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The Political Veil and Oil Colonialism in the Iranian Film ‘A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night’

Engy El-Refaee

Abstract

This study explores the iconicity of the veil in Ana Lily Amirpour’s Iranian film *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014). While the film is widely attributed to the discussion of feminism that frames the veil as a sign of patriarchal oppression, this understanding fails to take into account the historical and imperialist influences that tied veiling with oppression, a discourse that had gained momentum during the era of the European colonisation of the Middle East in the nineteenth century, and particularly one that merged with oil exploitation under Iran-led modernisation efforts. It also overlooks the politicisation of the veil in modern Iran by both secular and religious forces which was inextricably linked to oil politics. Therefore, this study examines how the veil discourse in Iran is entangled with oil imperialism. It employs a historical analysis method to situate the film within the petro-political history of Iran to understand how it affected the veil discourse throughout. By drawing on postcolonial theory, this study concludes that the veil discourse in Iran is essentially intertwined with oil imperialism, a view that not only supports the film’s narrative but is also one that is often overlooked in feminist media critiques.

Keywords: Veil; Islam; Iran; Oil; Middle East

Introduction

Muslim women, particularly those living in the Middle East, have been one of the most enduring subjects of discussion in Western media for the past few decades. The Islamic veil is one of the most contentious and frequently discussed symbols of women’s oppression under so-called patriarchal structures, as if patriarchy’s origins and existence were confined only to Middle Eastern or Islamic societies; an Orientalist assumption that overlooks the pervasive history of gender-based oppression in Western societies themselves.¹ Ashgar Ali Engineer, a renowned Indian Islamic scholar and activist, famously argued that ‘for thousands of years, women were kept in total

subjugation in all patriarchal societies, and it so happened that most societies were patriarchal. Thus, for centuries it was a “natural law” that women were inferior to men and must submit to the latter’s authority for the smooth running of family life’.² Even so, the typical image of Middle Eastern women that has long dominated Western media is still one of an ‘oppressed and eroticized creature controlled by men and religion’.³ Of course, the repetition of images of veiled women, most evident in post-revolutionary Iran, serves to fortify this status quo. Nevertheless, the portrayal of these women often falls short of capturing not only the historical trajectory of the veil but also the political contestations that shaped the discourse surrounding it.

More often than not, assumptions about Iranian women and Muslim veiling in the media and elsewhere fail to incorporate major historical injustices and geopolitical discourses that enforced a particular understanding of these women and the veil; an understanding that is far from true. Thus, shifting to a more positive and realistic portrayal of these women and the veil is a direly needed intervention. This is precisely the intervention made by *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), an impressive directorial debut from the Iranian American Ana Lily Amirpour. The film was released as Iran was negotiating the reopening of its economy, especially its oil sector, after years of isolation.

In my view, Amirpour ties the veil discourse in Iran with oil exploitation, the form of oppression that actually feeds the patriarchal structures so much decried by Western feminists. By linking the veil to oil imperialism, she critiques both the Western and Eastern narratives of the veil. In respect to the former, she demonstrates that the veil is not merely a symbol of oppression under male dominance but is moreover one that is essentially tied to oil exploitation as a form of imperialist domination. Historically, the linkage of the Islamic veil with oppression was a European construct,⁴ one that gained momentum during the era of European colonisation of the Middle East under the ‘civilising mission’ rhetoric tied to modernisation.⁵ This was the same period that witnessed the imperial takeover of Iranian oil by the British for both industrial and wartime purposes.⁶

Laila Ahmed, a Harvard Divinity professor best known for her influential work on Islam and feminism in the Middle East, famously critiques the Eurocentric view that connects veiling to oppression. As European imperial expansion reached new heights, so did their assumptions about their inherent racial and civilizational superiority. Anthropological studies at that time ‘provided “scientific” evidence such as that offered by the measurement of the skulls-which established the “truth” of European racial superiority’.⁷ These so- studies simultaneously reinforced notions of the inferiority of non- European subjects and women, a popular narrative that served the interests of the Victorian establishment in Great Britain. Under the dominant European belief that women and non-whites are naturally inferior, veiling in non-European communities was seen as evidence of women’s oppression. The veiling and seclusion of women was interpreted during earlier European encounters with Islam through Europeans’ own religious and cultural frameworks.⁸ In *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of A Modern Debate*, Ahmed asserts that this Eurocentric narrative was ‘derived from tales and traveller and crusaders’,⁹ thus illustrating the deep roots of this harmful discourse.

While Ahmed challenges dominant narratives about Muslims' veiling in her scholarly works, she did not adequately explore the relation of the veil discourse to oil exploitation. With respect to the latter, Amirpour criticises the politicisation of the veil in Iran by both secular and religious regimes, revealing how both forces exploited the veil for their ends. Historically, the veil has been a site of political contestation in modern Iran, from the forced unveiling of women during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi in the 1930s under his modernisation schemes to the compulsory re-veiling of women by Ayatollah Khomeini after the 1979 Revolution, under *Shari'a* (Islamic) Law in the Islamic Republic of Iran. While both events reflect the political struggle between secular and religious forces in Iran and their contestation for control over women's identity and sexuality, they also and more significantly reflect major geopolitical transformations in the country's economic orientation with oil, on the basis of which both rulers consolidated their power both domestically and internationally.

