

Veiling and Vampirism: Imperialism and Resistance in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*

Many young women are warned to never walk alone, especially at night, for fear that a monster will grab them and condemn them to a life of depravity and abuse. More so, societies have constructed these monsters, e.g. the ‘stranger in the dark alley,’ in order to create a physical enemy that can be vanquished, all in the pursuit of preserving women’s purity. However, women resist these narratives and constraints that society imposes upon them in favor of agency and personhood, defined as freely choosing one’s own course of life. This paper will focus on resistance through film, looking at one film in particular—an “American film set in Iran” entitled *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (VICE). The director, Ana Lily Amirpour, an Iranian-American filmmaker, uses this film, lauded as the first Middle Eastern Vampire Western, to critique the ‘women of Islam’ stereotypes that are propagated within U.S. and often Iranian culture, and reverses these stereotypes to make them sites of resistance. Thus, The Girl (the vampire in *A Girl Walks*), though portrayed as an ‘Other,’ uses her ‘Otherness’ to subvert Western imperialism, assert her mobility as a Muslim woman, reverse the image of females as victims, and claim the power that lies in her female sexuality.

Amirpour’s film is founded upon the title character, a young girl who walks home alone at night. In fact, she only ever walks at night because she is a vampire. Yet, she is a vampire living in Iran, so she too abides by the Iranian law that decrees that all women must be veiled. Complete with the beloved vampiric tropes of sucking blood and killing mercilessly, Amirpour puts forth a character in *The Girl* that fundamentally contradicts both the West’s and the East’s perception of a veiled woman. Indeed, skateboarding down the middle of an empty street with her veil floating behind her, *The Girl* is reminiscent of a superhero set against the heteropatriarchy’s adherence to gender norms. More so, it is important to understand that this

film was born in a state of liminality—between being American and being Iranian (VICE). Indeed, Iran has been vastly influenced by the West. This can be seen in the very subject matter of the film: The Girl wears a veil, an Islamic practice, and is a vampire, a uniquely Western phenomenon. Though there are references to vampires in other cultural and religious traditions, there is no such easily identifiable tradition in Islam. This may be due to the fact that consuming blood, as would a vampire, is considered *haram*, or forbidden, by *sharia law*, or the Islamic code of faith (Tasbeeh). Thus, *A Girl Walks* is at the junction of intimacy between Iranian cultural values and Western imperialism's imposition of ideas.

To better understand the contemporary society in which The Girl lives, it is first important to locate the society within its unique cultural history. Thus, a history of Iran as told through the history of Iranian women is most relevant for this paper.

Women embody the ideological struggle between colonial practices and indigenous agency. For women of the Muslim faith, this struggle has been etched upon their bodies in the form of the veil. For Iranian women in particular, this veil is called a *chador*, a piece of cloth that covers the woman from head to toe (Zahedi 80). From a Western perspective, the chador, similar to other forms of veiling in Arab countries, has become a symbol of backwardness and 'Otherness.' As Leila Ahmed writes, "Muslim societies are to be counted as advanced or backward by the extent to which they have abandoned their native practices, symbolized by the veil, in emulation of those of the West" (21). Iran, being a veiled country and refusing to participate in Westernization, is perceived as backward. This justifies the Orientalist divide of civilizations and supports the West's nation-building tactic of 'us-versus-them,' in which the West must always emerge the victor. In this paradigm, it is completely rendered invisible that "until the colonial era, the veil (in the sense of head-covering) was considered proper dress for all women,

regardless of religion” (Ahmed 36). In contemporary Western ideology, the Islamic covering or veil of any region has been viewed as oppressive and backward, leading to the West’s interference in indigenous practices.

As mentioned above, the covering of a woman’s hair was not unique to Muslim women. As Zahedi notes, “the erotic nature of female hair as a symbol of woman's appeal and her power over men” has led to the justification of concealing women’s hair in an attempt to control “female sexual power” (76). In fact, Muslim societies only adopted the veil as a result of their exposure to the societies they conquered, meaning that veiling was not indigenous to Islam (Zahedi 78). Once veiling became part of Iran’s cultural tradition, it was relegated to women of the upper-class, though men and women in the rural working class would cover their heads in the name of tradition and practicality (Zahedi 80). As travelling to Europe in the 18th and 19th century, and thus European ideas of enlightenment and progress, became more popular, a small minority of Iranians advocated for unveiling as a way to lift the inferior status of Iranian women, and to galvanize the nation’s move toward being a progressive (read: Western) society (Zahedi 80). The decades leading into the 20th century saw debates for and against the unveiling of Iranian women, but, with the rise to power of Reza Shah (with the help of British and U.S. interference), unveiling became law. The Shah regime entered into an era of modernization characterized by unveiling: “Reza Shah employed physical force to accomplish the unveiling of women...[his] soldiers were ordered to remove women’s veils” (Zahedi 82). This image of the unveiled woman became the image of the nation of Iran, while veiled women were marginalized. For many women, the veil had symbolized not oppression, but “respect, virtue, protection, and pride” (Zahedi 82). Thus, the forced unveiling is seen as a violation of their physical selves and moral psyches.

