

Masculinities in Banietemad's *Tales*: Reshuffling Gender Dynamics under Socio-economic Pressures

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Halfway through the film *Ghesseh-hā* (*Tales*, 2014), we embark with a documentary filmmaker in a minivan full of people conducting some industrial action. Their factory has closed down, but they have not been paid for months. The image switches to the documentary filmmaker's own camera; we witness a series of spontaneous testimonies from the workers. Their statements range from "I need my wage; I have a family to feed" to "I worked loyally all these years and now that's how they treat me?" Reza, one of the male leaders, expresses his despair: due to his lack of revenue, he has become dependent on the wage of his wife. Before the camera moves away, he rhetorically and repeatedly asks: "Is this acceptable?" Such testimonies of personal struggle echo larger social malaise. Eponymously, these stories form Banietemad's film, *Tales*, and highlight different aspects of gender subjectivities in Iranian society. The other stories showcase more situations of drug addiction, prostitution, abusive relationships, and financial desperation. In these intimate stories, Banietemad delineates the interplay of changing male and female subjectivities under socio-economic pressure. The film portrays how common people are squeezed in vicious circles of poverty and the battle to survive. "It's true that the questions we are dealing with are Iranian, but they are also global," said Banietemad in an interview in Venice (Roddy 2014). How does Banietemad portray gender reshuffling and representations of manliness in *Tales*? How does it echo her previous films? What does the actual production of this film tell us about today's politics of Iranian cinema?

These stories present how a lack of revenue brings Iranian ideals of manhood into sharper scrutiny. Thus, the film does not perpetuate the construction of a fixed gender, but, as noted by Pak-Shiraz (2017) regarding a series of post-2005 Iranian films, it instead challenges ideas of heroism, manliness,

and patriarchy. It relates “tales of men’s alienation and despair, presenting the diversity of performances of masculinity within Iran” (2017: 946). Thus, studies of masculinities in Iranian cinema have demonstrated the “diversity of the marginal experiences and the internal hierarchies of marginal masculinities” (ibid.) and have challenged stereotypes of Iranian or Middle Eastern masculinity more generally (Gow 2016: 175).

Importantly, *Tales* brings in another set of questions for the study of masculinities. Whilst Pak-Shiraz notes that in several recent films, including Saman Salur’s *Chand Kilo Khormā Barāye Marāsseṁ-e Tadfin* (*A Few Kilos of Dates for a Funeral*, 2006) and Majid Barzegar’s *Parviz* (2012), “the dysfunctional relationship between the genders is evident in the absence of any form of conversation between them” (2017: 959), as many challenges come in the way of the men’s repeated attempts to dialogue with women. Banietemad’s film narrates long conversations or arguments between male and female protagonists. Her filmic language is famous for her capacity to successfully represent male/female intimacy in ways that circumvent the regulations of modesty. In *Tales*, she uses themes of private and public spaces, the negotiation of the male/female divide, and lyrical ambivalence to denaturalize the idea of masculinity as fixed by portraying it in dialogue with femininity. *Tales*’ narrative resists simplification in readings of men’s and women’s roles. Instead, the film proposes a multi-faceted portrayal of men and women, and how they negotiate their position in their encounter.

In this chapter, I draw on masculinity studies as an object of knowledge that is always in relation to femininity, historically and contextually (Connell 2005). I will show how *Tales* problematizes the idea of a normative gender by “call[ing] to attention the construction of masculinity rather than concealing it” (Peberdy 2011: 29, cited in Pak-Shiraz 2017: 963). I argue that her films depict moments of crisis to better show the construction of masculinities and the possibility for alternatives, possibly based in openness and dialogue. Keeping this in mind, I draw on Pak-Shiraz (2017) to show that, in opposition to traditional depictions of male protagonists in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema and to the hypermasculine hero of commercial cinema, there is no such hero in *Tales*. Following the same trend as other post-2005 Iranian films, it portrays the “conflicted man negotiating between the contradicting demands of tradition and modernity” (Pak-Shiraz 2017: 953). According to Pak-Shiraz, key binaries from the Iran–Iraq War, such as opposing enemy/friend, hero/traitor of the “sacred defense” cinema, have shifted (ibid.: 946). This change allows for more articulate elaborations of masculinity and alternative heroisms. Martyrdom is no longer conceived as an “ideal of masculinity and heroism from its male population” (ibid.). One can thus wonder what the performances of masculinity are for the young war generation that is now living in a swiftly changing Iranian society (ibid.). I respond to this call by showing the range of different masculinities represented

in *Tales*. Thus, I contend that if Banietamad proposes a heroism in *Tales*, it comes from common people. With Khosrowjah (2011), I argue that these are post-modern urban heroes whose achievement is their capacity to survive amid difficulties and help each other in the urban jungle that is Tehran.

