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# 'I am them and they are me': the transnational body as collective in Iranian women's cinema

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## ABSTRACT

Women's bodies have often been used as metonymic, standing for the nation and its ideologies. In exploring both narrative and documentary style filmmaking, I turn to two films: *Gilaneh* (2006) by Rakhshan Banietemad and *A Moon for my Father* (2019) co-directed by Mania Akbari and Douglas White. In *Gilaneh*, Banietemad codifies the maternal to symbolise the nation, but only to subvert and critique the state's neglect of the forgotten mother. By imagining war beyond the borders of Iran, Banietemad also imagines the mother figure across the nation, giving her international significance. In *A Moon for my Father* Akbari features her own body and battle with breast cancer. Even in the film's most intimate moments, Akbari reflects on and connects herself to the women's movement in Iran. In their conceptualisation of women's bodies, I argue that both Banietemad and Akbari extend the singular body beyond its national boundaries, calling for and insisting upon an intersectional and collective feminism.

## KEYWORDS

Transnational cinema;  
women's filmmaking;  
transnational feminism;  
Iranian cinema; feminist  
filmmaking

## Introduction

In this essay, I turn to the cinema of Iranian women filmmakers, focusing on Rakhshan Banietemad's *Gilaneh* (2006) made and produced in Iran, and Mania Akbari's co-directed film *A Moon for my Father* (2019) made in the United Kingdom with her partner Douglas White. In exploring both narrative and documentary style filmmaking, I examine the ways in which the body is initially featured to draw on state politics and the nation. In both accounts, Banietemad and Akbari go on to extend the singular body beyond national boundaries. In *Feminist and LGBTI+ Activism*, the authors consider transnational spaces of resistance through 'individual bodies' as part of 'collective struggles' (Çağatay et al. 2021, 51). They argue that the body can appear 'both as an object of social control and as a site of agency' (Çağatay et al. 2021, 68). This paper considers this dual function of the body, as well as how both Banietemad and Akbari transcend the individual body beyond its national borders to 'incite collective practices' (Çağatay et al. 2021, 68).

I begin by exploring the ways in which the Islamic Republic uses the woman's body to produce and reproduce a national brand. Then, looking at *Gilaneh*, I discuss how

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Banietemad codifies the maternal to symbolise the nation, but only to subvert and critique the state's neglect of the forgotten mother. By imagining war beyond the borders of Iran, Banietemad also imagines the mother figure across the nation, giving her international significance. Turning then to Akbari's *A Moon for my Father*, I show how the film features her own body and fight with breast cancer. In a country where the woman's body has been subject to violence and erasure, Akbari turns to her own, visualising its scars and resilience. Even in her most intimate moments of healing, Akbari thinks about and connects herself to the women's movement of Iran. In their conceptualisation of women's bodies, both Banietemad and Akbari imagine something collective and transborder. By extending these bodies beyond national borders (of either rural Iran or from exile), they imagine and visualise the woman's body free from the grips of the nation state, challenging the ideologies of the Islamic Republic, but also insisting on an intersectional and collective feminism.

### **Cinema, nation, and the woman's body**

Golshifteh Farahani, one of Iran's most beloved stars, was forced out of her career in her country of birth after starring alongside Leonardo DiCaprio in Ridley Scott's CIA thriller *Body of Lies* (2008). While the film takes on a critical stance against the CIA (Gibbons 2012), it was Farahani's choice to appear publicly unveiled in New York for the film's premiere that caused the uproar. This, for the authorities in Iran, where mandatory veiling is heavily enforced, was seen as unacceptable. However, what led to Farahani's exile was her choice to pose topless, exposing her breast in a French video campaign, causing massive controversy (Liston 2012). The reaction was mixed, from those who celebrated Farahani's bravery to those who condemned her actions entirely (Mouri 2012). For the regime, this was viewed as evidence of the corruptive outcome of cinema that showed its 'hidden' and 'disgusting face' (Gibbons 2012). Farahani was forced into exile and denied re-entry into Iran. Not only is this example demonstrative of the Islamic Republic's desire to control women's bodies, but it was also seized by the regime as an opportunity to attack cinema for being what the Islamic Republic has always deemed imperialist, colonial, and sinful.

