



Representation of Women in Iranian Cinema: Jafar Panâhi Films

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of women in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema through close analyses of Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* (2000), *The Mirror* (1997), and *Offside* (2006). Moving beyond interpretations that frame Iranian women primarily through censorship and victimhood, the study argues that Panâhi constructs cinematic environments in which gender emerges as a contested performance shaped by spatial regulation, institutional control, and everyday negotiation. The analysis is grounded in Stuart Hall's constructivist theory of representation, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power. Through semiotic and spatial analysis of key scenes, the article examines how female characters navigate regimes of visibility, mobility, and authority within tightly regulated public spaces. Particular attention is given to spatial confinement, meta-cinematic rupture, and cross-gender disguise as narrative strategies that expose the constructed nature of gender norms. The findings demonstrate that Panâhi's films do not merely depict women as passive subjects of ideological control. Instead, they portray female bodies as sites where regulatory power and performative resistance intersect. By transforming spatial restriction into a cinematic critique of authority, the films reveal how visibility, movement, and embodiment function as arenas of gendered negotiation. By situating Panâhi's cinema within feminist film theory and spatial analyses of power, this study offers a theoretically grounded reassessment of women's agency in contemporary Iranian cinema. It contributes to broader debates on representation, visibility, and gendered space.

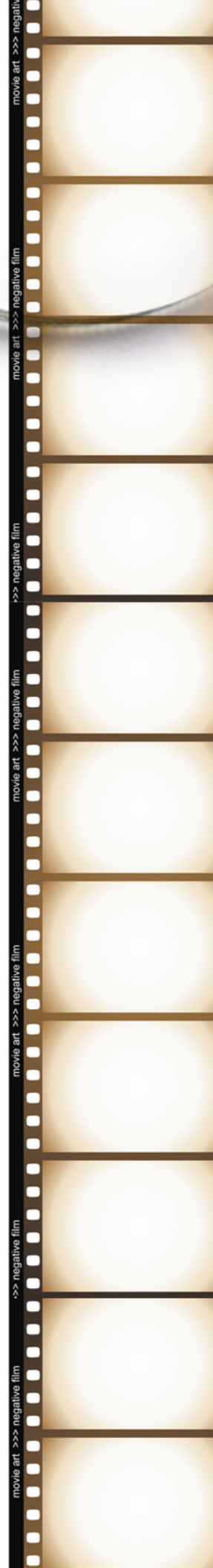
Keywords: Iranian cinema; representation; gender performativity; visibility; disciplinary space; Jafar Panâhi



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Representation of Women in Iranian Cinema: Jafar Panâhi Films

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Introduction

This paper is dedicated to Mahsa Amini and our Iranian sisters.

“Woman, life, freedom!”

The representation of women in Iranian cinema has long occupied a central place in film and gender scholarship. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, debates on Iranian cinema have largely focused on censorship regimes, veiling regulations, Islamic codes of modesty, and the marginalization of female bodies within a state-regulated visual culture. Many studies have examined how institutional constraints shape cinematic narratives and visual strategies, often emphasizing the limitations imposed on female representation. Within this framework, post-revolutionary Iranian cinema is frequently interpreted as a space in which women are either rendered invisible, symbolically purified, or constrained by ideological codes governing gendered visibility.

While these analyses have been crucial for understanding the institutional structure of Iranian cinema, they often risk reducing female representation to a narrative of victimhood or absence. Such perspectives foreground restriction but tend to overlook how filmmakers simultaneously construct cinematic spaces in which women negotiate, reinterpret, and

occasionally challenge those restrictions. In particular, Jafar Panâhi's films demonstrate that the representation of women in Iranian cinema cannot be understood solely through the lens of censorship. Instead, his films portray environments in which gendered bodies move through complex systems of regulation, spatial control, and social surveillance.

Panâhi's cinema repeatedly places female characters within situations where their visibility, mobility, and access to public space are tightly regulated. However, rather than presenting women merely as passive objects of authority, his films depict how everyday gestures, improvisations, and tactical adaptations allow characters to navigate these restrictions. Public spaces such as streets, stadium entrances, buses, and institutional interiors become sites where gender norms are enacted, negotiated, and occasionally destabilized. Through this cinematic strategy, Panâhi transforms ordinary environments into arenas where broader structures of gendered power become visible.

This article argues that Panâhi's films stage gender as a contested performance within regulated spatial environments. Drawing on Stuart Hall's constructivist theory of representation, Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, and Michel Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, the study conceptualizes female embodiment as a site where cultural meaning, institutional regulation, and everyday practices intersect. From this perspective,

cinematic representation does not simply reflect social reality; rather, it actively constructs and negotiates meanings related to gender, authority, and social order.

Hall's theory of representation emphasizes that cultural meanings are produced through discursive practices rather than passively reflected in images. Within this framework, film becomes a powerful site for the construction and circulation of social understandings of gender and power. Butler's concept of performativity further suggests that gender should be understood not as a fixed identity but as a series of repeated acts shaped by social norms. Gestures, clothing, movement, and bodily comportment become performative expressions through which gender identities are continuously reproduced or disrupted. At the same time, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power introduces a spatial dimension to these dynamics by demonstrating how modern systems of control operate through the organization of bodies within regulated environments. Institutions, surveillance structures, and spatial boundaries function as mechanisms for enforcing and internalizing social norms.

