



The Acoustic Screen: The Dynamics of the Female Look and Voice in Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin*

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Abstract:

*Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, the representation of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema has been one of the main concerns of Iranian officials. This concern caused the enforcement of cinematic restrictions on Iranian cinema in 1982, known as the Islamic Codes of Modesty. The prohibition of the close-ups of women's faces was one of these cinematic limitations. Since then, Iranian filmmakers have used a great amount of creativity in their films to not only represent Iranian women on the screen, but also to criticize the gender-segregated laws of Iran. Their creativity and efforts have gradually challenged and changed the modesty regulations. Abbas Kiarostami's film, *Shirin* (2008), stands out in this regard as the film provides an unprecedented portrayal of Iranian women through the use of close-up shots of 114 actresses throughout the film. This paper examines the aesthetics and politics of Kiarostami's cinema through a feminist analysis of *Shirin* in order to locate Kiarostami's film within a larger socio-cultural context of Iran. The main focus of this study, therefore, is to show how Kiarostami uses the cinematic apparatus to highlight female subjectivity not only in literary and cinematic platforms, but also in Iran's history and society.*

Keywords: Abbas Kiarostami; feminism; gender; Iranian cinema; Iranian women; *Shirin*.

The post-revolutionary cinematic works of Abbas Kiarostami have been the sites of film critics' and media scholars' analyses and debates over the years. Among the praises of Kiarostami's cinema, there have also been questions and critiques of the lack of representation of Iranian women.¹ Some critics have considered this lack to be part of Kiarostami's non-political approach to Islamic cinematic restrictions,² imposed upon Iranian cinema in 1982, known as the Islamic Codes of Modesty.³ Others have related it to

¹ Kiarostami started his cinematic career prior to the 1979 Islamic Revolution by making films for and about children for the "Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults." Therefore, some film critics have pointed out that children's cinema helped Kiarostami to align his post-revolutionary filmmaking to the gender-segregated and censored environment of Iranian cinema.

² Azadeh Farahmand, for instance, challenges the lack of female presence in Kiarostami's films by asserting that "the political escapism in Kiarostami's films is a facilitating, rather than a debilitating, choice, one which caters to the film festival taste for high art and restrained politics" (Farahmand 99).

Kiarostami's cinematic style, rather than his reluctance to deal with political and social issues. In this regard, film scholar David Oubiña postulates a "principle of subtraction" in Kiarostami's films: "It is not an adding together of shots but, quite the opposite, what is left after eliminating surplus images [...]" (Quoted by Alberto Elena, *The Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami* 152). This subtractive style is actively at work in Kiarostami's cinema, especially in regard to the representation of Iranian women.

Regarding Kiarostami's post-revolutionary films, Negar Mottahedeh asserts that "woman is what is subtracted from the screen in his oeuvre, and yet, this palpable absence in the actual narrative and on the visual track has given the figure unbounded significance" (91). Mottahedeh then goes on to name the visual treatment of women in Kiarostami's cinema an "absent presence" (Ibid.). There are, however, two major films among Kiarostami's cinematic works that mainly focus on women: *Ten (Dah)*, (2002) and *Shirin* (2008). These two films, aside from situating Iranian women at the center of their cinematic narratives, provide a close study of them within a socio-cultural context of Iran. Both films should also be considered two moments of cinematic rupture in Kiarostami's professional career: In *Ten* he breaks away from the village setting of his previous films by centering on the urban lives of Iranian women in Tehran, and in *Shirin* he diverges from the long shots of his realist cinematic style by presenting only the close-up shots of Iranian women's faces.

Given that in Iranian cinema, "the female body, which has been defined in historically charged and culturally assertive terms, is constantly reinvested thematically and technically" (Moore 1), this article aims to assess the politics and aesthetics of Iranian women's representation in Kiarostami's cinema within the broader context of Iranian society by focusing on two major goals. First, to provide a feminist study of Kiarostami's *Shirin* in order to highlight the significance of Kiarostami's shift from the "absent presence" of women in his films to foregrounding their subjectivity. Second, to underline Kiarostami's self-reflexive cinema in *Shirin* through the emphasis on cinematic spectatorship and artistic connections to other mediums, particularly Persian literature. The feminist approach in this article has a socio-cultural and religious specificity which is mainly based on the official implementation of Islamic Shi'i laws after the 1979 Islamic Revolution and its effects on women's representations in Iranian cinema.⁴