In *Tales*, the paths of the characters, including those from Banietamad's previous films, criss-cross. Those familiar with Banietamad's filmography know that she frequently features the same actors. This both broadens the horizon of *Tales* and provides her characters with increased breadth. In the scene described above, we meet Tooba (Golab Adineh), the respectable female laborer now in her sixties, who we previously saw in *Rusari Ābi* (*The Blue-veiled*, 1995) and *Zir-e Pust-e Shahr* (*Under the Skin of the City*, 2001). She is a hard-working and intelligent woman, even if she is illiterate.

Iranian films have portrayed how gender ideas have shifted with political changes throughout the last century. An assumption is that politics—stemming from power—infiltrates all aspects of life, and so does resistance (Laachir and Talajooy 2013). In this chapter, I will map masculinity theories in the context of Iranian cinema. The articulation of male characters is as important as that of female ones, yet it has received significantly less academic attention so far. This will provide me with the tools to examine gender dynamics linked to socio-economic processes in *Tales*. I will then move on to explore where this film stands in relation to Banietamad's earlier productions.

MASCULINITIES IN IRAN

Exploring masculinities requires some precautions since “masculinity as an object of knowledge is always masculinity-in-relation” (Connell 2005: 43). Thus, “masculinity and femininity are inherently relational concepts” (ibid.: 43). Butler's theory of gendered performativity (1988) suggests an emphasis on how everyday social practices reinforce or resist the wider cultural narratives of sexed and gendered subjects. In this view, masculinity is not a pre-existing or natural fact but an “effect” which is repeatedly achieved through discursive, embodied, and material performances (Butler 1988). Knowledge of masculinities arises within the larger project of knowing gender relations. Following Connell, “masculinities are configurations of practice structured by gender relations. They are inherently historical; and their making and remarking is a political process affecting the balance of interests in society and the direction of social change” (Connell 2005: 44). Thus, there are relations among masculinities: hegemony, subordination, complicity, marginalization (ibid.: 76). As we will turn towards later, socially dominant masculinities assert their position through the “marginalization or delegitimation of alternatives” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 846).

In the context of modern Iran, *namus* (honor) is the concept that closely links maleness and femaleness. As shown by scholars (Najmabadi 1997; Tavakoli-Targhi 2001), it has shifted through history in tandem with Iranian nationhood. Iranian modernity, shaped discursively, went through a rearticulation of pivotal concepts crafted by gender, such as nation (*mellat*) and homeland (*vatan*; Najmabadi 1997: 444). *Namus*, primarily established in Islamic thought, shifted to a national concern. In parallel, so did *mellat* (understood as brotherhood). Thereafter, in a process of slippage, “*namus* constituted purity of woman and Iran as subjects of both male possession and protection” (ibid.). This is essential to understanding Iranian interpersonal expressions. As explained by Mir-Hosseini, *namus* “is a core value, so deeply ingrained in the dominant culture that it is rarely questioned . . . except when it is attacked or infringed” (Mir-Hosseini 2017: 211). The complex concept of *namus* is key to understanding gender dynamics in Iran. To insist on the way that both femininity and masculinity are dynamic and changing in Iran, one needs to look at gender changes throughout the nineteenth century and the role of the state as a pivotal cultural shift. As noted by Najmabadi (2005), masculine stereotypes are as dynamic as female ones. As we have witnessed, the state has an important role in shaping gender dynamics, but the rupture that the 1979 Islamic Revolution sometimes represents needs to be nuanced. The substitution of the figure of the Shah as head of state after the 1979 Islamic Revolution with that of Ayatollah Khomeini, as one that “rendered a different hierarchy of masculinities in Iranian society,” was not completed to the point of replacing “the westernized with the religious as the new hegemonic order in post-Revolutionary Iran” (Pak-Shiraz 2017: 945). It was more complex; changes were already under way before the Revolution, and processes of rupture and continuity prevailed in the post-revolutionary period. This is also visible in cinema.

