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**Children in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema:  
Visions of the Future**

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**Children in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema:**

**Visions of the Future**

by

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## Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my family whose love, encouragement, and endless support has enabled me to follow my path as it leads ever on.

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First and foremost I thank Dr. Blake Atwood for his encouragement, patience, and faith in me as a scholar. I must also thank Dr. Kamran Aghaie for his commitment to challenging me to grow and learn. A number of friends did their part to keep me sane throughout this process, and I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge them. To Weston Bland, Laura Partain, Reem Harb, Jennifer Hunt, Kim Canuette Grimaldi, Gayle Fischer, Evan Coyne, Patrick Higgins, and Will Cumming, I couldn't have done it without each and every one of you. To my William & Mary family: Kate Hughes, Vicky O'Brien, and Kristen Clark, our video chats while struggling through our own graduate school experiences were the highlights of my weeks. Molly O'Hara and Allie Gordon, you have been my dear friends for almost two decades, and I cannot express what your constant love and support has meant to me throughout the past two years. Finally I thank Joseph Caterine, who has done more to support me throughout this process than I deserve.

## Abstract

# **Children in Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema: Visions of the Future**

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This project focuses on children in Iranian cinema in the Islamic Republic era in order to examine how child characters reveal visions of their future in Iran. This analysis will help the reader understand how privilege functions in relation to citizenship in Iran. Prior research argues that children in Iranian cinema represent humanist themes and utopic images of Iranian society. My thesis builds on this work to argue that images of the child represent more nuanced imaginings of the future, dependent on their ability to confront problems successfully.

This study does not consider children's films, but rather films with prominent child characters. It looks at child characters both as agents whose desires and anxieties drive the film's action and as objects with whom the audience can visualize the future. This project includes *Children of Heaven* [Bachcheh-hā-ye āsemān], *The Mirror* [Āineh], *Where is the Friend's Home* [Khāne-ye dust kojāst], *Bashu, the Little Stranger* [Bāshu gharibe-ye kuchek], *Baran* [Bārān], *The Apple* [Sib], *Life, and Nothing More* [Zandegi va digar hich], *The White Balloon* [Bādkonak-e sefid], and *The Day I Became a Woman* [Ruzi ke zan

shodam]. My thesis argues that the ways in which child characters interact with their environment highlight their level of privilege, revealing what types of individuals are best fit to thrive in Iranian society under the Islamic Republic. I argue that notions of citizenship and nationalism are integral to the characters' identities and indicated futures. Specifically, both ideal children and non-ideal children who maintain Iranian citizenship will have successful futures as participants in Iranian society, while non-Iranian nationals may not.

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## Introduction

Since the revolution, Iranian filmmakers have increasingly created films centered on child protagonists. A few scholars have treated this phenomenon in their academic work, while other writers have satirized the practice as cliché. In 2005, the Fajr International Film Festival introduced a new category called “Spiritual Cinema”, which caused festival-goers to speculate as to what characteristics pushed a film to belong in this category. The festival’s newspaper, *Jashnvareh*, ran a cartoon about the new category. The parody notes six features that mark a film as “spiritual”: rain, wind, a child, Afghans, an apple, and a camera.<sup>1</sup> Some reference specific movies; rain references Majid Majidi’s *Baran* (the Persian word for rain), wind references Abbas Kiarostami’s *The Wind Will Carry Us*, and an apple references Samira Makhmalbaf’s *The Apple*. The remaining three (a child, Afghans, and a camera) represent common tropes present in Iranian films. The cartoonist playfully mocks these images, defining the meaning of an Afghan character as “misery with an accent” and the meaning of children in films as “children as always wise and adults always stupid”.<sup>2</sup> Hamid Naficy cites a similar Iranian cartoon whose title he translates as “How to Become a Candidate for Festivals and an Oscar”, which includes the following features representing films with child protagonists: yearning for a pair of shoes, a balloon, and an earthquake.<sup>3</sup> This second list references Majidi’s *Children of Heaven*, Jafar Panahi’s *The White Balloon*, and Kiarostami’s *Life and Nothing More*.

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<sup>1</sup> Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema: Religion and Spirituality in Film*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2011, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema: The Globalizing Era, 1984 – 2010*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.

Iranians recognize the ubiquitous nature of children in Iranian films, yet the subject remains understudied. This thesis considers nine post-revolutionary films and attempts to discover the significance of the child in Iranian cinema. This thesis poses the central question: how do children in Iranian cinema represent competing visions of their future in Iran? In order to answer this question, the paper acknowledges and articulates the different types of children that exist in Iran and are represented in Iran's films. In particular it examines how filmmakers portray ideal and non-ideal Iranian children and the ways in which the films hint at differing futures for the child characters. The film argues that notions of citizenship and nationalism are integral to the characters' identities and indicated futures. Specifically, both ideal children and non-ideal children who maintain Iranian citizenship will have successful futures as participants in Iranian society, while non-Iranian nationals will not. However amongst the ideal Iranian nationals there are other differences such as gender and class that play decisive role in the type of future those children will have.

### **Concerning Citizenship and Children**

Hamid Dabashi characterizes the underlying message of the Iranian revolution as discontent couched in theological terms.<sup>4</sup> He argues that within theological language inherently "every disenfranchisement furnishes the parameters of the coming reenchantment, the very disillusion that serves the coming reillusion".<sup>5</sup> While the present thesis heavily considers Iranian nationalism, it is concerned more with the construction of Iranian citizenship and the representation of the Iranian citizen. James Holston and Arjun

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<sup>4</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Appadurai argue that modern states establish citizenship in two forms; first, as the primary identity which marks its citizens before all other markers and brings them under a specific set of laws; second, as the eradication of hierarchical identity markers in order to grant all citizens equal rights.<sup>6</sup> They note that citizenship can take both formal and substantive forms, but both do not necessarily apply to every citizen. Meaning, one can exist as a formally recognized member of a nation but not have access to the substantive rights and services on the same level as other formal citizens. Ruth Lister questions the status of the child as a citizen, arguing that because the state excludes them from fully participating in society (in that they cannot vote) children do not enjoy equal rights in the present.<sup>7</sup> Her argument echoes a larger trend in scholarship on the child as citizen wherein states and societies tend to view children as people who exist in a constant state of ‘becoming’, rather than ‘being’.<sup>8</sup> The child is thus understood to occupy a state of existence in opposition to adults, who are understood to have reached the goal of that previous ‘becoming’ by crossing the culturally-defined boundary from the sphere of childhood into that of adulthood. In this way, children and adults exist in separate states of being, locked in an eternal relationship of becoming and remembering.

If children and adults are marked as different to each other, it follows that to some extent adults desire to become like children and children desire to become like adults. Children dream of growing older and adults continually grapple with nostalgia for the past. Michael Taussig’s articulation of mimesis and alterity explains that the Self simultaneously mimics aspects of the Other’s identity while rejecting other aspects to

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<sup>6</sup> James Holston and Arjun Appadurai, “Cities and Citizenship” in *Public Culture* 8 (1996), 187.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Lister, “Unpacking Children’s Citizenship”, in *Children and Citizenship* ed. Antonella Invernizzi and Jane Williams, Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2008, 11 & 13.

<sup>8</sup> “Notions of Children’s Citizenship” in *Children and Citizenship*, 5.

keep the Other at a distance and preserve the Self.<sup>9</sup> The former we see in the way adults read the child as a site of memory, and of envisioning this past. Because all adults were necessarily children at some point, but have ceased to exist in that identity, adults look to children as a way of reliving their own childhood. Walter Benjamin posits that adults wish to experience the world anew, the way children constantly discover their environment.<sup>10</sup> Susan Buck-Morss explains that Benjamin perceived a connection between perception and action in the child's consciousness that "was an active, creative form of mimesis, involving the ability to make correspondences by means of spontaneous fantasy".<sup>11</sup>

Many have interpreted images of children as constituting ways for adults to remember the past. In her exploration of the child in Spanish cinema, Sarah Wright takes the child as a site of memory and argues that children function as a way of reliving, re-remembering, and reinterpreting major (often traumatic) events in Spain's recent history. Rediscovering events that have already occurred and therefore occupy some space in a nation's collective consciousness becomes possible through a child's perspective. But not only do adults become able to reinterpret familiar images because the child discovers things anew; the child's perspective is distinct from the adults' because of how they experience time and space in the present. Indeed, many scholars prefer to interpret the image of the child in film as reflecting the present moment of a society.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*, New York: Routledge, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Projects*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1989, 274

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 263.

Filmmakers' use of the figure of the child highlights the hopes, dreams, fears, and anxieties of society in a particular moment. Vicky Lebeau writes, "our modern commitments to the idea of the child are inseparable from its representation in visual form."<sup>12</sup> The image of the child in cinema presents the spectator with both what it means to be a child and what society owes the child. The child's perspective pushes the audience to interrogate the child's place in society by examining how children view others and others view children. Children in cinema are particularly deserving of attention because of their status as "others" in relation to the rational category of "adults" who in many ways essentially possess sovereignty over them. Adults may dictate what children do in the present moment, and can have an influence on what shape their future may take. The perspective of child characters in film creates a discursive cinema because children's opinions and desires "interrupt the homogeneity of time and experience"<sup>13</sup> represented through the adult's perspective.

Scholars who have written on the child in Iranian cinema especially tend to view such images as reflections of present Iranian society through either a utopic or humanistic lens. Dabashi argues that Iranian cinema in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but especially post-revolutionary Iranian cinema explores humanist themes borrowed from earlier traditions of humanist artistic expression found in Persian literature and poetry.<sup>14</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr suggests that filmmakers used child characters in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema to represent the desirable, utopic vision of the new Islamic Republic that was taking shape.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 10.

<sup>13</sup> Karen Lury, *The Child in Film* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2010), 3.

<sup>14</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *The World of Persian Literary Humanism*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012, 291.

<sup>15</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2006, 225.

He and Hamid Naficy both contend that the figure of the child became a common feature in post-revolutionary cinema because Iranian filmmakers were attempting to craft a new image of Iranian society to project to the rest of the world.<sup>16</sup> Naficy, along with many other scholars, notes the new pressures of censorship and gender segregation that pushed directors to use child characters as substitutes for adult women and for depicting interactions between men and women that the government now deemed inappropriate.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, one must recognize the role that the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance's censorship has on the content of Iranian films. As Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad writes, in terms of media, "the post-revolution regime has made a conscious effort to 'Islamize' Iran in order to create a society made up of good Muslims".<sup>18</sup> In any examination of Iranian cinema censorship remains an important factor to consider, especially in analyses focusing on the narratives Iranian filmmakers create in the Islamic Republic. For the purposes of the present project, the degree of control the state exercises over published media forms a general background theme, rather than a specific point of analysis.

This thesis aims to building on existing scholarship by examining how the child relates to varying imaginings of the future, rather than the present moment, the past, or a homogenous utopic vision of the future. It considers not what the child in Iranian cinema means as an image projected to the rest of the world, but as one reflected internally

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<sup>16</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, "Children in Contemporary Iranian Cinema" in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity*, ed. Richard Tapper, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2002, 231.

Hamid Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 4: The Globalizing Era, 1984 – 2010*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2012, 208.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 209.

<sup>18</sup> Saeed Zeydabadi-Nejad, *The Politics of Iranian Cinema: Film and Society in the Islamic Republic*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 6.

within Iran. This project therefore will illustrate the types of narratives that are told in Iranian society which helps us understand how Iranians relate to each other within their own communities.

### **The Child in Iran and Iranian Cinema**

The question of how the image of the child matters within Iran is significant because it is rooted in the context of the post-revolutionary period. In 1979, the Iranian Revolution took place, which overthrew the Pahlavi dynasty, at the time under the rule of Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi, and installed an Islamic government under the rule of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. With the new Islamic government came new Islamic laws. One of the many major changes in the legal system included a new definition of what it means to be a child. In the Pahlavi era, children were considered adults when they reached the age of 18 years old. In the Islamic Republic of Iran however, this age shifted to the age of puberty, defined as 9 years old for girls and 15 years old for boys.<sup>19</sup> This major shift may be a driving factor behind Iranian filmmakers' motivation to explore the character of the child and themes surrounding what it means to be a child, though this project does not intend to speculate on intention. Additionally, Elizabeth Warnock Fernea argues that in Islamic societies, Iran included, childhood is not necessarily regarded as a bounded period of time, and the concept of adolescence does not necessarily apply to every context.<sup>20</sup> She writes that one marker of the end of

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<sup>19</sup> Shirin Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child: A Comparative Study of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Legislation of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, trans. Hamid Marashi, Tehran: Vajeh Negar, 2000, 10.