As post-revolutionary gender-segregated laws have attempted to protect Iranian women's virtue and integrity, so have the Islamic Codes of Modesty in Iranian cinema tried to shield the female body from commodification. These codes, applied to the cinema in 1982, affected both thematic and formal aspects of Iranian films. As Hamid Naficy explains, the modesty codes "governed the characters' dress (long, loose-fitting), behavior and acting (dignified, no body contact between men and women), and gaze (averted look, no direct gaze)" (133). Women were

³ According to these codes, close-ups of a woman's face and her body parts, shot-reverse shots of characters in a male-female conversational scene, direct touching, as well as direct looking between a man and a woman were all prohibited. Iranian actresses were also required to wear the veil in all scenes, both exterior and interior.

⁴ As Afsaneh Najmabadi mentions, "One of the problems with current discussions of Islam and feminism is ahistorical generalizations. These generalizations screen away vast historical and contemporary differences among countries as diverse as Algeria, Turkey, Afghanistan, and Indonesia, to name just a few" (Najmabadi 29). This article, therefore, aims to provide a feminist reading of *Shirin* that pertains to the socio-cultural and religious context of Iran.

mainly depicted as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters in the background and therefore did not advance the films' narratives. Also, they "were often filmed in long shot and in inactive roles so as to prevent the contours of their bodies from showing" (Ibid.). The significant point, however, is that since 1982 the Islamic Codes of Modesty have been gradually reinterpreted, challenged, and changed. Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin* is an explicit example of this change. The film utilizes the close-up shots of women's faces as its main cinematic form to not only present a liberated portrayal of Iranian women on the screen, but also to challenge the cinematic conventions associated with the close-up shots of women's faces in Western cinema.⁵

***Shirin*: Mirroring the Self-Reflexive Cinema of Abbas Kiarostami**

Kiarostami's self-referential cinema has provided a unique way for him to highlight the limitations of the cinematic apparatus, among other themes. At the end of *Taste of Cherry* (*Ta'm-e gilās*, 1997), the final scene, depicting Mr. Badii (Homayoun Ershadi) in the grave looking at the cloudy sky, fades to Kiarostami and the rest of the film's cast and crew including the cinematographer, sound manager, and the lead actor. Kiarostami then announces the end of his shooting by asking his crew to rest under the shadow of a nearby cherry tree. Here, cinematic self-reflexivity explicitly shows itself through the emphasis on the act of filmmaking. Further, in *The Wind Will Carry Us* (*Bad ma ra khahad bord*, 1999) there is a scene in which the lead actor, Behzad Dorani, looks into the camera and shaves his face as if the camera is his mirror and he sees himself by looking at the spectators (See Fig. 1). An identical technique is used in *Copie*



Fig. 1 The actor treats the camera as a mirror. (Film still from *The Wind Will Carry Us* (Kiarostami, 1999))

⁵ As noted by many Western feminists, in Western cinema, especially classical Hollywood cinema (roughly from 1917 to 1960), close-ups of a woman's body parts tend to objectify the female body. "The use of such close-ups for the heroine stresses that, unlike the hero, she is valued above all for what her appearance connotes, for her beauty and sexual desirability" (Chaudhuri 37).

conforme (*Certified Copy*, 2010) when Juliette Binoche looks into the camera/mirror and applies her lipstick. In these scenes the screen has two different functions: It works as both a barrier and a connector. The screen separates/connects the cinematic world of narrative from/to the real world.

The interaction between the real and diegetic worlds is also tangible in *Shirin*. The film offers close-up shots of 114 women (113 Iranian actresses and a French actress, Juliette Binoche) in a cinematic auditorium, all of whom appear to be watching a famous Persian romance, *Khosrow and Shirin* (*Khosrow va Shirin*). In fact, we follow the story of Khosrow and Shirin through Shirin's voice-over, and instead of viewing the romance, we watch the emotional and engaging expressions of the story on the actresses' faces. There is no doubt that we, as the spectators of the film, are asked to engage with these actresses, the spectators of the love story within the film. What happens here is the circulation of looks between the film's spectators and the actresses/spectators of the romance. In *The Wind Will Carry Us* and *Certified Copy*, the cinematic self-reflexivity finds an explicit momentum, while in *Shirin*, it exists throughout the 92-minute film. There is no implication of the mirror here, rather the screen these women are looking at overlaps with our screen (as the spectators of the film) and both are aligned with the position of the camera. The role of camera/mirror, therefore, changes to camera/screen and reflection to projection. In this situation, the real world and the cinematic reality interact with each other such that the notion of cinematic spectatorship becomes complex. In this regard, Laura Mulvey, whose familiarity with Iranian cinema provides a meticulous insight into Kiarostami's self-reflexive cinema, points out:

