

# THE FOIL AND THE QUICKSAND: THE IMAGE OF THE “VEIL” AND THE FAILURE OF ABJECTI- ON IN IRANIAN DIASPORIC HORROR

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A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness [...]. Not me. Not that. But not nothing, either. A “something” that I do not recognize as a thing. [...] There, abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture [...].

— JULIA KRISTEVA, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*

## 1.0. INTRODUCTION

Modern true weird conceptualizes horror as the cluster of unreason emanating from the world-intelligible, recognizable only in its lurking closeness beyond the “self.” The crisis occurs when the image of threat is so intrinsic to the self that it cannot be cast off, as the distinction between the “unknowable” and the “self” blurs beyond recognition. As the very core of a knowledge system turns into an image of threat, its politico-cultural ramifications take the proverbial backseat, as the victim chokes in the apparent image of her own psyche and all that conditions it. They shudder at their own reflections but cannot deny it, as it will be a denial of the self. The plausibility or the coherence of the image in a culture system fades away in the sheer paralyzing terror that the image induces. And there appears the “world-without-us” — an uncanny, un-understandable, and often unknowable “spasm,” paradoxically within the “self.”

In the present study, a preoccupation with the representation of the Islamic culture in Iran falls short to the immediacy of the underlying terror that the image of the “Veil” evokes. The politics of representation of the image halts as both the spectators and victims fail to eject the image from the communal psyche. The line amongst the analyst, the progressive and the “right winger” fade, not just in a shared concern for a Muslim woman negotiating the paternal laws conditioning the taboos, but in an empathic recognition of the

crisis that occurs when the abject casting off of the quintessential image of the woman fails. The “primers of the culture” turn into the threat, unisolatable and thus, unobjectible.

While not exactly thematically similar, Babak Anvari’s *Under the Shadow* (2016) and Ana Lily Amirpour’s *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) might establish the substantiating overlay of the argument to come. The discerning reader may ask the relevance of considering two films by members of the Iranian diaspora.<sup>1</sup> In the post-revolution filmic language in Iranian cinema, there was a clear attempt of negotiation between the state injunctions of *feqh/fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) and the need to portray the national sensibilities. Due to a harness on the absolutist approach of the MCIG (Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance), following Khomeini’s demise and the gradual return to power of the Khatami government, there was a series of cultural policies not exactly adhering to the *feqh* based definition of social reality. Several filmmakers including Tahmineh Milani, Rakshan Bani-Etemad, Abbas Kiarostami, Makhmalbaf and his daughters publicly rehabilitated a more realistic take on everyday reality. This new phase, popularly called the Third Republic, influenced the rise of younger filmmakers to come open with their issues against the *feqh* based gender roles with a vocal need for the freedom for films and other cultural and social media.<sup>2</sup> For the Iranian diaspora, here was a chance to rethink their relationship with their roots, which, so far, they have longed for but have feared. For many, Iranian Cinema, especially following its global critical acclaim, was the one thing that they could identify themselves with. But with the return of the rightist injunctions with the Ahmadinejad Govt., for many of these younger Iranian diaspora or expatriates, a life of following the cultural injunctions was a distant fear, scarier than any immediate threat. Amirpour and Anvari, can therefore, offer an insight into the horror of the “Veil” (one of the most visible cultural injunction) offering a possibility of empathy amongst Iranians in and beyond the Persian shores.

The present study attempts to explore the dynamics of the image of *Chador* and the “fear” in contemporary Iranian diasporic “horror” film. It defies the ongoing controversy of whether “Veil” is an empowering choice for women or a symbol of domestic and societal oppression, offering a third paradigm of interest, exploring the image of the “Veil” as an element of “horror,” which cannot be purged out as the abject symptom of crisis because of its unisolatable association with the imagination of the Iranian “self.” “Veil” acts as either a foil to the terror of the disconcerting nonchalance amongst the urban populace or

an element that complements the said nonchalance. The image becomes almost impossible to be efficiently isolated as the symptom of the uncanny which can then be evicted from the “self” to sustain health. It is not the true-weird Large in Western Horror that defies familiarity. Conversely, its familiarity is what makes it threatening. It’s too near to the “self” to be avoided. Instead of the impulse to willingly dive into the abyss, as Eugene Thacker (2015) quotes Kierkegaard from *The Concept of Dread*, there is a shuddering realization that the abyss is already around the “self.”<sup>3</sup> A quicksand which emanates from the ‘self’ and, in turn, sucks the “self” in;<sup>4</sup> or the dark figure which is indistinguishable from the world around the “self.”<sup>5</sup>

The study intends to consider how the “unreal” presence of the Veil complements, what Barbara Creed calls, the eternal conflict between the maternal authority in the personal space of a female figure and the paternal laws which conditions the taboos and fears of the space.<sup>6</sup> It also seeks to question the contesting dialectics of the image of *Burqa/Chador/Hijab* in contemporary media representations, problematizing the tendency for sweeping generalizations, and understanding the cinematic aesthetic of the image across the psychoanalytic and socio-cultural axes. The case studies will be considered as an extension as well as a product of the layered aesthetics of modern imagination around this most visible identifier of Islam.

