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Film Review Essay

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Gifts and Kinship: Women as Men's Signs in *ʿArus-e Ātash*

This essay investigates the Iranian film ʿArus-e Ātash*, directed by Khosrow Sināʾi in 1999, through the lens of gender studies. In doing so, it employs Claude Lévi-Strauss' theory of kinship and elementary structures in order to create a context for the social structure of ʿashira as the prevailing unit of society among Khuzestāni Arabs of Iran. The significance of gift exchange as the predominant form of making alliances, as well as the position of women as the nucleus of these exchanges, is further discussed to shed light on the different socialization of male and female individuals in the ʿashira. Using Lévi-Strauss' ideas in conjunction with the gender feminism of Kate Millett and Catharine A. MacKinnon, the study explores how women in primitive societies have the dual function of being the men's property on an objective level as well as the means for alliance-making on a subjective one—a sign and a value at the same time. The essay concludes that men can also be considered as the victims of the patriarchal system since it creates a cultural image of men imbued with excessive masculinity that they may not be able live up to.*

Keywords: Gender; Female Identity; Kinship; Gift exchange; ʿashira; *ʿArus-e Ātash*; Iranian cinema

ʿArus-e Ātash (*Bride of Fire*), directed by Khosrow Sināʾi (1999/1378), is among the few movies in the cinematic climate of early twenty-first century Iran that puts women, and the question of their freedom, in the focus of an objective, critical scrutiny. It asserts its significance by opting for a nakedly realistic lens to explore this issue through which the sociocultural role of men and women is equally spread and dissected in the tapestry of its diegetic narrative. By dint of its disinterested and unvarnished look, then, it stands stylistically opposed to the gender-oriented (whether masculine or feminine) films of its own era[1] and the decades after it. However, as a blatantly feminine work of Iranian cinema dealing with the prison-house of *ʿashira*

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for modern Arab women in Khuzestān and its outworn familial codes of honor and masculinity, no analysis can admittedly circumnavigate the issue of gender at the heart of the film; any evaluative reading of *ʿArus-e Ātash* is thus inexorably subsumed under feminist studies. In the fact of the matter, the majority of the interpretive bibliography generated on and about the film emphasizes the issues of patriarchy and the suppression of women both in the local context of the film and, by extension, the social environment of Iran. Kiān Tājbakhsh, citing *ʿArus-e Ātash* as the ground upon which his research is built, visited the Arab communities living in Khuzestān in order to find answers to questions relating to the forced marriage of Arab women, customs and traditions of Khuzestāni Arabs, and the impact of the patriarchal worldview on the roles and duties of Arab men and women within their family and community. Tājbakhsh, praising the film for its boldness in choosing the taboo subject of honor killing, goes on to discuss such themes in the film as the opposition of culture vs. tradition, the proprietary outlook with which *ʿashira* regards women, and the role of education in Arab women's relative independence.[2] Along the same lines, Omid Bonakdār puts emphasis on the complex and delicate treatment of the film with regard to the feminine concerns of its script, but at the same time views the significance of the film structure on a par with its narrative content. In Bonakdār's estimation, the refusal on the part of the screenwriters (Khosrow Sināʾi and Hamid Farrokh-Nezhād) to make a typically villainous character out of Farhān, who in fact possesses such positive traits as smartness and sensitivity, is one of the film's prerogatives,[3] which, as we shall find out later, ultimately contributes to a deeper understanding of the inherent tragedy of the story. Shāpur Azimi offers a close reading of the film's screenplay with a narrow focus on its ability to create realistic characters. For the most part, Azimi is concerned with the antinomies of Farhān's character, who embodies the male ideology of the *ʿashira* but whose intricacies of personality and temperament at the same time distances him from the typical Arab man. Azimi further ascribes a centrality to the role of Aunt Hāshemieh in that she acts as a catalyst for the revelation of other characters in the film. Azimi's discussions highlight the position and cultural background from which the Arab patriarchy emanates.[4]

On the other hand, more recent studies about the film, even though still pivoting around the issue of women and gender, are primarily informed by more neutral and scientific approaches. For instance, Alirezā Morādi, Tubā Zamāni and Ali Kāzemi employ a semiotic methodology apropos of John Fiske to explore the narrative of the film in terms of its different sign systems; namely social (e.g. rituals, identities and customs), technical (camerawork, lighting, choice of actors) and ideological (modernism, individualism, patriarchy) signs. The authors argue that despite the emancipatory dimension of the movie in the guise of a fight for women's rights, the film nonetheless draws on a modernist approach by using the aforementioned sign levels in order to make a unilateral criticism of the Arab communities, and hence does not take into account the cultural particularities of the Arabs' ethnic life but only manages to draw an image of Arabs which essentially evokes Otherness.[5] Tezhā Mirfakhrāʾi and Esmāʿil Fathi investigate the construction of image of women in the cinematic works of the early twenty-first century in Iran (including *ʿArus-e Ātash*) by using

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an analytical discourse based on such parameters as social class, education, economic independence and personal/behavioral traits. Comparing a host of different female characters in ten Iranian movies, the authors point out how different cultural discourses influence the depiction of femininity in both elitist and mainstream cinema in Iran and draw the conclusion that the filmmakers from both groups tend to build their movies around the type of implied audience that respectively dominates the elitist and mainstream spectatorship in Iran.[6]