Kiarostami explores the narrow line between illusion and reality that is the defining characteristic of the cinema [...] This 'what is cinema?' approach to filmmaking affects the spectator's relation to the screen [...] To ask the spectator to think—and to think about the limits and possibilities of cinematic representation—is to create a form of questioning and interrogative spectatorship that must be at odds with the certainties of any dominant ideological conviction—in the case of Iran, of religion. (Afterword 260)

Although Mulvey wrote this prior to the making of *Shirin*, there are two main points in Mulvey's description of Kiarostami's self-reflexive cinematic style that are present in *Shirin*. The interaction of the real world with the cinematic reality is reflected through the presence of Iranian actresses. Those who have been actresses on the screen are now the spectators within the film. They might still be considered actresses for us, but their spectatorship is a reflection of our spectatorship. The selection of 113 Iranian actresses pays homage to Iranian cinema as well as Iranian television and theatre with an emphasis on the roles of women across these mediums.⁶ The inclusion of different actresses from different generations also recognizes both pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods of Iranian cinema. We do not get to know anything about the private lives or the characters of these Iranian actresses throughout the film, yet our association with them is through the roles they have played in Iranian films. Regarding the inclusion of a French actress, Juliette Binoche, Sara Saljoughi explains that this “functions to [...] include Kiarostami's subsequent film, *Certified Copy* (2010) [...], but also locates Iranian

⁶ *Shirin*, through its soundtrack, also pays homage to radio and the art of dubbing in Iran. By using famous figures of radio and movie dubbing such as Khosrow Khosrowshahi, Manuchehr Esmaili, and Fahimeh Rastkar, Kiarostami acknowledges an era in Iranian cinema when the imported foreign films were dubbed for screening in movie theatres or for television.

cinema in a global context. Binoche's face thus serves as an index for European cinema in the same way that the Iranian actresses' faces point to the work of Kiarostami's colleagues at home" (526).

Furthermore, *Shirin* signals the limitations of cinematic representation, especially in regard to women, in the context of Iranian cinema and society. Compulsory veiling of Iranian women after the Islamic Revolution has divided the perception and the use of space in Iranian society into two major sectors, the public and the private. Both a movie theatre and a narrative space on the screen are considered public spaces. Therefore, the presence of any unrelated men as spectators in the movie theatre and as cast and crew throughout the film production requires all actresses and those women working on the set to wear the veil. Both of these situations are presented in *Shirin*. In this film, all the women, as actresses and spectators, have headscarves reflecting the religious notion of film viewing as part of an ideological cinematic apparatus in Iran. As Saljoughi writes, "Because he is filming in Iran, Kiarostami is required to observe, at a basic level, the modesty laws by exhibiting women in veils. But, his lengthy mediation on the female face [...] offers a bold challenge to the law's emphasis on not looking at women, at avoiding a spectator-image relationship based on the fulfillment of the desiring male gaze" (533). The representation of the love story of *Khosrow and Shirin* through the soundtrack also hints toward the restricted representation of heterosexual love in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. In other words, the elimination of the image from *Khosrow and Shirin's* love story acknowledges a challenging awareness that its referential point is the representation of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema as both spectators and actresses.