By bringing these theoretical perspectives together, this study examines how Panâhi's films depict the interaction between gendered bodies, spatial regulation, and regimes of visibility. The analysis focuses on three films: *The Circle* (2000), *The Mirror* (1997), and *Offside* (2006). These films were selected because each foregrounds female characters

navigating different forms of spatial restriction, ranging from urban mobility and institutional environments to gender-segregated public events. Through semiotic and spatial analysis of key scenes, the study explores how cinematic representation constructs gendered negotiations of visibility, authority, and access.

Rather than portraying women as passive figures trapped within ideological systems, Panâhi's films reveal how gender norms are continuously produced, contested, and renegotiated through everyday interactions with institutional structures. By examining how cinematic space organizes visibility, movement, and bodily performance, this article offers a theoretically grounded reassessment of women's representation in contemporary Iranian cinema. In doing so, it contributes to feminist film theory and media studies by highlighting how gendered authority operates through spatial regulation and how cinematic narratives can expose the instability of such regulatory systems.

Literature Review

Scholarship on Iranian cinema has long emphasized the complex relationship between film production and political regulation following the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Early studies highlighted how filmmakers navigated censorship regimes through symbolic storytelling, allegory, and indirect narrative strategies. Naficy's extensive historical work demonstrates that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema developed a distinctive aesthetic shaped by institutional

restrictions, which encouraged filmmakers to employ minimalism, metaphor, and layered narrative structures (Naficy, 2012). Similarly, Mottahedeh (2008) argues that Iranian cinema frequently constructs allegorical narratives that indirectly address political authority and social regulation.

Within this context, the representation of women has been one of the most debated topics in Iranian film studies. Scholars such as Dönmez-Colin (2006) and Ghorbankarimi (2015) have examined how female characters are positioned within ideological frameworks shaped by religious norms, legal structures, and cultural expectations. Much of this literature has focused on how women's bodies are regulated visually through dress codes, spatial segregation, and narrative constraints.

However, more recent scholarship has shifted attention from censorship alone toward the dynamics of visibility, mobility, and negotiation within cinematic representation. Rather than portraying women solely as victims of ideological control, contemporary studies emphasize how Iranian films depict complex interactions between agency and restriction. For instance, Farahmand (2002) highlights how post-revolutionary Iranian cinema frequently constructs narratives in which female characters navigate social limitations through everyday practices of adaptation and resistance.

These discussions intersect with broader theoretical debates in media and cultural studies. Hall's constructivist theory of representation conceptualizes meaning as produced through discursive practices rather than passively reflected in images (Hall, 1997). From this perspective, cinematic representation becomes a site where cultural meanings about gender and power are continuously constructed and contested.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity further expands this framework by suggesting that gender is not a stable identity but a repeated set of stylized acts shaped by social norms (Butler, 1990; Butler, 1993). Acts such as disguise, bodily comportment, and mobility can therefore reveal the performative nature of gender categories.

In addition, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power provides a spatial dimension to these debates. In modern societies, power operates through the organization of bodies in space, regulating movement, visibility, and access (Foucault, 1977). Urban spaces, institutions, and surveillance structures thus function as mechanisms for enforcing social norms.

Recent media scholarship has also emphasized the politics of visibility in contemporary visual culture. Brighenti (2010) conceptualizes visibility as a social field in which recognition, power, and exclusion are negotiated, while Couldry (2012) argues that media representations play a crucial role in constructing social reality by determining who can appear and under what

conditions.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives with scholarship on Iranian cinema, this study examines how Panâhi's films depict gendered negotiations of space, visibility, and authority. Rather than presenting women as passive figures under ideological repression, the films construct complex spatial environments in which gender norms are performed, contested, and reconfigured. Several scholars have also emphasized Panâhi's distinctive approach to everyday resistance and spatial negotiation in Iranian cinema. Naficy (2012) notes that post-revolutionary Iranian filmmakers frequently employ restricted spaces and everyday encounters to expose the mechanisms of social regulation. Similarly, Farahmand (2002) argues that Panâhi's narratives often portray ordinary situations in which characters tactically navigate institutional constraints rather than confront them directly. These perspectives suggest that Panâhi's cinema is particularly suited for examining how gendered bodies interact with spatial restrictions and regimes of visibility. Building on these discussions, the present study interprets Panâhi's films as cinematic environments in which gender is performed, regulated, and negotiated through everyday spatial practices.

Scholars of Iranian cinema have frequently emphasized Panâhi's distinctive ability to reveal structures of power through ordinary social situations. Naficy (2001) argues that Iranian

filmmakers working under restrictive political conditions often develop subtle narrative strategies in which everyday encounters become sites of social critique. Within this framework, Panâhi's films foreground marginal spaces, minor conflicts, and routine interactions in order to expose how regulatory systems shape everyday life.

Similarly, Mottahedeh (2008) notes that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema frequently employs allegorical storytelling and spatial metaphors to address political authority without confrontation. Panâhi's films exemplify this strategy by placing characters within regulated environments such as streets, buses, checkpoints, and stadium entrances, where institutional control becomes visible through routine practices. These spatial encounters allow the films to explore how power operates through ordinary interactions rather than explicit ideological statements. Similarly, Mottahedeh (2008) notes that post-revolutionary Iranian cinema frequently employs allegorical storytelling and spatial metaphors to address political authority without confrontation. Panâhi's films exemplify this strategy by placing characters within regulated environments such as streets, buses, checkpoints, and stadium entrances, where institutional control becomes visible through routine practices. These spatial encounters allow the films to explore how power operates through ordinary interactions rather than explicit ideological statements.

