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## **Women in Iranian Cinema: Moving Beyond Conventional Legends**

**By Bahar Davary<sup>1</sup>**

**Under the Smoky Roof; (Zire Saghfe Doodi, original title, Pouran Derakhshandeh (director), 111 min., color, Feature film (drama), 2017, Tehran, Iran.**

Iranian cinema has been flourishing since the late '80s with the works of Abbas Kiarostami, Bahram Beyzaie, Tahmineh Milani, Rakhshan Banietamad, Majid Majidi, Asghar Farhadi, Pouran Derakhshandeh, and other internationally renowned filmmakers. Statistics indicate that in the last two decades, there have been a higher percentage of women filmmakers in Iran, in comparison with many western countries. Consequently, the portrayal of women has been one of the strong features of Iranian cinema, some have called this phenomenon a feminist streak. These films include themes such as the depiction of women's inner strength, and work power, (e.g. Bahram Beyzaie's *Bashu: The Little Stranger*, 1989); patriarchy: its oppression and its discontent (e.g. Tahmineh Milani's *Two Women*, 1989); social awareness of various contemporary women's issues, including sexual ethics, abortion, Aids and HIV, etc., (e.g. Rakhshan Banietamad's *Tales*, 2014); sexual abuse and its traumatic effects (e.g. Pouran Derakhshandeh's *Hush! Girls Don't Scream*, 2013) and many others.

Pouran Derakhshandeh's thirteenth feature film, *Zire Saghfe Doodi* (*Under the Smoky Roof*), is a deeply layered, sagaciously written drama. It is as much about forgiveness and restorative justice, as it is about gender relations, polygamy's harm, marital discord, as well as local and international discord. Looking at it more pensively, it is a contemporary interpretation of one of the forgotten stories of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*. The underlying insight of this story can be called the Sohrab complex, where a young woman named Tahmineh devotes her life to her father, and to her son, failing them both.

The film is centered around the marital discord of Shirin and Bahram. Their conflict is a manifestation of a phenomenon known as emotional divorce, (*talaghe 'atefi*), sadly common in many marriages and known to have negative repercussions, far greater than that of an actual legal divorce. This drama effortlessly captures the web of interlocking social, political, economic, and interpersonal relations in contemporary Tehran. It paints a picture of a society where deception can be commonplace, where friendships are transient, addiction is wide-spread, and where many turn to drug-dealing as a means to earn a living, as global economic sanctions, and mismanagements threaten domestic industry and jobs.

*Under the Smoky Roof*, one of Derakhshandeh's best works, is not just another story of one woman's unhappy marriage and depression. It is not just another film about a man's extramarital affair (in its semi-legal form, categorized under polygamy laws within the *shari'a*). It is not even solely concerned about the couples' disconnect from their son, or about a young man's anger and frustration and its causes or effects. The film is, above all, a lesson in problem solving; a wide angle frame on all societal discord and their inter-connection in the bigger web of greater Tehran with its 15 million dwellers. The film has a lot of subtext, and as such, is worth being watched and re-watched. It is this subtext which is the focus of this review.

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One might assume at the outset that this film is centered around gender relations. After all, it does depict the lives of three couples in varying degrees – four, if we count the semi-discreet relation between Bahram and Rana. It is, all in all, a quite fair, and unbiased portrayal of the characters, male and female, young and old. In fact, the exemplary marriage is presented to be that of Shirin’s parents, the oldest couple depicted in this drama. The film does not portray any one person/gender as the victim or as the oppressor, this despite including androcentric comments from Bahram who expressed that he has nothing to learn from a “woman counselor.” A hasty verdict may declare Shirin as a victim of a lustful, and uncaring husband, and an ungrateful son; a lonely woman, who has become invisible in her own home, to her own husband and son, while other references indicate that she is desirable and attractive. Yet, a more careful consideration – and a more focused look at the subtext – reveals that all the major characters of this drama, are both victim and guilty, at the same time.

In this gripping drama, Derakhshandeh’s choice of the wise voice of the film, is that of a young woman, Kiyana. Kiyana’s character (Arman’s “to-be fiancé”), despite weak acting, states arguably the most profound lines of the entire drama. She seeks to resolve their relationship problems at its onset, methodically and with reason and compassion. Derakhshandeh’s choice is commendable and timely, in the aftermath of unprecedented violence against young women in the case of the acid attacks in Isfahan and in Tehran in 2014. At a time when dokhtaran-e khiabane enghelab: Girls of Revolution Street, who removed their headscarves in opposition to mandatory hijab and held it out on a stick in a statuesque manner are called despised (*hagheer*), it is quite apropos to reflect on and to exhibit the wisdom of a generation of girls who are not remaining silent in the face of violence, and at the same time are not responding in like vein, but are seeking, and finding peaceful measures to bring an end to the cycle of violence.

In the first few opening minutes of the film, Kiyana sees the ills of the drug and alcohol-addicted youth at a private party held in the outskirts of Tehran, the kinds of which are common, as a measure to escape scrutiny or arrest by the morality police. Kiyana cogently objects to being among such company and a conflict ensues. She seeks measures to resolve the discord by dialogue, taking action towards solving the problem. Arman, however, is under the impression that all sins, big and small, can be forgiven, simply by making the appropriate compensation without retribution.

