

# An Iranian Female Vampire Walks Home Alone and Disturbs Freud's Oedipal Masculinity

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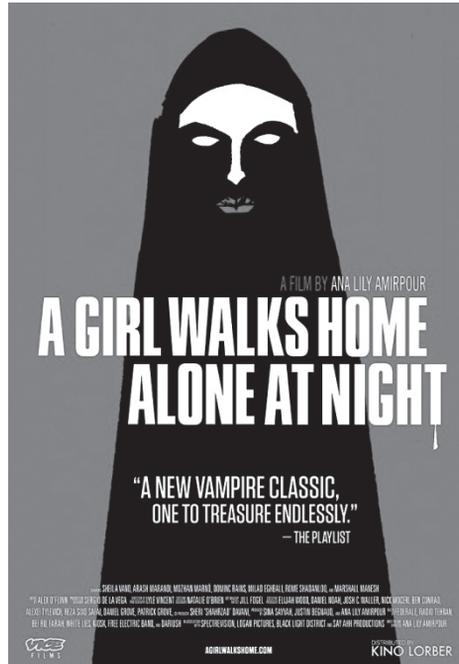
## Introduction

*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (*Dokhtari shab tanhā be khāneh miravad*, 2014)<sup>1</sup> is tagged as the first Iranian vampire feminist romance. This debut feature by Anna Lily Amirpour is set in a fictional Iranian town, called *Shahr-e Bad*, The Bad City. The opening scene introduces the viewer to Arash, a James Dean look-alike in blue jeans and white T-shirt driving a vintage 1950's Ford Thunderbird. Arash works as a gardener in rich neighborhoods while taking care of his addicted father. His father owes money to a violent tattooed drug dealer/pimp who takes Arash's car as payment. The unnamed vampire is a young girl who wears a black flowing *chador* resembling classic

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<sup>1</sup>*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, Vice Media, <http://films.vice.com/a-girl-walks-home/>. All images in this article are the property of Vice Media.

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vampire capes (See image 3 below). She skateboards the streets of the Bad City at night, targeting “bad” men who are abusive to women and viciously attacks them with her fangs. It is interesting that her fangs grow as she becomes angry and aggressive, or when she is sexually aroused. She meets the pimp Saeed, who is abusive towards a sex worker named Atti. Saeed notices the lonely (vampire) girl and invites her to his house, but while he is trying to seduce her she bites his finger off and brutally kills him. One night the unnamed vampire comes across Arash (See image 3 below), dressed as Dracula and high on drugs, stumbling home on his way back from a costume party. The lonesome vampire falls in love with Arash. Later we see Arash, who, fed up with his addicted father, throws him out of their house, who then takes refuge with Atti, the sex worker. He forces Atti to use drugs, which prompts the vampire to kill him. When Arash finds out about the death of his father, he decides to leave the Bad City with the female vampire. The film ends with Arash choosing to leave with the vampire even though he realizes she is his father’s killer.

The movie has had mixed reviews. Some have argued that it is an innovative art film for mixing several genres. Despite its entire Iranian cast of characters, Persian dialogue and sound track, and Persian iconography, it has received little or no attention among Iranians. It appears that being a highly stylized film in a genre that is virtually unknown to Iranians has made it rather indecipherable both inside Iran and in the diasporic community outside Iran. Perhaps a black and white vampire flick is expected to have a niche audience outside the confines of Iranian cultural influence. In that case, the exclusively Persian iconography of the film—which cannot be fully appreciated without familiarity with Iran’s political history, its religious, musical, literary and cultural traditions, the intricacies of Persian language, as well as the hybrid culture of the Iranian community of Los Angeles—leaves it open to the charge of self-orientalization. The charge of self-exoticization for the purpose of gaining a foothold in an already established genre may be supported on a few tenuous grounds; for example, Amirpour has candidly expressed her distaste for Iran as “a mess. Medieval. Suffocating.”<sup>2</sup> However, I take a poststructuralist stance and bypass discussions about the significance of the “author”, and speculations about her motives.

It could be argued that this is a feminist film for staging a lead female actor as the dominant subject with independent agency, identity and desire.<sup>3</sup> She is not a “projection of male values,” or a “vehicle of male fantasies,” or a “scapegoat of male fears.”<sup>4</sup> The film surely passes

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted in Megan Goodwin, “When the Vampire Looks: Gender and Surveillance in *A Girl Walks Home Alone At Night*,” *Mizan*, 18 April 2016, available at [www.mizanproject.org/pop-post/when-the-vampire-looks/#\\_ftnref8](http://www.mizanproject.org/pop-post/when-the-vampire-looks/#_ftnref8).

<sup>3</sup>Julianne Escobedo Shepherd, “Watch the Trailer For the First-Ever Iranian Feminist Vampire Western,” *Jezebel*, 27 October 2014, available at <http://jezebel.com/watch-the-trailer-for-the-first-ever-iranian-feminist-v-1651418042>; Laura Barcella, “The Feminist Vampire Movie That Teaches ‘Bad Men’ a Gory Lesson,” *Jezebel*, 25 November 2014, available at <http://jezebel.com/the-feminist-vampire-movie-that-teaches-bad-men-a-gory-1662788544>; Holly L. Derr, “A Feminist Guide to Horror Movies, Part 7: New Beginnings,” *Ms. Blog*, 27 October 2015, available at <http://msmagazine.com/blog/2015/10/27/a-feminist-guide-to-horror-movies-part-7-new-beginnings/>.

