

The Intersection of Gender and Disability in Bahram Tavakoli's *Here Without Me* and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

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Abstract

This article examines the intersection of gender and disability in *The Glass Menagerie*, a 1944 play by the acclaimed American dramatist Tennessee Williams, and the 2010 Iranian film adaptation *Here Without Me*, scripted and directed by Bahram Tavakoli. Disability studies refer to a relatively new discipline which seeks to investigate the variegated continuum of embodiment through cultural discourses that challenge the medical and scientific perceptions of disability. In the adapted film, compulsory able-bodiedness, the belief that perfect healthy bodies are the norm, while freakish, different, and disabled ones are deviations from the said norm, is seen on the screen countless times, a view established by the dominant culture of normalcy. As a site of intercultural transposition, the film re-contextualizes the intersection of gender and disability in contemporary Iran and hence throws some of the tacit assumptions regarding embodied experience into relief. Both the play and the film implicate fantasy as an implicit critique of normalcy.

Keywords: *The Glass Menagerie*, *Here Without Me*, Tennessee Williams, disability, gender

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Introduction

The medium of cinema is potentially able to create long-lasting images in the minds of the audience. In recent years, various minority groups such as people of color and women have used this medium as a platform to voice their long-repressed stories. Some movies in this regard have created amazing memories for the viewers. They have proliferated inspiring and counter-discursive narratives about the victims of society. In this way, they have effected a positive change in the understanding of gender, race, and disability, among others. Many actors that have played the roles of the oppressed have won prestigious awards in the entertainment industry and their discourses have had the power to establish a strong foothold in the mainstream show business. The problems and concerns of the disabled, however, have either been silenced or misrepresented for the most part in the history of the silver screen. If “cinema is the semiotic code of reality”, as Fraser (2016, p.5) claims, and given that the disabled constitute the largest physical minority group in most countries with almost 15% of the population suffering from some sort of mental or physical impairment (Davis, 1999, p. 502), one should expect to hear more about them in critical discussions of movies and literature.

In recent years, new movies have been produced that are not only aware of the complexities of the lives of people with disability, but also try to challenge the existing stereotypes and stigmas that are prevalent both in our collective unconscious and the entertainment industry. There is a growing body of work in the area of disability and cinema which for the most part is Eurocentric. Longmore (2003), for instance, delineates the topology of stereotypical screening of the disabled in Hollywood films where the disabled characters are projected as the “other” whom we fear, rebuff, stigmatize, and often seek to destroy (p. 132). Norden’s *The Cinema of Isolation* (1994) analyzes the “commercial cinema” of Hollywood to demonstrate how mutilated and broken bodies are used as “a politically charged commodity that moviemakers are asking audiences to ‘buy’” (1994, p. x). Gradually, the next generation of researchers included other issues in their discussions. Hoeksema and Smit (2001), for instance, proposed a “wholistic” approach that highlighted the role of the audience (p. 37), while Sally Chivers (2011) tried to expand the field by exploring the concerns of old age, impairment, and Hollywood cinema. While the mentioned studies focus on disability in

Anglophone cinema, Benjamin Fraser's *Culture of Representation* (2016) tries to address the issue of disability in the context of world cinema. This book also contains a chapter by Rosa Holman on Forugh Farrokhzad's *The House is Black* (1964). This chapter is one of the scarce existing studies on disability in Iranian cinema, and it demonstrates how bodies of those afflicted with leprosy can serve not as "abject sites of suffering and existential malaise, but as vehicles of ordinary pleasure, love, and enjoyment" (Holman, 2016, p. 256).

In the 1980s and 1990s, Iran saw a rise in the production of films which evolved around the theme of disability. The Iran-Iraq war led to the production of many movies which centered on the pains, sufferings, and issues of war veterans (*janbazan*) with disability. *From Karkheh to Rheine* (Hatamikiya, 1993) is a paramount example of the category of war cinema which puts into perspective the agonies of a veteran who loses his eyesight and suffers from leukemia as a result of wartime chemical attacks. The overwhelming majority of movies made about the issues and challenges of disability in Iran excluded the sufferings of women to the benefit of male protagonists. Gradually, movies like *We Also Exist* (Malekzadeh, 2004) were produced to make room for exploring the experiences of the underrepresented group of disabled female heroines or victims. However, in Iran, such representations have always been on the margins of the cinema of the disabled. As Naficy (2011) notes, male bodies in Iranian cinema are "documents of their active presence and agency in society, while women's bodies, are absent or covered up, effaced any evidence of their social agency" (p. 119). Naficy traces back the roots of this issue to the imposition of what he calls the rule of "modesty" which has had serious sociopolitical, stylistic, and narrative ramifications for the depiction of female sex and body, especially the disabled ones. In his view, this rule has compelled Persian filmmakers to avoid techniques which are often used in representation of the female body, namely close-ups and gaze. Such restrictions have significantly reduced the presence of disabled women to background shadowy figures in cinematic productions as if "they had no mind and no bodies, no weight, no agency (Naficy, 2011, p. 118).

