Though some of their styles and forms are influenced by arthouse cinema, their narratives follow a mainstream Aristotelian three to five act structure, demonstrate mainstream hierarchies of the visual over the aural, and focus on character, plot and cause-and-effect logic whereby every scene pushes the next in terms of a coherent chronological narrative.

Another type of memoir ‘backlash’ comes in the form of academia itself. Amy Motlagh’s main focus in her article “Autobiography and Authority in the Writings of the Iranian Diaspora” (2011) is on the fusion of academic scholarship and the memoir in the works of Iranian women in the diaspora. Like Malek, she notes how many of the memoir authors are established writers in other fields, including academia, and so the memoir combines scholarship and regular memoir. Yet, ironically, as Motlagh points out, the memoir backlash also interweaves the personal within the critiques. For example, she notes how Iranian scholars such as Fatemeh Keshavarz and Hamid Dabashi accused *Reading Lolita in Tehran* of “demonising” Iran and its people (415). Keshavarz even wrote

her own book in response to the memoir entitled *Jasmine and the Stars: Reading More than "Lolita" in Tehran* (2007), in an attempt to throw a more positive light on the people of Iran. Yet Keshavarz was also prone to criticism as her use of the personal was exactly the issue she had with Nafisi's book. This brings up a specific issue around the burden of representation, that of authority - who has the right to tell this story? The films in this study all express the very personal experiences of the filmmakers themselves who have either put their own life stories (*Under the Shadow, Appropriate Behavior)* or others' stories (*I am Nasrine*) into their narratives to avoid generalisations. *Under the Shadow* was based on the director Anvari's own experiences of war as a child while *I am Nasrine* was based on research and interviews of refugees in the UK which inspired Gharavi's script.

It is no coincidence that the filmmakers in my study chose to focus on their Iranian-ness for their feature debuts. Similar to the memoirs, the films are not only more 'authentic' but also more appealing in a global market that is still transfixed with the political and cultural sphere of the Middle East. 2009 brought huge global attention to Iran after protests broke out after the election of incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Other newsworthy events include the rise and fall of the Iran nuclear deal[18], international sanctions and since 2013, the new government under the reformist-backed cleric Hassan Rouhani. Iran has had a constant presence in international media, so it is not surprising that interest in the area and its people are still prominent. Counteracting Malek's point above,

[18] The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was an agreement between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN security council (the US, UK, France, Russia, China plus Germany), signed in 2015 which set strict limits on Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for less sanctions. The US under the Trump administration withdrew from the deal in May 2018.

however, these filmmakers are not limited to only making films about Iranian-ness or even in-betweenness. Nearly all of the filmmakers' second features do not feature any links to Iranian culture or identity. Amirpour released the black comedy thriller *The Bad Bunch* (2016), a story about a young white American woman fighting for survival in an apocalyptic future. Akhavan released the Sundance-winning *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2018), which focuses on a young white American girl being sent to a 'gay conversion' camp in the early 1990s to 'overcome' her homosexuality. Anvari released the thriller *Wounds* (2019), which centres on a white American bartender in New Orleans. Keshavarz directed *Viper Club* (2018), starring Susan Sarandon as a nurse attempting to free her son from a terrorist group. It is possible that these stories involve conscious decisions to avoid the pigeonhole that Malek talks about, as Anvari notes in an interview with *Film Comment* with regard to his debut *Under the Shadow*:

> I didn't feel like it was a moral duty that I had to make this film about Iran. I felt like I wanted to tell this story because I was passionate about telling it and it excited me and I thought that it was the type of story that I could use to introduce the world to the other side of Iran—the side that the media doesn't necessarily show to you in the Western world. (Quoted in Talu, 2016)

Unlike Anvari, however, Amirpour does not believe her decision to focus on Iranian-ness for her debut *A Girl* was a conscious political choice: "I personally

am not setting out to make any comment about anything” (quoted in Myers, 2014). Despite Amirpour’s intentions, the film has been read as a politically charged feminist work (see Myers, Ortiz, and Shadee and Calafell). However, it is worth noting that further films centring on Iranian-ness are still planned by at least two of the filmmakers: Tina Gharavi is following up her *I am Nasrine* with *The Good Iranian,* “a crime drama set in Europe and Iran” (Women Make Movies), which is currently in development; and Maryam Keshavarz has a variety of screenplays in development, including *The Persian Version* (2020) centring on an Iranian-American family in New York City (Maryam Keshavarz).

Memoirs, like other cultural outputs of the Iranian diaspora, have held powerful sway over representations of Iranians, Iran and the diaspora itself. As Whitlock claims, “the Iranian diaspora in the USA has been a vital intelligentsia in producing powerful ideas about exilic identity that have contributed to debates about multiculturalism, diaspora, hybridity, and transnationalism” (17). Aside from the scholars mentioned here, these creative works also present similar themes in both text and authorship. Women’s memoirs, like these films, have been written by and about this ‘intelligentsia’ to counteract the stereotypes and marginalisation of Iranians and Iran by the ‘West’. While *Not Without my Daughter* presented a backwards, violent Iran after the hostage situation (and Gulf War when the film was released), *Persepolis* (both graphic novel and film) was released after 9/11 as a response to the negative portrayals of Iranians in ‘Western’ media. While the Iranian film *A Separation* (Farhadi, 2011) became the first Iranian film to win an Academy Award in 2011, the following year, the same award went to the Hollywood studio film *Argo* (Affleck, 2012). If every action has a reaction, then the films in this study are all counteractions to the ongoing battles over

representation of Iranians on screen.

Women's memoirs have been criticised, but they also provide a platform for Iranian women's voices to be heard on a global stage. Malek claims that despite their criticisms, Satrapi's *Persepolis* and Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* both helped redefine the memoir genre into a hybridised text. *Persepolis* merged the graphic novel and memoir while *Reading Lolita* fused literary criticism and the novel ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 365). *Reading Lolita* garnered almost as much criticism as it did praise, and yet, even as its criticisms heralded more works by Iranians in the diaspora, Motlagh notes that by "demonstrating the scale and scope of the memoir's reach, *RLT* [*Reading Lolita in Tehran]* created a race within the Iranian diasporic community to use this medium to convey the "right" message about modern Iran (415)". Malek also cites the advantages of the genre when she states that "Memoirs, then, have not only allowed writers to record their histories, work through memoirs and negotiate their identities in diaspora, they also can provide a pedagogical forum in which identifications form across cultures, as well as between subjects, in the diaspora space ("Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 367). She cites Miller (*Age of Migration*) that this identification allows one "to read yourself across the body or under the skin of *other* selves" (Citing Miller, "Memoir as Iranian Exile Cultural Production" 367). Film in its original context as celluloid is also a type of skin so it is possible to see how these films negotiate a type of identity within their narratives. Though there have been numerous exports of cultural works by the Iranian diaspora, women's memoirs seem to be the precursor to the mini-boom of women's films in the diaspora.

Chapter Three: The Veil and Cultural Figures

> These photographs became iconic portraits of wilfully armed Muslim women. Yet every image, every woman's submissive gaze, suggests a far more complex and paradoxical reality behind the surface. (Shirin Neshat quoted in Brodsky & Olin 136)

In her photograph entitled *Rebellious Silence* (1994) from the series *Women of Allah* (1993-1997), Shirin Neshat photographs herself in black and white, wearing a full black chador. She holds a rifle that is centred perfectly on her body and face, which is covered in Persian calligraphy reciting words from Iranian women poets. Neshat's look is direct and confrontational, consciously complicating the viewer's gaze. As Neshat herself states above, the gaze is paradoxical much like the veil itself, which she states is, "extremely controversial, which has been considered both a symbol of repression and a symbol of liberation-resistance against the Western influence" (MacDonald and Neshat 628). Neshat's *Women of Allah* series was her first global success and yet it was also critiqued for harbouring Orientalist tropes. The photographs were all of a veiled Neshat, holding a weapon with poetry inscribed over her face or other body parts. Valentina Vitali in her article on Neshat's art history, "Corporate Art and Theory" (2004), notes how particularly in academic journals, Neshat's "entire body of work has often been accused of pandering to orientalism and of repeating stereotypes"

(1), of appropriation, and “Eurocentrism” (9). Neshat herself has confronted these critiques noting, “I feel that in all my work to date, although I have never denied women's oppression in Islam, I have never represented the female sector as 'victims,' which as you rightfully mentioned remains a Western cliché” (qtd. in Darabi) and again, “You have to keep in mind the context in which this work was made. I had no art career; I was not thinking about the audience since I didn't have any; I was making this work for myself” (MacDonald and Neshat 629). Earlier in the same article Neshat exclaims that *Women of Allah* was a result of returning to Iran after a 12 year absence and that it was her way to “reconnect” with her “long-lost culture” (628). The complexities of this image are relevant to discussions of the Islamic veil. Just as the figure in Neshat’s photographs both subvert and enforce Orientalist tropes, so it is the image of the veiled Muslim woman that has come to symbolise her as a marginal figure.

This chapter will look at the legacy and symbolism of the veil, particularly within Iranian history and Iranian diasporic cultural output. Historically the veil became a tool for both the government and those who opposed it. Reza Shah for example, made it illegal for women to be covered in public, while under the Islamic Republic it became illegal to be unveiled. However, the veil has also been used as a weapon to fight the system as shown by the many protestors who took to the veil during the Revolution against the Shah, to the more recent protests of women in Iran today who unveil publicly, risking imprisonment. Even within Iranian cinema, the veil becomes a political symbol. From the Revolution and war years where the veiled woman became the idealised mother/wife/sister behind those who were martyred, to women on film who are forced to veil in every situation.

The films in this study also utilise the veil but do so from the point of view of the diaspora. The protagonists in the following films are marginalised in distinctive ways through the use of the veil. In *A Girl* (Amirpour, 2012) the veil is associated with the figure of the vampire that is the epitome of this dual and liminal character. The vampire is the ultimate border crosser, living in-between life and death and continually crossing societal and cultural boundaries. In *A Girl*, she is a feminist vampire, but one that is both oppressor and oppressed and this is signified in her use of the chador. In *Under the Shadow* (Anvari, 2017), the jinn manifests itself as a literal chador, without a body and becomes a phantasm that haunts the protagonist, Shideh. In these films, the veil brings with it contradictions and complexities. In my screenplay *Lady Land*, I consciously play with Orientalist imagery through the figure of an Ancient Persian heroine, Banu Ghoshap who throughout the narrative, continuously appears to the protagonist Samira as a type of fantastical 'spiritual guide'. The veil becomes a symbol of appropriation that fulfils Orientalist fantasies, but it is also a symbol of rebellion and agency for the protagonists rather than straightforward oppression. Alongside this is *Circumstance* (Keshavarz, 2011) and *Lady Land*, that use dual characters who wilfully stay on the outskirts of society as 'slackers' and delinquents, and argue how this may be a reflection of hyphenated filmmaker who is sees themselves as marginal to the dominant society in a diaspora.

3.1 The Veil

The veil has been a part of women's dress in both 'Western' and 'Eastern' cultures for millennia, from the Egyptian goddess Isis who was associated with "veiled truths" (Khachabi 254), to forced veilings in the Assyrian empire and to Christian iconography of the veiled Mary in 'Western' art history. In Ancient Persia, the veil was in use throughout the Sassanid and Byzantine empires as a fashion statement until it became religious attire after the Arab conquests in the 7th Century. Even then, it was mainly the elites who took to wearing the veil. The religious veil today includes a variety of different fabrics worn by women including the *hijab*, which covers only the hair; the *chador*, a long fabric that covers everything but the face (common in the Persianate); the *niqab* that covers everything but the eyes; and the *burqa* which covers everything including the face. In "The Veil as national allegory" (2018), Walid El Khachab notes this diversity in the word itself: "Where the European words imply both hiding and revealing at the same time, the Arabic word (hijab) stems from a semantic root meaning covering or *hiding from sight*" (244). In Farsi, the word *chador* literally means *tent*, which Çagla Hadimioglu claims originates from the Turkish *chadir*. In an Islamic sense, this tent is used as a way to remove women from the gaze of men and hijab becomes a "visual prophylactic" (Hadimioglu 21). The veil is the symbol of secrets and revelations, which in this case is used to hide or reveal what lies beneath. Not just limited to fabric, the Orientalist veil extends to drapery, curtains and the muslin curtains that can lead into harems and bedrooms.

Women's bodies, and in particular their dress, became political ideologies with which the rulers of modern Iran aimed to control their citizen-subjects. Under Reza Shah 'Western' dress (or non-Islamic attire) became one of his most controversial acts when he outlawed the chador in 1936. As Faegheh Shirazi notes in *The Veil Unveiled: the Hijab in Modern Culture* (2001): "Whilst Ataturk encouraged Turkish women to abandon their veils, Reza Shah ordered Iranian women to unveil" (90). Under the White Revolution of his son, Mohammed Reza Shah, 'forced modernization' continued until the Revolution. Women, including those who were non-religious, took to veiling as a form of political protest against the Shah in the 1960s and 1970s; Khomeini, when he came to power, initiated the idea of mandatory veiling as a "recommendation" in 1980 (Shirazi 93) until it became law in 1983. By 1986 the punishment for not veiling included public lashings and imprisonment which is still in use today. What is important to note, as Shirazi does, is that contrary to belief, neither forced unveiling or veiling improved the status of women in society. Instead, it merely highlighted the vast differences among them. For example, those who were unveiled were often educated, middle and elite urbanites, whilst those who took to the veil were either illiterate or educated at home, religious and lived in rural areas. Thus "[i]t was the unveiled "Westernized" Iranian woman who became a scapegoat for the demagogues of the Islamic Republic of Iran" (Shirazi 91). Women who did not adhere to the veil were seen as puppets or dolls of the 'evil West' and their punishments were enforced by the newfound police unit, the *komiteh* or "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution" (Shirazi 94). A 'bad hijab' could constitute anything from partial veiling, to tight clothing and make-up which was thought to encourage the male gaze. This is shown in *Women without Men* (Neshat, 2009),

where women hide behind the chador as they occupy spaces dominated by men. Yet, their black chadors differentiate them from the masses of others dressed in white. One poignant instance of veiling in the film focuses on Munis when she joins in an anti-Shah protest. Lost amidst a sea of men in white shirts, holding their fists to the air, Munis stands out in her dark colours and yet she is completely ignored. Only within their own spaces, such as in Munis's garden or Fakhri's orchard, do these women have agency.

The veil also becomes an important visual tool within Iranian cinema, which has been heavily censored and state-controlled since the days of the Shah. Naficy, for example, states that in Iranian national cinema the veil is used to ban the female gaze by "making the female presence invisible" (cited in Khachab 245). He notes how women actors could not even look into the lens during the early days of the Revolution. Shirazi notes that in 1996 the Ministry of Culture published rules that forbade specific images of women's bodies, such as "tight feminine clothing; the showing of any part of a woman's body except the face and hands; physical contact; tender words or jokes between men and women" (64). However, Iranian filmmakers found new and creative ways around these rules. For instance, Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1996) focuses on nomadic tribes who are not policed as much by the state and are therefore able to wear colourful hijabs and garments, as opposed to the preferred dark colours of a chador. Tahmineh Milani's *The Legend of a Sigh* (*Afsane ye-ah,* 1991) satirizes the forced veiling of a young woman as she sleeps with a hijab in her own bed, alone (Basu 76). As a way to bypass this, some films go further and have their female characters shave their heads as in Granaz Moussavi's protagonist in *My Tehran for Sale* (Moussavi, 2009) in which Marzieh is an

actress who can only perform in secret and yearns to immigrate to Australia (Moussavi, p. 90). As a way to rebel against mandatory veiling, she shaves her head and appears without a hijab. The director, Moussavi notes, “I decided to shave her [Marzieh’s’] hair to bypass issues around her hair coverage because it was not always appropriate to portray her wearing a fashionable hair covering – for instance in bed early in the morning” (Moussavi 90). The actress playing her, Marzieh Vafamehr, was arrested in 2011, sparking international interest after which she was soon released.[19] The reasons for her arrest were not solely due to the hijab as the film also portrayed the government in a negative light and the filmmakers had never acquired permits to film in Iran. The film was never even released in Iran but had found its way in through pirated copies on the black market.

Hadimioglu discusses the history of the Iranian chador as a political artefact. She claims that the chador was seen as a sign of a backwards East and that since 1983 it has been seen as a tool of oppression, aided by the constant images of veiled women representing Iran (21). In his chapter, “Visible Minorities: Constructing and deconstructing the Muslim Iranian’ diaspora” (2016), Cameron McAuliffe studies the various stories of Iran in ‘Western’ news media, and notes that the "Photographs and illustrations that accompany articles about Iran often construct an inscrutable Muslim threat" (33). McAuliffe gives examples of stereotypical images of veiled women accompanying stories that have no relevance to the image. For example, an article centred on the US/Iran nuclear deal might feature a photograph of anonymous women in chadors. Sometimes

[19] Vafamehr was arrested on 29th June 2011, receiving a sentence of one year imprisonment and flogging. Her sentence was revoked to three months and the flogging was overturned.

the media image is completely incorrect as is the case in this article from the British *Daily Mail*, "Criticism: *My Tehran for Sale*, a film about a young actress in Tehran, was being distributed in Iran illegally, according to Fars news agency" (2011). The article focuses on the illegal distribution of the film in Iran and Vafamehr's arrest but one of the accompanying images focuses on a group of anonymous women wearing a full niqab, which is only commonly worn in countries such as Saudi Arabia (see Fig. 4). The veiled woman has become symbolic of Iran, making the Iranian woman Iran's "logo" (Roushanzamir 11). For McAuliffe this signifies that these veiled women are seen as representative of all Iranian women; all Iranian women are thus Muslim, and all Muslim women are oppressed (33).

Fig. 4. Photograph accompanying article on Marzieh's arrest, "Marzieh Vafamehr: Iranian Actress Sentenced to 90 Lashes". *Daily Mail Online*, 11 Oct. 2011, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2047279/Marzieh-Vafamehr-Iranian-actress-sentenced-90-lashes.html.

Elli Lester Roushanzamir focuses her study "Chimera Veil of "Iranian Woman" and Processes of U.S. Textual Commodification" (2004) on how US print media in the 1990s used Iranian women as symbols of Iran. She believes that after the Revolution there was a need for "instantly recognizable images and

for broad and deep circulation of images of the Middle East" (10); for Roushanzamir, the veiled woman functions as such in the 'West' precisely because she is a contradiction. She is seen as oppressed but also harks back to Orientalist fantasies of a sexualised East: "Iran's "national character" of traditionalism, violence, terrorism, fanaticism, and sexual license/oppression, lies hidden behind a [the] veil that embodies the totality and fulfils the Orientalist imaginary of repressed desire" (Roushanzamir 11). The veiled woman takes its cues from Orientalism, whereby it is a symbol of both violence *and* sexuality. Roushanzamir's points are still valid today after 9/11 with the amplification of a 'threatening Islam'. The memoirs discussed in the last chapter often used images of anonymous veiled women on their covers. In Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the US book cover shows two young women reading, their faces slightly hidden, wearing matching dark hijabs and *manteaux* (long coats); Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* focuses on a young woman in a more modern black hijab, wearing sunglasses and talking on a mobile phone, in contrast to the traditional Islamic architecture behind her; a cover of *Not without My Daughter* uses a close up of a woman fully covered by an inaccurate[20] niqab, with only her eyes peering through directly to the viewer. In these cases, the women are always anonymous, without identities, and in *Daughter's* case, captive and confrontational. Similarly, the films in this study also choose to show the veiled woman on their posters[21] and promotional materials. In *I am Nasrine,* we see a close up of Nasrine in a bright red veil looking over her shoulder directly at the viewer, but with a look that is

[20] As noted earlier, some of these images of veiled women of Iran are inaccurate as they focus on women wearing niqabs or burkas which are not common in Iran. McAuliffe also notes this in his study (33).
[21] I have chosen to focus only on the promotional materials released in the US, particularly as the US version is the one used in New Zealand.

more worried than confrontational. The poster shows Nasrine in Iran despite most of the film taking place in the UK, which again reinforces the ideology of the veiled woman as a signifier of foreignness, exoticism and marker of difference. *Women without Men* offers the scene of the anti-Shah protests where Munis stands in a black chador amidst a sea of anonymous men in white protesting with their fists raised high. In another version, the same image is used but reduced to the top half whilst the bottom half is a long shot of an empty country road with two figures walking in black chadors, their backs to the camera; *A Girl* shows an animated image of the Girl in her black chador, her missing pupils giving her the uncanny vampiric look. *Circumstance* uses various posters, often with three different images of Shirin and Atafeh together, including one where they both wear loose but brightly coloured hijabs. They appear more blissful than scared or worried. In contrast, the other films refuse to appropriate the veil. In the poster for *Appropriate Behavior* (Akhavan, 2014), Shirin peeps through two entangled naked bodies, this time slightly wistful and lost; in another version she sits in a public bathroom, covered in graffiti, her arms cradled for comfort. In *Under the Shadow* we find an unveiled Shideh holding Dorsa tight, literally under a shadow.

Cinema itself is a form of veiling and unveiling. The screen acts like a type of veil onto which shadows and light are projected. Khachab discusses the photographic works of women artists, including Shirin Neshat. He reveals the irony in analogue photography which is all about images being revealed. The shutter mechanism inside the camera apparatus acts as a type of “veil covering and uncovering the lens” (255). There is a second stage of revelation when the image is processed as a negative and, more positively, imprinted on photographic paper. Again, if we were to look at Neshat’s *Women of Allah* series,

we see a duality here of things not being as they seem. While the chador as a religious symbol functions as covering for the sake of modesty and safety, the woman's weapon shows the danger that hides beneath. In both *A Girl* and *Under the Shadow*, what lurks beneath the chador is literal danger in the form of a vampire or an antagonizing jinn.

Women without Men, My Tehran for Sale and *Circumstance*, all set in Iran, use the veil as a form of verisimilitude, while *Appropriate Behavior* shows no link to the veil at all. As such, my exploration of the veil as a symbol of marginality focuses on the other texts set in the diaspora, particularly the two horror films in my study and my own creative component.

3.2 The Veiled Vampire

A Girl heavily utilises the veil as it serves a dual function for the main protagonist who is also a vampire. The vampire is by definition a dual figure. Vampires are both alive and dead; they give life just as they take it away and, most importantly, they blur traditional social and cultural lines. In *Vampires, Race, and Transnational Hollywoods* (2017), Dale Hudson notes how the vampire is the ultimate figure of crossing borders. Vampire stories focus on "*bloods* that mix, *bodies* that migrate, and *borders* that mutate" (23). For Hudson, this border crossing has direct links to nativist concerns with migrancy. The vampire represents the feared immigrant – a trope that stretches back to Anglo-European literary incarnations of vampires, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which was loosely based on legends surrounding the Romanian warrior Vlad 'the Impaler'. Dracula hires English lawyer Jonathan Harker to assist him in buying

properties in Victorian London. The novel is wholly concerned with crossing borders - both geographically but also intertextually- as it is made up of letters, diaries and newspaper entries by everyone except Dracula himself (Hudson 25). From the beginning of the novel, as Hudson notes, the foreign Dracula is described as having the blood of various races within him. He is a "whirlpool of European races" (27). Cinematic versions of the text also emphasize Dracula's Otherness through his visual look. In *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (Coppola, 1992) Dracula dons a long embroidered red cape with a long plait down his back, looking like an ancient Chinese tapestry, while speaking with a mixed, generalised 'Eastern European' accent. When Dracula moves to London he dresses in a traditional aristocratic Victorian men's suit, enabling him to blend in and walk amongst the locals undetected, which in itself becomes fearful. When Stoker wrote the novel, London was already a large metropolis, but there were generalised fears of an invading East which would bring 'undesirables' who would overproduce and 'infiltrate' London with their own offspring. I would link this racist hyperbole to the global fear mongering about immigrants today, from the Trump administration's insistence on building a border wall in the US to the ongoing illegal offshore detention centres run by the Australian government. By comparison, Hudson gives the example of vampire Edward Cullen, in Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* book saga (2003-2005) and film series (2008-2012), who is an American-born citizen, so is not seen as a threat. Cullen was born in the US in the late 19th century and finds love with a human American woman, Bella, in the 21st century. Cullen does not blur or cross borders as his predecessors do, including sticking to a heteronormative monogamous relationship with a fellow 'white citizen' and therefore not engaging in miscegenation. Hudson notes that

"vampires are not necessarily feared or desired because they will drain the blood of the nation; instead, they may be feared or desired because they threaten or promise to populate the nation with progeny of so-called mixed blood" (23). Mixing blood directly relates to racial and ethnic mixing, feeding into nativist fears of multicultural and multi-ethnic populations.

The Girl in *A Girl*, despite actually being Iranian, still symbolises the feared immigrant. The Girl is a stranger in Bad City and her dress, the chador in particular, represents the fears of the diaspora that the filmmaker inhabits. Although the characters within the film do not react to the Girl's dress, the visual representation of the chador is symbolically expressive for a 'Western' audience. Even Amirpour notes that when she first wore a chador on a trip to Iran, she felt "like a bat" (Leigh para.1). The Girl blurs these distinctions – she is a stranger but racially she is the same. What 'others' her in this instance is her gender. Although many literary and cinematic vampires are male, female vampires have also been in popular culture for millennia, from an ancient Assyrian bowl, which shows a man "copulating with a beheaded female vampire" (Provost 114), to female vampires in Irish author Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872). However, unlike those female monsters who were seen as beasts with animalistic instincts (Provost 114), Amirpour's feminine monster is a feminist one. This is most evident in her use of the black chador.

In *A Girl*, the chador is a dual symbol that both covers and expresses the monster beneath. On one hand it is a feminine resurrection of Dracula's infamous black cape; on the other it becomes a superhero cape, visualised perfectly in a scene where the Girl steals a skateboard and rolls down a road, letting the cape flow gloriously behind her. The scene begins with a fade in extreme long shot of a

dark industrial street, lit by fluorescent lights on either side. A deep focus shows us the Girl in the distance as she skateboards. The camera stays static, centring the Girl as only the audio of the wind and wheels whirl through. We cut to a low angle mid close up of the Girl's face, blissful in the wind with the fluorescents above throwing lens flares across her face, imitating that of a superhero in flight (see Figs. 5 and 6). As Hudson claims*,* the vampiric black cape is seen as a cover for all the immoral things the vampire does, including "scenes of violence, sexuality, and interspecies coupling" (22). The Girl is a feminist vampire who, unlike her vampiric predecessors (with some exceptions), does not attack women, but "bad" men. She even saves Atti by killing her abuser Hossein. In that scene the frame is sped up to show her lunging at him as her cape surrounds her, thereby hiding the violent killing from the audience's (and Atti's) eyes. The faster frame rate allows for a sped up motion, indicating her superhuman strength, much like those of a superhero. The Girl is also responsible for 'saving' Arash, who is the one 'good' man in all of Bad City. With her he is able to escape the city. Inevitably, perhaps, the film still plays into patriarchal tropes. In one scene Arash hands the Girl earrings he stole. Because the Girl's ears are not pierced, she asks Arash to pierce them with the earrings in a rather suggestive act of penetration, an action which resembles the vampiric bite.

Fig. 5. Long shot of The Girl on a skateboard, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (00:37:20).

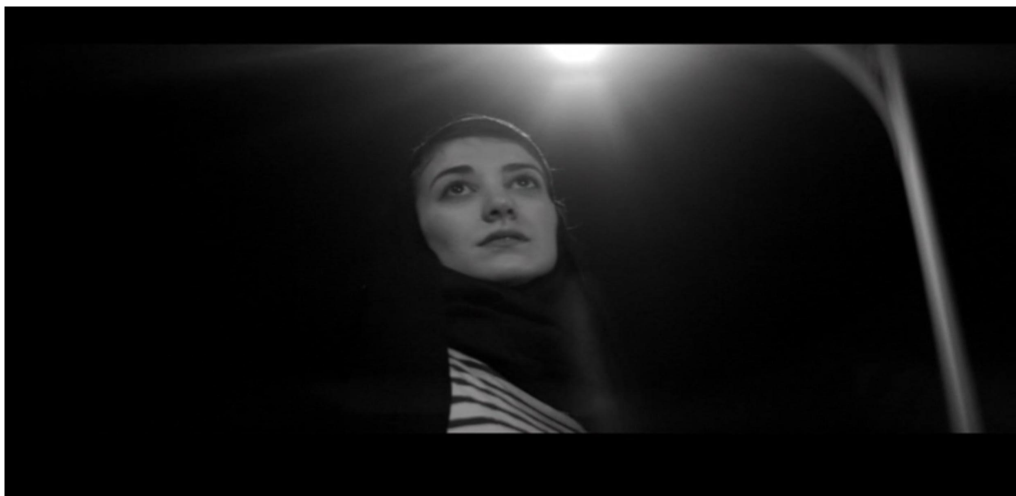

Fig. 6. MCU of The Girl on a skateboard, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (00:37:35).

For all her heroic acts, however, the Girl is still a monster. Taking cues from other Hollywood horror films, she becomes a figure of fear for the male characters (and possibly viewers). Barbara Creed opens her much-cited work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993) with the many problems that women in horror incur, including but not limited to the Freudian fear of castration. This harks back to ancient mythology, particularly the image of the

Medusa, which according to Freud represented the female genitals (Creed 2) and so women in horror are often only discussed in relation to the men in films. Women are to be feared because they can castrate the male or they themselves are castrated and therefore a victim. In her re-reading of Freud, by contrast, Creed's monstrous-feminine "emphasizes the importance of gender in the construction of her monstrosity" (3). Although her placement in most classical horror films is indicative of male fears about femininity (and female desires), the active monstrous-feminine is not merely the opposite of the male monster (Creed 7). The Girl is the epitome of the monstrous-feminine. Only men fear her as she only preys on men. Her chador remains a false sign that she is a 'pious and chaste' woman. In one sense she mimics what a monster would be. In one of the opening scenes, we watch the Girl spying on the Pimp and Atti in his car as the Pimp shoves his finger into Atti's mouth before making her perform oral sex on him. As the Girl 'walks home alone' –in this case the Girl is not the victim – she locks eyes with the Pimp and follows him back to his house. Here, with a handheld shot-reverse shot, a close up shows the Girl copy Atti's actions and takes the Pimp's finger into her mouth, imitating what she believes to be a human act. Yet she bites it off. The camera stays in a close up, the shallow depth of field giving her face an uncanny distortion, adding chaos to the scene (see Fig. 7). Crying in agony, the Pimp falls to the ground, the shaky handheld close up staying with him as the Girl shoves his own finger back into his mouth, copying a sadistic act of fellatio before she bites his neck and kills him. The eerie synthetic beat of the soundtrack and the way the close up hovers on the Girl's bloody face suddenly shifts the balance of power from him to her. This imitation of castration is a perfect example of the monstrous-feminine.

Fig. 7. CU of The Girl biting The Pimp's finger, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (00:23:30).