Unfortunately, both events reveal how Western imperialism and domestic despotism not only affected the veil discourse in Iran but also led to severe epistemic injustices that reduced the veil's definitional and functional role in history.¹⁰ Hamideh Sedghi, an Iranian-American political scientist and feminist scholar best known for her work on gender politics in Iran, famously explored how the politicisation of the veil in Iran reflects broader struggles over power and state ideology. In her book *Women and Politics in Iran: Veiling, Unveiling and Reveiling*, she explores how the Iranian state, whether secular or Islamic, has always instrumentalised women as sites of state ideology and control. Even so, like Ahmed, there is a notable absence of scholarship that links the politicisation of the veil in Iran with oil exploitation. While both scholars urge a deeper reading of the injustices inflicted on the veil discourse, much of their scholarly works focuses either on religious or cultural explanations while ignoring the role of oil politics as a structuring force. As I will demonstrate, the film addresses this issue through its visual aesthetics, especially through the iconography of the veil employed by the filmmaker and the oil scenes that follow afterwards. Indeed, Amirpour raises this correlation by presenting the protagonist's veil as a political symbol embedded in the ideological power structures of Iran that are inclusive of the country's economic orientation with oil. By visually tying the veiled protagonist to the images of oil fields in the film, Amirpour crafts a narrative that reframes the veil discourse with oil exploitation.

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night features a mysterious, nameless, and chador¹¹-wearing female vampire, simply known as 'The Girl', who preys on abusive and violent men at night in Bad City, a fictitious Iranian city inhabited by drug addicts and sex workers, and surrounded by industrial oil fields. The film's young protagonist nocturnally roams the streets of Bad City and observes the behaviour of her fellow night-wanderers. She chooses to pursue men who abuse women, particularly sex workers, and also scares young boys into treating women with respect. Given these features of its plot, the film has been widely celebrated as a feminist one.¹² In that view, it's not only the actions of The Girl's targets that inform her feminist activism but it is also her surveillance of -and confrontations with- young boys that lead viewers to treat the film as a feminist; as she clearly intervenes in both current and future patriarchy.

But this view, I claim, is only the foreground, because *The Girl*, who wanders the streets of Bad City at night preying on the unjust and the abusers of women, comes to us in the story only twice. Besides, Amirpour herself was averse to these feminist interpretations. When asked in an interview about whether or not she had intended for the film to convey feminist themes, she demurred, telling the interviewer, ‘I find these philosophies [feminisms] are the disease for which they claim to be the cure’.¹³ She encouraged the audience to reflect on why they rush to label stories about women as feminist when a feminist interpretation does not necessarily suit the narrative. Indeed, the setting of the film tells us much more about its meaning. There are frequent shots of oil rigs, which ceaselessly extract oil from the earth. Dead bodies are openly and casually displayed in a ditch, and poor families decimated by drugs and prostitution are conspicuously visible. The overall dysfunctional and bleak setting is quite visible in the characters’ relationship with one another, underscoring all the darkness that ‘black gold’ has brought to Iran. It’s no coincidence that after each scene in which the chador wearing Girl kills, there is a shot that follows depicting either drug injection or oil rig extraction. It can be said that Amirpour hints at the influence of oil exploitation on Iranian culture with her images and also, and most importantly, with the way in which *The Girl* wears the chador. The recurring images of active oil wells strike a parallel with the chador-wearing Girl’s killings, implying a historical connection between both.

While the chador is a traditional full-body black veil commonly associated with modesty in post-revolutionary Iran, *The Girl* does not wear it in a conventionally religious or conservative manner. Rather, she wears it over a striped t-shirt and sneakers, breaking with the typical visual syntax associating modesty with submission, whilst inviting other interpretations. In my reading of the film, I claim that the protagonist’s manner of wearing the veil symbolises both political regimes in Iran, the secular regime associated with modernity and the religious regime associated with Islamisation. Nevertheless, in most of her media interviews, Amirpour tended to downplay the significance of the political allusions of the film,¹⁴ including those related to the veil. She ‘does not see an ostensible message in the use of the chador, but rather emphasizes the tactile and haptic dimension of the chador as a film prop’.¹⁵ In my reading, however, Amirpour’s emphasis on the chador’s material qualities does the opposite of downplaying its political messaging – which is, in my view – that she does not want her film to be positioned within contemporary geopolitics just as she does not want it be aligned with Western feminism. In this way, she questions the legitimacy of the dominant ideological compasses guiding feminism and geopolitics.

However, one can still ascribe a multiplicity of usages and meanings behind the exterior image of the veil.¹⁶ After all, the way *The Girl* wears the chador not only destabilises the Eurocentric trope of the veil as a symbol of oppression circulating in the Western popular imagination after the 1979 Revolution, but it is also one that calls into question the historical multi-layered usages and meanings of the veil in Iran and the political nuances associated with it, especially in regards to situating the film in its geopolitical context. When the film was released in 2014, Iran was negotiating the re-opening of its economy, especially its oil sector, after years of isolation¹⁷ in exchange for significant limits on its nuclear programme. While the film is not explicitly about oil, just as it is not explicitly about feminism, it nevertheless resonates with the historical moment in

which it was released. The Girl's chador becomes a cinematic metaphor for the politicisation of the veil in Iran, influenced and shaped by oil; it represents a blessing as a natural resource, but it also represents a curse, as an impetus for imperial intervention and wars. The film, in that regard, can be seen as a cultural response to Iran's liminal state, a country caught between repression and change, isolation and reintegration. The same applies to the iconography of the chador, as a political signifier if not a historical commentary, for the historical battlegrounds in which the state staged its shifting relationship with global oil politics. Indeed, the chador has always served as a visible index of the state's alignment with, or resistance to, foreign influence over oil. Having said that, the structure of this paper is as follows: first, I provide a film synopsis and summary. Second, I incorporate the historical trajectory of oil exploitation in Iran and its impacts on the veil discourse. Third, I will relate the film's geopolitical context and the iconicity of the veil with Iran's historical context at the time. Finally, I end with a rejoinder on how the politics of veiling in Iran is deeply intertwined with oil exploitation.