GENDER REPRESENTATION IN IRANIAN CINEMA

The representation of women in Iranian cinema has gone through a significant change since the early 1990s. From that time on, a number of rising female directors and actors began depicting their view of Iranian society, as well as the role of women within it (Ghorbankarimi 2015). The many studies of gender in Iranian cinema have focused on female representations, leaving men unconsidered (for example, Lahiji 2002). There is, however, a growing literature on masculinities in Iranian cinema. Scholars have recently aimed to address the gender imbalance in recent studies by incorporating studies of masculinities (Abedinifard 2019; Gerami 2003; Gow 2016; Pak-Shiraz 2017) because the representation of one gender tends to inform the other (Gow 2016: 166) and “non-female-centric films” can portray strong feminist perspectives (Abedinifard 2019). According

to Pak-Shiraz, *film-farsi* (see below) created models of masculinity that reinterpreted the concept of *javanmardi* (chivalry) through its heroes and villains. It subverted the masculine hierarchies propagated by the state and “endowed marginalised men with the moral authority to take on the hypermasculine role without subverting the idea of hegemonic masculinity itself” (Pak-Shiraz 2018: 297). This sense, the “heroes of the 1950s and 1960s resembled a conventionally Iranian man” but “the hero of the 1970s *film-farsi* had the characteristics of the western hero” (Pak-Shiraz 2018: 301).

The pre-revolutionary *film-farsi* genre is known for displaying song and dance, and female stars, at times semi-naked, appealing to a male gaze (Lahiji 2002). Male characters in *film-farsi* were as stereotyped as women. In the pre-revolutionary culture, the hierarchical order featured the merchants and professionals (engineers, doctors, professors) at the top, with the *jahel* (urban cowboys) and *lat-ha* (misfits) at the bottom (Gerami 2003). After the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the veiling and codes of modesty regulating society put an end to sexualized portrayals of women and also brought new models for male characters.

Scholars have drawn on theories of masculinity to analyze Iranian films. For Pak-Shiraz, the crisis of masculinity in pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema is not so much about

masculinity’s assertion of power and authority over female subjectivities but partly their struggle and ultimate failure to form a relationship with them. The gendered social and political discourse within Iran magnifies these obstacles . . . and many recent art house films, including those discussed here, critically examine the challenges of establishing relationships and intimacy in a gendered society. (2017: 959)

For Pak-Shiraz, *film-farsi* subverted masculine hierarchies and presented the *luti*, or “tough guy,” as the central heroic character and the rich Westernized man at the bottom of the hierarchy. Shahin Gerami explores post-revolutionary masculine models and argues that there is a new genre “devoted to the war efforts and the martyrs. The martyr is a young, unmarried (virgin, innocent) man, fearless and strong” (2003: 267) and she thus argues that the “glorified new masculinity types” include the clergy and martyrs. Drawing on this categorization, Gow (2016) examines different representations of masculinity in post-revolutionary Iranian films featuring male characters, following Gerami’s conceptualization of masculinity in Iran. He highlights how Masud Kimiai’s *Dash Akol* (1971) displays the *luti*, or “tough guy” genre, as a particular form of masculinity.

To contribute to this growing scholarship on masculinities in Iranian films, I will look specifically at instances of gender relationality in *Tales*. Previous works have mostly examined men and not their masculinity construction with regard

to their women counterparts. Critiques of the concept of masculinity pointed to a “tendency, in research as well as in popular literature, to dichotomize the experiences of men and women” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 838). Taking a consistently relational approach to gender is more favorable (*ibid.*), as

women are central in many of the processes constructing masculinities—as mothers; as schoolmates; as girlfriends . . . we consider that research on hegemonic masculinity now needs to give much closer attention to the practices of women and to the historical interplay of femininities and masculinities. (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 848)

Looking at instances of female–male dialogue might provide the most appropriate material to understand gender dynamics. Due to the scope and length of this chapter, I have applied a more limiting heteronormative framework to the research rather than a more fluid one.

TALES’ SEVEN STORIES AS REALIST WINDOWS

Tales interconnects the stories of about fifteen characters in seven different shorts. Episodes take place chronologically, but no clear plot appears in their unfolding, reminiscent of French New Wave films. Characteristically, the figure of the upper-middle-class documentary filmmaker (Habib Rezaei) unites these chapters. He seems driven by an aim to portray society as it is in its most mundane expression. In the first scene of the film, seated in the back of a taxi, he films Tehran’s nocturnal urban landscape whilst listening to the cab driver’s life story (which refers to *Under the Skin of the City*). The driver is intrigued and asks: “Have you been away for long?” “No, how come?” responds the filmmaker. “Well, you’re filming the streets,” the driver says, clearly finding this bizarre, as though only foreigners would find the landscape interesting. The filmmaker states: “This is how I look at the world.” This sets the tone for the film. In *Tales*, we see portions of lives and hear stories without clear beginnings or ends, mere sneak peeks providing a taste of the broader social atmosphere. On this topic, Banietemad explains: “The documentary character is a representation of the position of the documentary that is constrained when making a film. It is, of course, a picture of a real filmmaker’s situation” (Simorgh 2015). Further:

the position of the documentary filmmaker in *Tales* represents the position of filmmaking in general, where his camera is not able to record the “real”—that is, in the sense that the perspective of the filmmaker and the way he views the world is through a camera lens only as a means to record and hold on to that moment. (Armatage and Khosroshahi 2017: 152–3)

In *Tales*, the documentary maker meets administrative restrictions on his work, but he persists.

