
Vampires, Jinn and the Magical in Iranian Horror Films

By Zahra Khosroshahi

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night (Ana Lily Amirpour, 2014) and *Under the Shadow* (Babak Anvari, 2016) use the magical and the monstrous to explore issues of femininity in diasporic Iranian horror films. Set in the fictitious Iranian ghost town of Bad City, Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* pushes the boundaries of the B-movie horror genre, place and the female body. Through its main character, Girl (Sheila Vand) – a veiled vampire who stalks the streets of Bad City using her magical and supernatural powers to feed on bad men – the film complicates the image of the veiled woman and subverts the assumption of victimhood suggested by its title. *Under the Shadow* also engages with the notion of “magical”, this time set in Iran during the Iran-Iraq War of 1980–88. The film is about a mother and daughter who are haunted by a Jinn, a supernatural creature found in Islamic mythology and theology configured here as a grotesque, malign, feminine spirit shrouded in a veil. Through the evil Jinn and the conceit of the little girl's missing doll, *Under the Shadow* offers a complex and shocking exploration of femininity in Iran, using the horror genre to explore the anxieties of motherhood, religion, and war.

The figures like the vampire from *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, and the mother and the Jinn from *Under the Shadow* function as “hybrid figures” that allow the filmmakers to explore hybrid identities. In doing so, the two films use the grotesque magical feminine figure to explore the limitations and possibilities available to women characters. While they comment on contemporary women's issues in Iran, they also challenge oppressive and reductive stereotypes often associated with the non-Western woman in European and American media.

Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night and *Under the Shadow* are Persian-language films and use in different ways Islamic and theological symbolism through the Jinn and the “chador” (a cape-like black veil that covers the hair and the body). In both films, the veil is used as a motif to comment on the female figures and their embodiment of the magical and the monstrous (both the vampire and the Jinn are veiled). While the concept of veiling and unveiling predates the Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, the discourse and the visualisation surrounding the hijab shifts under the new regime of the Islamic Republic ushered in by the

Revolution. This Islamic regime sought to create an entirely new identity for Iran by imposing new laws and codes regulating various aspects of life. These practices impacted the country's cinema as well; censorship laws were enforced to ensure that the films aligned with an ideology that mandated that the "media would disseminate and observe Islamic norms and promote the interests of the country".^[1] Here, the woman's body and its visualisation was central to the censorship guidelines, which is indicative of the Islamic Republic's social, cultural and political ideologies. For example, many of the restrictive laws prescribed that "women have to appear veiled" at all times.^[2] Subsequently, the female body and its representation in media and film also became reflective of cultural anxieties around gender and sexuality. As Negar Mottahedeh argues, for Ayatollah Khomeini (the leader of the Islamic Revolution) "women's bodies marked the site of contamination. They were the very fissures through which foreign impurities were introduced into the nation".^[3]

Therefore, women's bodies became central to the "cleaning-up" and purification of Iranian cinema and the reclaiming of the country's "lost" Islamic identity, serving as a rejection of the Western and Pahlavi ideals. Here, reforming and redefining of Iran's national cinema focused on women's bodies to aid such purification and reclamation. This "cleaning-up" of the country's cinema, and its close association with issues of gender and sexuality, itself reveals the anxieties and the mission of the Islamic Republic. Under the Islamic regime, women were (and are) mandated to abide by the so-called Islamic laws which enforce the veil in all public spaces, including the public space of the cinema screen. In addition to obligatory veiling, any close-up shots of a women's face or body became forbidden when the new regime took over. Discussions around Iran's post-Revolutionary cinema and the notion of women's bodies as "sites of contamination" illustrates the desire and need for the containment of female sexuality.^[4] Within this cultural context, female monstrosity is a powerful and subversive notion. As argued by Barbara Creed, "all human societies have a conception of the monstrous-feminine, of what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject".^[5] In the context of post-Revolutionary Iranian society, femininity and sexuality are seen as "abject" and "sites of contamination" that have to be tamed and controlled. Veiling becomes the means through which this happens.