Film Synopsis and Summary

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night features a young chador-wearing female vampire (Sheila Vand) who preys on abusive and violent men in Bad City, an imaginary Iranian underworld inhibited by social outcasts such as drug addicts, pimps, junkies, and prostitutes. She falls in love with Arash (Arash Marandi), who is possibly her first genuine human connection in a long time. His aesthetic James Deanque figure intrigues The Girl, who from the outset does not really know how to engage with a man who is not bad (like the others whom she kills). Arash works as a gardener and a handyman for a wealthy girl named Shaydah (Rome Shadanloo) in a suburban area to support his heroin addicted father named Hussein (Marshall Manesh), whom he has cared for since the death of his mother. Other characters that are featured are Saeed (Dominic Rains), a drug dealer and a pimp, who has been supplying Hussein with drugs. At one point, Saeed takes Arash's only prized possession, a classic 1950s Thunderbird, in exchange for the money his father owes him. Through Saeed, we come to know Atti (Mozhan Marnò), a sex worker who is connected to both Saeed and Hussein. Atti is another type of women who, besides The Girl, walks home alone at night, trying to find her way in the world of Bad City. She is a prostitute for whom The Girl feels a fondness and tries to rescue from Saeed and Hussein. Saeed violently exploits Atti, refusing to give her the money he owes to her, as The Girl watches. Walking home, Saeed realises that The Girl is following him, and he perceives this as an expression of her interest in him; The Girl, however, takes revenge and finishes him off. As The Girl surveys the injustices plaguing Bad City, she senses that Hussein is also abusing Atti. Suddenly, she appears at Atti's home and kills Hussien.¹⁸

While the film binds viewers to The Girl's actions, which express rage towards the abusive men whom she kills, the violence that The Girl exhibits is not the only violence in the film, if it can really be considered violence. Rather, there are other forms of violence than those that obviously meet the viewers' eyes. Bad City itself carries a much greater interpretational force in the film; it represents a character in its own right that has been infused with decay, violence, and human rights

abuses. Indeed, Amirpour invents a fictional image of Iran that reflects its real history of oil exploitation and the long-lasting effects of this exploitation on Iranian society and also on the environment. From the first shots of Bad City, the town is established as a lifeless, industrial wasteland, with images of oil derricks rhythmically pumping in the background. This imagery is not incidental because Iran's history is deeply intertwined with oil exploitation that (contrary to mainstream views that link it only with American imperialism) dates back to 1901 when a sixty-year oil concession was first granted to the British subject William Knox D'Arcy.¹⁹ It is on the basis of this concession that the British later controlled Anglo-Persian Oil Company (known contemporarily as 'BP') and the oil industry until its nationalisation in 1951 and the subsequent CIA-backed coup²⁰ that followed.

Likewise, the iconography of the chador is not incidental because oil exploitation has been interwoven with the unveiling of women in Iran under policies and schemes of modernisation suggested by the West and internalised by the East, which underlay deepening social inequalities and political instability. This is the 'thesis of the new colonial discourse',²¹ and Amirpour's reaction to it, expressed by how *The Girl* wears the chador *differently*. In my view, this different manner of wearing the chador is an invitation to reconsider Western misconceptions of the Islamic veil as a symbol of oppression. It is also a call to reconsider the historical instrumentalisation and politicisation of the veil in Iran by both secular and religious forces, as well as the revolutionary protests²² that were concurrent to the veil's politicisation long before the 1979 Revolution, an issue not considered by many Western scholars.

Undeniably, the characters of Bad City reflect the societal consequences of oil exploitation. Many of town residents are criminals, drug addicts or pimps, people that represent a community left to rot after years of exploitation and economic decline. Indeed, drawing on dependency theory,²³ one can see the film's illustration of how oil exploitation creates a condition of dependency that is evident in the characters' relationships with one another. For example, the drugs sold by Saeed correlate with a life-destroying dependency for Arash's father Hussein, who is often in a stupor. Later on in the film, Arash sells the drugs initially possessed by Saeed to make ends meet. Saeed also violently exploits Atti, the sex worker who is also dependent on her work, trying to make her way in Bad City; Saeed forces her to perform oral sex and then refuses to pay her for her services.

Arguably, it was oil exploitation in the first place that created the character of Saeed, the drug dealer and pimp. Weighed down by the harsh realities of modern capitalist society represented by Bad City, Saeed finds no fairness in this city; he therefore seeks purpose through violence. Saeed perhaps represents the story of the 'forgotten man' who has been crushed underfoot by the historical colonial trajectory of oil exploitation. This trajectory includes the violence inflicted on Iran (Persia at that time) during the first and second world wars through the Russian and British invasions, despite the country's declared neutrality.