If the chador hides the monstrosities of her vampiric needs, it also reveals the Girl's human side. Despite being a loner, the Girl is obsessed with humanity, as shown by her thirst for pop culture. Alone at home, her den or 'cave' is a basement flat covered in 'Western' pop music posters and fairy lights. A poster, reminiscent of a famous poster of pop singer Madonna, is redesigned with another face and inscription, which reads "Margaret Attwood", another cultural icon[22]. The Girl removes her chador and dances through the night, dressed like a Nouvelle Vague heroine in a Breton top and Anna Karina haircut. Underneath she is 'Western', yet her exterior form suggests the fanatical Iran: the chador-wearing 'oppressed' woman striking fear to the 'West'. Only Arash, the one 'good' man, is allowed to see her without the chador as she lets him into her basement.

[22] Amirpour notes that this was due to copyright issues to do with using the face of a well-known person such as Madonna. Instead the face is Amirpour's own (VICE). Attwood was also one of the people who donated to *A Girl*'s crowdfunding campaign (Leigh para. 19).

Representations of the veiled woman vary across cultures and in the 'East', it is not always a negative one signifying oppression. Hadimioglu notes that the chador in particular is "an extended skin" (19) but also has layered meanings, as opposed to the Orientalist meaning of the veil in the European sphere. To her, the chador "should be considered not as a void but as the result of an accumulation of inscriptions or projections so dense that they become solid – an ostensible black 'hole' that is in fact saturated with intention, memory and meaning" (22). Hudson uses examples of the alternative image of the veiled woman in the East, such as the skateboarding veiled girls in 'Skateistan' (Afghanistan) and veiled Palestinian women engaged in parkour (37). I would add that we are also beginning to see some contrasting images in the 'West', particularly with advertising. Examples include the latest campaigns from Nike advertising their new 'hijab' range to the veiled Bangladeshi-American Munira Ahmed as the symbolic face of the women's marches in the US in 2017.

A Girl, however, still deploys Orientalist representations of the Girl by using the chador to other her. She is the only key character who wears the black chador. The chador as a vampiric cape also plays into the notion that the Girl is to be feared like an "Ayatollah vampire" (Hudson 26). She is both hero and villain; she is living and undead; she is both local and foreign; she is the epitome of the dual figure, in this case, the figure that lives between the homeland and the diaspora. The iconic image of the girl in a chador riding a skateboard was used consistently in advertising and promotional material for the film to mark its point of difference. This image of the veiled woman plays into the Orientalist fantasy of the 'exotic' and 'feared' 'East'. As Hudson notes, "black capes may have seemed foreign to audiences during the 1930s, but the open black chador of Amirpour's

vampire is relatively familiar today, if sometimes reductively as a sign of patriarchal oppression or foreign menace" (37). Although *A Girl* is a feminist re-imagining of a modern, Middle Eastern vampire, the black chador she dons is still seen as a symbol of her otherness. Similar to the fear of Dracula and his Eastern family invading London in the 19th Century, the film expresses the fear of Islam and the Muslim figure in contemporary times. The veiled woman, like a vampire, is one who can walk amongst 'us', yet her veil is what visually signifies her as a threat. As Hudson notes, the mark left by fangs is similar to the X placed on homes during the plague; women who have it must be killed in case they reproduce mixed blood 'children'. If the mark of the vampire is like the scarlet A, then the veil is the mark of the feared immigrant.

3.3 The Veiled Jinn

The Iran/Iraq war brought the veil into focus in Iran once again. Given ongoing Sunni and Shia religious and ethnic disputes, there was already animosity between Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini (Shirazi 94). The Revolution gave Hussein cause to gain more territory, such as the strategic Persian Gulf, but the war was also a way to discourage a similar uprising in Iraq, particularly on the part of the Shia community, who, though a majority, did not hold much power socially or politically in Iraq (Shirazi 94-95). The komiteh's work was strongly in evidence during the war as upholding the Shia chador became an important way of differentiating Iran from its warring Sunni neighbour. It also became a weapon to control the country during the chaos. As many men (and boys) were sent to the

frontline, women were expected to also play a role. The war made the hijab an important propaganda tool: the veiled woman became the symbol of bringing up new generations of "pious" children (Shirazi 95) who would eventually become martyrs for the nation, as many did during the Revolution. Martyrdom and the role of the good wife and holy mother play an integral role in Islamic ideology as in Christianity. In Shia religion, the idealised woman is the Prophet's daughter Fatima, whilst the Sunni's worship his third wife, Aisha. Posters, murals and stamps showed women in chadors and hijabs, standing behind their sons, brothers and husbands as they prepared to go to battle. Some posters even show women in black chadors proudly holding guns which, as noted above, Neshat used as a basis for her *Women of Allah* series. The veiled woman as a *jihadi* and a martyr thus became synonymous, for outsiders, with images of Iran. After the war, although the komiteh lost some of its power, the law remained and ideology shifted to the veil as a symbol of a moral woman – one of "dignity, chastity, honor, duty, piety, and self-worth" (Shirazi 106). During the Green Movement in 2009, whereby thousands took to the streets in protest against the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the veil was once again converted into a tool of resistance. Women were unveiling in public (still punishable by imprisonment and lashings) as a form of protest, just as women had worn the veil in protest against the Shah before and during the Revolution. It is therefore not surprising that the veiled and unveiled woman becomes such an important figure in the films of the diaspora.

The Iran/Iraq war was not expected to last eight years (between 1981 and 1988) least of all by those in charge such as Khomeini and Saddam Hussein. Numbers of those killed and wounded vary greatly with one estimate stating that

500,000 Iranians were killed with one million wounded (Axworthy 293). Another estimates one million Iranians killed alongside 250,000-500,000 Iraqis (Black para.9).

Axworthy in his detailed chapter on the war in *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (2013) notes how the war "has had an important place in the Iranian psyche" (293) and the collective trauma gathered from such an event has been revisited in the film *Under the Shadow*. The film interweaves the fears and anxieties surrounding war with those of a woman and mother living under a repressive regime. The film opens at a solemn university hall in Iran sometime in the 1980s where many women walk past each other in chadors. Shideh, also wearing a black chador, sits before a University official who rejects her pleas to return to her studies due to her being a Leftist during the Revolution. On her way home, Shideh adjusts her hijab just before she is stopped at a checkpoint. The camera hovers close to Shideh, never venturing further than a close up. At one traumatic point, Shideh grabs Dorsa and runs outside, forgetting to wear her hijab. She is arrested, but instead of hearing her cries regarding the terror within her house, the police imprison Shideh for not covering her hair. One of the officers dictates to her, ""A woman should be scared of exposing herself more than anything else. So be ashamed ... Our men are becoming martyrs to protect these values" (00:59:37 - 01:00:00). Inside a bleak concrete cell, with a solemn green palette, a long shot shows Shideh holding Dorsa until a veiled woman enters and throws her a chador to wear. Shideh is alienated under a regime that chastises 'immoral' women who are unveiled and 'irresponsible' mothers. While the regime's oppressive horrors control the outside world, the jinn represents the internal terror within the home, and symbolically within Shideh.

The significance of using a jinn as the monster should not go unnoticed. The jinn as a cultural figure in Persian mythology is at times combined with Islamic folklore. Mark Allen Peterson focuses his piece “From Jinn to Genies” (2007) namely on genies who are subservient figures unlike the jinn that have free will and so can be an antagonizing force. Peterson notes the link to Islamic “cosmology” whereby the world is split into the “seen” and “unseen” (94), the latter which harbours angels and demons, who like the humans in the seen world, must answer to God. The jinn lives in an in-between place but can see both the seen and unseen worlds, though it cannot be seen by humans. As the jinn has free will, it has the choice to become ‘good’ and serve God or become an ‘evil’ *shaytan,* a term that has close associations with the term Satan in Christianity (Peterson 95). In *Under the Shadow*, the jinn manifests itself as a chador as it antagonizes Shideh. When Shideh returns home, she sees the jinn manifested as a chador draped on an invisible body. At one point, it quickly runs past her; at another point, it appears suddenly outside her window. In another scene, Shideh finds a book by the medieval Persian poet Saadi that tellingly describes the jinn’s motives: “Where there is fear and anxiety, the winds blow” (00:46:36). Images of covering and veiling are used throughout the film, from the heavy set curtains that keep the family encased in their apartment to a scene where Shideh finds her husband in her bed, only for him to disappear and for her to become trapped under the sheets. The film blatantly uses the trope of the veil as an oppressive force to challenge the heroine. Shideh even has a religious neighbour, Mrs. Ebrahimi, who adamantly wears her floral chador when the neighbours seek shelter in the basement, unlike Shideh who goes unveiled. In another scene, Shideh visits Ebrahimi who warns her of what is happening. “That thing [the

missile] didn't crash here by accident, I think it brought something with it ... jinn" (00:43:33 - 00:43:44). Shideh refuses to believe her. Ebrahimi is shown to be slightly simple as she tries to convince a sceptical Shideh of the existence of jinn. The veiled woman is either oppressed like Shideh or superstitious like Mrs. Ebrahimi.

The final confrontation with Shideh and the jinn takes place in the basement where the jinn entraps Dorsa underneath never-ending fabric as the entire space is covered by the floral chador. The frame is covered in the veil as we view the world from underneath it. The handheld camera jolts around as does the jump cut editing, adding to the chaos. Similar to the 'castration' scene in *A Girl*, the soundtrack keeps to a monotonous eerie tone as Dorsa's cries for her mother resound through. Shideh desperately fights her way through the encompassing veil until she finally grabs Dorsa and rips through the veil in a birth-like exit. As they run up the stairs, the veil transforms into tar and Shideh becomes stuck. She literally becomes a part of the building that she cannot escape from. Dorsa holds her hand out, grabs her mother and they escape. Shideh has finally proved her worth as a mother and it is strong enough to break the curse. In a regime that dictates women's roles as 'pious' wives and mothers, Shideh reclaims her role as a mother and so is no longer marginalised because of it. In another sense we could read this as Shideh escaping the exterior pressures of an oppressive regime for a better place. This Iran is a repressive, dangerous place for well-educated, ambitious women and Shideh needs to escape if she is to save her own daughter from the same fate.

3.4 Dual Figures

In *A Girl*, the Girl, as a literal outsider to Bad City, befriends the lonely and isolated Arash. In fact, all of the main characters live in isolation and on the fringes of society: sex workers, drug addicts and thieves. The first time Arash and the Girl meet, Arash is dressed as Count Dracula with a comical cape and fake fangs. In this world, the male vampire is not the threat and Arash is completely harmless. The Girl constantly imitates the humans around her. In one scene, the Girl follows Hossein from across an empty road. He stops. She stops. He turns, and so does she. The Girl literally mirrors Hossein's every move, much like a scene in another famous vampire film *Interview with the Vampire* (Jordan, 1994) where Louis, the one vampire who yearns to keep his humanity, is mirrored by a buffoonish vampire on a Parisian street, as a way to signal recognition that he too, is a vampire. Perhaps like an immigrant attempting to assimilate, the Girl merely copies what she believes will allow her to blend in. To fully assimilate, however, means letting go of one's roots completely, which the Girl refuses to do. For instance, she stays a vampire and a monster by killing Hossein. At the end of the film, however, she has taken on human virtues such as empathy and love by saving Atti and Arash. This is a possible ending for the immigrant living in marginality who takes on both cultures of the homeland and diaspora without fully disregarding either. The Girl does not revolt against the dominant culture nor does she become fully complicit. She fully acknowledges her duplicity.

In my screenplay, *Lady Land*, duality is seen in the two protagonists, Samira and Fari, whose attributes contrast with one another. Samira is a romantic idealist intent on finding her 'soul mate' and believes this lies outside of

Auckland and her life at home. Fari is a strong cynic who believes she is happy being an outsider though secretly she is keen to partake in society by beginning a career in law. Her own insecurities and fears around perfectionism hold her back. The screenplay ends with the break-up of this co-dependent friendship as both women realise their own complicity in 'clipping their wings' to gain real independence. While each character differs, their dialogue plays out as if they are the same person. This duality was important as it reflects my own hyphenated personality at that age. In one sense I was optimistic and believed I needed to explore the world in order to mature, and in another sense, I was terrified of doing so. In one scene in Act One, Samira and Fari observe a crowded party from the safety of Fari's car:

> SAMIRA. Is that girl wearing white pants?
> FARI. Jesus, the Millennium called hon. They want their metallics back.
> SAMIRA. Oh look, an ethnic!
> Sure enough, a lonely HIPSTER GUY (Māori, 20's) walks up the driveway against the sea of Caucasians.
> FARI. He's got a man bun. Self-hater.

The comedy draws from the opening image of the above scene:

> EXT. GENTRIFIED CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD - LATER
> A crowded house party pumps at a small home - it's heaving. People at the windows, outside on the driveway – it's marvellous. We move past and find Samira and Fari inside Fari's car. Fari finishes pouring some whisky into two mugs.

The scene prior found Samira celebrating her birthday with her family and this cuts to a house party indicating that it is still her birthday party but the focus on Samira and Fari sitting in a car *watching* this party indicates the strength (and

absurdity) of their self-imposed marginalisation. There is also a sense of hypocrisy as we sense that they perhaps do want to be a part of it, and this leads them both into discussing their plan for the commune in Wellington, which becomes the turning point that drives them into Act Two and dictates the rest of the narrative.

In the beginning, Samira and Fari believe that society is hostile to them and so they voluntarily hover outside of it. In Act One as we establish the world Samira inhabits, we find Samira eavesdropping on the tales of travellers at the hostel where she works as she has never travelled anywhere. At times, New Zealand society becomes a hostile place: they are harassed by a group of young English men in a bar and Samira is tormented by racist rants from a woman at a bus stop. By the end, they realise that the only way to challenge the hostility that confronts them daily, is to fight back. Silence or deflection is no more an option. After Samira and Fari have their final fight on the road, Samira finds herself alone at a New Year's Eve party talking to her mother on the phone. Mirroring that of the earlier scene at the bus stop, Samira is again racially accosted, this time by an angry Pākehā/White man who tells her to "go home and speak English". This time, with newfound strength, Samira does not ignore the taunt but confronts the man. "Why would I speak English at home?" By the end of her character's journey, Samira refuses to allow her Iranian identity to be the source of her marginalisation.

To empower Samira and Fari to break stereotypes often attributed to Middle Eastern women, I also subverted certain key themes. For instance, I attempt to rework the veil as a mythological symbol of Ancient Persian narratives and purposefully aim to avoid culturally appropriating the veil. The opening action

involves animated sequences reflecting the mythological story of Banu Ghoshap, an ancient Persian warrior mentioned briefly in Feredowsi's epic medieval poem, *Shahnameh: The Book of Kings*. Feredowsi uses real historical figures from the days of the Persian empire and blends them with mythological and supernatural beings. Similar to biblical stories, the chapters in *Shahnameh* reflect the eternal battle between good and evil. In the screenplay the animation is similar to that of Persian miniature paintings. In the opening we linger on Banu's veiled face as it morphs into our lead protagonist's (Samira) five year-old face who then tears the veil off. The opening images are purposefully playing with elements of Orientalism but cut short when the veil is abruptly torn off. Banu Ghoshap re-emerges throughout the screenplay as a type of internal hero's guide; a re-imagined mentor or 'fairy godmother'. Banu does wear a veil but as a warrior's uniform like a soldier. Banu's veil is not a tool of oppression or horror, but a form of wild abandon. Banu Ghoshap is described in the screenplay as a fearless warrior and adventurer who had the power "to make any man fall in love with her". This offsets a primary goal for the young protagonist Samira, who too yearns to one day find romantic love. Thus far Samira has latched on to Banu's power of making any man fall in love with her but has skipped Banu's fearlessness and adventure. When Samira does become a fearless adventurer, she realises she does not *need* a 'soul mate'.

As a child in Iran, Samira's mother read her love stories from *Shahnameh* but she created her own endings that always ended in the heroine finding love. When the family moves to Aotearoa New Zealand, young Samira turns Banu into her imaginary friend and only confidant. The story then cuts to the present day where a 21 year-old Samira, a virgin and single, feels stuck in a suburban life

without prospects. The little girl who had once shared Banu's aspirations, perhaps needs her internal heroine guardian to recalibrate her direction in life. Banu starts to return to Samira, firstly in dreams and then as a ghostly figure, but always at key turning points in Samira's journey. In fact, Samira begins writing stories about Banu's epic adventures and seven trials she had to undergo which then parallel Samira's own 'trials' through the narrative:

SAMIRA (V.O)
Banu's one wish was to meet her true love, who would never die and they would live together forever. But in order to meet her beloved, Banu had to undertake seven trials. For her first trial, Banu must leave her father and kingdom for a land unknown.

The night before their trip, Samira dreams about Banu for the first time in years and this prompts her to take up her writing once again; after Samira accomplishes one of her external goals, having sex for the first time, she sees Banu in a painting and then her actual figure appears to her in the vineyard; and finally, in the climax where Samira is in the ocean, Banu appears underwater with her. Unlike the veiled phantom in *Under the Shadow*, Banu is not threatening but merely challenging and testing Samira. Similar to the jinn however, Banu is a liminal figure that ventures between dreams and reality for Samira. She begins as a vision in Samira's dreams but by the end of the film, she manifests herself as a real figure. This idea of Banu being a part of Samira can be linked to ideas around abjection.

Theories of abjection in literature and cinema, championed by Julia Kristeva and Barbara Creed (among others) are helpful here as they pertain to

duality. Although a full exploration of this abjection lies outside the scope of this study, the ‘border’ and the body in the films of my study may be considered abject. As Creed defines it, the abject is that which is excluded “from the place of the living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self” (9). For Creed (again drawing upon Kristeva), the abject is shown in many ways in horror films in “food loathing”, “the corpse” and those who cross borders - whether those borders are between life and death, human and inhuman, good and evil - or even those who rebel against their ideological gender roles (Creed 11). These are abject figures and are (sometimes literally) thrown away, particularly in horror films, in the form of blood or other bodily functions. The abject in *A Girl* is the vampire. The Girl crosses the border between human and animal, living and dead. Creed dedicated an entire chapter to the female vampire and notes, “The female vampire is abject because she disrupts identity and order” (61). The Girl is both victim and hero and the abject *is* herself and her monstrous needs. Because the chador is symbolic of her femininity, and part of her monstrosity, she is the monstrous feminine. The Girl expels herself from Bad City, and though the ending is ambiguous with regard to where Arash and she are going, The Girl remains a vampire. In *Under the Shadow* the jinn is the abject in Shideh, signifying her fears around motherhood and she must expel it in order to save herself and Dorsa. The jinn is all that terrifies Shideh about motherhood to the point where it convinces Dorsa that the jinn would be a better protector than Shideh. In more than one scene Dorsa yells at Shideh that the jinn was “nice” and that “she” would look after her better than Shideh can. In the end, Shideh believes she has saved Dorsa as she takes her away from the apartment.

Yet the final shot lingers on Dorsa's doll Kimiya which was the talisman for the jinn. Her headless body stays in the car with Shideh and Dorsa as they escape, signifying that perhaps Shideh's insecurities will always be with them.

The idea of abjection also applies to *Lady Land*. Though not a horror film, the duality between the protagonist Samira and her imaginary mythological phantasm, Banu Ghoshap, also brings in a type of abjection. After Samira has had sex with Erez in the abandoned vineyard, she finds Banu astride her faithful horse donning a full ceremonial veil as if ready for battle. Banu is angry with Samira, and nearly brings the horse down on her but narrowly misses. In one poignant scene, Samira notices a miniature painting in the house of Fari's cousin, Azadeh. A figure in the painting looks exactly like the Banu of her fantasies. The revelation about Banu is important as it shows what Samira thought she wanted is not what she needed. When Samira was younger, Banu signified a romantic who only wanted to find a 'soulmate', which led Samira nowhere. Yet once she realises the truth about Banu, that she was fiercely independent and not reliant on finding lovers, Samira's fears are challenged and overcome. At the end of the climax, when Samira has lost her best friend and supposed 'soulmate', she falls into the ocean and nearly drowns. Banu once again appears, this time to help Samira resurface. Banu as a character is a trickster and form changer who is a type of hero for Samira but also that which she fears. Banu disrupts and blurs the borders of real and fantasy as well as disrupting Samira's narrative arc. Banu represents all of Samira's insecurities about her future and who she is to become. In the end, when she re-emerges from the water, rebirthed, Samira expels Banu as she is no longer needed. Samira has found her confidence to become who she really needs to become – a fully-fledged adult ready to partake within society.

The liminal figures of jinn and Banu seem to guide the characters to a more accepted place, one that is not liminal and marginalised but defined and accepted.

3.5 Generational Gaps

This duality of characters, who they are and who they are afraid to be, can be linked intrinsically to the ideals of immigrant children who are at odds with societal expectations from their home culture and those from the American/British/New Zealand culture. More often than not the home culture’s expectations are symbolised within the parents’ desires as we see in other diasporic films such as the early works of Gurinder Chadha (*Bhaji on the Beach* and *Bend it Like Beckham*). Hanif Kureishi a British-Pakistani author who teases these themes in his books, plays and films notes that:

> A child is a cocktail of its parent's desires. Being a child at all involves resolving, or synthesising, at least two different worlds, outlooks and positions. If it becomes too difficult to hold disparate material within, if this feels too "mad" or becomes a "clash", one way of coping would be to reject one entirely, perhaps by forgetting it. Another way is to be at war with it internally, trying to evacuate it, but never succeeding. (Kureishi 3)

In Kureishi’s case, the child is in conflict with the parents, as in the relationship between the ‘Western’ father Parvez and the conservative turned fanatic son Farid in *My Son the Fanatic* (Prasad, 1997). Sociological and anthropological studies such as Maryam Jamarani’s study on Iranian Australians, *Identity, Language and Culture in Diaspora* (2012) and Vida Nassehi-Behnam’s “Iranians in Britain” (2010) look at the different generational desires of immigrants in the ‘West’ and come to similar conclusions. Nassehi-Behnam’s findings emphasize the importance of generational gaps between immigrants, mainly dependent on how much the parents are “initiated” into the culture. The more they are, the less conflict between the generations (10). In Jamarani’s study on Iranian Australians, the generational gap is more prominent. She concludes that growing up within the same “heritage culture” as the parents allows the child to keep the same values and standards (98). However, children who grow up in a diaspora are faced with a different culture and due to involvement in school, and other such factors, usually adopt this new form of culture more than that of their parents.

This generational gap is reflected in *Circumstance,* which is set in the homeland but made by a filmmaker who is a second-generation Iranian-American. Teenagers Shirin and Atafeh rebel against society’s norms; they attend underground parties, take illegal substances and pursue sexual relationships with each other. Atafeh, in particular, blames her hedonism on her parents and their generation’s failure to accomplish a ‘future’ for her peers after the Revolution which is more of a comment on those in the diaspora than those within Iran. If it were not for the Revolution and consequent regime change that followed, these families would not have immigrated, and would have been thrown into a type of displacement where the future is unstable. The director Maryam

Keshavarz has noted that much of the story came from her own personal life from growing up as a bisexual woman in a religious home and spending summers in Iran and attending these underground parties (Khaleeli, "Maryam Keshavarz" para. 12). Yet even in the US, she had her own challenges with her parents who she describes as being "ultra-religious". She notes, "I wasn't allowed to date boys or go out after a certain time. When I made the varsity basketball team as a freshman – which was a big honour – you had to wear shorts, so my dad said: 'You can't play.' Of course I did what I wanted, but I constantly had these huge battles with him." (Khaleeli, "Maryam Keshavarz" para. 13). This generational conflict is replicated in *Circumstance*, where the challenges of the diaspora are symbolised in the repression of the state. Much of the criticism has been directed at the film's 'inauthenticity', given that the film's "glossiness and pace feel American" (Khaleeli, para. 15). And yet, the film also feeds into Orientalist negative stereotypes of oppressive men (such as Atafeh's brother, Mehran) and victimised women (such as Shirin) and the yearning for a happier future outside of Iran. Similar to *A Girl*, whereby the Girl and Arash leave Bad City and in *My Tehran for Sale* (2009), where Marzieh seeks asylum in Australia, these films reflect one-sided arguments that the future lies outside of Iran, perhaps in the diaspora, as it has done for its filmmakers.

The other films in this study focus on the protagonists' troubles within themselves rather than generational conflict. In *Appropriate Behavior,* Shirin believes her struggles with her parents, are due to her own refusal to come out, yet when she finally does reveal her bisexuality to her mother, her mother is more receptive and accepting than Shirin imagined, signifying that her problems arose more from her own insecurities than her parents'. The same occurs with Samira

in *Lady Land* who escapes her mother's insistence that she 'date' her cousin Sina who is visiting from the US. Believing her mother would be angry at her leaving, Samira refuses to answer any phone calls from her mother until the end when she is at a loss and needs her. Her mother, Zahra however, is more concerned with the death of her own mother than Samira's secret escape. Though Samira and Fari are adults, they are similar to Shirin and Atafeh in that they live in extended adolescence whereby they have not really experienced similar things as their peers. One important plot point is Samira's virginity, which at the start is her shameful admission but which Fari concludes is a result of her heritage:

> SAMIRA: I must be the oldest virgin in Auckland.
> FARI: Nah, you're ethnic, you're allowed to be sexually repressed.

Much of Fari's reluctance and fears revolve around misconceptions that she is a failure to her mother, Sussan. Yet in Act Three, when she finds herself alone with a broken down car, she can only think of calling her and the conversation that transpires allows Fari to realise the reality of the situation:

> SUSSAN: I never worry about you, you're the smartest person I've ever met, and I still can't believe you're related to Faranak [Fari's sister]

The conversation not only validates Fari's mother but is the point at which Fari realises her internal goal, that she will not be a failure and so she needs to accept the employment offer that was set up in Act One. Fari's final act for completion of her narrative arc is to reconcile with Samira and accept that this will mean the co-dependency will end.

What Fari and Samira, and the majority of the protagonists in each of these films feels, is marginalisation. They are more often than not separate from the dominant and this displacement comes from this alienation. This theme is predominant in the works of Edward Said, as in his memoir *Out of Place* (1999). Said was born in Palestine and lived in Lebanon and Egypt before moving to the US where he completed his degrees, including a PhD from Harvard University in 1964. As such, Said felt like an outcast in nearly every school, particularly due to his identity as an Arab-American. *Out of Place* focuses on an in-between place and yet Said was able to accept this duality and became one of the most prominent cultural thinkers from the last century. The marginalisation Said felt allowed him a different and more empathetic perspective of the world; even a positive one. He notes that “Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that – to borrow a phrase from music – is contrapuntal” (*Reflections on Exile* 186). We see this from the beginning in *Persepolis* (2007) which established a template for the rest of the films in this study. When Marji moves to Austria alone as a teenager, she first encounters hostilities towards her based on her nationality, which could have led to her rebellion but which continues once she is home. It is through her rebellion that her character arc develops and that she comes of age.

bell hooks develops the idea of empathy further when discussing marginalisation. hooks’ “Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness” (1989) focuses on the particular the struggle of African Americans as voices from the margins that are now becoming common:

> At times one knows only extreme estrangement and alienation. Then home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. (19)

Though I am not stating that the African-American experience equates with the Iranian in the diaspora or vice versa, what hooks notes bears some relevance to what these films explore in terms of perspective from a marginalised and diasporic point of view. As hooks states, “I am located in margin” (23), as is a diaspora viewing the dominant, and so are these characters who are on the outside looking in.

Chapter Four: Spaces, Borders and Transit

bell hooks's personal essay "Choosing the margin as a space of radical openness" (1989) explores the notions of space and borders for people of colour. hooks recalls her childhood living in a small town in Kentucky where the railroad tracks were symbolic of her place and status in American society as a minority. Whereas the area where hooks lived was poor, black and working class, beyond the tracks the neighbourhoods were more affluent and white. For hooks these railroad tracks presented a visual motif of marginalised identities and how people can be viewed from the "outside in and from the inside out" (38). hooks exclaims that such places are "sites of repression and sites of resistance" (21); they are places that oppress but also places where marginalised people gain awareness and possibly rebel against the dominant class. Marginal places therefore become important for the exploration of marginal identities.

In this chapter, borders and spaces become noticeable and the crossing over and blurring of these metaphorical binaries commonplace. Both *A Girl* (Amirpour) and *Under the Shadow* (Anvari) rely on horror genre tropes: *A Girl* purposefully blends the horror and the Western genre together, as it does its Iranian-ness and American-ness, by situating the story within a fictionalized Tehrangeles. This version of a simulated Iran becomes common in most of the films in this study, which are produced outside of Iran due to restrictions on films being produced within the real Iran. Much of the constraints in the Islamic regime focus on women and their bodies, such as the mandatory veilings. However, this

imposition is linked to the spaces women occupy, while the crossing between private and public spaces become important motifs in these films. *Women without Men* (Neshat) utilises the imagery of the Persian garden as a woman's space but one into which men often intrude. In *Circumstance* (Keshavarz) and *I am Nasrine* (Gharavi), the private and public space is replaced by 'East' versus 'West' dichotomies where the films explore the stereotypes of a 'barbaric East' and 'utopian West'. Yet they are also subverted, for instance in *I am Nasrine* where the worst atrocities occur for the protagonists in the UK. In the final part of this chapter, I explore the mobilisation of space and borders by focussing on my screenplay, *Lady Land*, which follows a road trip across New Zealand.

The road film genre has its origins in the US and its foundations outline a journey that is often both literal and metaphorical. Hollywood often centred road films on masculine and/or white characters and only recently has made the transition to include women and people of colour, with films like *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991). Other national cinemas have taken on the road film for their own journey stories, including New Zealand, where my screenplay is set. As a nation of islands and one that is relatively new to European settlers, the setting of New Zealand allows the film to differentiate itself from many of its European and American counterparts, as does the focus on two immigrant women of colour.

4.1 Genre Blends

The final chapter of Naficy's *An Accented Cinema* is dedicated to "Journeying, Border Crossing, and Identity Crossing". For Naficy, these exilic films follow a

journey and include various common iconographies of travel such as motels, airports, trains and buses. To begin, he notes how a country like the USA has been created by emigres and how this has enabled the domination of certain genres such as the Western and road movie (222) to become synonymous with the country. Naficy names three types of journey narratives in exilic films: homecoming, homelessness and home-seeking. The homecoming is literal, whereby the journey takes the traveller back to the homeland, much like my short documentary *Iran in Transit* (2012). The film used a first-person narrative of a 1.5-generation Iranian returning back to their place of birth, Iran, after a 17-year absence. These homecoming journeys provide ample examples of displacement whereby the traveller feels out of place even in their supposed homeland. In *Iran in Transit*, when I first land in Iran, I conclude immediately that "It's weird. Everyone looks like me, they speak like me, but I have never felt so out of place in my life" (00:17:25). Various family members are interviewed, including Arezou, a cousin who grew up in Canada and was adamant her homeland was anywhere she put her "backpack". Her journey parallels mine in that she travels back to Iran after a long absence, and, by the end of the film, Arezou revisits and questions her original statement, "Let's just say that for me, home is where what you value most important to you lays [sic]" (00:27:38). The film begins with the idea that home and homeland must be identical but concludes that the concept is much more complex and that perhaps there can be more than one homeland, "or none at all".