<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, *Children in the Muslim Middle East*, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, 10.

childhood is marriage, while others claim the act of having a child is what truly begins adulthood.<sup>21</sup>

Certainly, some Iranian filmmakers create films with children in mind as their intended audience. Such children's films do not form a part of this project's research. Instead, this project seeks to complicate the existing body of scholarship on the child in Iranian films created for an adult audience by arguing that child characters indicate varying visions of the future. The argument includes several questions, but primarily focuses on what characteristics the children in these films have that indicate whether their future in Iran will be successful or unsuccessful. More broadly, this project can provide some insight to the following issues. What do such portrayals tell us about ideas of citizenship, and specifically of children as citizens, in Iran? How does privilege influence the lives of these children? What do these films reveal about how the child in film functions? Finally, what can we learn about narratives in Iranian culture in the Islamic Republic era?

Analyzing how child characters interact with their environment forms the key component of my framework. I am concerned with how children communicate with other characters and the content of the messages they communicate, as well as how they act. This project analyzes the child, both as an agent whose problems and desires drive the plot, and as an object with which to imagine and reflect. The films are not discussed chronologically but rather thematically, as this allows for a discussion on how different portrayals of child characters lead to different conceptualizations of the future.

The study is structured into the following three sections. The first chapter

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<sup>21</sup> Warnock Fernea, *Children in the Muslim Middle East*, 10.

examines children encountering small-scale, individual problems and attempting to solve them. In each, the children's level of privilege lies in their status as ideal Iranian children who possess the ability to decode their environment and successfully interact with it. Each film concludes with the child's problem having been successfully solved in some way. This section argues that the child's status of privilege, here represented in part by their ability to communicate and characteristics that mark them as ideal Iranians, hints at a successful future for the child in the Islamic Republic. In order to make this argument, I examine Majid Majidi's 1997 *Children of Heaven* [Bachcheh-hā-ye āsemān], Jafar Panahi's 1997 *The Mirror* [Āineh], and Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's Home* [Khāne-ye Dust Kojāst].

The second chapter analyses child characters confronting large-scale, society-wide issues. These films explore non-ideal children, displacement, and the problem of integrating into a society with which they have a limited ability to communicate. This section argues that for children who are not privileged, here demonstrated in part by their difficulty to communicate and characteristics that mark them as non-ideal Iranians, their level of indicated success ultimately depends upon their status as Iranian citizens. Here, I analyze Bahram Beizai's 1986 *Bashu, the Little Stranger* [Bāshu gharibe-ye kuchek], Majid Majidi's 2000 *Baran* [Bārān], and Samira Makhmalbaf's 1998 *The Apple* [Sib].

The third chapter looks at films that contrast the lives of privileged children with those of unprivileged children. The problems faced by the privileged children in these films are addressed while the problems of the unprivileged are left unsolved. While communication plays a deciding role in the previous sections, here the children can all communicate on a similar level with their environment. Instead, this section argues that

other factors like gender or class play the deciding role in what shape their future will take. This section examines Marziyeh Meshkini's 2000 *Day I Became a Woman* [Ruzi ke zan shodam], Abbas Kiarostami's 1991 *Life and Nothing More* [Zendegi va digar hich].

## Chapter 1: Ideal Children

Contemporary discourse on children and citizenship focuses on the tension between regarding children as citizens “being” and as citizens “becoming”.<sup>22</sup> The discourse illustrates the idea that especially for children, the present necessarily informs the future, because they live and grow towards a specific state of being, meaning adulthood. Children are therefore often the targets of propaganda and other material related to state and community building. In post-revolutionary Iran the shaping of children has been particularly important. Hamid Dabashi and Peter Chelkowski write, “the children of a revolution are its first and future converts, its extension into the future”.<sup>23</sup> Representations of children in the post-revolutionary period can simultaneously act as a reflection of Iranian society at the moment and a prediction of how society will grow and change.

This chapter argues that Iranian films depicting ideal, privileged children indicate that these children will have successful futures within the Islamic Republic of Iran. The films *Children of Heaven*, *The Mirror*, and *Where is the Friend's Home* each portray normative Iranian children whose privilege lies in their ability to communicate with others and navigate their environment to solve a problem. This chapter first discusses the ways in which the children in these films are normative followed by how their ability to communicate determines the successful course their lives will take.

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<sup>22</sup> Antonella Invernizzi and Jane Williams, Preface to *Children and Citizenship*, Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Inc., 2008, x.

<sup>23</sup> Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution: The Art of Persuasion in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, London: Booth-Clibborn Editions, 2000, 232.

The ideal child refers to a set of social markers made up of behavioral traits and social beliefs that identify the individual within his or her group and allows him or her to interact with other members in regulated manner.<sup>24</sup> In terms of Iranian films, Hamid Reza Sadr posits that specifically using children “allows the projection of ideas about what people should ideally be like”.<sup>25</sup> Privilege refers to a social advantage into which one is generally born, and which grants them benefits that are denied to those without the same privilege.<sup>26</sup> This paper takes the ability to communicate as a site of privilege that contributes to determining the children’s fate.

### **Constructing the ‘Ideal’ Iranian**

Using state-related evidence, this section identifies the traits that the Islamic Republic government deems ideal for its citizens. I argue that ideal children grow up in a small Muslim family of a lower social class, display virtuous qualities related to Islam, attend school, and practice healthy habits. In Iran and other predominantly Muslim communities, family life plays an integral role in an individual’s development. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which Iran became party in 1994, declares the right to live under the guardianship of one’s parents as one of the child’s fundamental rights.<sup>27</sup> The parents’ married status confers upon their children many rights that the government denies to children of unmarried parents in Iran, because

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<sup>24</sup> Richard McElreath, Robert Boyd, and Peter J. Richerson, “Shared Norms and the Evolution of Ethnic Markers”, *Current Anthropology* 44 (2003), 123.

<sup>25</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2006, 232.

<sup>26</sup> “Privilege”, *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory*, ed. Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen A. Foss, (2009), 798.

<sup>27</sup> Shirin Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child: A Comparative Study of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Legislation of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, trans. by Hamid Marashi, Tehran: Vjeh Negar, 2000, 25.

the state considers such children illegitimate.<sup>28</sup> The size of the family also reveals whether the family is typical or not. In 1967, the Pahlavi government introduced the Family Protection Law to encourage family planning.<sup>29</sup> When the Islamic government initially came to power it repealed this law in favor of high fertility initiatives, but in 1986 decided to recommend family planning again.<sup>30</sup> Iranian elementary school textbooks from 1987 depict families as having two children each, which constitutes a significant departure from earlier family models, considering the Mother of the Year in 1966 had eighteen children.<sup>31</sup> In terms of family life, the Islamic Republic expects children to be born to married parents and into a family of approximately two children.

At the same time the government decided to encourage smaller families, the state simultaneously shifted from representing society through images of the urban middle class to images of the lower middle class.<sup>32</sup> In the 1980s the government carefully updated elementary school textbooks to reflect this ideology. The government changed representations of typical Iranian families to appear as individuals whose clothing and home indicate a low economic status.<sup>33</sup> A social studies textbook from 1988 contains illustrations of a small family living in a sparsely furnished home as a typical Iranian family. The same textbook shows a picture of a lavish home next to an image of a shantytown and tells the reader that this comparison illustrates the tyrannical nature of the

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<sup>28</sup> Shirin Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 191.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 216.

<sup>31</sup> Adele K. Ferdows, "Gender Roles in Iranian Public School Textbooks" in *Children in the Muslim Middle East*, ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, 356; Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, 191.

<sup>32</sup> Patricia J. Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari, "Changing Perceptions of Iranian Identity in Elementary School Textbooks" in *Children in the Muslim Middle East* ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 344.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

pre-revolution Pahlavi regime which it claims acquired its fortune by preying on the less fortunate of the nation<sup>34</sup>. The government explicitly rejects material representations of wealth and families with a large amount of children, constructing small families with a low economic status as ideal.

Due to the nature of the state, religion in the Islamic Republic functions not only as an individual identity marker, but as a tool for community and state building. Iranian law explicitly values Muslims over non-Muslims, considering the latter worth only half as much as the former in terms of blood money.<sup>35</sup> Besides merely adhering to Islam, certain character traits perceived to derive from one's Muslim identity are valued. In one of Khomeini's speeches regarding children, he spoke of the considerations necessary to take about their upbringing, including, "what sorts of people are necessary to produce a healthy and virtuous child".<sup>36</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea identifies hospitality as a key trait that Muslim parents teach to their children.<sup>37</sup> Health and hygiene also relates to religious virtues. Khomeini valued the well-being of children and considered health related to divine law.<sup>38</sup> Modern Iranian hygienists stress that "cleanliness is synonymous with Islam".<sup>39</sup> The Family and Population Regulation Act stipulates that the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting shall create and distribute programs concerning the health of children, mothers, and the general population of Iran.<sup>40</sup> It states that school textbooks must contain similar information. In college, all students regardless of their major must

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<sup>34</sup> *Social Studies Textbook Year Three*, Tehran: Islamic Republic of Iran Department of Education, 2003, 53.

<sup>35</sup> Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 66.

<sup>37</sup> Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, "Childhood in the Muslim Middle East", in *Children in the Muslim Middle East* edited by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 66.

<sup>39</sup> Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, 22.

<sup>40</sup> Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child*, 18.

complete a 1-credit course on family regulation.<sup>41</sup> Thus ideal Iranians are not only Muslim but display an array of revered qualities related to religion such as hospitality and healthy hygienic practices.

Iranian society considers education critical to a child's development. In 1943, the Iranian parliament passed a law that made school attendance obligatory for children between six and twelve years old.<sup>42</sup> The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran "grants free education up until graduation from high school for all children in Iran in order to reach self-sufficiency".<sup>43</sup> According to Shirin Ebadi, the Literacy Campaign that emphasizes reading and writing in Iran is very important.<sup>44</sup> Similar to the importance of hygiene, schools attempt to reinforce other healthy habits. In 1927, Iranian parliament passed a law making exercise a daily requirement in all Iranian schools.<sup>45</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet writes that in Pahlavi Iran, exercise became "a regular activity of youth organizations".<sup>46</sup> She posits that encouragement of exercise for youth was intended to create women fit to produce healthy offspring and men strong enough to serve in the armed forces.<sup>47</sup> In his book *Women and Youth*, former President Khatami writes in favor of exercise, arguing that Iranians cannot achieve a happy and healthy society without a dedication to exercise.<sup>48</sup> The Iranian state therefore considers an ideal Iranian as one who attends school and learns not only literacy and self-sufficiency, but who comes to understand the significance of exercise.

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<sup>41</sup> Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child*, 19.

<sup>42</sup> Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 128.

<sup>43</sup> Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child*, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens*, 137.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid, 26.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Mohammad Khatami, *Women and Youth* (زنان و جوانان), Tehran: Tarh-i Naw, 2000, 183.

Iranian parents and teachers also emphasize obedience as a desirable trait. Based on elementary school textbook depictions of boys and girls, the Islamic Republic constructs both genders as obedient.<sup>49</sup> Young girls in Iran and other Muslim communities should care for siblings and boys should care for animals or run errands. While practicing obedience towards all elders, children should ultimately respect the father's authority over the mother's.<sup>50</sup> In fact, the laws of Iran regard the child as belonging specifically to the father.<sup>51</sup> The state therefore values citizens who respect all authority but who give priority to male authority.

This section has outlined some of the various characteristics that mark a child as ideal. Namely, that they are born into a small family to married Muslim parents from a lower social class, display virtuous qualities such as hospitality, attend school, practice healthy hygiene and exercise habits, and obey authority. Now we can turn to filmic depictions of children who can be described by the aforementioned markers in order to understand what types of futures are possible for them in the Islamic Republic.

### **The Ideal Iranian Child in Film**

The film *Children of Heaven* tells the story of a brother and sister, Ali and Zahra, on a quest to solve the problem of Zahra's lost pair of shoes, all without telling their parents. With knowing just these first few details, the film immediately evokes a religious connotation. The title itself conjures holy imagery, while the children's names reference

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<sup>49</sup>Ferdows, *Gender Roles in Iranian Textbooks*, 333.

<sup>50</sup>Warnock Fernea, *Children in the Muslim Middle East*, 7.

<sup>51</sup> Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child*, 21.

specific figures in Islamic history. Ali's name refers to the first Imam of Shi'ism, who was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. Stories about Ali often center on his generous spirit, a quality exhibited by the character in the film as he seeks to solve the problem of his younger sister's lost shoes.<sup>52</sup> Zahra's name refers to Fatimah, the wife of Ali and daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, who is often called Fatimah Zahra, meaning "the shining one".<sup>53</sup> The child protagonists in *Children of Heaven* are sacred, divine, and precious. That the characters names reference a well-known adult married couple reflects Naficy's assertion that in some post-revolutionary Iranian films, child characters act as stand-ins for adult characters, depicting interactions that would be considered inappropriate for adult actors.

As the film begins, the form alerts the spectator that the story occurs within a child's world, preparing him or her to adopt a child's perspective. The title of *Children of Heaven* appears in a child's handwriting, letter by letter, on a black background lined to resemble a piece of paper from a school notebook. Though the first scene does not take place in a school, the title sequence reveals that the characters are elementary school age. The first shot is a sustained close up of an old man's hands fixing a broken pair of girl's shoes. The image has two purposes: to establish familiarity with the film's mythic object and to indicate the family's economic level. Instead of simply purchasing a new pair of girl's shoes, the parents have paid for this dirty, old, broken pair to be repaired with glue and thread. When the credits end, the camera zooms out to show Ali patiently watching the man repair his sister's shoes. Here is an image of a child obediently running an

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<sup>52</sup> Nacim Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 83.