The character of *The Girl* is also shaped by oil exploitation. She uses her vampire abilities to prey upon men who exploit and abuse women. Just as vampires drain blood to sustain themselves, the oil industry in Iran has also drained the country's most valuable resource to accommodate

Western interests, leaving behind a hollowed-out society. The chador, according to this argument, becomes a manifestation of the epistemic injustices imposed on its meaning; these injustices accompany the material extraction and exploitation of Iranian oil. Through its imagery of industrial decay, its focus on marginalised individuals, and its depiction of the chador-wearing vampire Girl, the film brings to light the influence on the veil discourse of the historical trajectory of oil extraction in Iran. Indeed, to understand the political undercurrents of this hauntingly stylised film, one must excavate the layered history of veiling, de-veiling and re-veiling in Iran and its complex ties to oil imperialism. In doing so, one must also situate the film broadly within Iran's petro-political history and specifically as a cultural product of the year 2014, a defining moment in Iranian history due to its nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (U.S., UK, France, China, Russia and Germany). These negotiations aimed for an ease in the economic sanctions on Iran in exchange for Iran limiting to its nuclear programme, culminating in what is commonly known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).²⁴ In the following section, I will further demonstrate how the veil discourse in Iran was closely intertwined with oil imperialism.

Veiling and Oil in Iran: A Historical Overview

Largely hidden from public purview by the Western media is a long history of harm inflicted on Iran through the interventions of great powers. While Iran is blessed with tremendous oil reserves, it is also cursed by this geological predicament due to the coveting of oil by major economic powers, which seek to plunder this natural resource. Unfortunately, Iran has fallen prey to a merciless oil politics, suffering catastrophic losses during both world wars as nations vied for control of its oil reserves. Given that Western interests in the modern period have always been defined by oil, Iran was subjected to a foreign-sponsored military coup (1953) and the Islamic Revolution (1978-79), two events that not only shaped the course of Iran's modern and contemporary history but also affected the veil discourse.

Women's role in the Constitutional Revolution

From the outset, the veil discourse in Iran has been entangled with oil politics. It is no surprise that Iran's first oil concession, D'Arcy's sixty-year concession of 1901, coincided with Iranian women's unique role in one of the most successful revolutionary movements in Middle Eastern history, the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911).²⁵ During the revolution, women clad in chadors fought at the front lines against foreign domination²⁶ and domestic despotism. They were veiled and secluded *andaruni*, the Persian equivalent of harem,²⁷ as was the social custom. At that time, there was no state-imposed policy of either unveiling or veiling but nevertheless it was part of a broader conversation about modernity, nationhood, and women's role in public life. Indeed, the veil was not *yet* a symbol of oppression. Nor were women passive as a result of patriarchy in the way it has been commonly conveyed in the media. Rather, these so-called 'invisible' women were capable of taking action. Through a series of protests, demonstrations and bloody clashes, women donning chadors, along with clergy, intellectuals and

bazaaris (workers in bazaars, the traditional marketplaces in Iran), compelled Muzaffar al-Din Shah (who granted the oil concession years ago) to accept the constitution, which could provide an opportunity to incorporate people's voices in government decision-making.²⁸

Nevertheless, following the revolutionary triumph that established a constitutional government, women became disillusioned with the clergy, who dismissed their demands for voting and girls' education.²⁹ A small number of intellectual women, mostly from the upper class, thus began to confront these issues by organising themselves into parties or *anjumans* (secret societies).³⁰ But such feminist acts were not confined to elite women only. Throughout the years of the Constitutional Revolution, many women gathered in the streets of Tehran, took off their veils and shouted: 'Long live freedom... We must... live the way we want!'.³¹ It was during this period that a noticeable change occurred in society; a change in women's perception of themselves and their awareness of the world outside the household. This empowerment- for the first time extending beyond the traditional confines of the home - allowed women to channel their anger about their oppression by taking an active role in the ratification of the constitution in 1906.

Compulsory unveiling and modernisation

The First World War brought instability and destruction to Iran. In order to prevent Iran's disintegration, Reza Shah led a bloodless coup and installed himself as king in 1925 after overthrowing the Qajar monarchy, aiming to restore Iranian's compromised sovereignty. Inspired to build a strong army and centralised state, he was imbued with Western and European notions. Reza Shah's vision of Iran was that of a society comprised of secular educational institutions, comparable to those in Europe, with unveiled women attired in Western clothing attending schools and teaching. Notably, he viewed the entry of unveiled women into public spaces as an essential component of modernity, modelled in Western norms. In 1936, he forced women to remove their veils under the mandatory unveiling edict of 1936.³² Iranian police had orders to remove women's veils if they did not comply. By that time, the image of the unveiled women became the image of Iran, and related to that was the linkage of unveiled woman with educational status. Reza Shah tied unveiling with women's education, as if by virtue of head covering, women were excluded from intellectual activity.