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology grounded in critical visual analysis. Rather than treating the films as narrative texts alone, the analysis conceptualizes them as spatial-discursive configurations in which gendered embodiment is regulated, negotiated, and performed. Within the analytical strategy of this study, the three theoretical perspectives operate in a complementary manner. Hall's constructivist theory of representation provides the conceptual basis for interpreting how cinematic images produce cultural meaning. Butler's concept of performativity functions as an analytical lens for examining bodily gestures, disguise, and everyday acts through which gender is enacted. Foucault's notion of disciplinary power, in turn, allows the analysis to interpret spatial arrangements such as institutions, checkpoints, and surveillance environments as mechanisms through which gendered regulation is organized. Together, these frameworks enable analysis of how meaning, embodiment, and spatial power intersect in Panâhi's cinematic narratives.

Film analysis is particularly suitable for examining cinematic representation because visual narratives encode ideological meanings through spatial composition, framing, and performative gestures. The study focuses on three films by Jafar Panâhi: *The Circle* (2000), *The Mirror* (1997), and *Offside* (2006). These films were selected purposively for three reasons:

Each centrally features female protagonists.

Each foregrounds spatial restriction as a narrative driver.

Together, they span a decade of Panâhi's filmmaking, allowing observation of thematic continuity and variation.

The aim is not comparative generalization but theoretical elaboration. The films are treated as analytical cases through which the intersection of gender, space, and disciplinary power can be examined.

The analysis integrates three methodological layers:

Drawing on Barthes' distinction between denotative and connotative meaning, key scenes were examined to identify: Visible spatial arrangements, bodily positioning, gestural codes, costume and disguise, and interactions with authority figures. Denotation captures what is shown; connotation interprets how these elements construct gendered meaning within ideological frameworks.

In line with Foucault's notion of disciplinary space, particular attention was given to enclosures (prisons, stadium perimeters, bus interiors), thresholds (checkpoints, gates, barriers), movement restrictions, and surveillance structures. Spatial patterns were coded to identify how cinematic framing organizes bodies within regulated environments.

Inspired by Butler's theory of performativity, the analysis isolates moments where gender is enacted, cited, or disrupted. These include:

Cross-gender disguise (*Offside*)

Refusal to perform scripted identity (*The Mirror*)

Negotiation of mobility (*The Circle*)

Acts of smoking, arguing, and persistence in a restricted space

These acts were interpreted as iterative performances within regulatory systems rather than expressions of fixed identity.

Scenes were selected for their presence of gendered spatial restrictions, interactions between female characters and authority, moments of visibility/invisibility tension, and performative disruption of normative codes. Scene selection followed a purposive analytical strategy. Rather than sampling randomly, the analysis focused on scenes that most clearly illustrate the interaction between gender performance, spatial regulation, and institutional authority. Scenes were therefore selected when they contained explicit spatial restrictions, encounters between female characters and regulatory figures such as police or guards, or moments in which gender norms are negotiated through bodily gestures, disguise, or everyday resistance. This approach allows the analysis to focus on analytically dense moments that reveal the mechanisms of gendered regulation within the films.

Each selected scene was coded across three axes:

1. Spatial condition (open/closed/threshold/surveillance)
2. Power relation (institutional/peer/collective/ambivalent)

3. Gender performance type (compliance/negotiation/disguise/disruption)

The goal was not statistical frequency but interpretive depth. Coding served as an analytical tool to structure interpretation rather than to produce quantitative claims.

Given the interpretive nature of visual analysis, the study acknowledges the researcher's role in meaning production. The theoretical framework functions as an analytical lens rather than a neutral observational tool. Interpretations are grounded in textual evidence and supported by established feminist and Foucauldian scholarship to ensure analytical coherence.

Film Analysis

The Circle (2000) Film Analysis

The Circle (2000) is widely considered one of the most significant films addressing women's experiences in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema. This film draws attention to its structure, which focuses on memory through the concept of identity. The gender discrimination that exists in society is portrayed by going beyond the discourse that is dominant in society, accompanied by the narrative established over the female identity in the film. The film tells the story of five women with distinct characters but the same fate. The fact that the film's story is based not only on one woman but also on many women elevates it to an artistic dimension. In the film, the past and the present are designed through each female character. When viewed semiotically in terms of denotation and connotation, some of the female characters represent

memory, and the past, and the other part represents the reconstruction of memory, which is the present. Panâhi's narrative strategy has frequently been interpreted as a form of everyday realism that exposes social regulation through ordinary situations. As Naficy (2012) observes, Iranian filmmakers often rely on seemingly simple narratives and constrained spaces to reveal broader social tensions. In this sense, Panâhi's cinema transforms routine urban encounters into cinematic sites where structures of gendered authority become visible.