After Reza Shah was deposed in 1941 by Allied forces in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the unveiling project was eased and women were allowed to once again choose their own style of dress (Zahedi 84). As Pahlavi continued in his reign, he also opened Iran's borders to Western influences, which was "a new form of political dominance and cultural imperialism" (Zahedi 85). Iranian citizens, in search of a return to their authentic and cultural roots, turned to Islam. This, of course, necessitated a change to women's appearances. In this framework, the modern Iranian woman was expected to be both public and educated while maintaining bodily integrity in the form of veiling. Therefore, "Iranian women with makeup and revealed hair were culturally 'inauthentic' to Iran. They symbolized the West; indeed they were the image of Western domination" (Zahedi 86-87). Thus, the veil adopted the new meaning of resistance to Westernization. However, this all changed with the Islamic revolution of 1979 in which the veil became compulsory. In this paradigm, the veil was infused with religious meaning (though the Qu'ran does not explicitly call for a woman to wear a veil) and was linked directly to a woman's religious duty, morality, and worth (Zahedi 79, 89). More so, during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), "women were expected to be at the service of the country, performing their tasks as loyal wives and mothers" (Sadeghi 252). The veil became the symbol of a nation and its values. Because of this conflation, "a misveiled woman was likened to the Baathist [Iraqi] enemy in the sense that both threatened (male) Muslim honor" (Sadeghi 252). Though it is impossible to discuss and understand all of the nuances in Iranian history and culture, and even all of the negotiations that contemporary Iranian women make regarding the veil, it is within this paradigm of converging female realities, of being controlled and of taking control, that *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* takes place.

As part of its imperialist strategy, the West engages in nation-building projects that necessitate the creation of an 'Other.' As Angela Davis states, "nationalism creates narrow perimeters around community, and processes of exclusion and prohibition are at its very core" (*Meaning* 73). In order for the West to construct a narrative of 'us-versus-them,' the 'Other' must be cast as the enemy. Therefore, Islam is most often cast as the barbaric enemy to the civilized West. Orientalist rhetoric presupposes that there is a fixed boundary between The West and Islam, between "past and present, us and them" (Said). Orientalism assumes Islam to be a homogenous threat to the imperial power of the West in which war must be waged against Islam in order to protect "freedom against fear" and, ultimately, "good against evil" (Said). This logic acts as a colonialist tool which "implies a relation of structural domination and a suppression—often violent—of the heterogeneity of subject(s) in question" (Mohanty 18). Muslim women, then, become the battleground upon which imperial forces exert their power and influence in an attempt to 'civilize' the backward nations of Islam. Muslim women, and, in this case, Iranian women in particular, are reduced into a homogenous category as 'Third World women' that codifies them as passive victims, dependent upon a Western savior (Mohanty 24-5; Kapur 116). Thus, Muslim women, located in the epicenter of the two 'categories' of women and Islam, justify the West's imperialist penetration of the 'Middle East' under the guise of, as Spivak proclaims, "white men saving brown women from brown men" (qtd. in Ahmed 24). Furthermore, a major tenet of colonization is to know, and thus to control, the 'Other': in "establishing the priority of European nationhood[,] [the colonizer] wished to control the hidden secrets of Africa and of woman by exposing them to scientific daylight...the wild...became the tame, the savage civilized" (qtd. in Lloyd 217). This same logic can be applied to the West's relationship with Iran. In order to control Iran, Iranian women must first be conquered. In order

to achieve this, the West must employ “the forceful act of gazing at the other, gaining knowledge and control over her by seeing her” (Smith 133). Yet, the veiled woman is purposefully not able to be seen. Citing the East’s ““sadistic and vampirish”” ways in regard to the veiled (read: unconquerable) women, the West demonizes the veiled woman because “this woman who sees without being seen frustrates the colonizer...She does not yield herself, does not give herself, does not offer herself” (qtd. in Fanon 38, Fanon 44). She, and thus Iran, is impenetrable to the West.