The containment and purification of female sexuality is not unique to Iranian cinema or Islamic culture. Looking at the genre of horror and thinking about the monstrous feminine, we witness the ways in which the two Iranian diaspora films challenge the pure/monstrous dichotomy set up by the restrictive categories of the regime. The Girl vampire and the Jinn have the veil in common, employed differently in both films as a way

to explore the “shocking” and “abject” of the female body in two very different societies. The notion of hybridity and the in-between explored in both films becomes an important way to reject and problematise these polarisations, which are challenged through form, genre and character in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow*. The filmic identity of both films necessitates an understanding of diasporic Iranian films and what Hamid Naficy refers to as an “accented cinema”.[\[6\]](#) Driving from two different, and possibly opposing traditions, the diasporic identities of the films allow for a much more nuanced discussion around the monstrosity and femininity of their female characters.

Hybridity in Diasporic Iranian Horror Films

The notion of hybridity plays out in various ways in both *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow*. Both films are diasporic films, scripted in the Persian language and made outside of Iran. Both Amirpour and Anvari explore social issues in Iran without the constraints of the Islamic Republic’s censorship laws through the medium of horror – a genre less popular amongst Iranian filmmakers. In many ways, both directors reimagine the construct of Iranian national cinema through horror, while still engaging with prominent social issues and themes. Whilst the theme of war, social issues and gender politics are common in Iranian cinema, by reimagining their audience through the horror genre, both Amirpour and Anvari bring to the screen something new: a cinematic hybrid that enables a complex exploration of gender politics and the magical woman.

In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha explores the idea of the “in-between”; for Bhabha, these are spaces that “provide terrain for elaborating strategies of self-hood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself”.[\[7\]](#) In both *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow* the “interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy”.[\[8\]](#) This sense of hybridity that Bhabha describes manifests itself in both films through genre, place and the monstrous-feminine. The diasporic contexts of Amirpour and Anvari’s identities and works invite an examination of hybridity and the in-between as productive ways to explore “Third space” and “the politics of polarity”.[\[9\]](#)

In his work on accented cinema, Naficy also considers alternatives spaces and ideas of hybridity: “if the dominant cinema is considered universal and without accent, the films that diasporic and exilic subjects make are accented”.[\[10\]](#) For Naficy, “although there is nothing common about exile and diaspora, deterritorialized peoples and their films share certain

features”.[\[11\]](#)

He describes such cinema as follows:

Accented films are interstitial because they are created astride and in the interstices of social formations and cinematic practices. Consequently, they are simultaneously local and global, and they resonate against the prevailing cinematic production practices, at the same time that they benefit from them. As such, the best of the accented films signify and signify upon exile and diaspora by expressing, allegorizing, commenting upon, and critiquing the home and host societies and cultures and the deterritorialized conditions of the filmmakers. They signify and signify upon cinematic traditions by means of their artisanal and collective production modes, their aesthetics and politics of smallness and imperfection, and their narrative strategies that cross generic boundaries and undermine cinematic realism.[\[12\]](#)

The issues of exile and postcolonialism are entangled in the discourse of diasporic cinema that both *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow* explore. Even at the production level, the two filmmakers and their works embody the hybrid identity that is often associated with accented and diasporic films - of being Iranian-American, or British-Iranian, as “neither here nor there”. Like the identity and ethnicity of their directors, the films themselves are hyphenated and, as described by Naficy, critical of both their home (Iran) as well as their host countries. However, what makes this even more significant is that the sense of hybridity and in-betweenness goes further than the identity of the film and is explored at the textual and generic level of the films as well, embodied and heightened through the magical woman figure.

Generically speaking, the films are not conventional horror films, but rather a tongue-in-cheek horror-western-coming-of-age story and a pseudo-realist war-horror and social film respectively. The feminine bodies in these films also become symbolic and suggestive of the hybrid. These bodies rise out of the prescribed identities given to “Other” women. Through their hybridity, they function as a rejection of the “pure” and homogenous set out both by the Islamic regime and also by the political discourse of veiling in the West - a point I will explore in further detail in the next section.