Naficy's second subgroup focuses on themes around 'homelessness' where characters often end up wandering on a journey rather than reaching a destination. He notes that it can have elements of 'fernweh', which is German for

"longing to escape the homeland for another place" (*An Accented Cinema*, 228). This wandering is often seen in road films where mobility and the journey itself is the focus rather than the physical destination. *Lady Land* explores the delayed coming of age of its two protagonists by using the road journey as a metaphor for their own personal journeys.

Naficy's final subgroup is that of home-seeking journeys, which focus on the desire to relocate to a found 'home'. Home-seeking journeys centre on geographical dichotomies, such as the south and north in African-American narratives, which signify the journey of enslavement to freedom (224). Journeys can also focus on the more global routes of those leaving the 'East' for the 'West', such as modern-day asylum seekers and refugees. Locally, they can be seen in genres such as Westerns that sometimes centre on newly arrived immigrants on the West coast from the big cities in the east. In fact, *A Girl* was sold as the 'first Iranian Western', reflecting its blending of horror and Western genres. While the vampire film concerns the blurring of borders, both literal and metaphorical, the Western, too, is falsely built[23] on the arrival of mainly white immigrants from Europe and the eastern coast of the US. Allusions to the 'civilised West' and 'barbaric East' are also referenced in the horror genre; as Hudson notes, "Count Dracula carried the limp bodies of his female victims into his crypt, reproducing images of Valentino's Sheik Ahmed carrying the limp body of his female conquest into his tent" (69). Here, he refers to the Hollywood studio film *The Sheik* (1921) and its representations of a 'savage East' in the body of the 'exotic' actor Rudolph Valentino. Dracula moving to London represents the invading East and only the

[23] I say 'falsely built' as the American West was already inhabited by indigenous peoples.

Western cowboy hero, in this case, Doctor Van Helsing's gang, can destroy him. This point seems rather poignant in today's context regarding the 'migrant crisis' in Europe. Many asylum seekers, particularly from the Middle East and Asia, take the Balkan route with hopes of reaching Western Europe and as such many Balkan states, including Hungary and Serbia, have now enforced harsh restrictions on them.[24]

A Girl purposefully blends the Western and horror genres, as it does with the blending of Iran and the USA. The film was shot in Taft, Southern California, a town that used to produce oil and natural gas. This is seen in various shots of rigs digging for oil, which even loom in the background when Arash gives the Girl his stolen earrings. The focus on oil is of course a dominant feature in the discourses of the Middle East, yet it also helps emphasise the duality of the space. Composition plays a large part in following genre conventions in *A Girl*. When the Girl and Arash first meet, the extreme long shot places each character at different ends of the frame, imitating the standoff popularised by Westerns. In fact, the aspect ratio of cinemascope used in the film is not only a visual nod to the popularisation of cinemascope in Westerns in the 1960s, but also a powerful way of framing the emptiness around them. In *A Girl,* the cinemascope frame shows us both a utopian and dystopian image of Bad City. In the opening sequence, a long shot finds Arash left of frame, dressed in a tight white T-Shirt, denim jeans and jacket, like James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955). We track Arash as he carries his cat across a dirt road, oblivious to the trench (on the left of the frame) that is covered with dead bodies. A sombre musical cue

[24] For example, Hungary has passed a number of laws which criminalise any person or organisation who assists illegal asylum seekers. The right wing prime minister Viktor Orbán has "branded the migrants a threat to Europe's Christian civilisation" ("Hungary passes anti-immigrant 'Stop Soros' laws" par 13).

emphasizes the grim image of corpses, contrasting with Arash, who is smitten with his feline friend. The black and white palette allows for high contrasts and harsh lighting. Various wide shots of empty, dark, suburban streets reveal the Girl, like a silhouette shadow in her chador, almost sneaking into frame at either side. Bad City is a place full of vice, but it is also an empty and isolated desert.

The space is its own Tehrangeles – a blend of Iranian-ness and American-ness. While the Farsi language resounds through the dialogue and written text (such as store signs and car plates), the characters transport themselves on skateboards and in American vintage cars. The characters move between very typical American suburban streets lined with newly built one-storey homes and manicured lawns, unlike the apartment-lined boulevards in Tehran. In contrast to *Under the Shadow* and *Circumstance, A Girl* acknowledges that it is not filmed in a real Iran by emphasizing its American-ness as well. While the interiors of the houses are adorned with Persian carpets and shishas, the music is a combination of Persian and Anglo pop. Music features very prominently throughout the film, with Amirpour at the helm as the music supervisor. The music ranges across songs from Radio Tehran, Kiosk, 'Armenian-Lebanese-US fusion' Bei Ru, White Lies from London, and well-known Iranian singer Dariush (Hudson 35-36). Amirpour has noted that the soundscape was intended to "create a certain feeling" (Bennett para.13), which could provide a sense of hybridity where 'West' and 'East' mix and blend together. Hudson believes *A Girl* is not about heroism but about the "isolated, dispossessed, and marginalised", meaning that Bad City is a place that is not "exotic but mundane" for Iranians and Iranian-Americans (39). This 'mundane' place is also a type of frontier.

The Western frontier has always been unknown to Europeans, and a place where heroes ‘find themselves’. It is therefore quite fitting to see the frontier as a space where everything blends and blurs together, making it a perfect space of hybridity. After all, historically the frontier is a site of invasion, conflict and even genocide. As a frontier, Bad city is also a dystopic place where it blends the ‘West’ and the ‘East’. As Emily Edwards says, it is a ‘twilight zone’ that is both familiar and disturbing and “serves as a visual setting of the ‘third space’” (19). Yet while Edwards believes Bad City to be more like a “prison” (21) that constrains its characters, I believe it to be a space that can only exist through hybridity, where each person is needed for the other to survive. It is also a space that allows for creativity that would not be possible if the film had to be made in the real Iran. All of the films in this study, except for *I am Nasrine* and *My Tehran for Sale* (Moussavi), were filmed outside of Iran due to heavy restrictions from the Iranian state on all films made within the country. *I am Nasrine* was filmed secretly with the filmmakers providing the Iranian censors a fake screenplay so they could be granted filming permits[25]; *My Tehran for Sale* went a step further and was filmed without state permission, causing the film to be banned in Iran and its lead actress to be imprisoned.

Since the formation of the Islamic Republic, Iran’s main organisation in charge of censorship for culture activities, such as cinema, is called Ershad, from the Farsi term, “Vezarat-e Farhang va Ershad-e Eslami”, meaning Islamic Guidance (Rahimi 363). Ershad is responsible for issuing permits for the arts and

[25] Only the opening scenes were filmed illegally in Iran and the Iranian crew are not credited for fear of harassment due to the film’s negative portrayal of the regime (BBC, “Bafta nomination for Tina Gharavi's smuggled film”).

is made up of eight different bureaus. Censorship can vary but it is fundamentally based on the concerns of the state: “the Ershad practice of interpretation is closely tied with production of what it deems "Islamic culture" through various media industries that reflect a deep interest in shaping national culture based on Islamic revolutionary ideals (Rahimi 363). Therefore, Ershad answers to the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance, who in turn answers directly to the Supreme Leader (Rahimi 365). In his article focusing on arts censorship within Iran, Babak Rahimi explains in detail the measures the state uses to facilitate censorship for its own ideological purposes. Rahimi believes the state uses both reactive and proactive, or soft power, measures. Reactive measures involve immediate restrictions such as the jamming of satellite and Internet during the 2009 protests, the refusal of permits to films not accepted by the Ministry, or even ‘unofficial’ censorship by hardliner factions that restrict promotion of a film by reducing their exhibition rights both nationally and internationally (Rahimi 371). Proactive measures, such as the use of propaganda, are taken in order to distil trust in the state. Rahimi gives the example from Naficy regarding the Farabi Cinema Foundation, which has provided support (financial and promotional) to films “approved by the ministry” (Rahimi 371). The submission of Iranian films for international film festivals and even the Academy Awards could be examples of proactive actions by the state.

Therefore, the heavy restrictions placed on filmmakers in Iran, particularly any who aim to criticize the state or “Islamic culture”, make it near impossible for filmmakers in the diaspora to film there. Hence, as much as cinema made within Iran must find creative ways around those restrictions, so films made in the diaspora must create imagined visions of Iran. Though the entire plot of *Under*

the Shadow takes place in the capital city Tehran, the film was filmed on location in Amman, Jordan, and in studios in the UK. Anvari agrees that his decision to shoot outside of Iran was mainly due to the restrictions he would face, particularly as his protagonist Shideh, is a woman: “My film is primarily focused on a woman and her private space, and how this private space becomes contaminated by the forces that are out of her control. It would have been nearly impossible to portray my character's lifestyle in a believable way if I were shooting in Iran” (Hamdan para. 13). He believed he would be given “creative freedom” in the UK. *Circumstance* has been condemned for not representing the ‘real’ Iran as it was filmed mainly in Lebanon. *Women without Men* was filmed namely in Morocco and has also been criticized for its inauthentic portrayal of an Iran of the past. Neshat, who has continually filmed her other projects in Northern Africa,[26] argues that her intention was purposeful in linking this simulation of a past Iran with contemporary Iran: “We Iranians have been fighting generation after generation for the same thing . . . This cycle keeps moving and the torch is passed on” (Khaleeli, “Shirin Neshat” para. 8). The scenes of protest against the Shah, for example, are dedicated to the protests against the 2009 elections that sparked the Green Movement, as supported by the final title text in the film dedicated to everyone who died “in the struggle for freedom and democracy in Iran - from the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 to the Green Movement of 2009.” These films do not aim for a real envisioning of Iran (past or present); instead, they create a *simulation* of what the filmmaker *desires* Iran to be. Bad City simulates a blend of Tehran and Los Angeles stuck in a Western horror nightmare; Tehran at war is a

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[26] Much of Neshat’s works are filmed in Morocco, Mexico and Turkey (Searle para. 9)

simulation of Anvari's memories of his youth; *Circumstance* shows a present-day simulation of an Iran as seen in fragments by a 'foreign' filmmaker at a certain time. Similar to *Persepolis,* which opted for animation to reconstruct the Iran of Satrapi's memories, these films also blend simulation and realism within their visual narratives. The duality of Iran and the US or UK becomes intertwined through memory and simulation creating a type of third place, not dissimilar to Bhabha's theory of the 'third space'.

4.2 Private vs. Public space

As a graphic novel, *Persepolis* has the advantage of using still frames to indicate time passing, which it does in a discontinuous state. As Ann Miller notes, right from the beginning of the book, the first panel cuts from 1979 to 1980 in one step for a "disruptive effect" (41). This disruption is also symbolic of Marji's own identity as an exiled figure and a teenager growing up in Iran under a new regime, "Many commentators of *Persepolis* have taken the panel in volume one, in which Satrapi portrays herself as split between modernity and Iranian tradition, as emblematic of her inner divide" (Miller 46). The film version accentuates this divide in scenes that show a frame within a frame; a close up on the television set, for instance, shows protests on the streets framed by a television, which in turn is framed by the frames of the actual film. This Russian Doll effect of a frame within a frame is an obvious symbolism of the dual self, or the layers of the self, which the films of this study all explore. This duality of the self is symbolic of the

marginalisation each character faces within their world and is shown notably in the spaces the women protagonists occupy, both public and private.

In *Women without Men* private and public spaces are used to symbolise the power dynamics between the women and men of Iran in the 1950s. In comparison to *A Girl,* where Bad City is a hybrid wasteland, in *Women without Men* the conflicted nature of space is symbolised through gardens. Valerie Palmer-Mehta, in "The Rhetorical Space of the Garden in Shirin Neshat's *Women Without Men*" (2015), notes the importance of the garden throughout history, particularly as a space of gendered politics, from the biblical stories of the Garden of Eden, where Eve is responsible for the expulsion of humanity from paradise, to the extravagant gardens of aristocrats in Europe in the 18th Century, such as Versailles, which showed the dominance and power of Louis XIV. In Iran, the garden has been significant as a place of paradise since the days of the Achaemenian Empire, with nine Persian gardens in Iran currently holding places on UNESCO's World Heritage list (Palmer-Mehta 86). Palmer-Mehta also notes how gardens represent paradise; even the word is taken from the ancient Persian word *pairidaeza,* meaning 'walled garden' or 'orchard'. Similarly, the Hebrew word *pardess* translates to 'orchard' (Bresheeth 756). This has a comparable meaning in Islam where the word heaven can also mean garden (Miller, quoting Faizi 78). Gardens in Iran are seen as safe, comfortable, heavenly and paradise-like, where one sits and contemplates, thinks and philosophises. The garden as a place of spirituality and awakening was not lost on Neshat, who notes:

> The concept of a garden has been central to the mystical literature in Persian and Islamic traditions, such as in the

> classical poetry of Hafez, Khayyam and Rumi where the garden is referred to as the space for 'spiritual transcendence'. In Iranian culture, the garden has also been regarded in political terms, suggesting ideas of 'exile', 'independence' and 'freedom' . . . in *Women without Men* the garden is treated as a space of both exile and refuge: an oasis where one can feel safe and secure. (Palmer-Mehta 85)

This security of the garden is emphasized by its surrounding four walls and secure gate; it is within these walls that the women in the film find their ultimate refuge. Ultimately, in the film, gardens become a place of sanctuary and an escape for women *from* men. The garden as a feminine space is noted in the Abrahamic religions; the ultimate garden was the Garden of Eden (created by the ultimate 'gardener', God) and it was supposedly Eve who tarnished it causing her and Adam's ultimate expulsion. Haim Bresheeth, in his article "Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men*" (2010), marks the significance of the garden in the days when nomadic tribes settled in the Fertile Crescent. He notes that it was women who cultivated the garden and agriculture while the men were away hunting and gathering (756). In Neshat's film, the gardens belong to the women and it is in the gardens where each woman finds peace and sanctuary. Perhaps in an ironic feminist twist to Eve's story, instead of destroying the garden, it is women who save it and flourish within it.

The opening image in *Women without Men*, finds Munis on top of her roof leaping to her death in her garden as her voice-over narrates in verse. From here, the narrative moves to a flashback of an earlier scene with Munis in the

same garden, enlightening the more naive Faezeh about her rather outdated ideas about women's roles and sexuality. Unlike Faezeh, Munis believes a woman's virginity should not be sacred, which becomes poignant and foreshadows Faezeh's later rape where she is forced to think the same. Munis owns the scene within her garden as she leads her friend around. Wide two shots of the women show Munis dominating the space without fear. Meanwhile, the more affluent Fakhri leaves her oppressive husband and buys a garden in the countryside which becomes a destination for the other women later in the film. The road to Fakhri's garden is a long and empty country road where, twice, we find extreme long shots of the women walking, covered in their chadors. The road cuts through the horizon and is almost filmed in a one-point perspective. Yet this symmetry is offset by the dark figures of Munis and Faezeh, who walk one behind the other (see Fig. 8). Unlike the enclosed walls of Munis's garden, Fakhri's is an orchard with wild and daunting trees. When Zarin, a sex worker, enters the garden through a hole in a wall, she finds her ultimate sanctuary here (and consequently later dies). Faezeh also finds her strength amongst the wildness of the trees. In one dream sequence that Palmer-Mehta focuses on, Faezeh faces the trauma of her rape as the garden becomes a place of redemption:

> Rather than feeling the calm and comfort typically engendered by the Persian garden, Faezeh is initially so overwhelmed that she calls out to God and leans against a tree to gather her strength. As a result of her rape, Faezeh has been catapulted into this new physical and mental space, this deep questioning of her belief systems. (89)

Gardens are feminist spaces where women such as Faezeh grow in strength, or find peace, such as Zarin and Munis. Even Fakhir finds her place in the orchard as a type of doting mother superior as she cares for Zarin and Faezeh there.

Fig. 8. Extreme long shot of Munis and Faezeh on the road to Fakhri's orchard, *Women without Men* (00:47:03).

The fantasy of the title, "women without men", does not last long as each of these spaces is consistently invaded by men. In Munis's garden, her brother Amir intrudes into the space and demands that Munis accept her engagement with a suitor, but Munis refuses and uses the garden as her space of rebellion. She throws herself off the roof and dies in the very garden that she loves. When her body is found by Amir and Faezeh, Amir buries her in the garden before anyone can see. This intrusion by men into the garden becomes a constant trope throughout the film, as Palmer-Mehta notes: "Amir intrudes into and defiles this sacred space ... his violation temporarily robs the garden of its safety and comfort, and seems to obviate feminist standpoints and possibilities" (88). The garden is Munis's private and personal space, which Amir invades and in which

by proxy he inspires violence. For Palmer-Mehta, the garden is a place of rebellion for Munis; indeed, the ultimate rebellion occurs when Munis's soul is resurrected by Faezeh as she digs her out of the earth before venturing outside into the town and the public sphere.

In the public sphere, it is men who occupy the most space and antagonize the women. As she wanders through public spaces, Munis stands out in her black chador, particularly in a scene where she walks through a protest of men wearing only white, while the presence of Munis herself is never acknowledged. Despite the visual contrast, she is still invisible in this space, much like the women who are silenced in Neshat's oppressive Iran, or even possibly, the voiceless exiles in the diaspora. When Munis sits in a 'men's only' coffee shop listening to the political news on the radio, Faezeh hovers outside the door, worried and constantly adjusting her chador. Her anxieties become real as she is spotted by two men who follow her down an alleyway and sexually assault her. At the climax of the film, Fakhri throws a party for her fellow elitist friends at her orchard until the Shah's soldiers invade the party and help themselves to dinner. The scene is almost comical as a high-angle long shot shows a view of soldiers in uniform feasting around the dining table as Fakhri's guests stand and watch. Every inch of the frame is occupied yet the contrast between the two groups is visually clear. The guests stand in their colourful attire in contrast to the green khaki uniforms of the soldiers and only the sounds of their cutlery and eating permeates the space (see Fig. 8). Palmer-Mehta believes Fakhri occupies a hybrid space whereby 'hell' was her life with her abusive husband and 'heaven' is her orchard with the man she has been in love with, Abbas, at least until he arrives with his new 'Western' girlfriend. Her rejection by Abbas shows that a 'real' heaven is not

attainable as it does not exist in this world. Neshat's intention has always been to show the history of Iran and its invasion by 'Western' imperialism as a way to 'educate Western' audiences:

> I made this film because I felt it is important for it to speak to the Westerners about our history as a country . . . That Iran was once a secular society and we had democracy and this democracy was stolen from us by the American government, by the British government. (Neshat, TED talk)

The Shah's army clearly signifies the imperial intrusions of the British and Americans during the coup on Mosaddeq and their backing of the Shah. The duality shown symbolises the strength of the people of Iran and the imperialism of the invading 'West'. This duality is also replicated between women and men in the new Islamist regime, which crosses their private and public spaces. The spaces in *Women without Men* signify a place of liminality and uncertainty, where there is no real stability as external factors can constantly intrude. For Neshat, who herself went into exile, the film's duality reflects the instability of exile. Only in the end, when Faezeh leaves Fakhir's garden, can we see a glimmer of hope that Faezeh may one day arrive somewhere that is indeed home.

Fig. 9. The Shah's soldiers dine at Fakhri's orchard party, *Women without Men* (01:21:55).

Neshat has consistently drawn on the dual influences of her native Iran and the US, where she now lives in exile. Her work is situated in between these two worlds. Her short installation series, *Rapture* (1999), *Turbulent* (2002) and *Fervor* (2002) feature two different screens facing each other. The viewer takes their place in the middle, seemingly where Neshat herself would be. Sometimes the individuals shown in the screens are separated by gender, as is the case with *Turbulent* where men watch a man sing on one side while a lone woman sings on the other. Rather than accept this in-betweenness, the viewer is conflicted as the screens are "mirrors of difference rather than of similarities" (Bresheeth 754). In *Women without Men*, the garden shows us the influence of both 'Eastern' and 'Western' art. While Zarin floats in the pool covered in brightly coloured flora and fauna, imitating that of a fallen Ophelia in the famous Pre-Raphaelite work of the same name by Sir John Everett Millais (1851-2), the garden also shows off Iranian miniatures. This mixture of the 'East' and 'West' is a constant reminder of the hybridity of these films, yet they are brief. Unlike the other films in this study, Neshat's *Women without Men* hovers around liminality, perhaps representing

instead the filmmakers' own life in exile. *Women without Men* would be an example of an exilic film, according to Naficy, but it is also one that ventures beyond. I wanted to include this film as it provides a bridge between the exilic films that Naficy explored, to the diasporic films created by hyphenated identities which I am focusing on.

4.3 'East' vs. 'West'

Steven Rawle in *Transnational Cinema* (2017) focuses on Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) which follows the contrasts of second-generation British-Indian teenager Jessminder's desires of pursuing football and her parents' of attending university and marriage. Rawle notes the way Jessminder negotiates a diasporic identity through these two different cultural spaces. The climax of the film centres on her football team's important match and the wedding of her elder sister Pinky. To appease her parents, Jess is obliged to attend the traditional Punjabi wedding but halfway through, her father, seeing how miserable Jess is, allows her to go to the match (as long as she returns). Rawles notes the importance of these two rituals, the wedding and the football match, as two different cultural spaces that are metaphorical of Jess's very existence as a second-generation British-Asian. Jess literally and successfully navigates between both spaces as she runs from the wedding to the match, happy with both choices. Rawle notes how the film negotiates diasporic identities within the home and the football field, breaks down the usual binaries of "West and the rest" (112), and thus allows for an exploration of transnationalism and multiculturalism

(113). These spaces are fluid so that Jess, like other diasporic identities in this study, is able to cross borders and live life with a hyphenated identity.

Borders and border crossings are obvious narrative and visual metaphors within transnational cinema. Certain borders have become even more prominent in recent times due to geopolitical shifts and global crises, and have gained popularity on-screen, such as the border crossings between Africa and Asia, on the one hand, and Europe, on the other, as part of the 'migrant crisis'. Even with those who cross borders, a sense of hierarchy exists. For example, there is the obvious privilege that enables tourists to cross borders with valid visas and passports in comparison with asylum seekers without accreditation who cross illegally and dangerously. Mainstream Hollywood examples of crossing borders, such as *Babel* (Iñárritu, 2006), concentrate on white American tourists who are in distress, as opposed to more independently made films on refugees and asylum seekers from the 'East', such as Michael Winterbottom's *In this World* (2002), which follows two Afghani boys who take illegal passage to Europe, and Gharavi's *I am Nasrine* (2012). Border-crossers who are illegal are therefore marginalised and, more often than not, punished for 'violating' borders. In *I am Nasrine*, Ali is killed in a brutal attack outside of his apartment block by a racist, homophobic gang, while Enayatullah, one of the protagonists from *In this World*, suffocates and dies in a container ship as they illegally enter Italy via the Mediterranean. The use of the 'East' and 'West' dichotomy is consistently used in texts that concern Iran as a nation, not just due to its imperialistic history but also due to its geographical location in the Middle East. As Miller notes, "Iran does not exist in isolation: as both geographical and cultural space it is subject to border-

crossings of all kinds" (44). Crossing borders is an obvious visual cue in films about exile and diaspora, as we see in *I am Nasrine*.

I am Nasrine uses aural and visual cues to emphasise the dual spaces Nasrine occupies as an exile figure. From the opening we have handheld 'amateur' images of Tehran streets shot by Nasrine, intercut with professional film shots of Nasrine on the back of a motorbike winding through the busy roads (see Fig. 10). At the start of the film, there is an old Persian song, which then blends into the classic 1980s British pop song "Everybody wants to rule the world" by Tears for Fears.[27] This Anglo-pop song contrasts with stereotypical images we see of the 'East' - bazaars, women in chadors and mosques. Visually and aurally the film blends the two spaces Nasrine will occupy - the homeland Iran and her new 'home' in the UK. This same scene is later mirrored in the UK but this time Nasrine rides a horse buggy through the streets with her new love interest Leigh. The chaos of the Tehran roads is replaced with the tranquillity of an empty, cobbled countryside while the fast tempo of the pop song is replaced with a slow, simple English folk song. The duality of spaces is repeated throughout the film. Nasrine sits in a science lab on her first day in school in the UK and we cut to a montage of Nasrine back in Iran, wearing the traditional school uniform, complete with navy hijab, playing basketball with her peers; Ali gleefully spins around on an amusement park ride as he notices a traditional Persian Sufi dancer below also spinning in a traditional dance, never knowing if this figure is a real person in the park or a reminder of the homeland; and Ali's coffin, finally, when it is being

[27] The importance of the song did not go unnoticed as it was nominated for Best Sync/Use of Existing Music in a Feature film at the 2014 Music+Sound Awards (Sync Music).

carried to his funeral, sits atop the horse buggy that Leigh leads through the British streets, while a classic Persian hymn is sung in voice over.

Nasrine follows Orientalist ideologies but also subverts them through its depiction of narrative space. From the beginning of the film, we are taken into the ‘savage’ Eastern dystopia of Iran. As noted, the opening montage shows Nasrine enjoying the rush of riding a motorbike through the bustling streets of Tehran. Within the first six minutes of the film, there is, then, an immediate cut to her being interrogated in a police cell. The police officer then forces himself on Nasrine and we cut again to Nasrine leaving in tears. The ellipsis is enough for the viewer to imagine the assault and subsequent rape Nasrine has endured. The police interrogation room is a dirty brick building, seemingly as ‘medieval’ as the punishment Nasrine endures (see Fig. 11). The mise-en-scene and edit presents us with a backwards and hostile world, unlike the Newcastle countryside where Nasrine and Ali end up. In the UK, Nasrine befriends a local girl, Nichole, who lives on a caravan site and rides horses. Even in the usual grim English weather, there is sunshine and a number of scenes show Nasrine watching horses run wild in slow motion in the serene landscape. When Nasrine falls for local man Leigh, she sits with him at an open fire looking up at the stars. She tells him, “It’s a nice world where you come from”. Leigh replies, “I thought

it was one world", to which Nasrine responds rather sombrely, "it's not" (01:03:18 - 01:03:32). For Nasrine, there is beauty in the 'West', even amongst the broken caravans and state housing where she lives with her brother.

Fig. 10. Nasrine films the streets of Tehran on the back of a motorbike with a male friend, *I am Nasrine* (00:01:41).

Fig. 11. Nasrine is interrogated in an Iranian police station, *I am Nasrine (*00:03:53).

Ali, like many of the other men in the films in this study, is the antagonist. He blames Nasrine for being forced to leave Iran and, like Mehran in

Circumstance, tries to become a devout Muslim as a way to overcome his own insecurities. He scolds Nasrine for going out at night as a young woman. Nasrine only wears her hijab when she is home with Ali, but she immediately removes it once outside. For Nasrine, the hijab is a visual cue of her marginality in this new place, so she wants to refuse it. Ali finds work at a local takeaway shop where, among the other Middle Eastern and South Asian characters, he stands out as the most reserved and conservative. One scene finds Ali in the alleyway with trash as he spots two unknown men having oral sex. Ali is both frightened and disgusted, and tells Nasrine, “I have more to pray for here” (00:30:47). Yet unlike Mehran, Ali’s religious quest is short-lived. His devoutness and disgust at the sexual act is a reaction to his own repressed sexuality, which he finally begins to accept when he meets a young white English customer Tommy at the takeaways. This subversion challenges the Orientalist notions of ‘East’ and ‘West’, and, indeed, it is in the ‘West’ where the greatest tragedy will occur. While Ali and Nasrine are vilified for being foreign by a group of locals who hang outside their state house, both characters also find solace in other marginalised characters. Nichole and Leigh, for instance, both belong to a working class nomadic ‘Gypsy’ community who live on their own land outside of the main centre. Ali’s homosexuality marginalises him to the point where he and Tommy are harassed by locals. This sense of alienation runs deep through the characters in this film, and while the ‘West’ is perceived as a beacon of hope, the worst atrocities also occur there. Ali is stabbed and killed outside their building block by the same group who vilified him and Nasrine. At first we wonder if he is killed because of his sexuality as he is assaulted by the same group that harassed him and Tommy earlier. Yet when Tommy leaves the building, he is left alone. In this world, the

'West' may have seemed like the "paradise" that Ali believed at one point, but it is also a place of hostility and punishment, just like the homeland in the 'East'. Yet the film does leave the viewer with a sense of hope, as Nasrine decides to stay, despite her parents' insistence that she return to Iran. Much like the epilogue in *Women without Men,* the film ends with a simple text: "the film is dedicated to those who died trying to find a better life in the UK".

It is also worth focusing on the reversal of the 'West' invading the 'East', as an empirical and cultural force. For example, Miller and others (Naghibi and O'Malley, Massey) explain how the cultural influence of 'Western' music and dress are shown in Marji's rebellion as a teenager in *Persepolis*. Marji listens to Kim Wilde's music and wears a jacket stating 'Punk is not ded [sic]' as she shops for Iron Maiden cassette tapes on the black market during the heyday of the Islamic regime. In *Under the Shadow*, Shideh's boredom is illustrated by her daily workouts to a Jane Fonda exercise video. In one scene, as a repair man fixes a broken window, Dorsa asks her mother if she can watch her 'tapes'. Shideh later chides her for this request, as 'foreign' VHS tapes are illegal and one could expose her to the authorities. Even in the language used we can see an Anglo-influence as Farsi words are at times mixed with English words like 'stress' in *Under the Shadow*, reflecting the more modern, urban Iran, which infuses everyday conversation with English words, no doubt influenced by the popularity of satellite television and the internet, both illegal under the regime but both accessible through illegal means.[28] In *A Girl*, the Pimp has a tattoo in Farsi but also the word 'Sex' in English across his neck. Though these are small details,

[28] Despite it being illegal, it is believed that as many as 70% of households in Iran have satellite television (Greenberg para. 5).

this consequence is in no doubt a reflection of the filmmakers themselves who are living in a hybrid world of American/British-Iranian-ness.

Miller cites geographer Doreen Massey on the importance of hybridity in youth culture where the local intercepts with the global as “imported cultural products will enter into locally produced systems of social interactions and symbolic meanings." (qtd. in Miller 45). Naghibi and O’Malley also apply this to Marji in *Persepolis* in “Estranging the Familiar” (2005). Marji’s obsession with consumerism is not only indicative of her need to be a ‘normal’ teenager but her unwillingness to fight the actual “political order” during the Revolution and subsequent Islamic regime that followed. Marji’s love of ‘Western’ pop culture also familiarises her for a ‘Western’ audience; they are ‘Western signifiers’ (Naghibi and O’Malley 231). The same theory applies to Atafeh and Shirin (in *Circumstance*), who spend their days in a hedonistic haze attending house parties, engaging in sexual relationships, taking drugs and even thieving. Though their unproductiveness would classify them as teenage slackers, their actions are also illegal in the Islamic Republic. Their very acts of rebellion are themselves political, which is confirmed when both girls are arrested by the *basij* (religious) police after being informed upon by Atafeh’s brother, Mehran. Similar to Nasrine’s experience in *I am Nasrine*, Shirin and Atafeh are held in a police station. While Shirin is scolded for the “anti-Revolutionary” works of her late parents, Atafeh is subjected to a sexual violation of her body to prove her virginity - which she ‘fails’. Atafeh again ‘rebels’ by driving alone at night with loud music and is arrested a second time but this time it seems as though she is rebelling against her parents and their generation, who she blames for bringing in this new oppressive regime.