<sup>4</sup>Molly Haskell, *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

the Bechdel test, a test that despite its humorous roots (it started as a joke) can be used as a serious critical tool. The Bechdel test measures the mere presence of women in a film. To pass this test, a film must meet two of these three simple conditions: (1) there be at least two women in it, (2) who talk to each other (3) about anything other than men.<sup>5</sup> However, I will argue that the significance of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* exceeds limited categorization as a vampire movie or a feminist art film. Perhaps reading a feminist agenda into this film has more to do with certain reviewers' inclinations than the intention of its director.<sup>6</sup> In any event, the goal of this paper is not to settle this debate. It is to examine the ways in which masculinities are deconstructed and reconstituted as spectacle in this film, and in the process the patriarchal boundaries of pleasure are remapped and circulation of desire is destabilized. I will use feminist psychoanalytic film theory as an analytical tool to guide my inquiry. Theoretical efficacy of this perspective remains in its deconstructive trajectory. As Laura Mulvey states, it is "a political weapon, demonstrating the way the unconscious of patriarchal society" structures cinematic representations.<sup>7</sup> However, this theory leaves the specific contours of an alternative feminist counter-cinema unarticulated. Should a feminist counter-cinema embrace patriarchal techniques of representation or develop its own cinematic language? Can a feminist counter-cinema dismantle the visual regimes of patriarchal power relation and still remain faithful to aesthetics of visual pleasure? I will argue that by engaging these questions this film enhances our understanding of feminist film theory by instantiating an example of a feminist counter-cinema. It is also significant that exclusively Persian iconography of this film broadens debates within feminist film theory

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(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 39; in Christa van Raalte, "No Small-Talk in Paradise: Why Elysium Fails the Bechdel Test, and Why We Should Care," in *Media, Margins and Pop Culture*, ed. Einar Thorsen, Heather Savigny, Jenny Alexander and Daniel Jackson (New York: Palgrave, 2015), 15-27.

<sup>5</sup>Raalte, "No Small-Talk in Paradise," 16-17.

<sup>6</sup>See Goodwin, "When the Vampire Looks."

<sup>7</sup>Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave, 1989), 14.

to include subjects (such as Muslim women, Iranian art and culture) whose epistemological roots extend beyond the horizons of Europe and the Americas. This film unsettles constructed boundaries that separate European from non-European subjects. As will be discussed below, this film does not offer a new model of masculinity outside the heterosexual patriarchal regime of representation and sexual identification. Rather, it uses patriarchal representational tools and tactics to produce a rupture in the purportedly homogeneous edifice of Oedipal masculinity, an opening towards yet obscure alternatives, the contours of which cannot be known in advance.

### **Feminist Psychoanalytic Film Theory and the Magic of Cinema**

The mainstream cinema positions women as spectacles, objects of the male gaze, fantasies and pleasures and secondary or incidental to the narrative. When they speak to other women—if they ever do—it is hardly about anything other than men. The male gaze often positions the spectator to identify with the male protagonist. It reduces the female spectator to either enjoy adopting the male point of view or be reduced to the passive, often erotic, object of the spectacle. This is what Mulvey in her influential essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” calls “castration.”<sup>8</sup> The “pleasure” referred to in the title of Mulvey’s influential essay is a reference to the “scopophilic” pleasure that is controlled by the male and directed at the female, a concept Mulvey borrows from Freud.<sup>9</sup> Scopophilia operates either as sexually charged voyeuristic or narcissistic pleasure produced through spectator’s identification with the male point of view or the male protagonist. Just as an uncoordinated, helpless, speechless infant whose ego boundaries are yet to be formed recognizes his own image in the mirror as an “ideal ego,” a more complete image of himself, perfect and in control, the spectator too identifies with the male image and male point of view projected on the screen.<sup>10</sup> The results are fantasies of power, mastery

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<sup>8</sup>Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14.

<sup>9</sup>Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 16.

<sup>10</sup>Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton and Company, 1977), 2.

and control, which hold a deep appeal for the human psyche. Freudian psychoanalysis explains that as humans we are haunted by a “lack” in the core of our being, a state of radical dependency and disempowerment at birth. This original lack of control, fragmentation and vulnerability in infancy on an individual level parallels the original lack and chaos on a cultural level. We are compelled to cover that originary lack through creative processes that create desires, religions, stories, myths, arts, fantasies, images and power structures such as patriarchy—none of which are pre-given. In the process we become subjects in what Jacques Lacan terms the “symbolic order.”<sup>11</sup> Theoretically this is articulated as a process of “suturing,” that is literally cutting and editing of the film which results in a desired and coherent narrative. Whether it is on a personal or a cultural level, the goal is to structure ego formation, but because the recognition of the self in the mirror (of whatever creative medium is employed: film, culture, etc.) is a misrecognition, the result is the fixation of the ego, closure of creative process and alienation of the subject. It is with reference to this split or alienation within the subject that the ego is held to be founded upon “imaginary, narcissistic, specular identification.”<sup>12</sup>