The Girl, symbolizing Iran, remains veiled. The veil “blocked the masculine gaze, subverted man’s role as the surveyor, and removed women from the category of object-to-be-seen. Instead, women became the seers, the surveyors who gained power, agency, and control” (Milani 8). Furthermore, Amirpour magnifies The Girl’s place as the ‘Other’ by making her a vampire, a creature who by nature is ‘Othered’: she is a monster, she is not human. Though she is relegated to the outskirts of society, condemned to loneliness in the night, she reverses the position of the ‘Other’ as a powerless being. Because she roams alone at night, she is unseen; she is outside the constructs of society’s hierarchy and domination. Her ‘Otherness’ endows her with the ability to watch and to exert power. Indeed, she watches and terrorizes Hossein, the old junkie who harasses and rapes Atti, a prostitute, reversing Hossein’s plea to Atti: “I want to watch you” (*A Girl Walks*). The Girl kills Hossein, saving Atti from further abuse and violation. In this sense, The Girl reverses the male gaze that has been normalized to abuse, and uses her own gaze to protect this woman with whom she feels a deep connection. Both are so-called women of the night. Moreover, The Girl is able to influence the future patriarchy when, one night, she follows a young boy through an abandoned alley, grabbing him and commanding him to “be a good boy” because “until the end of your life, I’ll be watching you” (*A Girl Walks*).

Thus, The Girl overturns the status quo and asserts her power as an ‘Othered’ Iranian woman by watching, knowing, and controlling.

More so, as the veil plays a vital role in the resistance to Western imperialism and to the male gaze, the veil is also a significant symbol within the schema of women’s mobility. In this case, the veil plays a dichotomous role—hiding the woman as it simultaneously allows the woman a physical space in which to make herself present. In one perspective, “the veil, in its traditional sense, not only polarizes but delineated boundaries. It consigns ‘power,’ ‘control,’ ‘visibility,’ and ‘mobility’ to one social category at the expense of the other” (Milani 5). From this perspective, the veil acts as a separator between the sexes and marks women as being ‘Othered.’ Indeed, “men and women did not have the same rights to the consumption of space: men moved around freely, women much less so, if at all...the presence of a woman outside the space of her home was an abnormal phenomenon” (Mernissi 41). Women were expected to be isolated and restrained from the public sphere. More so, though the veil allowed for women to exit from their private dwellings, “the veil can be interpreted as a symbol revealing a collective fantasy of the Muslim community: to make women disappear, to eliminate them from communal life, to relegate them to an easily controllable terrain, the home, to prevent them moving about, and to highlight their illegal position on male territory” (Mernissi 41). The veil acts as a marker of difference, of inferiority, and of a hypervisibility that ultimately makes one invisible. A woman who is veiled is delegitimized, her voice, if heard at all, is duly ignored. Therefore, it can be interpreted that “their [veiled women’s] public silence was long legitimized, spiritualized, fetishized, and idealized...Like the ‘dumb blond’ in the West, the traditional Iranian beauty appears to be made more alluring by not saying anything” (Milani 6).

The Girl embodies both this schema of veiling as well as its exact opposite—she is hidden from society, from Iranian men by her chador and from the public sphere by her inability to walk in the daylight, but she uses this invisibility to exert tremendous power. The Girl is also silent. Throughout the film, most of her emotions are conveyed with a single glance or movement of the head. However, it is with this silence that she lures predatory men to her. For example, as Saeed, the resident pimp (who adorns himself in an 80's velour tracksuit), forces Atti to perform oral sex on him in his car, The Girl watches, silently. He sees her and is terrified of her—"the mobility of women does indeed seem to pose a threat to a settled patriarchal order" (Nourai-Simone 70). The Girl, as self-appointed protector of Atti, hunts him down to enact revenge. She is the bait as she seduces him later that night, walking alone, transgressing the laws of morality and respectability imposed upon her. She merely glances at Saeed before he stops and tells her to come home with him, as he has already assumed that a woman alone at night is sexually available. He does not expect her to say 'no': "women's walking is often construed as performance rather than transport, with the implication that women walk not to see but to be seen, not for their own experience but for that of a male audience" (Solnit 234). In this case, The Girl uses her mobility to purposely make Saeed notice her so that she can avenge Atti. The audience assumes that Saeed does not feel threatened by her because, traditionally, he holds all of the power—he has mobility. Furthermore, once The Girl is in his apartment, and once he is in his territory of sexual authority, he sees her merely as a sexual conquest—even when her fangs descend as she is sucking his finger, he is more intrigued and sexually aroused than he is afraid (*A Girl Walks*). It is not until a few seconds later that he realizes his fatal mistake as she sinks her fangs into his neck, killing him. Thus, The Girl, through her mobility that directly challenges male authority, subverts her imposed inferiority and powerlessness. In fact, from her "veiled