The Islamic Republic's imposition of the mandatory *hijab* is not only to subjugate and oppress women (of course it is that too) but more so to secure a visible branding of its so-called 'Islamic' state. From its very inception, 'visuals have played a crucial role in cementing this regime and its propaganda' (Khosroshahi 2021). This has been carried out on women's bodies through enforced veiling and propagated through the nation's cinema.<sup>1</sup> The deliberate attack on cinema, through some of the strictest forms of "censorship, bans, and shutdowns, illustrates the regime's awareness and fear of the power of this visual medium. In its efforts to make the screen 'Islamic' (Egan 2011, 48), the regime has turned women's bodies into its major target. For the Islamic Republic, the geo-body of Iran is a gendered visualisation, centred on the female body. Not only does the regime use the woman's body for its ideological purpose, but it relies on these bodies as a way of expanding its own brand, both within the country and beyond it.

Through the strictest form of censorship,<sup>2</sup> the Islamic Republic has maintained a firm grip on women's cinematic images, systematically subjecting her to erasure, forced veiling, and into silence. In turn, these restrictions have unequivocally impacted the

way Iranian women have been represented in all public spaces. The international appeal of Iranian cinema has at times meant that the Islamic Republic is afforded an opportunity to further its ideological branding beyond its soil. The immense pressure on how Iranian female artists must conduct themselves highlights this. Ladan Rahbari, Chia Longman, and Gily Coene draw on the regime's outrage towards actor Leila Hatami on the red carpet at the Cannes Film Festival in 2014, where she appeared as a jury member. When greeted by the male president of the Jury with a kiss on the cheek, Hatami 'reacted warmly' (Rahbari, Longman, and Coene 2018, 1424). 'In contemporary discourses of Iranian nationalism', the authors write, 'the female body is considered a sacred site' (Rahbari et al., 2019, 1430). Both examples of Farahani and Hatami demonstrate that even beyond its borders, Iranian women's bodies and actions are policed. As Dilar Dirik argues, 'patriarchal mentalities often view women's conduct and bodies as representations of culture and territory. Controlling these becomes a way of publicly coding the permissible and the taboo' (2022, 4). The body then becomes a significant locus through which the Islamic Republic enforces and spreads its message and myth of unity. However, as Rahbari et al. write, this 'moral panic' reveals how the 'unruly bodies of women are also seen by the state as sites of power and counter-discourses, particularly when appearing in public spaces' (Rahbari et al., 2019, 1431).

The ongoing protests in the wake of Mahsa Jina Amini's murder (September 2022) by the state's morality police reveal the transition of 'moral panic' to a political one. The Islamic Republic's national brand, which has been reinforced through the *hijab*, is fiercely destabilised by women's public disobedience. What we witness is the fragmentation of the nation, facilitated through women's embodied resistance across every city in Iran. Loud and defiant chants of *zan, zendegi, azadi* (woman, life, freedom) mark a climactic moment in Iran's contemporary history. Images of women setting fire to their compulsory *hijab*, waving it in the face of their dictator has, indeed changed the iconography of the body, and with it the myth of a unified nation. Intersectionality sits at the heart of these feminist protests. Its very chant of *woman, life, freedom* adopted from the Kurdish *jin, jian, azadi* honors Amini's identity. These chants recited first in Kurdish, transcend Amini's birthplace of Saghez (Kurdistan Iran), connecting Iranian women's movement to one that is collective, intersectional, and transnational, thus, fragmenting the homogeneity the Islamic Republic has propagated and constructed for over four decades.

The *woman, life, freedom* movement gives Iranian women's activism and plight a transnational dimension. The country's diaspora, including many political dissidents who have been in exile for decades, has displayed their steadfast support for these protests. Iranian feminist groups have been particularly active through social media (Batmanghelechi and Mouri 2017, 51) using these platforms to maximise visibility and to create transnational links and alliances (Batmanghelechi and Mouri 2017, 53). But, as Halleh Ghorashi and Nayereh Tavakoli write, 'transnationalism is more than cross-border interactions' (2006, 90). For them, it is about the ways in which the 'local space gets redefined through transnational activities and vice versa' (Ghorashi and Tavakoli 2006, 1) inviting us to consider the multilateral exchanges that take place.

Despite the Islamic Republic's strategies, Iranian women from the onset of the revolution have fought and challenged its laws and ideologies. Even as the regime has attempted to erase, relegate, and dismiss them, women of Iran turn to their bodies as

‘sites of power and counter-discourse’ (Rahbari et al., 2019, 1431). Iranian women have tirelessly displayed their resistance, insisting on marking their visibility across various artistic spheres (Moghissi 2008, 546). The cinematic space has been used as a strategic and impactful medium through which these women express their activism and make their bodies public. In fact, by tuning into Iranian women’s cinematic contributions we are confronted by their commitment to transnational and intersectional feminisms that challenge borders and place. Banietemad and Akbari, in different ways, centre the woman’s body to ask important questions about their societies and the nation. In doing so, not only do they dare to visualise women’s embodiment but more importantly, they explore the singular body as a way to draw on the collective.