While the above-mentioned studies all take into consideration the questions of Arab culture, female identity and women's rights, what appears to be missing is an in-depth analysis of how primitive societies such as the *ʿashira* of Khuzestāni Arabs are structurally formed, which, in turn, will expose the ideological kernel of such communities; consequently, through such an understanding of society, the measures by which men and women are defined can be brought to light. Therefore, the current study aims to put the sociological studies done on the local Arabs' life in Khuzestān into perspective to highlight the socio-cultural aspects of *ʿashira* tribes and the codes and laws that govern them. As an introductory note to the sociological dimension of the study, the theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French anthropologist, will be evoked in order to discuss the formation of kinship in primitive societies and the nuclear position women occupy in such elementary structures. Along the same lines, while it was mentioned earlier that all studies cannot but be feminist in nature when it comes to ʿArus-e *Ātash*, none of the critical cases above are colored by the ideas advocated by prominent feminist theoreticians. Consequently, the current reading employs the theories of Kate Millett and Catharine A. MacKinnon as notable figures of the second-wave feminism who argue that gender, far from being a mere biological fact and hence determinist by definition, is in fact a socio-cultural construction. In conclusion, then, this study will show how the patriarchal culture not only draws the contours of women's existence and delimits their social experiences, but also gives way to an exaggerated form of masculinity in the case of Arab men who, not being able to keep up with this image, become a victim of the system themselves.

Gifts, Kinship and Women

In studies on cultural anthropology, gift exchange is considered as one of the primary forms of reciprocity in tribal communities, which effectively shapes the foundation of kinship. Gift exchange should be perceived in opposition to other non-market forms of trading such as bartering. In the latter, two commodities are exchanged directly and immediately as a form of non-market trade in which both parties submit to the explicit terms of the deal. Thus, through such an exchange, no social responsibility is imposed on either of the trading parties. Gift exchange, by contrast, is different from bartering in that it is performed as a social, communicative act between the giver and the taker. In other words, unlike a real gift for which no return is expected by the giver, gift exchange functions in a way that forms a social tie between two

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parties by creating (explicitly or otherwise) an expectation, or more accurately a *debt*, that has to be repaid by the taker in the future. In the words of Marcel Mauss, such gifts are "in theory voluntary, disinterested, and spontaneous, but are in fact obligatory and interested."[7] Thus it is obvious that gift exchange is a strategy for making kinship and social relations, rather than a simple means for economic trades. Regarding the social implication of gift exchange in primitive societies, Claude Lévi-Strauss writes that "gifts are received, gifts are given ... [but] without any apparent connexion [sic] between what is offered and what is obtained. Thus it is a question of reciprocal gifts, and not of commercial transactions."[8]

In this context, marriage (or more specifically the exchange of women) is also another form of such a strategy, which, according to anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss, stems from the incest taboo among family members. Exogamy, as a predominant rule for marriage, is thus dictated by the very prohibition of immediate female kin as objects for matrimonial reunion. It should be noted that the underlying reasons for this universal law (i.e. the prohibition of incest), is far more detailed and complex to be pursued within the limited scope of this study.[9] The emphasis here is on the significance of women as the nucleus of gift exchange for the purpose of making *affinities* and hence the formation of society as a whole. Therefore, we can observe how laws relating to marriage, which by definition follow the aforementioned taboo against incestuous relationships, have an essential bearing on the creation of civilized societies. As mentioned earlier, in a gift exchange as such, the giver offers a gift (more specifically, female kin) to another family in exchange for having access to the women in the other family. Hence, what should be brought to the focus is the *reciprocity* of such an exchange. In other words, by offering a woman of his own family, a debt is imposed on the other party which has to be recompensed in the future for this relation to work.

In short, Lévi-Strauss believes that all systems of kinship are founded on the very idea of exchange between different classes of a society: the rules of marriage have come about due to this special type of exchange. Lévi-Strauss categorizes this type of human exchange or alliance into two main groups. In the first, where the women in a family are offered to a pre-defined group of people (such as cousins etc.), the alliance has an elementary or *closed* structure of kinship.[10] In the second group, which Lévi-Strauss identifies as an *open* exchange, the alliance is based on "a collection of negative stipulation" in which the women are inaccessible to certain members of the family (brothers, uncles etc.), but otherwise are subject to free choice by the external members of the society as possible spouses.[11] This latter is also called complex structure of kinship by Lévi-Strauss. Yet Lévi-Strauss has a more fluid definition for these structures and sees different possibilities within them as he hastens to add that

> there is no absolutely elementary structure, because only exceptionally can a system ultimately determine one sole individual as the prescribed spouse ... Consequently, even in elementary structures there is always some freedom of choice. On the other hand, no complex structure allows a completely free choice, the rule being not that one can marry anyone in the system, but only those not expressly forbidden.[12]

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Needless to say, this study needs to dispense with the latter structures as they constitute—with certain exceptions—the norm for the urban, civilized models of society in today's world. Thus, the focus will be on the elementary structures of kinship which will be discussed in the context of the film, since in Sināʾi's movie we are faced with rather exceptional circumstances which aim to depict the gravity of inter-familial marriages in a more accurate and tangible manner.