seclusion” and fanged ability, she is able to “dominate the psychic order, inverting hierarchical norms of gender, position, and rank” (Milani 4). In other words, because she adheres to the normalized image of a veiled woman, she is able to gain access to Saeed’s sphere under the assumption that she will become his ‘victim.’ In the end, it is the complete opposite scenario as he begs her for his life. The Girl, as have many Iranian women, confronts and defies “male allocations of power, space, and resources. Exercising increasing control over how reality is defined, they are redefining their own status” (Milani 9). This redefinition of status can be seen most clearly in The Girl’s refusal to be labeled a victim purely based on her biological sex and gender expression/identity.

As mentioned in the introduction, one reason that women’s mobility is censored is because women, as a homogenous category, are “characterized by their victim status” (Mohanty 25). Hence, “women have routinely been punished and intimidated for attempting the most simple of freedoms, taking a walk, because their walking and indeed their very beings have been construed as inevitably, continually sexual” (Solnit 233). In other words, a woman who walks, especially at night, is viewed either as a prostitute living in disrepute or as a potential victim:

the routine harassment women experience ensures... ‘that women will not feel at ease, that we will remember our role as sexual beings, available to, accessible to men. It is a reminder that we are not to consider ourselves equals, participating in public life with our own right to go where we like when we like, to pursue our own projects with a sense of security’...fear of rape puts many women in their place. (Solnit 240).

The women-as-victim rhetoric is cyclical. If a woman is raped, she is labeled as a victim of men’s supposed inherent sexual violence. Once she is victimized, she becomes perpetually rapeable, continuing the cycle of her victimization. More so, sexual violence in-and-of itself is a

way to demarcate women as inferior: “sexual violence [is] used to generate gender and the distinction between men as superior and women as subordinate or inferior” (Kapur 102).

Furthermore, Orientalist logic informs the portrayal of women of the Global South as perpetual victims because it reinforces certain cultures (read: non-West) as “brutal and barbaric” (Kapur 104). Thus, women of the Global South are assumed to be “infantile, civilisationally backward and incapable of self-determination or autonomy,” which “reproduces the colonialist rationale for intervening in the lives of the native subject” in order to rescue them from themselves (Kapur 116).

In this paradigm, *The Girl* is viewed as inherently rapeable by the West because she is veiled, and thus backward. From the perspective of the men around her, Hossein, Saeed, and Arash—her lover—she is also viewed as a potential victim within their society. As discussed above, Saeed does not view her as a threat to his life. If anything, out of all of the characters in the film, Arash is the most victimized by his father, Hossein’s, dependence on drugs and by his class. Arash works as a handyman for Shaydah, the Princess, and later becomes a low-level drug-dealer because there are no other economic opportunities for him. Yet, when he meets *The Girl* as he is walking home from a party dressed as Dracula, he tells her to not worry because “[he] won’t hurt [her]” (*A Girl Walks*). His first instinct is to put her at ease by reassuring her that he won’t rape her. However, in a perfect twist, Amirpour has cast *The Girl* as the predator and Arash as the potential victimized prey—if she wanted to, *The Girl* could kill him then and there. Indeed, the audience is already well-aware of how fragile Arash is—he broke his hand while punching a wall. Thus, *The Girl* disrupts the fixed category of women-as-victim because, in essence, she doesn’t need saving. In fact, men are in need of rescue from her.

As *The Girl* subverts her positionality as victim, so too does she subvert the heteronormative sexual scripts that define female sexuality against masculinity's supposed dominant sexuality. The construction of women's sexuality as a passive and subordinate sexuality is not new to many readers; however, it can be argued that this overarching presumption about female sexuality has been propagated because female sexuality is viewed "as chaotic, threatening, subversive—a sort of wild nature to be subdued by masculine culture" (Solnit 236). More so, it can be argued that the entire concept of patriarchy is constructed around an inherent fear of female sexuality: patriarchy "is a manifestation of man's fear of woman, a fear arising in the first place from her crushing superiority—only she could create life in and through blood—and in the second place from his suspicion that woman, behind her veil of obedience, would be plotting her revenge" (Mernissi 37). This lends itself to the notion that sexuality is indeed, in Iran or in any other culture, "regarded as...the construction/reconstruction of power relations in public as well as private spheres" (Sadeghi 252). Thus, sexuality is constructed in such a way that maintains heteropatriarchal power. However, it is important to note here that in Islamic religious tradition sexuality is not constructed as being a taboo. In fact, Islam recognizes the omnipotence that sexuality holds: "'The Qur'an and Sunnah [Islamic sacred texts] provide that sexual desire is part of God's creation of the human being, something both men and women have...[F]emale sexual desire is seen as natural and not evil'" (qtd. in Azam 138). However, because there are many interpretations, manifestations, and distortions of religious texts, contemporary Iran is a culture that is "still very much structured by the privileging of male desire over female sexual expression" (Sadeghi 250). In a study conducted in 1997 in which 60 Iranian men and women were asked questions about various aspects of sexuality, "55 percent of Iranian men believe that in a time of sexual needs, their partner is