### **Coding/decoding the body as national in Banietemad’s *Gilaneh* (2006)**

Banietemad’s *Gilaneh* (2006) opens with the sound of explosions, missiles, bombing, and gunshots over a black screen. Without any images on the screen, through the conventions of sound, the film alerts its viewers of its war genre. Then, a close-up of Maygol (Baran Kosari) as she shakes and cries in her sleep. Her mother Gilaneh (Fateme Motamed Aria) comforts her: ‘you’re just dreaming’. Banietemad uses Maygol’s nightmare to frame the war narrative, in such a way that both removes us from the frontlines but still conveys the psychological consequences of war. The long and devastating years of the Iran–Iraq war (1980–88) have inevitably shaped the nation’s cinema. Coined as *defa-ye Moghaddas* (the sacred defense), its evolution as a genre, ‘allowed for the most articulate elaboration of key binaries (enemy/friend, revolutionary/antirevolutionary, hero/traitor, etc.)’ (Rastegar 2015, 126). Despite the genre’s gravitation toward propagandistic messages, there have also been films that challenge the war narrative. *Gilaneh*, for example, in its dedication to the marginalised stories of war, not only rejects glorification but also challenges the conventions of the war genre altogether.

The film consists of two parts: the first part of *Gilaneh* is set during the Iran–Iraq war of 1988. The film takes place in the lush and green landscape of Northern Iran in Gilan, far away from the frontlines of war. Gilaneh, whose name is one with the land (more on this later), is reluctant to send off her son Ismaeil (Bahram Radan) to fight. In this first half, we watch Ismaeil’s departure. Framed to fit the bill of a hero, representing a prince charming-esque aesthetic, he rides his horse to tell the young Setareh that he will be back to ask for her hand. Filled with promises that are never realised, Gilaneh vows that when he returns, she will forbid him from ever going back. With her son gone, Gilaneh must now accompany her pregnant daughter Maygol, in search of her husband in Tehran. The two travel on bus, across the country in the hope of finding Maygol’s husband. Maygol’s pregnant body further centralises the theme of motherhood in the film, but also alludes to the cyclical repercussions of war. As Maygol carries her own unborn child, her mother Gilaneh must protect her children from the violence of war. Maygol’s pregnancy stands for a metaphor that reminds us of the generational consequences of violence, a theme the film returns to in its latter half.

The second half of *Gilaneh* is set 15 years later, during the American invasion of Iraq in 2003. Ismaeil has returned home broken. Gilaneh, the single caregiver, watches over her only son, with all the dreams she once had for him now vanished. The film, through the bodies of both Ismaeil and Gilaneh, captures the lingering and tangible consequences

of the war at home, but also functions as a cautionary tale and warning for the rest of the world. Through its structure and engagement with time and history, *Gilaneh* asserts a transnational reading that draws connections between rural and urban spaces, as well as the national and international. And while the film subverts the conventions of the war genre by removing us entirely from the frontlines, it remains invested in the iconography of the body and its relationship with the nation. Significantly, however, Banietemad turns to the body to both codify the nation and critique the Islamic Republic.

Iranian women's bodies have for centuries been at the forefront of nation-building. Afsaneh Najmabadi discusses how 'the discursive production of vatan as a female body was achieved through the rearticulation of the classical literature of love into patriotic poetics' (Najmabadi 1997, 445). This resulted in the 'discourse of protection of women – a body that needs protection against alien designs, intrusions, and penetration – and defense of honor available to nationalism' (Najmabadi 1997, 445). As Najmabadi posits, modern Iranian nationalism was found upon the conception of purity, imagined as a female body (Najmabadi 2005, 97–8). 'The boundedness of this geobody' was 'envisioned as the outlines of a female body: one to love and be devoted to, to possess and protect, to kill and die for' (Najmabadi 2005, 98). This, since the 1979 revolution, with the enforcement of the *hijab*, has become even more pronounced where the woman's body has been visually coded to convey and carry the ideologies of the Islamic Republic both within and beyond the borders of the nation. For Najmabadi, the homeland that necessitates defending and protecting encapsulates a duality that invites a reading of *vatan* as both a 'female beloved' and a 'mother' (Najmabadi 1997, 445). In his reading of the nation, Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi suggests that the 'motherland' also contains a 'non-metaphoric corporeality' (2001, 114) that understands the woman's body as the 'originary home' of all Iranians (2001, 114). In thinking about the nation as matriotic, we are invited to consider the notion of caring for and protecting the homeland. Banietemad's *Gilaneh* engages fiercely with the metaphor of the body as a nation, but only as a means to challenge the state and to inscribe a different reading of the body altogether.