The significance of this research lies in the fact that there seems to be a lacuna in the literature of disability and cinema in Iran. By analyzing Bahram Tavakoli's *Here Without Me* (2010), we aim to fill this gap by analyzing the Persian

film and its American source, *The Glass Menagerie*, in the context of feminist disability studies—a body of work examining the sociocultural position of female disabled individuals within the vaster dominant culture.

Finalized as a complete play and premiered in 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* is Tennessee Williams's first major successful play. Being one of Tennessee Williams's enduringly popular plays, *The Glass Menagerie* has been adapted into screen numerous times during the decades after its premiere production. Bahram Tavakoli has made one of the latest attempts to transform this canon of American drama into a movie. The plots of both Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menageries* (1944) and the 2010 Iranian film adaptation *Here Without Me* concern the life and trials of a lower middle-class family of three (consisting of a mother, a son, and a handicapped daughter) each of whom daily fantasizes about a better life against the harsh reality of the financial struggles that have afflicted the family. While the setting and time of the original play, set in a St. Louis apartment in 1939, have been transferred into modern-day Tehran of 21st century, the film adaptation is very faithful to the source material with a few inevitable alterations for the localization and modernization of the play. Both works pay close attention to the problems of women in the context of an industrial society and economy.

Despite previous studies, Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* has been rarely examined from the perspective of feminist disability studies. Greenfield (1998) sees Williams's work as "an attack on the modern system of work and middle class... in postwar American drama" (p. 75). He believes that no aspects of this play should distract reader's attention from the role it plays as a "social commentary" (p. 75). Fomeshi (2013) analyzes the play through the lens of Marxism. He limits his study to Marx's concept of "alienation", and seeks to explain how Tom is "self-alienated" in the capitalist America (pp. 3-4). Nalliveettil (2014) takes a stylistic approach to the text. He borrows the "dialogic principles" of Weigand and provides a discourse analysis of Williams's play by uncovering "conventional and unconventional elements embedded in the structures of the language" of the drama (p. 201). Hooper's study establishes a link between the play and Williams's personal experiences. According to him, *The Glass Menageries*, is "a typical autobiographical play, yet it is clearly the work of a unique sensibility" (2012, p. 39). Blackwell (2000) examines the female characters of Williams's oeuvre and

concludes that Williams's "female characters fight a continuous battle to find a mate or to keep the mate they have already found" (p.14).

In the case of *Here Without Me*, the issue of disability remains rarely studied. Hamid Khanipour (2011) considers *Here Without Me* the "most bitter sweet" film he has ever seen and believes that by showing the harsh conditions of Farideh's workplace, the film attempts to make an unfair correlation between the capitalist economy of the original play and the 21st century Iran. He believes that Williams's play is obviously a criticism of the capitalist America while the same cannot be attributed to working conditions of the economy of Iran where humans are not treated as slaves. By analyzing the similarities and differences between the drama and the film, Ahmad Akbari (2011) reaches the conclusion that it is so faithful to the original text that if there were no storage house scenes, it would be safe to use "*The Glass Menageries*" as the title of Tavakoli's film. He maintains that since the opening monologue of Ehsan is much shorter than that of Tom, unlike the play, the film is in no way concerned with political and religious oppressions. Nima Behdadi Mehr (2011) is happy that the movie refuses to present a dark picture of Iran and lavishes praise on Tavakoli for choosing a "happy ending" that gives hope to spectators. Ghandeharioon and Anushiravani take an interdisciplinary approach to Tavakoli's *Here Without Me*. They state that since fidelity to the original text is not a guarantee for the success of an adapted film in Iran, they had to zoom in on the "hows" and "whys" of Tavakoli's interpretation of *The Glass Menagerie* using Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation. Comparative studies like the one done by Ghandeharioon and Anushiravani have the benefit of showing the process of adaptation in different cultures and languages by showing the ideological workings of each respective society and the complex inter-relationships between the source and adapted texts. Nevertheless, with particular attention to Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, what seems to be missing is a reading based on the way disabled people (i.e. Laura/Yalda) are portrayed in both the play and film. Therefore, as a popular work of drama and a recognized film adaptation, *The Glass Menagerie/Here without Me* can be considered an ideal text for exploring the question of embodiment and disability from a feminist perspective.

