

## **The Gaze of the Medusa: The Search for a Feminine Cinematic Language in Abbas Kiarostami's *Shirin***

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### **Abstract:**

This paper tries to explore the Iranian filmmaker Abbas Kiarostami's search for a "feminine" cinematic language by analyzing his remarkable film *Shirin* (2008). The paper tries to argue, how Kiarostami deviated from the traditional "male gaze" project emphasized by the film industries worldwide, especially the Hollywood film industry, and how he created a resistance against the dominant cinematic male gaze by positing a counter gaze or the "female gaze" by employing ingenious cinematic techniques in *Shirin*. The paper attempts to discuss the cinematic language of *Shirin* from the perspective of H  l  ne Cixous's seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa," which argues for the establishment of a separate literary language for the expression of female subjectivity, or the *  criture f  minine*. The aim of the paper is, therefore, to establish how Kiarostami tries to achieve a cinematic *  criture f  minine* by positing a symbolic challenge to the phallogocentric cinematic discourse.

**Keywords:** Abbas Kiarostami, *Shirin* and *Khosrow*, H  l  ne Cixous, The Uncanny, Jacques Lacan.

### **Introduction:**

Abbas Kiarostami, the celebrated Iranian auteur, has always mesmerized the film aficionados around the globe with his deeply insightful cinematic endeavors. His peerless depictions of the Iranian life and its vicissitudes have fetched him laurels from premier film festivals. But the trajectory of his directorial career suddenly changed with his film *Shirin* (2008), which is considered by many critics as a landmark in his variegated artistic career. *Shirin*, a geocentric film, captures reactions and responses of women audiences sitting in a dark auditorium, who are watching the tragic saga of the Persian mythological characters *Khosrow* and *Shirin* slowly unfolding on the screen. It can exasperate the audiences because of its apparent lack of a story, and the continuous cascade of the female faces it showcases, but it demands analysis for the political manoeuvre it has taken, which evokes consternation in the audiences' minds. This paper would try to analyze the film through the lens of H  l  ne Cixous's seminal essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." which engages in a quest for a feminine literary language, or the *  criture f  minine*, which is divorced from phallogocentric dominance.

This paper would try to focus on Kiarostami's search for a feminine cinematic language in *Shirin*, which could harbour women's sequestered subjectivity and desires, from the inside of a patriarchal cinematic network.

### **Medusa's Laughter: An Exposition of *Écriture féminine*:**

Hélène Cixous, the celebrated French literary critic, delves into the topic of the feminine literary language in her landmark essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." The literary domain has always been colonized by the phallogocentric presence, where women have been relegated to obscurity, they have remained as floating signifiers. The textual space is ruled by the patriarchal presence; masculine notions have gained the upper hand in the construction of meaning, which is defined by Jacques Derrida as *phallogocentrism*, "the system of metaphysical oppositions predominant in Western philosophy that has until recently been written by men" (Addicott). Cixous emphasizes the fact, that there is a close relationship between women's body and their writing, and patriarchy has repressed them for aeons. Religion, science, reason, and logic have been dominated by patriarchal conceptions, and women must spearhead reverse colonization of these domains through writing, which would reorient their position in the signifying system. Cixous conceptualizes the notion of *écriture féminine*, or "women's writing," which departs from the traditional masculine writing styles, and "examines the relationship between the cultural and psychological inscription of the female body and female difference in language and text" (Wikipedia). She gives a clarion call to women to write, and demonstrates the image of the feminine writing through the text itself, which relies heavily on metaphors and the stream-of-consciousness technique, "Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies..." (Cixous 875). Cixous uses the Greek mythological figure Medusa, the demonic character, whose head sprouted thousands of snakes, as a template to advance her thesis. Medusa's laughter symbolizes refusal to conform to the patriarchal dictums, and Cixous makes a cross-over between that laughter and popular culture, to encourage the women to repudiate truth and history written with the phallic stylus, and celebrate womanhood through writing. She critiques the notion of considering women as monstrous like Medusa, or as an "unexplored abyss" (which echoes Sigmund Freud's observation on women being a dark continent). Women, who have dared to assert their desires, have been ostracized for being dangerous and ugly, for emerging as an antithesis to the patriarchal notions of the beautiful and the loyal virgin. Cixous uses the term, the "Logic of Antilove," to expound her idea of the systematic oppression of the feminine space by the phallogocentric powers, "Insidiously, violently, they have led them to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense strength against themselves, to be the executants of their virile needs. They have made for women an antinarcissism" (Cixous 878). Therefore, she asks women to generate "sexts" (female-sexed texts) to create a counter literary and linguistic discourse, to establish