The structure of *Tales* shows a cross-section of Iranian society. The characters circulate in a range of sites and socio-economic levels. We gradually learn how they skillfully navigate the social world. Moreover, the film's settings contribute to building the narrative. Half of the short stories take place in closed sites that are in motion: a cab, a minivan, or a subway. They also happen in private environments, such as a family household courtyard, or in semi-private ones, such as a non-governmental organization (NGO) sheltering female addicts or an administrator's office.

As films from the Iranian New Wave "tradition" tend to achieve in a similar manner to French New Wave films, *Tales* reaches a high degree of realism. The incorporation of the documentary style and the absence of non-diegetic sounds and music in the film (except at the very end) reinforce the sense of realism. To write, Banietemad takes inspiration from the conditions of real individuals, as she explains: "The different characters of *The Blue-veiled* were inspired by my research into the conditions of working women, and those who are marginalized" (Armatage and Khosroshahi 2017: 145). For the preparation of *Khun Bāzi* (*Mainline*, 2006), Banietemad explains that Baran Kosari, who plays Sara, the protagonist, spent considerable time in close contact with young people who were struggling with addiction in tension-filled rehabilitation centers and thus, "she gained knowledge of where drugs are sold and a deep understanding of addiction" (ibid.: 151). With regard to the construction of the film *Tales*, I now turn to the political context that influenced the filming style.

GUERRILLA-STYLE FILMING WITHOUT BREAKING ANY RULES

The final form the film took makes sense only when *Tales*' shooting conditions are considered. *Tales* was made in an uncommon way, and yet, according to Banietemad, no rules were broken in producing it. After *Mainline* in 2006, Banietemad made no feature films until *Tales* in 2014 because she boycotted filmmaking under the previous government (2005–13). As she explains:

I didn't accept the new management of the Ministry of Arts and Culture, and I didn't want to make films under such conditions. Thus, *Tales* was made up of shorter films, which meant it didn't require a license, and as a result was made independently. (Armatage and Khosroshahi 2017: 152)

Tales was indeed created with a common short film license. Banietemad wrote these short stories in such a way as to produce a long film, which is not

prohibited by law (Simorgh 2015). With this idea in mind, Banietemad structured the script so it could be filmed in a short amount of time, but it took her years to mature the script with her collaborator and co-author, Farid Mostafavi. To stay close to her values and ambitions, Banietemad did not refrain from casting two actresses who were banned from acting or appearing on screen at the time of filming (Fateme Motamed-Aria and Baran Kosari). It was possible for these actresses to feature in the film because it did not require a formal statement from the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (Simorgh 2015), which supervises all cultural activities.

The film met with challenges but was nevertheless a success that appealed to national and international audiences. As Banietemad explains:

Tales wasn't screened until four years after completion. It didn't receive the right to be screened under the presidency of Ahmadinejad [2005–13]. Even with permission to be screened, which came under Hassan Rouhani's presidency [2013 to present], the immense pressure of opposing groups resulted in a two-year ban . . . The main cinemas that belonged to government institutions in Tehran and other cities boycotted the film and prevented its screening. (Armatage and Khosroshahi 2017: 140)

In the end, with very few exhibiting slots, *Tales* was released and still “took in ten billion rials” (ibid.), or about 30,000 US dollars at the time. The film won three national awards at the 2014 Fajr International Film Festival, including one for Best Film and one for Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Farhad Aslani (acting as Reza), and six awards at other international festivals, including the prize for Best Screenplay in 2014 at Venice.

Whilst Banietemad strongly supports women's rights movements and organizations, and makes films challenging systems of patriarchy, she does not consider herself to be a feminist (Armatage and Khosroshahi 2017: 154–5). She explains that the

term feminist in our society has been subject to confusing interpretations. Apart from progressive groups and intellectuals, it has created an inverted image that results in a feeling of disconnect between ordinary people and feminists. My job is to make social films, and what is most important for me is to have trust from the general public and to be able to communicate with them. (ibid.)