The signifier of the lack and desire to overcome it is the phallus, a symbolic configuration that represents an unattainable wholeness. No one can have the phallus, which means the universal lack is no other than symbolic “castration,” the condition that characterizes both male and female subjectivities. Therefore, as the privileged signifier which has no signified, the phallus should theoretically lead to an open process of creativity.<sup>13</sup> But in a self-serving patriarchal context, where the aim is to give order and fixed meaning, the open-ended process of meaning production is brought to a closure by binding the operations of the phallus entirely to the image of the castrated female. Mulvey writes:

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<sup>11</sup>Synonymous with language, the symbolic order for Lacan is the most important register of the unconscious that governs all manners of exchange. See Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 203-223.

<sup>12</sup>James J. DiCenso, *The Other Freud: Religion, Culture and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999), 45 fn. 60.

<sup>13</sup>Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 140.

“An idea of woman stands as linchpin to the system: it is her lack that produces the phallus as a symbolic presence, it is her desire to make good the lack that the phallus signifies.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, in mainstream cinema woman is a mirror for the male’s sense of lack and loss. The projection of lack and fragmentation on woman has deep roots for example in the Bible and Islamic tradition.<sup>15</sup> It is upon the woman that the sense of alienation resulting from the misrecognition of the self in the “mirror” is projected. Hence, in order to successfully enter the patriarchal symbolic order, requisite acknowledgement of the female as a castrated subject is followed by distancing oneself from the female and all that is considered to be feminine. Cinematically this is rehearsed in every “buddy” movie in which the celebration of male bonding and comradeship is contingent upon severing the bond with significant women in men’s lives (like mothers or wives). Michael Kimmel observes, “The male bonding celebrated in these films is a defensive reaction to patriarchal masculine failure; the men turn to each other because the world (and women) has failed them.”<sup>16</sup> However, male bonding is always through acts of power, domination and control and never translates into relationships of nurturing, caring and intimacy. Ostentatious homophobia, sexism, racism, and willingness to do violence are ways to ward off fears that male homosocial bonding may lead to homosexuality. The narcissistically male-centered “bromance” of modern pop culture, “an emotionally intense bond between presumably straight males who demonstrate openness to intimacy that they neither regard, acknowledge, avow, nor express sexually,”<sup>17</sup> is matched by its premodern institutionalized version of it, for example in Sufi brotherhoods of Perso-Islamic world.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 14.

<sup>15</sup>Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 113-114; for a discussion of the projection of lack and fragmentation on woman in Islamic tradition, see Mahdi Tourage, “Towards the Retrieval of the Feminine from the Archives of Islam,” *International Journal of Zizek Studies* 6, no. 2 (2012): 1-25.

<sup>16</sup>Michael Kimmel, *Manhood in America: A Cultural History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 207.

<sup>17</sup>Michael DeAngelis, *Reading the Bromance: Homosocial Relationships in Film and Television* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2014), 1.

<sup>18</sup>Amanullah De Soudy, *The Crisis of Islamic Masculinities* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 162.

Against this background we can ask, what does a feminist counter-cinema look like? Earlier theorists like Mulvey dogmatically advocated for disregarding the classical techniques of cinema. They argued for the development of specific aesthetics of feminist experimental film and counter cinema. Their goal was to de-couple the look of the camera from the male gaze and develop specific aesthetics of feminist experimental film even if this meant doing away with visual pleasure.<sup>19</sup> Later on, feminist theorists like E. Ann Kaplan highlighted the heterogeneity and complexity of the narrative mainstream cinema, and argued that feminist cinema should use traditional filmic means, the master's tool, so to speak, to dismantle the master's house.<sup>20</sup> Teresa de Lauretis famously argued that instead of destroying narrative and visual pleasure, feminist cinema should exploit the manipulative power of cinema, to be "narrative and oedipal with a vengeance."<sup>21</sup> In other words, instead of discarding narrative and conventional forms of pleasure in favor of the feminist content of a radical avant-garde cinema, feminist cinema should embrace female desire as well as contradictions of Oedipal scenario. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* does precisely that.



1. The vampire with her *Chador*

<sup>19</sup>Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 25.

<sup>20</sup>Anneke Smelik, "What Meets the Eye: Feminist Film Studies," in *Women's Studies and Culture: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Rosemarie Buikema and Anneke Smelik (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1993), 71.

<sup>21</sup>Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 108.