In what follows, first, a brief introduction to the tenets of feminist disability studies is provided. Then by focusing on the characters of Laura and Yalda

as the so-called “abnormal” bodies, we highlight the implicit critique of patriarchal societies for their dictating an ideal image of femininity. It will be demonstrated that, because of their physical impairment, neither Laura nor Yalda can live up to the ideological expectations of stereotypical gender roles. Finally, the fantasized happy ending (at least in many viewers’ eyes) of Tavakoli’s film will be taken as undermining the earlier critique of the ableist discourse of patriarchy.

Feminist Disability Studies

Feminist disability studies refer to a body of work that deals with the positions of disabled (whether physically or mentally) women within the feminist research corpus. Rather than relying on a medical perspective to investigate such positions, feminist disability studies aims to create a social context through which it starts to challenge the long-held notions about both disability and gender. Rosemarie Garland-Thompson (2005) summarizes the aims of this theory as follows:

It situates the disability experience in the context of rights and exclusions. It aspires to retrieve dismissed voices and misrepresented experiences. It helps us understand the intricate relation between bodies and selves. It illuminates the social processes of identity formation. It aims to denaturalize disability. In short, feminist disability studies reimagines disability. (p. 1557)

While at first glance feminist and disability theories appear to be dealing with separate issues, both indeed are similar in promoting the idea that both bodies and gender are social constructs. To understand the link that historically exists between disability and femininity, Garland-Thompson, in her book *Extraordinary Bodies*, reminds us of how already, in Aristotle, the female is regarded as a *deformed* male. As Ellen Samuels (2002) further explicates:

The notion that the disabled body stands in a similar relationship to the nondisabled body as the female does to the male has contributed, on the one hand, to the development of sexist medical models which pathologize female bodily functions such as pregnancy and menopause and exclude women from research studies, and on the other hand, to the de-masculinization of disabled men, who are then lumped together with women,

children, and the elderly in the realm of abject and dependent bodies. (p. 65)

There is accordingly a close alliance between feminism and disability theories as they both situate their topics within a sociocultural milieu to re-define, re-imagine, and re-map bodies. Such parallelism is grounded on the way both the disabled and the female are traditionally defined “in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority” (Samuels, 2002, p. 19). Therefore, investigating the cultural significance of disability and bodies enables the theorists of this discipline to understand the stigma attached to disabled bodies and reveal the discrimination pointed at these bodies, to dissect the identities that form this type of subjectivity, and more importantly, to highlight disability as an effect of power relations. Thus, the primary aim of this discipline is to move from exclusion to inclusion by showing disability as a variation in human body rather than a defect that has to be repressed or neglected.

In parting ways with medical diagnoses, feminist disability studies also focus on the patterns of meaning that emerge in the intersection between embodiment and culture. As such, they seek to show how a community of people, much like ethnic or gender groups, is excluded from the hegemonic society due to what is perceived as inferiority. These studies reflect over the way a variety of different people, deemed to be abnormal by a bodily impairment and how they are interpellated by the dominant culture. In doing so, it reveals the notion of normality as interconnected with the relations of power that repress any forms of “abnormality” in favor of hegemonic norms.

While feminist disability theory encompasses all genders, including the males, the question of women with disabilities is even more significant as it is doubly concerned with the history of female subjugation under patriarchal rule as well as the idealized form of bodies that have long been employed to frame feminine corporeal aesthetics. A great deal of feminism after all deals with the way female bodies have been and are subjected to men’s control where female embodiment can include especially sexuality and healthcare. Feminism, in the most part, has sought to balance the power relations in order to retrieve women’s own control over their bodies and sexualities. Furthermore, feminist discussions tend to highlight how women’s alienation from their own bodies has inevitably led to their oppression.

Such alienation can take the form of both biological and sociocultural separations. However, as Susan Wendell avers in *The Rejected Body* (1996), although feminist writings criticize unrealistic ideal standards that lead to the alienation of a large number of women, they have often focused on the sexual and reproductive aspects when discussing the female body and have thereby ignored it as equally a source of discomfort and suffering. Such overemphasis on sexuality has negatively culminated into the imaginary construction of an ideal female body which inexorably excludes women with disabilities.