According to Lévi-Strauss, elementary structures can be further divided into two categories: restricted or generalized.[13] The former follows a symmetric rule for marriage where an identical reciprocity exists between any pair X–Y regardless of the patrilineal or matrilineal kinship between the members of the clan. Thus Lévi-Strauss identifies this type of exchange as bilineal.[14] The latter, which more concerns us here, breaks further into two categories where it sees lineage and descent through an either/or divide between patrilineal and matrilineal kinship.[15] In other words, in a family, as the smallest social unit, both the paternal and maternal lines might be recognized, yet the clan or tribe sees the lineage through only one of these lines, and accordingly divides the descent as either patrilineal or matrilineal. Subsequently, the laws, traditions and regulations might be essentially varied for the different members of a clan with regard to their type of kinship and sex. Thus, although accepting the formal similarities and closeness of these two types of lineage class, Lévi-Strauss, regardless of the terms of reciprocity, accentuates the fundamental difference between them, especially in relation to the sex of the individuals.[16] Therefore, he contends that the patrilineal and matrilineal classes do not hold the same rank and position in different primitive communities for the simple reason that it is the women who are being traded by men in a gesture of gift exchange, while the reverse has never been the case. "The total relationship of exchange," he writes, "is not established between a man and a woman ... but between two groups of men, and the woman figures only as one of the objects in the exchange, not as one of the partners between whom the exchange takes place,"[17] and hence "the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship."[18]

It is evident, then, that whatever the line of descent—whether patrilineal, matrilineal or bilineal—the socio-political authority is exerted by men, and masculinity permeates through all stages and aspects of life as the authorial factor. One can thus easily observe how the roles of women and men—whose behaviors and responsibilities within the community are shaped and enforced by this essentially patriarchal culture—are influenced, defined and determined by the very kinship structure in the primitive, tribal societies. That is to say that, contrary to the biological view prevalent in the nineteenth century[19] (which in different shapes and forms has persisted up to the current time[20]) which saw the role of men and women in correspondence with their anatomy and katabolic/anabolic nature, feminists in the mid-twentieth century rightly began to observe that the problem of masculinity and femininity, or in other words the problem of gender, is a social/cultural one. They saw gender as a socially constructed phenomenon, rather than having roots in anatomy or

biology, which is given and transmitted to individuals through a culture of adaptation and conformity. In other words, women (as well as men) are not born into a gender (as Simone de Beauvoir famously said[21]) but rather acquire masculine and feminine traits through the institutions of family, society and the state. Therefore, sex is a representation of the biological identity of women, while gender, by definition, refers to their social/cultural experience.

Through such a new understanding of gender (as opposed to the biological determinism of sex), feminists such as Kate Millett[22] came to argue that women, from the very beginning of their childhood, learn to be docile and subordinate and uninterested in such matters as politics so that power can only circulate among men in the patriarchal society. Thus, for Millett, gender is a social construction that comes about through differential treatment between male and female children. Accordingly, Millett, whose focus in her seminal *Sexual Politics* is directed toward the power relations in the patriarchal society rather than the historical reasons for its genesis, accentuates the substantial contribution of family as an institution that not only acts independently and patriarchally as an agent that provokes its members to conform and adjust; but also thus bridges the gap and makes a smooth transition between itself and the society as the totality from which patriarchy emanates.[23] Regardless of the form of governmental system (and even in today's democratic societies), Millett maintains that the patriarchal society is, in principle, a feudal society in which the father appears as the head of community whose dominance is asserted in the form of ownership over his children and his wife. "Classically," Millett writes, "as head of the family the father is both begetter and owner in a system in which kinship is property."[24] Millett sees two separate cultures regulating the lives of male and female individuals that are conditioned by the experiences of early childhood—experiences which are marked by different expectations that are imposed on the children by their parents and peers. Thus the male child is encouraged to advance his aggressive impulses through an outward projection that celebrates the possession of phallus as a symbolic indicator of superiority while the female child is forcefully directed to suppress such impulses and turn them passively inward.[25]

Similar to Millett, Catharine A. MacKinnon emphasizes the socio-cultural aspect of gender inequality in the male-dominated societies in her *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. At the same time, MacKinnon sees the gender inequality under patriarchy as a result of a culture based on sexuality in which women's submission is *eroticized* in order to satisfy the male desire for dominance.[26] Through a process that MacKinnon calls gender socialization, "women come to identify themselves as such [sexually submissive] beings, as beings that exist for men, specifically for male sexual use."[27] In other words, as men are conditioned to learn their sexual dominance and women their subordination, the roles of masculinity and femininity in the society are defined through the position they respectively occupy in the dynamic relationship of dominance and submission. Therefore, this dyadic relation explicitly creates a gender hierarchy in which it is guaranteed that power is wielded by men only. Further, MacKinnon remarks that it is the masculine viewpoint that ultimately not only delineates the desire of both men and women but

also demarcates the various aspects of a woman's experience. MacKinnon, therefore, concludes:

> The perspective from the male standpoint enforces woman's definition, encircles her body, circumlocutes her speech, and describes her life. The male perspective is systemic and hegemonic ... Because it is the dominant point of view and defines rationality, women are pushed to see reality in its terms, although this denies their vantage point as women in that it contradicts at least some of their lived experience, particularly the experience of violation through sex.[28]