<sup>53</sup> "Fatimah" in *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc: 2014). Accessed December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/202575/Fatimah>

errand, participating in city life. In the following scene, a cart-vendor accidentally steals the newly repaired shoes as Ali purchases potatoes from the grocer, hinting at a pattern of actions to come.

One central message present in *Children of Heaven* is that although humans sometimes cause each other pain, they rarely do so out of malice. Indeed Iranians, adults and children alike, instead do their best to alleviate each other's suffering. Evil, according to *Children of Heaven* does not exist in a knowable form. The director never shows the sole character portrayed as the villain of the film. The landlord causes the family's financial woes; he comes to their home and yells at the mother about paying their back rent. But the only time the audience sees him, Majidi frames the shot from Ali's perspective, and hanging laundry blocks the landlord's face. Instead, the film contains a number of examples depicting compassion between Iranians. Though Ali caused Zahra pain by accidentally losing her shoes, when his teacher gives him a gold pen for getting good grades, he gives the pen to her to cheer her up. Zahra drops the pen at school, and the girl who ended up with Zahra's lost shoes picks it up and returns it to her. In this instance, the other girl knows she possesses an object belonging to Zahra and gives it back, unlike Zahra's shoes she unknowingly wears. At the end of the film, Ali comes in first place in the footrace and receives a prize and praise from his coach and headmaster. Disappointed that he did not instead come in third place, he looks around at the other boys upset that they did not win and observes their pain for losing something he did not intend to take away from them. This film asserts that ideal Iranian children possess an understanding of empathy and compassion and exercise these qualities when they realize they have hurt someone else.

The ability to understand others plays a central role in Ali's problem solving. Ali and his father spend a day in a wealthy neighborhood of Tehran seeking landscaping work. The one home that allows them to do the work does so because Ali successfully communicates with a young boy over the intercom who wants to play with Ali. The boy's grandfather pays Ali's father a significant amount of money for the work, which he later uses to purchase two new pairs of shoes for Ali and Zahra. This scene is important because it is Ali's ability to communicate with another child that ultimately leads to new shoes for Zahra, thereby solving Ali's problem. Thus despite the fact that Ali does not come in the correct place in the footrace in order to win a pair of shoes (third, not first), he essentially provides the solution to his own problem through his ability to communicate.

In contrast to the wealthy neighborhood with wide streets and natural scenery, much of the film's action occurs in narrow streets and alleyways, as Ali and Zahra run to and from their schools to share the single pair of shoes. These claustrophobic spaces are the only spaces where Ali and Zahra become isolated from others, allowing them to exchange the shoes in secret. Here, they exercise independence from their parents as they work on solving their problem. A stark difference in space comes during the scene of Ali's foot race. The competition takes place on a wide road in a forest that surrounds a lake. Here, as Ali makes his final effort to win a pair of shoes, he runs in an open, natural setting. The difference between the restricted space of the alleyways and the open road in nature represents Ali's journey; in the alleyways he and Zahra can only do their best to hide the loss of her shoes from others, but in the forest Ali has a real shot at obtaining a new pair for her.

The final shot of the film, after the race, emphasizes another central message of the film: if one works hard enough, one will be rewarded. The last shot is a close up of Ali's blistered feet sitting in the courtyard pool outside his home. The audience observes in detail the result of the physical labor, the point to which he pushed himself to solve his problem. Though Ali feels he has failed, the audience knows that Ali's father has bought new shoes for both Ali and Zahra, and he will soon be rewarded. In fact, Ali did not fail in obtaining new shoes, because it is due to his communication abilities in the wealthy neighborhood that his father earns enough money to purchase the shoes. Ending the film with the shot of Ali's feet leaves the audience to imagine the joy he will soon find, though Majidi does not reward the audience with this image. *Children of Heaven* thus presents the argument that ideal Iranian children who can communicate with their environment and find a solution to their problems will have successful futures in Iran.

Instead of a mythic object such as a lost pair of shoes, the plot of *The Mirror* is sparked by the absence of a mythic figure; a mother. This film begins by telling a fictional story of a girl, Mina, who must find her way home from school when her mother does not arrive to pick her up. Partway through the film, the actress playing Mina decides she does not want to act anymore and sets off to actually find her way home. In this documentary-style portion of the film, Mina forgets to remove her mic and the film crew follows her through the streets of Tehran. The title, "the mirror", seems to symbolize the reflexive nature of the film, as the process of filmmaking becomes a key element to the narrative. The young actress' desire to return home mimics that of the character she was meant to play, only now the girl, as an individual and not an actress, no longer has to

pretend to be on a journey home. *The Mirror* challenges the perceived distinction between fiction and reality, and acting and being.

The title and opening credits appear as white words on a black background, and the audience hears the sounds of traffic, followed by a bell ringing and the voices of young children exiting school. Before Panahi presents a single image, he grounds the film in its content and setting: an elementary school child living in the city, an experience to which many Iranians can relate. The first shot is a full shot that rests on parents waiting outside the school as a teacher opens the gates and children pour out. The camera follows a group of girls as they cross the intersection next to the school, then follows other people crossing the other intersections until the camera completes a full 360 pan and returns to the school gates. Now in the second shot, only Mina and a friend remain waiting for their parents, and the friend soon leaves. Panahi quickly problematizes the situation; a child has been left alone at a busy city intersection. Mina's facial expressions reveal confusion and anxiety as she asks a teacher why her mother has not picked her up. These opening moments reveal the film's central question: can a child safely and correctly navigate the streets of Tehran on her own?

*The Mirror* answers this question through a series of interactions based on communication, understanding, and perception. Mina speaks Persian and asks adults along her journey to help direct her home. Her ability to communicate allows her to decode her environment and solve her problem, since the film ends with her successfully and safely reaching her home. Though, she does make some mistakes along the way. In one moment, she attempts to enter a bus on the male-only side, but the driver quickly corrects her. Later, she considers accepting a ride from a male taxi driver, only to be

scolded by two women who pull her away and remind her of the potential for kidnapping. The film seems to argue that ideal Iranian children who possess the ability to communicate with others will participate successfully in Iranian society, and when they have problems adults will help and protect them.

Setting the action almost entirely in the city streets restricts the protagonist's development through the film in a liminal space. Instead of the usual circumstances in which Mina's mother would take her home, Mina finds herself in unfamiliar territory. She surely traverses these same streets with her parent, but on her own the rules have changed and she must decipher her environment. The setting paired with the age of the child also allows the film to enter spaces a single adult female character might not. Mina's entering the male-only side of the bus is not exactly scandalous; the misstep simply breaks the established rule. In another scene, she enters a car repair shop full of adult men who attempt to help her figure out where she lives. One could perceive the character in these circumstances as a stand in an adult female actor, and her age grants the camera access to spaces from which it may have otherwise been excluded.

Panahi uses the sound of a radio announcer reporting the scores of the 1996 AFC Asian Cup quarterfinal match between Iran and South Korea to annotate the film.<sup>54</sup> The match serves as a time marker, beginning during the first shot outside the school, and ending during the last scene of the film when Mina arrives home, with Iran winning 6 – 2. Having the match play throughout the film constructs Mina as a child growing up in a community where exercise and sport are important and normalized as part of daily

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<sup>54</sup> Kim Tong-Hyung, "Iran Presents Ultimate Test", *The Korea Times*, July 20<sup>th</sup>, 2007, accessed December 6<sup>th</sup>, 2014. [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/sports/2013/08/600\\_6894.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/sports/2013/08/600_6894.html)

activities. The broadcast also creates a parallel between the film's action and the game's. If Mina makes the right moves, she will succeed and find her way home. Framing the film against the backdrop of a soccer match assures the audience that Mina's journey is like a game, and though she may make mistakes, she is in no real danger.

The final shot of the film is a full shot of the doorway to Mina's house as she peeks her head out to talk to the man who originally recommended her as an actress to Panahi. The sound cuts out, reminding the audience of the blending between fictional and documentary filmmaking that is occurring. As the man walks back to the camera crew to explain that Mina feels upset and refuses to participate further in the film, Mina stares at the camera from her door before retreating inside and closing it behind her. Symbolically, she shuts the seal between the public and private sphere, delineating the difference between the liminal space of the street and the normalizing space of the home. *The Mirror* presents a strong-willed, independent child intent on achieving her goals. She owes her success both to her ability to communicate with strangers, and the kindness of strangers. However, as Ahmad in *Where is the Friend's Home* discovers, adults cannot always solve children's problems, despite their benevolent intentions.

*Where is the Friend's Home* tells the story of a boy, Ahmad, who accidentally takes his friend's notebook home from school and spends the afternoon and evening trying to find his friend Mohammed Reza's home to return his notebook to him. Kiarostami borrows the title from a poem by Sohrab Sepehri, an Iranian poet to whom he dedicates the film.<sup>55</sup> Sufis often use the word "friend" to refer to God, meaning both the

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<sup>55</sup> Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam*, 176.

Sepehri poem and Kiarostami film contain a religious element.<sup>56</sup> Interestingly, the “friend” in the film’s title and plot refers to Mohammed Reza, an elementary school aged boy. Kiarostami creates a connection between God and a child, indicating an element of holiness and spiritual purity contained in this child.

The film begins with the credits rolling over the image of a classroom door with the sounds of excited children’s voices in the background. This first shot, like the previous two films, establishes that the film occurs in a child’s world. In the second shot, the teacher arrives and checks the students’ homework, only to find that Mohammed Reza has not written his in his notebook because he forgot the notebook at his cousin’s house the night before. As the teacher reprimands Mohammed Reza, the camera stays on Ahmad and Mohammed Reza, now crying. The teacher remains a faceless voice, out of the shot, as the camera repeatedly switches back and forth between Ahmad looking at his troubled friend and Mohammed Reza crying into his hands. This sequence pleads the audience to empathize with the children and adopt their perspective for this situation and indeed the remainder of the film. The first scene constructs the teacher as a villain, forming a basis that informs the urgency of the film’s action after Ahmad accidentally takes Mohammed Reza’s notebook home and spends the film trying to find his home.

The central message of *Where is the Friend’s Home* differs slightly from that of *Children of Heaven* and *The Mirror*. While the film presents a child marked by ideal characteristics who solves a problem, he does so without the help of adults. Certainly he asks adults for help, but they cannot provide the answer to his question and Ahmad must

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<sup>56</sup> Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film after the Revolution*, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011), 44.

devise a solution himself. An old man agrees to walk with Ahmad on his journey, until he tires and must return to his own home. Khatereh Sheibani argues that this particular character expresses both a poetic and Sufi quality, stating he is the personification of “the leader or guide in Sufism”.<sup>57</sup> In another scene, Ahmad asks a group of men if one of them is Mohammed Reza’s father, but they ignore him. Ahmad possesses the ability to communicate with his environment, but those around him do not give him the information he needs. Instead, he copies his own homework into Mohammed Reza’s book and brings it to school with him the next day. The film asserts that Iranian children demonstrate resourcefulness in the face of a dilemma, compassion upon making a mistake that harms others, and loyalty to their friends.

The film also suggests that one may defy authority if it becomes necessary and is done for a good reason. Ahmad essentially tricks his teacher into believing Mohammad Reza did his own homework in order to spare his classmate the shame of being scolded again. Early in the film, when Ahmad leaves his home in search of Mohammad Reza’s, he ignores his mother’s orders to stay home. This small act of rebellion perhaps indicates that his fear of male authority exceeds his fear of female authority, or perhaps illustrates the extent of his empathy for his friend. Ahmad risks getting into trouble with his mother if it means he can help Mohammed Reza. In this case, the film emphasizes the virtues of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the community.

*Where is the Friend’s Home* highlights other qualities such as dedication to education and self-sufficiency as ideal for children to learn. In one scene, the teacher reminds the class that their first duty is their education, followed by their responsibilities

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<sup>57</sup> Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema*, 44.

to work around the home. Later, Ahmad's grandfather stops him on his journey and tells a childhood story, explaining that his father beat him once every two weeks regardless of whether he had behaved well or not. He characterizes this method as the proper way to raise a child because, "if he is lazy, he is of no use to society". The grandfather's words display the extent to which discipline and a willingness to obey orders informs Iranian attitudes towards children and the adults they will hopefully ideally become. The last shot of the film is a close up of Mohammed Reza's notebook pages as the teacher check his (actually Ahmad's) work. The teacher praises Mohammed Reza and the film ends. This final moment encapsulates the film's lessons; children should be useful, interested in schoolwork, and compassionate to their friends.