## Enter the Vampire

*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* is a highly stylized and visually pleasing film to the point that many reviewers perceive an over-emphasis on visual pleasure at the expense of “substance”.<sup>22</sup> The film locates itself along the continuum of the horror genre depicting monsters lurking in the shadows or symbolically within our own beings—the graffiti word *vahshat*, meaning “horror” in Persian, is clearly visible in several scenes. Susan Hayward writes that after its heyday in the 1930’s, vampires disappeared after World War Two, but briefly came back during the 70’s in a more romantic light deserving love and affection. The AIDS epidemic of the 80’s caused vampire films to disappear, only to reappear in the 90’s.<sup>23</sup> Interestingly the early twentieth century Count Dracula movies used a female vampire as the first prototype of this genre. In these movies women were the predatory beasts with lesbian inclinations instead of bloodsucking killers of men.<sup>24</sup> However, female vampires were exceptions not the norm; vampire films centered on the male. The last literary female vampire was noted in a novel written in 1871.<sup>25</sup> *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* does not easily fit into the categories that compose post-war horror films. It is not a psychological horror (like Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, 1960), and it is not a massacre movie (like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, 1974). More importantly, she does not stand for maternal plenitude, relegating lack to a distant memory. She is not the mother who satisfies the infant’s every desire and serves the sadistic aesthetics of his desire. The question of her position in the existing relations of patriarchal spectatorship is posed by Atti, the sex worker surrogating as the mother, when she asks

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<sup>22</sup>For example see Emma Myers, “ND/NF Interview: Ana Lily Amirpour,” *Film Comment*, March 19, 2014, available at [www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-ana-lily-amirpour/](http://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-ana-lily-amirpour/); and Keiron Tyler, “A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night: Style over Substance in the Supposed ‘Frist Iranian Vampire Western,’” in *The Arts Desk*, 21 May 2015, available at [www.thearts-desk.com/film/girl-walks-home-alone-night](http://www.thearts-desk.com/film/girl-walks-home-alone-night).

<sup>23</sup>Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 208.

<sup>24</sup>Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 204.

<sup>25</sup>Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 208.

the vampire: “What are you?” What is significant about horror films is that they are better reflections of the ideological positions of their time. Because they “are linked to the unconscious they can represent that which other genres repress.”<sup>26</sup> For example, Hitchcock’s horror films of the 50’s had Cold War resonances where the “red-scare” mentality led Americans to seriously doubt believing who people claimed to be. The Massacre/slasher movies of 70’s were a backlash against the feminist movement of the time.<sup>27</sup> In the post 9/11 era, in addition to popular films (on zombies, epidemic infections, etc.), a whole range of media exploited fear as a political and marketing tool. For example, “fear permeate[ed] television ads running the gamut from antibacterial soap to SUVs, [and] institutional emergency notification systems.”<sup>28</sup> Real or imaginary Muslims have a special place among post-9/11 monsters and apocalyptic films. Sophia Arjana writes: “Movies provided a vehicle for Muslim monsters to be displayed, and, I would argue, they continue to serve as the most dominant cultural force in the modern American milieu—a space in which Muslim monsters continue to be generated.”<sup>29</sup> Muslims as feared monsters infecting European bodies and borders, corrupting bloodlines has deep roots in the medieval Europe and earlier, providing “an important tool,” as Arjana notes, “for understanding the history of Christian-Muslim relations.”<sup>30</sup> In rare cases when a Muslim female appears as a villain, she is often under the control of malevolent men—Nazis, Arabs, or other irredeemable types.<sup>31</sup>

To be sure, there are no explicit references to Islam or Muslims in the film, but as Megan Goodwin observes, “Given the marked Iranian influences throughout the film, Islam is conspicuous in its absence.”<sup>32</sup> In

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<sup>26</sup>Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 211.

<sup>27</sup>Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 209-210.

<sup>28</sup>Jennifer Skinnon, “Redemptive Motherhood and a Discourse of Fear in Contemporary Apocalyptic Film,” available at [www.asc.uw.edu.pl/theamericanist/vol/26/26\\_57-71.pdf](http://www.asc.uw.edu.pl/theamericanist/vol/26/26_57-71.pdf).

<sup>29</sup>Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>30</sup>Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, 5.

<sup>31</sup>Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, 149.

<sup>32</sup>Goodwin, “When the Vampire Looks.”

light of the “pervasiveness of Islamic influence in contemporary Iranian culture” that Goodwin speaks of, we can take the *chador*-wearing character of the vampire in this film as a departure from the Orientalist trope of submissive Muslim women in need of saving from brown men’s tyranny. Yet, she is not a violent feminist bent on the retributive violence. Her brutal killings, as in the cases of the pimp and Arash’s father, takes place with a moral clarity. She does pose a potential threat to all men. For example, in a significant scene she confronts a young boy, asking him if he is a “good boy.” When he answers that he is indeed a good boy, she threatens him and warns him that she will be watching him until the end of his life. Then she steals his skateboard.

If there is one prominent theme in this film, it would be the gaze. The gaze is a relation to power, leading Mulvey to conclude that the gaze of the camera is a “male gaze.”<sup>33</sup> Goodwin perceptively points out the disruption of the male gaze in this film “reflects neither heterosexual male desire nor Western fantasies of ‘good Muslims.’”<sup>34</sup> The vampire with her prominent black eyes accentuated by the lighting and her *chador* (See picture 1) is not a passive object of the gaze. She is author of the gaze, returning the male gaze and making men uncomfortable. She is seen literally watching men of the city, keeping them under her own surveillance and punishing them when necessary. Her gaze and her character are the primary subject of the film, controlling the other characters and carrying the narrative to the extent that invites the spectator’s identification with her point of view. At one point, Arash’s father, while walking across the street parallel to the vampire, becomes very uncomfortable when he notices he is being followed. He stops and asks her: “What are you looking at?” When the vampire is the object of the pimp’s sexualized gaze and follows him to his apartment, the return of the gaze takes a violent turn. In this elongated pivotal scene, the pimp snorts cocaine to the sound of soft music as the vampire watches. Then he starts to dance slowly

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<sup>33</sup>Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 19.