the feminine voice in the patriarchal quagmire, "Write yourself. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth" (Cixous 880).

### **The Uncanny Spectators:**

Kiarostami's *Shirin* dawns in the audiences' minds with an unsettling effect, because of its unusual narratorial technique. Films are generally constructed as visual narratives with dramatic colors; they are perceived as graphic narratives on celluloid, which fulfill the mundane purpose of telling tales. But Kiarostami has relinquished this dominant film-making mode, as *Shirin* doesn't indulge in simple visual storytelling. Through the meticulous use of close-ups, it captures the reactions of nearly a hundred and fourteen Iranian women spectators sitting in a dark auditorium. Not a single frame of the film they are watching is shown for once, only its dialogues are heard, which act as the objective corelatives for the spectators' facial expressions and emotional responses. Faint outlines of the men sitting beside the women are visible, but the camera deliberately effaces their presence and zooms in on the female faces only, and creates a montage of the spectators' faces by obstructing the view of the projection screen.

The concept of "watching the watchers" has previously been explored by Kiarostami in his *To Each His Own Cinema* (2007). In *Shirin*, the same practice continues, where the women are watching a cinematic adaptation of a 12<sup>th</sup> Century Persian poem *Khosrow and Shirin*, a tragic romance penned by Nizami of Ganjeh, based on a Pre-Islamic Persian antecedent, narrated by the poet Shahnameh. However, only the sounds surfacing from the projection screen are heard, "The drama that takes place off-screen is conveyed to us through the gestures and facial expressions of the audience, thus turning the film that we are watching into what could be seen as one extended, unbroken reaction shot" (Grønstad 24). The spectators' faces are turned into a force-field of a plethora of emotions: joy, melancholy, wonder, empathy, etc. *Shirin* becomes an arena of the "real" audiences' negotiations with the on-screen "doubles," who are unaware of the former's existence, as Asbjørn Grønstad argues,

"Stripped of most of the usual distractions that ordinarily pull us away from such close encounters with a cinematic other - narrative action, non-human objects, landscapes, whole bodies in motion - *Shirin* also skillfully utilizes temporal duration as an aesthetic effect that augments the spectator's sensation of intimacy with the faces on the screen" (25).

However, *Shirin* translates this intimacy into horror; the reversal of the camera position (which generally represents the audiences' perspective) triggers serious anxiety, as Kiarostami's audiences can't comprehend how to negotiate with the sudden eruption of an uncanny female gaze that adorns the film-frames. The female spectators emerge as uncanny figures, which push the audiences into a zone of aporia and intellectual uncertainty, thereby

subverting “the face-to-face encounter, which for the Lithuanian- French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas embodies the essential condition of ethics” (Grønstad 25).

Sigmund Freud extensively explored the pernicious psychological phenomenon called the “Uncanny,” in his essay *Das Unheimliche* or “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919). It’s an eerie psychological experience of fright, terror, and dread, triggered by an encounter with things, persons, situations, and events, which are familiarly unfamiliar, terrifying, or ambivalent, which generates intellectual consternation, and intersects with the aesthetics of anxiety. Freud defines uncanny as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220). It’s the return of the traumatic past, the reenactment of the familiar in the guise of the unfamiliar that arrives with a threat. He discusses the German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch’s previous study of the uncanny, who defined the phenomenon as the fear of the unfamiliar, characterized by intellectual uncertainty. Freud elaborates on this definition, by focusing on the interplay between the two opposite German words *heimlich* and *unheimlich*. The word “home” is intrinsically associated with *heimlich*, it’s something which is concealed and kept out of sight, “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly” (Freud 222). *Unheimlich*, on the contrary, is something, that “ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to life” (Freud 225). *Heimlich*, therefore, has two-tiered paradoxical implications: it’s something familiar but simultaneously kept out of the visual ambit, while *unheimlich* also means something kept out of sight. Therefore, the two apparently contradictory words become synonymous, generating ambiguous connotations and self-contradictions. These two arcs of intellectual uncertainty and semantic synonymy are crucial for the understanding of *Shirin*’s female gaze.