MacKinnon's theory of gender marks a difference from other gender theories preceding it in that she believes male dominance is not necessarily established through a cultural acquisition based on differential treatment, as Millett remarked. That is, she does not believe that differential treatment causes the power inequalities, but rather it is the male hegemony which already precedes the different socialization among male and female humans. She thus maintains that the pleasure men obtain from the very objectification of women reveals the secret kernel of the patriarchal intention. According to MacKinnon, then, not only sexuality "is shaped under conditions of gender inequality" but also this sexuality itself is "the dynamic of the inequality of the sexes."[29]

ʿArus-e Ātash *in a Sociological Context*

When screened nationally in Iran in 1999, *ʿArus-e Ātash* caused a lot of controversy—in one instance, a cinema theater in Ahvāz was burned as a protest against the film.[30] For the most part, these controversial outbursts were fueled by the local Arabs' reaction to the film as they believed it was bigoted against the Arabs and did not portray them and their way of life accurately and realistically. In other words, the Arabs believed that a film made by Tehrani people could not possibly depict the *ʿashira* life and relations in a fair and disinterested manner.[31] While this type of aggressive reaction is a typical response to any depiction of a minority or class in Iranian cinema and television,[32] in the case of Arabs and *ʿArus-e Ātash* it had, in fact, some realistic resonations. Arab tribes of Khuzestān predominantly live in rural, primitive spaces, isolated from the civilized, urban topography of the cities. This isolation is partly due to their way of life and partly due to a deep-rooted public sentiment that regards Arabs as inferior Iranians. As early as the late nineteenth century, Khuzestān was playing a vital role in the politics and economy of Iran. The discovery of oil and the subsequent building of a large oil refinery in Abadan, as well as being the main site for the war between Iran and Iraq, has made Khuzestān a geopolitically and economically significant territory of Iran. Yet during the postwar era, Khuzestān, perhaps due to ineffective policies on the provincial and national levels, has become a rather deprived region. Along with this relative deprivation, Khuzestāni Arabs feel a certain exclusion from other ethnicities living in Iran. Navvāh and Taqavinasab

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have investigated the relationship between the relative deprivation in Khuzestān and the effect it has on Khuzestāni Arab people's ethnic and national identities. They found that "as the feeling of relative deprivation among Khuzestāni Arabs increases, their ethnic identity is reinforced and consequently certain aspects in their national identity begin to wane."[33]

Thus, while the Arabs' reaction to the film did not happen in a void, Sināʾi's movie is subtly aware of the situation in Khuzestān. *ʿArus-e Ātash* is Sināʾi's attempt to bridge the gap between the urban culture of modern-day Iran in 1999 in the city of Ahvāz (as represented by the rationality of Dr. Parviz and his lawyer friend) and the sequestered, rural lifestyle of Iranian Arabs in the suburban palm groves of Khuzestān. Relatedly, while analyzing the social structure of Arab communities in Khuzestān, Amānollāh Qarāʾi Moqaddam identifies *bayt* (home; family) as the smallest social unit; the aggregation of *bayts* will form *ʿashira* (tribe) and the collection of *ʿashiras* will form *taifa* (sect; division).[34] Qarāʾi Moqaddam emphasizes the concept of alliance and collaboration in the *ʿashira* life which encompasses a collective effort in building houses and farm works up to defense against external aggression and "honor killing."[35] According to Qarāʾi Moqaddam, then, Khūzestāni Arabs

> in addition to the national civil code which is executed in all parts of the country, follow rules and regulations particular to their own ethnic communities which resemble an internal law ... [and] has even priority to the governmental rules and regulations ... [and to deviate from it] is deemed [by Arabs] as a capital sin and unforgivable."[36]

The main argument of Qarāʾi Moqaddam is centered on the concept of *nahva*, which denotes the killing of girls or young women for having illegitimate relations (that is, a relationship outside of wedlock) with men or for refusing to marry their first cousins (or other male members of the *taifa*) or for marrying men outside the *taifa* without acquiring the consent of their first cousins. Qarāʾi Moqaddam observes:

> Among the Khūzestāni Arabs, it is customary to divide and distribute the daughters of a family to the male members of the *taifa* and the young maidens are mandated to marry their designated fiancé ... after reaching sexual maturity. This is because the Arabs believe that "girls must marry their cousins" and that "girls are spoken for their cousins" as soon as they are born.[37]

Consequently, we can observe how another set of laws and regulations operate in the communities of Khuzestāni Arabs, which regards, among other things, the murder of female kin for any sexual transgression (that is, having a relationship with a non-Arab or outside of wedlock) a mandatory obligation of all its male members. On the other hand, Zahrā Zolfaqāri, discussing the marriage customs of Khuzestāni Arabs, notes that the insistence among Arabs upon consanguineous matrimony is due to an ethnic desire to keep harmony between the families in a

tribe. The Khuzestāni Arabs hold consanguineous marriage in high esteem because it keeps the blood pure. But further, as Zolfaqāri contends, "they believed this type of marriage will have a more long-lasting stability, and at the same time by giving their daughter to the family of [father's] brother, they made sure there will be peace."[38]

Through this context, we can now have a more comprehensive view about how social relations work in the plot of *ʿArus-e Ātash*. The film tells the story of a young Arab woman named Ahlām, who, growing up in the city of Ahvāz, is now finishing a university degree in medicine. Ahlām is in love with her professor, Dr. Parviz, and they intend to marry. But being an Arab woman means that Ahlām is bound by the traditions of her *ʿashira*: that a woman, when reaching an appropriate age, should marry her first cousin. Ahlām is thus, despite her will, bound by a "contract" to marry her cousin, Farhān—a local boat-rider who smuggles cigarettes from nearby Arab countries over the border. Ahlām returns to her home village and while staying at Aunt Hāshemieh's home tries to talk Farhān into seeing the reality of the situation. Yet both Ahlām and Parviz's attempts to "talk it out" with Farhān and the elders of the *ʿashira* are futile. After an unsuccessful attempt to elope with Parviz, Ahlām is then forced to marry Farhān. The film tragically ends with Ahlām committing suicide on the night of the wedding through self-immolation while Aunt Hāshemieh simultaneously murders Farhān with his own dagger.