<sup>34</sup>Goodwin, “When the Vampire Looks.”

as he approaches the vampire. The vampire still in her *chador* stands motionless as the pimp run his fingers over her face while gyrating to the sound of music. In a sexually charged gesture she gently opens her mouth and the pimp slowly puts his finger in her mouth (no doubt his finger metonymically stands in for his penis) (See picture 2). This is when his half open eyes gazing into the vampire's eyes change to express horror and pain as she bites his finger off. She then proceeds to retributively violate him by shoving the severed finger into his mouth and kill him as he screams in agonizing pain. The male gaze is "disciplined" in another scene as well. When Arash's father forces Atti to dance for him, sexually objectifying her body, he is murdered by the vampire.



2. The vampire stands motionless as the pimp slowly inserts his finger in her mouth

The vampire locates herself within the patriarchal cinematic order where all subjectivities are arranged according to the male point of view. However, by carrying the narrative and authoring the gaze, that is to say, by being the protagonist of the story, she subverts the male-centred conventions of cinema. More importantly, having the instrument of power and violence, that is, her vampire fangs that grow at the moment of her anger and arousal, she claims the power of the phallus. Of course, no one can have the phallus, which is precisely the meaning of lack and castration. The symbolic castration marks both sexes. The concealed phallus symbolizes an always absent guarantee of universality. It is precisely in its absence that the phallus

in the Lacanian model can fulfill its potential function of freeing the signifying process and subject formation from the closed confines of cultural formations.<sup>35</sup> Yet it comes as no surprise that through obfuscated epistemic fault lines that separate the biological organ, the penis, from its unrepresentable symbolic correlate, the phallus, male subjects deny their own castration. The result of this imaginary equation between the penis and the phallus is the spectacle which comprises the stuff of “dominant fiction” in a patriarchal society: “the images and stories through which a society configures consensus, images which films draw upon and help to shape ... an imaginary equation between the penis and the phallus, which cements the male subject’s identification with power and privilege.”<sup>36</sup>

The vampire does not contest the phallogocentric regime of signification, but works within its limits. She decouples the epistemological dependence of the phallus on the penis. As if the script was written à la Judith Butler, the film demonstrates that the penis does not have to always be the one and only privileged referent of the phallus and its signifying function, even though this privilege is always pre-emptively negated.<sup>37</sup> The phallus could symbolize other body parts, such as the vampire’s fangs, a functional metonymy for the penis. This is evident when her fangs are “erected” in what can only be interpreted as sexual arousal. In a sexually charged scene, Arash pierces the vampire’s earlobes with the pin of earrings at her own request. The vampire’s retractable fangs instantiate the same capacity for “turgidity,” which makes the penis uniquely favored to be a phallic organ.<sup>38</sup> The power of her fangs establishes her as the “phallic woman.” This is a departure from mainstream horror films

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<sup>35</sup>Lacan explains that the phallus can perform its signifying function only when veiled, “as itself a sign of the latency with which any signifiable is struck, once it is raised (*aufgehoben*) to the function of signifier.” Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, 288.

<sup>36</sup>Shohini Chaudhuri, *Fem Film Theorists: Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Teresa de Lauretis, Barbara Creed* (London, New York: Routledge, 2006), 107.

<sup>37</sup>Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 84.

<sup>38</sup>Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection*, 287.

in which penile instruments (such as knives and chainsaws) are used as “phallus replacement or substitute” for re-castrating the female in order to establish an independent/self-sufficient male subject.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* recuperates that lost “radical political edge of gore cinema.”<sup>40</sup> The power of signification (meaning production as well as frightening, killing, and establishing her difference as vampire) rests on the vampire’s phallic power, signified by her fangs. She is therefore the “other” fully invested with the power of otherness, unravelling the self-referential narcissistic fiction of male subjectivity.

### **Masculinities**

Displacing the penis from its privileged position as the primary referent of the phallus would have been enough to make this film a “feminist flick”. The narrative could have followed Butler’s theoretical insight that the displacement of the penis underscores the viability of the “lesbian phallus”, a potentially castrating formulation that Butler admits is contradictory in itself. The lesbian phallus parodies the dependency of the phallus on the penis as its one and only anatomical occasion, showing that the stabilizing effect of the phallus is entirely based on a reified phallus-penis relationship.<sup>41</sup> Butler writes: “In a sense, the simultaneous acts of deprivileging the phallus and removing it from the normative heterosexual form of exchange, and recirculating and repriviling it between women deploys the phallus to break the signifying chain in which it conventionally operates.”<sup>42</sup> However, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* takes a different route. Remaining phallogocentric and decidedly heterosexual in its staging of desire and visual pleasures makes this particularly relevant to constructions of masculinity.

One of the male characters in this film, the pimp, is the first to be

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<sup>39</sup>Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 210.

<sup>40</sup>Hayward, *Cinema Studies*, 210.

<sup>41</sup>Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 57-92.