Nevertheless, it is important to recall that the unveiling initiative came at a time of rapid social change, amid the turmoil that swept up national economy during the inter-war years. It was at this time that Reza Shah reversed the earlier policies under the D'Arcy Concession. He needed 'additional funds from the Anglo-Persian Oil Company, which had reduced its royalties to Iran during the depression'.³³ A new agreement was reached in 1933 that addressed many of Iran's demands while replacing the 1901 D'Arcy Concession,³⁴ the latter leading many nationalists to criticise the deal and use it to justify the 1951 oil nationalisation of Iran, an event that was followed by a Western-backed coup of Iran's leadership and the replacement of British imperialism with American imperialism. The negotiated deal remained far from equitable but nonetheless gave the Shah some necessary funds³⁵ to spend on arms, construction and building a strong army.

Although Reza Shah did not complete any mass-housing projects, he significantly impacted domestic life through the enactment of legislation, like the unveiling law',³⁶ which in so many ways 'profoundly impacted the domestic experiences of women, who besides being constrained by the patriarchal nature of the traditional family in Iran, had to spend the majority of their time at home'.³⁷ It's worth noting that besides the unveiling law, the domestic life of Iranian women was affected by the architectural changes brought by modernisation. Unlike the traditional housing that Iranian women were accustomed to, the modern oil towns built by the British, like Bawardah in Abadan, lacked any privacy for Iranian women'.³⁸ With the onset of the Second World War, Reza Shah eventually abdicated for his son, Mohamed Reza Shah. It was during this period that Iran's oil proved its significance and influence in international relations for the second time.

Modernity and recartelization of oil

Mohamed Reza Pahlavi (Shah of Iran, 1941-79) worked to extend his father's programme of Western-style modernisation. Although the unveiling law was relaxed under his reign, it was a distraction from the recartelization of oil (in other words, the re-establishment of Western imperial control over Iran's oil) that came as a reaction to the nationalisation of the industry in Iran, which 'since 1901 had been operating under the monopoly of the British'. The formation of an oil consortiums between the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC) and the international oil cartel ensured Western – especially British and American - petroleum companies access to Iran's oil'.³⁹ At this time, the United States had begun to become involved in exporting Iran's oil and incorporating it into its sphere of influence, the implications of which reverberate to this day. Meanwhile, the lifting of the ban on the veil brought back interest in wearing it again. This period was considerably liberating for Iranian women because it gave them, at least, the freedom to decide whether to veil or not, even though veiling was still considered a sign of backwardness in the eyes of the Iranian government. Besides maintaining a flexible attitude towards unveiling, Mohamed Reza Shah institutes a series of modernisation reforms in 1963, known as the White Revolution, which included women's suffrage among its provisions.⁴⁰ Increasing oil revenues were used at that time to invest in these development projects.

Nevertheless, these reforms were opposed by many clerics, such as Ayatollah Khomeini, who viewed these modernisation projects as antithetical to Islam and a threat to traditional values.⁴¹ Furthermore, 'these policies that attempted to westernize the country were not in harmony with the vast number of underprivileged Iranian women who were left out of the benefits obtained from large oil revenues'.⁴² The stark polarisation of society into the ultra-rich at the top and the poor on bottom, along with rampant inflation, stoked public discontent and eventually led to the 1979 Revolution and the re-veiling of women under the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ever since, sanctions have been imposed by global powers; these sanctions have only increased in scope and intensity over time. They have undermined Iran's sovereignty while crippling its capacity to engage in international trade and finance its economic activities.

Geopolitical Context of the Film and Iconography of the Veil

A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night was released in 2014, at a time when Iran was negotiating the reopening of its economy. International sanctions of increasing scope and intensity severely harmed its national economy, and after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's sovereignty was undermined even further by sanctions. The first set of sanctions⁴³ against Iran was a ban on its oil imports, which included 'blocking all \$12 billion in Iranian government assets in the United States [... and] an embargo on US trade with Iran and travel ban to Iran'.⁴⁴ Eventually, the US Congress passed a law named the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 (ILSA) 'to sanction people or businesses investing over \$20 million in Iran's energy industry',⁴⁵ which was Iran's main source of income. The intent of the sanctions was purportedly to pressure Iran to cease its nuclear weapons programme and end its support of acts of international terrorism. The international community criticised this step in the beginning, and Iran managed to cope with these sanctions for years. But from 2006 onwards, the United Nations Security Council and the European Union started to impose [further] sanctions on Iran, including restrictions on Iranian banks and financial institutions, forcing it into isolation from both the international trade and financial system.⁴⁶ The US also extended its sanctions on Iran's central bank, a disruption that translated directly into macroeconomic instability. In 2012, Iran felt the effect of all the international sanctions imposed on it 'when the Rial, Iran's currency, lost approximately eighty percent of its value in 2011'.⁴⁷ Undoubtedly, that's a profound problem for a country that is highly dependent on oil revenues. It was only at this stage that Iran reopened negotiations regarding its nuclear programme with the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, the European Union, and Germany in return for the lifting of some sanctions. Ultimately, in 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with leading Western nations to lift specific sanctions in exchange for restricting its nuclear programme.⁴⁸ While the negotiations were symbolic of Iran's desire to re-integrate into the global economic and political order after years of isolation, one could argue that this agreement was also a historical reminder of Iran's contested oil sovereignty, dating back to the 1953 coup that ended Iran's nationalisation efforts.