The central plots of *Children of Heaven*, *The Mirror*, and *Where is the Friend's Home* are rooted in kindness towards others. Naficy writes, "compassion for others is tied to a religiously optimistic worldview in which individual efforts for the collective good are rewarded".<sup>58</sup> *Children of Heaven* and *Where is the Friend's Home* express their spiritual quality explicitly through their titles, while *The Mirror* reveals this characteristic solely through the characters' actions. Each of these films depicts a child displaying characteristics that mark him or her as ideal. They are all Iranian citizens, speak Persian, live in a family with married parents, attend school, and exercise. The children in these films rely the help of adults to push them towards their goals, but it is their ability to communicate that allows them to solve their problems.

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<sup>58</sup> Naficy, *A Social History of Iranian Cinema Volume 4*, 212.

## Chapter 2: Non-Ideal Children

The first chapter established how the Islamic Republic defines its “ideal citizens”, but Iran has a very diverse population ethnically, linguistically and to a lesser extent religiously. Ideal Iranian children were shown to have successful futures because they had characteristics which aligned them with the ideal and allowed them to participate in society in a successful way. Children who fall outside of the margins of what the state deems ‘ideal’ may have different levels of success participating in society. This chapter therefore examines filmic depictions of children whose characteristics in some way mark them as ‘different’ and determines what types of futures they might achieve in Iran. This chapter argues that ethnic and linguistic differences are acceptable but difference in nationality is not. This chapter asks the question: can children who are marked as different have successful futures in the same way their ‘ideal’ counterparts can?

This chapter discusses representations of children whose characteristics mark them as existing beyond the margins of what the Iranian state presents as typically Iranian. The three films analyzed here are: *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1989), *Baran* (2000), and *The Apple* (1998). What differentiates the children in these films from those in the previous chapter is the nature of their performed identities, meaning the reason as to why they possess the characteristics that mark them as different. Whereas the children in the previous chapter largely inherited the characteristics that both caused and allowed them to participate successfully in Iranian society, here the children live through imposed identities that hinder their ability to engage with society on the same level as their ideal peers. The destruction of the Iran-Iraq war leaves Bashu a displaced war orphan who must forge his own path. The decades-long devastation of Afghanistan forces Baran’s

family to seek refuge in Iran, a country with an inconsistent record of how it treats this refugee population. The girls in *The Apple* have essentially been imprisoned by their parents for their entire lives within their home. The first two examples are fictional stories that place the blame of the burden the children have to bear on the state, while the third interestingly considers a real-life example of neglect by two adult members of Iranian society.

This chapter argues that depictions of non-ideal children in the Islamic Republic show their futures to be varied, with the dividing factor resting on national identity. Their success depends upon their ability to adopt qualities or alter their circumstances that will allow them to act as successful members of society. Like in the previous chapter, the willingness of adults to help the children reach their goals is a crucial factor to determining their fate. The degree to which others empathize with these children significantly affects their fate. Beyond their imposed identities, the children in the films examined here each possess a difficulty in communicating.

### **Politics of Difference in the Islamic Republic**

First this chapter must determine what ‘difference’ within Iranian society looks like. Using state-related materials I argue that non-ideal members of Iranian society are those who fall into at least one of the following categories: individuals of foreign nationality, non-ethnic Persians, non-Persian speakers, non-Twelve Shi’is, persons who do not follow Islamic law, men who desert military service, women who reproduce with foreign nationals, and those who are disabled. The level at which these individuals can

participate in Iranian society varies, and their marked differences can significantly alter their lives in the Islamic Republic.

The previous chapter showed that the Iranian government constructs the ideal Iranian as someone who first and foremost possesses formal citizenship. The status of an individual's national identity determines whether or not he or she legally belongs to the state and what responsibilities the individual and state have towards each other. For those who live in Iran but do not possess Iranian nationality, their foreign citizenship immediately marks them as different relative to the ideal Iranian. Simply living within the borders of the nation does not in itself confer national status upon individuals. Immigrants and refugees who relocate to Iran do have the opportunity to become Iranian citizens if they conform to a specific set of rules. But, the government prohibits certain non-nationals from becoming citizens. Namely, if they are not an adult, have not lived five years in Iran, are deserters from military service, or have been convicted of any major crimes.<sup>59</sup> The Islamic Republic government values citizens who obey the rule of law and willingly serve their government in times of conflict. Persons under eighteen years old may not apply based on the condition that they have not yet attained the intellectual maturity required to advocate for themselves and make such an important decision. The state groups non-Iranian children, military deserters, criminals, and people who have lived in Iran for less than five years into a category of people they refuse to include in the official citizenry.

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<sup>59</sup> "Article 976," The Civil Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Yale Law School, accessed Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2015 via [http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/assc/iranislamicrepof/iran\\_civil\\_code.pdf](http://www.law.yale.edu/rcw/rcw/jurisdictions/assc/iranislamicrepof/iran_civil_code.pdf)

The exclusion of men who desert the military reflects the construction of men who participate in military service as the ideal. The themes of martyrdom and armed resistance against oppressors were prominent features of the discourse surrounding both the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war. Khomeini especially praised young men and school-age boys for joining the Basij forces and defending the Iranian nation.<sup>60</sup> One such child who died on a suicide mission during the Iran-Iraq war, 13-year-old Hussain Fahmideh, was featured on a stamp and according to Chelkowski and Dabashi, revered by Khomeini as a hero.<sup>61</sup> School textbooks encourage students to visit the gravesites of the so-called “martyrs of the revolution”.<sup>62</sup> A social studies textbook from 2003 asks students to consider the purpose one might find in joining the Basij.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, a textbook on Persian literature contains a poem about a 14-year old Basij fighter, and a textbook on Islamic culture and religious education contains a four-page section dedicated to the Basij.<sup>64</sup> This veneration for men and boys who willingly sacrifice their lives in the name of religion and of the state coupled with the explicit exclusion of those who failed to fulfill this duty for their home country to becoming Iranian nationals, positions deserters as existing contrary to the state’s values.

Beyond praising men and boys who participated in the war, Kashani-Sabet argues that the state encourages honoring those who returned from the frontlines wounded and disabled.<sup>65</sup> She found that the government provides pensions for veterans and benefits for

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Chelkowski and Hamid Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 132.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 130.

<sup>63</sup> *Social Studies Textbook Year One*, Tehran: Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Education, 2003, 66

<sup>64</sup> *Islamic Culture and Religious Education Textbook Year Two*, Tehran: Islamic Republic of Iran Ministry of Education, 2003, 58 – 61.

<sup>65</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, “The Haves and the Have Nots: A Historical Study of Disability in Modern Iran”, in *Iranian Studies*, 43:2, 194.

the disabled. In terms of the larger disabled community in Iran, she concludes that Iranian society throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century has “increasingly adopted an attitude of tolerance and pity, though *not* always one of equality towards the disabled”.<sup>66</sup> One’s status as ideal or non-ideal relative to one’s disability seems to depend upon the origin of the disability.

Returning to the subject of nationality, the state seems to consider certain non-Iranian nationals more ‘ideal’ than others. For those who have not lived long enough within Iran’s borders to qualify for citizenship, the Islamic Republic grants some rights, though these individuals’ ability to exercise these rights varies. Persons who enter Iran illegally, for example without obtaining a visa, may receive a one to three year sentence in prison or a fine of between five hundred thousand and three million rials.<sup>67</sup> The state may also punish Refugees who fail to apply for official refugee status in Iran. This mechanism allows the government to control the number of people entering Iran and to discourage ‘undesirable’ people from crossing the border but in the process excludes individuals without the financial resources to obtain the materials needed to enter Iran legally. Iran enforces such strict rules namely because the nation has played host to a large number of Afghan refugees since 1978. At its height in 1991 the number of Afghan refugees in Iran reached 3 million, and currently consists of approximately 950,000 Afghans, the second highest refugee population in the world.<sup>68</sup> Many scholars have noted

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<sup>66</sup> Kashani-Sabet, “The Haves and the Have Nots”, 195.

<sup>67</sup> Shirin Ebadi, *Refugee Rights in Iran*, trans. Banafsheh Keynoush, Lebanon: Saqi Books in association with UNHCR, 2008, 22 & 31.

<sup>68</sup> “Islamic Republic of Iran,” UNHCR, accessed Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2015 via <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e486f96&submit=GO>;

“Afghanistan xiv Afghan Refugee in Iran,” *Encyclopedia Iranica*, accessed Mar. 12<sup>th</sup> 2015 via <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/afghanistan-xiv-afghan-refugees-in-iran-2>

the Iranian government's erratic, continuously shifting policies regarding its Afghan population, arguing their unstable place in Iranian society allows the state to exploit them as a source of cheap labor.<sup>69</sup> While the state deems such foreign nationals as non-ideal members of Iranian society, the Islamic Republic indeed values them for their disposable labor.

In terms of Iranian-born nationals, the population comprises a vast array of ethnic and linguistic diversity. The previous chapter proved that state-sponsored media presents Persian ethnicity and the Persian language as features of the typical Iranian citizen, leaving the rest outside the national imaginary. Despite such portrayals only 61% of the population is ethnically Persian, followed by 16% Azeri, 10% Kurd, 6% Lur, 2% Baloch, 2% Arab, 2% Turkomen and Turkic Tribes, and 1% other. Similarly, the state's official language, Persian, is spoken by 53%, followed by 18% who speak Azeri Turkic and Turkic dialects, 10% Kurdish, 7% Gilaki and Mazandarani, 6% Luri, 2% Balochi, 2% Arabic, and 2% other.<sup>70</sup> The state generally ignores the minority languages in its various state building efforts. Golnar Mehran concluded in her study of twenty-six post-revolutionary elementary school textbooks that Persian was so heavily emphasized that students were "led to believe that Persian is the only language used by Iranians".<sup>71</sup> Though Patricia J. Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari's study found a slight increase in the use of Arabic in post-revolution textbooks compared to pre-revolution, this increase

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<sup>69</sup> Zuzanna Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspiration and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran," *Iranian Studies*, 46:6, 856; Kamran Rastegar, "The Iranian Mediation of Afghanistan in International Art House Cinema after September 11, 2001" in *Global Frames on Afghanistan* ed. Zubeda Jalalzai and David Jeffries, Duke University Press, Durham, 2001, 149

<sup>70</sup> "Iran", CIA World Factbook, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014, accessed Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2015 via <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>.

<sup>71</sup> Golnar Mehran "The Presentation of the "Self" and the "Other" in Postrevolutionary Iranian School Textbooks" in *Iran and the Surrounding World*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie and Rudi Mathee, Washington D.C.: University of Washington Press, 2002, page 236.

was due to religious relevance rather than being featured as a distinctly Iranian language.<sup>72</sup> The state considers those who belong to ethnic minorities and who speak a minority language as their first language or as their only language to exist outside the mold of an ideal Iranian citizen.

Despite the marked differences of non-ethnic Persians and non-Persian speakers, the state constructs itself as a place where ideal Iranians exist peacefully alongside non-ideal Iranians because of their overall adherence to the Islam. Only 0.7% of Iranian citizens belong to a religion other than Islam.<sup>73</sup> In a declaration to the country on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1979 Khomeini states, “Blessings be upon you for such a government where differences of races and black and white, Turks or Fars, Kurd or Baluch, is not debated. All are brothers and equal.”<sup>74</sup> This mention of “black and white” almost certainly alludes to the United States, which he elsewhere criticized for having poor internal race relations. His comparison between race in Iran and race in the United States implies that Iranians respect one another despite differences in racial markers specifically due to the fact that Iran is a Muslim nation. In a separate message for radio and television from the same day, Khomeini assures the nation, “It [Islam] respects all groups, Kurds and other groups who have a different language are all our brothers. We are with them and they are with us. We all belong to one nation, to one faith.”<sup>75</sup> With this latter statement he creates a hierarchy of relationships between citizens and higher structures, positioning membership to the nation as preceding membership to the Muslim faith in importance to one’s identity. The

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<sup>72</sup> Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari, “Changing Perceptions of Iranian Identity in Elementary Textbooks”, 353.

<sup>73</sup> “Iran”, CIA World Factbook, June 22<sup>nd</sup> 2014, accessed Jan. 28<sup>th</sup> 2015 via <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

<sup>74</sup> Ministry of National Guidance, ed. *Selected Messages of Imam Khomein*,. Tehran: The Hamdami Foundation, 1980, 2.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, page 8.

nation's 'sisters' are notably absent from these proclamations of cross-diversity brotherhood, but a later statement praises Iran's women for their commitment to Islam. In his last will and testament, written in 1983 and published in 1989 following his death, Khomeini writes, "We are honored that our women, young and old, big and small, weak and strong, are present and work, side by side or even better than our men, in raising the status of Islam".<sup>76</sup> Mehran also found that though elementary school textbooks feature one non-Muslim faith, Zoroastrianism, the books discuss the faith in a way that leads the readers to perceive it as a religion only existing in Iran's ancient history, without any communities within the Islamic Republic currently practicing it.<sup>77</sup> Of the many aspects of Iranian nationals' identities, the state values practicing the Muslim faith above all others, and deems those who do not so unimportant that the state does not include them in discussions of Iranian identity. However, simply belonging to the Muslim faith does not characterize one as ideal, instead one must belong to a specific branch of Shi'ism.