The body, especially the female body, is the site of idealization in consumerist societies—it becomes objectified through a cultural process where in turn the power relations for its control emerge. Nevertheless, this cultural process whereby the body is driven towards perfection also comes with the failure to control the body which results in rejection, shame, and fear. Laura and Yalda struggle with the mounting pressures of the ideal female body in their respective societies. The following section brings to the fore the failure of the two characters in (and in a sense resistance) adapting to the dominant culture of normalcy and patriarchy.

Dislocated Bodies in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Here Without Me*

Commenting on the American society and culture of his time in *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams seems to be mainly concerned with the issue of conformity in the American lifestyle. The consumerist and capitalist culture of America had “reduced social relations to ‘vital statistics’ so that men (and women) became interchangeable” (Babcock, 1999, p. 20). This is reflected in the description of the setting in the first scene where the Wingfields’s apartment is pictured as “hive-like conglomerations of cellular living-units ... of the lower middle-class population” that “are symptomatic of the impulse of this largest and fundamentally enslaved of American society to *avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist as one interfused mass of automatism*” (Williams, 1999, p. 20, [emphasis added]). Williams’s description suggests that the industrial post-war America has turned the lower middle-class into robots that have no identity of their own. Instead of fostering difference and individuality, this ruthless capitalist culture insists on conformity. The desire for a homogeneous society where sameness and normalcy are promoted as a result of the modernization and development of new technologies is perpetuated

by such agents as Amanda and Jim who “consume and digest the narratives of the Culture Industry at the same time they police the identification and desires of others” (Babcock, 1999, p.21). This policing exposes the existing pattern in the American society that enforces conformity to create normal subjects instead of “freaks”, “cranks”, or cripples (Babcock, 1999, p. 22).

An example of this policing behavior is when Amanda wants to convince her daughter to brace herself for possible future married life as a housewife. Amanda is overwhelmed by the American Dream of Success which is reflected in her slogan “try and you will succeed” (Williams, 1999, p.43). Her children, however, cannot fulfil the societal demands placed on them through Amanda. Helplessness of both Tom and Laura is reflected in the only entrance to the Wingfields’s house which is a fire escape that implies the “implacable fires of human desperation” (Williams, 1999, p.20). Both Tom and Laura are caught in a burning hell for which there is no easy solution in the America of Great Depression. Tom can ultimately escape by simply leaving the house as his father did, but Laura’s situation is more complex than Tom’s. According to Hanna and Rogovsky (1991, p. 49), women with disabilities in America are less likely to be seen in the public than their male counterparts. Their study shows that the chances of a female handicap remaining single are twice that of men with disabilities (p.52). This seems to be related to the fact that “social ties have repeatedly been found to be associated with good health” (p.52), and it affects the women disproportionately especially because of the prevalence of discourse of sexism. “Sexism in American society is the expectation that women will be social caretakers, whereas men will do the ‘work’ (implicitly, paid work outside the home)”, Hanna and Rogovsky claim (1991, p. 55). Sexism has also another consequence: disabled women are considered “incapable of independence” (p. 55). Further, the society regards women’s disability as a stigma that damages their attractiveness. If one is in a wheelchair or wears braces, no matter what they do, they are not “going to look like Cheryle Tiegs or Marilyn Monroe” (Bogle and Shaul, 1981, p.92). This type of women “are thought not to be able to function as wife, mother, or sexual partner, and to be in need of nurturing” (Hanna and Rogovsky, 1991, p. 59). It is in this context that Laura’s timid response, “Mother- I’m crippled,” makes senses. The viewers are not surprised to see Laura’s admonition by her mother: “I’ve told you never, never to use that word. Why, you’re

not crippled, you just have a little defect-hardly noticeable, even!” (Williams, 1999, p. 31). As Amanda reveals, she used to be a perfect example of ideal beautiful woman. She claims that she had 17 suitors, and “sometimes there weren’t chairs enough to accommodate them all” (Williams, 1999, p. 23). Her ideal of beauty has its roots in the beauty magazines to which she subscribes and which illustrate physical perfection, and form the people’s idea of a normal body. Amanda’s chastisement and her insistence on avoiding the taboo word “cripple”, therefore, shows how she has internalized the stigmas attached to disability and its acknowledgement. Laura is prohibited from admitting her bodily dysfunction as part of herself because lameness is associated with disgrace and shame (Kent, 1998, p. 29). Therefore, Laura has two alternatives in coping with her disability. She may either follow her mother’s edict and “develop charm” or she has to disregard it in its entirety and not touch upon it when the issue comes up.