## 2.0 SUBLIMINAL FEARS OF THE BARED HEAD: THE VISUAL POLITICS OF VEILS

What is interesting about the niqab is that it isolates the person wearing it, while at the same time, here in the Western world, especially in France, it puts you in the spotlight. That is the contradiction; by wishing to disappear from the public sphere, you are far more visible, you take possession of the public space. It is an empowering piece of clothing, but it can also be frightening.<sup>7</sup>

Ayatollah Khomeini’s regime considered the site of the uncovered female head a contamination of the Shi’ite values of post-revolutionary Iran. To stop further contamination, the MCIG enforced a system of modesty in 1982. Women's bodies became subject to a system of regulations that will project the modesty of Iranian women by standing “warrior like,” against the contaminating forces of Western melodrama's dominant codes of voyeur-

rism and fetishization. Stringent rules on the portrayal of gender relations and direct gaze between male and female characters on screen were implemented. The Iranian filmmakers often satirized such injunctions by scrupulously following them bordering the ridiculous and the unrealistic. For instance, director Tahmineh Milani portrayed the invasion of the *feqh* in the interiors of the bedroom as the younger sister of the female protagonist in *Afsane-ye-ah* (*The Legend of a Sigh*, 1991) was shown wearing a Veil in bed.<sup>8</sup>

Veiling and the dynamics of full or partial covering of the female body has become a recurring concern of the Liberal rhetoric in global media over the last half decade. The iconic July decision of the French legislative units to summarily ban facial wrapping in an alleged attempt to “protect” Muslim women from communal pressure leading to gendered regression, elicited a counter-argument where any pro-secular stance is dismissed as an ethnocentric racist inability to understand “other” cultural practices. While most political analysts have equated the series of spectacles leading to the Burqa ban as emblematic of the post 9/11 ideological and political shift<sup>9</sup> leading to a generic disdain for all visible representations Islam, it remains an effort to reduce the scope of the debate to certain visible representations of a culture than a symbol of a pathological phobia of the “other.” It was possibly easier to make the image of Veil as an emblem of the non-“self” and hence appropriate for summary abjection, than engaging with an exploration of an inheritance of intolerance towards anything beyond the “world intelligible,” let alone in addressing the fact that the image of the Veil has been a site of struggle even within the Muslim communities. Hence, any study of the image of a “Veil” ought not be a homogenous treatment of Veil throughout the communities.<sup>10</sup> Especially, in Iranian Cinema, the study of Veil ought to subvert the conventionally unquestioned Cinematic systems, to credit the spatial and temporal discontinuities amongst the Iranian filmmakers in and beyond the Iranian soil.

In an attempt to place similar rationale in understanding the visual politics of the practice of veiling, it can be deduced that there exists an inadvertent attempt of the media to promote a culture through the visual digression of the truly problematic to a more congenial dogma. This may appear as a significant departure from the initial formation of the public sphere and social/ entertainment media with an urge to hold the proverbial mirror upto the society. The fear, regardless of all possible analysis, persists.

However, a few points may be deduced here. First, an apparent increase in the Veil imagery might be a direct result of the meteoric rise of anti-Islamic aggression. A reactionary adherence with *visibly* “Islamic” customs (facial hair or choice of garments) and recognizable elements of a Muslim habitus (*namaz*, Ramadan fasting etc.) might be construed as defiance against the polemic insults against individuals with certain religious affiliations.<sup>11</sup> Second, the return of debates concerning veiling in the Liberal agenda may also be a digressive ploy to redirect global attention away from the ambivalent grey zone where “religion” and “culture” intermingle, to a more approachable dogma with consignable binaries. The practice “encapsulates [...] a political, ideological and affective heritage that is no less than a specific trajectory of south Asian modernity,”<sup>12</sup> rather than engaging with complicated rhetoric of religion and communal practices as an idealized cultural system symptomatic to certain social conditions.<sup>13</sup> Third, the preoccupation with the Veil rhetoric and the “fear of wrapping” might also be a strategic introduction of those obvious signs of oppression that were conducive to active mobilization in the growing academic practice of third-world feminism as the oft overlooked underbelly in global feminist politics. Practices like honor killing, female genital mutilation, sexual oppression within religious sects made entries in global media with the advent of an endemic trend of creating a binary between secular humanitarianism and the “other” oppressive cultures.