Both Qarāʾi Moqaddam and Zolfaqāri's observations find a strong echo in Farhān's early encounter with Ahlām, where he "educates" her about the meaning of *ʿashira*:

> This is not a kindergarten. This is an *ʿashira*, you hear? It's one family, but a large one. It has its own rules, which everybody must obey. If somebody started a fight, everybody would rise to his defense. If somebody made a mistake, everybody would pay. If this *ʿashira* is to live on, the laws must be followed. If the blood of *ʿashira* runs in our veins, we must obey the rules. You are part of this *ʿashira*. You don't like it? It's your own problem.[39]

Similarly, Kiān Tājbakhsh relates how, when interviewing the head of an *ʿashira* in Khuzestān about women's right to work in Arab communities, was met with the reply that "It's not right for them [to work]. I am myself an able man and I can support my wife and daughter. Therefore it's not necessary for them to work. If my wife needs anything, I will buy it for her."[40] This claim by the Arab elder, while aptly capturing the deep-seated tradition that shapes the *ʿashira* life both in reality as well as in the film, is significant on two levels: firstly, it appears that not only might women's occupation induce fear in their men, in that working already signifies a relative independence from men, but it also reveals the insecurity of men as they regard women's working as a sign of inadequacy and incompetence (and even impotence) on their own part. This phenomenon echoes the claim made by MacKinnon that in a patriarchal society it is ultimately the male outlook which defines the social existence of both men and women in a patriarchal

system. At the same time, it is interesting how the issue of masculinity itself in Arab communities is a reaction to the women, rather than being a precursor to their subjugation. In other words, an Arab man would feel he has lost his honor, and therefore his sense of masculinity, if he allowed his wife to work in public.

On the second level, the claim emphasizes how in Arab culture the needs of a woman are reduced to market items that are affordable and purchasable by their men. Additionally, it also reminds us of the issue of trading and gift exchange in patriarchal society, which shows how the women themselves, objectified by men, are caught in this marketing network where they are tossed around without any agency of their own. In the patriarchal society, as Lévi-Strauss remarked, women, regardless of their actual status, are only debts that exchange hands between men. This exchange of women as the most elementary structure of kinship in a clan acts as a guarantor of the coherence and unity of that clan. Accordingly, in the opening minutes of *ʿArus-e Ātash*, the viewer is informed that Farhān, who has not seen his cousin (Ahlām) before, has nevertheless been sending gifts to Ahlām and her mother for a number of years in a gesture of marriage proposal—which is more rooted in an obligatory Arab custom than personal affection.

It should be noted that Ahlām, who has lost her father in childhood, has moved to the city with her mother, has grown up and gone to school there and is now finishing a degree in medicine. One can conclude then, from the *ʿashira* perspective, that Ahlām, not having a man (father) in her life, is just a sign (property) without an owner. In the male economy of the patriarchal society, Lévi-Strauss maintains, women simultaneously embody two symbolic functions as "the subject of the desires of others"—that is, as an occasion for exchange and making affinities and alliance—as well as "the object of personal desire" for satisfying the sexual and *proprietorial* instincts of men.[41] Thus for Lévi-Strauss a woman is at the same time a sign and a value. From this perspective, Farhān's gifts, far from having an emotional value, are signs of a tradition in which a woman is a man's property and can be bought and sold like a commodity. The often repeated line in the movie which Arab women tell Ahlām—"do you want people to talk rumors behind your back?"[42]—is also indicative of this objectified condition of Ahlām, who cannot live and choose independently of the men in her *ʿashira* since they see such independence as a sign of transgression and depravation. Unless Ahlām finds a man, an owner, she is regarded as a wandering figure—an ownerless sign and hence dangerous and threatening. Moreover, even the closest women in Ahlām's life, such as her mother and aunt, view a choice of partner outside the men of *ʿashira* as a transgression. When telling her mother she loves Dr. Parviz, her mother's reply is: "It's all my fault for bringing you to the city. It has put wrong thoughts in your head."[43]

Equally important is the comparison the film makes between the gifts given to Ahlām by Farhān and Dr. Parviz. Farhān's gifts are decorative items such as mirrors, flower pots and tablecloths, which indicate Farhān's view of the domestic nature of in their future. As Shāpur Azimi writes, "Farhān sees everything in terms of money, food, gold and clothes ... He is a man with a patriarchal worldview.