Against this backdrop, *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* can be read as an allegorical meditation on Iran's vulnerable position in the world. On the one hand, the constant presence of oil derricks in Bad City is a visual representation of Iran's dependence on oil and a possible nod to Iran's struggling oil sector, which had been under pressure due to sanctions. On the other hand, this desolate environment not only reflects a country that has been left behind, but perhaps one that is also awaiting revival through international engagement.⁴⁹ Likewise, the veil, once a sign of oppression in both Eastern and Western narratives, has become a cultural barometer of oil colonialism in Iran. By tracing the historical arc of veiling, unveiling and re-veiling in Iran along the dynamics of oil imperialism, we see how the iconography of the veil gestures towards a new narrative, one that links the veil discourse within the broader economic and geopolitical dynamics of oil while calling for epistemic justice. After all, to reduce the veil to either oppression or

empowerment, as most people do, is to flatten the rich complexity of Iranian women's lived experiences.

Conclusion

This study investigated the iconicity of the veil in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*. Unlike the widespread discourse that links the veil with patriarchal oppression, this paper proposes a new vision connecting the veil discourse in Iran with oil imperialism. Through historical analysis drawn from postcolonial theory, it demonstrates how the veil discourse in Iran is intertwined with oil exploitation, a connection often overlooked in feminist media interpretations of the film. It also demonstrates the extension of the imperial logic of oil to cultural domains, including with Western interventions imposing their own moral, economic and gender norms on the perceived nature of the veil in Iran. Oil colonialism, therefore, is not just an economic phenomenon but also an epistemic one. Oil, therefore, should not be considered as an isolated entity but moreover as a manifestation of real social and political relations that have shaped the veil discourse in Iran and elsewhere. As underscored by distinguished scholar Peter R. Odell, 'the Middle East without oil would be a very different region',⁵⁰ perhaps one that has neither conflict nor oppression. Unfortunately, the discovery of oil in Iran was the beginning of a history of disruption and intrusion in the Middle East, the repercussions of which are felt globally.

AI Assistant Statement

I have not used any AI tools in my research or writing.

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About the Author

Engy El-Refaee is an economist and philosopher with expertise in research, economic development and education. Her academic interests have recently expanded to include Film hermeneutics and Gender Studies with a particular focus on feminist theory, political economy and postcolonial theory. She holds an MSc in Philosophy from Edinburgh University and an MA and BA in Economics from The American University in Cairo.

¹ A brief history on the origins of patriarchal oppression reveals that in both ancient Greece and Rome, women were politically excluded from public life. In medieval and early modern Europe, women were denied education and even subject to laws that enforced their obedience to male authority. The Western Enlightenment itself, often celebrated as the birth of Western liberal values, largely excluded women from its vision of rights and reason. In the twentieth century, Western women lacked basic political rights: for example, women in France couldn't vote until 1944. In Switzerland too, women's suffrage came only in 1971. Even though, Western discourse has often portrayed gender oppression as something foreign to them, something 'Islamic' or 'Middle Eastern'. It shouldn't be a surprise though that women in Iran were granted their right to vote in 1963.

² Ashgar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam*, (Sterling Publishers Private Limited, 1992), 1.

³ Nahed El Tantawy, "From Veiling to Blogging: Women and Media in the Middle East," in *Women and Media in the Middle East: From Veiling to Blogging*. (London: Routledge, 2013), 767. Here, one feels intrigued to question the *content* of that oppression, simply because women in the Victorian establishment in Britain, for example, were much more oppressed by men. Other than the fact that the Victorian dress was hardly the most liberated dress, women were seen as intellectually inferior to men because of their 'biology'. Because women have smaller brain size than men, it was assumed that she is inferior. This theory was advanced by Paul Borca, a French anthropologist in the nineteenth century, who argued for the biological inferiority of women and non-whites. For more see Charles Sowerwine, "Women's Brain, Man's Brain: Feminism and Anthropology in late Nineteenth-century France," *Women's History Review* 12, no. 2 (2003).

⁴ The Islamic veil as a symbol of oppression was a relatively recent idea that gained prominence with European imperial incursions into, and control over, much of the Middle East in the nineteenth century, before which the veil was a status symbol among the Muslim ruling class and urban elite. However, as Muslims fell under European domination, the veil has assumed a new and important focus, which denotes oppression. For a detailed account, see Leila Ahmed, "Unveiling," in *A Quiet Revolution: The Veil's Resurgence, from the Middle East to America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 23-24, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300175059>.

⁵ It shouldn't be a surprise to claim that oil imperialism has acted as a vehicle by which Iran would gain modernity. This movement of modernity, it is believed, is said to have brought social, economic and political progress in Iran, and of course other 'less developed' areas of the world, like Egypt and the alike, which didn't obtain after all.

⁶ For the British, back then the aim was to guarantee a steady source of this *new* fuel (instead of coal) for its naval forces. Actually, it is believed that Iran's oil flow resulted not only in the victory of the British (and the Allies) in World War One but also the development of the Petroleum industry in Iran in the first place. For a detailed account, see Shana Petro Energy Information Network, "Iran Oil and Two World Wars," 21 October 2018, accessed 20 October 2025, <https://en.shana.ir/news/285275/Iran-Oil-and-Two-World-Wars>.

⁷ Leila Ahmed, "Unveiling," 23.

⁸ Ibid., 24. Ahmed argued that they viewed veiling as linked to polygamy, reinforcing the belief that Islam was oppressive to women, when the practice itself was considered anathema in tenth century Europe. Even so, polygamy was celebrated in the Christian tradition much like Islam. The Bible records many instances of polygamy in the Old Testament.