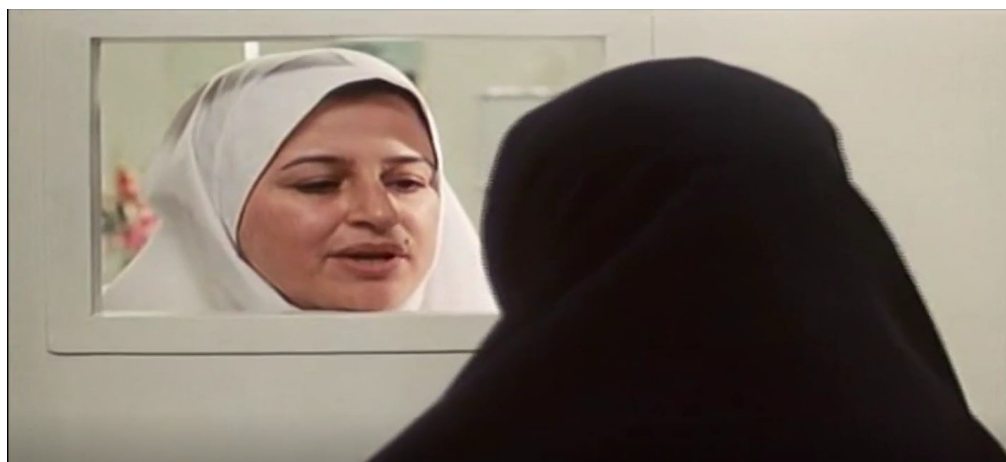


Figure 1: Nurse and Mother.

Solmaz Golami, one of the film's most important female characters, gives birth to a girl in prison. The film starts with Solmaz's birth scene. However, the woman's face is not shown throughout the film. In the film's first scene, the dialogue between the nurse and Solmaz's mother, and between Solmaz's mother and the nurse, makes it clear that the baby is a girl. Through this opening scene, Panâhi foregrounds the gendered expectations surrounding female birth and situates the narrative within the broader social structures that regulate women's lives

in Iranian society. One of the most important themes of the film is the portrayal of Solmaz and her mother's feelings, such as pain, fear, uneasiness, and helplessness, in this scene. In the first part of the film, where the director Panâhi mentions the story of Solmaz, the director aims to show the audience the suffering of the women most affected by the revolution and to confront them with their past. Here, in a literal sense, the film expresses the fear and uneasiness women experience, as well as the oppression and pain they have endured from the past to the present.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	A nurse informs the grandmother that the newborn baby is a girl.	The dialogue reveals the child's gender immediately after birth.
Spatial configuration	The scene takes place inside a hospital ward where female bodies are medically and institutionally regulated.	The hospital functions as a disciplinary institution in which gender is bureaucratically classified.
Performative gesture	The grandmother reacts with anxiety and disappointment.	Gender expectations are reproduced through everyday emotional responses rather than explicit ideology.
Visibility regime	The mother's face is not shown clearly.	The partial invisibility of the mother symbolically reflects the marginal position of women within patriarchal social structures.
Interpretive meaning	Gender becomes socially meaningful from the moment of birth.	The scene establishes the film's broader critique of gendered regulation within Iranian society.

Table 1: The Circle (2000), the dialogue between the nurse and the mother.

Another important female character of the film is Arizu. With the character of Arizu, the director takes the woman out of her former helpless, passive appearance and gives her a new

look that highlights her active, strong aspects in line with today's conditions. The scenes in the film where Arizu, who escaped from prison, argues with the men who tease them on the street, smoke comfortably in the middle of the street despite the ban, escapes from the prison together, her friend Nergis and tries to calm her down when she is exhibiting a hasty attitude, and seeks loans from her friends without giving up even though they have no money, are indicators of this situation. With Arizu, Panâhi brings to light the bad memories women have had, helps them come to terms with them, and thus transforms those memories.



Figure 2: Arizu.

Another character in the film is Nergis, who escaped from prison with Arizu. Nergis has a very different character from Arizu. Panâhi refers to the past by showing that there are also women who fear rebelling against the patriarchal order of society, as in the character of Nergis, and therefore remain silent. This is why the character Nergis in the film is portrayed as a timid, uneasy woman who avoids speaking to men, despite having escaped from prison.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Arizu smokes openly on the street despite social prohibitions.	The action appears as a casual everyday gesture.
Spatial configuration	The street functions as a male-dominated public space.	Women's presence in such spaces is socially contested and monitored.
Performative gesture	Smoking becomes an act of defiance.	The gesture disrupts expected norms of modest female behavior.
Visibility regime	The camera frames Arizu centrally within the street environment.	Her visibility challenges the gendered ownership of public space.
Interpretive meaning	These everyday gestures illustrate how limited forms of agency emerge through tactical negotiation within regulatory structures rather than through confrontation with authority.	Gender norms are revealed as socially enforced performances rather than natural identities.

Table 2: *The Circle* (2000), Arizu smoking on the street.



Figure 3: Arizu and Nergis.

At this point, unlike Arizu, who represents the reconstruction of memory, Nergis is the character representing memory in the film. From a semiotic point of view, the cowardly and

silent character of Nargis in the literal sense expresses the position of women in Iranian society in a connotative sense.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Two women run after escaping from prison.	Their physical movement suggests urgency and fear.
Spatial configuration	The urban street functions as an extension of the prison environment.	Public space becomes a site of surveillance and control.
Performative gesture	Arizu appears confident, while Nargis is anxious and silent.	Different modes of negotiating gendered restrictions emerge.
Visibility regime	The women remain at risk of detection by authorities.	Visibility itself becomes a risk within disciplinary spatial structures.
Interpretive meaning	Female mobility is fragmented and precarious.	The contrast between the characters illustrates diverse responses to patriarchal constraints.

Table 3: *The Circle* (2000), Arizu and Nargis, after the escape scene.