The vast majority of the population adheres to the state's official religion, Twelver Shi'ism. A smaller portion, about 5 – 10%, is Sunni.<sup>78</sup> Culturally, a certain extent of tension exists between Shi'is and Sunnis due to political history and the significance of Shi'i martyrdom and the Karbala narrative in Iranian culture.<sup>79</sup> Hamid Dabashi and Peter Chelkowski write that in the 1979 national referendum, to vote in favor of the Islamic Republic one had simply to choose the color green on the ballot,

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<sup>76</sup> Ayatollah Rohullah Khomeini, *Imam Khomeini's Last Will and Testament*, Washington D.C.: Embassy of the Democratic and Popular Republic of Algeria Interests Section of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1989, 14.

<sup>77</sup> Mehran, "Presentation of the Self and Other", 236.

<sup>78</sup> "Iran", CIA World Factbook.

<sup>79</sup> Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*: 77.

representing Imam Hussein. To instead vote no and choose the color red was, they argue, “a total negation of identity to any remotely Shi’i state of mind.”<sup>80</sup> In reference to this perceived strain on inter-Islamic relations, Khomeini extends his line of thinking in his April 1979 statement about the Islamic Republic as a brotherhood by saying, “We are brothers with the Sunnis and we must not claim to be better than they are.”<sup>81</sup> He cautions Iranians against arrogance despite the acknowledged difference and instead pushes them towards amity and humility. Furthering this sentiment, Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari found that Islamic Republic school textbooks downplay the differences between Shi’ism and Sunnism, and instead emphasize a broader category of “Islamicism”.<sup>82</sup> The state does not deny that Sunnism marks a citizen as distinct from the ideal Iranian Shi’i, but makes efforts to create an atmosphere conducive to mutual understanding for the overall maintenance of stability within society. Essentially the Islamic Republic tells its people, certain differences (like being Sunni) can be accepted while others (being Zoroastrian, Jewish, or Christian) are to be ignored.

Less ideal than non-Shi’is are Iranians who do not follow religious law. One particular cultural aspect of secular life that Khomeini criticized relates to marriage. In reference to the pre-revolution, non-Islamic marriage laws he states, “Young boys or girls in full sexual effervescence are kept from getting married before they reach the legal age of majority. This is against the intention of divine laws.”<sup>83</sup> He implies that in order to comply with religious law, young people should get married before the age of eighteen.

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<sup>80</sup> Chelkowski and Dabashi, *Staging a Revolution*, 75.

<sup>81</sup> Tony Hendra ed. and Harold J. Salemson trans., *Sayings of the Imam Khomeini: Political, Philosophical, Social, and Religious*, New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1980, 8.

<sup>82</sup> Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari, “Changing Perceptions in Iranian School Textbooks”, 343.

<sup>83</sup> Tony Hendra ed. “Sayings of the Ayatollah”, 33.

This is especially important for girls as he says, “It is highly recommended that a girl be married off as soon as she reaches the age of puberty. One of the blessings of man is to have his daughter experience her first period not in her father’s house, but in that of her husband.”<sup>84</sup> Khomeini considers Iranians who marry around the age of puberty as ideal and those who wait until later as non-ideal and as acting in defiance of both national and religious law. Aside from ignoring any concerns over a pubescent child’s agency, his statements ignore the practical realities that render marriage possible, namely the financial resources necessary to get married and start a family. The Islamic Republic does, however, have clear views on what economic status is appropriate for its citizens.

Further rules related to family life include laws determining whom it is acceptable for Iranian women to marry. These laws shed light on what characteristics the state considers highly important as they specify who has the ability to reproduce the next generation of Iranians. Article 1059 of the Civil Code expressly forbids Muslim women from marrying non-Muslim males.<sup>85</sup> Article 1060 of the civil code stipulates that an Iranian woman may not marry a foreign national unless she obtains the special permission of the government.<sup>86</sup> Similar rules restricting Iranian men’s choice of marriage partner do not exist due to the patriarchal structure of family life, meaning an Iranian father transmits identity to his child and therefore the identity of the woman is generally irrelevant.

There are many characteristics that mark one as different within Iran. National origin, citizenship status, and religion seem to be the most important identity factors to

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<sup>84</sup> Tony Hendra ed. “Sayings of the Ayatollah”, 109.

<sup>85</sup> “Article 1059”, The Civil Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

<sup>86</sup> “Article 1060,” The Civil Code of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

consider, followed by ethnicity, language, and disability (depending on the origin). Behavioral markers that classify an Iranian as non-ideal include deserting military service (for men), having a relationship with a foreign national or non-Muslim (for women), and individuals who do not follow national or religious guidelines in terms of marriage and the family. The following section will examine what filmic portrayals of children who are in some way marked as different relative to the ideal Iranian look like.

### **The Non-Ideal Child in Iranian Film**

Besides their various individual characteristics that mark them as different, the child protagonists of these films share a common hardship: the inability to communicate. Unlike the children in the previous three films whose critical privilege lies in their ability to utilize the Persian language, the children here find it difficult to engage with their environment through speech. In Bahram Beizai's 1986 film *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, the main character finds himself unable to use his native Arabic to communicate with the Gilaki speaking people of Gilan, a region in the north of Iran to which he flees. Majid Majidi's 2000 film *Baran* follows the story of a young Afghan refugee in Iran who throughout the course of the film does not speak a single word. Samira Makhmalbaf's 1998 film *The Apple* recreates the true story of a social worker sent to investigate a home where two 11 year old girls have been imprisoned by their parents and subsequently not acquired language or been properly socialized. Vicky Lebeau calls the cinematic trope of an unspeaking child "cinema infans", meaning "without language"<sup>87</sup>. She argues that the

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<sup>87</sup> Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, 17.

image of the child without speech relates to modern constructions of children focusing on the inherent otherness children possess.

Before *Bashu, the Little Stranger* even begins, the title identifies Bashu as a “stranger” (gharibeh), making it clear that his character is marked as different from the other characters. The word carries a number of meanings; Zuzanna Olszewska translates the adjective “gharib” as meaning “strange, lonely, foreign”<sup>88</sup>. The adjective creates an image of someone who does not belong, who intrudes into a space. The word tells the audience what to expect when they see him, reflecting the internalized prejudices the other characters in the film feel when confronted with Bashu. This initial characterization prepares the audience to enter a relationship with the film, understanding that some of it will be unknown to them. This holds true, as Iranian spectators quickly discover that none of the main characters speak Persian, thus forcing them to encounter aspects of minority culture within Iran. Beyond being marked as a stranger, other factors identifying Bashu as different become clear within a few minutes of the film. First, Bashu is an internally displaced child who flees his home village after its destruction and the deaths of his parents and sibling due to the Iran-Iraq war. An orphan child without a family or a home, Bashu immediately strikes the audience as an unprivileged Iranian. Second, he speaks Arabic and is thus a member of the mere 2% Arab population in Iran. Third, as a native of the south of Iran, Bashu’s skin color is considerably darker than the light skinned people native to the region of Gilan. His ethnicity and inability to communicate with the

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<sup>88</sup> Zuzanna Olszewska, “‘A Desolate Voice’: Poetry and Identity among Young Afghan Refugees in Iran”, *Iranian Studies* 40:2, 203.

members of the Gilaki community to which he escapes feature as central themes in the film.

The credits begin with white text on a black background with a red warplane crossing the frame behind the title. Next, two planes appear, then three, then four, then nine, then twenty-five. The steady increase in planes implies a growing threat and impending violence. The first succession of shots are quick full-shots of explosions interspersed with images of Bashu's family members dying. This beginning sets up an atmosphere of chaos, crisis, and tragedy, thrusting the viewer and the film's protagonist into an atmosphere far removed from any sense of normalcy. The war attacks Bashu without warning, establishing the film's central problem of how this child can re-build his young life.

The central message of Bashu contends that despite ethnic and linguistic barriers, Iranian nationals can find a way to live peacefully amongst one another and work together in the face of danger. For Bashu, there are a number of differences that members of the Gilaki community must overcome in order to accept him. First, the color of Bashu's skin illustrates how such differing communities can exist in Iran without realizing the other exists. When Bashu reaches Na'i's home, where the majority of the film's action transpires, she asks him (in Gilaki) "why are you so dark"? His physical appearance so starkly contrasts with that of the members of her community that she must interrogate him to discover an explanation for his very existence. Later, she attempts to wash him with soap to try and lighten his skin, in an effort to make him look more like her two small children. Another character, a young girl, rubs his face with her finger to see if the color will come off. Such attempts to render Bashu like themselves, with a

lighter skin tone, exemplify a desire to erase that which renders him other and assure themselves that underneath a certain layer Bashu can be identified as familiar, known, and safe. Authors have noted the film's relationship to Michael Taussig's theory on mimesis and alterity both in form and content. Negar Mottahedeh writes that the film's production functions as a form of mimesis, mimicking Bashu's retelling of how his family perished.<sup>89</sup> On the meeting between Bashu and Na'i, Nasrin Rahimieh argues "they have been forced to confront the illusion of seeing themselves replicated in the images of others"<sup>90</sup>. These various interactions centered on the problem of Bashu's skin color serve to underscore the significance of his introduction into the Gilaki community, and the extent to which a transformation needs to occur in order for Bashu to succeed here.

Beizai includes certain critiques of Iranian society implicit within Bashu's transformation. Rahimieh argues that Na'i referring to Bashu as a "child of the sun and the earth" later in the film defies the need for "a father to give him a name and an identity".<sup>91</sup> Furthering this line of thought, Na'i's declaration complicates the idea that in Iran fathers must transmit identity to their children. She overrides the name given to Bashu by his deceased biological father and renders his potential adoptive father's absence irrelevant. More powerfully, though, her statement redefines Bashu's identity from an ethnic, linguistic, or 'foreign' one, instead to an idea that groups him with all other children in Iran. She re-orders the markers of his identity, privileging his humanity

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<sup>89</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2008, 25.

<sup>90</sup> Nasrin Rahimieh, "Marking Gender and Difference in the Myth of the Nation: A Post-revolutionary Iranian Film", in *The New Iranian Cinema: Politics, Representation and Identity* ed. Richard Trapper, I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, London, 2002, 243.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid*, 249.

above all others. Soon after Bashu arrives, they attempt to teach each other the words for a few objects in their own languages. The scene ends with them learning each other's names, symbolizing the first step towards acknowledging one another's existence as a person rather than an abstract, unknowable being. Lebeau posits that the unspeaking child in film reflects "the basic anthropological situation" which renders the human like an infant<sup>92</sup>. Bashu's inability to communicate with Na'i and his dependence on her compassion to survive mimics the relationship between a helpless infant and a mother. Her compassion literally saves his life twice; first when she tends to him while he is ill and second when she pulls him out of a river.

However, the Persian language plays an integral role in Bashu's acceptance into the Gilaki community. When the local boys fight with Bashu, he silences them by picking up one of their schoolbooks and reading aloud in Persian: "Iran is our country. We are from the same land... We are the children of Iran". Bashu stuns them with the discovery that they all share knowledge of the Islamic Republic's official language. After this scene, the boys still fight with Bashu but are quick to play with him again, demonstrating their changing perception of him from a mere stranger to someone with whom they can engage due to a newfound manner of mutual communication, which underscores the significance of the shared language.

*Bashu, the Little Stranger* presents the image of an Iranian child who is resourceful, brave, and clever. Bashu escapes death in the first scene by sneaking into a truck that drives away from the destruction. Despite witnessing the violent deaths of his family members and experiencing the intense anxiety of fleeing a war zone, he finds a

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<sup>92</sup> Vicky Lebeau, *Childhood and Cinema*, 64.

solution. For some, the fact that Bashu ran away from the war signifies dishonorable actions and marks him as a non-ideal Iranian. According to Hamid Reza Sadr, a major reason the government censored the film from 1986 to 1989 was the objection that a good Muslim would have stayed to fight the Iraqi enemy.<sup>93</sup> In this way, some interpreted him as a war deserter, someone undeserving of Iranian nationality as the previous section determined. The film's emphasis on Bashu's trauma however clearly justifies his actions and challenges this perception. Reza Sadr argues that because child characters push films into "the realm of personal experience and feeling", they "depoliticise the audience's reactions"<sup>94</sup>. To an extent this may be true, but certainly some spectators may perceive the parallel between Bashu's anguish and the trauma some adult men felt after participating in the Iran-Iraq war. Though the film's central critiques focus on ethnic and linguistic issues, forcing the audience to consider the psychological pain suffered by some fighters expands both the cinematic and national discourse on a topic directly relevant to the preservation of the nation.