In the play, Laura feels the pressure of other people’s condescending look at herself. It is not just her mother that has carved into her mind the shame that she experiences about her body. Her brother also accepts that something is wrong with being disabled, and that his love for Laura has blinded him to the truth: “We don’t even notice she’s crippled any more” (Williams, 1999, p. 51). Jim is another figure that takes the arrogant role of a healthy expert who dares to lecture Laura on what she should make of her disability. He is willing to blame the victim [i.e. Laura] instead of the network of meanings that (re-)inscribe fear and shame on disabled bodies. In their dialogue in the dinner scene, Laura informs Jim that they used to attend the same choir class in high school. She was always late because of the brace on her leg which “clumped” loudly. In response, Jim tells her that he barely noticed the sound and that her shame emanated from her “self-consciousness”. Laura, then, points out that she was relieved as soon as the singing started. This exchange between the two characters highlights the contrast between the joy and relief arising from conformity and being in harmony with others during Laura’s choral practice and the feeling of dissonance and shamefulness resulting from her nonconformity, difference, and disability. Then, Jim takes an authorial tone by telling her that he knows more about disabled people than themselves. He cites one of his friends as the reason why he is more skilled at analyzing people’s characteristics. In a language similar to Amanda’s, she blames the disabled person (i.e. Laura) for the inferiority

she undergoes rather than the dictates and conditions of the society. He tells her that “lack of confidence” in herself as a person and the fear of walking in front of the class because of a clump (which is nothing but “a little physical defect” and is “practically non-existent”) are the reasons why she shunned social participation.

Laura’s understanding of her body and self is different from her mother and Jim. In the play, she responds to Amanda when asked why she has stopped attending her typing classes:

AMANDA: Laura, where have you been going when you’ve gone on pretending that you were going to business college?

LAURA: I’ve just been going out walking.

AMANDA: That’s not true.

LAURA: It is. I just went walking.

AMANDA: Walking? Walking? In winter? Deliberately courting pneumonia in that light coat? Where did you walk to, Laura?

LAURA: All sorts of places - mostly in the park.

AMANDA: Even after you’d started catching that cold?

LAURA: It was the lesser of two evils, Mother. I couldn’t go back up. I threw up - on the floor! (Williams, 1999, p. 20)

Thus, Laura has to choose between an anxiety induced by the fear of being with people – whom she feels look down on her due to her handicap – and walking alone. It is worth noting that while Laura is extremely ashamed of her bodily imperfection in the company of any group of people, she enjoys going out for walks when alone. This emphasis on walking and the different connotations that it has for Laura at times when she is alone and among strangers marks the cultural and social character of Laura’s disability. This is the source of her shame and behavioral affliction which turn into a kind of comfort and enjoyment for her. Laura explores her subjectivity through such physical acts as walking. Contrary to the times when she is confined to the house, she feels freedom and exhilaration when not restricted to the way others observe her and define her through her disability. However, when Laura talks excitedly about how she went to visit art museums and bird houses, her mother immediately chastises her secrecy, to which Laura replies: “Mother, when you’re disappointed, you get that awful suffering look on your face, like the picture of Jesus’ mother in the museum!” (Williams, 1999, p. 35). Here, by comparing

Laura to Christ, Williams points to the sacrifice that she is expected to make for her brother and mother as did Christ for the redemption of sinners. Laura has to prove herself a docile, refined, and marriageable woman so that she might attract a gentlemen caller, and in this way, help the family both financially and set Tom free from the burden of her protection. By failing to be a compliant subject, she leaves her mom, and by extension, the society, disappointed, which proves the point raised by Browne et al. (1985) that the disabled children often bear the “burden of family’s frustrations and resentment” (p. 129).

There is then a clear contrast between the way Laura sees and defines herself and the way others do. Further, Laura is never asked by her mother and brother how she feels about her physical difficulties. Amanda denies that Laura has an impediment, while Tom confesses to his mother that Laura is different from other girls because she is handicapped. In the scene where she dances with Jim, we see another glimpse of Laura’s interpretation of her own body. While dancing, Jim bumps into the table which causes one of the glass figurines, the unicorn, to fall off the table and lose its horn. Jim apologizes because he thinks he must have smashed her favorite one and asks for her forgiveness. Laura responds, “I don’t have favorites much. It’s no tragedy, *Freckles*. Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are. The traffic jars the shelves and things fall off them” (Williams, 1999, p. 73). While this sentence may be considered as Laura’s attempt to ease Jim’s sense of awkwardness and discomfort, Laura seems to debunk subtly the social understanding of compulsory able-bodiedness. According to MacRuer (2012), who coined the term, “when disability is subordinated in the hierarchic dichotomy disability/able-bodiedness appears as normalcy, the condition which appears as normalcy is actually a compulsion” (p. 8). Laura’s statement, although acknowledging the superiority of able-bodiedness in the society, marks that no matter how careful a person is, their bodies are still fragile and their wholeness will not be tenable. By addressing Jim as “freckles”, she also takes a jab at and points to Jim’s imperfection, a reminder to him that aims to make him aware of the equality and contingency of their bodies. Ultimately, Laura’s is the story of a young girl whose particular type of embodiment is not congruent with cultural social ideals. The mentioned examples show how anything less than normal is looked down upon in the play.