Sharon Todd, in one of the few early articles on the image of veiling (“Veiling the ‘Other,’ Unveiling Our ‘Selves’: Reading Media Images of the *Hijab* Psychoanalytically to Move beyond Tolerance”),<sup>14</sup> holds the issue of intolerance towards *hijab* as a stance supporting the right of many over that of one, as well as stereotyping the idea of the “normative” in a multicultural society. Questioning the representational politics of *hijab*, Todd argues that in the media representation, the iconic use of *hijab* or any other kind of Veiling implicates more an idea of the “self” and what is associated in the imagination of it, than perpetuating the “other.” Such stereotypes establish the definition of a social group and those who are “outside” of it.<sup>15</sup>

The argument takes us far. If we follow the logic that stereotypical images fortifies the imagination of the “self” as opposed to the “uncanny” representation of the “other,” then any inversion of the rationale should also be applicable. If the representation of the “other,” instead of being inherently different from the “self,” reflects the very image of it, then the imagination of the ‘self’ implodes into a fatalistic crisis. For instance, if the media

representation consigns the image that one associates with the “self” as the iconic “other,” then the imagination of the ‘self’ bounces back into an abyss of confusion. To make the long deal short, the “self” looks at the mirror and finds the “other” (enforced by media and other social representation) and recoils in horror.

### 3.0 THE ABJECT THAT I CANNOT PURGE: FEAR OF MUTILATING THE “SELF”

The creeping threat in the two films for the case study never gets assimilated in a rational understanding of the origin of the impending crisis or the justification behind the haunting. The crisis flirts with the victims and the spectators alike in a Ligottian “frolic,” which defies any human attempt of understanding. What remains is a frantic effort to escape from the recurrent image of *Chador*, a stiff moving triangular stretch of dark fabric or yards of floating floral print — images that cannot essentially be cast away as the “other,” on sync with the backdrop offered within the celluloid canvas. The characters cannot purge themselves of the image, as it willy-nilly becomes a part of their essence. The image of horror sinks in and there is no retching it out, as it stops being “opposed to I”<sup>16</sup> and creeps into the “self.” The victims ingest the threat and turn into a locust carrying the seed of horror. I don’t understand the horror because it is in me. It cannot be separated from my “self,” because then the threat will sustain and mutate, and the “I” will die or turn into another unknowable. “I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which ‘I’ claim to establish myself.”<sup>17</sup> “I” am in the process of becoming an “other” at the expense of my own death.

Kristeva’s idea of the abject is not what disturbs cleanliness or health, but it is rather the disruptor of identity, system and order. In the Iranian context, however, the idea of identity and the order may be opposed to each other as the identity is enforced by an order which the identity cannot or will not adhere to. The abject cannot be consigned to any perimeter; it transcends the border between the self and the “other.” It is the element closest to the “self”, yet not exactly the self, which has no compunction to betray the self. Thus, for Kristeva, the culmination of all abjection is the abjection of the self that defies all that which can serve as the basis for the creation of the “self.” The body and the ego are offered for the final castration that mutilates the “self” beyond all recognition. I am no

more because I have purged what I thought is me.<sup>18</sup> Kristeva alludes to the image of a child who swallows up his parents too soon. As the child notices the overwhelming emptiness that is inside “him,” what bubbles up as a response to this self-annihilation (as the closest entity of a child is the maternal figure) is fear; an absolute uncanniness — unapproachable but intimate. Such great is the power of fear that it repudiates everything about the self and casts it without any bearings. Thus, the “self” becomes an exile caught within the perpetual questions of “Where” and “Who” am I? For a member of the Iranian diaspora, this can become a double separation — as the self recognizes the “Veil” as an element of the root culture, forced and defamiliarisingly foreign, but nevertheless a part of the “self” which they have inherited but do not choose — an element of horror, a nightmarish possibility. To cast this out is, in a way, separating oneself from the roots and can situating oneself elsewhere. This purging will negate the sense of the inherited “self,” and will intensify the angst of the rootless. The Who and Where dynamics will pile up with the earlier geographic, and now psychological separation.

#### 4.0 “LIFELESS SHAPE IN A DARK SACK”:<sup>19</sup> WOMEN’S RIGHTS IN IRAN

It has been a standing concern for most Middle Eastern Feminist scholars that most human rights studies, before the iconic 1990 Pohl report, dismiss the everyday discrimination against the women (especially secular women) in the streets of Iran. Though the report intended to be a UN special study on the condition of social dissenters in the post revolution theocratic Khomeini rule, it unwittingly recorded several things.

Women were discriminated and oppressed based on their physical appearance and the “image” they portrayed. For instance, the adherence to the correct way of Veiling and the proper way of conducting herself, determined the degree of safety accorded to a woman.

Rigid parallels were drawn between the “image” of a woman, predominantly represented by the conventionality of her chador, and her political as well as cultural beliefs.