As already mentioned, horror films are not very popular in Iran, so both *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow* delve into a new territory for the Iranian and non-Iranian audience. An exception of a horror film made in Iran is *Girl's Dormitory* (Mohammad Hossein Latifi, 2005).[\[13\]](#) Discussing the film, Pedram Partovi contends that “the sources of the ‘horror’ in the film very much had its roots in Iranian

popular (religious) culture, partly drawing inspiration from Islam”.[\[14\]](#)

While *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow* are made outside of Iran, their source of inspiration is also rooted in, and in response to, the cultural, religious and societal conventions of the country. The use of the chador in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and the Jinn figure in *Under the Shadow* are key examples of how both Amirpour and Anvari engage with cultural and religious symbols, and yet, the way in which they are employed differs in the two films. About *Girl's Dormitory*, Partovi posits that part of the “magic” in the film is its invitation for the viewer “to consider Iranian women in very different roles than those found previously in much of Iranian popular cinema”.[\[15\]](#) This is a sentiment that also plays out in the two diasporic horror films, as the two films challenge the role of Iranian women in the Islamic regime, while also questioning the representation of the “Othered” female body on the international stage.

Inspired by many Western pop-culture references, Amirpour’s *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* sits comfortably in between various genres and places. Although it is filmed in California, the film is set in a fictional Iranian ghost town called Bad City, at once embracing and rejecting the idea of place and identity. As Emily Edwards argues, “Bad City is representative of a liminal land to such an extent that it departs from our terrestrial world all together”.[\[16\]](#) Bad City is reflective of cultural and social issues that closely pertain to Iranian society but functions as a stand-in for patriarchal structures and social problems more broadly, not just those of Iran. The wide suburban streets feel very much like a conventional Hollywood horror-genre movie. The film’s genre is not so easily definable however: it is a vampire film that borrows from the western genre, with elements of comedy and coming-of-age drama, and ultimately tells a love story. As Mark Kermode observes about the film in his review for *The Guardian*: “cinematically, it exists in a twilight zone between nations (American locations, Iranian culture), between centuries (late 19th and early 21st), between languages (Persian dialogue, silence cinema gestures) and, more importantly, between genres”.[\[17\]](#)

Whilst always interested in complicating notions of place and genre, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* also utilises cliché and archetypal characterisations – hyper-exaggerated at times – as a way of exploring Girl’s identity and place within Bad City. This idea is heightened by the depiction of Saeed (Dominic Rains). Covered in tasteless tattoos (“SEX” on his neck and “JakeSh”, which translates as “pimp”, on his body), he represents the drug-dealer, the pimp, the “bad” man. Atti (Mozhan Marno) on the other hand, is the victim of Saeed and the patriarchal society of Bad City; Atti plays the prostitute to his pimp, her body marking the brutality of male violence. Then there is Arash (Arash

Marandi), who is part everyman, part western hero and features heavily in the opening of the film. He is from a different cinematic realm to the vampire. And yet, Arash and Girl become close, and the film explores their burgeoning relationship.

Though *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* relies on familiar visual motifs and stock characters, such as the pimp and prostitute, through its genre and diasporic identity, the film resides in between such categories. The sense of hybridity and complexity in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* extends to its main character, Girl, and it is through her that the film explores the magical and the monstrous, especially in the context of global politics. The chador-wearing, Iranian vampire on a skateboard carries with her visual, cultural and political significance. First, her very “nature” as a vampire situates her within a space of liminality. The figure of the vampire exists “between life and death” – “a hybrid being” by nature.[\[18\]](#) The film situates her fluidity in a world of labels and archetypes, yet Girl is resistant to these ideas; her hybridity is unique in this world, and this is her magic. As Tabish Khair and Johan Hoglund claim:

The vampire has always been a traveller and the vampire story frequently explores and transgresses national, sexual, racial and cultural boundaries. Appearing in many cultures during different epochs, the vampire is not only a wandering creature but also a shape changer.[\[19\]](#)

Girl herself occupies an interesting space which marks her as a “shape changer” within the film – feeding on and killing bad men, as well as subverting the image of the passive veiled woman. But also, as described here, her vampiric identity serves political and visual significance.