*Bashu, the Little Stranger* teaches the audience that ethnic and linguistic differences between Iranians become irrelevant in the face of a common enemy, and that Iranians derive strength from their ability to fight alongside one another as a united front. Rahimieh points out that the film's final scene solidifies Bashu's acceptance into his adoptive family as Bashu, Na'i, and her husband chase wild animals away from their fields together.<sup>95</sup> Defense of the home serves as a dual symbol for unification of the

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<sup>93</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 208.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 232.

<sup>95</sup> Nasrin Rahimieh, "Marking Gender and Difference", 246.

family and unification of the nation, stressing that unity beyond differences between Iranians is not only possible but necessary to the preservation of the nation.

*Bashu, the Little Stranger* shows that a child can find success in the form of acceptance by and participation within an Iranian community if he conforms to a certain set of qualifications. In an interview, Beizai notes that during the Iran-Iraq war, displaced children were commonly seen roaming the streets of Tehran. In his own words he asks, “But who can solve the problem of these boys and girls? This film is mainly the answer. We are responsible for the young generation.”<sup>96</sup> Finding a common way to communicate with one another, the recognition of one another’s needs, and the exhibition of mutual compassion are ways by which these characters come to empathize with one another. In terms of an Iranian childhood, Bashu’s journey towards inclusion and stability within his new family and community involves preserving his health and hygiene and helping him to obtain an education.

*Baran* also tackles the issue of displacement in Iran but offers a different vision of the future for Afghan refugee youth in Iran. Baran, like Bashu, finds herself in an unfamiliar place and must adapt to the circumstances in order to survive. Majid Majidi’s film begins with a textual preface briefly detailing the history of war in Afghanistan since 1979. Speaking of the 1.5 million Afghan refugees in Iran, the statement ends with this phrase: “Most of the young generation was born in Iran, and has never been home”. Though the film tells a fictional story, Majidi assures the audience that the experiences portrayed by the onscreen characters are strongly rooted in reality. In fact, the actress

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<sup>96</sup> Gönül Dönmez-Colin, *Cinemas of the Other: A Personal Journey with Film-makers from Iran and Turkey*, Chicago: Intellect, 2012, 33.

playing the role of Baran is herself an Afghan refugee that Majidi discovered, and aspects of her character are inspired by young Afghan girls the director witnessed dressing in ‘male’ clothing in order to work.<sup>97</sup> The director frames the film towards a separate audience than the other films considered here. The English-language preface forms part of a larger trend whereby Iranian filmmakers frame films concerning Afghan characters as intended for a global audience.<sup>98</sup>

Baran, unlike *Bashu*, does possess the capability to speak the language in her new space. However, her character never speaks a word throughout the film, except for singing a few words when she believes she is alone. The character’s absence of speech symbolizes her disconnection from those around her as well as an incapability to express herself in this space. Zuzanna Olszewska’s study of identity formation amongst young Afghans in Iran argues that poetry and literary expression function as important modes through which the diasporic community maintains its identity.<sup>99</sup> The fact that Baran does not engage in speech reflects her inability to create or maintain an identity in Iran, underscored by the film’s ending in which her and her family return to Afghanistan.

The first few scenes focus on Latif, an Iranian teenager who works at a construction site that becomes the film’s central setting. Following Latif for the first few minutes allows the viewer to understand that he, not Baran, will act as the main character. Indeed throughout the film, the spectator perceives Baran through Latif’s point of view, and she constitutes an object of study. This perspective constitutes a shift from that of *Bashu*, in which the character marked by difference acts as the protagonist.

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<sup>97</sup> Dönmez-Colin, *Cinemas of the Other*, 70 & 76.

<sup>98</sup> Rastegar, “Global Frames on Afghanistan”, 157.

<sup>99</sup> Olszewska, “‘A Desolate Voice’: Poetry and Identity among Young Afghan Refugees in Iran”, 203.

The narrative of *Baran* makes the statement that although certain barriers can be overcome, the essential difference of national identity is too great to confront. Baran's failure to integrate into Iranian society is symbolized by Latif's failure to formally enter into a romantic relationship with her. In her examination of young Afghans' political concerns in Iran, Olszewska cites a teenage girl who dreams of advancing her status in society by marrying an Iranian man.<sup>100</sup> She notes that the girl perceives marriage to an Iranian national as her only chance for upward social mobility in a society that both passively ignores and purposefully excludes the non-ideal group to which she belongs. Since identity passes from the father to the child, her future children with such a partner would face a better prospect for a successful future in Iran due to their ideal national status. Being of foreign origin immediately marks Baran as different, but being Afghan has its own particular connotations in Iran. For example, some Iranians use the Persian word "Afghani" as a class and ethnicity based insult.<sup>101</sup> Olszewska notes that for Afghans in Iran "passing" as a higher social class, marrying whom one chooses, and dressing in particular ways "add up to more significant outcomes in the high-stakes game of status performance and mobility".<sup>102</sup> Though Latif comes from a lower social class, his status as an Iranian national would prove beneficial to Baran to an extent.

The film takes place primarily at a construction site employing Iranians from various ethnicities and Afghan refugees. The site is somewhat removed from the city of Tehran, as evidenced by shots from the roof in which various characters observe the distant buildings. Baran dresses as a boy in order to work at the site to replace her father,

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<sup>100</sup> Zuzanna Olszewska, "Classy Kids and Down-at-Heel Intellectuals: Status Aspiration and Blind Spots in the Contemporary Ethnography of Iran", *Iranian Studies* 46:6, 847.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, 850.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, 860.

Najaf, who broke his leg. This gendered disguise enables Baran to enter and participate in an otherwise exclusively male space, similar to moments in *The Mirror*. Dressing in a way such as to hide her identity further represents the idea that here in Iran the Afghan girl does not fit in.

Though transformations occur that bring Baran closer to conformity to Iranian ideals, the difference of her national identity proves too great. After it becomes clear that Baran cannot adequately perform manual labor, the site manager, Memar, switches her and Latif's positions. Latif initially treats Baran poorly because he perceives her to have taken something that belonged to him. However, after he discovers Baran's true identity, he falls in love with her and begins helping her. In this instance, an Iranian accepts a character marked by difference, making that character's life in Iran a little easier. However, the film ends with Baran and her family returning to Afghanistan, asserting that life in Iran for a young Afghan cannot be successful.

*Baran* criticizes both the Iranian state and members of Iranian society for the unkind manner in which they treat Afghans. Regardless of her attempt to participate as a productive member of Iranian society, Baran and her family cannot find permanent refuge in Iran. The process by which Latif comes to empathize with Baran occurs because her true gender renders her a love interest for Latif, thus deserving of his compassion and kindness. Though, they cannot get married and fulfill that requirement for transitioning to full adulthood (as described in the previous chapter). Their different realities, both relative to each other and to the rest of Iranians, prevent them from participating in Iranian culture on a similar level as Iranians of their age.

While Bashu and Baran's essential problems are due to state-wide issues of war, the girls in Samira Makhmalbaf's *The Apple* have their mother and father to blame for their predicament. The local, personal nature of the story shows that individuals can affect children just as intensely as large-scale disasters. The film is a fictionalized retelling of true events in a small quarter of Tehran. Zahra and Massoumeh, though approximately twelve years old, rarely venture beyond their home's gate and speak in an unintelligible language that only they understand. A neighbor writes to the government and a social worker comes to the home to improve the girls' situation. The title references one of the film's main symbols. When the social worker asks the girls if they want anything, they request an apple. Later, in an exercise of forced perspective, the social worker locks the father behind the home's gate in order to show him how he has treated his daughters for the past twelve years. While isolated behind the gate, one of the girls hands their father an apple. In the last scene of the film, a boy dangles an apple from a window, taunting the girls' blind mother, who in the last shot grasps the apple in her hand. According to Hamid Reza Sadr, the fruit represents life and knowledge in Iranian poetry.<sup>103</sup> Samira Makhmalbaf's film seems to use the symbol of an apple to extract similar meaning from the events; the arrival of the social worker creates new possibilities for the girls and expands their knowledge and experience of the world, while forcing the parents to confront the difficult reality they have created for their daughters.

The desire for life represents one of the central themes of the film's narrative. The first shot of *The Apple* is one of the girls' arms attempting to reach a potted plant in order to water it. Beginning with an image showing a struggle to cultivate life reflects the

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<sup>103</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 244.

intense struggle Zahra and Massoumeh will face if they hope to someday participate in society alongside their peers. The girls asking the social worker to bring them the poetic symbol of an apple furthers the notions that they both want to expand their horizons but will need help in order to do so. In this way, the lesson of *The Apple* seems to contend that though there may be Iranian citizens who do not treat their children in a manner that conforms with the state's ideology – children should attend school, exercise outdoors, socialize with other children – Iran has enough ideal citizens who will speak out against injustice and attempt to protect both ill-treated children and Iranian society as a whole.

The film ends on a hopeful note, indicating Zahra and Massoumeh will have an improved and possibly even successful future. The father agrees to take the girls out on errands with him, and they set off to explore the streets together. They leave the blind mother behind, but the final shot of her holding an apple hints that she too has attained an understanding of how to better care for her children. Despite the hopeful ending, the film critiques male control over women, evidenced by the social worker's shock at the father's excuse that he cannot let the girls play in the street because a boy could touch them. Hamid Dabashi argues that the film blames the parental generation in Iran for what “calamitous tyranny has been exercised over Samira and the rest of the population, women in particular”.<sup>104</sup> *The Apple* shows children marked by difference in the form of mental developmental delays due to parental negligence. The girls do not behave appropriately in certain social situations but despite their predicament appear relatively happy, and thanks to a neighbor and a social worker will hopefully have a more successful future.

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<sup>104</sup> Hamid Dabashi, *Close Up: Iranian Cinema, Past, Present, and Future*, Verso, New York, 2001, 269.

These three films present children living in Iran whose characteristics somehow mark them as ‘different’ relative to others in their communities. One is internally displaced, one a refugee, and two victims of neglectful parents, though all share a common difficulty in communicating. Beizai, Majidi, and Makhmalbaf portray difference through ethnicity, national identity, language, and disability. The filmmakers construct narratives in which the path to a successful future for non-ideal youths in Iran depends both on the individual child and the society surrounding them. In the case of Bashu and Zahra and Massoumeh, the actions of guiding figures like Na’i and the social worker push the children to be integrated into their communities. For Baran, however, no amount of Latif’s efforts to help her in Iran can overcome the essential difference of her national identity. These films indicate that the Islamic Republic has space for difference amongst its inhabitants, given that they indeed belong to the nation.

### **Chapter 3: Ideal and Non-Ideal Children**

The previous chapters established what types of futures Iranian films foreshadow for children marked as either ideal or non-ideal. Factors such as nationality, ethnicity, and religion impact the way children navigate the spaces in which they find themselves and indicates how others may view them. Though characteristics that place one in the category of ideal or non-ideal influence the children's ability to interact with their environment and successfully solve their problems, the critical privilege in *Children of Heaven*, *The Mirror*, *Where is the Friend's Home?*, *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, *Baran*, and *The Apple* lies in the character's ability to communicate. This chapter instead explores other possible sites of privilege that influence (and in some ways control) the course of a child's life in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Using Abbas Kiarostami's 1991 film *Life and Nothing More*, Marziyeh Meshkini's 2000 film *Day I Became a Woman*, and Jafar Panahi's 1995 film *The White Balloon*, this chapter argues that gender and class form critical sites of privilege that play the deciding role in determining to what extent these children will be able to successfully participate in Iranian society. Setting these films in liminal spaces (a village, an island, and the street) symbolizes the struggles of those unprivileged in terms of gender and class.

#### **Gender in the Islamic Republic of Iran**

Though it is of course possible for girls and boys in Iran to possess a similar level of privilege, their essential difference lies in their gender. The state inherently values its male citizens over its female citizens. According to the Islamic laws of Iran, in terms of

blood money, women and girls are worth half as much as men and boys.<sup>105</sup> According to the United Nations' Gender-related Development Index (GDI), Iran ranks 106, which Elhum Haghighat explains as meaning Iran has a high level of gender inequality in terms of leading healthy lives, knowledge, and standards of living.<sup>106</sup> She suggests that although during the past few decades the government has expanded educational and employment opportunities for women, these women have largely come from the middle and upper classes of Iranian society.<sup>107</sup> Citing quantitative data from The World Bank Group, Haghighat compares women's participation in the labor force throughout three decades and against the other nations of the Middle East. She finds that women made up 20% of the Iranian labor force in 1980, 20% in 1990, and 33% in 2000-2004, and that in 2000-2004 while 11.6% of men were unemployed, 20.4% of women were unemployed.<sup>108</sup> Thus girls in Iran face a future in which they are less likely than boys to possess good health, attain a high level of education, or obtain a job.

Similar to the conceptualization of children as others to adults, a conception of women as others to men exists as well. In his book *Women and Youth*, President Khatami interestingly groups women and young people (meaning children, adolescents and college-aged Iranians) together. His one chapter on women discusses the difficulties faced by women in Iran, the struggle between tradition and modernity, and women in the field of politics and society.<sup>109</sup> Grouping women together with youth indicates Khatami's view that each deserves specialized attention as categories distinct from the rest of

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<sup>105</sup> Ebadi, *The Rights of the Child*, 7.