The possibility of any woman beyond the “non-hijab” was summarily rejected. The folds of hijab represented a woman in the then Iranian communal psyche. The image of a secular woman defying the insistence of any kind of Veiling was blotted out thoroughly.<sup>20</sup>

There were distinctions drawn between the “correctly” veiled and the “badly veiled” women in contemporary Iranian society. While the “correctly” veiled women became symptomatic of the “anti-Western credentials”<sup>21</sup> of the Islamic consciousness to the curious, the “badly veiled” ones became collaborators with the West and hence fair game for all state sanctioned violence, dismissal from jobs and harassment in streets being just the beginning.

Later studies made on the then social conditions reflect an interesting phenomenon. Unable to fight the very justification of Islam (maybe out of fear of retribution or probably owing to the fact that most of the dissenters were practicing Muslims), record number of women found ways of defying the discriminatory laws within the permissible grounds of protest. They countered the patriarchal interpretation of the legal tenets of *Shariah* and *velayat e faqih*, by offering alternative liberal readings of the Islamic jurisprudence. While questioning and purging out the very existence of Islam and the visible icons of the religion in popular sentiment, the secularists insisted that the discriminatory rules and subsequent violence are not consistent of the understanding and principles of true Islam. The arguments constituted a parallel school of feminism contained within the ambit of constitutional Islam, yet seeking to modify the legal interpretations and the execution of laws against the interest of women, paving the way to a more flexible and better Islam:

Islamic “feminists” wished to remove *fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence, from the male monopoly. They argued that, throughout history, men had inappropriately defined the perimeters of *shari’ah* laws and kept women secluded in subordination.<sup>22</sup>

This series of counter-movements proposed by Islamic feminists (in lieu of any better word) brought about small but significant victories. Between 1992 and 1997, few revisions were made in the ambit of family law, bringing divorce cases under the jurisdiction of courts rather than the unilateral socially sanctioned abandonment or the discretion of the whimsies of local clerics. However, most such laws and revisions of legal terms were sketchy at best, as the legislature could often neither manage to nor intend to successfully implement the law in favor of the woman defendant. There has, since, been a recurrent conflict between the cleric preferred family courts and the Islamic feminists upholding the UN regulations on women and children rights; fluctuating according to the degree of influence of the clerics and their sympathizers in women groups like *Majlis*. Thus, by the end of the millennium, with the exception of *hijab*, most feminist groups were arguing on



issues external to the grounds of violation of women's rights, more concerned about the idea of authenticity of Islam and improvement of living conditions for women.<sup>23</sup> The "Veil" and the argument around it were consciously repressed as it became part and parcel to the idea of the "self." To a Diasporic individual, the "Veil," therefore turned into a shroud of familiarity and repugnance, oscillating between the identifier of Iranian womanhood and the forced conformation to a root long left behind- unrecognizable in isolation, thus scarier.

#### 5.0 LAMIA ON SKATEBOARDS: *A GIRL WALKS HOME ALONE AT NIGHT*

Ana Lily Amirpour creates a mood of incongruence. Summarily inverting the idea of the 1970s female vampire, the Girl in her 2014 debut "Iranian Spaghetti Western Horror" *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, juxtaposes the fecundity of artistically monochromatic cityscape to a darkness of hopeless survival in a dying society, where any sound is drowned in blaring Iranian rock, drugs, grime and violence. The language and a few articles in confining households determine the culture, but there are precious few signifiers otherwise. Things are left unexplained. In the opening sequence, Arash spares no glance at a ditch full of corpses as he saunters holding a cat towards a shiny convertible. This callous disregard to violence, as the frame freezes to display the title card, becomes analogous to the abandon of reason as violence becomes an integral part of life. As a mechanical whir frames an abundance of machine plowing on, a slovenly father injects himself narcotics listening to television where a man warns about the insecurity of women in this society.

In the dark alleyways, disreputable citizens are stalked by a figure draped in a stiff triangular chador, barely distinguishable against the darkness of the backdrop. Saeed, a violent drug peddler with an eclectic combination of tattoo spots the triangular chador for a second while extorting sexual favors from a prostitute, before it disappears. The Girl, in the first glimpse of her face visible from her chador, appears young and very "properly" expressionless. As she comes out of a stationery store flanked by propaganda posters with a faceless chador on one side and a tele-evangelist on the other, her jeans and striped shirt peeks out as the chador balloons behind her in a wing-like trail. Her chador does not stand out even amidst other women in their hijab and western wear, smoking cigarettes,