She reasons that her focus is more on women, “but that doesn't mean I just have to make films about women, as my look at male characters is no different to female characters. But it's natural that I know more about women than men” (Simorgh 2015).

MINGLING TALES OF TODAY AND YESTERDAY

In this section, I will focus on several scenes that meaningfully depict gender dynamics in resonance with Banietemad's previous films.

The shared burden of honor for men and woman: the episode where Abbas encounters his estranged neighbor, Massoumeh

Abbas (Mohammad Reza Forutan), the cab driver, picks up a young woman with a sick baby (Mehraveh Sharifinia). At first, he wants her to get out, thinking she is a prostitute, because she does not give him a destination. (Abbas asks: "Where do you want to go?" She replies, "Wherever you go." He yells, "Aren't you ashamed of yourself?" and "Don't you have a brother who's enough of a man to keep you from doing this?") But slowly he recognizes her as Massoumeh, his former neighbor when she was still a teenager. Whilst driving to a destination unknown to both the protagonist and the audience, Abbas recounts the story of *Under the Skin of the City*: after yet another fight between Massoumeh and her brother, in which he beats her and cuts her hair, Massoumeh runs away. The tension rises in the car as Abbas recalls the story whilst addressing Massoumeh in the front mirror, and she repeatedly asks him to stop the car because she wants to leave. It is implied that she took up what is considered a sinful life as a runaway girl, sleeping on the streets of Tehran. In his voice, Abbas displays a sense of resentment towards her "asshole junkie" brother and he shakes his head in disapproval. Although he chastises Massoumeh for the life she has led, he does not see her as the one to blame; he offers her a cigarette. At the end of his story, the two of them express their regret for the past. When he stops the car and gets out, one wonders whether Abbas will throw Massoumeh out of his car or hand her to the police. When he returns with a stuffed monkey for the baby and medications, he sees that she has gone. In Abbas's attempt to contribute to healing the baby, we can find a symbolic gesture of reconciliation and hope for what the future might hold. Perhaps the baby is the most palpable outcome of Massoumeh's tragedy but can still be healed and thus saved.

In this scene, it appears that Abbas harbors resentment towards Massoumeh's brother, but also towards himself for not preventing her tragedy from happening. A younger Abbas in *Under the Skin of the City* would fiercely react against men who beat their wives or sisters, including his own sister's husband. As he strove to lift his family out of poverty (his mother worked in a labor-intensive job in a factory), he took high risks that did not pay off in the end. His heroic intentions led to a tragic destiny that dragged himself and his family down. In failing to provide for his relatives, he failed to approximate to the ideal of the provider, the breadwinner. Abbas also offers an alternative masculinity with regard to the beatings. As shown by Pak-Shiraz (2018), *film-farsi* promoted a kind of eroticization

of violence against women (as an erotic act of hegemonic masculinity), which boys were socialized to find erotic and entertaining. In this sense, boys understood that to display manhood involved committing acts of aggression. However, Abbas could not stand up to such hegemonic masculinity, as he now wished he had. In many ways, the *bi-namusi* (dishonor) of Massoumeh becoming a prostitute spills over to the men in her surroundings, who have proven unable to step in and protect her. As seen before, *namus* (honor) is closely linked to maleness. It conceives the purity of woman as subjects of male possession and protection (Mir-Hosseini 2017). Abbas, like other boys, was raised with the duty to protect the *namus* of his close female relatives. However, socio-economic inequality plays a major role in the multiple dynamics shaping gender relations, such as marital abuse. For example, poverty and lack of economic opportunity may lead to the reliance of common people on the black market.

Mocked hegemonic masculinities and institutional violence: the bittersweet encounter between Mr Halimi and a bureaucrat

A respectable retired civil servant in his sixties, Mr Halimi (Mehdi Hashemi) waits a whole day for his appointment with the administrative manager. Desperate to get his case fixed, he sneaks into the office of the busy bureaucrat (Hassan Mahjuni), who does not realize Mr Halimi has entered for several minutes. Mr Halimi hands the bureaucrat a dense folder and explains his Kafkaesque story. After working loyally for over thirty years as a civil servant, he requires financial support for some costly surgery and he has been asked to undress to prove the surgery has taken place in order for his claim to be accepted. As he speaks, the bureaucrat ignores him completely; his phone constantly rings, either to hold work-related discussions or to speak with his wife, who is organizing a dinner. When his mistress calls, the bureaucrat responds in a smarmy voice whilst Mr Halimi is still explaining his case. The bureaucrat turns back and says to Mr Halimi: “I’m drowning in work here!” preparing to leave the office. Mr Halimi becomes extremely frustrated and screams: “Now for a bill, I have to keep pulling my pants down in front of the likes of you?” thereby expressing his sense of “emasculatation” and humiliation.