Here, the film’s introduction to Girl is worth noting. In this scene, the film sets up the character and her purpose, but most importantly, through the Saeed character, subverts ideas of oppression often attached to the veiled woman. Shortly before Girl appears, Saeed and Atti are in the car, and Atti asks for her money. Saeed responds to her violently, pushing down her head. Standing nearby and hidden in the dark, Girl watches this exchange take place and also sees Atti violently being pushed out of the car. In the next scene, as Saeed walks to his flat, Girl follows him. It is obvious from their interaction that Saeed does not fear her. For him, the girl walking in a black chador represents the “good” girl. She continues to follow him, and this intrigues Saeed, causing him to invite her over and suggesting his desire to unveil her. In his flat, Saeed approaches her. Girl takes his finger into her mouth, in a sexually suggestive manner. What happens next is unexpected. The “good” veiled woman sucks the blood out of his finger, biting it off and spitting it out, leaving the once confident Saeed in a state of fear and shock. She then attacks and kills

her victim.

In this scene, Amirpour reverses the power dynamics between Girl and the pimp, subverting the image of the veiled woman as a victim, oppressed or passive. Also, Girl's violence functions here as revenge for his violence towards Atti, affirming the vampire's feminist mission. As well as violently killing him, the biting of the finger is suggestive of Saeed's castration, which signifies Girl's feminine power. For Edwards, "as a vampire, and an allegorical outcast in society, the girl in the chador represents Amirpour's conception and criticism of identity."[\[20\]](#) She is, Edwards goes on to say:

A personification of the vampiric nature of diasporic identity. She is both dead and immortal, like the timeless yet shifting connection diaspora communities parse out between home and host country. Diasporic membership confers the benefit of belonging even in exile, but this membership proves to be a barrier to new forms of self-actualization.[\[21\]](#)

The magic of the vampire figure is that she remains liminal by her very nature, representing a state of in-betweenness. In *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, the vampire's feeding on bad men becomes a feminist statement (shown best in the scene where Girl saves Atti); and so, while the veiled female is not "contained" or tamed, her monstrosity is used for the greater good. With this, Amirpour questions moral polarities, and instead delves into the complexities of morality. Later in the film, for example, Arash knows that Girl has killed her father (another "bad man"), and yet the two reunite and leave Bad City together as lovers.

Anvari's *Under the Shadow* also explores the hybrid figure, albeit in an entirely different way and through a different kind of monster – the Jinn. Like *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, this is also a diasporic film, engaging with the world of in-betweenness through its very form. The Jinn, like the vampire, is difficult to define. As Mark Peterson states, "in Islamic cosmology, the universe is structurally divided into a seen and unseen world", and the Jinn occupies a "special, liminal status; they are of the earth, yet unseen on it".[\[22\]](#)

Set in Tehran, during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), *Under the Shadow* uses genre conventions to tell the horrifying story of war. The film begins with Shideh (Narges Rashidi), a former medical student, as she tries to convince the officials to permit her to complete her education. In this conversation, the audience learns of her involvement with student leftist groups, meaning she is prohibited from resuming her studies. Returning home heartbroken and angry, she packs her books, but holds on to *A Book of Medical Physiology* gifted to her by her mother, who has passed away. The film is mainly set in a Tehran apartment block, focusing

on Shideh and her young daughter, Dorsa (Avin Manshadi). Shideh's husband Iraj (Bobby Naderi), a doctor, must leave Tehran for military duty. Leaving the family behind, he asks Shideh to consider moving temporarily to the north where his parents reside – far away from the bombings and missile attacks, but she is reluctant. Before he leaves, Dorsa tells Iraj that she will be scared, and he reminds her that Kimia, her beloved doll, will take good care of her.

Using the war as its backdrop, *Under the Shadow* delves into the anxieties of a polarised nation and, through the character of Shideh, questions the patriarchal forces of the Islamic regime. Rejected by her country's law that bans her from pursuing her dreams, her pain and her anxiety as a mother are made manifest through the horrors of war. The possible existence of a Jinn which seemingly haunts Shideh and Dorsa – whether it is real or a figment of Shideh's imagination – is questioned throughout the film and is used to blur the line between dreaming and reality, religion and superstition. The demonic forces that drive the plot of *Under the Shadow* become a means through which the film explores the consequences and trauma of war and the religious state. Shideh's one-time dream of becoming a doctor is turned into a living nightmare, entangled with her identity as a mother and a woman.