as it blends her in the silhouette of the dark alleys. In the bright hipster's den wallpapered in punk rock posters, record boxes and bookshelves, the Girl puts on gothic makeup and shimmies without the telltale chador. The punk session ends in under a minute as Saeed unwittingly invites the Girl (back in her *chador* blending against the dark sidewalk) inside his decadently plush apartment. As he attempts to initiate a sexual encounter, the Girl bares her fang as she sucks and chews out his finger<sup>24</sup> in an adaptive image of vaginal dentate. As the screaming Saeed is fed his own finger, an obvious phallic metaphor, the blood smeared goth makeup menacingly descends upon him as the *chador* settles like a winglike cape around them. Ironically the first words of the Girl, somewhere in the middle of the film, set the logic of the film straight. As the Girl playfully scares a little boy on skateboard, she whispers in his years: "Answer me. Are you a Good boy, or not? ...I can tear the eyes out of your skull and feed it to the dogs. Till the end of your life, I will watch you. Be a good boy!"

As the Veiled Vigilante preys on "bad" boys while skateboarding through darkness, Arash dresses up in a Count Dracula cape to gatecrash a costume party. The similarity between the Girl's *chador* and the Boy's vampire cape is stressed as they face each other in a posh locality; both "Veiled" similarly in goth makeups and stiff fabrics. The usual attacker-victim dynamics inverts as the seemingly fragile Girl in a submissive *chador* becomes the predator and the clueless drugged boy in a cape and tousled hair reminiscent of a *hijab* stands in danger. The "deliteralizing gesture" of the first encounter between the duo stretches out at a wide angle as the audience is prepared for an indescribable occurrence in the context of the "Bad City" where violence is treated in a strangely dissociative manner. The object of threat makes its presence felt as an impassive face looms in a bellowing cape as the shadow in the corner and an eerie spectral disquietude and unrest. The physical distance between the predator and prey withers away as they both melt into the surrounding darkness, in a reflecting similarity of appearance and gesture. He drapes the end of his cape around her and draws closer in a protective embrace. It becomes difficult to tell them apart as the identity of the "self" and the "other" blurs away and any possibility of closing one's eyes at the frightening "other" or purging oneself of the crisis, disappear.<sup>25</sup> Abjection fails and so does any recognizable stereotyping of the fear. The Girl does not match the aggressive lamia like figure who seduces her prey, as her impassive features and 'tame' gestures belie any effort at deliberate seduction. But the one, who crosses the line, dies.

You cannot escape the threat as the threat cannot be defined against the incongruent usual. The aging prostitute rewraps her *hijab* before performing oral sex, the vampire punishes her “bad boy” preys while settling the *chador* around them both and a heavily made-up cross dresser dances around with a balloon in western wear and a *hijab*, while the prey protectively embraces the Veiled lamia veiling her in his Count Dracula costume. The predator and the prey share a kiss, forgives the “punishment” of a rapacious parent and drives away with their cat into darkness and metallic music. The required monstrosity of the aggressive feminine (symptomatic of Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*) is missing as the Veil becomes a foil to the ‘world-intelligible’ yet undistinguishable, and hence unobjectionable.

#### 6.0 THE FLORAL YARDS OF QUICKSAND: BABAK ANVARI’S *UNDER THE SHADOW*

Unlike Amirpour, Anvari has a particular agenda as his object of crisis is much less corporeal and creeps in on the victim and the audience alike as more of a disembodied dread than a distinguishable figure. There is no Veiled phantasm (alive or dead) behind those floral yards, the Veil *is* the phantasm. And as Shideh and the other women walk around draped in this phantasmic entity, the specter or the “true-weird” envelopes them making them reflections of what they fear. The context of the dread is set, as the film opens with a menacing drumbeat in a sterile University corridor with students scrupulously draped in dark *chadors* and properly speaking to their own kind. The protagonist Shideh (Narges Rashidi) sits across a stiff official in a room prominently festooned with a Khomeini portrait, being rejected in her plea for continuing her medical studies. This is the confining world of refusals and dark shrouds for the penitent rebel, as the figure of authority looks on and bombs drop at a distance. As Shideh drives away in tears, she is forced to come out of her dark musings as the culture police stop her and she furtively tucks back any truant curls under her Veil that she is allowed to take off only after reaching home with a sympathetic neighbor.

The Veil persists; as the traditional Mrs. Ebrahimi does not unveil even under an unsettling air raid alarm, standing apart from the “unveiled” Shideh and Mrs. Fakur. In the bright sunny kitchen, the looming threat of Dorsa’s nightmare, the annual draft notice of Iraj ordering him to the Iraq-Iran War and the memories of Shideh’s sleepwalking are enhanced as the taped window casts a crossed shadow at the family. For the first half of the film, Anvari utilizes the classic genre tropes of haunting with the creeping buildup of