Therefore he believes if 'the wife of a *man*' demands something, he only needs to provide."[44] By contrast, Parviz's gift to Ahlām at the beginning of the movie is a pen. In addition to the sexual, Freudian connotation of a pen as a phallus, which depicts the attraction Parviz is showing to Ahlām, a pen, as a tool for writing (and hence knowledge), appears to be a sign of urban civilization and freedom—an alternative to the forced marriage with a first cousin. In other words, while Farhān's idea of marriage is the domestication and therefore imprisonment of his wife, Parviz's gift suggests the ability to freely write a new future. Thus, from this perspective, it is these two opposing forces that shape the conflict in the movie.

Returning to our earlier remark, we observed how the Arabs of Khuzestān, despite the national civil laws enforced in the entire country, have adhered to their own system of customs and laws in order to be able to keep their ethnic community pure through the generations. As already stated, the women have a key role in the formation of kinship in this Arab culture. At the same time, the Arabs seem to have no choice but to treat women as objects of trade and to sacrifice them in order to keep their traditions alive. It is this tenaciousness and rigidity that ultimately makes them tragically bitter. Accordingly, the movie inevitably ends with the two deaths (one actual and one implied) of the lead female characters – Ahlām and Aunt Hāshemieh. From the first moment Ahlām sets foot in her home village, she immediately becomes a prisoner who can only passively watch, from the window of Aunt Hāshemieh's house whose bars remind the viewer of a cell in a jailhouse, as the events unfold. She is seen in only three external shots during her stay in the village, in all of which she is either being watched by the men of *ʿashira* (particularly Feisal, Farhān's brother) or told by Farhān to get back inside the house. Gradually, the modern, independent woman of the city gives way to a docile, passive woman of *ʿashira*. This transformation can be detected in Ahlām's change of clothes during the time of the film: her urban appearance, combined with her sense of independence and rebelliousness, becomes altered to the local costumes of Arab women and an experience of subordination. Moreover, in a village where hardly any woman is literate enough to read a letter, Ahlām's status as a doctor of medicine is undermined time and again by both men and women of the village. The words *khanom doktor* (female doctor) is always uttered by Farhān with a hint of contempt rather than as an appropriate title for a woman with a university degree in medicine. The tragic ending of the film thus points to the rigid structure of *ʿashira* life which, by definition, cannot assign a position within itself for a woman of Ahlām's stature—an educated, independent woman who does not blindly follow the regulations of *ʿashira* and who envisions a different future for herself outside the bound of her blood community. Hence, the only decision Ahlām is allowed to make on her own, the only place where she can show agency and authority, is killing herself, which, in the film, is shown as an act of self-immolation. Perhaps one can see this self-immolation as another form of *nahva*, which the screenwriters, Farrokh Nezhād and Sināʾi, have refused to directly depict, due to its controversial and taboo nature, in order to prevent a public trauma.[45]

The second death, which is an implicit one, befalls Aunt Hāshemieh who, per her central role in the script, typifies all the Arab women who can only silently suffer and

conform to the masculine customs of their ʿ*ashira* and in turn watch their lives, especially in the particular case of Aunt Hāshemieh, waste away without any prospect for the future.[46] By killing Farhān at the wedding ceremony, Aunt Hāshemieh thus embraces the punishment of *qisas* (retaliation) for murder in the first degree at the cost of avenging Ahlām's and her own doomed fates as hapless Arab women living in a strictly patriarchal society. Curiously, Aunt Hāshemieh, for the better half of the film, typically intends to prevent Ahlām from a tragic fate by easing her into marrying Farhān and making her accept the inexorable rules of the ʿ*ashira*. Further, she possesses a central role in the film as she is in constant interaction with other members of the community and she hears all the conversations. Significantly, her own life story, which is revealed in a conversation with Farhān, is a tragedy in itself: against her will, she is forced to marry the younger brother of her first cousin (Farhān's father) after he refuses to marry her. After her marriage to the younger brother, she realizes her husband is impotent and cannot give her a child, which is the only thing that would give value to her otherwise empty life. Having no other alternative since social pressure impedes her from revealing her husband's secret, she is condemned to a life of silence until her husband dies. But by that time, she is too old to be considered for a second marriage and thus she is forever deprived of having a son of her own. "If things wouldn't have happened in the way they did," she confesses to Farhān, "maybe Farhān was now my own son. Instead of calling me auntie, he would call me mama."[47] She therefore sees Farhān as the son she never had. Yet despite being a submissive character throughout the film, Aunt Hāshemieh is the only woman who shows actual power of agency against the tyranny of men in her community: unlike Ahlām who resorts to suicide, she draws Farhān's dagger in a moment of absolute revolt and murders him with his own symbolically phallic object of male authority. By murdering Farhān, then, not only does she forfeit her own life by later succumbing to the law of *qisas*, she also murders her own sense of motherhood by killing her surrogate son and thus symbolically ending the ruthless cycle which gives birth to this oppressive masculinity. Her final act complements her earlier monologue in which she says, "I always wanted to have son who wouldn't turn out to be like his father. Or his uncle."[48]

On the other hand, the question of masculinity in the film appears to be an issue which manifests itself more clearly in direct opposition to the "danger" of femininity and the equally independent and authoritative potential of female members of the tribe. Accordingly, the film works to draw this vulnerable nature of the power play between Arab men and women. Therefore, it should be said that Farhān, although the very embodiment of Arab patriarchal tradition, is himself a victim of this complex situation. Despite his rough and villainous appearance in the story, Farhān is a rather interesting and compelling character with complexities that define him as all too human. Azimi regards the script as the film's strongest point. Regarding the character of Farhān, Azimi believes that "Farhān is not a one-dimensional character in the script of *Arus-e Ātash*. He breathes, he laughs, he is tough, but he also cries. Farhān is an emotional character."[49] As the film progresses, the viewer begins to see the delicate position Farhān occupies in the community: as a man he possesses all the

privileges that are given to him by the ʿ*ashira*, yet being a man has its own difficulties, as the film shows.