To reveal the development of this mentality and its possible causes, the filmmaker uses two allusions; the first is to a case in religious law, and second to a case in secular law. In rationalizing his way of thinking, Arman points to the notion of *diyeh* in Islamic law. In the case of involuntary manslaughter, *diyeh* is a financial compensation made to the victim’s family by the guilty party. His point is that a mistake, even in the case of manslaughter can be forgiven by monetary compensation. The point that is often forgotten is that *diyeh*; monetary compensation is part of the process of retribution, only after the aggressor has sought forgiveness from the victim. The second case, is more universal in context, where the aggressor remains relentlessly unapologetic, in spite of being at fault, by suggesting that simple payment for the damages are sufficient retribution. Both cases are acceptable means of retribution in Iranian society, and, the latter is acceptable in most societies. Yet, Kiyana, refuses to accept a gift in lieu of a meaningful apology. She takes a further step in solving the problem by arranging a meeting for couple’s therapy. In my view, this is one of the highest points of the film, where Kiyana points to the philosophy of forgiveness. The young woman declares that retribution and forgiveness must go far beyond the legal compensations allocated to it in both religious and secular law. She points out, to the deeper meaning of retribution and forgiveness; i.e., cultivation of virtue, and restoration of

broken relationships. This is an important reference to the significance of restorative justice that is so highly needed not only in contemporary Iranian society, but on a worldwide scale.

The frustrations of a young man are depicted in the film; frustrations resulting from the limitations of his relationship with her, their inability to be intimate before marriage, and his inability to ask for her hand. His parents' long-lasting discord and emotional divorce, is exasperated by his father's discreet marital affair and by his mother's retreat into antidepressants and diet pills, he takes it out, perhaps unintentionally, on his beloved fiancé.

Bahram may have found a way to drown his unhappiness in the company of a loving younger woman Rana, taken as a second wife (although not a full legal wife). In spite of this, he too is a victim. His factory is going bankrupt as the line of production coming to a halt, as a result of economic sanctions and the "flourishing" of the import business. He is dreading the push to lay off all of his workers, knowing fully well that many will end up destitute. He has long felt rejected by his wife, who found comfort in the unconditional love of their son (at least, until the time he grew up to be an adult.) She wrote Bahram out of her emotional attention shortly after their wedding, in the early months of her pregnancy. Knowing how frustrated he was, she enjoyed being only a mother; devoted solely to her child. Rana, (Bahram's second and –secret- wife) is portrayed as efficient, elegant, thoughtful, warm, and loving, despite her entering into the semi-legal marriage with an already married man, breaks many stereotypes about those who enter into such marriages. She is repeatedly denied her desire to live alongside her husband, as he divides his time between the two households, as well as running a factory in the midst of a crisis. Her longing to have a child is viewed by Bahram as treason to their love (most likely peppered by his experience with Shirin and their son). Her ultimate decision shows agency and courage in the face of a difficult situation.

They are all victims, and they all share part of the guilt, but their stories do not have to end in victimization and in guilt-marking. The film posits that restorative justice is possible, and that our choices and actions do make a difference, that healing can begin when the perpetrators acknowledge their wrong doing, and express guilt and remorse for their action.

The enigmatic point of the drama, which may have easily escaped many, is when the counselor hints at Shirin's Sohrab complex. In a quite calm manner, as the two women sip tea, the counselor makes a passing reference to the tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab (without going into any level of detail). A few seconds later, as if by mistake, she calls Arman, "Sohrab"! Many who view the film may have not taken note of it at all, even if they had watched it more than once.

The tragedy of Rostam and Sohrab is the most renowned story of Ferdowsi's 10th century epic, *Shahnameh*. It tells the tale of a father and son, both exceptional heroes, who encountered each other for the first and only time in the battlefield. This encounter resulted in the father (Rostam) killing his son (Sohrab). What most people do not know about this story is that Sohrab's mother, Tahmineh, was not really in love with Rostam. She was solely enamored by Rostam's fortitude and might. As a young girl, her only wish was to be wedded to Rostam, the legendary hero of ancient Iran, whose fame had reached her land and beyond. Her ultimate desire was to bear Rostam's son. She wished to sacrifice herself, so that her father, the ruler of Samangan could have a hero to call his own, because as her father had said: "a ruler without a hero, has no power." Tahmineh and Rostam's marriage only lasted one night, and that at the persuasive request of Tahmineh, knowing fully well that Rostam would depart in the morning, never to return. She spent the best part of her life alone, raising a son, a strong hero, for her father, only to be killed by his own father.

In Ferdowsi's epic, Tahmineh's sole life-purpose was her son, Sohrab, who led a tragic end. Derakhshandeh's character is not bound to meet the same tragic end. Shirin may have taken a page from the legend of Tahmineh, but she is not to emulate her to the end. In the last scene of the film, she stands outside the police station (edareye agahi, literally "the awareness office"), as she gazes towards new horizons. Derakhshandeh's didactic drama sheds light on the notion that women can and should turn betrayal and hurt into growth and self-discovery. It encourages women to rewrite their narratives, moving beyond the existing religio-national myths and legends.