⁹ Leila Ahmed, "Discourse of the Veil," in *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, ed. Kecia Ali (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021), 149, <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300258172>.

¹⁰ Throughout history, from ancient traditions to modern representations, the veil has signified different meanings in different eras, regions, contexts and cultures. Islam did not invent veiling, nor is veiling a practice limited to the Middle East. Rather, veiling is a tradition that has existed for thousands of years both in and far beyond the Middle East, and even before Islam came into being in the seventh century. For a detailed account, see Sahar Amer, *What is Veiling?* (The University of South Carolina, 2014), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469617763_amer.

¹¹ For Iranian women in particular, the veil is called a chador, a piece of cloth that covers the woman from head to toe. In this paper, I use both terms 'chador' and 'veil' interchangeably.

¹² According to that view, it is a feminist film simply because the Girl attempts to rid the fictional world of Bad City from the violence of patriarchy. While in Western media, veiled women are often portrayed as victims of oppression or powerless, the film flips this trope because now the girl is the hunter, not the hunted, and her chador becomes a tool of empowerment, not a sign of submission. In this context, both the film and the chador become emblematic of feminist rage and resistance against patriarchal structures. For feminist readings, see Shadee Abdi and Bernadette M Calafell, "Queer utopias and a (Feminist) Iranian vampire: a critical analysis of resistive monstrosity in *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 34, no. 4 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1302092>.

¹³ Rich Juzwiak, "The Iranian Vampire Tale of *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night*," *Gawker Archives*, 21 November 2014, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://www.gawkerarchives.com/the-iranian-vampire-tale-of-a-girl-walks-home-alone-at-1661607676>.

¹⁴ This is very clear in the film's ending in the car when the Girl and her lover Arash decide to leave Bad City, heading towards an uncertain future. It can be argued that the film's refusal to offer narrative closure suggests the ambiguous direction of Iran in 2014, the year the film was produced.

¹⁵ Alena Strohmaier, "On the Re-Configurations of Cinematic Media-Spaces: From Diaspora Film to Postdiaspora Film," in *Re-Configurations: Contextualising Transformation Processes and Lasting Crises in the Middle East and North Africa*, eds. Rachid Ouaisa, Friederike Pannewick and Alena Strohmaier (Springer, 2021), 226, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-31160-5_14.

¹⁶ Here, I draw on Alberto Baracco's film hermeneutics, a methodological strategy for the interpretation of film. Alberto Baracco's film hermeneutics is a reading that moves back and forth between the viewer horizon and the 'cinematic text horizon,' adding 'never-ending' layers of meaning and understanding of the film. For more, see Alberto Baracco, "Hermeneutics of the Film World: A Riceurian Method for Film Interpretation," (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-65400-3>.

¹⁷ Iran's economy is dependent on oil; it is the only productive sector that brings income to the country.

¹⁸ There are unnamed characters in the film; there is the little boy (Milad Eghbali), who serves as an innocent bystander, witnessing all the injustices in Bad City and who the Girl intentionally scares so as to deter him from contributing to such injustices in the future. There is also a trans woman who we see dancing alone with a balloon. For the purposes of this study, I will not focus on these characters.

¹⁹ At that time, the Qajar dynasty (that came before the Pahlavi dynasty) was deeply indebted to the West. The Qajar kings had been borrowing heavily from European powers, particularly Russia and Britain, to cover administrative costs and personal expenditures.

²⁰ As is the case with most countries rich in oil and/or other strategic commodities, I claim that the coup in Iran was predicated on oil. Unfortunately, the 1953 CIA and MI6 backed coup against the late Iranian Prime Minister Mohamed Mossadegh, who had nationalised Iranian oil after years of British exploitation, reinstalled the Shah and ensured Western control- mostly the Americans - over this naturally given resource.

²¹ Laila Ahmed, "Women and Gender in Islam," 152. This is a term used by Ahmed - according to her 'the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam centered on women...Islam was oppressive to women, and the veil was the comprehensive backwardness of Islamic society'.

²² For example, the mass rebellion against a British tobacco concession in 1980-92. Iranian women, clad in their chadors, had been at the forefront of Iranian national consciousness fighting for their sovereignty. For a detailed account, see Andre Vogel, "The Source of Change Within Society: A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women's Movements," *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship* 2, no. 4 (2018), 13, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/jogc/vol2/iss4/2/>. Besides, there were other reformist-autonomist revolts in the provinces of Gilan, Azerbaijan, and Khorasan after World War I, the rebellions in Azerbaijan and Kurdistan after World War II, the mass supported oil nationalisation movement under Mosaddegh (who ruled the country from 1951 to 1953), and the popular anti-government demonstrations of the early 1960s all involved, to a greater or lesser extent, efforts to end foreign control over the Iranian economy and to build an independent state. For a detailed account, see Nikki R. Keddie, "Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective," *The American Historical Review*, 580.

²³ The general premise of dependency theory is that underdeveloped nations enrich – with their own resources, at their own expense – developed nations. Officially developed in the late 1960s following World War II, dependency theory was a reaction to modernisation theory, an earlier theory of development that assumes progress led by developed nations but in reality, such progress rests on exploitation of underdeveloped nations.

²⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action*, accessed 21 October 2025, <http://2009-2017.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa>.