<sup>42</sup>Butler, *Bodies that Matter*, 88.

killed by the vampire, and in the most brutal manner. The pimp's genealogy may be traced back to the popular "tough-guy" character of pre-revolutionary Iranian cinema who remains one of the two Iranian mimic figures that have been successfully transplanted into the exilic cultural sphere (the other is the perennial racist blackface figure of Haji Firuz).<sup>43</sup> But unlike the tough-guy type (whose historical roots go back to the premodern tradition of altruistic chivalry)<sup>44</sup>, the pimp is more comparable to its counterpart in American pop culture, particularly in Blaxploitation films and Gangsta rap. The uncanny similarities between the pimp's personal style in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* and the stereotypical pimp of American cinema who is fond of "theatricality" is worth noting here.<sup>45</sup> Like a more grotesque hence darker imitation of his African American prototype, the pimp in this film could be a signifier of young Iranian men's struggle to come to terms with their masculinity. The pimp's carefully trimmed facial hair and tattoos, especially his prominent tattoo of *jaakesh* ("pimp") in Farsi on the side of his head, and the huge *Farvahar* across his chest (a symbol borrowed from the Zoroastrian faith implying nationalistic-racial supremacy) could be an expression of displaced masculinity yearning for recognition. Or perhaps he is "a ghettocentric icon of upward mobility" for diasporic masculinities.<sup>46</sup> This is particularly significant in the United States' body politics that render Iranian men's diasporic masculinities "overexposed," to borrow from Shahram Khosravi, to the racialized and securitized gaze of the normative white American culture.<sup>47</sup> Like the young black

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<sup>43</sup>Hamid Naficy, *The Making of Exile Cultures: Iranian Television in Los Angeles* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 183.

<sup>44</sup>Parviz Jahed, "Film Farsi as Mainstream Cinema," in *Directory of World Cinema: Iran*, vol. 10, ed. Parviz Jahed (Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2012), 74.

<sup>45</sup>Christian and Richard Milner, *Black Players: The Secret World of Black Pimps* (London: King Flex, 1973), 112.

<sup>46</sup>Ronald L. Jackson II, *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media* (Albany: SUNY, 2006), 118; Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' but a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gansta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 122.

<sup>47</sup>Shahram Khosravi, "Displaced Masculinity: Gender and Ethnicity among Iranian Men in

men in the United States, the pimp may be acting from a position of race and class marginality to acquire some measure of power and control in a subculture that is overinvested in the sexual economy of pimp-whore complex. This is similar to the experience of most black men in the United States, who, according to Cornel West, acquire power “by stylizing their bodies over space and time in such a way that their bodies reflect their uniqueness and provoke fear in others.”<sup>48</sup> West is quick to conclude that even though these acts of “resistance” in a hostile culture impose their own kind of order to chaos, in a society that exalts a “machismo identity” such forms of self-identification are self-defeating because they ultimately support the violent patriarchal status quo.<sup>49</sup> Without a vigilant consciousness of the intersectionality of structures of power, privilege and domination, the risk of reproducing violence and inequality through the very acts of resistance will always remain a possibility. *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* does not glorify the pimp as the prototype of the “bad boy” who is simultaneously feared and desired, but eliminates him as the worst expression of masculinity found in the Bad City.

Understanding the pimp’s function in a patriarchal society is important for the significance of the pimp’s violent death in this film. Pimps and patriarchs are different sides of the same coin: “The role pimps expected women to play is merely an imitation of the role patriarchs expect their wives and daughters to play. The passive subordinate demeanor expected of the prostitute is not unlike that demanded of all women in patriarchal society.”<sup>50</sup> The raw violence, charm and dependency of the pimp on “his” women is a brutal reminder of patriarchy’s suppressed underbelly. In psychoanalytical terms the pimp is a *symptom* of patriarchy, the mirror image of the patriarch. The appearance of the symptom “disturbs the surface of false appearances,” to use Slavoj

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Sweden,” *Iranian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2009): 591-609.

<sup>48</sup>Cornel West, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001), 128.

<sup>49</sup>West, *Race Matters*, 128.

<sup>50</sup>bell hooks, *Ain’t I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), 109.

Zizek's description.<sup>51</sup> In clinical terms, eliminating the symptom is not good enough because unlike the medical model that views a symptom as an "index" of disease, psychoanalysis takes symptoms as "signifiers" of disease; if one signifier is removed it will simply be replaced by another.<sup>52</sup> The goal of intervention is thus to address the "structures" that give rise to symptoms. The killing of the pimp removes the immediate threat, but he would be easily replaced by another without any threat or disturbance to the structural power of patriarchy that brings about the conditions for his existence in the first place. The vampire's murder of the pimp and "saving" Arash could lend support to Hamid Dabashi's creative hypothesis that Iranian culture is essentially a communal Freudian Oedipal complex in reverse. He writes that instead of the son killing the father, in the Iranian cultural context it is the father's killing of his son that produces the communal guilt and repression and subsequently takes on cosmic and metaphysical proportions. As examples, Dabashi notes the tragic deaths of Hussain, the Prophet Muhammad's grandson's death, and its parallel in the mythical deaths of Siavush, the son of King Kavus, as well as Sohrab, son of Rostam, the legendary pre-Islamic folk heroes of Iran.<sup>53</sup> He concludes that to the extent that Iranian culture is imbued with Shi'ism it is a "son-religion," which is "subconsciously aware of the guilt of infanticide (a religion of fathers afflicted by the guilt of having killed their son)."<sup>54</sup> By sparing the son killing or being killed by the father and removing the threat of the pimp, the vampire annuls both patricide and infanticide and the subsequent foundational guilt.