The dawn of the female faces generates a claustrophobic atmosphere, as the “real” spectators cannot comprehend the emergence of their celluloid counterparts. The audiences’ desire to watch a concrete dramatic narrative is subverted by the facial cascade; they appear as the “doubles” or the audiences’ cinematic doppelgangers. This triggers intellectual uncertainty: who are the real audiences? The denizens of the celluloid space, or the persons watching the film in reality? Are the celluloid females piercing the audiences with their gaze, or is it the reverse? Kiarostami effaces the boundary separating reality and fiction, which creates intellectual confusion amid the spectators, and the space of intimacy, described by Grønstad, is translated into an arena of terror. Several of *Shirin*’s actresses are renowned cinematic personalities, like Juliette Binoche, Golshifteh Farahani, Leila Hatami, and Taraneh Alidoosti; they are celebrated across the world for their artistic prowess. But the unusual cinematic treatment makes these familiar faces inexorably unfamiliar, as the audiences try to navigate the dubious gap between fiction and reality, “...there are some lovely Kiarostami touches here too - the beautiful, liquid eyes of the women, many of whom are easily identifiable as actors from other Iranian films, the composure of their expression, the notion that we see it is not just a face but a window to a soul” (Fainaru). The language of

*Shirin*, therefore, transgresses the mundane boundaries of objectivity, and scans the intellectual and emotional topographies of women, which have hitherto been assiduously effaced from the global cinematic discourse. The marriage of the uncanny and the emotional, therefore, inaugurates a new cinematic language for expressing the unheard feminine voice.

Women in the Iranian society have led a sequestered life in accordance with the Islamic codes of conduct in the post-Iranian Revolution phase, since the early 1980s. Their prerogatives of window-shopping, attending picnics and hair salon, underwent denudation after the 1979 revolution, when the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini decreed that all women, irrespective of religion or nationality, had to veil their faces. Under the robust gaze of the patriarchal Symbolic Other, Iranian women lead a life of truncated liberty; they could brandish their jewellery, and unhesitatingly walk down the Tehran streets before the revolution, but the current situation demands them to wear a coat and loosely-fitted headscarves, to comply with the Islamic parameters of feminine decency. Baroness Haleh Afshar, professor of women's studies at the University of York, observes, "But they are still very much within the male domain. The woman would not be allowed into the same room as the men - they would sit in a separate area for prayer, away from the men" (qtd. in BBC News). Women have been barred from attending men's football matches, a topic that has been extensively dissected in Jafar Panahi's film *Offside* (2006). Women's spectatorial role is, therefore, a contested topic in Iran, and the outlines of the men adorning the dark auditorium in *Shirin* indicates, that women audiences in the Iranian theaters have to be chaperoned by male companions. Iranian women have been *heimlich* subjects, with simple and cloistered lives, under the sway of the patriarchal machinery; their faces are protected from the society's penetrating gaze. But *Shirin* decimates this notion, by eliminating the male presence from the cinematic field, and focusing on the women's faces through close-ups. This decomposes the "angel in the house" image of the Iranian women, and instantaneously makes them *unheimlich* subjects, who can subvert the dominant patriarchal/masculine gaze by positing the reverse or the female gaze. They pierce the smokescreen of dictums, and assert their subjectivity, thus reconsolidating the repressed memories of women's liberty in the pre-revolution era, which are abhorrent to the current Iranian administration, which is largely theocratic, chauvinistic, and authoritarian. The cinematic language crafted by Kiarostami celebrates this transition from the *heimlich* to the *unheimlich*, which captures the dawn of the Iranian New Women, who have unshackled themselves from the patriarchal chains, through their unprecedented and uncanny resurfacing from obscurity, and they colonize the patriarchal cinematic discourse with feminine subjectivity, by petrifying the authority.