Figure 4: Pari and Munir.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Two women meet and discuss Pari's pregnancy problem.	The conversation revolves around secrecy and fear.
Spatial configuration	The scene occurs in a semi-private domestic space.	Domestic space becomes a temporary refuge from public surveillance.
Performative gesture	Pari insists on finding a solution despite social risks.	Her persistence demonstrates agency within restrictive conditions.
Visibility regime	The interaction occurs away from male authority figures.	Female solidarity temporarily reshapes the politics of visibility.
Interpretive meaning	The scene emphasizes collective coping strategies among women.	Negotiation rather than open resistance becomes the primary survival strategy.

Table 4: The Circle (2000), Reunion of Pari and Munir.

Another important character of the film is Fereṣteh (Pari). Like the other characters, Pari is on the run. With Pari's story, the director not only deals with the past of women but also brings the woman to the present with their new identity by revealing Pari's strong, challenging, resistant, and unyielding side. The fact that Pari, who escaped from prison, became pregnant because of forbidden intercourse, and that a woman cannot have both abortion and birth of a common-law child under Iran's laws, trying to solve this issue without anyone knowing, reveals the painful past of the character. However, the fact that the woman searches for a while and finally finds her friend Munir, whom she sees as the only person who can solve this problem and whom she has not seen for a long time, is one of the important scenes that emphasize the woman's struggle and strength. In this scene, Panâhi strips the woman of her past image as the

“other” and the passive one, and brings her together with the new image she wishes to have today. From a semiotic perspective, Pari conveys the literal difficulties she has experienced. On the other hand, she presents the traditional Iranian woman as someone afraid and hiding what she has endured, and the new identity of the woman as someone who does not give up after facing those difficulties.

The character of Elham in the film appears to be a woman who marries a doctor she met at the hospital where she worked shortly after her release from prison, but she hides her past. Elham, who cannot help Pari, who is waiting for help, fears that her husband will learn about her past. She is a character who does not dare confront her past and is very satisfied with her life. At this point, it is necessary to include De Beauvoir's views on this issue. According to de Beauvoir, women are seduced by the perceived advantages of being protected objects. These advantages come much more easily than taking responsibility for one's own life (Donovan, 2015, p. 236). De Beauvoir's view mentioned above is supported by the fact that Elham, who married a doctor who was in a very good position in society, put her past under the control of her husband and did not even help her friend Pari, who was in a difficult situation and was waiting for her help because of fear. At this point, it can be said that Elham, who is an important

part of the film's narration, represents memory, as it embraces the patriarchal order that dominates society.



Figure 5: Pari and Elham.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Elham refuses to help her friend because she fears her husband's reaction.	The refusal is framed as a personal decision.
Spatial configuration	The domestic environment is structured around patriarchal authority.	Marriage functions as a disciplinary social institution.
Performative gesture	Elham prioritizes social respectability over solidarity.	Gender norms are internalized and reproduced through everyday choices.
Visibility regime	Elham seeks to hide her past from her husband.	Respectable femininity depends on controlled visibility.
Interpretive meaning	Patriarchal power operates through self-regulation.	Women participate in reproducing social constraints.

Table 5: *The Circle* (2000) – Pari and Elham.



Figure 6: Mojgan.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Mojgan appears with visible makeup and expressive clothing.	Her appearance contrasts with normative modest dress codes.
Spatial configuration	She is shown inside a police vehicle surrounded by male officers.	The vehicle becomes a mobile disciplinary space.
Performative gesture	Mojgan remains calm and continues smoking.	Her attitude challenges the authority of the situation.
Visibility regime	Her appearance attracts attention from both police and spectators.	Visibility becomes a site of confrontation with social norms.
Interpretive meaning	Mojgan embodies an alternative feminine identity.	The character exposes the instability of socially imposed gender codes.

Table 6: *The Circle* (2000), Mojgan.

One of the most important and notable characters in the film is Mojgan. Mojgan, who lives as a prostitute in Iran, appears as the most contradictory character in the film with her fancy clothes, lipstick, and hair that can be seen under the headscarf. The woman, who draws attention with her dismissive attitude, surprises the audience with her fearless stance, especially in the scene in which the police catch her. Mojgan's indifference to society's patriarchal structure and her fearless attitude place her among the film's characters who represent today. While the woman is being taken to be questioned, she remains quite calm and even smokes without hesitation among many men, although it is forbidden inside the vehicle. From a semiotic point of view, while she expresses a character distinct from the traditional Iranian woman through her ornate, unconventional dress, she saves the woman from her painful past. She places her in a memory she reconstructs within today's conditions, with her new identity. In this way, she glorifies the female identity in the memory she has transformed. Despite the past that victimizes and marginalizes women in Iran, she places women in a stronger and freer position in the memory she reconstructs through this film and changes the perception of women in the past. Radical Feminist Burris likewise argues that women should be organized to liberate their own culture (Donovan, 2015, pp. 271-272). From a theoretical perspective, Mojgan's character can also be interpreted through the intersection of visibility, performativity, and disciplinary space. Her conspicuous appearance and confident behavior position her body as a

highly visible presence within a regulatory environment dominated by male authority. Drawing on Brighenti's notion of visibility, this heightened exposure transforms her body into a site where social norms are both enforced and contested. At the same time, Mojgan's gestures, such as smoking, maintaining composure in the police vehicle, and openly displaying her appearance, can be understood through Butler's concept of performativity. These acts reveal gender not as a fixed identity but as a stylized performance negotiated within restrictive conditions. Finally, the police vehicle and the surrounding officers constitute what may be described, following Foucault, as a mobile disciplinary space in which surveillance and authority operate through spatial containment. Mojgan's calm defiance within this environment exposes the instability of these regulatory structures and highlights how visibility itself becomes a terrain of negotiation.