<sup>106</sup> Elhum Haghighat, "Iran's Changing Gender Dynamics in Light of Demographic, Political, and Technological Transformations", in *Middle East Critique* 23:3 (2014), 313 & 314.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, 318.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, 320.

<sup>109</sup> Mohammad Khatami, *Women and Youth* (زنان و جوانان), 13 – 46.

society, and his writing acknowledges that women face certain gender-based challenges in both public and private life in Iran.

The state publishes school materials that teach Iranian children what values and behavior the government considers appropriate for girls and boys. A social studies textbook from 2003 contains a section instructing children on the social benefits of helping one another. The section describes different activities for girls and boys; girls should help their classmates with homework and boys should help each other do well in sports.<sup>110</sup> Adele K. Ferdows found in her study of gender in Iranian school textbooks that the traits most heavily associated with girls are “mother” and “guide/protector of child”.<sup>111</sup> However there is some difference between descriptions of each gender; the books describe girls as “self-sacrificing” children who “do not venture out” and boys as “adventurous”.<sup>112</sup> The books almost always refer to men by their personal name (84.8%), whereas they refer to women generally simply with the word “woman” (55.1%) and much less by personal name (31.9%).<sup>113</sup> Ferdows notes that two versions of the textbook for future professions exist, separated by gender. Girls learn about sewing, nursing, and food preparation while boys learn about farming and civil engineering.<sup>114</sup> She writes that “a majority of Iranian women support the Islamic system and many actively participate to promote the official regulations and rules regarding women.”<sup>115</sup> In a similar study of Iranian school textbooks, Patricia Higgins and Pirouz Shoar-Ghaffari find that textbooks

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<sup>110</sup> *Social Studies for Year One*, Tehran: The Islamic Republic of Iran Department of Education, 2003, 80.

<sup>111</sup> Adele K. Ferdows, “Gender Roles in Iranian Public School Textbooks”, in *Children in the Muslim Middle East* ed. Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995, 329 & 331.

<sup>112</sup> Ferdows, *Gender Roles in Iranian Textbooks*, 333.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, 330.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, 327.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid*, 334.

from the mid-1980s present women as largely responsible for completing housework, while a lesser number perform agricultural work or teach children in schools.<sup>116</sup> In contrast, the books present men as largely working outside of the home. Therefore, state published materials encourage girls and boys to pursue different careers as well as encourages different values to adopt.

The Islamic Republic of Iran greatly values the role of motherhood. Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet notes that after the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the state began celebrating Mother's Day on the day of Fatima's birthday. The government made the association between Iranian mothers and Fatima in order to emphasize the Islamic and familial values Fatima embodied that the state valued, namely her chastity, religiosity, and her domesticity.<sup>117</sup> According to Kashani-Sabet, Ali Shariati revered the values of propriety and motherhood for the Iranian woman.<sup>118</sup> Girls in Iran grow up learning that society considers their reproductive capabilities of value.

As Yuval-Davis explains, a national ideology based on assimilation theoretically erases the societal divisions otherwise inherent in ethnic differences.<sup>119</sup> Yuval-Davis and Anthias argue, the woman represents "the maintenance of the ethnic boundary" within the nation.<sup>120</sup> Tamar Mayer explains that nationalisms are created as heterosexual male constructs whose purpose is to perpetuate patriarchal hierarchies and norms.<sup>121</sup> Thus

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<sup>116</sup> Higgins and Shoar-Ghaffari, "Changing Perceptions of Iranian Identity in Elementary Textbooks", 356.

<sup>117</sup> Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, *Conceiving Citizens: Women and the Politics of Motherhood in Iran*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 2010.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*, 209.

<sup>119</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*. (London: SAGE Publications Ltd., 1997), 53.

<sup>120</sup> Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis, "Introduction", in *Woman-Nation-State*, ed. Floya Anthias and Nira Yuval-Davis. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 13.

<sup>121</sup> Tamar Mayer, "Gender Ironies of Nationalism", in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer. (London: Routledge, 2002), 6.

within this system, the role of the woman is centered on the reproduction of members of the ethnic community and transmission of that community's culture and ideology.<sup>122</sup> In following this thought, Julie Mostov contends, when a woman has a child with a member of another nation she betrays her nation and actively participates in causing its death.<sup>123</sup> This is among the many reasons interethnic couples and their children are perceived as abnormal or deviant in comparison to normative society.<sup>124</sup>

### **Class and Refugees in The Islamic Republic of Iran**

In 1979, the beginning of the Soviet War in Afghanistan spurred a massive wave of refugees who fled from Afghanistan into the neighboring countries of Pakistan and Iran.<sup>125</sup> The new Islamic Republic of Iran allowed refugees to enter Iran and offered them education as well as subsidized healthcare and food throughout the 1980s, but retained restrictions on their employment.<sup>126</sup> The types of work Afghans were allowed to engage in included primarily hard labor. These jobs were often poorly paid and many faced exploitation.<sup>127, 128</sup> By 1992, the UNHCR estimated there were 2.8 million Afghan refugees living in Iran.<sup>129</sup> Approximately 10% lived in refugee camps, but most had settled near urban areas.<sup>130</sup> Under President Rafsanjani, the Iranian government began a process of encouraging the repatriation to Afghanistan which included making it difficult

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<sup>122</sup> Anthias and Yuval-Davis, "Introduction", 7.

<sup>123</sup> Julie Mostov, "Sexing the Nation/Desexing the Body", in *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing the Nation*, ed. Tamar Mayer. (London: Routledge, 2002), 45.

<sup>124</sup> Sheila Allen, "Identity: feminist perspectives on 'race', ethnicity and nationality", in *Gender, Ethnicity and Political Ideologies*, ed. Nickie Charles and Helen Hintjens. (London: Routledge, 1998), 60.

<sup>125</sup> Fariba Adelhah and Zuzanna Olszewska, "The Iranian Afghans," *Iranian Studies* 40, no. 2 (2007): 138.

<sup>126</sup> U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, "World Refugee Survey 2009: Iran", accessed December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, <http://www.refugees.org/resources/refugee-warehousing/archived-world-refugee-surveys/2009-wrs-country-updates/iran.html>

<sup>127</sup> Diana Glazebrook and Mohammad Jalal Abbasi-Shavazi, "Being Neighbors to Imam Reza: Pilgrimage Practices and Return Intentions of Hazara Afghans Living in Mashhad, Iran", *Iranian Studies*, 40 no.2 (2007), 140.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

<sup>129</sup> Adelhah and Olszewska, *The Iranian Afghans*, 142.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid*, 141.

to renew their refugee papers, not allowing newly arriving Afghans to register as refugees, and denying them access to public services.<sup>131</sup> These circumstances forced many to live, and remain in impoverished situations. Within Iran, the early 2000s marked a shift in government policy. Iran passed the “Article 48” law which meant that any Afghan without a work permit was required to leave Iran.<sup>132</sup> While repatriation was the defining element of Iranian government policy in the 1990s, it became much more severe in the early 2000s. Beginning in 2002, Iran began increased the number of so-called “no-go areas” in which foreigners cannot reside.<sup>133</sup> This included areas already inhabited by Afghans, and overall made it easier to deport them.<sup>134</sup> In 2003, the Iranian government began a policy called “Amayesh” which was a new system purportedly designed to re-register the papers of Afghans already in Iran.<sup>135</sup> However, many Afghans have not been allowed to register for an Amayesh card for various reasons.<sup>136</sup> Under President Ahmedinejad, the Iranian government grew more restrictive and repressive towards the Afghan population, and over 100,000 Afghans were forcibly deported in 2007.<sup>137</sup> Since that same year, Iran has not allowed Afghans arriving in the country to register as refugees.<sup>138</sup>

## **The Ideal and Non-Ideal Child in Film**

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<sup>131</sup> Adelhah and Olszewska, *The Iranian Afghans*, 141 & 142.

<sup>132</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan, Closed Door Policy: Afghan Refugees in Pakistan and Iran,” *HRW* 14, no. 2 (February 2002): 15. Accessed Dec 3<sup>rd</sup> 2013 via: <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/pakistan/pakistan0202.pdf>

<sup>133</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Unwelcome Guests”, section 9, accessed Dec 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, [www.hrw.org/reports/2013/11/20/unwelcome-guests-0](http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/11/20/unwelcome-guests-0)

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Unwelcome Guests”, section 8.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> Alisa Tang. “Iran Forcibly Deports 100,000 Afghans”, *Washington Post*, June 15th, 2007. Web. [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/21/world/asia/for-afghan-refugees-in-iran-painful-contradictions.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/21/world/asia/for-afghan-refugees-in-iran-painful-contradictions.html?_r=0)

<sup>138</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Unwelcome Guests”, section 8.

Abbas Kiarostami released *Life and Nothing More* [Zandegi Va Digar Hich] in 1991. The film forms the second in what film critics have dubbed Kiarostami's "Koker Trilogy", which begins with *Where is the Friend's Home* and ends with *Through The Olive Trees*. *Life and Nothing More* blends documentary and fictional filmmaking, following a fictional director (essentially Kiarostami himself) and his son on a personal journey to Koker following a devastating earthquake in order to find the stars of *Where is the Friend's Home* (Babak and Ahmad) and discover how the earthquake has affected them and indeed if they survived. The film compares the perspective of adults and children concerning the disaster, but also specifically contrasts the perspective of the director and his son, who have come from the city, with those of Iranians who live in the countryside. Pak-Shiraz views this film as presenting the spectator with philosophical questions concerning the nature of life, death, and God and presents it within a framework of traditional Qur'anic discourse.<sup>139</sup> The heaviness of the sheer unpreventable destruction weighs down upon many people shown in the film, and indeed upon Kiarostami himself. Mottahedeh quotes the original press book distributed by the Farabi Cinema Foundation in which Kiarostami explains "the tragedy of death grew paler and paler...50,000 people had died, some of whom could have been boys of the same age as the two who acted in my film."<sup>140</sup>

Despite the director's words, Mottahedeh writes that some have criticized the way Kiarostami made this film as dehumanizing.<sup>141</sup> Dabashi quotes a number of critics who present similar complaints, mainly that in privileging the perspective of outsiders and that

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<sup>139</sup> Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 181.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid*, 114.

<sup>141</sup> Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories*, 95.

of children (who demonstrate interest in frivolous things like soccer games instead of the tragedy), Kiarostami cruelly ignores the real devastation of life that has occurred in favor of making a film that appeals to a European, film-circuit audience.<sup>142</sup> Pak-Shiraz correctly points out that the film shows no dead bodies, despite the shots of burial scenes.<sup>143</sup> The accusation holds partly true – for *Life and Nothing More* he received the Roberto Rossellini award at Cannes in May of 1992, and in August the Francois Truffaut Prize.<sup>144</sup>

*Life and Nothing More* begins with the audio of a radio announcer describing the Red Crescent's plea for people to adopt children who became orphaned as a result of the earthquake. As the fictive film director and his son wait in line to pass through a toll booth, the son wonders if the toll booth employees will permit them to pass faster if they pretend to be bringing relief supplies to the two boys they are on a journey to find. The father seemingly half-jokingly responds that his son's suggestion is not a bad idea; hinting at his agreement that the employees (along with the radio announcer) would value a demonstration of compassion (though feigned), a virtue we know from the first chapter that the Islamic Republic reveres.

The most poignant scene of the film comes when the director's son has a conversation with a woman who lost her young daughter in the earthquake. Speaking about the devastation he tells her that God does not desire to take life from his children, to which she responds: "If God didn't kill my child, then who did?" He explains this

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<sup>142</sup> Hamid Dabashi, "Abbas Kiarostami – Through the Olive Trees", *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, Washington D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2007, 286 – 291.

<sup>143</sup> Pak-Shiraz, *Shi'i Islam in Iranian Cinema*, 191 & 192.

<sup>144</sup> Hamid Dabashi, "Abbas Kiarostami", 300.

away, saying the earthquake is responsible, not God, and in fact her daughter was lucky because now she won't have to do her homework. The disconnection between the boy's nonchalance and the mother's desperate suffering points to exactly the disconnect between city life and rural life in Iran. The boy's family and friends did not perish in the earthquake, his house has not been demolished, and he has not been forced to look death in the eye. Despite shared characteristics that mark the boy and the deceased girl as ideal Iranians in many ways (Iranian citizens who speak Persian, live in a family, and attend school), the location of their lives privileged the boy over the girl.

Another scene reflects this contrast between children affected by the earthquake and those who are not. They stop at the side of the road and the father walks into the trees, finding a baby alone in a hammock, softly crying and making other noises to itself. As the father looks around for the child's parent, his own starts to call him back. He runs to his son as the baby cries in the forest. The father's movements are imbued with a sense of urgency, a need to return to his own son. Perhaps viewing this unknown baby, alone in the forest, reminded him of the vulnerability and preciousness of a child's life and the context of the thousands dead from the earthquake awakens him to the need to protect his own son. Why did the baby survive when so many others nearby perished, the film asks.