Similarly, in the film adaptation by Tavakoli, the focus is on the representation of family dynamics in the 21st century Iran that is undergoing industrialization. The society, not dissimilar to Williams's America, is a crippling one looking for conformity and homogenization, albeit in a more family-centered way than Williams's, which is reflective of the state's view of gender and women's role in society. Farideh, the mother of the family, works in a food plant, where female and male workers are standing in production lines while wearing uniforms. They are interchangeable and indistinguishable to the point that Farideh works overtime in her friend's place, Sara, so that she can get back home and fulfil her traditional household activities of cooking and washing, and no one would have noticed it if she had not forgotten to use the attendance device. Farideh's son, Ehsan, is also bored with the everyday drudgery of doing the same thing in the lackluster setting of a storage house. He seems to be suffering from a strange cold that leaves him constantly coughing and cannot be cured by using turnip or other medications prescribed for it. Although Ehsan's constant coughing may be the result of smoking which is invariably referred to in his conversations with his mother, it marks his physical defect and the imperfection resulting from a mysterious incurable disease.

Throughout the movie, compulsory able-bodiedness is seen on the screen countless times, a view whose seeds are planted by the dominant culture of normalcy and are scattered by the members of the society. Apart from Ehsan's incurable cold, the female characters, including Yalda, and Sousan, an off-screen figure mentioned passingly in the dialogue between Farideh and Sara, are body shamed. Sousan's freakish face is so ugly that she has to use most of the cosmetics Farideh sells to appear in the public, while Yalda's difference cannot be easily covered because she cannot walk without her crutch. The desire for wholeness and elimination of anything less than perfect is reflected in the old sofa that Farideh wants to change. Motivated by the arrival of a gentleman caller, she wants to make an impression on him by getting rid of the old rugged sofa, a thorn in the eye, onto which she seems to project all the vices she is unwilling to accept, despite the fact that Yalda has no difficulty accepting it the way it is. Farideh's desire for wholeness can be seen in her description of the new sofa: it has a beautiful color, some drawers to store things, and can be converted into a bed. In short, Farideh is looking for a flawless sofa. Incompleteness permeates all aspects of the lives of the Tahavi family

even in the fact that the father of the family is missing except as a portrait on the wall.

Yalda is the central “crippled” character who is subject to the scrutiny of both patriarchy and ableism. Already the “second sex” in a patriarchal society, she is burdened by the aggravating circumstances of being a working-class handicap in a third world country. Contrary to common belief, disability is not equally distributed among the population, with the lower-classes likely to suffer from some sort of disability in comparison with the middle or upper classes. Being a woman can also disproportionately affect one’s chances of disability and “the social oppression experienced by many Third World women ensures that they have the most difficult lot of all” (Davis, 1995, p. 162). It is in this context of triple suppression (gender, class, disability) that we see her for the first time on the screen. She is standing in front of a mirror talking to a set of glass figurines which symbolizes the society, in general, and the students of the sculptor class, in particular, who make her feel ill at ease by looking down on her as an abnormal human being. She questions what she considers the inquisitive look of a glass turtle, which reflects her anxiety in public spaces, by saying “What’s wrong? Why are you staring at me like that?” (Tavakoli, 2010, 04:24). After a brief fit of shivering and regaining her composure, she puts her crutches aside and tries to imitate and practice normal walking while having a basket of glass figurines in her hands. Murmuring “It’s almost done. I won’t drop you” (Tavakoli, 2010, 05:07), she limps to the other side of the hall without the help of her crutch, but she cannot maintain her control and falls on the ground. The glass figurines scatter all over the place and the unicorn hits the table and loses its horn. Unlike Williams’s play where the breaking of the unicorn takes place in the scene when Jim and Laura dance – Jim lectures her on the good that comes from the incident near the end of the play (i.e. the unicorn no longer stands out because it becomes similar to other horses) – Tavakoli sets the scene in the opening minutes of the film. This transformation foreshadows Yalda’s final integration into the dominant culture of conformity, normalcy, and sameness through marriage in the dream-like ending. Yalda, picks the figurine, looks at it, and smiles, which may point to her joy in seeing the unicorn (herself) eventually become similar to the other glass figurines.