The Mirror (1997) Film Analysis

The Mirror (1997) is Panâhi's film that won the Golden Leopard award at the Locarno Film Festival. The film tells the story of Mina, a little girl who goes to primary school in Tehran, and what she experiences and sees along the roads she takes home when her mother does not pick her up after school. The film consists of two different parts. Mina starts her journey by boarding the bus; she thinks it is the one she takes with her mother every morning. The bus driver is the one he sees with his mother in the morning. When the bus arrives at the last stop,

the driver says it is going in the opposite direction and puts Mina on Abbas's bus, another driver going in that direction. The bus assistant, unaware of the incident, takes Mina off the bus.



Figure 7: Mina.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Mina waits alone in the schoolyard for her mother.	The scene presents a child in a moment of uncertainty.
Spatial configuration	The school functions as an institutional environment governing children's movement.	The child must wait within the rules of institutional time and order.
Performative gesture	Mina appears anxious and repeatedly looks around.	Emotional expressions communicate vulnerability.
Visibility regime	Adults observe the child from a distance.	Children's presence in public space remains dependent on adult authority.
Interpretive meaning	The scene establishes themes of dependence and surveillance.	Institutional environments structure childhood mobility and autonomy.

Table 7: *The Mirror* (1997) Mina is waiting for her mother .

The second part of the film begins with little Mina, who, despite persuasion, refuses to act and decides to "really" go home. She changes her clothes and continues her journey more

determinedly and knowingly. As a matter of fact, it is difficult to play the role of a child who can hardly find her way home, and to show her arm as if it is broken, and to go to a lower class than the one she studied in. This turn in the second part awakens the audience and suggests that the film continues to employ improvisational techniques and talents.



Figure 8: Mina's journey.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Mina asks strangers how to reach her house.	The girl interacts with unfamiliar adults in public spaces.
Spatial configuration	Tehran's streets appear crowded and disorienting.	The urban environment becomes a space of uncertainty.
Performative gesture	Mina insists on finding her way on her own.	Her persistence signals emerging agency.
Visibility regime	The child becomes visible to many strangers.	Visibility produces both vulnerability and potential assistance.
Interpretive meaning	The scene reflects a child negotiating an unfamiliar space.	Urban mobility is framed as a learning process shaped by social interaction.

Table 8: *The Mirror* (1997). Mina is trying to find her home.

The mirror is another aspect frequently emphasized in Kiarostami's cinema, in which children embody the symbolism of universal integration in childhood. *The Mirror (1997)* is one of the most experimental works not only in Iranian cinema but also in the history of cinema. The reason for this is Mina's words in the middle of the film, *"I am tired of the plaster on my arm and the clothes I am wearing, I do not want to play..."* Mina leaves the film. In the rest of the film, Mina is watched as a 'film-within-a-film' through the camera's eyes, where she hears her own voice thanks to the microphone on her and is secretly followed. The fictional reality created in the first half of the film becomes a recording of reality in the second half. This sudden intervention, like fiction, offers the audience new "forms of seeing", and this time Mina tries to find her home with her real identity. Either way, the goal is to get home, and the streets of Tehran are overcrowded.

Mina's reactions, such as *"I do not tie my scarf like that. I do not have a plaster on my arm"* marks the transition from naturalistic acting to a documentary with an experimental approach in Iranian Cinema. However, the results obtained are not far from the poetic reality. This situation is directly related to the selection of amateur actors from life in the representation of children. When Mina is left in the city square in real life, she will have a hard time finding her way home and will approach the event with the naivete of a child, saying to people who do not know her, "You tell me the way to my house, and I will go myself." Despite its differences,

the film generally carries the typical features of Iranian Cinema, such as the use of natural light, natural space, and real time. From a theoretical perspective, Mina's refusal to continue acting also reveals the performative and constructed nature of social identity. By removing the props that define her fictional role, Mina disrupts the cinematic performance expected from her. This moment can be interpreted through Butler's notion of performativity, as it exposes how identities are sustained through repeated acts and social expectations. At the same time, the film's continued tracking of Mina through hidden microphones and observational camerawork introduces a dynamic of surveillance reminiscent of Foucauldian disciplinary space. The city becomes a field of observation where the child's movements are monitored and recorded, transforming the urban environment into a quasi-documentary space of visibility and control.

Offside (2006) Film Analysis

Panâhi's narrative approach suggests that restrictions can be navigated through improvisation and everyday tactics. *Offside (2006)* tells the thrilling, frightening story of women who attend football matches disguised as men. This documentary-style film is the director's first film to feature comedy elements. With this film, Panâhi succeeds in reaching wider audiences, reminding them of Ken Loach with its sarcastic narrative, handheld digital camera work, and amateur actors.



Figure 9: A woman entering the football play.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Women attempt to enter the stadium disguised as men.	Disguise becomes a practical strategy.
Spatial configuration	The stadium gate functions as a controlled checkpoint.	Gender restrictions structure public entertainment space.
Performative gesture	Women imitate male behaviors and clothing.	Gender appears as a performative surface rather than a fixed identity.
Visibility regime	Officials inspect spectators entering the stadium.	Access to public space is determined through visual verification.
Interpretive meaning	Disguise reveals the constructed nature of gender categories.	Institutional rules enforce gender boundaries through surveillance.