repeated air-raids, Dorsa's insistence that a mute boy "told" her of *Djinn*s around them, Shideh trying to desperately resuscitate elderly Mr. Bijari with CPR while an unexploded missile falls through the ceiling and Dorsa's doll Kimia being allegedly abducted by the *Djinn* in the Veil. The Veil imagery enlarges as the toothy missile crevice on the ceiling is *covered up* in a canvas shroud. The first encounter with the uncanny occurs with Mr. Bijari's daughter Pargol recounting the strange passing of her father, who had survived the missile, but had a heart attack after seeing a shocking "something" behind her. Pargol's inability to describe the eldritch depicts the failure of the rational imagining of the "otherworldly," except in a sense of deep belligerence towards the "self" as it lurks in "all the dark corners in which the I's mastery would be challenged."<sup>26</sup> Though, the skeptic protagonist dismisses the "uncanny," the seed of disquiet is sown and the image appears soon. As Shideh, deep asleep, suddenly finds her faraway husband beside her spewing cruel dismissals as a figure looms large under the blanket and "covers" her within its suffocating folds. It cannot be a dream as "it was too real," and the missile must have "brought something with it." Shideh is warned by the devout Mrs. Ebrahimi that if the *Djinn* takes a treasured personal possession from an individual, it is the first stage of haunting and soon, the possession will start.

As the Fakurs leave for Paris, the haunting escalates and Shideh finally sees "something." As she wakes from her sleep to draw the curtains (another persistent Veil metaphor other than the blankets), a Veil speeds past outside the window. As the Ebrahimis leave the mother-daughter duo behind, Shideh spots the dead Mr. Bijari in their bedroom as the cracked ceiling, the one between their apartment and the Bijari's, eerily repairs itself and Dorsa is found speaking to a "Lady standing in the corner." As a terrified Shideh runs barefoot and bareheaded with Dorsa; she is arrested for indecent exposure by the police and is forced to cover herself in a full body chador. "This sort of behavior is intolerable. A woman should be more scared of exposing herself than of anything else. These are not old times now. We have values. Our men are becoming martyrs to protect these values," the official drones on and a dispirited veiled Shideh looks on emptily. As they tiptoe their way back, Shideh starts at her own reflection in a chador, and the image of crisis is determined. A half-crazed Shideh envisions Dorsa sitting with her mouth grotesquely open looking up at the missile hole; the full bodied floral Veil blocks her way to Dorsa and then plunges towards her. Dorsa's blue hooded jacket draws her in the raid shelter as the face turns into

a pair of gigantic jaws trying to swallow her. As Shideh runs for Dorsa, yards of bellowing chador drapes around her and the only way out is mercilessly tearing it and pushing her child away from crisis. As the mother is sucked in the quagmire of melting chador, the child pulls her out. The image of threat remains all around them, ever present, lurking at the corner, as Shideh drives away draped in a chador.

## 7.0 CONCLUSION

The image of the Veil persists as the appropriation of it determines the degree of liberation that a woman invests in her “self.” As the “Veil” becomes the marker of servility and backwardness, a distinction rises between the “veiled” and the “unveiled,” with a discursive subjugation of the latter on the former. The romanticization of a “canvas wall” emblematic of the “Veiled” permanently categorizes the individual behind the *Burqa* into an uncanny non-being to the “unveiled” bourgeoisie secular who allegedly (described by historian Homa Nateq) demanded a participation in the reactionary politics of Khomeini draped in rippling black *chadors*. The argument went both ways when the Islamic feminists re-veiled themselves as a mark of empowerment and openly disapproved of their unveiled sistren, as they found their preoccupation with veiling counter-productive and digressive from what is important. The *hijab* (“But no Chador. Never a Chador...”) <sup>27</sup> acquired a reputation for a socially enabling tool to preserve the Islamic norms that are chosen to be an identifier for Iranian womanhood, and any deviance from such an image will be tantamount to betrayal of cultural identity: “under all the talk about hijab freeing women from commercial or sexual exploitation, all the discussion of *hijab*’s potency as a political and revolutionary symbol of selfhood, was the body: the dangerous female body...” <sup>28</sup>

Eventually, the discursive arc comes full circle as most Human Rights reports save a noncommittal passage on the everyday practical inconvenience of chador and the inability of choosing one’s attire under a totalitarian regime with hardly enough attention towards its imposition as a violation of agency. With an attempt to invest the wearer with a significantly uniform worldview, the *ulemas* appropriated the private space of the Iranian women projecting an adopted consciousness homogenizing over individuality of the wearer. And the wearer never afford the luxury of purging her consciousness of the veil

— either they submit to the orthodoxy and drape their persons in the yards of anonymity, or they defy against the dictate of the society and forever is haunted by the disapproving image of the Veil. The distinction between the public and the private spaces gradually narrows to nothing as the confining boundary of the yards of fabric wall closes in on the ‘self’ becoming indistinguishable from the “self.” The necessary distancing required for abjection is negated and eventually any effort to purge out the confining threat fails.