The structural power of patriarchy is best displayed by the character of the father, who has the most important function of imposing the fundamental principles of all social relations, which Lacan formulates

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<sup>51</sup>Slavoj Zizek, *Enjoy Your Symptom! Jacques Lacan in Hollywood and Out* (New York: Routledge, 2008), x.

<sup>52</sup>Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 86.

<sup>53</sup>Hamid Dabashi, *Shiism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2011), 16.

<sup>54</sup>Dabashi, *Shiism*, 14.

as “the law.”<sup>55</sup> In *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*, it is the father who holds his son Arash in the grips of his power, despite being an addict, sick and begging his son for money (all indications of the intrinsic sickness of patriarchy). Yet his weaknesses would not diminish the key symbolic position of the “father” in what is theoretically articulated as the Oedipal scenario. The Oedipal scenario is “an almost universal principle of the operation of the film in the American cinema.”<sup>56</sup> The father may be a real person, but more significantly this is the paternal function that regulates pleasure, desire, activation of sexual identification, and differentiation.<sup>57</sup> It would not have made a difference if the father in this film was healthy and strong. Even in his sickness, addiction, and desperation, the father exerts his power. The killing of the father by the female vampire in this film is a step towards breaking out of the Oedipal structure of father-child-mother. Contrary to the Oedipal movement of mainstream cinema, which is towards the son entering the patriarchal structure through a direct relation to the father (accepting him, rejecting him, killing him, ignoring or rebelling against him, etc.), the narrative in this film moves the son away from the father of Oedipal scenario towards the female vampire. Instead of shifting the male’s experience of lack onto the figure of a woman who is then punished, possessed or discarded so the son could claim the paternal power, in this film it is the Girl who is the hero with power to terrify, to castrate and control desire and pleasure in the narrative. It is she who is accorded the prohibitive and legislative role, which is reserved for the father in the Oedipal scenario. For example, she violently intervenes in the sexual objectification of the street worker’s body by Arash’s father and Arash is castigated for sexually objectifying a female dancer in a party.

Herein lies the significance of the vampire. By stripping the enduring

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<sup>55</sup>Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 101.

<sup>56</sup>Mathew Tinkcom and Amy Villarejo, eds., *Keyframes: Popular Cinema and Cultural Studies* (London, New York: Routledge, 2001), 13.

<sup>57</sup>Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 62.

Oedipal scenario of its paternal agency, the vampire shows that desire is not a pre-existing given subsequently moulded and manipulated in film. Desire is a product of the created filmic experience. What and how to desire is created by imposing prohibitions that while confining desire and restricting its parameters, construct it as essentially the desire to transgress. Evan's explanation of dialectical relationship between the law and desire explains this well: "Desire is essentially the desire to transgress, and for there to be transgression it is first necessary for there to be prohibition."<sup>58</sup> It follows that if desire is not pre-given; the subject's relation to desire is not "fixed" either. Therefore, subjective positions conditioned by film, such as the male gaze of the camera, the phallogentric nature of desire, and constructed masculinities do not have to be discarded. Hence, the vampire does not transgress the phallic economy of representation. It is good to be reminded here that transgression is produced by and supports what it purports to subvert. To paraphrase Lacan, transgression is the reverse of the law.<sup>59</sup> The same normative subjective positions that are used in mainstream cinema to narcissistically cover over the split of the subject (and result in the closure of the creative process and the narcissistic identification with the specular image on the screen) could be used to unravel the seamless suturing of Oedipal masculinity into the patriarchal symbolic order. Put differently, the transformative possibilities offered by the vampire are not invented outside of the phallogentric system of signification, but within in. As Mulvey reminds us: "There is no 'way' in which we can produce an alternative out of the blue, but we can begin to make a break by examining patriarchy with the tools it provides, of which psychoanalysis is not the only but an important one."<sup>60</sup> This is demonstrated in the vampire's killing of the most negative character of the film, the pimp by biting him and violating him with his own severed finger.

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<sup>58</sup>Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 102.

<sup>59</sup>In Lacan's formulation, it is desire that is "the reverse of the law." See Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 99.

<sup>60</sup>Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, 15.