Banietemad often uses names to codify her characters, here, naming the film after the mother figure, marking her as a central character. Whereas war films are often invested in the role of the male soldier and the battleground, rendering women and mothers invisible, *Gilaneh* invites an entirely opposing gaze at the war and the role of the mother. Not only does *Gilaneh*'s character share her name with the film's title but more importantly her name explicitly connects her with the land. Gilan is a province that lies along the Caspian Sea in Iran, known for its fertile and green landscape. The film's title *Gilaneh* marries the mother's broken body with that of the nation. In this reading, *Gilaneh* herself becomes an embodiment of a space impacted by war. As Michelle Langford argues, *Gilaneh* 'evokes a particularly matriotic concept of *vatan* in order to not only emphasise the persistent effects of the Iran–Iraq war, but also highlight the duty of care needed to tend to the nation's wounds' (2021, 170). But in codifying *Gilaneh*'s body as the nation, Banietemad not only rejects war and its glorification but more importantly exposes the lack of care by the state. What the film achieves is a critical stance and reading of the nation state and an entirely different model for memorialisation of war.

Banietemad, through her *Gilaneh* character, explores a culturally and politically marginalised figure. And while the film depicts *Gilaneh* as the ultimate sacrificial mother,

it does so to shed light on important social issues of post-war Iran and as a way to expose stories that have been left untold. The film's portrayal of the sacrificial mother is used as a means of critiquing the political and social representations of war in Iran – of marginalised groups such as that of Gilaneh and her disabled son. In her categorisations of mothers, Roxanne Varzi refers to Gilaneh as 'the silent other', this is the 'the mother whose son is neither martyred nor returns a hero, but is broken, paralysed and in need of constant care – unsung and denied help from the state that has turned its back on him when he failed to return as a martyr or hero' (Varzi 2008, 89). As Varzi goes on, women like Gilaneh are 'never celebrated visually in the public sphere or paid for the state in subsidies' (Varzi 2008, 89). The invisibility of these bodies is an ideological tactic by the regime. What *Gilaneh* does is make visible the stories that the 'state leaves out of its many murals, plays, movies and renditions of the war's legacy' (Varzi 2008, 89). Removed from the kind of visuals promoted and endorsed by the state, Banietemad's reading of Gilaneh's body as the nation is never in pursuit of nationalism or glorification of war.

As such, Banietemad not only rethinks the representation of the soldier/hero figure but also disrupts nationalistic discourses of motherhood. Linda Åhäll describes the 'Patriotic Mother' to be the 'ever-ready womb for war, who performs her duty by "producing" children [soldiers] of the nation' (2012, 107–8). Gilaneh only has one son, and hers, as Varzi notes, returns neither a hero nor a martyr. Also, the sacrifice she pays for is never coded as voluntary or willing. Gilaneh never agrees to this, and this is significant in exposing the imposition of the state, which I argue questions the idealisation of the mother and her sacrifice entirely. This maternal figure who is represented as the epitome of the sacrificial mother is visualised through her broken body, as she struggles to care for her disabled son. By making visible and public (through film) the pain and struggle embodied by both Gilaneh and her son, Banietemad taps into a very different recollection and memory of war. Through the disabled Ismaeil, *Gilaneh* reflects on the state's neglect, and in doing so, reimagines not only the war genre but also the state's response. The consequences of war remain to be felt, and Gilaneh's body bears and carries its pain and trauma. This is depicted through images of a hunched back mother who carries and cares for her son. The film's reliance on the Gilaneh figure offers a poignant commentary not only on motherhood and the limitations of sacrifice but also on the female body and the way it carries the plot and the nation, as the two merge into one, the name serving as its connector.

The state's memorialisation of the war never extends to those like Ismaeil, who are 'unsung and denied help' (Varzi 2008, 89). By placing her protagonists in the rural region of Gilan, Banietemad furthers their isolation. The slogans and iconography of war are silent and absent, making visible and loud the traumas of Gilaneh and her son. The heroic or martyred soldier is replaced by a man who is neither. The mourning mother too, now hunched back and exhausted, is replaced by one who must offer full-time care. But Gilaneh must still practice gratitude and perform happiness for having her son back alive. In a scene, the mother who is desperately waiting for a widowed woman to arrive, in the hope of marrying her son, begins to imagine his wedding. As if nothing has changed, she engages in a festive dance, singing to her son. The paradox of a joyous song performed by the mother's broken body mirrors the way in which the lush landscape of Gilan holds memories of pain and trauma.