In the two films used as a case study in the present enquiry, the horror of the self, works in two different ways. Amirpour creates the image of the veiled lamia as something which is disruptively incongruous and yet strangely is an undistinguishable modality matching the darkness beyond. Conversely, for Anvari’s *Shideh*, the trailing floral chador is a nightmarish reality of her “self” with dark promises of a future that she desperately tries to avoid. While the former satirizes the self/other stereotype by matching the stiff triangular chador with roller skates, the latter builds on the stereotype of the prescribed normativity by investing in it a horror of the unavoidable future. While Amirpour’s *Girl* is threatening in her seductive weirdness, Anvari’s veiled phantasma codifies the religious political image threatening the idea of secularism, tolerance and liberality. Thus, while the other more conventional female characters around *Shideh* escape unscathed, the Westernized mother-daughter duo is sucked into the quagmire of the chador. If we follow Nima Naghibi’s argument on the politics of extensive media representation of Persian women, we will have to begin with the *apriori* that the representation of Veiled Iranian women is fueled by the taboos, fears and other *gemeinschaftic* conditioning of a culture and in turn displays a discursive effect on communal psyche and the material lives of women.

Amirpour’s imagination of the Veil is a foil to the macabre vampiric cape, indistinguishable from the mechanical whirl and the dark arctic coldness of the “Bad City.” It is there as the uncanny, menacing figure (curiously like the Dark Knight) melting into the darkness. You “know” what it is, and attempt at “understanding” its rationale, but cannot get rid of it, because you cannot tell it apart from the “self.” The “self” and the “other” fall in love, as the “world-intelligible” and the “world-without-us” merge in a cacophony of music with the cape and the chador draping around each other. Anvari’s floral Veil is faceless, and can be the externalization of the victim’s worst fears and insecurities. It cannot be purged out as the cultural conditioning of the “self” cannot be imagined without it. The Veil persists and though the protagonist tries to attempt, it still has her prized medical book (the symbol of her individuality and ambition), and is firmly attached to her as *Shideh* is forced to re-

main veiled. Anvari's Veil is all around the victim, and hence cannot be distanced and abjected as the "self" will not survive the purge. The "Veil," thus becomes inseparable to the imagination of the Iranian diaspora. Film, one does not want it or even knows it, yet, the passion for it is joyful, violent and tormenting. The desired reflection of the self shatters as the shadow of the Veil creeps up behind one, as the ego contemplates being the "Other." In Persian diaspora, the cinematic imagery of the "Veil" remains suspended in an undefinable space of seduction and repudiation, as the idea of the self does not want to associate itself with the "Veil" but cannot contemplate itself without it. If abjected, the "Veil" will take the sense of "self" away leaving a hollowness that intensifies the power of horror.

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1. Ana Lily Amirpour was born in the UK and Babak Anvari was born in Iran but immigrated to the UK at the age of sixteen.

2. Ziba Mir-Hosseini, "Iranian Cinema: Art, Society and the State," *Middle East Report* 219 (Summer, 2001): 29.

3. Eugene Thacker, *Tentacles Longer than Night: Horror of Philosophy Vol. 3* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 118.

4. As we literally see happening to Shideh in *Under the Shadow*.

5. Arash embracing the Girl in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*

6. Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1994), 51.

7. Quoted in Anneliese Moors, "NiqaBitch and Princess Hijab: Niqab Activism, Satire and Street Art," *Feminist Review* 98, "Islam in Europe" (2011): 128. The quotation is a transcription from a video featuring Princess Hijab's story about Art and Islam, as broadcasted by Al-Jazeera's English language programme on 6 July 2010. According to the video the comments are on the social reaction to a veiled figure as observed by Princess Hijab, the persona of an anonymous street artist working in the Paris metro.

8. Negar Mottahede, "Iranian Cinema in the Twentieth Century: A Sensory History," *Iranian Studies* 42.4 (September 2009): 534.

9. For the first time in recent political history, fundamental Islamic principles were considered to be an enemy to Western liberating and democratic ideals, whereas before the collapse of the twin towers there was an overt truce between fundamentalist Islam and the Occidental powers against the political ideology of Communism — Lubna Duggal and Abhishek Shaw, "Burqa Battles: the Left Needs to Reclaim its Space in the Battle for Secularism and against Fundamentalism," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45.32 (August 2010): 9.

10. Though addressing a different socio-political context, Ananya Jahanara Kabir writes about how the immediacy of certain socio-political conditions might have been obfuscated by "conflating that issue with images that stoked barely subliminal fears of an atavistic, resurgent Islam" — Ananya Jahanara Kabir, "The Burqa Ban," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45.37 (September 2010): 1. The Burqa Ban in France unilaterally prescribes the side that any analyst needs to take without permitting an objective analysis of choices that Muslim women make in the *glocal* media.