Considering the vampire as the phallic woman who defies the Oedipal trajectory of the mainstream cinema and the reifying male gaze is particularly significant in relation to the constructed masculinities in this film. She stands alone as the author of her own story, not in relation to any man. As indicated in the film, we do not know what exactly she is, but it is instructive to keep in mind what she is not. She is not Hollywood's conventional strong female character, "the devouring vamp, origin of a dangerous enjoyment in which every man risks annihilation and against which he has to defend himself by establishing an ever more intimate brotherhood."<sup>61</sup> Neither is she the "white male fantasy" of "bad girl" who is compelled to confront evil because of the trauma of her killed father; nor is she the "tough daughter" who successfully negotiates "deadly masculinist social scripts, restoring order to the father-son relationships by killing bad fathers and replacing weak sons."<sup>62</sup> As the phallic woman, the vampire neither represents lack nor the illusory plenitude of fullness where the male spectator can return in order to experience a sense of completion. Neither is she impersonating a man nor "appropriating the penis in fantastical or plastic form."<sup>63</sup> She remains a heterosexual woman, indicated in the film by her attraction to Arash. We can argue she is a source of visual pleasure for the (heterosexual) female spectator.<sup>64</sup> The source of her strength is precisely her being a fantasy which does not easily fit in the neatly organized Oedipal structure of patriarchy. Being a fantasy does not mean the vampire is an illusion opposing a correct perception of reality, as if reality could be perceived in a singular way or unmediated access to it were

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<sup>61</sup>Paul Verhaeghe, "The Collapse of the Function of the Father and Its Effects on Gender Roles," in *Sexuation*, ed. Renata Salecl (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2000), 140.

<sup>62</sup>A. Susan Owen, Sarah R. Stein, and Leah R. Vande Berg, *Bad Girls: Cultural Politics and Media Representations of Transgressive Women* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 23-24.

<sup>63</sup>Carellin Brooks, *Every Inch a Woman: Phallic Possession, Femininity, and the Text* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006), ix.

<sup>64</sup>The disappearance of the female vampire in cinema is pointed out as "a great loss of possible identifications and visual pleasure of female audience." See Anneke Smelik, "Feminist Film Theory," *The Feminist eZine*, available at [www.feministezine.com/feminist/film/Feminist-Film-Theory.html](http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/film/Feminist-Film-Theory.html).

even possible.<sup>65</sup> Being a fantasy means the vampire is discursively constructed, demonstrating that reality too is produced through signifying processes, which means this film is about reality of reflection not a reflection of reality. She deconstructs the operations of the always already male gaze of the camera through which the male spectator in his Oedipal journey identifies with the specular image of the male hero of the mainstream cinema. She exposes the intrinsic flaws of such a journey, its gaps, dissonances, fragilities and lack in the process of image production that must be sutured in order to reflect back a spectacular image of the consolidated male ego. The female vampire with her phallic power is a fantasy, but a fantasy that tells the truth about the fantastic construction of Oedipal masculinity. This is perfectly captured in her meeting Arash, wearing a Dracula costume at night, a scene which could have been written according to Lacan's insight that reality is accessible only through fiction, because reality "is structured like fiction."<sup>66</sup> Behind the mask of Dracula worn by Arash is not his true self, but his location in the symbolic structure organized around the foundational Oedipal fantasy.



3. The vampire with her skateboard by her side meets Arash

### Concluding Scene

The killing of the father by the vampire is not an intrinsically radical gesture—after all, the guilt of killing the father in the Oedipus myth

<sup>65</sup>See Freud's explanation of "fantasy" in Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary*, 60-61.

<sup>66</sup>Slavoj Zizek, *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan Through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 1992), 18.

makes his memory even stronger. However, it is the killing of the father that presents the opportunity for breaking out of the Oedipal impasse. In the concluding scenes of the film Arash is leaving the Bad City on a dark night with the vampire in his fancy car. When he notices that his dead father's cat is among the vampire's belongings, he realizes that his father was killed by the vampire. He is faced with a choice of either claiming a righteous rage and revenging his father's death, or accepting the vampire as his liberator. The former option is a scripted reaction expected of him if he is to take his father's position in the symbolic order and thus perpetuate Oedipal masculinity. It necessitates possessing or punishing the female, projecting lack and disempowerment unto her, and distancing himself from all that is feminine in order to secure a space for himself in the patriarchal power structure. But Arash chooses the vampire, gets in the car, and together they leave the Bad City. They disappear into the darkness, like the heroes of a Western movie, riding into the sunset. Whereas the hero of a Western film leaves the town folks and "the woman" behind, in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* the female vampire, the primary agent of the story, rides into the darkness with the only good man of the city. The lone gunman of the Western film continues his journey alone after killing the villains, but the vampire drives away with Arash to where we can imagine it to be a better place, but the coordinates of which cannot be known in advance. Just as the gunman of a Western film riding into the sunset signifies the unfinished conquest of the West, the vampire and Arash disappearing into the darkness allude to the defeat and displacement of patriarchy as yet an unfinished project.

The solution offered by the vampire, therefore, is a modest one. She offers the young man a way out of the constraints of Oedipal deadlock (symbolic prohibitions of desire resulting from the father's intervention, which become even stronger in the event of patricide). This "way out" is not a roadmap to a pre-Oedipal mother-child-phallus location where the son joins with the inaccessible object of his desire represented by the mother, who then satisfies his every

need. That would have infantilized the son and required him to be the phallus for the mother, who presumably would be envious of men's power (represented by the penis). Nor does the vampire in herself represent plenitude. She too is marked by lack; otherwise, she would not desire. She is both a phallic woman capable of castrating men, and vulnerable and flawed in her desire for Arash. The way out is simply an opening towards the unknown, a transformative open-ended possibility afforded by the phallus but foreclosed by the Oedipal deadlock.