According to Moharrami (2012), “bleakness and coldness of the opening of

the film make the wrong impression that we are going to see a feminist movie similar to works of Tahmineh Milani in the 1990s where a working-class woman is depicted, but we soon realize that it is even a more serious work". This quality of being more to the film than meets the eye can reveal Tavakoli's understanding of the correlation between gender and disability in Postrevolutionary Iran. The repressive nature of Mohammadreza Shah's monarchy rendered the demand for a constitutional country a lost cause and gradually resulted in the overthrow of his dynasty (Fischer, 2003, p. 181). After the toppling of Shah in 1979 and the first tumultuous years of uprisings and upheavals, the Islamic Revolution managed to establish its position firmly. Women had a prominent role in the new system which defined them as mothers and citizens on whom the foundation of the new Islamic nation depended. The women were seen as either "mothers" or "potential mothers." They were in turn the creators of Islamic families and the families were seen as the building blocks and foundations of the Islamic nation (Javadi Motlagh, 1991, pp. 301-302). The ideal Islamic female citizen was defined in sharp contrast to the Western values of femininity. This new worldview left almost untouched the male superiority inside the family but championed the more active participation of women in the community. This was evident in the clergy's support of women's right to vote under the precepts of Islam.

The preamble to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran has a section on women's position in the society which delineates the roles assigned to them. As stated in the Constitution, the women of Iran had long been under a repressive and despotic regime and they deserve to be granted more rights. In the Constitution, the family is considered the "primal unit of the society" which guarantees "humanity's growth and development" (Preamble). Family, as such, functions as a liberating force. According to the Constitution:

In keeping with this view of the family unit, women are emancipated from the state of being an "object" or a "tool" in the service of disseminating consumerism and exploitation, while reclaiming the crucial and revered responsibility of motherhood and raising ideological vanguards. Women shall walk alongside men in the active arenas of existence. As a result, women will be the recipients of a more critical responsibility and will enjoy a

more exalted and prized estimation in view of Islam. (Preamble)

As the Preamble demonstrates, the main objective of the new system is to break women from the shackles of western consumer culture and their objectification as “sex objects.” Instead, they should actively engage in social practices, especially by fulfilling their domestic responsibilities as mothers and procreators of “ideological vanguards” (Constitution, Preamble). Therefore, the dominant gender discourse in Iran after the 1979 Revolution considers families as the building blocks of the society. The ideal way for a woman to realize her potentials is through marriage which in turn will lead to the procreation of children. While an ordinary healthy woman in Iran has to face the mundane challenges of the patriarchal society, Yalda, similar to her American counterpart, has to encounter the double pressure piled up on her as a result of her physical defect. On the one hand, the only path for a woman to be successful is to become a mother by marrying a man and producing offspring; on the other hand, a disabled female person is not considered a proper partner in life. For a female disabled subject like Yalda, the intersection of both disability and gender shapes her identity.

Studying the position of disabled women in rural Iran, Don et al. investigate some of the problems that rural disabled women experience. These problems are mainly related to the roles this type of women play in the family and their education, and almost all physically-incapacitated women face them both in rural and urban areas. Such girls are usually deprived of education because of its inaccessibility (e.g. the buildings of schools are not designed for people with disabilities) or because in the traditional binary of breadwinner/housewife, at best they occupy the unprivileged position of housewife. “There is a quiet sense of acceptance” that disabled women are supposed to be dependent on their brothers or fathers for living and sustenance (Don et al., 2015, p. 811). Therefore, they are restricted to home and are assumed to need no schooling. Farideh’s take of Yalda’s situation is affected by a similar perception of disability and gender. She talks to Ehasn in privacy and tells him that his sister is sad because her brother’s future is thwarted so long as her sister and mother are with him. Then, she proceeds to make a distinction between herself and her daughter by likening herself to a fidgeting cat whose agility guarantees her survival and independence to some extent while Yalda will always need a guardian to protect her. Later on, Ehsan who considers her