*Gilaneh*, however, is more than a reminder for its viewers of a historical war that took place. The film reimagines the threat of war by connecting history to present politics. In its latter half, the world is quiet (so it seems). The threat of war may be lifted, but the consequences are present and felt by the mother and son who must carry their marked bodies. In removing itself from the frontlines, *Gilaneh* demonstrates how war shows up everywhere else. Fifteen years later, temporally removed from the Iran–Iraq war, Ismaeil is unable to escape its realities. But he must now also watch the news coverage of the Iraq invasion, taking place not too far away from home. Banietemad’s meta-cinematic technique points to the global repercussions of the Iraq invasion by America, serving as a vivid reminder for everyone watching. With this, Banietemad shows the cyclical nature of violence and war. Ismaeil’s still and static body (he cannot move) is the visual reminder of what war brings. Shouleh Vatanabadi writes about time and space in the film: ‘the director of *Gilaneh* weaves the narrative in such a way that the audience remains conscious of the dialectics of times and spaces’ (2009, 180). She then goes on: ‘this particular emphasis on the fluidity of times and spaces in the film also enables Bani- Etemad to tell the story of war and its victims beyond the bounds of fixed nations’ (Vatanabadi 2009, 181).

While in *Gilaneh* Banietemad offers a matriotic reading of the nation, the filmmaker never endorses this embodiment. The paradigm of the woman’s body as/for the nation is a gateway through which the filmmaker offers her criticism of the memorialisation and preservation of war, giving us an alternative account. What is important is how through its structure and the ‘dialectics of times and spaces’ (Vatanabadi 2009, 180) *Gilaneh* enables a transborder consideration of war and the maternal figure. In an interview, Banietemad speaks to the significance of time and space in the film:

I always thought that if I showed Ismael in an urban setting, I would not be able to portray him as a universal victim of war; he would be more depicted as a victim of the specific war between Iran and Iraq. But when I set him in that beautiful scenery, that village, in nature, I thought he could be more of a universal figure. He could be a young American who goes to war and is a victim; he could be an Iraqi soldier, Palestinian, an Israeli soldier, for that matter. *Gilaneh*, for the same reason, could be the universal mother figure; she could be an American, Palestinian or Iraqi mother (Laureier and Walsh 2005).

These film choices allow Banietemad to connect with an audience beyond the boundaries of Iran. *Gilaneh* reflects its context, retelling the story of an eight-year-long war that impacts two nations, leaving homes and bodies dismantled. In its first half, the film travels outside of the green landscape of Gilan. The audience along with pregnant Maygol and her mother *Gilaneh* move between cities in Iran. Along the way, on their long bus journey, they witness images of war. The film produces a sense of fear and uncertainty as we wonder if Maygol will ever find her husband. In this first part, the film travels back in time and space, to what will be a recent memory for the Iranian audience. In its second part, years after the war, back again in the green land of Gilan, Ismaeil and his mother live. They live with the pain, the memory, and the consequences of the many long years of war. In this landscape, the film becomes less culturally specific. The explosions of the war they lived through have now been replaced by other sounds elsewhere and Ismaeil, in his broken and paralysed body, sits and watches. Through landscape and space, Banietemad reconstructs a national story about war, making it internationally relevant, and in the

process, Gilaneh's portrayal as a mother also offers a potential to cross the borders and boundaries of the Iranian state.

While *Gilaneh* is made and produced entirely in Iran, the film through its use of the meta-cinematic as well as the way it oscillates between time and space invites a transnational reading. The footage of the war next door is contained within a small television screen, showcased in the corner of a room in rural Iran. The film, in addressing its own historic moment, still extends beyond it. Banietemad's insistence in connecting these narratives is facilitated through the mother's body, where the Gilaneh figure serves to expose the fragility of the nation-state and its empty promises. But what is most significant, I think, is the way Gilaneh's body rises out of its national boundaries. By making her motherhood internationally relevant, Banietemad redirects and retrieves the 'silent' mother from the margins of society, and instead reimagines her as a connector. The film then not only frees Gilaneh from the grips of the nation and creates a visual space for a different kind of memorialisation, but also inserts this rural Iranian mother within a transnational context.

### **The body as collective resistance in Akbari's *A Moon for my Father***

Where Banietemad uses narrative cinema to extend Gilaneh's body beyond the borders of Iran, Akbari turns to her own to connect the personal to the collective. For over two decades, Akbari documents her body through sickness to recovery, from Iran into exile, navigating between her past into the present. The body for Akbari serves as a central locus through which she expresses her existence, struggles, transitions, and triumphs to reflect and visualise the various intersections of her identity as an Iranian woman. But while Akbari's reflections rise from the personal, her travelling body moves beyond the singular, to connect back to the collective feminist movement of a country she has been forced to leave.