Circumstance, like *I am Nasrine*, is highly critical of the Islamic Republic. The totalitarian oppression of the two women is perfectly embodied in the figure of Atafeh's brother, Mehran. A former drug addict who has returned home, Mehran finds solace in his local mosque after realising that he has been given a second chance to live a 'good' and pious life. Mehran is a hypocrite and, much like the regime he represents, he is a fundamentalist. When a drug addict is begging in the mosque, an elder offers the beggar food and tells Mehran that "the mosque is a place for everyone" (00:17:46). Mehran is furious and disagrees. Whilst in principle, Islam and the mosque is intended 'for everyone', Mehran, and the regime he represents, believe otherwise. Mehran's new-found extremist ideologies allow him to work for the religious police as a spy and he begins exposing his old friends and even begins secretly observing his own family. The film blends grainy, green surveillance footage throughout as we watch the goings-on in the family house from the point of view of Mehran's spy camera. The transitions from the controlled film space (with the main professional camera) to these pixelated, random surveillance shots is a constant reminder of the imposing regime that dictates the lives of the characters, even within the supposedly safe spaces of their own homes (see Figs. 12 and 13).

Similar to *A Girl* and *Women without Men*, Atafeh and Shirin are continually harassed by 'bad' men. Shirin's conservative uncle tries to wed her to an older gentleman; when Shirin is arrested, Mehran steps in and marries her instead as a way to 'save' her, despite being the reason she was arrested to begin with; and in one scene Shirin is sexually harassed by a male taxi driver. The intrusions by these 'bad' men also works to keep Shirin and Atafeh apart as lovers. Together they dream of leaving Iran for a fantasy life in Dubai, which is

encapsulated in the opening scenes of the film, reflecting an Orientalist fantasy. Atafeh is dressed as an Arabian belly dancer, who lip syncs to a classical Persian song and dances seductively in a nightclub, as Shirin watches her lovingly. The fantasy is never realised but altered as Atafeh in the end secretly leaves Iran for Dubai by herself.

The duality of ‘East’ and ‘West’ is also represented in the film in the mise en scène. Atafeh’s family is from an elite class, which is shown in their ostentatiously lavish house with gold interiors and expensive set-pieces influenced by the ‘West’, such as a vintage gramophone where Atafeh’s dad plays a classical Bach piece for Atafeh who then plays something similar on the piano with Mehran. The film blends classical European music with classical Persian music as well as hybridised music such as hip hop with Farsi lyrics. Music plays an important role in the narrative - from Shirin dancing to an old Persian pop song as she cleans her house, to Atafeh singing angrily in her car to rock music. The blending of music is also imitated in the blending of film styles. The scene with Shirin dancing, for instance, is shown in slow motion in a spotlight with jump cuts, like a music video to the beat of the song, rather than sticking to seamless cuts for continuity. There is also an arthouse influence mixed with classical Hollywood, as shown in a sequence where close ups of Mehran playing the piano are intercut with extreme close ups of Shirin’s red painted lips in an almost Lynchian dream fantasy. Even though the film’s production company is called A Space Between Productions, the filmic space is not liminal but hybrid. It is an Iranian story about Iranians but one that is made by those in the diaspora and thus heavily influenced by an American narrative and style. For example, Atafeh and Shirin come from very different class backgrounds and yet this

division is never addressed despite class being a major factor in Iranian society. This negligence is indicative of a Hollywood point of view where class divisions can be broken and the ideology of freedom becomes the core pursuit of the two protagonists. Shirin and Atafeh want to be ‘free’ to be themselves and to love each other, and they believe that they can only do this outside of Iran. This limited and problematic perception of the country foregrounds Americanised ideals of individuality and freedom.

Fig. 12 Mehran watches Shirin through his secret cameras, *Circumstance* (00:56:23-56:47).

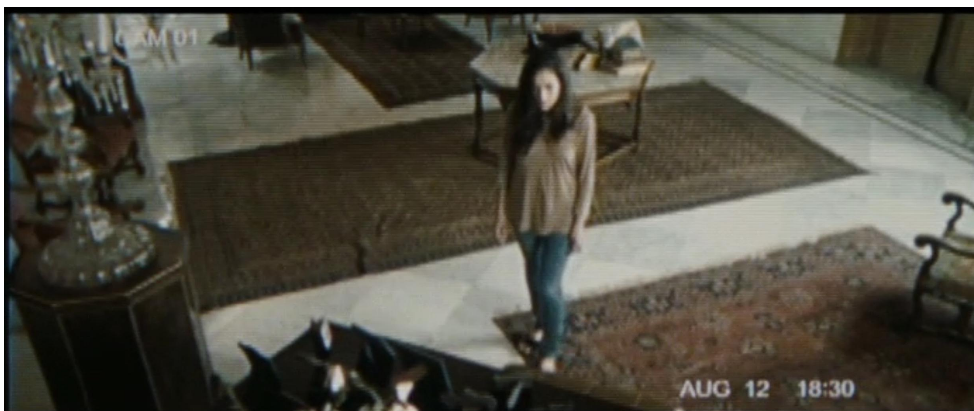

Fig. 13. Eyeline match of CCTV footage of Shirin as Mehran watches, *Circumstance* (00:56:23-56:47).

4.4 In Transit

In Naficy's subsection on homelessness, the characters take a literal journey, but the story revolves around the journey rather than the destination. Naficy calls such journey films, "journeys of identity" (*An Accented Cinema* 237) where characters, often newly arrived immigrants, are transformed by their journeys, which revolve around the shift in a character's immigration status from illegal to legal. The transformations in the films in my study are not based on homelessness. For example, Nasrine, as far as the audience knows, is still waiting on her asylum case at the end of the film, as is Marzieh in *My Tehran for Sale*. Atafeh leaves Iran but we do not know her status when she arrives in Dubai (if she even arrives). More often than not, the transformations are personal and based on identity shifts rather than outside factors. *Lady Land* in particular, takes a literal journey that takes elements from the road film, a fitting genre for diasporic journey films. Road films also take on different journeys as they pertain to the ideals of being at home. They may involve home-seeking journeys where characters are finding a new home either by choice or by force; or they may involve nomadic journeys where the characters are more interested in wandering than reaching a certain destination (Naficy, *An Accented Cinema* 222-223). The road film thus has contemporary relevance in a globalised world where migration is very visible and occurs on a grand scale.

The road film has traditionally been as interchangeable as the automobile with American culture. It is no coincidence, then, that the beginnings of the genre came about with the introduction of consumer cars. The Ford factory line

pumping out mass-produced vehicles in the 1920s is often linked to the similar production processes of the classic Hollywood studio system. Studio films, often formulaic, were being mass-produced during both Hollywood's pre-sound (before 1927) and post-sound eras or what was termed the 'Golden Age' (1927-1960). The idea of the car as a tool for freedom and thus individualism becomes synonymous with the ideology of the 'American Dream', alongside the link to consumerism and capitalism, which dominates the US cultural sphere.

What is absent are the forced relocations and journeys taken by the indigenous peoples of the land. Like the absence of the colonized, the absence of race and gender diversity in road films was evident in road films in the 20th century. *Thelma and Louise* (Scott, 1991) broke the mould in terms of feminising the road journey, but that model has rarely been replicated. In my research, I found a handful of Anglo-American-Australian road films that centre on women protagonists, and even rarer, on women of colour. Examples include *Bhaji on the Beach* (Chadha, 1993), *Rabbit Proof Fence* (Noyce, 2002), *Just Like a Woman* (Bouchareb, 2012), *The Sapphires* (Blair, 2012), which has women of colour as co-leads, *Farah Goes Bang* (Menon, 2013) and *American Honey* (Arnold, 2016). *Farah Goes Bang* follows a group of young American women, including the protagonist Farah, an Iranian-American, who take a road trip across the United States in order to gain support for the upcoming election of John Kerry in 2004.[29] This independent film (made completely outside of the Hollywood studio system) premiered at the 2013 Tribeca Film Festival in New York and was only internationally released online via iTunes and Vimeo by the filmmakers

[29] *Farah Goes Bang* has an Iranian-American protagonist but was directed by a non-Iranian. It was not released internationally and so was not included as one of the core texts explored in this study.

themselves (*Farah Goes Bang* official website). Unlike the border journeys that Naficy focuses on, these road films celebrate the romanticism of the journey from the privileged viewpoint of a hybridized citizen – one whose legal status is not an issue.

The road film follows certain ideologies that are similar to the Western, including exhibiting visual landscapes between 'civilised' and 'savage' environments (such as the town or the open empty road), while narratively they often focus on the protagonists' sense of rebelliousness. The road film also uses the open or undefined 'space' of the road to negotiate identities. In his book, *The Road Movie: In Search of Meaning,* Neil Archer notes how the road film can be a fitting genre for transnational cinema, "One of the attractions of these films for global audiences is that they offer the vicarious experience of movement and encounters beyond the familiar, creating in the process forms of transnational experiences that are at the same time central to the films' ideas", as they present a "visual and aural experience of otherness" (87). For Archer, 'postmodern' road films further show a type of self-reflexivity in their awareness of filmic tropes, which they may also subvert (83). Much like exile and diaspora, they reveal a fluid space that is not fixed or stable.

New Zealand cinema history has had its own examples of the road film, such as *Goodbye Pork Pie* (Murphy, 1981), rebooted again as *Pork Pie* (Murphy, 2017) and *Snakeskin* (Ashurst, 2001). Unlike classic Hollywood road films the latter two did portray a woman or person of colour as co-leads. Alongside this difference, the road film in a New Zealand context has its own distinctions from its American and European counterparts. First, geographically, New Zealand (and Australia) are distant from the 'majority' of the world and as such were colonized

much later, as Catherine Simpson notes in her article “Tinkering at the borders: *Lucky Miles* and the Diasporic (No) Road Movie” (360). In the case of New Zealand, all roads lead to the ocean. The road journey often abruptly ends due to the country being made up of islands.

In *Lady Land*, the two protagonists Samira and Fari are headed towards a clear destination: the capital city of Wellington. But as demanded by the convention of the road film genre, it is their individual and collective internal journeys with which the narrative is most concerned. Theirs is a journey of “becoming grown up” a delayed coming of age, or as Fari terms it, “an extended adolescence” due to which their transition into adulthood takes place at age 21 instead of their late teens. The screenplay begins with the protagonists dealing with their displacement in this society. They are outsiders because they are migrants and women of colour, but also because they refuse to partake in the ‘norms’ of society such as socialising with their peers, forging romantic relationships or pursuing career goals. By the end of the screenplay both women have crossed this marginal border into the mainstream. Both women are forced to socialise with strangers they meet on the road; Samira has her first romantic liaison; Fari decides to accept her job offer in Sydney; and the ending finds Samira buying a round-the-world ticket in order to have her ‘overseas experience’, which in itself is a ‘rite of passage’ for young New Zealanders. For Samira and Fari, the road journey is symbolic of their transition into adulthood, and more metaphorically, into New Zealand society.

In terms of the development of *Lady Land*, the screenplay was always written as a road film as the intention was to subvert a quintessentially American and masculine genre and to create one that was New Zealand-based and which

focuses on women. Much like Chadha's *Bend it Like Beckham,* the screenplay also plays with clichés as well as subverts them within its spaces, reinforcing it "for an immigrant audience". For example, the entire first act of the screenplay takes place in Auckland and, more specifically, within the protagonists' homes. Samira has a birthday with her extended family in a scene which depicts some stereotypes of Iranians both visually and narratively:

> INT. HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS
>
> Samira, now slightly dressed up, takes a deep breath and walks into the living room. Various Iranian guests, Aunties, Uncles, Cousins mill about. They're loud - both vocally and visually. A couple of staunch Grandmothers sit in the corner, with colourful hijabs. Different faces greet her as she does the rounds.
>
> GUEST 1
> Samira jan, darling you got fat!
>
> GUEST 2
> Dear, you've lost so much weight!
>
> GUEST 3
> Why are you so black?
>
> Samira gives her best fake smile.
>
> An abundance of Persian food lines the dining table as the women lay it out and the men knock back whisky.

Samira's mother Zahra, who is the source of Samira's obsession with finding a 'soulmate', surprises Samira with a birthday gift: her cousin Sina, who is visiting from the US, much to Samira's disgust. Zahra is symbolic of those of the Revolution generation and first-generation migrants who still hover within a sense of exile. In one scene, Zahra recalls how her favourite memories of Samira are

when she used to read to her from the *Shahnameh*, back in Iran - as shown in the opening pages. Zahra has clearly left her heart in the homeland, unlike her daughter who yearns to escape it. Once on the road, the only allusions in Iranian-ness come in the form of Banu. In contrast to Jessminder in *Bend it Like Beckham,* who continually crosses two different cultural spaces, in *Lady Land* the two protagonists escape one cultural space for another, in this case the open New Zealand road upon which their journey keeps being thwarted by internal and external obstacles. Samira and Fari's self-loathing is a product of alienation, from Pākehā/White New Zealand and from their parents who still speak of a "back home" that has little meaning to Samira and Fari.

Lady Land is a coming-of-age film, which, as noted by Isolina Ballesteros, is a common theme in diasporic films. She claims that many autobiographical works reflect the diasporic writer and/or filmmaker's own experiences of growing up "in-between" (*Immigrant Cinema in New Europe* 209). In particular, she notes the importance of comedies,

> The lightness of the genre, established through comic situations and prototypical characters that prompt immediate spectatorial relief and identification, as well as depictions of the family as a privileged locus for referring microcosmically to society at large, serve the purpose of problematizing the tensions and complexities of diasporic relations. (21)

Comedies allow for the exploration of cultural stereotypes and clichés. Comedy also allows for a kind of celebration of this hybrid culture, specifically in the films

of the 1.5- and second-generation. Films such as *Women without Men* and *Nasrine* focus on tragedy and survival and are almost defensive with regard to the discrimination they face, whereas the films *A Girl, Appropriate Behavior* and *Lady Land* use comedy to rebel against this displacement and eventually accept this hybrid identity, however unstable it may be.

Persepolis also uses comedy to symbolise Marji's alienation but it also serves drama as a way to explore the darker themes within the story such as the tragedy of war. Just as it blends drama and comedy, *Persepolis* also blends the memoir and graphic novel genres, with the graphic novel being a very 'Western' and supposedly, masculine medium. Historically, the graphic novel has not been seen as 'high art' so its marginality aligns with marginalised identities. It is also a much hybridized medium, which enables the presentation of a transnational subject. As Ann Miller notes in "Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*: Eluding the Frames", "Throughout *Persepolis*, she [Satrapi] uses the resources of a less prestigious art form to disrupt ideological conformity by eluding any such predetermined frames of gendered or national identity" (51). Amy Malek also agrees that the hybrid use of memoir and graphic novel has helped "redefine" the memoir genre ("Memoir as Iranian exile cultural production" 365) and "enabled new hybrid cultural forms to emerge" ("Memoir as Iranian exile cultural production" 359). For Malek, Satrapi has created a third space which allows access to Iran and its culture for non-Iranians but also for Iranians in a diaspora. This third space, which has continually appeared in this study (Bhabha, Said, Naficy, Edwards, et al), is an *extension* of Bhabha's third space. These films use narrative space to explore the tensions and relationship of Iranian-ness and American/British/New Zealand-ness. This extended third space is pushing

and blurring borders as the films do with the blending of genres and of culture. This extended third space is one that is fluid and positive, allowing for a celebration of the hyphenated identities rather than wallowing in displacement or marginality.

Chapter Five: Critical Reflections

The foundation of this screenplay was laid in a postgraduate screenwriting class at the University of Southern California (USC) in 2012. After writing various short scripts, our major assignment for the semester was to complete an original narrative feature screenplay. Each week, the class of six students would read sections from their screenplay, starting with a short treatment, to key scenes then progressing to a full screenplay. My original intentions were to take an established masculine and 'white' American genre like the road film, and turn it into a comedy about women in Aotearoa. The USC process was extremely fast with limited feedback. Many conventional screenwriting steps, such as writing an outline or detailed character profiles were overstepped in order to complete a full draft in six weeks. The draft drifted from my original intent. I wanted to write a heartfelt comedy about an immigrant woman who is coming of age late in life. I also wanted it to be a 'love/hate letter' to Aotearoa from the point of view of a 1.5-generation immigrant, someone who is very close to my own character as an Iranian growing up in Auckland and to look at some of the challenges and quirks that come with that. Instead, I ended up writing a generic road film about two young women overcoming various challenges on the road including the ending of their friendship over a love interest, an Israeli backpacker.

The screenplay was very plot focused where the plot drove the narrative without much thought to character. As a result, many of the character's motives

and backgrounds became cliched. For example, Samira's mother Zahra was a depressive widow who was dependent on Samira and so her departure for the road became a conflict. However, this conflict was not revisited later in the screenplay and their relationship merely recovered. Other characters such as Erez were conveniently placed within scenes, entering and exiting when needed to once again satisfy the plot rather than character intentions. The road itself also became superficial with many of the 'stops' taking place in popular tourist destinations such as Cathedral Cove in the Coromandel which appealed more to an international audience and increased the overall production value of the film. In fact, the original budget estimated for the screenplay was US $5 million.

Originally, the narrative was set just prior to the turn of last century in 1999 with Samira and her Pākehā friend Romy taking a road trip with an Israeli backpacker to the town of Gisborne to be the first in the world to see the new Millennium. The title was an homage to the incoming year 2000 and the genuine 'Y2K' fears around the possibility of a 'glitch' or 'bug' in computer software when the two-digit date would switch from 99 to 00 as opposed to 1999 to 2000. The title was also a reference to the geographical location of New Zealand as being 'at the end of the world'. An early writer's statement notes:

> *At the End of the World* is a story about strong and active female characters that are not waiting to be saved. They are a generation that came about at an interesting time, at the turn of the 21st Century where the 'slackers' of the previous Generation X were giving way to a new decade focused on the self. (Appendix C)

This setting and the idea of two ‘slackers’ lent itself to a comedic genre and so the tone was set right from the beginning and is the only key part that has not changed dramatically.

The first draft of the screenplay was thematically quite restrained, with a stronger focus on plot and dialogue but with a unique point of view, that of a voice from the Iranian diaspora situated in Aotearoa. As screenwriting theorist Craig Batty notes, “By imagining and experiencing the thematic situation of a story, audiences process the meaning of their own lives in parallel” (“A Screenwriter's Journey into Theme” 116) and “Theme offers, if you will, a place to come home to” (“A Screenwriter's Journey into Theme” 120). Theme allows for a stronger relationship between the film and its audience, which then allows for a more impactful and satisfying film. The intention to create a more complex and thus more satisfying screenplay was what encouraged me to use the screenplay as the creative component of my doctoral study.

The PhD allowed for extensive research into the themes around identity and Iranian culture using film texts as a way to inform and influence the screenplay. Alongside this was research into the screenwriting process within the academy specifically exploring discourses around practice-led research. The screenplay was also developed within industry, with input from producers, script consultants and state funders who each had their own ambitions and agendas, the most important being seeing the screenplay progress into production. Their eyes on the production prize differed to the academic eyes on this project. Within the PhD with creative practice, this screenplay needed to articulate with my academic arguments rather than a stand-alone piece of work that is merely a

blue-print for the film yet to be made. Since the academic aspect of the thesis is rooted in film studies and textual analysis, the screenwriting process or script-development are therefore not the core focus of this practice-led research. However, it is relevant to critically reflect on this process within the academic and industrial contexts.

5.1 Development through the PhD

Thematically, the strongest appeal of the screenplay was its focus on an Iranian immigrant and how she navigates her family expectations with that of her own in New Zealand, specifically Pākehā, society. Subconsciously, themes such as displacement, home, and marginality have always been in my earlier works such as my Master's thesis documentary *Iran in Transit* (Golbakhsh, 2011) and short narrative film *Tehrangeles* (Giwargis, 2012) which looked at the tragic history of a young Iranian couple living in exile in Los Angeles. *The Waiting Room* (Golbakhsh, 2019) gave an insight into a fictional airport waiting room where a young Iranian refugee befriends an Israeli immigrant in a room as the world outside wallows in xenophobia and anti-immigrant sentiment. One of the central themes in all of these films was the question of identity and accepting one's place in the world, or simply put, 'finding a home'. Looking through a thematic lens is how I began this doctoral study, using the films in my study and noting their similarities and differences regarding Iranian identity and marginality. The intention was to see if this research would then inform my own screenplay and how I could strengthen and clarify these themes to make a stronger and more impactful story.

Reading scholarship on postcolonial theory, diaspora and exile studies, and viewing and analysing Iranian diasporic films in relation to this scholarship contributed to the development of the themes in my own screenplay. These included Iranian culture as seen through diasporic points of view, even when the story is set in Iran; the marginality of the central character within their world; the need for that character to 'find' their place within it; and, the constant juggling between the 'East' and 'West' through spaces and cultural (supernatural and mythological) characters. For example, the inclusion of the mythological character Banu from the ancient Persian poem *Shahnameh*, developed further as a narrative device to clarify Samira's character arc as well keeping the link to her Iranian cultural roots.

Early in the doctoral process, I focused on the screenplay as its own text alongside scholarship around screenwriting discourse which compared to most other literature is still in its infancy. In his book *Screenwriting: History, Theory and Practice* (2009), Steven Maras, like his successors, develops theories around two main topics, authorship and craft versus imagination. Screenplays are often inherently seen in the industry as purely blueprints of films and not completed artefacts in themselves. They are merely there to build on and as various practitioners and artists add to them (from the director to the producer to subsequent writers), questions of authorship make it difficult to contain screenplays as stand-alone objects. Maras notes that this position developed in film history is due to various factors, including the nature of the studio system, "[T]his emphasis on the 'writerly' rather than the product aspect of scripting goes against a dominant logic of the studio system, organised around the separation of the work of conception and execution" (21). Screenwriting, like every other

process in the film studio industry is just another step towards the final product, the finished film. Steven Price, in his seminal work, *The Screenplay: Authorship, Theory and Criticism* (2010), also claims that the studio system influenced the development of the screenplay but in a positive way. He notes that in early cinema, scripts were nothing more than “photoplays” or “scenarios” (2), written as a list of scenes or shots just prior to shooting. It wasn’t until the emergence of the studio system that a ‘standardized script’ arose. As numbers involved in production grew, all personnel needed to be prepared and a written piece of text was deemed the best option to ensure a film was smoothly realised.

Nowadays in the industry, screenplays can be seen as technical pieces rather than creative ones. Both Price and Maras see this position stemming from the birth of the auteur theory in film history in the 1950s and the French New Wave, which gave full authorship to the director. However, Price argues that auteur theory actually helped to raise the profile of the writer as the French New Wave was also about writer-directors, and not all of them dismissed the role of the writer such as Alain Resnais who collaborated with writers like Marguerite Duras and Alain Robbe-Grillet (21). It is also no coincidence, Price claims, that the boom of ‘how-to-guides’ on screenwriting flourished soon after (and continues to do so as a profit-making industry on its own). For example, the importance of theory of story and the three-act structure was heralded by Syd Field (*Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting*, 1979) whereas more recent guide-books strive for more rigid formulas, such as the controversial “minute-to-minute movie formula” (Suderman para. 4) beat sheet of Blake Snyder’s *Save the Cat! The Last Book on Screenwriting You’ll Ever Need* (2005).

As an experienced screenwriter, I did not rely on these how-to-guide books to construct the format but instead focused on themes to strengthen character and plot. The screenplay is a three act structure that loosely follows the hero's journey with Samira as the heroine. Much of the craft arose from developing authentic characters in order to motivate the plot. Thorough character backstories were constructed with constant reflection of the overall themes of the story. Similar to the films in the study, the screenplay used the screenwriter's own background to supplement certain character traits and plot points. For example, the extended adolescence and delayed maturing of the two characters arose from discussions from other Iranians in the diaspora as did the scenes with Samira's birthday and family members who were all based on personal childhood experiences. As these characters were secondary or background only, their development was restricted and they stayed as stock characters: the strict matriarch; the superficial elder sister; the passive father and visual cliches of Iranian culture in the diaspora such as BMW cars and lavish outfits, which also appear in *Appropriate Behavior* when Shirin attends a Nowruz party. Thematically *Lady Land* explores generational gaps such as the relationship between Samira and her mother; duality between Samira and Fari but also Samira and Banu; and space, with the road and physical geography of New Zealand.

Another major topic screenwriting studies scrutinizes is the distinction between the craft of screenwriting and its artistry or creativity. Jill Nelmes supports the study of screenplays by comparing the screenplay to other forms of writing, mainly playwriting and poetry. She notes how screenplays adhere to

such strict paradigms that they need craft, as did the writers of sonnets in 16th Century Europe:

> Screenplays may appear formally simple with lots of space on the page but screenplay writing can be compared to poetry; it is a sparse form, where dialogue is kept to a minimum and in which visual metaphors are often as important as dialogue in communicating an idea. What is not said often carries great emotional weight. (109)

Craig Batty and Dallas J. Baker also compare the rigid form of screenplays to that of the short form Japanese Haiku poem, whose restrictive form may “enable” more creativity than inhibit it (70). Unlike prose which often focuses on the inner thoughts of a character, screenplays have restrictive features in their form, such as the 12-point Courier font to allow for a time estimate (one page equals one minute of screen time) and a focus on the visual. There are also common narrative points that the ‘how-to-guides’ continually advise on, such as adhering to a three to five act structure, limited dialogue and incorporating a strong character ‘arc’ whereby the character changes throughout the narrative, which takes much of its influence from the much cited Christopher Vogler’s *The Hero’s Journey* (influenced by Joseph Campbell’s work on mythology).

The basic foundation of the hero’s journey follows a reluctant protagonist who departs their ‘ordinary world’ for the ‘extraordinary world’ where they must overcome various battles and challenges in order to find their ‘elixir’ to take back to the ’ordinary home’. Through this journey they have a psychological

metamorphosis, developing 'heroic' traits and so when they return 'home' they do so as a hero. Samira's journey loosely follows this paradigm: she must leave her 'ordinary world' of suburban Auckland for the road in order to seek Erez, her 'elixir' and amidst the way, she finds what she actually needs, her independence. When she returns 'home' she is changed into a more mature and independent woman ready to undertake her next heroine's journey, in this case, travelling overseas. The hero's journey is often aided by important archetypes such as a 'wise mentor' and challenged by antagonists. In *Lady Land*, alongside Fari, Samira meets various allies: The farmer, Murray, they meet on the road is symbolic of a foreseeing mentor as is the misguided Azadeh. In the end both Samira and Fari reconcile with their mothers as a way to seek independence from their families. Samira's biggest antagonist remains within her own doubts surrounding her abilities and insecurities around independence which accumulates into a climax at the New Year's party when she falls into the ocean and must swim her way out. *Lady Land* unapologetically follows this template as right from the beginning it was intended to be a mainstream narrative. Thematically, the screenplay relies on more nuanced influences, specifically from other diasporic films outlined in this study including an exploration of 'Iranian-ness'.

In the past, the limiting discourse about what constituted 'a New Zealand film' made it amply clear that New Zealand stories were only deemed as 'national stories' when they dealt with either Pākeha or Māori experience. To pre-empt a pushback that a film in New Zealand with two migrant, non-Pākehā leads might engender, I originally settled for an Iranian and a Pākehā woman as buddies on the road. My supervisor Shuchi Kothari argued that among other elements,

having both women as Iranian would be a critical point of difference that would render my story original and complex. Kothari's rationale for having both leads as young Iranian women was to challenge the notion that the experience of immigrants could only be understood when mediated by Pākeha. I returned to my original impulse of writing two Iranian leads. The film industry too was slowly beginning to reflect the changing multicultural landscape. Debut films directed by first generation migrants in Aotearoa, such as *My Wedding and Other Secrets* (2011), *Apron Strings* (2008) and *Sione's Wedding* (2006), were finding audiences. The global successes of Iranian diasporic films made between 2007-2017 also support the changes in industry.

5.2 Development through Industry

When Nelmes compares screenwriting to prose and poetry, she notes how especially important craft and form is to screenwriters writing genre (109). Genre became more important to *Lady Land* (which had begun as *At the End of the World*) as the screenplay was developed through industry, particularly as the narrative followed a well-known American genre, the road film. Industry producers know well that genre sells more readily than drama as does the New Zealand Film Commission when it makes its preference about supporting genre publicly known.

The historical origins of the road film genre began with the rise and growth of the US automobile industry, such as the Ford Motor company, as well as the studio system in Hollywood, both of which were producing products for mass

consumption. As such, the road trip genre became synonymous with the US with classic films like *It Happened One Night* (1934)*, Easy Rider* (1969) and *Thelma and Louise* (1991). Only later in the century did the genre become popularised elsewhere including European cinema with well-known films like Wim Wenders' *Kings of the Road* (1976) and Agnès Varda's *Vagabond* (1985). In New Zealand, one of the most successful national films was *Goodbye Pork Pie* (1981), remade in 2017 as *Pork Pie,* a road film that follows the exploits of a middle-aged man and teen boy driving through New Zealand in a stolen car. While Chapter Four looked at the conventions of this genre in relation to my screenplay, critical reflections need to also be made on how the genre was one of the key challenges faced from the industry when developing the screenplay.

In 2016, the screenplay was under option (contractually agreed to be produced) with Miss Conception Films and received Early Development Funding from the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) which is a specific financial loan to assist the writer and producer in the development of a feature screenplay. Detailed feedback is given from two assessors on both the screenplay and the application. The feedback was blatantly against the genre chosen, as in their words, they "receive too many road films and in order for one to be successful, like *Pork Pie*, it has to stand out" (NZFC). The feedback did note that the originality lay in the characters and themes specifically around the protagonists exploration around migrant identities and the 'slackerdom' of two women characters from a point of view that "has not been seen" (NZFC). As a result, two new drafts were written where the genre changed to a straight drama with comedic elements whereby Samira and Fari remain in Auckland and the narrative arises from their everyday lives with their families and friends. This draft

did elevate the characters and their backgrounds but it also lost much of the energy and urgency that the road trip element provided.

While writing this screenplay as part of my PhD with creative practice, I had feedback from experienced creative practitioners both in and outside the University. At the University of Auckland, my supervisor Shuchi Kothari, herself an experienced screenwriter and film producer provided consistent feedback as did Emily Anderton, a script consultant who was working on behalf of Miss Conception Films. Together we deconstructed the important elements of the screenplay: What is the story? Whose story is it? What are the wants and needs of these protagonists? What do we want the audience to feel at the end? Even though *Lady Land* was a heroine's journey, not a hero's journey, I still had to find a way in which the audience could relate to the physical and emotional goal of the protagonists. As stated by Batty, as a screenwriter I had "to ensure that an audience not only identifies the dramatic question of the screenplay, but understands how and why it has been posed" (*When what you want is not what you need* 61). Identifying Samira and Fari's goals proved to be the most difficult . And throughout the development process I kept experimenting with different physical journeys to match the psychological ones. So, even though it was not what the New Zealand Film Commission had recommended, what this deconstruction proved was that the story was in fact a road film. What I needed next was to strengthen the motivations for the women to go on the road in the first place, and the psychological changes that would occur as they journeyed on. This process was invaluable to not only prove that the story belonged to the right genre, but also to strengthen characters and the manner in which their actions reveal the theme. For example, Fari's goal of moving into the commune near

Wellington changed to her deciding against it and moving to Sydney to pursue her career. Samira's original goal was to find a 'soulmate' much like what she believed Banu did, but this needed to change by the end when she found her independence instead.