***Shirin*: The (In)Visibility of Iranian Women in Cinema and Literature**

As noted earlier, the actresses of *Shirin* appear to be watching the love story of Khosrow and Shirin on the screen. This romance is an adapted narrative from *Khosrow and Shirin*, the literary masterpiece of the twelfth-century Iranian poet, Nezami Ganjavi (1141-1209), that centers on a love triangle. Shirin, the Armenian princess, and Khosrow, the prince of Persia, fall in love with each other. Although Khosrow loves Shirin, due to political interest he marries Maryam, the daughter of a Byzantine king. Shirin also has another lover, Farhad, who is the master of stone carving. Farhad is trapped by the jealousy of Khosrow and kills himself when he is falsely told that Shirin is dead. Later in the story, Shirin finally marries Khosrow, but kills herself upon witnessing the murder of Khosrow by his son from another woman. This story, as the object of the actresses' gaze on the screen, is provided to us only through the soundtrack. But why does Kiarostami connect this love story from classical Persian literature to the medium of cinema? How do cinema and literature, as the artistic showcases of Iranian culture, represent women? And what is the relationship of this cinematic and literary representation to the situation of women in today's Iran? In fact, the significance of *Shirin* can be found in the connection it creates between Persian literature, one of the main sites of Iran's cultural expression throughout its history, and Iranian cinema, one of the main sites of cultural representation in contemporary Iran. These two mediums have a crucial role in defining and naturalizing the notions of femininity in Iranian society, and *Shirin* explores this role.

Throughout the history of Iran, a woman's invisibility, chastity, charm, and silence have been considered her ideal features. These feminine characteristics of Iranian women have had a major impact on the representation of heterosexual love stories in both Iranian cinema and Persian literature, which entail the recognition of women's presence in their narratives. This

means that the cinematic and literary tropes, used in the representation of Iranian women, often protect these feminine ideals. It is in this situation that classical Persian literature is full of narrative poems on heterosexual love such as *Leyli and Majnun* (1188), *Khosrow and Shirin* (1175-1191), and *Vis and Ramin* (1055).⁷ Furthermore, in Persian literature, as in Iranian cinema, “in the act of narration, the poet [the filmmaker] and the reader [the spectator] are always present and witnessing” (Milani, “The Politics and Poetics of Sex Segregation” 4). This makes the representation of love as a personal and emotional act very challenging. In Persian literature, as Farzaneh Milani explains, Iranian poets and authors “reconciled narrative needs with social properties [...] Some writers, for instance, imported their heroines from foreign lands. Shirin, the lofty heroine of Nezami’s *Khosrow and Shirin* is from Armenia; in the same work, Maryam, Khosrow’s first wife, is Byzantine” (Ibid. 3-4). The prejudiced and possessive protection of Iranian women not only shows itself in these literary works, but also in Iranian cinema. In fact, since the advent of cinema in Iran at the outset of the twentieth century, it took a considerable amount of time before Iranian women appeared on the screen. Dönmez-Colin writes:

The first Iranian silent feature film, *Abi and Rabi* (1930) [...] was a comedy with no women in the cast or the crew. The second Iranian film, *Brother’s Revenge* (1931) daringly introduced two women characters but they had to be played by non-Muslims [...] [The taboo broke] with *The Lor Girl* (1933), the first sound film [...] featuring a Muslim [Iranian] woman, Ruhangiz. (11)

Although in Kiarostami’s *Shirin*, the audio narrative revolves around the love story of an Armenian woman within the context of Iranian culture, we follow the story by meditating on the faces of Iranian actresses. Therefore, the dominance of women’s roles (woman as the actress, woman as the spectator, and woman as the narrator) becomes central in the film. Shirin, the narrator of Kiarostami’s film and the heroine of the classical Persian story of *Khosrow and Shirin*, connects the notions of femininity in Iranian society from the past to the present. This connection signals that the roles of modesty governing Iranian literature and cinema come from the ideological notions of a nation that also controls the representations of literary heroines and cinematic actresses. In *Khosrow and Shirin*, Shirin is a wise, independent princess with power, wealth, and mobility, but her desire for Khosrow, the king of Persia, is totally controlled and regulated. In the film, as we hear, there is a party held in Armenia in which Khosrow demands Shirin’s body. In response, Shirin says, “The king desires an intimate union of Shirin’s body to warm his bed; water to quench his thirst. But alas, it is quenched at the cost of Shirin’s virtue.” Therefore, she denies Khosrow’s carnal request in order to protect her virginity and virtue until she becomes his wife. The presence of Iranian actresses in *Shirin* reminds the audience of the modesty codes, imposed upon Iranian cinema in the post-revolutionary era in order to control the visibility and mobility of Iranian women in this medium. The old and young actresses on the screen, however, show the continuity of the legacy of female presence in Iranian cinema that is becoming more powerful.

The connection between the story’s heroine, Shirin, and these actresses also points to the challenging history of literature and cinema in Iranian society with regard to notions of femininity and representations of women. As Azar Naficy asserts, the love stories of classical Persian literature “are supposed to revolve round the male hero. But it is the active presence of the women that changes events, [and] [...] diverts the men’s life from its traditional course [...]”