In this section, I turn to *A Moon for my Father* (2019), co-directed by Akbari and her British sculptor partner Douglas White. I read the film as transnational and what Laura U. Marks calls 'intercultural cinema', a cinema that 'draws from many cultural traditions' (Marks 2000, 1) and 'moves backward and forward in time, inventing histories and memories in order to posit an alternative to the overwhelming erasures, silences, and lies of official histories' (Marks 2000, 24). In fact, Akbari maps onto her body a lived and dynamic history that begins with the personal but lends itself to something far more political and collective, reminding us of the interconnectedness between the two. Reading Akbari's films as transnational affords us insight into local and specific complexities, but also aligns her work with intersectional feminist texts that rise out of Iran and belong everywhere.

*A Moon for my Father* begins with Akbari's medical examination in London, where she lives in exile. But it goes back in time, through images and voiceovers to connect her body to its lived experiences of pain and trauma. This starts with a letter exchange between the couple, implying they are in a long-distance relationship. Akbari's voiceover is in her mother-tongue Persian, followed by English subtitles: 'Douglas-e aziz' (my dear Douglas). In response, White's voiceover in English - 'Dear Mania' - is followed with Persian subtitles. By insisting on both

languages to be subtitled, the exchange removes Persian and Akbari's identities from the margins, and de-centers White's Britishness. Through these voiceovers, the audience is invited to watch the personal histories of both Akbari and White, as they reunite within the same frame, and under one roof, to co-create and produce (a film and a child).

In their exchange, the two explore the question of 'what is a body?' White immerses us in a world of creation and construction through sculptures. Akbari turns to her own body, to think about re-construction and re-building. About midway through *A Moon for my Father*, White and Akbari appear in the same frame, reunited. This alludes to the travel that has already taken place. The film itself, the letters they exchange, and the voiceovers all create pathways of travel back to the past. By returning to her own history, Akbari relays in an intimate exchange with a lover, the events of the war and revolution that she has lived through. Now in London, after undergoing two mastectomies, we watch as Akbari decides to undergo reconstruction surgery. 'Douglas, for 13 years I slept in my underwear to avoid touching my breasts, I did not even really look at them. I decided to change this line of death into a line of life. I decided to build a new home for my soul'. Not only do these lines convey Akbari's position of agency and control over her body and her fate, but also in this act of rebuilding, the filmmaker begins to conceptualise home away from home.

Marks argues that one of the key identifiers of intercultural cinema is 'that it uses experimental means to arouse collective memories' (Marks 2000, 62). She goes on: 'perception in such works is not just an individual exploration but socially and historically specific: it embodies a collective expression even as it is highly personal' (Marks 2000, 62). Using her cinematic body as a vessel, Akbari travels between time and space, linking the personal with the collective memories and recollections of a post-revolutionary and post-war Iran. In *A Moon for my Father*, the filmmaker's personalised and diagnosed body disrupts not only the myth of national unity but also extends this cinematic body to imagine a new collective. In the film, Akbari's body becomes a symbolic and visual reminder of the nation, where her body is intertwined with images of war, homeland, oppression, and sickness, as well as triumph, resistance, hope, and joy. By the end of the film, we watch Akbari's body endure and fight – in the ultimate form of resistance, against all odds, as she miraculously births and breastfeeds her newborn.

*A Moon for my Father* is bookended with Akbari's body. This opening scene takes place in a hospital where we watch her undress. Her body is bare, and her scars exposed, with skin folded over an empty breast. Akbari is instructed to change positions and to face various directions, as an additional camera (that we never see on screen) documents her body. In a scene that feels both medical and personal, the double-cameras function to centralise and visualise this scarred body. I find that through this confrontational opening scene, Akbari insists that we look at her body, which dismantles both modesty codes, but also subverts notions of the female body for male pleasure and gaze. The title of the film, *A Moon for my Father*, then appears on screen, and we begin to hear Akbari's voiceover as she addresses her partner and lover, White.

In their exchange, White tells Akbari about his sculptures. He is making black palm trees out of rubber. In her voiceover, Akbari says: 'Douglas, your palm trees take me back to my childhood. To the war between Iran and Iraq'. As Akbari is transported back into

this lived history, the audience too, through sounds and images of war on screen, is embedded within this specific historical moment.

Douglas, the palm trees of Southern Iran, tried to stand firm during the war. They were scorched, they turned black. They smelled of smoke, war and blood of violence and ruthlessness. If they could talk, they'd have hundreds of stories to cry out. Memories of the massacre of women, men and children, of homelessness . . . of injuries . . . of starvation.