Table 9: *Offside* (2006), Football play scene.

Offside (2006) is also reminiscent of the film "Delta" in its female protagonists, which embodies all the cinematic codes of Panâhi's cinema. The film tells the tragicomic story of female fans who tried to enter the Iran national match against Bahrain in the 2006 World Cup

qualifiers. The women who tried to enter the match by painting their faces in the colors of the Iranian flag and hiding under hats were noticed by officials, arrested, and kept outside the stadium. The film progresses in real time throughout the international match. Like the women outside the stadium, the spectators cannot enter the match for a moment. The progress and score of the match can be seen in the voices from inside and the excited statements of the young guards. Over time, the situation becomes quite funny, and the young guards - albeit unconsciously - take the women's side and become part of another game being played outside the stadium. The film ends with the women who were taken to the police station by car, taking advantage of the match celebrations and mixing with the crowd in the square. As a unifying factor, everyone, including the young guards, comes together in the enthusiastic crowd formed by the "national match" victory; the regime, which is not there, is represented by the young guards with their authority and prohibitions, and is offside.

When viewed semiotically, in terms of denotation and connotation, Panâhi reveals the unifying dimension of football; on the other hand, he shows the absurdity created by policies that "marginalize" women and restrict their freedom.



Figure 10: Guards and female fans.

Analytical Dimension	Observation	Interpretation
Denotative level	Female fans are detained outside the stadium by young soldiers.	The women remain physically close but excluded.
Spatial configuration	The stadium perimeter functions as a liminal zone.	The boundary marks the division between inclusion and exclusion.
Performative gesture	The detained women argue with the guards.	Verbal negotiation becomes a strategy of resistance.
Visibility regime	The women can hear the match but cannot see it.	Visibility is constructed as a privilege granted by authority.
Interpretive meaning	The scene highlights gendered exclusion from public participation.	Collective celebration temporarily destabilizes disciplinary control.

Table 10: *Offside* (2006), Guards and Female fans scene.

Although Panâhi insisted in all his interviews that he did not make political cinema, expressing his reaction and anger towards Iran's current system with a more humanistic and ironic perspective, his films are political both because he exposes the absurdity, ridiculousness, and unacceptable attitude of the authority to the face of the regime and because of the position

of his camera. He portrays the Revolutionary Guards, police officers who represent authority, as the first to volunteer to shake up the rigid authoritarian structure. It is the young guards who ask Peri to dial the number of the person they will call in the film *The Mirror* (1997), and can establish the best dialogue with the female fans outside the stadium in the film *Offside* (2006). Finally, Panâhi's attitude toward filming is unifying, even when the regime stands ready and omnipresent, with all its evils. It can be said that Panâhi's view of Iran is calmer and more dignified.

Discussion

This study focuses on three films and therefore does not claim to represent the entirety of Iranian cinema. The analysis of *The Circle* (2000), *The Mirror* (1997), and *Offside* (2006) reveals that Jafar Panâhi constructs cinematic environments in which gender, visibility, and spatial regulation intersect. Rather than portraying women solely as victims of ideological repression, the films depict how female characters navigate systems of surveillance, restriction, and social expectation through everyday practices of negotiation. Across the three films, spatial organization, bodily performance, and regimes of visibility emerge as key mechanisms through which gendered power relations are produced and contested.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the films illustrate how disciplinary power operates through spatial arrangements rather than through overt spectacle. Institutions such as hospitals,

schools, stadium gates, and police vehicles function as micro-sites of regulation where bodies are classified, monitored, and redirected. The analysis of *The Circle* demonstrates that confinement extends beyond prisons into urban space itself. Streets, vehicles, and checkpoints create a fragmented geography in which female mobility becomes precarious and conditional. Women are repeatedly stopped, questioned, or redirected, illustrating how everyday movement becomes subject to bureaucratic verification and surveillance.

These spatial dynamics align with Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, which emphasizes that modern systems of control operate through the organization of bodies in space rather than through visible punishment. In Panâhi's films, power is rarely centralized or spectacular. Instead, it appears dispersed through mundane procedures, young guards, institutional rules, and spatial boundaries. This diffusion of authority creates a regulatory environment in which women must continually negotiate their presence in public spaces.

At the same time, the films illustrate that gender operates as a performative practice rather than a stable identity. Butler's theory of performativity provides a useful framework for interpreting the bodily gestures, disguises, and everyday acts depicted in the films. In *Offside*, women attempting to enter the stadium adopt masculine clothing and gestures, revealing that gender categories can be temporarily performed and imitated. The act of cross-gender disguise

exposes the socially constructed nature of gender boundaries. Similarly, gestures such as smoking in prohibited spaces, arguing with authorities, or refusing expected roles demonstrate how gender norms are repeatedly enacted under social pressure.

Importantly, these acts do not necessarily constitute open resistance. Instead, they represent forms of negotiation within constrained environments. Characters such as Arizu in *The Circle* or the female football fans in *Offside* do not overthrow institutional structures; rather, they maneuver within them. These everyday gestures reveal how agency can emerge through persistence, improvisation, and adaptation.

The politics of visibility also play a crucial role in Panâhi's cinematic strategy. Drawing on Hall's theory of representation and Brighenti's work on visibility, the films can be understood as sites where social meanings about gender are constructed and contested. Visibility in these films is neither neutral nor equally distributed. Women's bodies are frequently positioned at the margins of the frame, partially obscured, or spatially separated from centers of authority. These visual strategies reflect broader social dynamics in which female presence in public space is simultaneously visible and regulated.