Shideh's anxiety and suffering is explored throughout the film – the Jinn symbolising the monstrous and functioning as a metonym of the restrictions Shideh faces as a woman in this new post-Revolutionary Iran. Outside of the home, Anvari shows these restrictions through the legal system, and inside the home, the Jinn becomes the figure of angst for Shideh – giving her no place to run. In the opening scene, as Shideh returns home after being told that she cannot continue her studies, her car is stopped by guards. She pulls down her window, addresses the guards, and is then cleared to drive on. Shideh then bursts into tears. In this short sequence, the film demonstrates the restrictions and the pressure placed upon women in Iran – always under control and anxious about the possibility of reprimand from state actors. The security of the home, which for many Iranians functions as a non-politicised place and their only refuge from the oppression of the regime, slowly breaks down in *Under the Shadow*. The backdrop of war terrorises civilians and brings violence and trauma into these personal spaces, depicted literally in the film through the missiles and bombs that break into the house, leaving it scarred and broken. The film shows Shideh constantly taping up broken windows and crumbling walls, as if she is blocking out evils from the outside world. Through its genre and narrative, *Under the Shadow* shows how Shideh's world is haunted by a triangulation of events: the revolution and its aftermath, the war, and the Jinn which brings these traumas to the surface.

The magical Jinn figure functions as an important symbol, allowing the film to explore the deep-rooted issues of the patriarchy in Iran and to comment on motherhood and the war. Through the Jinn, *Under the Shadow* also questions reality: that which is believed versus that which we end up believing. Most importantly, the presence of the Jinn creates a sense of doubt through its hybrid nature. According to religious texts, Jinn are not necessarily evil, offering moral ambiguity. Taking into account “Islamic writings, Jinn live alongside other creatures but form a world other than that of mankind. Though they see us, they cannot be seen”.[\[23\]](#) Similar to the vampire, they too, through their very existence, reject the notion of purity. In *Under the Shadow* the Jinn figure is understood to be real by Shideh’s religious neighbour: “they appear in the Quran”, she proclaims. She continues to tell Shideh that once they take a personal belonging from you, they never leave you alone. And despite Shideh’s disbelief in Jinn, she begins to look frantically for Dorsa’s missing doll.

As shown thus far, the vampire and the Jinn both represent the hybrid and in-between, becoming central figures within these works, as well as the films’ gateways into exploring gender and femininity. In both *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow*, the magical is used as an essential symbol for what is feared - or, in other words, the “Othered” body, the monstrous. With the veil in common, both the Girl vampire and the Jinn are used as ways to explore the “shocking” and “abject” of the female body.[\[24\]](#)

Veiling and Unveiling: The Horrors of the Female Body

The vampire from *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and the Jinn in *Under the Shadow* function as the magical and super-natural creatures that reveal the purported horrors of the female body and femininity in general. In these films, the veil is fundamental to both figures’ identities and, with their magic powers, marks them as an “Other”, characterised by a subversive monstrous feminine. As Shohini Chaudhuri suggests, “the monsters’ Otherness is often configured as a bodily difference”.[\[25\]](#) Monsters and their visualisations serve a purpose, reflecting “the anxieties of their times” and responding to their political conditions and contexts.[\[26\]](#) In other words, “monsters become a frame for understanding the cultures that produce them, exemplifying specific cultural moments, as well as ideologies surrounding Otherness”.[\[27\]](#)

At stake here is how both *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and *Under the Shadow* use the magical, monstrous-feminine characters of Girl and the Jinn to respond to and challenge their cultural moments. The representation and visualisation of a character as complex as Girl is significant in a post-9/11 era, where “the (American) battle with evil

entails a conflict with the (un-American) monstrous or ‘terrorist’ body”.[\[28\]](#) The image of the Muslim woman as oppressed, vilified and victimised fits well within these ideologies. Amy Farrell and Patrice McDermott argue:

The very representation of non-Western woman ‘in need’ constructs and reinforces a narrative in which all that is Islamic/Muslim/non-Western is painted as ‘uncivilized’ and ‘barbaric,’ the women are seen as ‘victims,’ and Westerners, as providing a ‘civilizing’ effect.[\[29\]](#)

While maintaining aspects of the monstrous-feminine figure, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* shifts this paradigm, challenging the representation of the veiled vampire. Girl rejects notions of passivity and oppression, with the film’s title and her initial vulnerability both proving to be red herrings. Additionally, Amirpour redefines the idea of the “barbaric”. Girl is, after all, still a veiled vampire with teeth and blood-lust, but her strong moral compass channels her barbarism into a benevolent vigilantism.

Amirpour’s *A Girls Walks Home Alone at Night* is not interested in clear-cut imagery and depictions. The film is daring in its exploration of femininity and the “Othered” body, where even the notion of monstrosity is challenged. This is also the case in the treatment of the film’s exploration of Atti, the prostitute. Her interaction with Girl demonstrates a sense of camaraderie between the two female characters. Seeing Atti in trouble, Girl takes matters into her own hands. In return, Atti helps her hide the dead body. In a brief scene, the two women engage in a conversation. “Are you religious or something,” Atti asks, to which Girl responds: “No”. Atti’s room has a map, and we learn that she is planning her escape from Bad City. This scene grants Atti cinematic space and time, elevating her well beyond her archetypal role as a prostitute. The exchange between the two women serves as a special moment in the film, confirming Girl’s moral mission and feminist agenda.

The characterisation and visualisation of Girl as a chador-wearing, skateboarding vampire situates her within the framework of the magical woman: a feminist “baddie” with a noble cause, feeding on bad men in a direct attack on the vile patriarchy of Bad City. In addition, Girl responds to current representations of the Muslim and “Othered” woman through her depiction as a vampire. Amirpour’s narrative and visualisation of the female character challenge conventions of religiosity, Muslimness and femininity. Within this context, where the Muslim female body is constantly subject to veiling and unveiling, exhausted by a discourse of “liberating”, Girl brings to the screen something new: the magical, the monstrous, and the rebellious. Fearlessly cruising the dark streets of Bad City on her skateboard, the chador-wearing Iranian vampire shatters any assumptions of pity. The veil, flapping behind her like a superhero’s cape,

allows her to float with power and adopts an entirely new meaning.

Amirpour's *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* subverts the image of the veil in response to its political moment. In *Under the Shadow*, while the veil adopts a different meaning, it still sheds light on its own social and historical context. Girl's chador allows her to stand out, but Shideh's obligatory veil is a burden and stands in for the oppressive regime that bans her from pursuing her dreams. *Under the Shadow* also uses the veil to comment on the monstrous, but with a different twist. As discussed above, the idea of monstrosity is closely linked with sexuality in the Iranian context, as women's bodies become "sites of contamination" in need of control, purification and cleansing. The film uses the Jinn as its clear-cut supernatural and monstrous figure, as a way into the more complex interior world of Shideh, whose autonomy and sense of self are controlled and whose behaviour grows frantic and unpredictable as a consequence. In the post-Revolutionary society of Iran, Shideh herself is deemed a monster. The film's narrative alludes to this. Shideh is to be blamed for Dorsa's missing doll; even her maternal role and capabilities are questioned.

Under the Shadow also dares to explore the notion of the monstrous in the context of Islamic culture, drawing its inspiration from the Jinn figure. As Francesca Leoni argues:

Monsters and monstrosity are mostly uncharted subjects in the context of the Islamic cultural sphere. This is fairly surprising given the wealth of creatures populating the related material, and specifically artistic, production that could be considered 'monstrous'.[\[30\]](#)

And yet, interestingly, the Jinn in *Under the Shadow* remains completely veiled and concealed. The veil links Shideh to the Jinn figure as a symbol of her internalised fears and the violence done to her. In the film's climatic scene, the Jinn appears as an all-consuming veil, pulling Shideh's daughter away from her. Earlier in the film, Shideh took Dorsa from the house, with both of them running out into the street and Shideh forgetting to wear her obligatory headscarf. The two are stopped by the guards and taken into custody, where Shideh is given a black chador. Returning home, she sees her reflection in the hall-way mirror and jolts, not recognising herself. In this scene, she becomes the very image she fears, and her reflection and her imagination of the Jinn merge into one.