The tragedy of the Iran–Iraq war has informed many Iranian filmmakers' works and aligns Akbari's film with Banietamad's. Generations of people have been deeply impacted by loss, chemical attacks, displacements, and violence. For Akbari, her memory of the war is experienced through her body and the bodies of others. In fact, her body as well as her film become a space through which memories of war are reserved and 'cried out' replacing the silence of the scorched palm trees. In her letter to White, she says: 'the skin of my breast has inspired a dialogue, taking me to the years of war', here linking Akbari's trauma of war to her fighting body. Visually and sonically, the film takes the viewer back in time. Chants and slogans are recited and sounds of explosions and bombs fill the screen. For an Iranian audience, the specificity of these images produces a sense of cultural memory. Through its use of war iconography, Akbari's recollection of her past is made tangible and even familiar for non-Iranian audiences too. The interconnectedness Akbari draws on is extended to other bodies: 'to me the bodies of war veterans who lost their limbs while fighting for their beliefs protecting their homeland, are not so different from my body. They fought for their beliefs. I fought to survive. Ultimately, we are all proud of our loss'. The voiceover is accompanied by what Akbari calls 'war bodies',<sup>3</sup> images of injured and amputated veterans fill the screen. The filmmaker demands from us to watch these bodies, in the same way that she insists we look at hers in the film's opening scene.

In *A Moon for my Father* we see images of bodies and sculptures merged with religious and patriotic chants, as well as sounds and images of war. The war was over when Akbari was 13, but it continued 'insides us' she says. 'All my teenage memories and those of my body were mixed up with religious music and chants'. Here, Akbari also touches on the entrenchment and insertion of the Islamic Republic's values and political ideologies onto the most of private spaces and matters, including the woman's body. Post-war Iran meant for the regime an even more strict assertion of *its* version of Islamic codes in its re-assessment of a unified nation. Years later, removed from the war-entrenched soil of her country, even as she heals, Akbari is taken back. In this scene, we watch Akbari post-surgery as she slowly washes and dries her naked body. The bright green wall is in contrast with the white towel and bandage, and the scene conveys a sense of tranquility. There are curtains, but they are left open. Even in this moment of healing, Akbari's body reminds her of Iran. She says, 'I have lived most of my life in Iran where the female body is a source of guilt and is constantly censored'. Akbari's bare and reconstructed body is represented with agency. The still camera framing her body, and the curtain left open, defies the censorship guidelines that have for years governed her life in Iran. Both the surgery and the framing of her body become ways in which the filmmaker regains control, and once again links her triumph over cancer with her fight against the patriarchal dictatorship.

Akabri turns to her body – through its sickness and recovery – to think about the nation, as Banietamad uses Gilaneh’s hunched-back and exhausted body to raise questions about the state. In her cancer journals, Black and Lesbian writer and activist Audre Lorde connects her battle against cancer with her experiences as a Black woman in America. She writes: ‘the struggle with cancer now informs all my days, but it is only another face of that continuing battle for self-determination and survival that Black women fight daily, often in triumph’ (Lorde 1997, 41). Lorde’s conceptualisation of her sick and healing body offers a productive gateway into thinking about the relationship and connection between the personal and the political. In *Illness as Metaphor*, Susan Sontag reads illness, and cancer specifically as a metaphor that spans and spreads across historical contexts (Sontag 1997). Speaking to the Palestinian context, Abir Hamdar explores Palestinian singer and composer Rim al-Banna’s post-illness body, from her cancer diagnosis to her death, and the commemorations that follow. Drawing on her music, her interviews, and her reception, Hamdar argues that the artist’s cancer can be viewed as an allegory for the colonial context of Palestine (Hamdar 2020). But for Hamdar, it is more than that, reading al-Banna’s cancer as a ‘site for a poetics of Palestinian unity and resistance’, too (Hamdar 2020, 234). These different contexts enable an intersectional feminist reading that connects the bodies of Lorde, al-Banna, and Akbari, drawing our attention to these transnational experiences linked through experiences with cancer. Though in an entirely different context from White America and occupied Palestine, Akbari’s diagnosed body also serves as a metaphor for her fight with both cancer and the patriarchal dictatorship.