expected to respond, whether or not she favors it” (Sadeghi 255). These expectations and double standards exist partly because sexuality is viewed as a distinctly private affair. Because young women are less likely to be economically independent than their male counterparts, these private spheres most often come under the jurisdiction of masculine power, so that sexual politics are once again placed within a power grid: “male members are active sexual partners, expressing their sexual desires, while female members are mostly passive and responding to their male partner’s demands” (Sadeghi 256).

In this way, *The Girl* undermines masculine sexuality. She not only possesses her own physical space, but also enters into Saeed’s apartment under the guise of adherence to sexual mores: he expects her to have sex with him because it is his desire. However, a famous trope among female vampires in popular Western media is that “a ‘latent vampire’ lay ‘concealed under thoroughly respectable inhibited womanhood” (qtd. in Dijkstra 4). Instead of performing the expected script, she deviates from her role as passive female sexual object and asserts her dominant power using her agency and personhood, or, rather, her ‘vampire-hood.’ As mentioned above, as she is sucking Saeed’s finger, representing the phallus and all of the connotations of masculine control and privilege, she bites it off, and, in a reversal of roles, uses his severed finger to caress his own lips before she kills him with a bite to the neck. More so, this killing, among the others that she commits, is a transgression of respectable womanhood. In order to kill, she has to maintain contact between two sensualized parts of the body: her mouth and her victim’s neck (*A Girl Walks*). In other words, the act of killing evokes the image of “sexual intercourse as the deadly attack of a cannibalistic usurper” (Dijkstra 11). Thus, her vampirism “provides her both goals and resources—a powerfully feminist combination. It also suggests freedom from prescribed sexual and social mores” (Valentine). This autonomy, largely created

by her being triply ‘Othered’ and unbelonged as a veiled woman in the eyes of the West, and as a woman in Iranian patriarchy, and as a vampire, disrupts both Western and Iranian society’s, “attempts to fetishize manhood as a gateway to immortality” (Dijkstra 5). In the end, it is The Girl, and female sexuality, that will live forever. Furthermore, the girl possesses and acts upon her inherent biopower, which Foucault defines as the sovereign’s “right to take life or let live” (241). Thus, The Girl is her own sovereign because she decides who lives and who dies. For example, she protects Atti, and she kills Saeed. In one of the more intimate scenes between The Girl and Arash, she turns to him and pulls his head back, baring his neck to her. Again, she has the ability and the sovereignty to kill Arash; instead, she rests her head on his chest, deciding to let him live, and, indeed, making the choice to leave with, and to love, him.

With this choice, and with every choice she makes, The Girl innately contradicts, through her veiled female vampire status, the very foundations of patriarchal control. Yet, the purpose of this paper is not to idealize, idolize, or fetishize The Girl or anything that she represents. Writing as an ‘outsider’ located in the West, I want to acknowledge that accepting Western “hegemony as a fact...overwhelms the resistance and agency of peoples beyond the borders” of Western society (McFadden 57). In other words, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* acts as an alternative narrative to the supposedly fixed hegemonic ideology that is often perpetuated throughout the West. Amirpour’s film is a critique of this hegemony and provides many tools from which to, as The Girl does, renegotiate boundaries. *A Girl Walks* engages directly with Angela Davis’ call for imagination to be used “in a transformative way...to remake the world so that it is better for its inhabitants—not only for human beings, for all its living inhabitants” (“Vocabulary” 20). It is from this knowledge that we are able to challenge and destabilize the hegemonic principles that

construct and constrict our lives. It is because we are able to imagine the potential of a transformed world that we are ourselves able to transform it, and to create actualized change.

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*A Note on Sources: I have used a few sources that are non-peer-reviewed such as blogs. I have done this for two reasons: 1) There is very little academic discourse on vampires in Islam; 2) A majority of the growing revolution among Iranian youth culture is taking place in online forums.