⁷ The *Encyclopedia Iranica* is used for indicating the production dates of these Persian literary works.

(117). This strong presence of Iranian women in the narratives of classical Persian literature, however, occurs in a fictional world. As Iranian women gradually start to gain a real, powerful presence in contemporary Iranian society, “their active and subversive function [in classical Persian literature] is turned into a passive and submissive one” (Ibid. 119) in contemporary Persian literature.⁸ The voice of Shirin in Kiarostami’s film is the majestic voice of a woman in classical Persian literature that is going to fade in Iran’s contemporary literature, and the death of Shirin at the end of the film may point to this issue. However, contemporary female writers such as Forough Farrokhzad, Simin Behbahani, and Shahrnush Parsipur have tried to revive the voice of Iranian women in the literary world.

The same situation has happened in Iranian cinema. In pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema, the portrayal of women as either chaste individuals, confined within the familial structure (mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters), or cabaret dancers and prostitutes, were two extreme female portrayals that did not represent the reality of women’s lives at that time. Also, in the early years of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema, the representation of women became radically unidirectional—passive, chaste, and submissive. However, none of these efforts could prevent Iranian women from having a strong cinematic presence. In fact, the Iranian actresses in *Shirin* are continuing the strong presence of Shirin. This time, however, they are not merely performing in a transcendental world of literary narrative or a cinematic fictive world, but in today’s Iran. The continuity of female influence and power from Persian literature to Iranian cinema, and then to Iranian female audiences in Kiarostami’s *Shirin* uses the cinematic apparatus to underline female individuality. The following section focuses on the functions of the female look and voice in *Shirin* to depict this continuity.

***Shirin*: The Liberation of the Female Look and Voice in Cinema**

Besides the historical ties regarding the treatment of Iranian women in literature and cinema, it is the significance of female identification and spectatorship that connects the story of a heroine like Shirin to the actresses and female audiences of the film. In *Shirin*, Kiarostami activates and mobilizes the look in order to represent a heroine’s story to the women/actresses and the female spectators. Considering the notions of female charm and invisibility in Iranian culture, a woman not only cannot be an agent of the look, but she should also veil herself in order to block the male gaze. In Kiarostami’s *Shirin*, however, the Iranian woman is simultaneously subject and object of the gaze, positions that are denied by the cinematic modesty codes and Iranian culture. In this film, the female gaze finds a subjectivity as the circulation of the look centers on “looking” rather than the object of that look. In this regard, Asbjørn Grønstad asserts, “In Kiarostami’s film the object of the gaze is forever severed from the seer, an elision which produces a double absence and accentuates the act of looking as an isolated event [...] [Therefore,] in *Shirin* seeing takes precedence over being seen” (30). There is no doubt that the actresses on the screen are the objects of our look, but due to the aforementioned effect of the

⁸ Azar Naficy in her article, “Images of Women in Classical Persian Literature and the Contemporary Iranian Novel,” explains that many social changes in Iran, including the compulsory unveiling of women during Reza Shah’s reign, occurred simultaneously with the introduction of the novel in Iran. As women were coming to the fore in the society and public spaces, the anxieties of Iranian men found one of its expressional venues within the contemporary Iranian novel. “The women ruling with wit and majesty over the fertile land of classical Iranian literature are stripped and divided in the later romance-novels, and mutilated and murdered as in [Sadeq] Hedayat’s *The Blind Owl*” (120).

cinematic apparatus, the actresses' look is aligned with ours, highlighting the act of our cinematic spectatorship. In fact, what is at stake in *Shirin* is the centralization and activation of female look and female subjectivity as the main components of the narrative movement.

Laura Mulvey identifies three looks within a cinematic apparatus: "That of the camera as it records the profilmic event, that of the audience as it watches the final product and that of the characters at each other within the screen illusion" ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" 208). In addition to Mulvey's categorization, Paul Willemsen defines a fourth look, "the look at the viewer," which is an imaginary look "in the field of the other" (216). All of the above-mentioned looks are active and present in *Shirin* including the imaginary look of the other, which is recognizable through the traces of lights and shadows on the actresses' faces, a sign of the screen in front of these women and a signification of the other's gaze.