The first conversation between Farhān and Ahlām in the first minutes of the film aptly depicts the power play between the two in particular, and between Arab men and women in more general terms. On the first encounter with Ahlām in the palm garden, Farhān encourages her to get back inside the house so that they can talk later in private. Farhān appears as a caring person who doesn't want Ahlām to be "under the hot sun"; whereas in reality, it seems, he has (like any other Arab man) *gheyrah* (protective jealousy); in fact, he seems more concerned with Ahlām not being seen in public (or more specifically, not to be exposed to the public male gaze) as she is, to his thinking, his own private property. Therefore, in his first appearance Farhān is shown as a rather insecure man. During the conversation with Ahlām, when she admits she does not love Farhān and thus cannot marry him, the viewer is immediately introduced to the other side of Farhān's character, namely his jealous/aggressive temperament: "Who do you think you are?" he lashes out. "You think you're the only woman I can marry to?"[50] This change of behavior has two reasons. Firstly, Farhān is an emblem of Arab masculinity and machismo. In the film, Farhān is surrounded by signs of masculinity and sexuality. On two occasions he is described by Aunt Hāshemieh as a hungry wolf as well as a bull ("Farhān is more masculine that a bull"[51]). Even his incessant smoking seems to allude to these masculine signs of virility. This macho quality is also and more importantly defined as Arab men by not being romantically bound to women. For instance, when later in the film Farhān is eavesdropping from outside on the conversation between women in Aunt Hāshemieh's house, where Ahlām is also present, he is ridiculed by his brother Feisal for caring too much about Ahlām. Again, we see the violence in Farhān's temperament as he attacks his brother to defend his masculinity. Secondly, as women are only considered as a convenient tool for Arab men to gratify their sexual and emotional desires, a man like Farhān cannot tolerate and/or appreciate rebelliousness on women's part. In other words, he is not used to women talking back to him. That is what makes him furious when first talking to Ahlām, who does not appear to fear to speak her mind. It is precisely this boldness in Ahlām which triggers Farhān's anger. He thus aggressively cuts shorts Ahlām's speech, only to allow her to talk again later with his permission. Thus this early conversation highlights the structure of power inside the Arab community.

Furthermore, part of the aggressiveness that Farhān shows is a reactionary opposition to the urban lifestyle of Ahlām and Parviz. For Farhān, for instance, there seems to be no virtue in education, as he repeatedly endeavors to undermine both Ahlām and Parviz's social positions as doctors. In addition, for Farhān this intellectual superiority constitutes a threat to his own position within the community. In the same conversation with Ahlām, after she tries to convince him, in a rather patronizing manner, that they are not a good match for marriage, Farhān's reaction and reply indicate his anger at being mistaken for a simple, foolish man. Farhān's reply to Ahlām's rational explanation is, "That is the problem. People who come from the city think we [villagers] are only a bunch of donkeys."[52] The fact that he is actually not as simple-minded and

vulgar as both Ahlām and Parviz think him to be is part of what makes the character of Farhān an intriguing presence in the film. Farhān is in fact very smart and seems to be completely aware of the complexity of the situation. Yet despite this knowledge, he is insistent that the *ʿashira* laws should be obeyed, no matter what. This duality of mindless machismo (and a disdain for urban people) and actual intelligence is also manifested in Farhān's confrontation with Dr. Parviz. Before uttering a word to him, Farhān starts beating Parviz violently. Only after throwing punches at Parviz's face is he able to sit down and talk the problem out in a more civilized manner. Thus we can see how for Farhān violence precedes rationality, because it is in this way that he can assert his authority and power when confronting "people from the city."

Yet the film also emphasizes the rational/emotional side of Farhān's character. In his private conversation with Aunt Hāshemieh, the viewer witnesses, after all the macho behavior earlier, Farhān's vulnerability for the first (and only) time in the film. His reply to Aunt Hāshemieh, who has come seeking for an alternative way to liberate Ahlām from the marriage bond, is that he knows it is not right to force Ahlām against her will and that he is aware of her suffering; but he simply does not have the competence to handle the situation and bring justice outside the options that *ʿashira* allows:

> Do you want me to be the laughing stock among these people who are not worth a penny altogether? Is this what you're asking me? How can you ask me this? It never mattered to me whom I marry. I never was that kind of a person. I was minding my own business, living my own life. But now I don't know what to do anymore ... It's hard to be a man of *ʿashira*. It's hard.[53]

Thus we can see that the patriarchal society, since it seeks to systematically distribute power among only men and that it defines and redefines gender roles for both males and females, can also turn into a burden on the shoulders of the men who are culturally forced to live up to an unreal, excessive image of masculinity. Just as women in these societies acquire female traits from the day they are born and learn that they have no place or position in the men's game of power except first as objects of desire for men's sense of dominance and sexuality and later as mothers for giving birth to (male) children, men also undergo a similar process of cultural acquisition in which they learn, in the particular case of Khuzestāni Arabs' community as an example, they should defend their masculine honor against other men at any cost. Knowing that he is oppressing Ahlām yet insisting on keeping up the traditions of *ʿashira* at any cost makes Farhān close to tragic figures in ancient Greek plays: his fall is rooted in this blind pursuance of tradition and masculinity.