Granaz Moussavi's *My Tehran for Sale* (2009) was the creative component in her practice-led research in which she wrote the screenplay and directed the film alongside a written exegesis to form her doctoral thesis. Moussavi's research explored poetic discourse in Iranian and 'Western' literature and cinema to inform her screenplay and film which she described as "poetic cinema" (2011). Moussavi worked as a poet in Iran before immigrating to Australia and *My Tehran for Sale* is based on her poem *Sale* (2009) which explores life in exile. As Moussavi notes in her exegesis, her main challenges with developing her screenplay came from within industry when an Australian production company, Cyan Films, optioned the film. Moussavi argues how she had to constantly compromise between wanting to stay true to her own artistic vision, specifically creating a more poetic arthouse cinema, and mainstream Australian narratives, "Specifically, the SAFC [South Australian Film Corporation] and producers consistently pushed for stronger and more conventional and expository approaches to narrative development. My biggest challenge through the process of script editing was to write the drafts in a way that satisfied the investors while advancing the poetic qualities of the film" (83). For Moussavi, the feedback included clarification, exposition and "more linear storytelling" (84) which for her contradicted what she originally wanted. Instead, Moussavi used her research into Iranian poetic cinema to inform her decisions and subvert areas of the film to satisfy both her own vision and that of her investors. *Lady Land* has

not suffered similar pressures because the screenplay was always written for a mainstream audience with an accessible narrative style. The films that I analyse in the academic section of this thesis have been key influences and none of them are abstract of experimental or poetic. *Lady Land's* plot is linear, with two women protagonists, driven by their wants/needs, and who find closure and clear resolution at the end. Perhaps my road has not been thorny because the unfamiliar content and culture of *Lady Land* are communicated through familiar generic conventions.

The humour, quick banter, 'slacker-slickness' are aimed at the primary demographic of a teenage audience, skewed towards girls and women between the ages of 12-25. The commercial bankability of this screenplay has seen the project move from its initial low-budget of under NZ $1 million[30] to a more substantial NZ $2.2 million (as of 2020) with the intention of securing international sales and distribution.

Another key involvement in the industry development of the screenplay included the invitation to attend a week-long writer's intensive called Story Camp. It was organised by Script-to-Screen, a charitable organization whose mantra, "to support New Zealand screen practitioners to tell exceptional stories that reflect who we are" ("About Us" para. 1), evokes the NZFC's focus on 'New Zealand stories' by focusing on the filmmakers, the "screen practitioners" and audience, the "we". The week was catered to each individual screenplay from nine writer and producer teams with experienced local advisors spending time with the writers and exploring their key issues within the screenplay. One of the advisors

[30] The NZFC considers feature film budgets below $1 million to be low-budget (NZFC).

on *Lady Land* was screenwriter and playwright Briar Grace-Smith, who had worked as a consultant on it previously. The addition of Banu, the mythological character and catalyst for Samira to begin her adventure, was a result of workshopping the screenplay with Grace-Smith in 2017. At Story Camp, along with Grace-Smith, Banu as a script device was clarified more. For example, as opposed to Samira reciting the legend of Banu as a past story, Banu became symbolic of Samira's own adventures and through her we see more of Samira's inner psychological thoughts. Banu is linked directly to Samira's voice-over, which at times embellishes or downright lies about what is happening in the narrative. Alongside identifying Banu's role, Samira's wants and needs were also solidified and simplified. Samira wants to follow Erez so that she can 'lose her virginity' and start a romantic relationship, but she needs to find independence from Fari and her family in order to finally find her place.

The coming of age genre also utilizes locating the character within a specific place within society. Displacement is a common theme in diasporic cinema. Returning to Naficy's definitions, if exile is about the direct relationship to the homeland and desire to return, and diaspora adds in the relationship with the new 'home', then the theme of 'finding a home' becomes an integral part of this screenplay.

As the project secures more partners, the screenplay will continue to evolve and eventually form the basis from which I take my vision from the page to the screen. When I wear my director's hat, the screenplay is solely a blueprint and not necessarily its own artefact as some screenplay discourse argues. However, for the purpose of my doctoral thesis, this screenplay is a completed text. Perhaps similar to the characters and themes of films that have been

analysed in this thesis, and my own New Zealand-Iranian identity, the screenplay too is a product of hyphenation. It has been simultaneously developed in the University and in the industry and hopefully bears the best of both.

Chapter Six: Conclusions

In 1998, my final year of high school, my Bursary subjects included photography. My year-long project was an attempt to unconsciously mimic what Shirin Neshat had done with *Women of Allah* – that is, to 'reconnect' with my culture. Unlike Neshat, I was completely ignorant of this culture. Advised by my American art teacher, who had recently returned from Afghanistan, I photographed a friend wearing the full burqa as a comment on the oppression of women in the Middle East. The photographs featured a mixture of Orientalist tropes, like the unnamed figure in a burqa lounging in front of a Persian carpet as if reclining in a harem, imitating 19th-century European paintings of the Orient, or the veiled figure holding domestic items such as an old-fashioned metal jug or large serving plate. Around the images I wrote Persian words such as زن (woman) or دختر (girl). I also added invented lines and shapes that were not of any language but 'looked Persian'. I wanted to appease my audience – or at least meet a New Zealand examiner's expectations. It worked. I received a high mark and an A bursary.

In hindsight, this project was a confusing mess, a mixture of Orientalist imagery and generalised stereotypes of a fictional Orient, and an attempted subversion of these by including a figure barely seen in New Zealand art at that time: the veiled woman from the Middle East. I see it as an early example of my challenges around understanding and representing Iranian identities without pandering to preconceived images, in a way, much like Neshat. Similarly, I have

found challenges with my screenplay, *Lady Land*, which is the creative component of my doctoral thesis and half its submission requirement.

Revisiting the methodology and questions I asked in the beginning of this study, I have outlined three key areas of this study which help answer the key question I posited: In what ways do films made in the Iranian diaspora thematically show marginality and belonging within exile and diaspora? In what ways do they show a sense of 'Iranian-ness'? And how do these themes then inform my own creative practice as an Iranian-born practitioner living in the diaspora?

6.1 Conclusions from Diaspora Studies

The theoretical aspect of this study has focused on postcolonial theories, particularly the work of Hamid Naficy, who explores exile and diaspora cinema, including films of the Iranian diaspora. In *An Accented Cinema,* Naficy categorizes exilic and diasporic films as 'accented' insofar as they offer an alternative to the dominant cinema, in this case Hollywood mainstream. For Naficy, exile cinema is often the result of trauma and many of the themes and aesthetics in the films in his study reflect this (such as claustrophobic spaces, or transitional locations). Exiles live in *liminality* – hovering between doubt and anxiety with a desire for home. However, Naficy emphasizes that liminality is not always fixed and exile can find ways to move forward, usually into an understanding of being part of a diaspora where the relationship between the homeland and new home changes to something more "multi-listed" (*An Accented*

Cinema 14). These modes of production helped lay the foundation of my study which used Naficy's model as a starting point. However, the films in this study differed both thematically and stylistically as well as in the way they were produced and distributed.

While certain films in Naficy's study wallow in exile and in that liminal space 'in-between', the films in my study are created in the diaspora by those living in a diaspora, rather than in exile. I have considered, then, the themes and aesthetics of Shirin Neshat's *Women without Men* (2009), Maryam Keshavarz's *Circumstance* (2011), Tina Gharavi's *I am Nasrine* (2012), Ana Lily Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) and Babak Anvari's *Under the Shadow* (2016). These filmmakers, I note, range from those born in the homeland (Gharavi, Neshat and Anvari) to those born in the diaspora (Amirpour, Keshavarz) and yet all of their perspectives are from within the diaspora. Even the films set in Iran provide a simulation rather than a direct representation of Iran through a diasporic lens. The authenticity in the stories relies not on 'Iranian-ness' as it relates to all Iranians, but 'Iranian-ness' as it is experienced by those in the diaspora.

In the beginning of this study I set out to explore what a hyphenated identity means in relation to 'Iranian-ness'. In this study, a hyphenated identity is often symbolically represented by marginal characters, specifically women protagonists. Marginality is shown through the use of cultural iconography, such as the veil, and through cultural figures such as a vampire and jinn or 'monsters'. The veil has had a long legacy in the 'Middle East' and has particularly negative associations in the 'West'. In Iran it has been a propaganda tool for the state, from outright bans under Reza Shah to forced veilings under the Islamic

Republic. In these films, the veil becomes an important visual tool to show marginalisation, yet it is also shown as both a liberating and oppressive force. Neshat's global success with her *Women of Allah* photographic series received much criticism for showing a veiled woman holding weapons, therefore perpetuating the idea of the fanatical and violent Muslim woman. The veiled woman became the "logo" (Roushanzamir 11) for Iran in 'Western' media. Neshat defends her series but also states that the work must be explored in relation to its time. This is similar to what Dale Hudson notes with regard to the visual use of the chador in *A Girl,* which, for a modern audience, is symbolic of a "patriarchal oppression or foreign menace" (37). The image of 'threatening Islam' is still prevalent in the films in this study, yet the filmmakers attempt to subvert it whenever possible. In *A Girl,* the Girl's chador serves a dual function by hiding her monstrosity while serving as a heroic cape which covers her 'Western' attire underneath. She becomes both villain and hero by killing the 'bad men' of Bad City and saving the 'good' woman Atti and 'good' man, Arash. In *Under the Shadow*, the veiled jinn symbolises the 'ideal' woman/wife/mother during the Iran/Iraq war and Islamic regime. Shideh is marginalised because she 'fails' to reach the idealised version of the 'perfect' Islamic woman and mother, and so her daughter, Dorsa, is placed in constant danger from the jinn. The ending shows Shideh saving Dorsa and escaping the jinn therefore overcoming her own insecurities around motherhood, and escaping the regime that dictates her marginalisation.

In *Circumstance* and *Lady Land*, the 'monster' figure is replaced by the 'slacker', a figure who symbolises a form of arrested development, but also one that resists the state and society. A 'slacker' can be an antithesis to the

productive worker; thus, Samira and Fari show their marginalisation within society by refusing to partake in social norms such as socialising with others or undertaking careers. In *Circumstance*, Atafeh and Shirin are hedonistic, but through 'partying', drug taking and having 'illicit' love affairs, they rebel against the authoritative nation-state in which they live. *Circumstance* depicts its characters from a purely diasporic point of view as it harshly criticizes Iran, and suggests that any real future for Iranians lies outside of it. *I am Nasrine* is similar, but does not show the 'West' through the same positive lens. Nasrine and Ali are thrown into exile in the UK where they both find happiness with other marginalised figures, their 'lovers' Leigh and Tommy, and yet the greatest tragedy also occurs in the 'West', when Ali is murdered. In *Women without Men*, private and public space is gendered as women are constantly alienated and ignored in public. All the women in the film find their solace in gardens, which are highly significant in Iran. While being invisible in public may be linked to the oppressive measures placed on women in the Islamic Republic, invisibility may also be representative of the marginalised exile in the diaspora.

The films in Naficy's study were produced independently with low budgets, and with the filmmaker taking on multiple roles. The films in my study also place the filmmaker within various roles, such as Amirpour as writer, director and music supervisor for *A Girl,* or Akhavan as writer, director and lead actor for *Appropriate Behavior*. However, the key difference is the way these newer films were released and exhibited in comparison to the ones in Naficy's study. While Naficy's films did not solely focus on Iranian filmmakers, all of the films were independently released and often received limited exhibition. In contrast, the films in this study were released globally, including *A Girl* and *Under the Shadow,*

which sold to the online streaming platform Netflix. These films are not defined as 'Iranian films' or 'Iranian cinema' as they are not made within Iranian national cinema and at times were included as part of other national cinemas; for instance, *Persepolis* is included as a French production and *Under the Shadow* is included as a British film.

The films in this study were all produced and exhibited during the decade between 2007-2017. One of the major reasons for the significance of this period is that these films are natural successors to the 'boom' in Iranian women's memoirs in the 'West' in the early 2000s. Memoirs, like other cultural outputs of the Iranian diaspora, have held powerful sway over representations of Iranians, Iran and the diaspora itself. Betty Mahmoudy's *Not without my Daughter* (1989), Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Iran* (2004), and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005) were three of the most famous and successful, alongside Marjane Satrapi's hybridized graphic novel and memoir *Persepolis* (2003), which was then adapted into an equally successful animated film of the same name, released in 2007. Amy Malek concludes that these memoirs provided an authentic insight into Iranian women, even if at times these same stories were criticized for 'pandering' to the 'West' through their use of Orientalism. Despite these critiques, the memoirs provided a global platform for these women artists to be heard. As noted, the films in this study either describe the filmmaker's own life stories (*Under the Shadow, Appropriate Behavior* and *Circumstance*), or others' stories (*I am Nasrine*). *Under the Shadow* was based on the director Babak Anvari's experience of war as a child, while *I am Nasrine* was based on the research undertaken on refugee stories told to director Tina Gharavi. By personalizing the stories, these narratives are also able to subvert certain stereotypes, which is

shown in the ways that the films explore their protagonists' marginalisation. As noted in Chapter Five, I had similar intentions in my screenplay *Lady Land*. Though not directly based on a true story, many of the challenges the characters in my screenplay face as young women transitioning into 'adulthood' are based on my own experiences, as an Iranian New Zealander, at that age. Once again, this brings up the challenge of authenticity and the burden of representation. As Christopher Gow notes, the Iranian New Wave cinema was popular in the 'West' as audiences were keen for films from Iranian made by Iranians themselves rather than outsiders such as Hollywood. I believe this is the same for these newer films, which reflect Iranian identities for both those in an Iranian diaspora and those outside.

One of the reasons that audiences in the 'West' are so keen for stories on Iranians is the continuing presence of Iran and Iranians (both at home and in the diaspora) in global news. As Malek notes, the memoir 'boom' was a result of political tensions between Iran and the 'West' and significant geopolitical events that occurred as a result. For example, the success of Mahmoudy's memoir *Not without my Daughter* (1987) and the adapted film of the same name (1991), relies on the vilification of the Iranian people which reflected the dislike and distrust of Iranians in the US after the US hostage crisis 1979-1981. Similarly, Iranian stories, particularly memoirs after 9/11 and during the War on Terror, such as *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) and *Lipstick Jihad* (2005), were highly successful in the diaspora and the 'West'. It is possible that the films made in the diaspora *by* the diaspora are natural successors to earlier Iranian memoirs, as shown by the first global film hit, Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2007) based on her own graphic novels of the same name (released 2000 and 2004).

Alongside geopolitics, there are other factors that helped these diasporic films reach global audiences. Firstly, film technology available to filmmakers today is much cheaper and easier to access than it was for the filmmakers in the 1980s and 1990s, when Naficy placed his study. There are cheaper professional resources, such as the use of digital rather than film, and there is greater accessibility to global exhibitors, such as online streaming platforms like Netflix, which help fuel a global audience keen on seeing more Iranian cultural output. Secondly, there is a growing interest in diaspora stories, such as those of the South Asian global community with films by Gurinder Chadha and Mira Nair. Similar to Chadha and Nair, the filmmakers in this study have produced further films that do not necessarily centre on Iranian stories, such as Anvari's *Wounds* (2019), Amirpour's *The Bad Batch* (2016), and Keshavarz's *Viper Club* (2018), thus escaping the 'pigeon hole' that Malek predicted for the memoir writers, who were 'confined' to the memoir genre despite having expertise in other areas (Nafisi is an academic and Moaveni works as a journalist). Finally, with the exception of Neshat, the filmmakers in my study were not forced into exile as adults but grew up in a diaspora. Their films, then, unlike those that Naficy focused on his study, do not necessarily revolve around life in exile. Instead, these more recent films made in the diaspora explore hyphenated identities through similar themes of marginality and displacement.

Nima Naghibi focuses her book, *Rethinking Global Sisterhood: Western Feminism and Iran* (2007) on postcolonial feminist studies and quotes Iranian studies theorist Minoo Moallem, who in turn has argued for new forms of scholarship to study Muslims, not just Iranians, in the West:

> New scholarly paradigms are needed to study Muslims in the West, since neither modernist notions of identity nor taken-for-granted notions of area studies are able to grasp the complexity of an unstable and contested world of meaning, identities and subjectivities. As a field of knowledge production, Middle Eastern studies is marked by the absence of a certain postmodern scholarship that could potentially equip it to meet these challenges – in particular, colonial and postcolonial studies, transnational feminist theories, transnational cultural studies …. (quoted in *Rethinking Global Sisterhood* xi)

Similarly, past postcolonial and transnational feminism focused on female representations within Iran is only now beginning to study women filmmakers and the representations of Iranian women in the diaspora.

This study has attempted to explore a specific part of the 'Middle East' story, that is, one in the Iranian diaspora as reflected in cinema. As a globalised world continues to grow with more and more insights into contemporary exilic and diasporic experiences, it remains imperative to continue researching and studying these experiences through different art-forms. If anything, it proves what Moallem noted, that in such an 'unstable' world, more than anything we need more alternative and marginal voices within the academy.

6.2 Conclusions from the Creative Component

My feature screenplay *Lady Land* views Aotearoa New Zealand through the perspective of two immigrant women protagonists. My aim has been to both explore and challenge concepts or clichés about Iranian culture and the Iranian diaspora. Some of the challenges have involved telling the story through the screenplay form, which has very rigid restrictions. A screenplay is not a film. It is a blueprint of something that has not yet been created, and therefore the story of the screenplay is not its final or complete form. My intention is to direct this feature film but, until I do, my vision remains on the two-dimensional page.

I have drawn arguments and inspiration from films of diasporic Iranian filmmakers discussed in this study, and yet I am analysing their films and not their screenplays. This study involves an affective and analytical response to tropes of 'monsters, slackers and lovers' that are encoded in performance, music, sound, mise en scene, and editing - not simply words on the page. *Lady Land* reveals related themes and uses cultural figures such as mythological figures and slackers, but its aesthetic choices are suspended until it appears on screen. Authors such as Jill Nelmes and Craig Batty have written about the process of screenwriting and explored screenplays as specific artefacts, but for my purposes I decided to focus purely on theme, particularly that of marginalised identities from an Iranian diasporic point of view.

As a screenplay is a blueprint, there are still areas that require improvement, and I believe the focus on what makes a story 'Iranian' or characters 'Iranian', a sense of 'Iranian-ness', has proven to be the most difficult

to convey. Samira and Fari face their own challenges growing up as Iranian immigrants in New Zealand; *Lady Land* looks at their marginalisation as hyphenated identities but also focuses on the break-up of a co-dependent friendship in order for each of them to gain independence. Samira's birthday party scene and her mother Zahra's desires for Samira to marry are both modelled on stereotypes of Iranians, and yet once Samira and Fari start their road trip, the only link to 'Iranian-ness' is the figure of the Persian warrior Banu. This aversion to solely focusing on 'Iranian-ness' is related to my own fears of the burden of representation, which I briefly looked at in Chapter Two. Because this 'burden' acknowledges that minority artists must only represent their marginality as their focus, I was highly aware of not solely focusing on Samira and Fari's ethnicity as the reason for their marginalisation. I felt that the characters needed further complexities, such as Fari's fears of starting a career or Samira's misplaced goals around finding a 'soul mate', so as not to reduce them to two-dimensional stereotypes.

Another challenge has been keeping one's 'eye on the market'. While I began this project as part of my PhD study, the story was optioned by Miss Conception Films and producers Ainsley Gardiner (*Boy, The Breaker Uppers, Cousins*) and Georgina Conder (*Free in Deed, Reunion, Cousins*). Both believed in the marketability of this project and encouraged me to use my comedic voice to tell a buddy-road story of two young women coming of age: coming to terms with who they are and where they are. With Miss Conception films, the project twice received New Zealand Film Commission development funding. While this is definitely a positive signal of the worth of my work, it also comes with commercial responsibility, with which PhD work does not ordinarily concern itself. Therefore,

the screenplay will continue to be developed as a commercial project even after the completion of this PhD.

Steven Price notes that the first full critical study in English of screenwriting was *The Screenplay as Literature* (1973, Douglas Garrett Winston), which argued that the screenplay is not only on a par with other literature but that it even surpasses it. Price asks that perhaps the question should not be whether or not screenplays are literature but why this argument has constantly been difficult to prove. One reason he gives is the lack of scholarship around the screenplay, as “its status as literature will always be open to question, sealing its fate as a form that seems fated forever to disappear and reappear as the return of the repressed in literary studies” (27). The notion that screenwriting is literature is only starting to be taken seriously by various journals which have returned to this early question, including the *Journal of Screenwriting* and *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing,* which was the first academic journal to publish completed screenplays. Furthermore, research into practical subjects such as screenwriting takes place in academia as well as in the industry where experienced practitioners use such studies to develop their own craft as professional screenwriters. This is the area in which I have explored and concluded my study with the development of an original feature screenplay based on practice-led research on theories around screenwriting and film themes

As noted in the Introduction, my study of hyphenated identities within an Iranian diaspora addresses a relatively new topic. Yet, as Iran remains a focal point of ‘Middle Eastern’ and ‘Western’ geopolitics, given its stand-off with Sunni Saudi Arabia, the recent fall of the nuclear deal and the escalating conflict

between the current Islamic Republic regime and the Trump administration, so cultural output that explores notions of Iranian-ness will continue to be popular. Since the ‘boom’ of memoirs in the early 2000s, as Malek noted, there have been more memoirs published, such as Farideh Goldin’s *Leaving Iran: Between Migration and Exile* (2016), and Masih Alinejad’s *The Wind in My Hair: My Fight for Freedom in Modern Iran* (2018), which focuses on Alinejad’s journey as an activist in Iran to living in exile in the US. There are also more films set for production, including one by Keshavarz, *The Persian Version,* which focuses on a Persian family living in New York. Gharavi is also developing *The Good Iranian* for Film 4/BFI, while Akhavan is producing her third feature with the BBC, which focuses on a young Iranian woman during the Revolution (Zeitchik para. 16). Though there is a lack of diasporic pan-Asian film representation in Aotearoa, there are projects currently in development. Roseanne Liang’s *Shadow in the Cloud* is due for release in 2021 while the 2020 New Zealand-On-Air Asian and Pacific People's Feature-Length development initiative is funding the telefeature *Princess of Chaos* created by Flat 3 Productions, a company created by and run by pan-Asian creatives. Alongside this will hopefully be the production and release of *Lady Land* in the near future.

6.3 Coda

In a strange yet fitting ending to this study, in 2020 I published my first book of personal essays, entitled *The Girl from Revolution Road* (2020), which takes its name from one of the pieces that looks at the veil as a paradox, especially from a diaspora point of view. Inspired by those very memoirs I had studied in this

thesis, the book relies on the memoir format but also fuses it with essays and visual descriptions of my own experiences as a child of the diaspora, the challenges of growing up Iranian in Aotearoa and learning to finally embrace the hyphenated identity which I gave myself. The book uses humour as a device to both engage and educate its mainstream readership in an accessible way. The intended audience initially was those similar to myself, Iranians and other 'third culture kids' growing up in a diaspora, so much so that the book is dedicated to those "To all those who grew up in a diaspora". Yet, similarly to what transpired with the memoirs of the early 2000s, the book also found an audience in the 'West' for its Pākehā readership who were eager to hear from a marginal voice writing about growing up in marginality in their country. Part of this was due to the ongoing conversations around racism and Islamophobia since the 2019 terrorist attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, just as part of the success of the earlier memoirs were due to the sudden spotlight on Iran and the 'Middle East' in the aftermath of 9/11. This experience proved the importance of such stories, just as I hope this study proves how scholarly debate and exploration is also needed with regard to these very stories.

In the final essay of the book, I come to a conclusion that is not dissimilar to the conclusions of this study,

> I'm starting to believe that I have more than one place and that I do not have to solely align my identity with just my Iranian or my Kiwi side. I am privileged in that I have found home in more than one place and that I consider my identity to be made up of

> being a hyphenated Iranian-New Zealander amidst many other elements. (231)

My hope is that this study provides insights into the emergent creative outputs of hyphenated subjects within the Iranian diaspora. As film production and exhibition habits change, so do films being made within the Iranian diaspora. As Iran continues to be a geopolitical focus point, so too will cultural output that explores notions of Iranian-ness. More importantly, the 1979 Revolution that marked the exodus of so many Iranians into exile and diaspora reached its 40th year in 2019. The generation who witnessed it first-hand are becoming older, so it is inevitable that the 1.5-generation and those of the second- and third-generations living in exile and diaspora will grow even larger and so, too, will the number of works being created that focus on living in the Iranian diaspora.

Appendix A

Lady Land Logline and Synopsis

Logline

When Kiwi-Iranian Samira, a 21 year old teenager, falls for an Israeli backpacker she drags her cynical best friend Fari on a foolhardy romantic quest, but this adventure may just force the two to grow up instead.

Synopsis

Samira, 21, is a dreamer and a romantic, filled with stories about the great Persian warrior Banu, her mother read to her as a child growing up in Iran.

As such she is often lost in daydreams and has grandiose ideas of life – such as becoming a writer and having great lovers – despite never writing anything nor ever having had any lovers. Samira has only one friend, the cynical FARI, 21. Together they're inseparable, constantly judging and hating on others mainly because they feel as though they can't be a part of it. Ironically, they both end up working full time at a youth hostel despite never having been, well, anywhere. Fari is keen for them both to move the ultimate Millennial commune where her cousin Azadeh lives, while Samira yearns for her soulmate.

When Sina, a distant relative decides to visit New Zealand, Samira's mum has an idea to hook these two up – much to Samira's absolute horror. Instead Samira instead believes her knight is the elusive but charming backpacker Erez, 25, even if he's Israeli. Desperate to follow him to a New Year's party she accepts Fari's idea of moving to the commune. They decide to leave the very next day without telling anyone. Similar to the seven trials Banu had to undertake in order to find her soul mate, so begins Samira's own seven trials.

On the road, the trails escalate from almost being arrested, meeting a hermit farmer, and getting into a drunken brawl with some English tour guide. They find Erez who joins them and as predicated is the catalyst to the friendship breaking down. After a romantic poolside moment at a motel, Samira and Erez's romance blossoms causing Samira and Fari's friendship to disintegrate.

Much to Fari's disappointment, the two flirt their way to Azadeh's commune where things come to a halt. Azadeh is not the cool hippie Fari always dreamed about and Fari has to reconsider her life choices. Lost for advice, she tries to find Samira who ignores her calls as she is busy having a romantic night with Erez in the abandoned vineyard. Furious, Fari confronts Erez telling him to leave.

In the morning, Samira learns some dire truths about Erez who heralds his own secrets. He has a fiancé back home and is invested in travelling solo without

cares for anyone else he finds on the way. He leaves a heartbroken Samira who blames it all on Fari.

Dejected, Samira and Fari have their final falling out. Fari realises Samira might not always need saving and Samira realises her ultimate dream of finding a soul mate may be all nonsense. Samira leaves for the party as Fari leaves the commune.

Samira makes her way to the New Year's party only to be confronted with Erez in the arms of another woman. Devastated, she has lost the lover and best friend. She steps into the ocean. Struggling to swim she emerges, rebirthed and ready to take on this next step in life.

Fari meanwhile has realised that she does not want to be a loser like Azadeh and she tries to leave but the car breaks down again. Alone on the road with no Samira she calls her mother who comforts her. Fari pushes her car to a closed gas station and waits the New Year out - alone but happy.

As the New Year hits, Samira is in the middle of a crowd, dancing and loving life. Her adventure is just beginning and she doesn't need anyone to help her.

In the morning, the two reconcile, politely, yet they both know that this friendship has changed forever. Back at the home, Samira says her goodbyes to Fari who is ready to take on her sister's wedding and a new job in Sydney. Samira stands in front of a giant map in her bedroom. She puts pins in various countries, ready to take them all on.

Appendix B

Lady Land Screenplay

LADY LAND

Written by

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Developed with the Assistance of the New Zealand Film Commission.

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draft #7 01/2020

FADE IN:

MONTAGE BEGINS:

1 INT. LIVING ROOM, TEHRAN, IRAN (LATE 90S) - DAY 1

Intricate ancient Persian paintings adorn a large book. The pages reflect famous mythological stories.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
In Ancient Persia, there once lived a King who adored his only daughter Banu Ghoshap.

As Samira narrates, the pages come alive and the images reflect the story that she tells. The paintings now show a woman warrior BANU (early 20s, Iranian).

SAMIRA (V.O.)
Banu was a hopeless romantic. She had special powers of making anyone who met her fall in love with her but unfortunately when they did, they fell to their deaths, rather cruelly. Banu’s one wish was to meet her true love, who would never die and they would live together forever.

The paintings focus on Banu’s face framed by a traditional, colourful veil. It fades into live action as Banu becomes SAMIRA (5 - Iranian).

Titles: Iran

Her mum ZAHRA (Mid 20s - Iranian) reads to her from this book. Behind them sits a TV that shows the political turmoil of Iran; protests; war.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
When Banu met her one true love, he took her from her homeland for the exciting new land of India. Like Banu, I too yearned for adventure.

TV: A WORLD MAP shows thousands of dots leaving Iran for other countries all around the world. A dot on the screen lands in New Zealand.

MONTAGE ENDS

2 EXT. EMPTY SERENE FARM PADDOCK, AUCKLAND, NEW ZEALAND - DAY 2

Samira (5) clings to her mum Zahra and her dad, JAFAR (30s). They smile while taking photos but Samira's eyes widen in terror.

A sheep bleats in the background. Samira runs off screaming.

SAMIRA (V.0.)
I never got to India.

3 EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND, AUCKLAND - DAY 3

Samira sidles up to a SCHOOLBOY (5). He eats a mince pie. Samira instead brings out dish after dish of Persian food. It's like a feast.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
But I still believed in finding
that one great love.

She offers the boy some food. He leaves disgusted.

Samira looks down embarrassed. Suddenly a pair of feet in intricately woven sandals come into view. Samira looks up and sees Banu. She sits with Samira and joins in her feast.

A TEACHER (30s) walks around the playground. She notices Samira eating by herself but conversing to thin air.

4 EXT. NATIVE BUSHLAND - DAY 4

Samira runs through hiding behind each tree dressed in her traditional veil like Banu. Banu follows Samira and overtakes her. Samira laughs as she chases Banu. Their cat and mouse game echoes through the dense bush.

5 EXT. SAMIRA'S HOUSE - DAY 5

Samira sits on the porch enthralled in an English as a Second language book.

Jafar drives up in his courier van. He walks up to Samira and drops off some books for her. She's overjoyed.

Zahra paces in the background yelling on the phone, obviously an overseas call.

ZAHRA
(yelling in Farsi,
subtitled in English)
(MORE)

ZAHRA (CONT'D)
Hello! Hello?...Hi! Yes we're all good, how are you? Hello?...I SAID WE'RE ALL GOOD...