In contrasting the perspective of the city-dwelling director and son with the lives of the village-dwelling Iranians struck by tragedy, the film presents the spectator with questions concerning fairness, morality, faith, and loneliness. Khatereh Sheibani posits that the director's constant asking for directions in *Life and Nothing More* reflects a

“philosophical uncertainty” which the film borrows from Persian Sufism.<sup>145</sup> She contends that the repeated shots of ruins echo imagery present in Hafiz’s poetry, but instead of simply emphasizing the destruction these images reflect the “isolation of the Sufi in his quest for absolute truth”.<sup>146</sup> She writes that such images highlight the thinker’s solitude, and indeed, the film ends with a sense of loneliness as the director never finds the actors from his film or learns for certain what has happened to them. It is interesting to note that much of *Life and Nothing More* transpires in silence; meaning not without sound with without speech. The silence of the journey connects to Sheibani’s point concerning solitude of the actors. Hamid Reza Sadr takes this silence as “a masterly demonstration of how death and devastation can become a dramatic source of life”.<sup>147</sup> This film shows how children are subject to the random chaos of the universe. Despite parents’ best efforts to raise their children in a way that prepares them for a successful future in Iranian society, some children simply will not have a future.

Instead of contrasting children who will and will not have futures, Marziyeh Meshkini’s 2000 film *Day I Became a Woman* examines gender as the determining factor in a child’s future. The film differs in style from the others this thesis discusses. Split into three shorter sequences, each segment of the film features a woman at a particular moment in life confronting a problem. The first sequence depicts Hava, a young girl whose grandmother explains that since today is her ninth birthday she must veil herself and cease to play with her male friends. The second follows Ahoo, a newly married young woman who enters a women’s bicycle race against her husband’s wishes. The

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<sup>145</sup> Khatereh Sheibani, *The Poetics of Iranian Cinema: Aesthetics, Modernity and Film after the Revolution*, London: I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd, 2011, 45.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Hamid Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2006, 235.

third focuses on Houra, an old woman who has come to the island of Kish (where all three sequences are set) in order to purchase all the goods she was never able to previously acquire. Anna Dempsey argues that setting the film in Kish, an Iranian island in the Persian Gulf, means the female characters in this film exist in a liminal space that renders their presence “invisible to those who reside in the ‘center’”.<sup>148</sup> Simultaneously, however, the space becomes a zone where “those who have been marginalized can assert their right to inhabit the center”.<sup>149</sup> Farhang Erfani notes that Kish plays host to close to one million visitors per year “who come to spend lavishly”, in contrast to the living conditions of those who live on the island who are quite poor.<sup>150</sup>

The film’s title explicitly references the first sequence in which Hava convinces her mother and grandmother to let her play for one more hour, until noon, before she has to come home and stop playing with her best friend, Hassan. The title implies a transformation occurs on this day, as the girl crosses the threshold from childhood to adulthood according to Islamic law. In becoming a woman, Hava’s mother and grandmother expect her to significantly alter her behavior. The first shot is from the perspective of someone on a makeshift raft, looking out to the sea through the black cloth serving as a sail. Later the audience learns this black cloth is actually Hava’s new chador that she gives to a few boys at the beach. The first shot reflects the new challenge before Hava; perceiving the world through a veil which will from now on filter her landscape.

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<sup>148</sup> Anna M. Dempsey, “Telling the Girl’s Side of the Story: Heterotopic Spaces of Femininity in Iranian Film”, in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, 32:2 (2012), 375. (374 – 390)

<sup>149</sup> Dempsey, “Telling the Girl’s Side of the Story”, 382.

<sup>150</sup> Farhang Erfani, *Iranian Cinema and Philosophy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, 118.

This images acts as a metaphor for how she, as a woman, will experience life as she grows older.

The main theme of this segment seems to be that the future of girls in Iran differs, for the worse, from those of boys in Iran. Hamid Reza Sadr argues that Hava is keenly aware that “her new status is a lesser one”.<sup>151</sup> She understands that after the morning passes she will no longer be able to play with her friend Hassan. When he cannot come out to play this morning, Hava finds a solution by buying a lollipop which they share through his window. Dempsey points out that the candy sharing with Hassan represents one of the last moments where Hava can exercise autonomy over her body.<sup>152</sup> This film presents a clever girl who although she cannot alter her circumstances, does her best to enjoy her last fleeting moments of freedom.

Dabashi argues that in terms of realism Marziyeh Meshkini is a parabolic filmmaker, as opposed to Kiarostami who creates films of actual realism and Makhmalbaf who creates films of virtual realism. He writes, “This realism finds and delineates the simple facts, before they have been assimilated into a theory, perspective, ideology, or metaphysics-without allowing the particulars of her observations to claim a normative reality”.<sup>153</sup> He lists some of the abuses Iranian women have been made to endure in the Islamic Republic: forced veiling, violent banning of young women from soccer stadiums, systematic campaign of terror and intimidation or gender apartheid in schools, hospitals, and other public domains.<sup>154</sup> “The fact that emerges from *The Day I*

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<sup>151</sup> Reza Sadr, *Iranian Cinema: A Political History*, 267.

<sup>152</sup> Dempsey, “Telling the Girl’s Side of the Story”, 383.

<sup>153</sup> Dabashi, “Marziyeh Meshkini: The Day I Became a Woman”, *Masters and Masterpieces of Iranian Cinema*, Washington D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2007, 373.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid*, 385.

*Became a Woman* is the systematic, unjust, and endemic repression of women written and carved into the fabric of a culture”.<sup>155</sup>

The film differs from others discussed in this thesis because it directly foreshadows the possible shape Hava’s future could take within the Islamic Republic of Iran with the next two sequences, focusing on a young woman and an old woman. Dabashi writes, “one can easily see Hava as the child of Ahu, and Ahu as the youthful Hura”.<sup>156</sup> Anna Dempsey describes the men chasing Ahoo in the second segment as representing “codes which silence the public female voice and hide the female body beneath the cloak of modesty.”<sup>157</sup> This contrasts with the third sequence in which Houra, the old woman, purchases all the possessions her heart desires and sails into the ocean on a makeshift raft with some local boys. Dempsey writes that this film as whole imagines two possible futures for young Hava.<sup>158</sup> However, the end of Hava’s segment suggests that though girls may have varying possible futures in Iran, their status as ‘lesser’ (as Reza Sadr phrases it) remains unwavering. The last shot is identical to the first, suggesting a permanence and continuity to the condition of girls and women in Iran.

Jafar Panahi’s 1995 film *The White Balloon* suggests a similar permanence to the situation of Afghans in Iran. Unlike *Baran*, this film argues that space exists for Afghans in Iran, but only in the margins. The story follows a girl, Raziye, as she makes her way through the streets of Tehran to buy a goldfish for the evening’s Nowruz celebration. She loses her 500 Toman note and the film centers on her struggle to convince strangers to help her retrieve it. Anna Dempsey suggests that the sidewalk, much like the village in

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<sup>155</sup> Dabashi, “Marziyeh Meshkini: The Day I Became a Woman”, 388.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid, 387.

<sup>157</sup> Dempsey, “Telling the Girl’s Side of the Story”, 383.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid, 389.

*Day I Became a Woman* functions as a liminal space within which the female protagonist of *The White Balloon* can critically observe life in Tehran and assert her right to space. Carla Calargé argues that *The White Balloon* essentially functions as a fairytale, using the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” as a comparative framework. She posits that because the title does not contain a character’s name, the story of *The White Balloon* can apply to any child and that because the child characters do not possess extraordinary qualities, they easily resemble all children.<sup>159</sup> However, the title does reference a character – an Afghan balloon vendor present in the first and last scenes. The “white balloon” is a reference to the fact that he must work, emphasizing this difference between him and the main girl and her brother.

Raziyeh’s journey to find the money ends with the Afghan boy providing a stick and gum with which Ali, Raziyeh’s brother, retrieves the money from the grate into which it fell. Ali gives the stick back to the Afghan boy, and he and Razieh immediately leave. Reza Sadr writes the film’s message is “sentimentalized socialism... suggesting that poverty is not an obstacle in a world in which people are all kind and generous”. He misses exactly what Panahi critiques Iranians for missing: the ignored and forgotten Afghan boy selling balloons on the street to make a living. Indeed the film forgets him for most of the story; he points Raziyeh’s mom in the direction of her daughter in the first scene and only reappears at the end of the film to provide another solution to a problem. The film ignores his perspective and privileges that of Raziyeh, however the last shot of the film makes a significant critique about the futures of the various children in this film.

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<sup>159</sup> Carla Calargé, “‘Le Petit Chaperon Rouge’: un moyen de lire ‘Le Ballon Blanc’”, in *The French Review*, 79:4 (Mar 2006), 782.

Instead of following Razieh and Ali home and thus concluding the main plot, Panahi remains with the Afghan character. The last shot of the film is of the boy sitting on the grate alone, holding his stick with a single white balloon tied to it, as an unseen radio announces the countdown to the New Year. It is an image of a child worker; he is deprived of the pleasure of celebrating the New Year and instead sits in solitude. The film's sudden shift in focus from the simple, entertaining story about Iranian children looking for a lost object to remaining on the Afghan boy, the filmmakers force their audience to confront a tragic image that is representative of Afghan child workers many Iranians likely pass on the street. It is a rejection of the attitude that their plight is to be ignored, which can be interpreted as a criticism of the government's treatment of this population.

In this film, Panahi and Kiarostami show an Afghan character as being helpful to Iranian characters and thus constructive to the society even though his help is brought about somewhat exploitatively. The end is an unexpectedly emotional, yet simple depiction of the realities an Afghan street worker's life in Iran. The difference between his life experience and that of Razieh and Ali is underscored by the fact that he, unlike them, cannot celebrate the New Year. In this film, the cinematic discourse has focused primarily on children's issues of poverty and child labor.

The films in this chapter present contrasts between children who are privileged over others in some way. Whether through unpreventable disasters, assigned gender roles, or the economic class to which one belongs, these filmmakers present children who have little control over their futures. *Life and Nothing More* shows the unfairness of death as a final, though random, determining factor in what shape a child in Iran's future may

take, if any. *The Day I Became a Woman* argues that girls in Iran will have varying futures, they all share a common thread of restricted autonomy, as compared to boys. *The White Balloon* critiques the dismissal of Afghan youth Iran, suggesting a permanence to their poverty and an unchanging future. Together, the three films demonstrate how factors other than conforming to a set of 'ideal' markers can guide the course of a child's life in Iran.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the ways Iranian filmmakers have depicted child protagonists during the post-revolutionary era. The first section examined three films whose child characters could be described as ideal based on their characteristics. These markers, in conjunction with their ability to communicate in Persian, allowed them to interact with their environment in ways that led to them successfully solving their problems. The films *Children of Heaven*, *The Mirror*, and *Where is the Friend's Home* argue that in the Islamic Republic of Iran, children who are citizens, ethnically Persian, who speak Persian, live with their family, attend school, and follow healthy and hygienic practices will have successful futures in this society.

As the first chapter established what an ideal Iranian might look like, the second chapter analyzed images of unideal Iranians. These children were marked by difference in at least one major way; a foreign nationality, a minority ethnicity, speaking a language other than Persian, the absence of a family, and not attending school. The characters in *Bashu*, *the Little Stranger*, *Baran*, and *The Apple* share the inability to communicate with others, hindering the way they interact with their environment. These films tell us that while certain differences can be overlooked or unlearned, being of foreign nationality cannot.

The third chapter considered films where ideal and unideal, privileged and unprivileged characters are directly compared. While the previous two chapters took communication as a crucial site of difference, this chapter considered other major factors that can play a deciding role in the shape one's future may take. In looking at *Life and Nothing More*, *Day I Became a Woman*, and *The White Balloon*, this chapter argued that

differences in class and gender act as primary markers of privilege that determine to what extent a child will have a successful future.

Many of these films quickly establish that the story takes place in a child's world or tells the story from a child's perspective. Whether through the title, credit sequence, or opening shot the filmmakers prepare the audience to engage with the film in a particular way. The primary settings of the films consistently situate the children in liminal spaces, such as alleyways, the streets of Tehran, a town in the countryside, a construction site on the outskirts of the city, or an island off the coast of Iran. Placing the children in these spaces allows them to undergo a transformation. However children, regardless of the plot of the film, necessarily exist in a liminal space due to the nature of their age. As argued in the introduction, children are marked as different from adults because they have not yet reached the culturally-defined boundary into adulthood. Therefore it is possible that Iranian filmmakers are choosing to place stories about children in these settings simply because they are children.

The image of the child in film reveals how a society views its youth in a particular historical moment in time. Such images may reflect state-building projects, societal ideology, or religious-based morals. Moving forward from this thesis, scholars could utilize the framework presented here to gain an understanding of children in other global cinemas and societies. Indeed, examining the ways societies portray their youngest members provides invaluable information regarding race, gender, and class in that society.

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