Conclusion

Drawing on the sociological theories of Claude Lévi-Strauss, this research explored the structure of kinship in the Arab communities of Khuzestān in order to lay the

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theoretical background for investigation of Khosrow Sināʾi's *ʿArus-e Ātash* and its feminist concerns. Further, by evoking the ideas put forth by the second-wave of feminism which theorized how gender is the result of cultural manipulation, this research discussed the male hegemony in the narrative grain of the film and the proprietorial way in which Arab women are regarded in their community. The objectification of women has a twofold manifestation in the primitive society of *ʿashira*: on the one hand, women are exchanged in a gesture of reciprocity between the male members of the society as an occasion for forming bonds between families. On the other hand, from a patriarchal worldview in which women have no rank or position in the hierarchical system of the society, they are reduced to men's signs of property and masculine sexuality and only serve to either gratify the male sexual need as wives or to continue the line of progeny for the reinforcement of the male dominance as mothers. Finally, it was discussed how the patriarchal culture of the *ʿashira* inevitably gives way to exaggerated forms of masculinity which at times do not correspond to realistic expectations.

Notes

1. Instances abound. See *Do Zan* (*Two Women*), directed by Tahmineh Milāni (1999), in which, while the center stage is given to women, the men, as typical of Milāni's other films, are reduced to unrealistically villainous caricatures; *Eʿterāz* (*Protest*), directed by Masʿud Kimiāʾi (2000), depicts its male hero as displaying derailed, exaggerated machismo.
2. Tājbakhsh, "Tradition; Women and Challenges Ahead."
3. Bonakdār, "A Note on *ʿArus-e Ātash*."
4. Azimi, "The Role of Character."
5. Morādi, Zamāni, and Kāzemi, "Cinema and Difference."
6. Mirfakhrāʾi and Fathi, "The Image of Women."
7. Mauss, *Gift*, 1.
8. Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 68.
9. See Freud, "The Horror of Incest"; Durkheim, *Incest: Nature and Origin*.
10. Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 479.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., xxiv.
13. See Korn, *Elementary Structures Reconsidered*, 21–4.
14. Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 147.
15. Ibid., 104.
16. Ibid., 115.
17. Ibid., 116.
18. Ibid., 117.
19. See Geddes and Thompson, *Evolution of Sex*.
20. See Paglia, "Sex and Violence"; Channel 4 News, "Jordan Peterson Debate."
21. De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 267.
22. Interestingly, Millett visited Tehran in 1979, less than a year after the Islamic Revolution, to support an Iranian women's rally on International Women's Day at Tehran University against Āyatollāh Khomeini's policies regarding laws of education and divorce for women. Millett was detained and threatened with jail for being a homosexual but was later released and sent to Paris. See Millett, *Going to Iran*.
23. Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 33.
24. Ibid.

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25. Ibid., 31.
26. MacKinnon, *Feminist Theory*, 130.
27. Ibid., 110.
28. Ibid., 114.
29. Ibid., 130.
30. ISNA News Agency, "On the Centennial of Cinema."
31. Tājbakhsh, "Tradition; Women and Challenges Ahead," 150.
32. See Jām-e Jam Simā, "From Doctors to Wholesalers."
33. Navvāh and Taqavinasab, "Sense of Relative Deprivation," 147.
34. Qarā'i Moqaddam, "Honor Killing," 78.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid., 79.
37. Ibid.
38. Zolfaqāri, "Customs of Marriage," 111.
39. *ʿArus-e Ātash*, directed by Khosrow Sinā'i.
40. Tājbakhsh, "Tradition; Women and Challenges Ahead," 150.
41. Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 497.
42. *ʿArus-e Ātash*, directed by Khosrow Sinā'i.
43. Ibid.
44. Azimi, "The Role of Character," 21.
45. Bonakdār also seems to point to the same idea where he sees the direction and editing of the film paced in a way to exclude excessive violence. See Bonakdār, "A Note on *ʿArus-e Ātash*," 33.
46. Aunt Hāshemieh has a far stronger presence in the film than all the other characters: she is in constant contact with both Ahlām and Farhān; she also continually eavesdrops on conversations where other characters are not allowed to be present and in turn provides secret information for Ahlām; what's more, she intercepts Ahlām's letter to Parviz in order to find out about her secret plans. In short, she contains all the different perspectives in the film in addition to her own, and is in possession of more information than the rest of the characters. In the much-lauded scene where she divulges her own painful tale to an indifferent cow, she also reveals, perhaps in a more effective way than Ahlām's self-immolation, the background which forms the plight of Arab women regarding how their own happiness is tied to having a son so that their child may be free to choose his destination in the future. In this respect, the aunt can be seen as a stronger embodiment of Arab women and their plight in that she has remained, witnessed and endured the suffering.
47. *ʿArus-e Ātash*, directed by Khosrow Sinā'i.
48. Ibid.
49. Azimi, "The Role of Character," 21.
50. *ʿArus-e Ātash*, directed by Khosrow Sinā'i.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.

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