

Calderwood Student Prize in the Humanities
FREN/CPLT 359, Spring 2020 (Lydgate)

Assignment 4, Film Review, *Women Without Men*

Julia Camilli, "Change Will Come"

In today's charged political climate where American-Iranian tensions dominate headlines, *Women Without Men* (2009) takes viewers back to Iran in 1953, when the US crossed the political rubicon by intervening in Iranian politics, setting the stage for the geopolitical conflicts of today. Although the CIA-engineered coup to overthrow progressive-leaning Mohammad Mossadegh and reinstall the dictatorship of the Shah serves as important cinematic context, it merely frames the dominant subject of the film, the women. *Women Without Men* focuses on the lives of four different Iranian women, showing us a brief snapshot of what it means to navigate life as a woman in Tehran at the time. Based on the 1990 novel by Shahrnush Parsipur and directed by the Iranian multimedia artist Shirin Neshat, the film is powerful in its silence and the beauty of its characters and landscape; such quietude contrasts with an underlying, unspoken tension that makes the film an intense yet worthwhile experience.

The four women of the film—Munis, Faezeh, Zarin, and Fakhri—have different backgrounds, making an unlikely group. Munis' desire for personal freedom contrasts with her friend Faezeh's religious devotion and conservative outlook, while Zarin's past as a working prostitute contrasts strikingly with the wealth and status of middle-aged Fakhri. Despite these differences, the group of four is united by their experience of mistreatment by men. Munis is constrained by her authoritarian older brother and Fakhri by her abusive husband, while Zarin and Faezeh must process trauma inflicted upon them by anonymous men. Their lives overlap when Fakhri leaves her husband and purchases a villa outside Tehran. The other three women gravitate to the villa; Zarin stumbles upon the property accidentally and is found lying unconscious in a pond after fleeing the brothel, while Faezeh seeks out a place of refuge with Munis' help after being sexually assaulted. Munis doesn't stay long, lingering at the villa only to drop Faezeh off and then starting a second life working with a pro-Mossadegh Communist group. Regardless of how long each woman stays, they all find what they need within the group, whether that's independence, coming-of-age, or the freedom to do what they like. Rejected or hiding from their past lives in one way or another, the four women adapt to their new-found autonomy. Little dialogue occurs amongst Munis, Faezeh, Zarin, and Fakhri but the silence between them affirms their deep yet unspoken bond and their resilience.

Neshat's vision of the villa and the cinematographer Martin Gschlact's work give Fakhri's new home meaning beyond the physical space itself. The villa and surrounding orchard have a mystical, hazy quality that envelops the lives of its female inhabitants. This mysterious aura also serves to protect Faezeh, Zarin, and Fakhri in their nascent independence, shielding them from

the constraints and unrest of the outside world. In scenes where each woman travels to the villa, we get long shots of a single, solitary road that make it feel as if we are going back in time or traveling to a different world; one where women coexist sans men. The scenes from the villa are full of color, whereas the scenes of Tehran are presented in dull shades of grey, with the notable exception of the opening scene. Fakhri's property calls to mind the Garden of Eden—lush, green, and enchantingly quiet. The air is thick with possibility, both from the connections between the female characters and the land itself.

The gauzy properties of the villa translate to the screen the “magical realism” that Neshat adopts from Parsipur, coloring *Women Without Men's* characters and plot. By incorporating fantastic and mythical elements into the stories of Munis, Faezeh, Zarin, and Fakhri, she implies there is more to an otherwise realistic story. Her use of magical realism makes it feel as if the four women are part of an art exhibition, portraits that she then brings to life not as characters but as symbols of what it means to be a woman in Iran. Munis, Faezeh, Zarin and Fakhri are important not because of who they are but what they represent; they are figures who gain true relevance and strength only in relation to each other and their significance in a larger story. The properties of magical realism also allow Neshat to convey meaning without overtly stating her message; she uses aesthetics and oneiric elements to make a deeper political statement. Her technique is well-suited to the current political context of Iran, where anything perceived as critical of the government is considered treason. Neshat's status as an Iranian exile herself shows the risks and consequences of making politically dissident art.

Throughout the silences of the film, tension hums in the background, leaving us with the feeling that something isn't quite right. When Fakhri and the women open up the villa for a party, inviting men into their space, a cognitive dissonance is created. The get-together was intended to celebrate the women's newfound independence and companionship, but it signals change and a possible threat to the safe haven they have created instead. Upon hearing Fakhri's plans to host this gathering, Zarin falls sick, an ominous warning about what's to come. The unease of the party is magnified by Neshat's pairing of uncomfortable opposites: the tragic passing of one of the women contrasted with a beautiful singing performance, the fall of another's political dreams against the backdrop of a wedding party, the appearance of soldiers on the night Fakhri begins her new, independent life. This jarring juxtaposition slowly crescendos to a breaking point during the party, which ends up being the villa's last.

The magic that has been cast over the villa proves to be precarious. The return to normal suspends Fakhri's small oasis of women supporting other women and growing into their true identities. The commune of women living independently and healing together threatens the existing social order, and with the reinstatement of the Shah, can no longer be permitted. Things seemingly go back to the way they were before. Yet, in her new dress and made-up face, tracing her steps on the road back to Tehran, Faezeh's character hints otherwise. The women from the

villa can return to a semblance of normal life, perhaps, but not to its substance; more change will come.