**The Castrated Audience:** Films are generally perceived as commercial enterprises, or nodes within a capitalist network, and this perception has been bolstered by the Hollywood film industry. "Scopophilia," or the love of looking, has been the dominant trope for film-

making and film-viewing processes around the globe, and it has been vivisected in Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," where she unravels "the way the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured the film form" (Mulvey 14). The absence of a phallus makes a woman embody lack and nothingness, and man gains authority by the virtue of this phallic lacuna, which is coupled with the castration fear. Mulvey observes, that woman "firstly symbolizes the castration threat by the real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic" (14). The primacy of the Name of the Father, in the phallogocentric ecosystem, motivates Hollywood cinema to visually respond to the unconscious patriarchal desires. Audiences play the role of the voyeur, who secretly peeps into the characters' private lives, and derive pleasure by objectifying them, especially the women. This voyeuristic pleasure has been materialized by the presence of the fourth wall, i.e.- the projection screen, which separates the audiences from the actors' fictional realm. The gaze mapping the characters is essentially masculine and heterosexual, since it desubjectivizes and commodifies the women characters. Roland Barthes' observation on the darkness of the movie theatre, which facilitates this "Peeping Tom" attitude, as expounded in his essay "Leaving the Movie Theatre," seems to be pivotal, "Not only is the dark the very substance of reverie (in the pre-hypnoid meaning of the term ); it is also the "color" of a diffused eroticism...the movie house (ordinary model) is a site of availability (even more than cruising), the inoccupation of bodies, which best defines modern eroticism-not that of advertising or strip-tease, but that of the big city" (Barthes 346). Audiences project their sexual desires on the screen, and their voyeuristic drive is satisfied by the exhibition of the female body parts.

Kiarostami subverts this practice, through the establishment of the female gaze. The close-ups of the female faces could easily have been interpreted as a parade of sexual objects, but their soft, watery eyes, staring directly at the camera, benignly throw a political challenge against the discourse of the male gaze; it's reminiscent of the final freeze-frame from Francois Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, where the protagonist, Antoine Doinel, stands on the seashore and stares directly at the audience. His atrocious gaze punctures the projection screen, as if he's accusing the audiences of orchestrating a heinous project that jeopardized his life. *Shirin's* actress, by positing a counter gaze, castrate male gaze's power and hegemonic presence, and tries to reclaim feminine subjectivity by challenging the majoritarian patriarchal film-viewing approach. The counter gaze reorients the women's position in the voyeuristic mechanism; the "real" audiences perceive themselves to be pierced by the actresses, who are attempting to uproot the phallogocentric cinematic discourse and establish a gynocentric one, by reconfiguring the patriarchal unconscious, by halting the attempt to fetishize the actresses' bodies, and summoning the castration fear. The Name of the Father, which is now being colonized by feminine presence, emasculates the audience, "All this involves a 'symbolic castration', in the sense of an acceptance of a 'symbolic' operation in lieu of a 'real' castration" (*The Cahiers*). Jacques Lacan explained, that

“woman is a symptom of a man, in the sense that a woman can only ever enter the psychic economy of men as a fantasy object (a), the cause of their desire” (Evans 223). But *Shirin*'s language translates women from a symptom to the Lacanian Real, which is inscrutable and terrifying.