sister's disability as an undeniable disadvantage, is criticized by her mother for bringing Reza, a betrothed guy, to the house, to which Ehsan reacts by saying "nowadays, healthy guys do not marry healthy women, let alone lame ones" (Tavakoli, 2011, 01:10:06) which points to two things: the outward deformity of the disabled which might seem unappealing to suitors and one important stigma attached to disabled women, asexuality. The sexual impotence of the disabled is a common belief and has consequences in real life for them. As Don et al. note, "the disabled girls find it more difficult to convince others of sexual harassment against them because others tend to regard them as non-sexual" (2015, pp. 812-813). The study of Don et al. shows that fulfilling the role of a sexual partner is an unlikely and unfeasible occurrence for disabled girls so much so that even when they are sexually harassed and recount their stories to others, no one believes them because they are deemed to lack charm, beauty, and sexual chemistry. Ehsan who is so overwhelmed by this side of the stigmatizing culture cannot see a future for her sister as a wife although it is the same system that dictates that girls should get married if they are to be accepted as a normal member of the patriarchal society. Similar to Laura, Yalda is subject to the pressures of patriarchy. This is reflected in her name which refers to winter solstice, a name which by dint of its connotations implies the length and depth of the miseries that she has to experience in comparison with the so-called ordinary healthy women.

In the scene where Yalda and Reza are talking and sharing ideas, Yalda says:

You know I never go anywhere. I'm always here. Because these crutches make noises that make people stare at me. It makes you feel peculiar. (Tavakoli, 2011, 01:05:40)

As she utters these words she is overwhelmed by a sense of anxiety and looks distraught as she continues to say:

People look at me in a weird way and it makes one feel bad. There is nothing wrong. I am ok. I am just not used to talking to people. I will be ok in a bit. I am fine. (Tavakoli, 2011, 01:05:48)

This dialogue clearly shows that there is a correlation between physical disability and social interaction for Yalda. It is for this stigma that her mother has to fabricate lies (e.g. she studied all day and prepared the food for the party) in order to overshadow her deficiencies and embolden the qualities expected from a woman in

the patriarchal society of Iran.

The ending of the film represents and confirms the daunting outlook of ableist patriarchy toward the disabled females, in this case Yalda. Should Ehsan leave the “here” of the title which could refer to both home or country, the patriarchal logic should remain in place and cannot be shaken off. Based on the dominant discourse of patriarchy in Iran, a woman should always be dependent on a family, where the husband or the head of the family protects her, and the wife fulfils her childbearing role. When Ehsan is relieved from his patriarchal duty, either through death by poisoning or wish-fulfilling thinking, the only imaginable path of success and happiness for a woman, especially a disabled one, in an ableist patriarchal society is through finding a protective stand-in (i.e. Reza) in marriage. In the final scene when Reza asks for Yalda’s hand in marriage from Farideh, he says “don’t worry, I’ll take care of her, as you did.” (Tavakoli, 2011, 01:25:35). Interestingly enough, Reza is a name with religious connotations. As the story goes among Shiites, Imam Reza, the 8th Imam of Twelver Shias, interceded for a gazelle with a hunter who intended to kill her. Imam Reza, who is hence given the title “Guarantor of Gazelle”, convinces the hunter to let go of the female gazelle so that it can breastfeed her fawn. Therefore, he becomes her savior and protector. The etymological meaning of “Reza” is also “to give consent and approval.” Tavakoli conflates these two features to better represent the intersection of disability and patriarchy. Reza whose name has strong associations with the protection of people, especially female ones as in the story of the female gazelle, has to “consent” to supersede Ehsan as Yalda’s protector if Ehsan wants to relinquish his patriarchal duties. To put it differently, for Yalda who is both female and handicapped, there is no room to accept her bodily difference as it is and to believe that she can stand on her own. Thus, in the last scene, Farideh’s wish almost half-way through the film comes true: Yalda walks independently of her crutch, she is a housewife, and has a chubby daughter. This ironic scene seems to condemn the expectations of the viewers to forego differences in bodies and their contingencies.

Conclusion

Characters like Laura and Yalda in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Here Without Me* problematize the hegemonic determination of able-bodiedness. The present study

attempted to throw into relief the intersection of gender and disability across two cultures in these two works by employing feminist disability studies. The consumerist cultures of Williams's play and Tavakoli's film privilege the able-bodied subjects over the physically handicapped. Amanda and Farideh, the mouthpieces of the patriarchal ableist discourse, insist that Laura and Yalda's only option for having a normal life as crippled young girls is marriage. Williams, however, decides not to cater to the audience's expectation for a felicitous marriage at the end, and instead portrays Laura as a character who is both conscious of the stigmas attributed to her deformed body and resistant to dominant views of body wholeness and perfection. Tavakoli's film, however, has an ironic ending, which can be both read as an implicit critique of normalcy and the cancelling out of any resistance. At any rate, the use of feminist disability studies in comparing these two works has enabled (a curious metaphoric construction) us to closely investigate the multilayered ways in which gender and disability could turn into a site of double oppression.

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