11. It is important to note that in France the movement preceding the Burqa ban allegedly started when progressive women struggled against incidents involving members of fundamentalist organizations "slut shaming" unveiled schoolchildren. This movement led the French legislature in banning all religious symbols from school premises including crosses, rosaries, turbans etc. However, with the blanket ban on all forms of facial and head covering, the women who had previously resisted the fundamentalist moves, had no recourse but in seeking refuge within reactionary fundamentalism: "The initial inquiry we need to make is whether the burqa belongs to the same class of religious symbols as the cap, rosary and bangles. These markers of identity make small additions to the physical appearance, and thereby the social self, of the wearer. None of them can be compared with the burqa which dissolves the public identity of the individual wearer and thereby imparts to her an overarching religious identification. It leaves no room for individual identification since the person wearing it becomes a non-being whose public presence is wholly reduced to being a member of a religious group." — Krishna Kumar "Burqa: More than a Symbol," *Economic and Political Weekly* 45.35 (August 2010): 4.

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12. Kabir, "The Burqa Ban," 18.

13. In retrospect, we might look into the Foucauldian warning of culture specific "regime of truth" which acts as the mechanism to distinguish truth from falsehood; a kind of *a priori* that creates a socially sanctioned procedure of truth acquisition by investing certain bodies with the agency of authenticity; as opposed to "new forms of Orientalism, along with racism *vis-à-vis* Middle Eastern peoples and cultures, have found currency in a reinvestment in the civilizational tropes of Islam and the West" — Mino Moallem, *Between Warrior Brother and Veiled Sister: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Politics of Patriarchy in Iran* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2005), 19.

14. Referring to the suspension of Emilie Ouimet from a school in Montreal in September, 1994, for refusing to the official behest to remove her *hijab*, Todd quotes the principal of the school: "the wearing of a distinctive sign, like the hijab or neo-Nazi insignias could polarize the aggressivity of students" — Sharon Todd, "Veiling the 'Other,' Unveiling Our 'Selves': Reading Media Images of the Hijab Psychoanalytically to Move beyond Tolerance," *Canadian Journal of Education / Revue canadienne de l'éducation* 23.4 (Autumn 1998): 439.

15. *Ibid.*, 440.

16. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 1.

17. *Ibid.*, 3.

18. *Ibid.*, 210.

19. Reza Afshari quotes Mahnaz Afkhami Secretary-General of the Women's Organization of Iran under the Shah in the beginning of his chapter in *Human Rights in Iran: the Abuse of Cultural Relativism*, on women's rights in Iran: "In December of 1979, Ms. Farrokhrou Parsa, the first woman to serve in the Iranian cabinet [Minister of Education, appointed 1968], was executed [...]. A few hours after the sentence was pronounced she was wrapped in a dark sack and machine-gunned [...]. The significance of her position for the Iranian women's movement rested not so much in her considerable personal achievement but in that she was one of hundreds of thousands. Those who executed her also understood this and staged the event as a symbolic attempt to reduce her — and through her the type of women she represented — to an insignificant, lifeless shape in a dark sack." — Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: the Abuse of Cultural Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 250.

20. Dr. Homa Darabi's public unveiling and subsequent self immolation on protest against the Iranian theocracy can be considered as an example. In fact, Dr. Darabi's familial and social conditions strongly remind one of Anvari's Shideh.

21. Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran*, 252.

22. *Ibid.*, 255.

23. Two of the more reactionary laws passed during this moment of backlash are firstly, the gender based segregation of hospitals with the rule that patients can be treated only by the physician of the same sex; and secondly, the restrictive censorship imposed over media and literature (mostly those which were sensitive to women's conditions) on the potentially spurious ramification that these articles can make to incite conflict in society. The latter law also included a blanket ban on all "provocative" foreign female images with bared head and any literature alluding to "direct relations between [unveiled?] women and men" as they can "stimulate the youth and awaken their instincts" — *ibid.*, 259.

24. The scene is significant. It was almost a rerun of the earlier sequence of sexual extortion of the aging prostitute, where the drug dealer had pushed his fingers in the mouth of the woman prompting her to suck it in a strangely erotic manner. As Atti, the prostitute primly sets her hijab right before lowering her head to deliver a forced oral sex act the chador appears for a second voyeuristically looking at the duo. In the latter sequence as the Girl first sucks out the finger, there is a promise of the same objectification of the female body, which gets subverted the next second as the girl bites the finger out and drains him of his blood.

25. Something the little boy did by first trying to run away from the Girl and then, failing all, closes his eyes in an attempt to negate the "other."

26. Emmanuelle Levinas, *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (London: Continuum, 2006), 121.

27. Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran*, 263.

28. Brooks quoted in *ibid.*, 263-264.