6 INT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND, AUCKLAND 6

The same Teacher from before yells at Samira whilst holding a drawing and a maths book. It's inaudible like a scene from Charlie Brown. Samira is on the verge of tears. The Teacher hands back her homework. Samira looks at it. It's a child's drawing of a bride and groom who are also Prince and Princess - and blonde and white.

7 EXT. SAMIRA'S HOUSE - ANOTHER DAY 7

On the same child's drawing, a small darker figure like Banu lurks in the background. Zahra looks at it as Samira awaits her verdict.

ZAHRA
Nice. But who's this dark woman?

Samira takes it back and draws over Banu as Jafar's taxi car drives up.

8 EXT. SCHOOL PLAYGROUND - DAY 8

A group of young SCHOOLGIRLS (5) all blonde, giggle in delight as one of them hands out birthday invites. Samira stands next to them watching. She doesn't get one.

9 INT. SAMIRA'S LIVING ROOM - ANOTHER NIGHT 9

Samira sits reading a tacky romance novel next to Zahra. Jafar comes in wearing a simple suit. He proudly hands Zahra his new business card for an IT company.

ZAHRA
(in Farsi, subtitled in English)
Jafar, what kind of name is Jeff?

'Jeff' shrugs.

10 INT. SAMIRA'S LIVING ROOM - DAY 10

Samira (now 10) reads vigorously - another terrible romance novel like 50 Shades of Grey.

She looks outside and sees Banu who waves to her to join. Samira gets up, goes to the window and closes the curtains.

11 EXT. NATIVE BUSHLAND - DAY 11

Samira runs through the bush again loving it.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
I now had dreams like everyone else. I believed by 25 I'd be married to the love of my life and living as a famous romance novelist in London. Like Salman Rushdie, but with better hair.

There's no Banu. Instead, Samira spots a YOUNG WHITE PRINCE (looking like the Prince in her drawing) who reaches his hand out to her. She smiles.

12 INT. RECEPTION DESK - DAY - PRESENT DAY 12

Two bodies (YOUNG COUPLE) are in an intimate embrace, making out hard-core. Samira (now 20 going on 21) is not one of them. She watches from behind a shabby desk.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
Like Banu, those dreams left me too.

REVEAL: A sign above Samira at the desk reads: 'Auckland Youth Hostel'.

13 EXT. AUCKLAND QUEEN STREET - DAY 13

Workers, shoppers, students and tourists, all mill about this bustling energetic high street. Some flashy stores, some not so much.

Sandwiched between a greasy kebab shop and a tiny travel agency is the Auckland Youth Hostel.

14 INT. YOUTH HOSTEL RECEPTION - DAY 14

Samira stares at a large WORLD MAP on the office wall. There are only two pins on the whole map - one stuck in Auckland; the other in Tehran. It's a pretty sad map. FARI (21, Iranian) enters, nose deep on her phone.

FARI
(reading)
Thirty two ways to satisfy your man in the New Year. Apparently, sex is going to be...exactly the same as last year.

SAMIRA
Lame and for other people?

FARI
Yep.

SAMIRA
What’s my star sign say?

FARI
Samira, (reading) if you’re in a relationship -never... If you’re single, the Moon enters your sign this week so be prepared to fall head over heels for a gorgeous stranger. Get that bikini waxed Sagittarius! Jesus, who knew the Moon keeps tabs on your pubes.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
Fari is my best friend.

15 EXT. PRIMARY SCHOOL - DAY - FLASHBACK 15

Samira (5) is excited to get a note from a SCHOOLBOY #2 (5). She opens it.

On letter: A crudely drawn picture of a girl with facial hair with ‘Samira’ written next to it.

The Boy and his MATES laugh. Samira is distraught. Suddenly Fari (5) jumps in and violently shoves the Boy over.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
Fari has different views on love.

Fari grabs Samira’s hand and they walk off victorious.

END FLASHBACK.

16 INT. YOUTH HOSTEL RECEPTION - DAY - PRESENT DAY 16

Fari hands Samira a bottle and a badly wrapped gift as they both settle at the desk.

FARI
Happy Birthday!

Samira unwraps it revealing a bottle of prosecco and one of those ‘grow your own boyfriend’ gag gifts.

SAMIRA
Thanks.

FARI
Well you’ve made it to 21 without topping yourself, so you deserve a drink.

Samira opens the boyfriend gag. The cheap paint on its face makes him look grotesque. His body flops comically.

FARI (CONT’D)
You should call him Keanu. After your first love.

SAMIRA
Maybe he’ll become real?

FARI
And you can finally lose your virginity, you old slag.

Fari lights up a joint.

SAMIRA
You don’t ‘lose’ anything. (Then) Do you?

FARI
Is that a serious question?

SAMIRA
(quickly laughing)
No.

FARI
If you weren’t so picky you’d know.

SAMIRA
I don’t want to bang my cousin like you.

FARI
Hey! Cousin through marriage. That’s not illegal.

SAMIRA
Maybe not in Iran. God, I must be the oldest virgin in Auckland.

FARI
Na, you're ethnic. We're allowed to be sexually repressed.

Samira goes through her phone on a dating app as Fari looks on.

SAMIRA
I mean, how am I gonna find the one?

FARI
For sex?

SAMIRA
No, I mean, like you know, the one..

FARI
(groans)
You are so bourgeois. Just bang someone then ghost them like normal people.

Beat.

SAMIRA
Have you told your mum yet?

FARI
About the law job? (shakes her head) No. Why would anyone voluntarily move to Sydney? Besides I don't dare give her that satisfaction.

SAMIRA
Satisfaction of a daughter with actual plans?

FARI
Career goals is just another capitalist trap.

SAMIRA
Didn't your sister say only lesbians and ugly girls have careers?

FARI
That woman is unhinged. I mean, who has a wedding this close to New Year's?

SAMIRA
I think it's romantic.

FARI
You think everything is romantic. Do you not remember their engagement?

17 INT. FARI'S LIVING ROOM - FLASHBACK 17

An iPad screen shows us a montage of hot air balloons, Fari's sister FARANAK (30s, Iranian) and her FIANCE (40s, Chinese) running in slow motion on some hills all to some terrible love ballad. Fari and Samira watch next to a proud Faranak fiddling with her oversized engagement ring.

FARANAK
My dressmaker once met Megan Markle.

Samira is impressed. Fari is not.

END FLASHBACK.

18 INT. YOUTH HOSTEL - PRESENT DAY 18

Fari burns a piece of paper with her joint. She holds the paper up and deliberately waves the smoke towards the smoke detector.

SAMIRA
Her fiance is a babe though.

FARI
He looks like Chinese Gollum.

SAMIRA
Is your cool aunt Azadeh invited?

Fari shrugs.

FARI
She's far too cool for this bougie shit. Apparently her commune is so popular now that people have to go on a waiting list to move in.

SAMIRA
Wow, that’s so like California.

FARI
Wellington IS California. We need to go.

SAMIRA
You’ve been saying that for two years.

FARI
Yeah and who’s not so keen to go?

SAMIRA
I dunno, my mum would freak.

FARI
Wuss. I’d give anything to live off the parent grid. We’d be super cool there y’know.

Samira isn’t so sure.

The smoke detector is covered in smoke. Alarms resound. Panicked feet scramble above and around. Samira and Fari don’t flinch.

Bodies begin running into reception, most of them HALF-NAKED GUYS. It’s a hot chaotic mess. Samira and Fari watch them unashamed. Samira notices EREZ (27, Israeli - charming, worldly hipster) as if he’s in some filtered soft focus haze like in a Bollywood film. He smiles at her in slow motion. She smiles back. Fari sees this and looks at Erez. She only sees a moron slapping another Man with a wet towel.

19 EXT. AUCKLAND CITY STREETS - AFTERNOON 19

Samira stands scrolling through her phone. She’s fixated on Instagram accounts of various young people: Selfies, couple shots - all glamorous and in different cities. She looks at her own Instagram. She has one photo on it. It’s her fifth birthday in Iran with her mum and dad looking on proudly. Samira stares at it.

DRUNK WOMAN (O.S.)
Oi, you! Yeah you!

Samira looks around but notices she’s talking to her.

DRUNK WOMAN (CONT'D)
Yeah you fucking Asians and
Indians. All you Indians and Asians
coming here...

Samira looks back to her phone trying to ignore her.

DRUNK WOMAN (CONT'D)
You fucking come here and you're
all trash. Yeah, there should be a
bomb y' know? A nuclear bomb and it
should drop and get rid of all you
rubbish...

She keeps mumbling. Everyone else at the bus stop looks at Samira. She pretends to put her ear phones on. The bus arrives. Everyone else gets on but her. She waits for the next one.

20 INT. SAMIRA'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT 20

Samira reads next to her dad who is watching TV. A small plastic Christmas tree sits in the corner with some pieces of silver tinsel. Zahra walks back and forth on her phone Skyping someone. She holds the phone up in the air as if trying to get reception.

ZAHRA
(in Farsi, subtitled)
No she's good, Samira's doing
great. She works so hard, you know
saving up for a house or PhD...

BRUCE
(to Samira)
Or husband.

Samira snorts.

SAMIRA
You wish Dad.

JAFAR
I do, actually. Put on Graham
Norton. He's funny.

Finally hanging up, Zahra sits next to Samira.

NB: THE REST OF THE CONVERSATION WILL BE IN FARSI, SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

ZAHRA
I cannot stand that woman.

SAMIRA
She’s your sister.

ZAHRA
Guess what?

Samira doesn’t react.

ZAHRA (CONT’D)
I’m talking to you. Did you hear
Sina became a doctor?

SAMIRA
Who’s Sina?

ZAHRA
Your cousin. In California.

SAMIRA
Which Sina?

ZAHRA
The one with hair. On your dad’s
side.

SAMIRA
He got his PhD. He’s a fake doctor.

ZAHRA
Still a doctor. He’s coming to
visit this summer.

SAMIRA
What?

JAFAR
Sina? He’s a good boy.

SAMIRA
Why?

ZAHRA
I think you two will, how you say,
hit it off?

Samira can’t believe this.

SAMIRA
Are you serious? Mum, we have the
same last name!

ZAHRA
Eh, so what? It’s not a problem to
marry your cousin in Iran.

SAMIRA
We're not in Iran!

ZAHRA
It does not matter. He is a good boy. He will make a great husband.

SAMIRA
Maman!

ZAHRA
Do not yell at me Samira! What have I always told you?

Samira refuses to answer.

ZAHRA (CONT'D)
All you need in your life, is that one great man.

Zahra pets Jafar on the knee rather condensing. Samira is still in shock.

They watch TV. It sounds like Graham Norton. Jafar suddenly laughs at the TV.

JAFAR
He's so funny!

21 INT. SAMIRA'S BEDROOM - LATER 21

Samira walks in somewhat defeated. Her room is bursting at the seams with garish pink. Dolls, soft toys and fairy lights. It's the bedroom of a 13 year old. She brings out her diary and writes:

On diary: 21.

She draws a sad face next to it. Then she begins playing one of those pre-teen games like PRAM which predicts who you will marry. Samira's PRAM has names like famous movie stars, 'hot backpacker' and 'Sina'. She lands on Sina. Not happy.

22 INT. YOUTH HOSTEL KITCHEN - MORNING 22

Samira changes the overflowing bin bags as she eavesdrops on a conversation between two FEMALE BACKPACKERS (20s).

FEMALE BACKPACKER
And then we ended up on this pub crawl in the middle of Prague with these Moroccan polo players.
(MORE)

FEMALE BACKPACKER (CONT'D)
That’s where I met her. We got engaged in the slums of Marrakesh. Like so authentic...

23 INT. YOUTH HOSTEL RECEPTION - LATER 23

Samira eagerly takes notes as she listens to another FEMALE BACKPACKER rambling on to her.

FEMALE BACKPACKER #2
Then there was this doctor in Shanghai. He was an asshole but he was so, how you say, fuckable? Like he was just a walking fuck.

Her notebook is full of doodles and incomprehensible nonsense.

24 INT. YOUTH HOSTEL KITCHEN - LATER 24

Samira goes through various bags of food and drink throwing out old items and pocketing things she likes. She listens in on a group of BACKPACKERS.

FEMALE BACKPACKER #3
He proposed during the full moon party in Koh Phangan. The whole party applauded and even the little orphan kids I volunteered for started crying.

OTHER BACKPACKERS
Oh wow!

FEMALE BACKPACKER #3
German men are so romantic...

Samira listens wistfully, oblivious to the bullshit.

25 INT. YOUTH HOSTEL RECEPTION - LATER 25

Samira reads from one of her awful romance novels.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
Sebastian dismounted from his horse with the precision of a professional ballet dancer. His hairless chest and 8 pack abs practically glittered in the sunlight as he walked towards Esmeralda....

The door bell rings as A FIGURE walks in the hostel. Samira watches. The figure is EREZ. He walks almost in slow-motion, the light behind him like a halo, his hair blowing in the non-existent wind....

EREZ
Hey.

Samira almost loses her words. Erez is one of those lose your breath kind of guys.

SAMIRA
Um, hey.

Beat.

EREZ
I'm Erez.

SAMIRA
Hey.

EREZ
That's your name?

SAMIRA
No, um Samira.

EREZ
Cool, Spanish?

SAMIRA
I wish. Iranian.

Erez laughs.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
What?

EREZ
I'm Israeli.

SAMIRA
Funny.

EREZ
Y'know I nearly got to Iran once.
But I got arrested at the Iraqi
border.

SAMIRA
Wow.

Beat.

EREZ
So I’m looking for a ride to Wellington. For that big New Year’s party?

SAMIRA
Ah, ContiKiwi bus tours, next door.

EREZ
OK. (Then) You been?

SAMIRA
To Wellington?

She shakes her head.

SAMIRA (CONT’D)
But I’ve heard it’s just like California.

Erez laughs surprised. He spots the world map behind her.

EREZ
Whose empty world is that?

SAMIRA
(quickly)
Manager’s. She’s never been anywhere, so she opened a hostel instead. Kind of like cheating travel.

EREZ
That’s sad.

SAMIRA
No it’s not. She’s planning on going.

Erez smiles, he notices her book.

EREZ
You still read books?

SAMIRA
Yeah, I hate screens.

EREZ
Me too. It’s romantic.

SAMIRA
It is romantic.

EREZ
I have a lot of respect for anyone
who can write.

SAMIRA
I’m a writer! I mean, I’m trying to
be. I want to be, I mean.

EREZ
That is so cool. Samira. What are
you writing?

SAMIRA
(shrugs)
Things. Stuff.

Erez laughs.

EREZ
Well maybe you should come to
Wellington. It might give you some
ideas.

SAMIRA
Really?

EREZ
It is New Year’s. We’ll be the
first to see it!

SAMIRA
I think, I think I’m working
though...

EREZ
Here. (Motions the book) May I?

Samira nods. He takes it and writes his phone number on the
same page Samira was reading from.

EREZ (CONT’D)
We can make it an adventure.

He winks and leaves. Samira watches him then looks back at
her book. There’s a smiley face next to his number. She’s
smitten. Samira looks back at the map behind her.

An aggressive bell ring makes her turn back around. A
customer dressed like BILBO BAGGINS stands angrily.

SAMIRA
Hobbiton tour is next door -

BILBO
They fucking told me it was here.

SAMIRA
It’s not -

BILBO
Look, I’ve been waiting for fucking hours and no one can tell me where the fuck to go.

SAMIRA
It’s next door -

BILBO
(shouting)
Those fuckers next door said to come fucking here! Do you know how fucking hot it is in here? This is real fucking vintage fucking velvet!

Fari comes in noticing the commotion.

SAMIRA
I’m sorry but, I don’t know...

BILBO
(Imitating Samira)
Oh, Oh you’re sorry....

FARI
Hey. Frodo. Chill.

BILBO
I’m fucking Bilbo you philistine!

FARI
No you’re a sad middle aged man in velvet. So fuck off back to the shire.

BILBO
I’m -

FARI
--Piss off!

Another figure, dressed as GANDALF opens the door.

GANDALF
Phil, mate, we're at the hall
across the street!

'Phil' calms as Fari smirks at him. He quickly leaves.

FARI
What would you do without me, aye?

Samira doesn't answer but just looks back at Erez's phone number.

26 EXT. SAMIRA'S FAMILY HOUSE - EARLY EVENING 26

A suburban nightmare. The house seems bustling with every light on inside. A bunch of shiny cars, all black BMWs, are parked outside.

27 INT. HALLWAY/LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS 27

Samira, now slightly dressed up, takes a deep breath and walks into the living room. Various Iranian guests, Aunties, Uncles, Cousins mill about. They're loud - both vocally and visually. A couple of staunch Grandmothers sit in the corner, with colourful hijabs. Different faces greet her as she does the rounds.

GUEST 1
Samira jaan, darling you got fat!

GUEST 2
Dear, you've lost so much weight!

GUEST 3
Why are you so black?

Samira gives her best fake smile.

An abundance of Persian food lines the dining table as the women lay it out and the men knock back whisky.

28 EXT. FARI'S FAMILY HOME - EARLY EVENING 28

Another suburban hellhole. Identical 90s new-build houses each with their own identical driveway and manicured lawn. In contrast, outside one driveway sits Fari's 90s Toyota Corolla.

29 INT. HALLWAY/KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS 29

Fari walks through a packed hallway full of wedding things. An abundance of pink frills and lace everywhere. It's as if a Disney film threw up in her hallway.

SUSSAN (O.S.)
Fari jaan! Is that you? Come here!

Reluctantly, Fari goes into the kitchen.

KITCHEN

Sussan (Iranian, 50s) minces around like a mad cook. She's dressed up but still has curlers in her hair looking like a 1950s housewife. She shoves a bowl of cream and whisk in front of Fari.

SUSSAN (CONT'D)
You're late. They'll be here soon.

FARI
The wedding is in two days. Can't they eat then?

SUSSAN
Don't whip it too fast, you'll ruin it.

Fari mixes faster so she can ruin it. Fari's sister, Faranak walks in.

FARANAK
(to Fari)
Where the fuck were you?

SUSSAN
Faranak!

FARANAK
Sorry, where the F were you?

FARI
At work! Jeez.

FARANAK
(hands Fari a piece of typed paper)
Why haven't you ticked off all the actions on the list? Have you not done them?

Fari looks the paper - front and back.

FARI
Alright *Ivanka!* I've just been busy.

FARANAK
With what? All you do is smoke weed and hang out with your one loser friend.

FARI
She's not a loser! You're the loser, buying into some oppressive capitalist nonsense.

FARANAK
I made you maid of honour! You should be honoured!

FARI
You know the origins of bridesmaids was that they would be decoys to ward off thugs from kidnapping brides, that's why they all wear the same hideous dress.

FARANAK
Oh! You just don't care about anything but yourself.

FARI
Not true. Don't care about that either.

FARANAK
Such a loser.

SUSSAN
Oh shut up, both of you, for goodness sake.

She grabs the cream off Fari and begins whipping angrily.

SUSSAN (CONT'D)
Fari, You have an amazing IQ, almost as good as that, that robot man in a chair.

FARANAK
Russell Crowe?

FARI
Stephen Hawking. RIP.

SUSSAN
Yes him! He went to Cambridge and wrote a whole bunch of smart books and was a professor and, and he couldn't even use his hands!

FARI
Mum, I'm not a genius.

SUSSAN
Obviously not.

FARI
Well what's the point? Marry some accountant and get a mortgage?

She sees her sister preen.

FARI (CONT'D)
And wear pastels everyday like this asshole? (Points to Faranak)

FARANAK
Hey!

Sussan beats the cream hard.

SUSSAN
You want to turn out like your Aunt Azadeh? Give up everything and live in a lesbian commune?

FARANAK
She sells drugs.

FARI
Azadeh gave up law?

Faranak nods.

SUSSAN
Stupidity must run on that side of your family.

Over-whipped, the cream curdles. Sussan slams the whisk.

SUSSAN (CONT'D)
Get out! Both of you!

Fari and Faranak leave.

30 INT. FARI'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS 30

Fari walks in and slams her door. Her bedroom is like a time warp back into a 90s teenager. Posters of obscure bands on the wall alongside photos of her and Samira.

Fari shoves her phone into a charge and begins swiping through Instagram. She lands on Azadeh's profile and begins going through her photos: Various shots of a beautifully maintained commune complete with a vast vineyard, lush vegetable gardens and pool; Azadeh with groups of young good looking people all smiling, building sustainable cabins, picking fruit, making own organic wine and other questionable bullshit.

31 INT. SAMIRA'S KITCHEN/LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS 31

Zahra brings in the cake and everyone sings "Happy Birthday" in Farsi and clap. People whip out their phones and take pictures. About a million flashes go off at Samira. She forces a smile.

Zahra then leads in a lanky Middle Eastern guy (20s) dressed in a suit with a head full of gel and a discerning smirk. He walks in slow motion, imitating that of Erez earlier, but this time the mood is creepy. There is nothing charming about this Persian yuppie.

SAMIRA

Oh my God.

ZAHRA

Look, what your present is!

SAMIRA

Mum!

The Guy goes in for a kiss on each cheek.

GUY

Happy birthday!

SAMIRA

Thanks. Sina.

Others cheer and clap, as an Auntie sparks the candles forcing Samira to blow our the candles once again. This time she looks at Sina watching her and her misery is at an all high.

32 EXT. BACKYARD, SAMIRA'S HOUSE - LATER 32

Samira stands with her cousins, LILY (20s - gorgeous and knows it) and SINA who chain smoke.

LILY
(fixing Samira's hair)
If you lighten your skin a bit, you could almost be pretty.

SAMIRA
Thanks.

LILY
You look Afghani. (Beat) Did you guys talk to Sara?

SAMIRA
She just got back from Iran, aye?

LILY
Yeah, did you see her new nose job?

SINA
She should've worked on that fat ass first.

They laugh.

LILY
So Sam, you still at that hostel job?

SAMIRA
Yep.

SINA
Didn't you want to be a writer?

SAMIRA
Yeah, I am a writer.

LILY
You know if you got a real job, you could totally buy a house. Not in Auckland--

SAMIRA
--You mean a real job like you? Working for your mafia dad?

LILY
He's not mafia! He's in waste management.

SINA
Or you could find yourself a nice doctor.

He smiles.

SAMIRA
Oh yeah. Congrats. Where did you go again, UCLA?

SINA
UC Santa Cruz. Way woke. UCLA is for suckers, man.

SAMIRA
So what you gonna do now?

SINA
(ironic?)
Work for my dad, obviously. Find a wife. Persian, obviously. As long as she can cook ghormeh sabzi.

LILY
Obviously.

SAMIRA
I can’t make ghormeh sabzi. I can barely make toast.

SINA
That is unfortunate.

SAMIRA
Do you cook?

SINA
(offended)
No. Of course not. What a stupid question. Can you make good tea?

SAMIRA
Tea?

SINA
Yeah, Persian tea. Hot, dark amber coloured with a hint of cardamon?

SAMIRA
Um, I’m not sure.

LILY
You Americans want it all aye?

SINA
I'm not American. I'm Persian.

LILY
Don't listen to him, just bag yourself a South Island boy. They love anything exotic. Middle Easterns are so in right now. I'd get in fast though, you're not getting any younger.

SAMIRA
21 is not old. (Beat) Is it?

Lily shrugs.

SAHAND
Alexander the Great was 22 when he took over Persia.

He stares at her matter of fact.

ZAHRA (O.S.)
Samira! Lily!

Zahra stands at the back door.

LILY
Shit.

Lily drops her cigarette, sprays herself in perfume and mouth freshner and leaves. Samira begins to walk in but Sina grabs her arm.

SINA
So, tomorrow then?

SAMIRA
Aye?

SINA
We'll go out tomorrow. A date? Give our moms something to talk about.

He winks and lets her go. She leaves, something between confused and disgusted.

33 EXT. GENTRIFIED CITY NEIGHBOURHOOD - LATER 33

A crowded house party pumps at a small home - it’s heaving. People at the windows, outside on the driveway - it’s marvelous. We move past and find Samira and Fari inside Fari’s car. Fari finishes pouring some whiskey into two mugs.

FARI
Happy birthday. You old cunt.

They take a sip, Samira almost retching at the taste - clearly not a drinker. Fari downs it. They watch the party-goers.

SAMIRA
Is that girl wearing white pants?

FARI
Jesus, the Millennium called hon. They want their metallics back.

SAMIRA
Oh look, an ethnic!

Sure enough, a lonely HIPSTER GUY (Maori, 20s) walks up the driveway against the sea of Caucasians.

FARI
He’s got a man bun. Self-hater.

Samira watches the Hipster Guy hand his friend a beer. He then lights up a joint and a crowd mills around him eagerly.

SAMIRA
We could go down to the park?

FARI
And get molested by some engineering students? No thanks.

They watch the party.

FARI (CONT’D)
We could always go watch some more feminist porn?

Samira shakes her head.

FARI (CONT’D)
I got a good download this time.

SAMIRA
(shakes her head)
No. I just want something, something more than this.

They both watch the Hipster Guy make out with someone.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
Let's go somewhere, like for New Year's.

FARI
Is this because of that Israeli guy?

SAMIRA
No! Give me some credit.

FARI
I'm perfectly content here, drinking my Che Vas Regal.

SAMIRA
It's Chivas Regal, you philistine. Need I remind you what we did last New Year's?

34 INT. SAMIRA'S LIVING ROOM - FLASHBACK 34

Samira and Fari sit wedged in with Samira's parents watching the TV. They all hold a glass of bubbles. The TV sounds like Graham Norton. Jafar laughs.

JAFAR
He's so funny!

Samira and Fari are miserable.

END FLASHBACK.

35 INT. FARI'S CAR - PRESENT DAY 35

Samira and Fari have the same miserable look on their faces.

FARI
I hate Graham Norton.

SAMIRA
I hate Auckland.

FARI
We're Aucklanders.

SAMIRA
We're Iranians. Who live in
Auckland.

Beat.

FARI
You know I was messaging Azadeh
last night. She said there's a room
going at the commune.

SAMIRA
What if we just went?

FARI
No, no, we need to save more.

SAMIRA
For what? More moon cups and hemp
bags?

FARI
I dunno...

SAMIRA
Fari, what's been our dream since
high school?

FARI
Gang banging Obama?

SAMIRA
No! Our other dream!

FARI
Living in a 90s sitcom.

SAMIRA
Yes! Being 20 somethings and living
in a loft, dating, having fun and
wearing florals.

FARI
Friends. Except with brown people
and no Ross.

SAMIRA
Exactly!

FARI
I dunno. It sounds far fetched.
Besides, I hate the country.

SAMIRA
You hate the city! Please? Do this for me? For us?

Fari ponders this.

FARI
Why now all of a sudden? Don’t you have a date with your greasy cousin?

SAMIRA
I just want to go now. For the summer. We can have an epic summer.

FARI
It would be gangster as fuck to bail on Faranak.

SAMIRA
(surprised)
Really? I mean, yes! Forget her, you don’t want to wear pastels.

FARI
I fucking hate pastels.

Fari ponders it again.

SAMIRA
An epic road trip and an epic summer Fari.

Fari finally smiles. Samira screams in excitement surprising Fari.

SAMIRA (CONT’D)
(yelling)
Road trip!

FARI
(yelling)
Road trip!

Beat.

FARI (CONT’D)
What the hell do you do on a road trip?

SAMIRA
(calmer)
Dunno.

36 INT. SAMIRA'S LIVING ROOM - LATER 36

Samira walks in to the immaculately clean room and finds Zahra finishing off some final dusting - not that it needs it.

SAMIRA
Maman? What you doing?

NB: THE REST OF THE SCENE WILL BE IN FARSI, SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

ZAHRA
Hmmm? Just cleaning.

SAMIRA
It's past midnight!

Zahra grabs a wrapped present from the table and hands it to Samira.

ZAHRA
I forgot this. For you.

SAMIRA
Thanks mum.

Samira opens it up. It's the book *Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi, a Persian classic about ancient myths and real monarchs throughout the ages. It has an intricate Persian miniature painting on the cover, similar to the animation in the opening.

ZAHRA
It is the one I always read to you back in Iran. Do you remember?

SAMIRA
(nods)
Thank you, it's beautiful.

ZAHRA
I loved reading to you, you remember? But you are too old now.

SAMIRA
I'm not that old mum.

ZAHRA
For me. You are too old for your maman. It is time for a husband.

SAMIRA
Eh maman, come on.

Zahra ignores this and hugs Samira deeply.

ZAHRA
Happy birthday my dear.

The hug takes a moment. Zahra is the first to break it.

ZAHRA (CONT'D)
Sina, told me you are taking him out tomorrow. Make sure you only take him to expensive places. I do not want his mother to think we are cheap just because we live in New Zealand. Good night.

She gives Samira a final kiss goodnight on the cheek and leaves.

37 INT. SAMIRA'S BEDROOM - LATER 37

Samira looks at her book. We see the cover in more detail, it really is beautifully illustrated. She turns to the first page and there's a penned dedication to her in Farsi, written by her parents.

On dedication: To our dearest Samira. Happy 21st.

Samira traces her finger across each letter.

SAMIRA
Samira...ttaaval..tavalodet moborak.

She closes the book and suddenly the cover animation seems to move slightly. She zeros in on the figure of a woman - in a long lace veil, with a sword, looking very much like Banu. Suddenly she has an idea.

Samira grabs her phone. She flicks through to Instagram. Scrolls. Nothing interesting. To Snapchat. She takes a selfie, adds a graphic "Happy Birthday", flicks through some filters. Boring. Delete.

She goes to her contacts, to E and stares at Erez's name for a bit. She texts.

Insert text message: Hi Erez, hope you found a ride for New Year's. Samira. P.S the Iranian hostel girl.

She hesitates. Then sends. She's quite proud at this move.

Immediately her phone vibrates. Grabbing it we see Erez has replied.

Insert text message: Samira! My favorite hostel girl (emoji) Hows it going? What you doing? (double emoji)

Samira is smiling ear to ear. She replies.

Insert text message: Actually it was my birthday today (emoji). Yay me.

Those three torturous dots appear showing Erez is typing.

He replies: OMG!(many, many emojis). We need to celebrate! You must come! (so many damn emojis).

Samira is in heaven. She texts back rapidly, all giddy and loving it.

38 EXT. FARI'S BEDROOM - EVENING 38

Fari finishes packing a small bag. She places a sealed envelope on the desk which reads "Mum". She then takes another note from her desk.

On note: Good luck with the big day. P.S. Weddings are cattle markets for the middle classes, and you are the cow.

She smirks, then folds that note and puts it into an envelope addressed to Faranak. She rolls another joint, happy with her choice.

39 EXT. FOREIGN LANDSCAPE - DREAM 39

Banu stands in the distance in a vast colourful field as if in an oil painting. She's dressed in her wonderful ancient Persian attire. Next to her stands the Prince, handsome as ever. Once again, he reaches his hand out to her.

END DREAM.