The contrast between the two men is blatant. Mr Halimi was the protagonist in Banietemad’s first feature, *Khārej az Mahdudeh (Off Limits)*, 1988). In that film, Mr Halimi, a modest employee, grappled with the municipal bureaucracy. Mr Halimi and his wife were robbed but could not seek support from the police because their neighborhood did not appear on the map due to a cartographic error. In *Tales*, Mr Halimi is still troubled with the cold and vicious bureaucracy of governmental officials. This tragi-comic scene shows two different masculinities. The bureaucrat is dressed smartly and is financially well off (he is hosting a party with lavish dishes), and in addition he can “afford” to

have a mistress. Whilst he embodies the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, which is “related to particular ways of representing and using men’s bodies” (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005: 581), the film mocks him. The intrusion of the popular song “Susan Khanoom” during the mistress’s call is a tragi-comic instance. This song itself mocks men who compete to win a date with a classy woman. The situation echoes Connell and Messerschmidt’s definition of masculinity as “essentially a collective process whereby men compete with other men for validation and confirmation. Masculinity is collectively enforced, protected, and threatened” (2005: 832). Hegemonic masculinity does not necessarily “mean violence” but can be supported by “ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion” (ibid.). In contrast with the previous scene’s references to physical violence, here an *institutional* violence is experienced. According to Connell, “the top levels of business, the military and government provide a fairly convincing corporate display of masculinity . . . It is successful claim to authority, more than direct violence, that is the mark of hegemony” (2005: 77). Here, the bureaucrat embodies this hegemonic masculinity as he personifies power—even more so because it is a power that he seems to use arbitrarily.

Social class and love: the scene where Reza starts an argument with his wife, Nobar

Reza (Farhad Aslani) sits on the staircase in the courtyard of their home waiting for Nobar (Fatemeh Motamed Aria) to come home from work. She arrives, quite meaningfully, with a piece of bread. He is suspicious of her fidelity, as a letter has just arrived from her ex-husband. As the discussion becomes heated and filled with wrath, he grabs his wife’s *chador* and pulls it down—displaying violence without physically touching her. He asks her to read the letter out loud, as he is illiterate. The letter at first is ambiguous and she stops halfway. Reza asks their son to continue reading. It is revealed that the letter expresses her ex-husband’s last will. Realizing his unfounded mistake and faulty accusation, Reza holds his head under the running faucet at the sink whilst he cries. He may act in this way to cleanse himself from the offense he has done to Nobar (before prayer, a Muslim must perform ablutions and wash certain parts of the body as an act of purification). Reza then returns to the courtyard staircase, still crying. Nobar approaches him and gently leans her head on his shoulder. The scenes ends with this tender view.

Reza reveals his insecurity towards Nobar’s ex-husband, the wealthy factory owner. In Reza, some will recognize the poor working-class laborer from *The Blue-veiled*. The film is about Rasul, a tomato sauce factory owner in his fifties and wealthy widower, whose love for Nobar, one of his farm workers who wears a blue veil, is taboo. Rasul’s family rejects the union due to class

and age differences and attempts to break off the relationship. As described at the beginning of this chapter, Reza has told the filmmaker in *Tales* that he depends on the wages of his wife. His jealousy is a reaction to his perceived “emasculatation,” as he has lost his status as *pater familias*. In the figure of the *pater familias*, manhood is strongly associated with the status of the breadwinner who provides for his family (Connell 1998), an ideal that defines patriarchal masculinity. This scene is highly allegorical, since Nobar literally bears a loaf of bread, portraying that she is the real breadwinner.

Matching male ideals is always challenging but is even more so at times of economic hardship, leading to perceived experiences of emasculatation. As shown by Connell, we cannot talk about a “masculinity crisis” in this case (2005: 84). Masculinity is not a system but a configuration of practices within a system of gender relations; therefore, we may instead speak of the disruption or transformation of the system. There can be a “crisis of the gender order” (Connell 2005: 84), in which it is essential to look at the female roles in this reordering. Seen in this light, this transformation can be read as emancipatory.