In *Offside*, this tension is particularly striking. The detained female fans remain in physical proximity to the football match but are denied visual access to the stadium. They hear

the crowd and react to the unfolding game without being able to see it directly. This spatial arrangement demonstrates how visibility becomes a form of political privilege. Access to public events is determined not only by physical proximity but also by institutional recognition.

Similarly, *The Mirror* complicates the relationship between representation and reality through its well-known narrative rupture. When Mina refuses to continue acting and removes the props that define her character, the film exposes the constructed nature of cinematic representation itself. The camera continues to follow her through the streets of Tehran, transforming the narrative into a hybrid space between fiction and documentary. This moment reveals how identity, like cinematic representation, is shaped through performance and repetition.

Across the three films, Panâhi constructs a consistent pattern in which space, visibility, and performance interact. Spatial boundaries regulate movement, social expectations shape bodily behavior, and visibility determines access to public life. However, the films also reveal the instability of these structures. Disguises succeed temporarily, guards hesitate to enforce rules, and characters find unexpected ways to maneuver past bureaucratic barriers. These moments suggest that disciplinary systems depend on constant repetition and enforcement in order to remain effective.

Taken together, the analysis suggests that Panâhi's cinema does not simply depict women under repression; rather, it visualizes the mechanisms through which gendered authority is organized and negotiated in everyday life. Women's presence in public space appears neither fully autonomous nor completely suppressed. Instead, it emerges through continuous interaction with institutional rules, spatial constraints, and social expectations. This interpretation also resonates with broader scholarly discussions of Panâhi's cinematic style. Scholars have noted that Panâhi frequently situates political critique within seemingly ordinary social encounters rather than overt ideological confrontation. Naficy (2001) describes this strategy as characteristic of Iranian filmmakers working within constrained political environments, in which everyday realism serves as a vehicle for subtle social commentary. Similarly, Mottahedeh (2008) argues that spatial encounters and allegorical situations in post-revolutionary Iranian cinema allow filmmakers to address structures of authority indirectly. In Panâhi's films, these narrative strategies transform urban spaces, checkpoints, and institutional environments into sites where the mechanisms of social regulation become visible through routine interactions.

Within this framework, gender can be understood as a process of spatial negotiation. Female characters navigate urban environments, institutional boundaries, and regimes of

visibility while simultaneously performing socially recognizable forms of femininity. Their actions reveal both the persistence of patriarchal regulation and the possibility of agency within constrained conditions.

By bringing together theories of representation, performativity, and disciplinary power, the analysis highlights how Panâhi's films transform everyday spaces into arenas where gendered identities are continually produced and contested. In doing so, the films offer a nuanced cinematic exploration of how authority operates through spatial control, how gender norms are enacted through bodily performance, and how visibility itself becomes a terrain of political struggle.

Conclusion

This study has examined the representation of women in Jafar Panahi's *The Circle*, *The Mirror*, and *Offside* through an integrated framework that combines constructivist representation theory, gender performativity, and Foucauldian disciplinary power. Moving beyond explanatory models centered exclusively on censorship and ideological repression, the analysis has demonstrated that Panâhi's cinema constructs a dynamic field in which gender, space, and authority intersect.

Rather than depicting women solely as victims of restriction, the films stage female embodiment as a process of negotiation within regulated spatial environments. Public mobility,

visibility, and access emerge as politically charged practices. Enclosed spaces, checkpoints, surveillance structures, and thresholds do not merely confine women; they expose the micro-physics of power through which gendered norms are enforced and reiterated.

By applying Butler's theory of performativity, the study has shown how gender in these films operates as iterative stylization under constraint. Acts of disguise, refusal, persistence, and negotiation reveal the constructed nature of normative femininity. Repetition sustains regulatory systems, yet repetition simultaneously destabilizes them. This duality underscores the fragility of disciplinary authority.

Foucault's concept of disciplinary power further illuminates how Panâhi visualizes regulation not as spectacular repression but as everyday spatial organization. Power is embedded in movement restrictions, bureaucratic procedures, and mundane interactions. However, the films also reveal that such power is contingent, situational, and dependent on constant reinforcement.

Conceptually, this article proposes gendered spatial negotiation as a framework for understanding women's cinematic presence in contemporary Iranian cinema. This concept captures the interplay between discursive construction, embodied performance, and spatial regulation. It allows for an analysis that avoids both reductive victimhood narratives and

romanticized resistance.

By situating Panâhi's films within feminist film theory and spatialized understandings of power, this study contributes to scholarship in three ways:

1. It shifts the analytical focus from censorship alone to the spatial organization of gendered visibility.
2. It systematically integrates performativity into the study of Middle Eastern cinema.
3. It expands feminist film theory beyond gaze-centered paradigms toward a model attentive to movement, thresholds, and access.

Panâhi's cinema ultimately demonstrates that the regulation of women's bodies is inseparable from the regulation of space. However, it also shows that space is never fully closed. Through embodied persistence, irony, and negotiation, female characters expose the instability of the structures that seek to regulate them. In this sense, the films do not offer resolution. They offer visibility to the ongoing negotiation between authority and presence, a negotiation that continues to shape both cinematic representation and lived experience. Future research may examine women's representation in films directed by Iranian female filmmakers.

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