Through storytelling and memory, Akbari deliberately connects her singular body to the feminist movement of Iran. The body as a site of oppression and illness is instead reimaged through possibilities in such a way that asserts Akbari’s body as a ‘site for a poetics’ of ‘unity and resistance’ (Hamdar 2020, 234). Akbari’s account then is more than just a travel back in time, or a recollection of traumas of war and revolution. The film also propels us forward. One of the most significant moments in the film is when Akbari goes on to edit her own pregnant and naked body onto the podiums on which Iranian women have stood protesting the compulsory *hijab*. In the film, Akbari uses an image of Vida Movahed from December 2017, an Iranian woman standing on a utility box, with her headscarf removed, waving it. Her peaceful protest, like many other Iranian women’s, has been met with violence and imprisonment (Radio 2019). The image of a naked and pregnant Akbari onto these same podiums, inserted within the city landscape of Tehran, shatters the enforced modesty codes of the Islamic Republic and aligns the filmmaker with her fellow compatriots. As such, the imagined myth of unity preserved and enforced through the Islamic Republic’s nationalistic ideologies is fiercely challenged here. Akbari’s pregnant body is also significant in both the visualisation of her resistance and fight against cancer, as well as its links to the nation. Patricia Pisters writes about the ‘double function’ of the female body ‘with respect to reproduction’ (Pisters 2007, 71). She argues that ‘by becoming pregnant and giving birth the female body literally produces life. At the same time, metaphorically it is often seen as the safeguard of the nation, the reproduction of national values, tradition, and patriarchal history’ (Pisters 2007, 71). Akbari’s pregnant body functions almost in opposition. Not only is she not safeguarding but instead she uses her pregnant body to subvert this very idea as she dismantles the patriarchal and nationalistic values of Iran.

This scene also visually fragments the national unity promoted by the Islamic Republic. The post-revolutionary identity of the nation has firmly rested on women's veiled and concealed bodies. Akbari's assertion of her own body onto these stands fractures the regime's myth of unity. But in the absence of a unified image, Akbari proposes something new: a transnational and feminist collectivity. Basia Sliwiska writes that 'bodily visual activism is a performative enactment of assembly on the grounds of equality and insistence on interdependency' (Sliwiska 2020, 7). She argues that a precondition of political demands can be met through plurality of bodies (Sliwiska 2020, 7). 'To survive, bodies need other bodies for support' (Sliwiska 2020, 7). Akbari visualises her connectedness to her homeland, demonstrating that she is unable to conceptualise her body in isolation. In a powerful line, she says, 'I feel I am them and they are me'. By merging her body with these women, and her story with theirs, Akbari claims a spot, a place in this ongoing resistance, and even in her exile, imagines her body as part of Iran's women's movement. In doing so, she reimagines new possibilities for the future of Iran – ones that are not far from the chants of *woman, life, freedom* that reverberate through the streets of Iran.

Akbari marks her body as a site of agency and resistance. By inserting herself and insisting on her connection to the collective movement of Iran, the filmmaker refuses the limitations of borders and the conditions of her exile. In *Gilaneh*, Banietemad also rejects the imposition of borders. Gilaneh's body is initially codified to stand for the nation, but only as a subversive strategy to expose the state's neglect. Instead, through the film's narrative structure and its transnational approach, Banietemad extends the 'silent' mother's place in history, allowing her to travel beyond the boundaries of Iran. The bodies of Gilaneh and Akbari then not only facilitate movement across and beyond borders but also play with the 'dialectics of times and spaces' to resist the memorialisation of war and insist on alternative histories. In both films, the individual bodies of Gilaneh and Akbari transcend national boundaries, igniting a feminist and transnational sense of collectivity.

*A Moon for my Father* ends in a similar way as it begins. On screen, we watch Akbari's naked body, as she is directed and redirected to stand facing various directions. The medical camera is once again outside of the filmic frame. In this closing scene, Akbari's body is different where she has made, in her words, 'a new home for her soul'. Post-construction surgery, Akbari's body still contains scars that convey to us how much she has endured. Next to her is her baby, in a stroller, distracting both Akbari and the audience. Akbari's pregnancy itself serves as a miraculous event. It is a journey of injections and pain that the film documents for its viewers. But here, in this final moment, it is Akbari's resilience and survival that really stand out.

## Notes

1. The *hijab*, I would argue has been one of the most effective ways in which the regime has secured its desired image of an Islamic nation. But other visuals such as images of martyrs through murals have also aided in the creation of the Islamic Republic's nationalist branding. In general, the Iran–Iraq war became a highly political moment for the regime to think about its image both within Iran and the region.

2. Agnes Devictor draws on the 1996 booklet, which details what is forbidden. They are as follows: ‘it is not allowed for women to be filmed in close-up, to use makeup, or to wear tight-fitting or colourful clothes; men must not wear ties or short-sleeved shirts unless they are negative characters, no Western music is allowed, no intimate lighting; even the editing must correspond to the Islamic norm’ (Devictor 2002, 70).
3. In an interview I conducted with the filmmaker in Autumn of 2021, Akbari uses the term ‘war bodies’ to refer to bodies impacted by war.

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