### **The Cinematic Sorority:**

Shirin and Khosrow's tragic romance is the axis around which the film rotates. The Sasanian king Khosrow's love for the Armenian princess Shirin couldn't finally attain fulfillment, as the story concludes with the couple's tragic death. The majority of the audience breaks into tears as the heroine's life touches a tragic embouchure, but finally, Shirin addresses them from the screen by rupturing the fourth wall. By referring to them as sisters, she asks, “Are you shedding these tears for me, Shirin? Or for the Shirin that hides in each one of you?” (*Shirin* 1:25:35- 1:25:45). Her life was devoid of favour or recognition, and she suffered from the pangs of unrequited love; she finally terminates her life through suicide, “Only a dagger could relieve me from these many years of exhaustion” (*Shirin* 1:26:37- 1:26:45). Her identification with the female audiences, makes her the symbol of universal femininity, she becomes the epitome of women's perpetual suffering inside the oppressive patriarchal order. Her condition not only reflects the humiliation and the torture faced by the Iranian women, but also the predicaments of women by patriarchal and misogynistic societies around the world. Shirin becomes a signifier of the feminine condition, while the female audiences are absorbing her attitude and her distaste towards the oppressive patriarchy. Psychoanalytic film critics, like Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry interpret the film screen “as a mirror through which the spectator can identify himself or herself as a coherent and omnipotent ego. The sense of power that spectatorship provides derives from the spectator's primary identification with the camera itself” (*Film Reference*). This concept is tethered to Jacques Lacan's concept of the Mirror Stage, which discusses a child's misrecognition of his fragmentary body as a whole in the mirror, and his identification with the illusory unity leads to the formation of his infantile ego through an imaginary process. The female audiences, through their identification with Shirin (who dawns as the “ideal ego”), can transcend their fragmentary and decrepit nature of existence induced by the patriarchal Other, and this crystallizes their ego, which is accomplished through their empathetic nexus with Shirin. Though they have largely remained passive and mute, their “identification with the camera provides the spectator with an illusion of unmitigated power over the screen images” (*Film Reference*). This leads to the creation of a cinematic sorority of empathetic females, as they can reclaim their subjectivity and self-worth in the cinematic discourse, and efface the strains of antinarcissism, described by Cixous. Shirin's character bolsters the resignification of cinematic language; women are translated into signifiers from signified, which is colored by their consciousness of being the subjects of patriarchal oppression, which needs to be denigrated.

### Conclusion:

Kiarostami's films of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century are populated with female characters embarked on a quest to find a personal space; besides *Shirin*, films like *Ten* (2002) and *Certified Copy* (2010), explore the theme of women's personal struggles and quest for love, in the confined vehicular space, or on the sun-kissed Parisian streets. However, his earliest films, which were primarily funded by government organizations, depict a striking absence of women. His *Where Is the Friend's Home* (1987) or *A Wedding Suit* (1986) are teeming with young male protagonists, while women have been sidelined. In his essay "Where are Kiarostami's Women?," Iranian film scholar Negar Mottahedeh, "noted the gender difference between Kiarostami's post-2000s films like *Ten* and his earlier work. It's not an accusatory question, really; as Mottahedeh points out, Kiarostami's representation of women in his films is strongly correlated to the censorship rules of the Islamic Republic" (Hassannia). The dawn of the millennium marked the shift in Kiarostami's cinematic oeuvre, as he journeyed from the phallogocentric to the gynocentric domain, and *Shirin* marks the culmination of his attempt to find a cinematic *écriture féminine*, which is characterized by the celebration of feminine subjectivity in the cinematic space, resignification of female's position in the cinematic discourse, and the union between the uncanny and the emotional, which counters the patriarchal hegemony. It marks a significant departure from his earlier films portraying female characters "aligned with symbols of nature and desexualized from typical heterosexual encounters and exchanges - thereby presenting the modest representation of women expected by the government...they are presented incompletely to viewer and male characters alike, and they match the films' lack of narrative closure" (Hassannia). *Shirin*, on the contrary, strategically perforates the Islamic hegemonic laws, by utilizing a novel cinematic language, and diplomatically subverts the governmental parameters. The verbal passiveness of *Shirin*'s actresses might symbolize obsequiousness, but their gaze constitutes their feminine vernacular, which intersects with the vicious gaze of the mythical Medusa; it flummoxes and intimidates the patriarchal stooges, and transforms them into nonplussed stones.

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