In both films, the veil functions as a visual motif, used to comment on the horrors of the female body and society. In *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* the chador visibly marks Girl, redefining her on the international stage, serving as a rejection of the stereotypes often associated with the image of the Muslim woman. In *Under the Shadow* the veil is also used to

grapple with the complexities of Iran's post-Revolutionary cultural and political context, to comment on attitudes towards women and their bodies, and to hint at the prevalent conceptions of the female body. The Jinn becomes a gateway, a visual motif through which the film explores the patriarchal forces of Iran and, also, the scars of war. As her home is terrorised by external demonic forces, Shideh is shown obsessively taping her cracked windows and walls. The intrusion of the Jinn figure that enters the confines of her home is used to critique the Islamic regime and its intrusion into the private sphere and personal space of Shideh's home. What is more, through the Jinn, *Under the Shadow* takes its criticism even further, commenting on the external forces of the Iran-Iraq War, hinting at and problematising Western intervention.

Where *The Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is about claiming hybrid identity, *Under the Shadow* explores the anxieties of in-betweenness and the scars of war. Through the magical figures of the vampire and the Jinn, both films confront the attitudes of the monstrous feminine in the Iranian diasporic context. In his book *Vampires, Race and Transnational Hollywoods*, Dale Hudson says:

A film with an Iranian American perspective, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* exemplifies how vampire stories migrate and mutate to convey ever-shifting identities and orientations in a world where the United States and Iran might not be as distant or as different as once imagined.[\[31\]](#)

Using the fictitious Bad City, Amirpour reimagines and complicates place and borders. Amirpour's magical vampire lives somewhere between the cultural references of America and Iran - between life and death, always in the liminal. What connects Girl to Anvari's Shideh character is her rebellion. Despite the shackles of an Islamic regime and the super-natural forces of the Jinn, Shideh consistently represents and embodies a fierce rejection of the Islamic Republic and its patriarchal ideologies.

Notes

[\[1\]](#) Eric Egan, "Regime Critics Confront Censorship in Iranian Cinema," *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (2011), 48.

[\[2\]](#) Josef Gugler, *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence* (2011), 10.

[\[3\]](#) Negar Mottahedeh, *Displaced Allegories: Post-Revolutionary Iranian Cinema* (2009), 1.

[\[4\]](#) This also demonstrates that the authorities were well aware of cinema's power and influence, using the visual culture as a form of

propaganda for its new messages around piety and modesty. While Iranian cinema continues to be subject to censorship, filmmakers have found ingenious ways to combat and challenge its red lines. Iran's reception on the global cinematic stage attests to its success.

[5] Barbara Creed, "Horror and the Monstrous-Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection," *The Dread of Difference*, (2015), 37.

[6] Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001)

[7] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (2004), 2.

[8] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 5.

[9] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 56.

[10] Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 4.

[11] Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 3.

[12] Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 4-5.

[13] The film is about two friends, Roya (Baran Kosari) and Shirin (Negar Javaherian), who leave the familiar and over-protected environments of their homes to attend college outside of Tehran. The girls' dormitory, however, is under construction, which means that the two friends along with several other female students have to temporarily reside elsewhere, close to the college. Their new home is run-down, next to an even more dilapidated and abandoned house. Their creaking temporary residence is run by an older woman who warns them against entering the neighbouring house, marking it off-limits from the start, and sparking curiosity. The house is where "Jinn" live, she tells them.

[14] Pedram Partovi, "Girls' Dormitory: Women's Islam and Iranian Horror." *Visual Anthropology Review* (2009), 187.

[15] Partovi, "Girls' Dormitory" 187.

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