40 INT. SAMIRA'S BEDROOM - LATER 40

Samira wakes up. She grabs her diary next to her to write but she stops. Instead she gets up, goes to her desk and grabs a fresh new notebook. Inspired, she writes.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
In Ancient Persia, there once lived
a princess called Banu Ghoshap.
Banu was a hopeless romantic.
(MORE)

SAMIRA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
She had special powers of making anyone who met her fall in love with her but when they did they fell to their deaths cruelly. Banu’s one wish was to meet her true love, who would never die and they would live together forever. But in order to meet her beloved, Banu had to undertake seven trials. For her first trial, Banu must leave her father and kingdom for a land unknown.

41 INT. SAMIRA’S HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS 41

Samira attempts to sneak out. Suddenly she spots her mum in the kitchen making tea.

She hides the bag then goes to Zahra and gives her a kiss on the cheek and a hug. Zahra is surprised by this sudden intimacy.

ZAHRA
What?

SAMIRA
Nothing, see you.

ZAHRA
Do not be late for Sina!

SAMIRA
Yeah, yeah.

She leaves as Zahra goes back to making her tea.

42 EXT. SAMIRA’S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS 42

Fari rolls up in her lovable Corolla and Samira gets in quickly.

43 INT. COROLLA - CONTINUOUS 43

Samira hesitates.

SAMIRA
Actually forget it let’s stay.

FARI
Don’t be an asshole.

SAMIRA
My mum is going to lose her shit.

FARI
Jesus Christ, the revolutionaries
would be so proud of you.

She drives before Samira can get out.

44 EXT. AUCKLAND STREETS/HIGHWAY - TRAVELLING - DAY 44

The Corolla speeds through Auckland - the cityscape, the waterfront and finally onto the concrete motorway as the city quickly fades into countryside green.

They drive along the highway. Soon they’re only surrounded by paddocks.

45 INT. SAMIRA’S KITCHEN - DAY 45

A note on the fridge reads: Mum and Dad. Gone away for New Year’s. Don’t stress. Back soon.

The fridge door opens as Zahra grabs a yoghurt.

ZAHRA
(in Farsi, subtitled)
Make sure you leave some for
Samira, she should be home by 5.

The fridge door shuts and the note stays unread.

46 EXT. STATE HIGHWAY - DAY 46

The Corolla speeds through a two lane highway. The scenery is lush green bush for miles. Not that the two inside care much.

47 INT. COROLLA - TRAVELING 47

Fari drives as Samira reads from her phone. They listen to a podcast about famous murders.

SAMIRA
(reading)
Listen to loud music.

FARI
Dumb.

SAMIRA
Get into a fight.

FARI
Better.

SAMIRA
Bang a hitchhiker

FARI
Meh.

SAMIRA
Have your car breakdown.

FARI
Stop reading *Buzzfeed*.

SAMIRA
It's the list of the things you
have to do on a road trip.

She changes the radio to something quite Top 40. It's disgusting. Fari changes it back.

RADIO PODCAST DJ 1
They found an actual head in
Dahmer's freezer...

DJ 2
Damn, how big is that freezer?

RADIO PODCAST DJ 1
As big as his dick?

They both laugh.

48 EXT./INT. PETROL STATION - LATER 48

The Corolla rolls into a semi crowded station. The usual holiday makers mill about.

SAMIRA
Do you want anything to eat?

FARI
Mince and cheese pie.

SAMIRA
Funny.

She goes through her bag looking for her wallet.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
Shit.

49 EXT. PETROL STATION - CONTINUOUS 49

The door to the boot is opened as Samira and Fari veer inside. Samira ruffles about in her bag as Fari smokes. Samira shuts the boot still not satisfied.

SAMIRA
Shit!

Fari notices a Woman (40s) in athletic wear staring at her.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
Why don't you have a bank card!

FARI
And support land mines and pedophilic CEO's? No thanks.

SAMIRA
We can't fill this on $10.

The Woman walks past and scowls at Fari.

WOMAN
You can't smoke here!

FARI
Yeah yeah, fascist.

She puts the cigarette out as they both get back in the car.

50 INT. COROLLA, PETROL STATION - CONTINUOUS 50

Samira watches people walking around. It's getting busier.

FARI
Let's gas and dash.

SAMIRA
OK.

FARI
I'm joking Samira.

SAMIRA
No one will know, look how busy they are.

FARI
Are you insane? There are cameras!

Samira looks around and sure enough spots a CCTV camera. She rummages around in her bag again and brings out a couple of scarves.

SAMIRA
Here.

She hands Fari one.

FARI
No.

Samira puts the scarf around her own face imitating that of a niqab. Only her eyes and nose are visible. She jumps out as a frightened Fari quickly shoves hers on.

From inside, Fari watches Samira put gas in the tank.

FARI (CONT'D)
Oh my God.

Samira finishes, Fari starts the engine. Samira jumps in.

SAMIRA
Go!

Fari revs the car, it stalls. Terrified, Fari starts it again and calmly they pull out.

51 EXT. PETROL STATION - CONTINUOUS 51

The Corolla calmly merges onto the highway.

52 INT. COROLLA, TRAVELING 52

High on adrenaline, Samira screams in excitement. Fari, still terrified manages to crack a smile too.

FARI
Holy shit. We're so dead.

SAMIRA
Just keep going!

FARI
Won't they have my number plate?

SAMIRA
Shit. We're so dead.

Fari puts her foot down harder and the car speeds up.

53 EXT./INT. COROLLA, TRAVELING - LATER 53

Samira, now wearing the scarf like a hijab, reads from her phone.

SAMIRA
If found, the driver may be inclined to pay a fine of up to $500 or serve time...

FARI
Oh my God!

SAMIRA
Don’t worry, it’s New Zealand.

FARI
And people don’t get arrested? I can’t believe you did that.

SAMIRA
But wasn’t it wild?

FARI
No! You’re a fucking lunatic.

SAMIRA
Wow. Relax.

FARI
(yelling)
Lawyers can’t get arrested!

Fari swerves to the side and stops the car.

Beat.

SAMIRA
Sorry.

FARI
I mean, not that I care or anything.

SAMIRA
Yeah.

Fari, now calmer, starts the car again and slides back into the highway. The tension is still there.

To break the silence, Samira goes searching in her bag for her water bottle. She finds her wallet hidden deep in the bag.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
(quietly)
Shit.

FARI
What?

SAMIRA
My wallet.

Samira holds it up.

FARI
What!

SAMIRA
I didn't know...

Fari is already distracted by her rearview mirror. A police car follows.

FARI
Shit!

SAMIRA
What?

Suddenly sirens from the police car. Samira turns and spots the car.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
Shit!

54 EXT./INT. SIDE OF HIGHWAY - CONTINUOUS 54

The Corolla comes to a gentle stop. Fari is almost shaking, her hands stay rigid on the wheel.

FARI
Shit, shit, shit, shit...

SAMIRA
Don't take your hands off the wheel, they might think you have a gun!

FARI
Shit, shit, shit....

Out of her side mirror, Fari notices the COP exit their car and slowly walk up to her window. Fari winds it (yep, winds) down slowly adding to both the suspense and absurdity of the situation.

COP
Ladies...

She bends down to look at Fari and Samira who peeps over Fari.

COP (CONT'D)
I clocked your speed going -

She stops as she notices Samira's 'hijab'.

COP (CONT'D)
(nervously)
Oh Asalum-alakun!

Stunned, Samira and Fari stay silent.

COP (CONT'D)
You seem to be going a tad bit fast, I mean, not a biggie, but kind of is, y'know? Should be less than 100km, but you were going a little bit over. Where you off to?

SAMIRA
(quickly)
Ramadan.

Fari glares at her but the Cop is taken back.

COP
Oh! OK, right.

FARI
Yeah, uh, we gotta get to the mosque to do y'know Ramadan.

COP
Of course, of course, I'm sorry to hold you up, please...

The Cop, clearly uncomfortable about this whole scene, just walks off quickly, gets in her car and drives away.

Samira is smiling but Fari is still fuming.

FARI
We should just go home.

SAMIRA
What? Why? She let us go.

FARI
This was a bad idea.

SAMIRA
So you wanna go back to Faranak's putrid pre-wedding wedding dinner?

FARI
Don't you understand? I can't get arrested!

SAMIRA
Why not? It'd be pretty gangsta if you did.

FARI
(yelling)
I just can't!

Samira watches her. Fari is slightly shaking.

SAMIRA
Are you still thinking of the job in Sydney?

FARI
No. I mean, I dunno.

SAMIRA
It's OK.

FARI
(starting car)
I mean I don't care. Careers are just another capitalist traps

FARI (CONT'D)
...of making everyone become obedient productive drones.

SAMIRA
...of making everyone become obedient productive drones.

FARI
Funny.

SAMIRA
You're just scared.

FARI
What?

SAMIRA
It's like when you got Head Girl and you couldn't stop throwing up for like three days...

FARI
I was sick!

Samira just looks at her knowingly.

FARI (CONT'D)
And I was clearly a diversity win. Fuck becoming a model minority Samira. And yeah fuck that Lavender monstrosity wedding.

Samira smiles. Fari starts the car, revs it. The car putts and stalls.

55 EXT. SIDE OF ROAD, HIGHWAY - CONTINUOUS 55

The bonnet of the car opens as Fari and Samira peer inside. A bit of steam escapes.

SAMIRA
We're gonna be late!

Fari looks at her.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
I mean, it'll take us forever to get there now.

FARI
Che's overheated, just needs a bit of time.

56 EXT. SIDE OF THE ROAD - LATER 56

Fari finishes rolling herself a smoke next to the Corolla. She notices a white cross with fake flowers on the road side - the kind they put up when someone has died on the road. No other cars pass them.

AT BUSH

Samira finishes pulling up her pants after doing a sneaky wee. She notices a veil being carried by the wind. It disappears down a drive way. Samira follows it. She goes around the bend but the veil has disappeared.

Samira’s phone vibrates. It’s Zahra.

SAMIRA
Shit. Hi mum.

57 INT. SAMIRA’S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS 57

Zahra has been vacuuming. She stops angrily. The room is immaculate.

THE REST OF THE CONVERSATION WILL BE IN FARSI, SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

ZAHRA
What is in Wellington?

INTERCUT WITH ROADSIDE

SAMIRA
You know, the place...

ZAHRA
How dare you leave me a note! Why did you leave? What about Sina? You know how I feel about New Zealand roads, are you in Fari’s car? That car is not safe....

She continues rambling as Samira barely listens. Samira spots a farm tractor trudging along towards her.

SAMIRA
(to phone, in Farsi, subtitled in English)
No mum, I’m not punishing you! Just let me...what? Mum stop crying. Mum! It’s just for New Year’s!.....Yeah OK I’ll call you once - twice a day...OK...Mum, I’m sorry, I gotta go.

The tractor stops in front of Samira.

FARMER
You right girlie?

Samira nods. The Farmer is extraordinarily good looking. He smiles at her and she practically blushes.

SAMIRA
Uh, yeah. Our car, um broke down.

58 EXT. SIDE OF ROAD, COUNTRY ROAD - LATER 58

The Farmer looks under the bonnet. He shuts it and wipes some sweat off his brow. He walks to his tractor and grabs a giant bottle of water. He walks back and opens the bonnet again. He begins pouring water into the tank in silence.

SAMIRA
Thanks for the help.

The Farmer just nods.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
I'm Samira. This is Fari.

THE FARMER
Murray.

Silence.

SAMIRA
It's a nice day huh?

MURRAY
You girlies tourists?

SAMIRA
Yep.

FARI
Nope.

SAMIRA
I mean, we're from Auckland.

Murray just nods.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
We're going to a New Year's party.

FARI
And to Wellington.

SAMIRA
Yeah, but a party too. We're big travellers.

Silence.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
So you live nearby?

MURRAY
Yep.

SAMIRA
With your family?

FARI
Samira!

SAMIRA
I mean, if you have one.

MURRAY

SAMIRA
You'll find someone else. She just wasn't your soulmate.

Murray scoffs.

MURRAY
Meaning?

This time Fari laughs.

SAMIRA
Your other half. Plato said in the beginning we were conjoined until we were parted, so we spend the rest of our lives searching for that other half and only when we find them can we be full.

Murray looks at Fari.

MURRAY
(motioning Samira)
Your mate alright?

FARI
She's just read too many romance novels.

SAMIRA
No I haven't.

FARI
That's all you read you dope.

SAMIRA
So what?

MURRAY
You following a lover on this road trip then aye?

SAMIRA
(quickly)
Uh, no.

FARI
(to Samira)
Are you?

SAMIRA
No!

MURRAY
Careful what you chase. Sometimes
it ain't what you're looking for.

The bottle is empty now. He shuts the bonnet and walks to his tractor again.

FARI
He's deep. For a hick.

SAMIRA
No he's not. And why you taking his
side?

Murray comes back. He hands Samira a small Swiss army knife.

MURRAY
For your journey.

SAMIRA
Uh, thanks, it's OK I don't need
it.

MURRAY
Yep you do.

She takes the knife. Murray goes back to his tractor and drives off.

59 EXT. FARM DRIVEWAY, SIDE OF HIGHWAY - LATER 59

Fari and Samira get back in the car.

SAMIRA
You think he was a serial killer?

FARI
Why did he give you a knife?

SAMIRA
It's just a small one.

FARI
God, you’re so naive.

SAMIRA
What?

FARI
Nothing. (Then) Sorry. Just be careful.

Samira is a little hurt but she puts the knife in her pocket.

Fari starts the car.

60 EXT. HIGHWAY - LATER 60

The Corolla zips through some beautiful scenery. Classic road trip imagery.

Inside the car is silent. Samira writes in her notebook.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
In Banu’s second trial Banu meets a hermit who has three hearts. The Hermit can see the future and he warns Banu of an incoming betrayal. He gives her a weapon to help her. Banu takes the weapon and continues on her quest.

Samira checks her phone. A text to Erez:

On phone: Hey, how’s the trip going? I’m on the road!

It stays unanswered.

Another text comes through.

On phone: Salaam it’s Sina. Where’d you run off to?

Samira scoffs.

SAMIRA
You really think I’m naive?

FARI
No, I’m just being a dick.

SAMIRA
Really?

FARI
Really.

Beat.

SAMIRA
I mean this is fun right?

FARI
Yeah.

Samira is not convinced.

SAMIRA
Tick.

FARI
What?

SAMIRA
Car break down. Road trip list.

Fari smiles.

61 INT. COROLLA - TRAVELLING 61

Fari takes a quick look at the map on her phone.

FARI
We should make it by midnight. What are you writing?

SAMIRA
Just writing.

FARI
Please don’t say spoken poetry.

SAMIRA
When was the last time you saw your aunt?

Fari shrugs.

FARI
She just decided to fuck it all and run this vineyard commune with her girlfriend. Rad!

SAMIRA
From law to wine. Seems legit.

FARI
So fucking cool. I can’t wait.

SAMIRA
Me too. I wonder what guys in
Wellington are like?

FARI
Probably the same as Aucklanders.

SAMIRA
Maybe I’m more hip down there, you
know being from the big city?

FARI
Aucklanders are as hip as herpes.

SAMIRA
Maybe I’ll find some traveler, and
we’ll wander around the city,
talking philosophies and drinking
craft beers like in those *Before
Sunset* movies.

FARI
It can’t be worse than that last
date you went on.

62 INT. THEATRE, AUCKLAND - NIGHT - FLASHBACK 62

Samira stands next to SHAH (Indian, 20s) in a small but
packed theatre. There are no seats. They watch the stage as
an Actor dressed as a Kiwi recites.

ACTOR
*Love is a rapist! It is that which
oppresses us. Just as the Kiwi
cannot fly, we cannot love.*

SHAH
(whispering)
I love the arts.

Samira nods and looks to her other side where a horrified
Fari stands.

The Kiwi falls in front of them, screams and ‘dies’. The
audience claps.

END FLASHBACK.

63 INT. FARI'S CAR - TRAVELING 63

Samira receives a text from Erez finally. She almost lets out a scream. She looks at her map.

SAMIRA
Let's stop in Hamilton.

FARI
No.

SAMIRA
Come on, you can't let one bad episode ruin an entire city for you.

FARI
I was lost for five hours Samira, as a ten year old. And that stupid white lady nearly called immigration on me.

SAMIRA
Oh yeah. She thought you were an asylum seeker.

FARI
Fucking racist.

SAMIRA
She's probably dead by now. Come on, let's stop over. Please?

Fari groans.

64 EXT/INT. MAIN ROAD, HAMILTON - TRAVELING 64

The Corolla drives past a sign that says "Welcome to Hamilton". Fari groans even more loudly.

SAMIRA
Come on, I've heard it's the Paris of the Pacific.

They drive past a group of trashy Hens on their night out.

65 EXT. LOCAL PUB - EVENING 65

An old beaten building that's turned into a makeshift pub pumps music and general crowd sounds. The Corolla pulls into the carpark next to the ContiKiwi bus much to Samira's excitement.

66 INT. LOCAL PUB - LATER 66

A typical local pub devoid of class and manners but full of life.

Samira and Fari walk through taking in the sights. Some of the BACKPACKERS from the hostel play pool in the corner. An UNFORTUNATE SOUL sings a cover song with a band. A makeshift dancefloor has a few PEOPLE on it. A bunch of locals look on bemused.

A group of giant BRITISH GUYS (20s). They all cheer at the TV. It’s the World Dart’s competition.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
For Banu’s third trial, Banu must cross a derelict bridge across a mountain but it is guarded by a huge angry lion. Banu kills the lion but not before he wounds her.

Erez is nowhere to be seen. Samira and Fari wait at the bar.

One of the Darts guys, LAD 1, notices them. He wanders over and puts his arm around both of the girls.

LAD 1
You right? So you girls Mao-ree?

This is going to get weird.

67 INT. PUB - LATER 67

Samira stands with Lad 1 underneath the TV.

LAD 1
The segments on the dart board have two minor rings that modify the score, the inner ring being worth triple the segment value and the outer being worth double, the highest score a player can contain from any single dart is 60, that being a triple 20, and the most they can score from a visit to the *oche* is 180.

SAMIRA
Wow, darts sounds fucking hard-core.

She looks around trying to spot Erez.

AT TABLE

Fari watches Samira hoping to get her attention. One of the other lads, CHARLES, leans over to her.

CHARLES
You know, I've always want to do an Asian chick.

Fari downs her drink.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
I'm Charles.

FARI
Of course you are.

CHARLES
Your English is really good.

FARI
Yours is OK.

CHARLES
You know, I love the Asian culture.

FARI
That's a rather broad statement.

Charles stares at her, completely hammered.

CHARLES
Is it?

FARI
I mean, what part of which culture? Is it the food of Tajikistan or the minarets of Indonesia?

CHARLES
I'm well jizzing over your eyes.

Charles puts his hand on hers.

CHARLES (CONT'D)
Have you ever tried anal? You don't know what you're missing.

Fari slaps his face hard. Charles is barely fazed. He laughs instead. This makes Fari more mad. She slaps him harder this time.

He stands up and towers above her. Fari doesn't care, she hits him again and kicks him in the shins.

Charles hollers and smashes a glass. His mates take notice as does Samira who rushes over. Fari is having a blast. Charles' friend tries to intervene and he shoves Samira. Fari is about to attack but suddenly Erez jumps in from out of nowhere and punches the Charles. It's chaos.

68 EXT. PUB - CONTINUOUS 68

Samira, Fari and Erez are almost thrown out by a SECURITY GUARD.

SECURITY GUARD
Fucking tourists!

FARI
We're not tourists! We're from Auckland!

The Guard ignores her.

FARI (CONT'D)
Oh my God Samira that was so wild!

SAMIRA
You hit someone!

FARI
He deserved it. A rapist in the making. #MeToo mutha fucka!

SAMIRA
Get into a bar fight!

FARI
Tick!

SAMIRA
(to Erez)
You OK?

They get to the car and catch their breath.

EREZ
Yes, are you?

Samira nods and finally takes in the fact that she found him.

EREZ (CONT'D)
I'm so happy you came!

SAMIRA
Me too.

Fari looks on confused.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
Oh this is Farkhandeh.

FARI
Or Fari for short, 'cause no one
non-Persian can pronounce it.

EREZ
(perfectly)
Farkhandeh

Fari is shocked as he shakes her hand.

The group of backpackers, including the Darts Guys, walk out and pile onto the ContiKiwi bus. Charles, the driver, shoves past Erez angrily. He opens the bus storage and waits, motioning Erez.

Erez obliges and goes to grab his backpack. Samira motions to Fari. Fari tries to ignore her.

Fari watches Erez put his backpack on and stand to the side, banished as the bus doors close on him.

SAMIRA
I mean, we do owe him right?

Fari glares at her but gives in. Samira, gleeful, hugs her then runs over to Erez. Fari watches them. Erez suddenly waves at Fari. Fari waves back less enthused.

69 EXT./INT. COROLLA - CONTINUOUS 69

Erez piles in the back as Fari revs up the car.

FARI
Right, before we leave. Car rules.
One, no one drives Che Guevara but
me. Two, you can smoke in El Che
because he would've wanted that.
And C, your government is an
asshole that needs to stop washing
its hands clean off the unlawful
blood of Palestinians.

Erez is slightly stunned but he smiles anyway.

EREZ
Yes M'am.

The car starts and they're off.

70 EXT. STATE HIGHWAY - EVENING 70

The Corolla speeds through a two lane highway. The scenery is lush green bush for miles.

EREZ
So tell me, an Iranian and an Israeli go to a bar...

SAMIRA
And they hold each other hostage?

Erez laughs.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
Sorry. Bad joke. (Beat) So how long are you here for?

EREZ
You mean existentially? How long are any of us here for? (He laughs). I don't know. Been travelling six months, coming up to seven.

SAMIRA
All by yourself?

EREZ
It's the best way.

Erez goes through his phone.

EREZ (CONT'D)
Here. This is epic. I used to listen to the album every night when I was volunteering in Myanmar.

FARI
Did the Zionist just oppress my radio?

EREZ
I'm not a Zionist.

Fari scoffs.

EREZ (CONT'D)
I mean, we're a minority but we try to protest.

FARI
So you’d be fine if it all went back to Palestine? You would just leave?

Erez stays quiet.

FARI (CONT’D)
Zionist.

EREZ
You have a very black and white view of the world.

FARI
There’s nothing grey about legalized oppression.

SAMIRA
Can we change the subject?

EREZ
Why? We’re just getting to know each other.

FARI
Samira hates conflict.

SAMIRA
I do not.

FARI
Yes you do!

SAMIRA
OK fine.

EREZ
Have you been back to Iran?

SAMIRA
Once, when I was 15. I hated wearing a hijab. That’s all I remember.

Erez laughs.

EREZ
I can imagine.

SAMIRA
Yeah but still. It’s where I’m from. Where the family’s from. Shouldn’t that mean anything?

FARI
Yes.

EREZ
No. Home is about energy. Not a solid place.

FARI
What?

EREZ
You can make home wherever you want it to be.

Fari can't believe this guy. Samira can.

EREZ (CONT'D)
Whoever you are/
Wonderer, worshipper, lover of leaving/ It doesn't matter/
Ours is not a caravan of despair.
You know that one?

FARI
Kanye?

SAMIRA
Rumi.

Erez still holds her hand.

EREZ
Come, even if you have broken your vows a thousand times...

Fari can't take it. She turns up the radio and drowns him out.

71 EXT. MODEST MOTEL CARPARK - NIGHT 71

The Corolla pulls into a half full carpark. Underneath the neon motel sign reads: 'Now with THREE TV channels!'.

72 INT. MOTEL RECEPTION - NIGHT 72

Fari and Samira stand before the owner HAMISH (40s). He takes Samira's credit card with a creepy smile.

HAMISH
Just one room?

FARI
Yep.

HAMISH
Well if you lovely ladies get
scared in the middle of the night,
I'm just next door.

SAMIRA
(disgusted)
We'll be fine. We're from
Auckland.

HAMISH
I'm just saying, if you get
lonely...

Fari grabs the key and they quickly leave.

SAMIRA
Cheers.

73 EXT. MODEST MOTEL CARPARK - CONTINUOUS 73

Fari and Samira walk up to the car where Erez is on his phone
chatting quietly.

SAMIRA
Did you hear him smack his teeth?

FARI
I actually threw up in my mouth a
little.

SAMIRA
I feel so unclean.

Fari stops Samira before they reach Erez.

FARI
Hey, be careful. This ain't a
movie.

SAMIRA
Yeah I know.

FARI
I just mean, remember we're going
to the commune.

SAMIRA
Yeah, OK.

FARI
Promise me? It’s the start of our new lives.

SAMIRA
Yeah, I know.

They reach Erez who finishes his call.

74 INT. MODEST MOTEL ROOM - LATER 74

A twin bed sits in the middle of a small room covered in a grey shag carpet. The room has hints of mustard yellow and some rather questionable wallpaper that has probably never been changed since the 1970s.

SAMIRA
Road trips are so cool.

FARI
What is that smell?

EREZ
Who wants to go for a midnight swim?

Samira smiles.

75 EXT. POOLSIDE, MODEST MOTEL - LATER 75

Fari and Samira sit on a pool chair each, fully dressed as they watch Erez jump in the pool in his shorts. It’s rather perverse.

FARI
So did you ever reply to Sina?

SAMIRA
What do you think?

FARI
He might not be so bad y’know. I mean, at least he’s Iranian.

SAMIRA
Since when does that matter?

FARI
Same culture. He’ll get all the annoying things.

SAMIRA
What about Israeli?

FARI
You wanna give your mum a heart attack?

SAMIRA
Why don’t you like him?

FARI
I like him, I just don’t trust him.

Erez grabs three beers from the pool and wades over to the edge to where the women are. He gulps down half of one as Samira watches. She does the same. Erez cheers her on.

EREZ
What a cool woman.

FARI
(to Samira)
What are you doing?

Samira shrugs. She lets out a slight burp.

EREZ
The pool is really nice.

Both Samira and Fari shakes their heads.

SAMIRA
I’m not a good swimmer.

EREZ
(laughing)
You live on an island.

SAMIRA
I know, I just don’t like it.

EREZ
Come on, I’ll save you.

FARI
She can’t swim.

EREZ
Trust me.

He smiles that ever charming smile and stretches out his arms to Samira. Samira gives in.

FARI
Samira!

Samira shuffles and tries to get in confidently but she struggles and practically falls in. Not a sexy look. Erez helps her up as Fari stands up worried.

EREZ
She’s OK!

He leads Samira away from Fari, to the middle of the pool.

EREZ (CONT’D)
See, I got you.

Samira is loving it. Fari watches them. Erez and Samira wade closer to each other, loving the flirting. Samira even finishes Erez’s drink. Fari can’t take it. She leaves her beer and walks off back to the room.

IN POOL

Samira notices Fari leaving but Erez steers her gaze back.

EREZ (CONT’D)
You’re very beautiful Samira.

SAMIRA
Uh, thanks. You too.

Erez laughs.

SAMIRA (CONT’D)
Sorry, I’m not very good at compliments.

EREZ
You do not need to be sorry.

They continue wading as they gaze at each other. Erez touches her arm as she gets goose-bumps.

EREZ (CONT’D)
In English, what do you call these?

SAMIRA
Goose-bumps.

EREZ
Funny name.

SAMIRA
Yeah guess so. How did you learn English?

EREZ
School.

SAMIRA
Me too. I had to so I could make friends. And not get yelled at. People don't like it when you can't speak in their own language. It makes them edgy. It's kinda sad.

Erez just watches her. He finally goes in for a kiss. Samira manages a giggle, almost ashamed.

EREZ
What?

Samira shakes her head and goes back for another kiss. This time it is long and finally sexy.

Beat.

EREZ (CONT'D)
Come to the New Year's party with me.

SAMIRA
I can't.

EREZ
Why?

SAMIRA
Fari doesn't want to.

EREZ
Do you want to?

He kisses her again.

EREZ (CONT'D)
I want you to.

Samira kisses back and gives in.

76 INT. MOTEL ROOM - LATER 76

Fari sits on the bed flipping channels on a remote in the dark. The only light that emanates comes from the TV as it changes various shows. It suddenly stops on Graham Norton.

Some raucous laughter from the screen. Fari stares angrily at the screen.

She picks up her phone and goes through Azadeh’s Instagram again: the flowing vineyard; the large country house glimmering in the sun. She smiles.

77 EXT. POOLSIDE, MODEST MOTEL - MORNING 77

Samira wakes up in Erez’s arms on the pool chair. A towel is wrapped around them like a blanket. She spots Fari by the car smoking watching them. Samira waves, a little embarrassed. She gets up without disturbing Erez.

AT CAR

SAMIRA
You’re up early.

FARI
You sleep out here all night?

SAMIRA
Yeah. Romantic aye?

Fari shrugs.

FARI
So, are congratulations in order?

Samira shakes her head.

SAMIRA
No! But I really think I like him Fari.

FARI
He’s leaving.

SAMIRA
Yeah but...

FARI
But?

SAMIRA
Nothing.

Fari sweetens a little.

FARI
Hey, we’ll all have a blast at Azadeh’s aye? Maybe I’ll even get to like him a bit.

SAMIRA
Really?

FARI
Stranger things have happened.

She watches Erez as he wakes up. He waves at the both.

78 EXT. COROLLA, HIGHWAY - AFTERNOON 78

The two lane highway has now become a treacherous two lane rural climb up a mountain. One one side the cliff face; and on the other is a steep drop into some very dense native bush.

The Corolla trudges along very slowly, leading a long line of frustrated cars behind it.

79 EXT. FARI'S CAR - TRAVELLING - AFTERNOON 79

The country roads are empty as the Corolla makes it way through. They slow down at a sign reading: Electric Lady Land.

SAMIRA
Are you sure?

FARI
(reading off her phone)
Yep. Fucking hippies.

The car drives on the gravel up the long drive.

80 EXT. AZADEH'S COMMUNE, ELECTRIC LADY LAND VINEYARD - CONTINUOUS 80

The Corolla stops and the group exits taking in the rather sad sight.

A large cabin peeks out of overgrown shrubbery. The cabin has seen better days but is obviously lived in. AZADEH (Iranian, 40s) comes out and waves. Her hair is dreaded and she looks like a mix of a Grey Lynn community leader and a hermit living in a mountain.

AZADEH
Fari! Haere mai.

Fari gives her a giant hug.

AZADEH (CONT'D)
Samira! You two! Still attached at the hip I see?

She hugs her too.

AZADEH (CONT'D)
(To Erez)
Who's this guy?

FARI
He's Israeli. Erez. My cool aunt.

EREZ
Hi!

A younger woman, EDITH (30) in various florals comes up.

EDITH
Kia ora lovelies.

She kisses everyone including Erez who she kisses twice rather slowly.

AZADEH
Edith!

Edith lets Erez go.

AZADEH (CONT'D)
Edith, my partner. Come in.

They all walk in.

81 INT. ELECTRIC LADY LAND COMMUNE - CONTINUOUS 81

It's shabby, tiny and messy as hell. There definitely is a funky smell and it's visually worse than an Otago student flat. Azadeh takes them on a short tour as the group look around, rather surprised.

AZADEH
This is the main living area slash kitchen. That's Sage, Jax and Chamomile there. They're great cooks.

They walk into a hallway, again stuffed to the brim with knick knacks and trash.

Azadeh opens a bedroom door. A bunk bed and a double bed is all that fits. A naked COUPLE obviously in the middle of something, surface from underneath the sheets.