In *Shirin*, the four looks of the cinematic apparatus are interwoven complexly into two main categories. The looks of the camera, the audience, and the imaginary other collapse into one look, and the look of the characters becomes the only one standing on its own. However, the characters' gaze is only definable through its interaction with the other three, or the one integrated look. Therefore, the gaze of the female audiences is aligned with the female imaginary look, and both are in interaction with the look of the female characters. What happens here, then, is the domination of the female gaze throughout the film. Although there are some male spectators in the auditorium in the film, they are always in the darkness, in the background, and mostly out of the frame (See Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Male spectators are not visually emphasized in the film. (Filmstill from *Shirin* (Kiarostami, 2008))

The circulation of the female look in *Shirin* influences female identification. Kiarostami uses close-ups as his cinematic approach to convey the articulation of female identification (from the soundtrack's story to the women/actresses who are watching the story, and then to us). By representing the faces of the actresses in close-up shots, the film's spectators become closer to them. This closeness, besides breaking the modesty codes of post-revolutionary Iranian cinema

that are supposed to make Iranian women distant and inaccessible, plays a major role in the recognition of female desire and identification.

In *Shirin*, we do not have any background information about the women represented on the screen, though we know them as actresses and associate them with their roles in previous films. Also, our look constantly moves from one close-up shot of a face to another. But, there is a subtle identification at work that comes from the continuity of the story on the soundtrack as well as the masterly use of close-up shots within the narrative structure by Kiarostami. As Elizabeth Cowie argues, with regard to the conventional use of the close-up in (Western) cinema, “Identification [...] arises not with the visual view of a character but with a close-up shot of the character looking [...] It is an identification of order: I am what I see” (105). Indeed, the reason that Kiarostami provides us with the close-up shots of the actresses’ faces looking at Shirin’s story, without providing us with their point-of-view shots, must have something to do with the process of female identification (See Fig. 3). Cowie, in her explanation of identification through close-up, furthermore claims that this identification would soon transform “to medium-shot from close-up, or to the object of glance, [which] breaks up the absorption in the image of the other [...]” (Ibid.). The exception, however, is Kiarostami’s *Shirin*. Neither does it provide us with the “object of glance,” nor does it move away from close-up to medium shot or long shot. Therefore, the absorption in the narrative is progressive and continuous.



Fig. 3 The actresses’ connection to the story resonates through their emotional expressions. (Film still from *Shirin*)

As the female look becomes active in *Shirin*, the fetishization of the female body fades away. Regardless of the static impression assigned to the close-up and the closeness of the female body to the audience, which might provoke the implication of possession and fetishism as is the case in classical Hollywood cinema (roughly from 1917 to 1960), the close-ups of *Shirin* work towards subjectification of the female body rather than its objectification. The women in the film are introduced to us, from the beginning, in close-up shots and throughout the film their proximity to us remains immutable. The close-up shots, therefore, do not break the female body; rather, they dominate it. In fact, it is mainly through these close-ups, and through the look and

the values associated with it, that the female identification in the film can be understood. It is because “spectatorship refers not just to the acts of watching and listening and not just to identification with human figures projected on the screen, but rather to the various values with which film viewing is invested” (Mayne 31).

The significance of the female look and spectatorship in *Shirin* constitutes another instance of self-reflexivity in Kiarostami’s cinema. Generally, in cinema it is accepted that “the spectator has the privilege of ‘invisibility,’ looking without being looked at” (Stacey 21). In *Shirin*, however, we not only watch the women/actresses of the film as the spectators of Shirin’s love story, but we also get involved in a cinematic reality that reflects the reality of our own spectatorship. In Laura Mulvey’s words, “In Kiarostami’s cinema, an aesthetic of digression leads toward an aesthetic of reality, not in a simple opposition to fiction, but towards ways in which the cinema acknowledges the limitations of representation” (*Death 24x a Second* 125).

This self-referentiality of cinema and “the limitations of representation” manifest themselves in *Shirin* through the separation of the image and sound tracks. There is one dominant voice in the film and that is the female voice-over. Therefore, as much as the treatment of the female body and the unleashing of the female look are important in *Shirin*, so is the liberation of the female voice. Throughout the history of Iran, the female body and voice have been oppressed as “both tongue and body can speak [...] Both are powerful transmitters of messages. Both can be muted, mutilated, appropriated” (Milani, *Veils and Words* 48). In contrast to the historical attempt at ostracizing the Iranian female body and voice, the separation of the soundtrack from the image in *Shirin* gives an independent identity to the female voice and body.