Intimacy in dialogue: the final scene with Sara and Ahmad

Ahmad (Payman Maadi) is a driver waiting to pick up Sara (Baran Kosari), a volunteer at an NGO that shelters female addicts, from the hospital. We can sense a romantic charge in his behavior prior to her arrival: he examines himself in the mirror and fixes his hair. Nobar wheels Samira, a resident at the shelter who had attempted suicide, to Ahmad’s minivan. What Nobar says to Samira in a motherly tone provides context: “Why would such a pretty girl slit her wrists? You have your whole life in front of you; you’ll be a bride one day, then a mother.” Then Sara arrives and the minivan departs; the conversation between her and Ahmad is riddled with tension. They accuse each other with provocative remarks. Sara hints at the fact that Ahmad studied Mechanical Engineering at university but was expelled due to his political inclinations, referring to Ahmad as *dāneshju-ye setāre dār* (star-holding student), a term that describes students who have been banned from university because of their political involvement or membership of particular groups. Ahmad expresses with disdain that, by helping addicts, Sara conducts herself like “Mother Theresa.” They disagree about what “helping others” means. Ahmad says: “You should think of a situation where we can figure out how to keep 100 girls off the streets,” to which Sara answers, “Okay, so since we can’t save them all, I shouldn’t help this one either?” Ahmad may be hinting that Sara should pursue politics instead of losing herself in petty charity work. They seem to disapprove of each other but show a high degree of attention all the same. Sara asks, “Why don’t you do something in your field?” to which Ahmad answers sarcastically, “I hadn’t thought of this at all!” Part of their conflict stems from their different class backgrounds, as Sara

grew up in a middle-class family and Ahmad comes from a more disadvantaged background; he says, “you have always had things your way. Whilst everyone else, including me, have had no say in our lives.”

As Sara justifies her choice to bring assistance to addicts, which she has experienced herself, Ahmad asserts she does not want to move on and says provocatively, “You’ve built a wall around yourself . . . and you won’t even take a look beyond it.” Sara wants to come to the core of the discussion and asks him if he likes her. He tries to dodge the real answer and asks her the same. Sara pauses and then says no. He looks hurt and asks her whether the problem lies with him. Sara, admitting it would not make a difference, confesses that the issue is herself.

Whilst Ahmad exposes his vulnerability in admitting his romantic emotions towards Sara, his persistence to reach her inner self comes to fruition. By the end of their confrontation, he manages to break down Sara’s outer shell and renders her as exposed as he was, turning the intimate encounter into a shameful confession. With this move, he prevents his perceived “emasculatation” and keeps a straight face. The dialogue ends as he asks the rhetorical question: “Do I need to know anything more than the fact that you can change the bandages on Samira’s open sores despite her being HIV-positive—without wearing gloves?” disclosing that she is also HIV-positive.

Ahmad and Sara’s confrontation displays the opposition of two stubborn people incapable of getting along and yet able to reach a mutual understanding. Intimacy is conveyed successfully in their provocations, jokes, and mockeries. Whilst Sara’s assistance to drug addicts is deplored by Ahmad, it might be possible that, for Sara, her dedication to this work is her way of using her agency: that is, her capacity to act independently and to make her own decisions in an autonomous manner. She cares for the marginalized, and thus she positions herself against the dictated social structure mentioned by Nobar: “you need to get married and have children.” This non-compliance with parental expectations echoes the theme of drugs that is central in *Mainline*, in which Sara conceals her drug addiction from the man she prepares to emigrate to Canada to marry. Filmed almost monochromatically to reflect the gray atmosphere, *Mainline* asks whether Sara’s emigration would ever make her happy or would cause her problem to grow worse due to isolation. In *Tales*, Ahmad, in his well-intended attempt to “save” her, imposes his own vision of success upon her.

CONCLUSION: URBAN HEROES AND PRODUCTIVE ALTERNATIVE MASCULINITIES

Banietemad’s depictions of masculinity in situations of drug addiction, prostitution, abusive relationships, and financial desperation offer a wide range

of performances. There is something inherently subversive, even resistant (Laachir and Talajooy 2013), in showing spaces that deal with social issues such as drug addiction that the official state narrative tries to conceal. *Tales* offers slices of ordinary lives. Since masculinity is not a pre-existing or natural fact but an “effect” (Butler 1988), the film shows how it is achieved through different means. Due to poverty and lack of economic opportunities, “traditional” roles fragment and gender subjectivities as effects become ever more visible. If there is a hero in *Tales*, it is the one who survives the harsh life of Tehran. It may be Abbas and his behavior as a *Javanmard*, who attempts to help Massoumeh’s sick baby. It may also be Sara, who remains close to her ideals battling against “traditional” expectations. Tehran is the new battleground, no longer remote war fronts where soldiers fought and died for their ideals (Pak-Shiraz 2017: 954). In this vein, the anti-hero in *Tales* is the incompetent bureaucrat in the tragi-comic scene with Mr Halimi, where his hegemonic masculinity is mocked.