AZADEH (CONT'D)
That's Leaf and Rose.

COUPLE
Hey!

SAMIRA AND FARI
Um hi...

They quickly avert their eyes and follow Azadeh with Erez.

82 EXT. ELECTRIC LADY LAND COMMUNE - CONTINUOUS 82

Azadeh stands with Fari, Samira and Erez as they all stare at a goat.

AZADEH
We call her Gilda. We don't know where she came from, but she's a good gardner.

EREZ
Cool.

83 INT. LOUNGE, COMMUNE - CONTINUOUS 83

The group walk back in. A couple of the other commune dwellers play on a games console. Azadeh sits next to Edith who rolls a joint.

Fari, Samira and Erez stand awkwardly wondering what to do. Fari finally sits next to Azadeh.

FARI
Can I have some?

EDITH
Sure lovely. But later you gotta work for it. Planting it, taking care of it, giving it some love.

EREZ
Can I use your bathroom?

AZADEH
Yeah outside. The one inside needs some plumbing but we, we haven't had a chance to do that yet.

SAMIRA
Oh are you new here?

AZADEH
No.

Erez leaves as Samira manages to wedge herself between the game players who pay no attention to her.

FARI
So you make your own wine? So cool.

AZADEH
(snorts)
Nup. Way too much work aye. We sell this instead.

She points to her joint and hands it to Fari to smoke.

SAMIRA
Sell weed?

AZADEH
You know us Persians are always good business folk.

SAMIRA
Yeah, real estate or kebab shops, not drugs.

EDITH
Wow she's a bit of a square.

Samira looks snubbed.

FARI
She's fine. So the vineyard's just a front?

AZADEH
Pretty much.

FARI
That's gangsta.

AZADEH
So who's the guy?

FARI
He's Israeli.

AZADEH
Are you two an item?

SAMIRA
No! We just met. I mean, maybe we will be.

Fari takes a huge puff and nearly coughs it all out.

FARI
I think I'm gonna love it here.

Edith offers Samira some but she refuses. Clearly, she is not so sure about this place.

84 INT. LOUNGE, AZADEH'S HOUSE - LATER 84

The group chills in the lounge. Erez plays with a guitar next to another commune dweller, ROSE, who shows him some chords on her guitar. Edith shows Fari some jars on the side table. They're all filled with different strands of weed and named after a famous historical feminist.

EDITH
The Sylvia Plath one is good if you're just wanting to chill, but be wary if you're in a depressive mood. The Germaine Greer one is nasty, oh but this one (grabs one), is epic.

Fari smells it. It's pretty strong.

EDITH (CONT'D)
The Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Samira stands talking to Leaf who is completely nude.

LEAF
Yeah, everything. Hiking, camping, yoga and we even have our own naturist knitting group which has been really popular here.

Samira is trying with all her might to not look at his nakedness.

Erez and Rose start playing a melody that becomes a well-known song. The rest of the group watch, with Erez and Samira locking eyes. Samira walks over to him and sits by him like a smitten teenager.

Erez and Rose start singing and soon enough the rest of the group sings along except Fari who is obviously hating this entire display. Rose hands Erez a joint as he takes a big hit. He hands it to Samira who takes a puff. She coughs but laughs along with Erez.

Samira notices Fari watching her in shock. Samira shrugs it off.

85 EXT. COMMUNE - CONTINUOUS 85

The outside is pitch dark except the light emanating from the windows. Inside, we can make out the group trying to sing and laughing.

86 INT. LOUNGE, COMMUNE - LATER 86

Fari, Azadeh and Edith lay about the living room. The atmosphere has changed to something quite tranquil.

Samira stands transfixed at a framed picture on the wall. It’s an intricate Persian miniature painting. A Persian woman wearing traditional floral attire, rides a gallant horse. Suddenly it looks as if the horse moves and the Woman smiles.

AZADEH
Is there a reason your Israeli mate makes so many calls?

FARI
Maybe he’s Mossad.

AZADEH
Hide the weed!

They laugh.

SAMIRA
He’s not.

FARI
You don’t know.

SAMIRA
Neither do you.(Indicating the painting)Where’d you get that?

EDITH
Do you not love it?

AZADEH
This one (patting Edith) got it for, when I became a barrister.

FARI
Wait I thought you dropped out?

AZADEH
Mate, I was a barrister for like 15 years.

EDITH
For the Man.

AZADEH
Yep, the big oil Man.

Samira spots Erez outside the sliding door. He waves to her. She goes out as Fari watches.

87 EXT. COMMUNE, BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS 87

The backyard is small with an odd shaped empty swimming pool. Beyond the manicured garden lies fields and the vineyard. Erez finishes his phone call as Samira walks up.

EREZ
Hey. (Then) Wanna walk through an abandoned vineyard ruins?

SAMIRA
Um, sure.

They set off through one of the rows.

88 EXT. VINEYARD - CONTINUOUS 88

Many of the vines are old or overrun with weeds. Like an abandoned Tuscany. Samira and Erez walk close, every now and then sneaking looks at each other.

89 INT. LOUNGE, COMMUNE - CONTINUOUS 89

Fari sits next to Leaf who draws the lines on his hand with vivid pen, obviously very stoned. Some bed springs squeak in the distance.

Azadeh wanders in with a giant book, torn pages, added notes, like a really utilised old Bible. She plops it in front of Fari.

AZADEH
Here.

FARI
What is it?

AZADEH
The commune book. Like, what you need to know, duties, rules, regulations.

FARI
A rule book for a commune?

AZADEH
Yeah mate.

Fari flips to the first page. It’s got a lot of fine print.

FARI
(reading)
No cooking between 1.30am-4.30am. That’s um so precise.

AZADEH
Yeah. Can have anything from like 10 to 20 people living here at one time.

Fari looks around. That clearly sounds like a nightmare.

AZADEH (CONT’D)
Also, usually when you’re a newbie you gotta work your way up to like better chores. You know, earn your keep.

FARI
Like a meritocracy?

Azadeh doesn’t respond. She finds a used cigarette, opens it and takes out the tiny bits of residue and makes up another joint as Fari watches disgusted.

FARI (CONT’D)
Why did you quit?

Azadeh shrugs.

AZADEH
Why not?

LEAF
Careers are a capitalist conspiracy of making everyone become obedient productive drones.

Fari is slightly shocked at how almost word perfect it is.

FARI
Yeah, that’s what I say. But now you get to hang out here forever, and be free right?

AZADEH
I chose to be free.

She lays back with the joint as Leaf begins drawing with the vivid on her arm. The bed springs get louder as does some moaning. Azadeh and Leaf are completely oblivious to it.

LEAF
Azi, you got fired love.

AZADEH
Oh yeah.

She laughs as does Leaf.

FARI
Really?

AZADEH
I never liked my boss. He like, wanted me to work like everyday and it was hard you know. I tried to MeToo his ass but it backfired.

FARI
They didn’t believe you?

AZADEH
It wasn’t true.

Fari can’t believe this is her hero. Azadeh laughs again as does Leaf.

LEAF
You’re such an idiot.

The two of them laugh even harder. Azadeh now grabs the vivid pen and begins drawing on Leaf’s face. Fari notices a cockroach struggle across some dusty rubbish in the corner. The bed springs get louder and faster as a woman screams quite loudly. This is a nightmare.

Fari texts Samira: Hey, you OK? Where are you?

She looks back at Azadeh who is drawing around the joint hanging out of Leaf's mouth.

90 EXT. VINEYARD - CONTINUOUS 90

Samira lies next to Erez as they both stare up to the sky.

EREZ
So what angry feminist were we smoking?

SAMIRA
Anais Nin. She's not angry. Although there's a reason they're all angry. Anyway, she's a writer.

EREZ
That's cool.

SAMIRA
She wrote a lot of erotic fiction.

She grins as Erez leans closer and kisses her.

91 EXT. COMMUNE, BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS 91

Fari looks for Samira but to no avail. It's deathly still apart from some cicadas chirping. She notices the giant empty swimming pool like some gaping hole in the ground. Fari calls Samira but it goes to voicemail.

92 EXT. VINEYARD - CONTINUOUS 92

Erez is on top of Samira now as their making out gets more intense. He starts unclothing her. Samira just holds on.

SAMIRA
Um...

Erez stops momentarily.

EREZ
You alright?

SAMIRA
Yeah, just been...a while.

Erez smiles and gets back to it. They have sex in this abandoned vineyard. To Samira, it’s one of the most amazing moments ever. If a little uncomfortable.

93 EXT. VINEYARD - LATER 93

Fari walks through the vineyard, it’ eerily empty. She keeps calling Samira but it keeps going to voicemail.

Fari spots two bodies up ahead. It’s Samira and Erez lying next to each other in an embrace. Fari calls Samira one more time as she walks closer. She stops as she sees Samira’s phone flashing but Samira purposefully ignores it. Fari leaves.

94 EXT. VINEYARD - LATER 94

Samira and Erez walk back through the vineyard, their hands brushing up against each other but never falling into place. Samira is still smiling as they trudge through rows and rows of abandoned vine paths. Samira is on a total emotional high.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
For her fourth trial Banu must find a special flower to heal her wound from the lion. This flower only grows on a mound that men have fought wars over for centuries. Banu manages to find it and the flower blossoms but it does not heal her completely.

Samira stops and looks down one of the empty paths. She spots a flowing skirt disappear around the corner of a row. She follows it.

OPEN FIELD

Samira spots a dark silhouette. It’s the Prince from her dream. He reaches out as she walks over to him excited.

Suddenly the silhouette becomes Banu on her horse. She pulls the reins so the horse goes up on its hind legs ready to crash down on a terrified Samira.

Banu looks at Samira for a second, and instead pulls the reins the other way and gallops off to the distance.

95 EXT. COMMUNE, BACKYARD 95

Fari lies in an empty swimming pool looking up.

96 INT. LOUNGE, COMMUNE - LATER 96

Erez plays on the game station alone. The lounge is empty except the usual rubbish. Fari comes in from the backyard.

EREZ
Hey.

FARI
Hey. (Then) Where's Samira?

EREZ
Asleep.

Fari watches him.

EREZ (CONT'D)
I do not sleep much these days.

FARI
Too much partying?

EREZ
No. Just things.

FARI
Bad things?

Erez stops playing and looks at her.

EREZ
(smiling)
Define bad.

He turns the game off and gets up.

EREZ (CONT'D)
Well, it was nice meeting you Farkhandeh. Maybe we will run into each other again.

He puts his hand out. Fari takes it.

EREZ (CONT'D)
I will make sure Samira gets home safe.

FARI
What you talking about?

EREZ
After the New Year's party.

FARI
She’s going?

EREZ
Of course.

FARI
And will you be *bringing her home* safely?

Erez shifts uncomfortably.

FARI (CONT’D)
Then maybe you should leave in the morning Erez.

EREZ
Is it up to you?

FARI
Yeah. It is.

EREZ
Are you sure Samira wants the same thing as you?

FARI
Of course she does.

She leaves as Erez ponders this.

97 EXT. COMMUNE - DAY 97

The vineyard looks even more rundown in the bright morning sun. Cecil the goat, eats away at a plant.

98 INT. BEDROOM, COMMUNE - EARLY MORNING 98

Samira suddenly opens her eyes. She notices she’s in bed alone. She looks for Erez. Her phone vibrates. It’s her mother. She ignores it.

Erez walks in, fully dressed now with his small backpack.

SAMIRA
Morning.

EREZ
Hi.

SAMIRA
We’re leaving now?

Erez stops and just looks at her.

EREZ
I have got a ride with Rose. She is going to the party too

SAMIRA
Great, I can get ready now.

EREZ
No, you should stay.

SAMIRA
What's wrong?

EREZ
Nothing. (Then) I just have to sort out some things.

SAMIRA
Oh. The calls?

EREZ
Yeah

SAMIRA
Your mum? I know the feeling.

EREZ
My girlfriend.

SAMIRA
Oh.

EREZ
Well fiance to be honest.

SAMIRA
What?

EREZ
It's complicated.
(beat)
She's my friend's sister. He died.

SAMIRA
Oh. I'm sorry.

EREZ
At a check point of all places. There was a fight, people panicked, he got in the middle of it and got stabbed.

SAMIRA
Jesus.

EREZ
Yeah.

SAMIRA
So you left.

EREZ
So I left.
(beat)
I do love her but I just... I don’t want that responsibility. I’m sorry.

SAMIRA
That’s OK. I mean, we can still hang out, I guess.

Erez shakes his head.

EREZ
You know me, I travel alone. Besides, you are staying here no?

SAMIRA
No.

EREZ
That’s not what Fari said. I think she needs you. You should stay.

He gives her a big hug and a quick kiss.

EREZ (CONT’D)
You are an awesome woman Samira.

He leaves.

99 INT. CORRIDOR, COMMUNE - LATER 99

Fari walks through past a naked Leaf.

LEAF
Morning.

Fari nods her head but quickly makes her way past. She hears some commotion in the room nearby. She knocks on the door.

FARI
Samira...

No response. Fari slowly opens the door.

100 INT. BEDROOM, COMMUNE - CONTINUOUS 100

Fari enters and notices Samira packing her bag angrily.

FARI
Hey.

Samira ignores her.

FARI (CONT'D)
Apparently we gotta sign a couple of things. Who knew communes were so bureaucratic.

Samira stops.

SAMIRA
Are you happy?

FARI
Huh?

SAMIRA
Are you happy?

FARI
I'm never happy, you know that.

SAMIRA
He left!

FARI
Oh.

SAMIRA
Yeah, because of you Fari!

Samira attempts to zip up her bag but a shirt is stuck in the zip.

FARI
He's a traveller, that's what they do. Besides, we came for *this*!

SAMIRA
No, Fari, no! That was your dream. I knew it would be a disaster.

FARI
Like following a bloody Israeli across country?

SAMIRA
Is this what it’s about? You jealous? Of me and Erez.

Samira tries to shove the zipper but it won’t budge.

FARI
Wow. Are we really doing this?

SAMIRA
What?

FARI
If I’m so jealous, where’s your soulmate now, aye? This obsession with Erez and romance and all those fallacies are demented Samira, they’re not real!

SAMIRA
You don’t know everything. You’re so bitter, you don’t even know what you want.

FARI
And you do?

SAMIRA
Yeah. I don’t need you to save me.

She pulls the zipper until it rips apart, along with a tear in the shirt.

FARI
OK I won’t. See how far you get. You’re the reason we’ve done nothing all these years.

SAMIRA
No. You are! You’re just gonna stay here and do nothing. It doesn’t matter Fari, you’ll always be a loser!

Fari, hurt, leaves. Samira holds up her torn shirt and tosses it.

101 INT. LOUNGE, COMMUNE - LATER 101

Samira walks in with her bag and spots Azadeh on the couch, once again sparking up.

AZADEH
Morena.

SAMIRA
Is there anyone else driving to that New Year's party?

AZADEH
What party? Where's Fari?

Samira notices the painting again. This time the Banu look-a-like definitely moves. Samira walks closer to it to spot it again.

AZADEH (CONT'D)
You know this story?

Samira nods.

AZADEH (CONT'D)
She was this like warrior woman who refused to marry any dude that came for her.

SAMIRA
Then she found her soulmate.

Azadeh scoffs.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
That's the story! She had the ability to make any man fall for her.

AZADEH
Where did you read that?

SAMIRA
My mum. Back in Iran. I memorised all the stories.

AZADEH
Nah mate. Edith told me, her legend is like all about independence. She refused to marry some prince dude so her dad like banished her but she didn't care and all and she just went away.

SAMIRA
Went away?

AZADEH
Yeah like, but in a cool way. Like
by herself.

Samira is confused even more as she stares back at the paining. Banu seems to smirk.

102 EXT. ROAD OUTSIDE COMMUNE - DAY 102

Samira storms down the road with her pack. A car zooms past. She looks around a bit lost. She checks her phone. A few missed calls from Zahra.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
Trial number six. All is lost.

Samira walks down the road a bit until a car pulls up. The DRIVER (50s) leans out of the window.

DRIVER
I'm going as far as Hawke's Bay
love.

Samira hesitates.

DRIVER (CONT'D)
You coming or going?

Samira takes a breath and gets in.

103 INT. LOUNGE, COMMUNE - DAY 103

Fari sits next to Azadeh and Leaf who watch TV. It's some terrible reality show about weddings. Edith storms around in the kitchen attempting to make breakfast but merely banging doors and pots. Fari watches a bride twirl around in her puffy dress.

LEAF
Weddings are so bourgeois.

AZADEH
That's a funny word. Boo-jwa. Like
you're booing someone.

LEAF
It's French you imbecile.

AZADEH
(laughing)
Imbecile.

Leaf laughs along.

EDITH
(yelling)
Azi! What happened to our one pan?

AZADEH
It had to soak.

Edith holds up a pan with a hole in it. Clearly it soaked for too long. Edith yells and throws it on a pile of rubbish. She storms out.

LEAF
Eating is bourgeois.

Fari looks back at the commune ‘Bible’.

On book: No WiFi or internet. No social media. No email. No computers. Except old school Nintendo. We are not a part of this bourgeois society.

Fari ponders this. She slams the book shut and leaves.

104 EXT. COMMUNE - AFTERNOON 104

A car door opens as a bag is thrown in. Fari slams the door and gets in the driver’s seat. She revs the car and leaves a pile of dust as she gets the hell out of there.

105 EXT. PARTY GROUNDS ENTRANCE - AFTERNOON 105

Boundless amounts of people, on foot, in cars and bikes converge around. Samira walks through the crowds taking in the sights.

106 EXT. PARTY GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS 106

The crowds are mainly teenagers and 20-somethings. All milling around on the grounds and the beach. Some have tents up on the grassy knolls. Many carry six-pack cans. It’s like one big casual beach party - not exactly Glastonbury. Samira walks through.

108 EXT./INT. COROLLA, MAIN ROAD - AFTERNOON 108

The Corolla staggers up the road. Fari swerves it to the shoulder as it comes to a full stop and dies.

Fari sighs, almost in tears.

109 EXT. PARTY GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS 109

Samira walks past crowds of revellers, each overjoyed and drunk. A GUY (20s) shoves a Happy New Year hat on her. She knocks it off. A GIRL (20s) falls and spills an entire beer on Samira's legs. The Girl is oblivious. She just laughs and stumbles off.

People seem to get louder and more obnoxious. She's in a fucking nightmare. Samira watches two YOUNG WOMEN (25) laughing uncontrollably at something together.

Samira spots a couple kissing at a tree. The WOMAN moves away to reveal Erez. Samira can't believe it.

Erez notices her, a bit sheepish. Samira storms up.

EREZ
Uh, hi, Samira!

Samira, still high on adrenaline, shoves Erez hard.

SAMIRA
Complicated? No! You're just an asshole!

EREZ
Ow, hey!

She shoves him harder until she trips and they both fall over into a mud puddle. The Woman who was with him holds her hands up in defeat and moves away. A small crowd has gathered.

Samira wipes her muddy face as they both catch their breath. Erez tries to help her up but she pushes him away. She gets up herself and walks away.

EXT. PARTY GROUNDS - LATER

Samira, covered in mud, wanders around. Suddenly her phone rings. It's Zahra.

THE REST OF THE CONVERSATION WILL BE IN FARSI, SUBTITLED IN ENGLISH.

SAMIRA
(into phone)
Hi Mum.

EXT. SAMIRA'S BACKYARD - CONTINUOUS

Zahra switches off the lawn mower. The lawns are immaculate.

ZAHRA
(into phone)
Samira! Why didn't you call me back?

INTERCUT with party grounds.

SAMIRA
Sorry. (Then) You don't sound mad.

Beat.

ZAHRA
Samira, your grandmother passed away last night.

SAMIRA
Oh. Which one?

ZAHRA
Nahid.

SAMIRA
(still unsure)
Dad's mum?

ZAHRA
Mine! My mother, Samira!

SAMIRA
Oh. I'm sorry mum.

ZAHRA
She had a heart attack. It was her damn smoking I know it. God rest her soul.

A MAN (50s) stop stands next to Samira smoking.

SAMIRA
(unmoved)
Yeah. I'm sorry. Are you OK?

ZAHRA
Yes. I think. How are you? Are you having fun?

SAMIRA
Yes. Sorry about Sina.

ZAHRA
It’s alright. He criticized my sabzi polo, anyway. Remember don’t drive at night. Don’t eat meat from small shops--

SAMIRA
--Yeah, Mum, I know.

ZAHRA
OK. Miss you, bye.

SAMIRA
Bye.

Samira hangs up a little stunned. The Smoking Man shakes his head still smoking.

SMOKING MAN
Go home and speak English...

SAMIRA
What?

SMOKING MAN
I said, go home if you can’t speak English.

SAMIRA
Why would I speak English at home?

SMOKING MAN
What?

SAMIRA
Why don’t you go home and learn some manners!

SMOKING MAN
This is my home.

SAMIRA
It’s my home too!

SMOKING MAN
Fuck off.

SAMIRA
You fuck off!

The Man flicks his cigarette near Samira’s shoes. He starts to walk off but Samira shoves him hard.

The Man is about to respond but Samira shoves him again. He’s in shock. Samira shoves him again, this time harder and he falls to the ground.

SMOKING MAN
Ah, my knee!

He holds his knee as Samira looks at him ready to kick. Instead she spits on him. And then walks off leaving the stunned Man on the ground.

110 EXT. MAIN ROAD - LATER 110

Fari tries to use her phone but she can’t get a signal. She paces a bit. She notices some cars passing. Fari takes a breath and stops a passing car.

DRIVER #2
You need a ride?

FARI
Na, but you know if there’s a petrol station near here?

DRIVER #2
Yeah that way, like 15 minutes?

She looks to the distance then back to her car. She puts it into neutral and tries to push it. It doesn’t budge. She really tries and it finally moves a little bit.

111 EXT. BEACH, PARTY GROUNDS - LATER 111

Samira walks down the beach that is filled with party-goers. Some swim in their clothes. Others have started a bonfire on the sand.

She stares at the water then slowly makes her way in.

Samira goes further and further out until her feet can’t touch the ground. She dives down.

UNDERWATER

Samira submerges and suddenly she sees Banu staring at her. Banu floats in the water, her long hair rippling through the water. Samira watches her almost mesmerized. Banu holds her hand as they sink together.

Samira starts to panic as she continues to submerge. Her shirt is intertwined with Banu’s. Samira struggles but the more she does, the more entangled she becomes. Samira rummages in her pocket and finds the Swiss army knife from Murray. She quickly cuts through the fabric. Suddenly Banu disappears. Samira kicks with all her might to the surface.

Samira re-emerges. She takes a gulp of air and like a toddler splashes her arms and kicks her legs madly until she begins to move towards the shore. She is swimming with the aid of a STRANGER.

AT THE SHORE

The Stranger helps Samira up.

STRANGER
You OK?

Samira laughs loudly much to the shock of the Stranger.

112 EXT. MAIN ROAD - LATER 112

Fari pushes her faithful Corolla down the road with all her strength. Some cars beep at her. She waves them along.

113 EXT. PARTY GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS 113

Music pumps through the atmosphere. Bodies sway in motion around the lake. Everyone is dancing. Samira is in the middle of it all, finally enjoying herself.

114 EXT. EMPTY PETROL STATION - CONTINUOUS 114

Fari pushes the Corolla into an empty gas station. The doors are shut.

On sign: New Year’s opening hours: 6am

She looks around at this desolate place. She has to hold her tears back. Desperate she calls her mum.

115 INT. BATHROOM, FARI’S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS 115

Sussan places a long strip of hair wax on her arm and smooths it down. She has bleach on her upper lip as her phone rings. She pulls the strip off in pain and quickly answers.

SUSSAN
Hello?

INTERCUT WITH EMPTY PETROL STATION.

FARI
Mum? Hi it’s me.

SUSSAN
Fari jaan, how are you? Are you alright?

FARI
Yeah. I think. Mum, I’m sorry.

SUSSAN
For what?

FARI
For leaving like that. I just, I just had to.

SUSSAN
Did you find what you were looking for?

FARI
What do you mean?

SUSSAN
Fari, I’m not mad. I’m actually glad you girls did something for once.

Sussan begins applying another strip of wax to her other arm.

FARI
Really?

SUSSAN
Yes.

FARI
I didn’t mean to make you worry. I’ll be back tomorrow. In time for the stupid wedding.

SUSSAN
I never worry about you, you're the smartest person I've ever met, and I still cant believe you're related to Faranak.

Fari can't help but laugh, tears included and all.

FARI
I kinda feel bad I ditched her.

SUSSAN
Don't be. Your crazy sister is making me wax my arm hair because she thinks it'll stick out in the wedding photos.

Sussan pulls the wax and squeals a little. Fari laughs again.

FARI
You should tell her, her nose will take all the attention anyway.

Sussan laughs.

FARI (CONT'D)
Mum, I got that law job in Sydney.

SUSSAN
(ecstatic)
Oh I knew you would get it! Well done Fari!

FARI
Thanks.

SUSSAN
Are you and Samira celebrating? Send her my love.

FARI
Yes. I will.

SUSSAN
OK, well happy new year love.

FARI
Happy new year mum.

She hangs up.

116 EXT. PARTY GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS 116

A loud countdown has begun.

REVELLERS
10...9...

Samira joins in, screaming at the top of her lungs, surrounded by ecstatic strangers, all drunk and happy.

REVELLERS (CONT'D)
...5...4...3...2...ONE!

The commotion is intense, the vibes high and everyone hugs and kisses. A GUY suddenly pashes Samira intensely. She's then grabbed by another WOMAN who also kisses her.

SAMIRA
(yelling)
Happy New Year!

117 EXT. EMPTY PETROL STATION - CONTINUOUS 117

Fari sits on the bonnet of the Corolla. She watches some fireworks explode in the distance.

FARI
Happy New Year.

118 EXT. PARTY GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS 118

Fireworks blast in the sky as Samira watches. She smiles as people celebrate all around her.

119 EXT. PARTY GROUNDS - MORNING 119

The beach and grounds are awash in litter and empty cans. The streets are empty except for a few revellers still wandering around like zombies.

Samira is one of them. Looking like someone who hasn't slept for weeks, she smiles as she walks with some of her new friends from the night before. She spots Fari standing next to her Corolla in the distance.

120 EXT. CARPARK, PARTY GROUNDS - CONTINUOUS 120

Fari watches Samira say goodbye to some party-goers. Samira reaches Fari and the Corolla.

SAMIRA
Hey.

FARI
Hey.

SAMIRA
Did you come for the party?

Fari shakes her head.

SAMIRA (CONT'D)
Oh thanks.

FARI
Don't mention it. You had fun?

Samira shrugs.

SAMIRA
You?

FARI
Of course not.

Beat.

SAMIRA
I'm sorry.

FARI
Nah, I'm sorry.

SAMIRA
Yeah.

FARI
Come on then, unless you've joined
the Gloriavale cult over there.

They see a couple of young WOMEN (20s) wearing flower crowns still dancing to no music on the hill top. Samira laughs and gets in the car. Fari starts the Corolla and it pulls out amidst some of the other revellers gearing up to go home.

The Corolla drives down the main road until it disappears into the horizon.

EXT. FARI'S HOME - EVENING

Samira stands at the door and knocks. It opens to reveal Fari in a very frilly peach coloured bridesmaid dress. Samira laughs.

FARI
Don't. I'll cry.

SAMIRA
Maybe your cousin will like you in it?

FARI
Maybe yours will.

Samira hands Fari her *Shahnameh* book.

FARI (CONT'D)
What's this?

SAMIRA
You might need it. Y'know when you're all alone without me.

FARI
Funny. (Then) Thanks. You sure?

Samira nods.

SAMIRA
Give them Aussies hell.

FARI
You know I will (Then) Promise me, you'll apply to the creative writing programme.

SAMIRA
I make no such promise.

FARANAK (O.S.)
(screaming)
Fari!

FARI
Gotta go.

SAMIRA
See ya.

Fari shuts the door as Samira makes her way down.

SAMIRA (V.O.)
Banu's final seventh battle takes place in an unknown ocean. Banu fights gloriously but her ship sinks.
(MORE)

SAMIRA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Thinking her drowned, her crew leaves but Banu survives and after months at sea alone, she makes it to a new land as a hero.

121 INT. SAMIRA’S BEDROOM - LATER 121

Samira stands in front of a brand new world map on her wall. She shoves a ‘Fari’ pin onto Sydney. Then she starts sticking the ‘Samira’ pin on various cities around the world - Bali, Delhi, London, Madrid.

SAMIRA (V.0.)
In Ancient Persia, there once lived a princess Banu Ghoshap. Banu was a great lover who had many admirers. Yet she decided to defy them all and continue her adventures in far-off lands. Banu became the greatest warrior she always knew she was.

More pins get added onto Santiago, Mexico City, Los Angeles and so on.

END.

Appendix C

Lady Land Writer's Treatment (2013)

In 2012 I was invited to Israel after my thesis short documentary won an award at the Tel Aviv Student Film Festival - A place where my Iranian passport forbids me to visit as it does not exist, "Not permitted for use in the Occupied Palestine".

Customs in Israel only cares about names. If your name is remotely Arab/Muslim you are taken into a secret waiting room to wait further interviewing. The hostility is there but so is the humour and humility of the place. The guards were in on the absurdity of the situation and despite their blunt questionings, were actually rather approachable and empathetic. Even when leaving, I was taken for a search as the guard kindly but bluntly told me they were afraid I would have a bomb on the plane. This whole experience gave me the idea for a feature. How could I essentially make something so hostile such as the relationship between Iran and Israel friendly? How could I make fun of this irrational fear? This fear of the stranger or of others is something I focus on a lot in my work.

I wanted to subvert a very male dominated genre that of the buddy film, to one with just funny women. I also wanted to place a strong American genre, the road trip, in New Zealand, where we could show off the epic landscapes but also show the mundane ugliness that can exist in any country. Growing up on Auckland's North Shore provided years of suburban boredom for me which I was able to put in the script. Growing up as an immigrant in Auckland, provided even more.

Most of my films originate from the point of view of the migrant. As a first generation immigrant in New Zealand I have been afflicted my whole life with displacement, being different and being between two worlds. This aversion to people we don't know is perverse and logically wrong. I want to give a voice to them.

At the End of the World is a story about strong and active female characters that are not waiting to be saved. They are fighting societal expectations and realizing their own path. They are a generation that came about at an interesting time, at the turn of the 21st Century where the 'slackers' of the previous Generation X were giving way to a new decade focused on the self.

Though identity politics and cultural differences come into it, the story is still a simple tale about two friends taking a road trip and growing up just a wee bit. One of the major themes of the film is the duality of living in two worlds. Currently there is a popular form of thought about emerging adults, where young people now live at home longer and become 'adults' at a later stage in life. This has been common in my community and I always saw this as a type of extended adolescence. As such, this film is a type of coming of age but with emerging adults. Both Samira and Fari need to learn to find independence from each other but also to 'break the chord' from their families.

I feel that it is a story that is fitting to tell now – not only due to the ridiculous fear-mongering of foreigners from certain political parties and persons, but the success of recent émigré cinema means there is an audience for it out there, both critically and commercially.

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