At the beginning of the film, Shirin directly calls upon her female spectators to hear her story: “Listen to me, my sisters. It’s time for my story. Right here, by the lifeless body of Khosrow.” Then, Shirin explains the events through an extended (audio) flashback, which relays why she is in her current situation. In fact, her voice is auto-biographical and authoritative. These features of Shirin’s voice-over are the same as the characteristics of male voice-over in classical Hollywood cinema. In this regard, Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener, based on Kaja Silverman’s theories of sound in film, write:

Silverman detects in the use of sound in classical cinema a similarly hierarchical gender logic as Mulvey had seen in the visual structures of look and gaze: ‘a textual model which holds the female voice and body insistently to the interior of the diegesis, while relegating the male subject to a position of apparent discursive exteriority by identifying him with mastering speech, vision, or hearing.’ (143)

In Kiarostami’s film, however, Shirin’s voice highlights Iranian women’s powerful subjectivity. As the female voice in *Shirin* is a disembodied voice, the spectators can only relate the voice to a woman named Shirin. There is no other information about the voice and its body, which makes Shirin ethereal and mysterious. To disembody the Iranian female voice is to represent the freedom of Iranian women’s individuality and to expand their power beyond cultural and historical boundaries. In other words, Kiarostami disembodies Shirin’s voice in order to prevent it from localization and limitation. It is only with this technique that the process of female identification—from Shirin, a twelfth-century heroine, to the Iranian female spectators inside and outside of the film—becomes complete. This female identification resonates at the end of the film when Shirin points to the emotions and sympathy of her female audiences by saying, “You listen to my story and cry. Through these tears, I see your eyes. Are you shedding these tears for me, Shirin, or for the Shirin that hides in each of you?”

As Shirin's disembodied voice on the soundtrack creates a mysterious perception of the heroine, so do the images of women/actresses without any voice. Although the women on the screen are famous actresses and may look familiar to us, the elimination of their voices has made them characteristically equivocal in a way that even the visual images of their expressions cannot provide an insight into their characters and personalities.⁹ In the case of either the female image without voice or the female voice without image, Kiarostami prevents the Iranian women from being fully exposed to the spectator's gaze, thus creating a unique cinematic representation of Iranian women rarely seen in Iranian cinema. In regard to the separation of a woman's voice and body in a cinematic representation, Kaja Silverman starkly mentions:

To permit a female character to be seen without being heard would be to activate the hermeneutic and cultural codes which define woman as 'enigma,' inaccessible to definitive male interpretation. To allow her to be heard without being seen would be even more dangerous, since it would disrupt the specular regime upon which dominant cinema relies; it would put her beyond the reach of the male gaze. (164)

Both of these cinematic situations, described by Silverman, exist in Kiarostami's *Shirin*, and each has its own cultural, social, and religious implications. The voice of Shirin may be the voice of each of the actresses or female spectators of the film: a voice from Iran's literary past that summons Iranian women to revive their mobility and courage, and to take actions toward achieving their passions and desires.

By considering *Shirin*, indeed, it is difficult to argue that Kiarostami's choice of these actresses and the story of *Khosrow and Shirin* does not relate to the gender politics of Iran. Through cinematic self-reflexivity, Kiarostami creates connections between spectatorship and identification, desire and subjectivity, literature and cinema, and past and present. He then situates these ties within the socio-cultural history of Iran. Therefore, Kiarostami forms a cinematic aesthetics that reflects the politics of gender in Iranian society. In *Shirin*, he intentionally breaks away from the depiction of women through an "absent-presence" style in order to centralize the Iranian women's look and voice as a contradictory practice against the oppressive gender and sexual laws within both Iranian society and Iranian cinema. This attempt makes *Shirin* not only an aesthetic rupture in Kiarostami's oeuvre, but also a unique representation of Iranian women on the screen in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema.

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⁹ In *Taste of Shirin*, a documentary about the making of *Shirin* directed by Hamideh Razavi, Kiarostami asks the actresses to think about their memories and experiences in order to more easily express their emotions. In this regard, Kiarostami tells his actresses, "The best way is to play a personal movie of your own [...] If you remember a story that made you sad 10 years ago, if you remember it, it will give you a better sense of your role." But, even here, we do not know what these actresses are thinking about, and therefore, our close understanding of their characters remains impossible.

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