The camera often displays three protagonists: a man, a woman, and a vehicle. Khosrowjah describes the Kiarostamian male protagonist as

increasingly alienated socially and culturally to the degree that the car is both a safe haven and a metaphor for uprootedness. This urban, middle-class, male protagonist has lost his home. His anchor, his car, is not a new dwelling, but a sign of his inability to stop, to rest. (Khosrowjah 2011: 57)

In several instances, such as in the last scene with Sara and Ahmad, a male and female character share the closed space of the minivan in ways that circumvent modesty regulations by opening up sealed thoughts. Banietemad uses the car, the subway, and the minivan as liminal spaces to navigate between the public and the private, the male and the female characters. These enclosed moving spaces are also spaces from which the characters cannot easily escape. The car and minivan in particular become spectacular capsules for building tension. The male character sitting in front of the female characters, usually driving, looks at her through the front mirror. They share a closed space and their own “battleground,” renegotiating their positionalities in the tumultuous city of Tehran.

In *Tales*, as male/female characters argue, intimacy is conveyed successfully and produces mutual understanding. It is specifically in these encounters that this negotiation is made visible. Moments of crisis in gender systems are fecund moments of transformations and emancipation from assigned roles.

Filmography

FICTION FILMS / DIRECTOR

Ghesseh-hā (*Tales*, 2014)
Khun Bāzi (*Mainline*, 2006)
Gilāneh (*Gilane*, 2005)
Zir-e Pust-e Shahr (*Under the Skin of the City*, 2001)
Bārān va Bumi (*Baran and the Native, Kish Tales*, 1999)
Bānu-ye Ordibehesht (*The May Lady*, 1998)
Rusari Ābi (*The Blue-veiled*, 1995)
Nargess (*Nargess*, 1992)
Pul-e Khāreji (*Foreign Currency*, 1989)
Zard-e Ghanāri (*Canary Yellow*, 1989)
Khārej az Mahdudeh (*Off Limits*, 1988)

DOCUMENTARIES / DIRECTOR

Touran Khanom (Co-director Mojtaba Mirtahmasb, 2018)
Āy, Ādam-hā (*Hey, Humans*, 2016)
Yek Sāat az Yek Omr (*One Hour in a Lifetime*, 2015)
Hame-ye Derakhtān-e Man (*All My Trees*, 2015)
Ān Suy-e Ayeneh-ha (*The Other Side of Mirrors*, 2014)
Concert-e Ayeneh-ha (*The Mirrors Recital*, 2014)
Concert-e khodāvandān-e Asrār (*The Concert of the Lords of Secrets*, 2014)
Otāgh-e 202 (*The Room No. 202, Part of Kahrizak 4 Views*, 2012)
Fardā Mibinamet Elinā (*See You Tomorrow Elina*, 2010)

Mā Nimi az Jame'yat-e Irānim (We Are Half of Iran's Population, 2009)
Hayāt Khalvate Khāneh-ye Khorshid (Angels of the House of Sun, 2009)
Farsh-e 3 Bodi (3D Carpet, Part of Iranian Carpet, 2007)
Ruzegār-e Ma (Our Times, 2002)
Zir-e Pust-e Shahr (Under the Skin of the City, 1996)
Ākharin Didār bā Irān Daftari (The Last Visit with Iran Daftari, 1995)
In Film-hā ro beh ki Neshun Midin? (To Whom Do You Show These Films?, 1993)
Bahār tā bahār (Spring to Spring, 1993)
Gozāresh-e 71 (The 1992 Report, 1993)
Tamarkoz (Centralization, 1986)
Tadbirhā-ye Eqtesādi-e Jang (The War Economic Planning, 1981)
Mohājerin-e Rustāi dar Shahr (Occupation of Migrant Peasants in the City, 1980)

PRODUCER / ARTISTIC CONSULTANT / COLLABORATIONS

Khāneh-ye Man Mahak (Mahak My Home, a collaboration, 2014)
 Karestan Documentary films as follows (Artistic consultant, 2013):

- *Poets of Life*
- *Puzzles*
- *Mother of the Earth*
- *MAHAK: A World She*
- *Friends at Work*
- *Flax to Fire*

Bacheh-hā rā dar Madreseh Negahdārim (Keep Children in School, a collaboration, 2012)
Heiran (Producer) (Director: Shalizeh Arefpour, 2009)
Second Home (Producer) (Director: Mahvash Sheikholeslami, 2008)

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