²⁵ Prior to the constitutional revolution, a dual system of authority existed in traditional Iranian society where several other patriarchs (clerics, tribes, and local notables, including princes and other provincial governors) checked the patrimonial powers of the king in some arenas.

²⁶ By that time, Iran [at the time under the Qajar dynasty] was increasingly subject to Western economic penetration and domination by Great Britain and Russia. For a detailed account, see Nikki Keddie, 'Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective,' 580.

²⁷ Originally, the term 'harem' refers to the section of the house where a Muslim leader's wives live. For more, see "Muslim Journeys | Item #238: Harem" from Oxford Islamic Studies Online" (15 March 2025), accessed 21 October 2025, <http://bridgingcultures-muslimjourneys.org/items/show/238>. However, the harem was eventually constructed by Western authors as a space of absolute oppression in which women were entirely disempowered and objectified; for more, see Natasha Bharj and Peter Hegarty, "A Postcolonial Feminist Critique of Harem Analogies in Psychological Science," *Journal of Social and Political Psychology* 3, no. 1 (2015), 259, <https://doi.org/10.5964/jspp.v3i1.133>.

²⁸ Hamideh Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran. Veiling, Unveiling and Reveiling* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 43, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://doi-org/10.1017/CBO9780511510380>.

²⁹ The clerical hierarchy, led by Ayotallah Fazlollah Nuri (the Khomeini of his time) proclaimed these demands to be part of a conspiracy to eradicate Islam in the country. He issued a religious edict against girls' schools and declared these schools and women's education in general contrary to Islamic law.

³⁰ Poupak Tarafeshi, "The Struggle for Freedom, Justice, and Equality: The History of the Journey of Iranian Women in the Last Century" (MA diss., University of Louisville, 2010), 8, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1928&context=etd>.

³¹ Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 25.

³² Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: Veiling Practices and Muslim Women," in *Women, Gender, Religion: A Reader*, ed. E. A. Castelli (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 429. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-04830-1>.

³³ Firoozeh Kashani-Sabet, "The Other Fight: Women's Suffrage and Iran's Oil Nationalization," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 56, no. 2 (2024): 272, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743824000576>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ehssan Hanif, "Writing Domesticity: Historicising Two Silenced Stories of Modernisation by Iranian Women Writers," in *Staying with Modernity? (Dis)Entangling Coloniality and Architecture* (Jaap Bakema Study Centre, 2024), 59-60, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://philpapers.org/archive/HANWDH.pdf>.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 101. Another study suggested that the consortium was composed of major oil companies, including AIOC (now BP) with forty per cent of shares, Royal Dutch Shell was given fourteen per cent and Jersey, Texas, SoCal, Gulf, and Socony acquired seven per cent each, while the French CFP obtained six per cent and the remaining five per cent went to several US oil independents. The consortium estimated Iran's share based on 50-50 profit-sharing which lasted until the oil crisis of 1970s. For a detailed account, see Cyrus Bina. "Iran's Oil, the Theory of Rent, and the long Shadow of History: A Caveat on Oil Contracts in the Islamic Republic," in *L'économie politique de la République islamique d'Iran*, ed. Anne Le Naëlou, Tania Angeloff, Roser Cussó and Pierre Janin (Publications de la Sorbonne, 2017), 63-90, accessed 20 October 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/e26452353>.

⁴⁰ Andre Vogel, "The Source of Change Within Society: A Brief Survey of Modern Iranian Women's Movements," *Undergraduate Journal of Global Citizenship*, 2, no. 4 (2018), 7, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/jogc/vol2/iss4/2/>.

⁴¹ Sedghi, *Women and Politics in Iran*, 128.

⁴² Tarafeshi, "The Struggle for Freedom," 3.

⁴³ This can be traced to the 1979 hostage crisis when Iranian students took hostage American diplomats from the US Embassy in Tehran.

⁴⁴ Melody Fahimirad. "The Iran Deal: How the Legal Implementation of the Deal puts the United States at a Disadvantage both Economically and in Influencing the Future of Iran's Business Transactions," *Northwestern Journal of International Law and Business*, 37, no. 2 (2017), 305, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/njilb/vol37/iss2/4/>.

⁴⁵ Islam Abdelbary and Rasha Elshawa. "Economic Sanctions as a Foreign Policy Tool: A Case Study of the Iran West Conflict," *Migration Letters*, 20, no. 7 (2023), 218, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://migrationletters.com/index.php/ml/article/view/4392>.

⁴⁶ Abdelbary and Elshawa, "Economic Sanctions as Foreign Policy," 216.

⁴⁷ Oliver Borszik, "International Sanctions against Iran under President Ahmedinejad: Explaining Regime Persistence," *GIGA Working Paper, German Institute for Global and Area Studies* (Hamburg: GIGA, 2014, 2024), 1, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://ciaotest.cc.columbia.edu/wps/giga/0034014/index.html>.

⁴⁸ Kali Robinson, "What is the Iran Nuclear Deal?" *Council on Foreign Relations*, 27 October 2023, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/background/what-iran-nuclear-deal>.

⁴⁹ This is much like Iran's current global ambitions in its nuclear programme amid Israel's war on it.

⁵⁰ Peter R. Odell. "The Significance of Oil," *Journal of Contemporary History* 3, no. 3 (Sage Publications, 1968), 93, accessed 21 October 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259700>.